

PLAYING THE GAME - BY OUR RULES OR THEIRS?

by Janet Beebe

The purpose of this paper is to call attention to the broad issue of economic viability as it relates to feminist publishing. More than any other resource, most of us lack money, and this holds some important implications for us. If we, as feminist publishers, are going to survive and thrive in the next ten years, some examination of who we are, why we are publishing, and where we are headed is going to be needed.

I work with Kinesis, Vancouver's feminist newspaper. Like most other feminist publications, we are in financial straits. Our printing costs have risen steadily, from just under \$7000 in 1977 to a projected \$11,000 this year. In times of inflation, when one runs just to stay in place, increases of this order are hard to face and keep us anxious much of the time. Right now, with a circulation just under 1000 and little or no advertising, we are just managing to keep our head above water.

The economic pinch is hurting all feminist publishers. Substantial increases in printing costs have already forced some of us into debt, and having to raise outside funds feels like just one more drain on our energies.

We can't know at this point when or if prices will rise out of reach. Even though there will always be a great demand for low-cost printing, the skyrocketing costs of paper and photographic materials are making the supply of low-cost printing less and less a reality.

In addition to this, technological advances are causing great changes in the printing industry which are going to benefit primarily large-volume publishers, by streamlining the process from typesetting to printing. As the industry changes, fewer shops will be interested in doing the kind of camera-ready work we need done, and the competitive prices we now pay will become correspondingly harder to find.

Further to this trend, at least one major printers' union is beginning to take a hard line on camera-ready copy. The printing unions want to alleviate high unemployment among their members by eliminating printing jobs which are not union produced from start to finish. Those of us who now save money by doing our own paste-up and typesetting may find it more difficult to do so. As publishers, how do we plan to meet these changes?*

Feminist publishers differ from mainstream publishers in important ways. What these differences mean is that solutions to economic problems that established publishers resort to, may not always be relevant for us.

For example, we publish largely by means of volunteer labour. We are not the only type of publication to prove that volunteer workers can get the job done. But we are different in that we believe in and attempt to work collectively and with skill-sharing in mind. These conditions, combined

* These changes will affect the future economic viability of feminist presses as well. Basically, they will mean further polarization in terms of equipment, resources and capital between the large presses and the small ones, which will make it harder for feminist presses to compete.

with our volunteer status, make it more difficult for us to efficiently coordinate tasks, to publish regularly, or to get involved in long-range planning.

Secondly, we as feminist publishers have refused to make money a criterion for access to our publications; most publications allow some form of sliding scale to operate. This is because our community is such that our readers, for the most part, don't have much money. This has a lot to do with why we are a community in the first place, for those who don't accept the values of larger society usually don't get the benefits that accrue from acceptance either. From this, it is easy to see why we find it difficult to make ends meet. The market mentality, of course, operates differently: only those who can pay get the goods.

Raising money for feminist publications via advertising is a problem for much the same reason. Our readers don't as a rule have much disposable income, and advertisers know that. Few will choose to advertise where there is no profit to be had. Advertising sources are further limited by our politics - we want ads that are (at the very least) non-sexist, non-racist and non-classist. Selling advertising where the money lies thus becomes a very difficult job, because many advertisers believe that stereotypes sell products. Many of us also dislike the hustler mentality that has been traditionally associated with sales work. Given a volunteer staff, selling advertising can very quickly come to be seen as a low priority.

Thus we see, as feminist publishers, that not only rising costs, but our politics affect our economic viability. We are publishers who do not believe in many of the rules of the game as it is ordinarily played, even as we insist on our right to play.

We are operating in a social context dominated by big business and consequently stand in the shadow of their values and assumptions. We should be aware of these assumptions and be able to evaluate our functions, needs and successes independently of them.

For instance, it is a generally accepted notion that "bigger is better". More is certainly cheaper, if we look at the concept of volume discounts. As publishers, we are justified in wanting to expand our readership. But I do question here how well read are the papers we already print. Do we know? From an ecological point of view alone, is an expansionist ethic in and of itself a worthy aim?

Another example is the concept of "fresh news". Mass media, by its own every-hour-on-the-hour example, impresses on us the importance of up to date coverage. So we too push ourselves against deadlines and hurry to fill our pages with the latest details.

And if that news is fulfilling a communicative function, and as long as it's providing balanced coverage of all the issues, that's fine. But we must be very clear why we publish that particular information, for contrary to the common belief that "old news is no news", an "old" piece of information does not lose its usefulness to us simply because it has been around for a while. I think particularly of the valuable contributions to theory - not easily categorized as "news" - which have appeared on our pages over the years (community debates and controversy included). To be sure that our energy and resources are being well-spent, we should be taking the time to ensure that the information we are publishing will be both useful and of lasting value to our communities. In light of

these kinds of issues, we as feminist publishers must learn to evaluate our work according to the needs of the community we serve, and according to our own values, rather than those of mainstream publishers.

Beyond that, it is important that we learn to co-operate with each other. Small feminist publications are particularly deserving of attention in this respect. For example, those publishers among us who of necessity publish on a very small scale to meet the needs of often isolated and/or dispersed groups of women, may well find undue emphasis on financial self-sufficiency to be meaningless. The women who produce these papers have been forced in the past to work in a near vacuum of useful publishing connections, and it is this kind of support we are going to have to provide for each other.

What if economic necessity requires that we cut back to make ends meet? There are several options. We can publish less often - Makara, one feminist publication which folded, may eventually re-surface as an annual. Or, we can print fewer pages, go to cheaper paper, and discover cheaper methods of production where we now use costly materials. These kinds of decisions are painful to make, and depend a lot on how a publication has chosen to present itself and to whom. But if these kinds of changes can allow us to survive, then it is misleading to see them as signs of failure. Though we are encouraged to believe that poverty simply proves our unworthiness, we know this isn't true.

Economic measures put forward by mainstream publishers will not necessarily work for us, in the long run, because we are not them. The problems we face as feminist publishers are fundamentally quite different from those faced by established publishers whose interest lies in maintaining a profitable status quo. The problems are real, but they don't have to be insurmountable. We need to look in other directions for radical and innovative solutions to our current troubles. Those solutions, while they may be different from what we are doing now, can work for us and for our communities.