Feminist Media Products: Alternative Voices, Participatory Spaces

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Abstract

Due to its general distrust of the mainstream counterpart, the Feminist Movement has a long history of creating media products in order to educate, mobilize, and coordinate its actions. The Feminist Media Products (FMPs) continue to exist and thrive in the digital age. This paper examines how FMPs fit into existing models of alternative media framed within Atkinson's three definitions of alternative media, (2011) and Lievrouw's Genre Framework for alternative and activist media (2011), and showcases how online platforms function as participatory spaces for their users, as outlined by Jensen et al. (2006). A content analysis of 50 FMPs found that FMPs fit into models of alternative media, with some variations. In the case of Atkinson who states the content is what makes media alternative, the findings argue that it is rather the perspective with which the content is presented that makes it alternative. In the case of Lievrouw, the findings show that FMPs are far more permanent rather than ephemeral. It was also found that online platforms have allowed for the creation of participatory spaces, and that the founders of FMPs prioritize this as a goal.

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Introduction

Numerous political, economic, and social shifts, including the most recent U.S. election, have resulted in a resurgence of various activist movements within English speaking North America (Sydell, 2017). Citizens who have never participated in any form of activism are now actively partaking in interventionist actions. Amongst these shifts is the revitalization of the Feminist Movement - one that has been historically concerned with various issues related to the systematic oppression and unequal treatment of women. Such social movements have a long history of using media, and especially alternative media, in order to educate, mobilize, and coordinate in an effort to help participants create collective action resulting in societal improvements (Lievrouw, 2011). The feminist movement, however, has long suspected mainstream media outlets of harboring sexism, and has thus historically avoided using this outlet in the dissemination of relevant news and information (Steiner, 2012). Even so, as Steiner states, participants in this movement have traditionally used new or alternative media in order to create spaces in which to share women's news and perspectives between themselves, and with the greater public (2012).

Perhaps the most poignant example of these Feminist Media Products (FMPs) is the emergence of do-it-yourself (DIY) feminist publications in the 1990s, that allowed ordinary women, and more specifically, women who were marginalized or disregarded by the larger publishing mechanisms, to spread their ideas using media products, usually reliant on straightforward technological processes, in order to spread their message on a local, national, and international level (Druecke & Zobl, 2011). Emerging technologies have changed the format of

these feminist media products, pushing them into the digital realm, but have not fundamentally altered how and why their producers make them and why their consumers use them (Lievrouw, 2011).

FMPs, usually outliers of the mainstream media, can be used for a variety of reasons, including mobilization, not only of participants, but also of ideas as well as interventions. These media products, which can also be interchangeably described as projects, although they can be very diverse in their format and content, may form a platform for criticizing the dominant structure and contents by mass media channels. Some are characterized as small-scale, small-run, non-professional do-it-yourself (DIY) products, while others, typically digital, can have a very professional, even corporate feel (Druecke & Zobl, 2012). The format of these FMPs are varied, and can include print and online magazines, print zines or webzines, pamphlets, booklets, posters, (we)blogs, and other materials, printed and digital. For the purposes of this paper, FMPs refer to media products or projects in the digital form, which include blogs, magazines (also referred to as ezines), podcasts, and other formats that the internet supports.

Using existing frameworks developed by Lievrouw (2011) and Atkinson (2011), this MRP will focus on how English language FMPs produced in the U.S and Canada fit into existing models of alternative media, and also how they form participatory spaces for their audiences, as described by Jensen et al., (2006). It will integrate Lievrouw's (2011) Genre Framework for Alternative and Activist new media in order to assess how North American FMPs fit into the model of New Social Movements in the postmodern era, specifically in regards to the makeup of its "actors," and their use of media and Information and Communication Technologies. It will also evaluate to what extent FMPs fit into Atkinson's three definitions of alternative media, and will incorporate some components of Atton's considerations around power dynamics and

alternative media production. Additionally, it will summarize and evaluate to what extent FMPs are creating participatory spaces for their users or consumers. A creative component of the project will include a directory of FMPs, as it appears that such a resource does not currently exists.

As the political climate in the United States and Canada continues to trigger and spark feminist activism aimed at breaking down systems of oppression and creating inclusive spaces characterized by dignity and respect (Women's March, 2017), FMPs will continue to be important in promoting the movement's messages and in helping audiences seeking a place to stay up to date or to participate in the movement through the use or creation of such media. It is therefore important to understand how these FMPs function within the realm of alternative media, and the potential they have for creating participatory spaces, and what the possibilities for their production are.

Literature Review

Steiner (2000) has written that feminist media products suggest a model for oppositional, or in other words, alternative media. In order to understand the current state of FMPs, their makeup, and whether the above statement holds true, several relevant themes are examined in the literature review. These include:

a. the nature and characteristics of alternative media in the context of two existing frameworks – that of Lievrouw (2011) as well as Atkinson (2011).

b. the history and nature of Feminist Media Production within the context of the four feminist waves.

    c.   alternative media production and how it permits for the creation of participatory spaces

        for its users.

Part One: Characteristics of Alternative Media

In order to understand whether FMPs can be classified as alternative media using

contemporary models, it is important to first delve into the characteristics of alternative media.

According to Atkinson (2011) alternative media, is not only a voice for social movements but

also a form of resistance against hegemonic power structures in society, as resistance to

hegemony can be carried out in the actions of people within their daily lives, aiding in the

"production of a broad tapestry of different alternative media" (p. 15). Additionally, quoting

Dowling et al. (2001), Atkinson (2011) states that alternative media represents a response to

oppressive and hegemonic powers by activists, and functions as a creative outlet for those who

feel marginalized. Additionally, he states that this media exists in whatever formats are available

to the people that produce them. Alternative media is characterized as maintaining independence

from large media conglomerates and promotes "horizontal" and thus more "participatory

linkages between their audiences," (p. 16). Not only does it act as a platform for radical or

alternative points of view, alternative media emphasizes the "organization of media to enable a

wider social participation in their creation, production and dissemination then is possible for

mass media," (p. 16). Atkinson argues that alternative media production is typically

economically strained in terms of reliable sources of income and funding. Its production is also

characterized by a decentralization of resources, where one person on the team tends to play

multiple roles, for example, that of both editor and writer. The intention behind this is that it

becomes possible for various people on the team to step in and fill in different voids as they arise (2011).

Atkinson states that media should be considered alternative if it contains any of the three following qualities:

A. The content can be defined as alternative in relation to what is normally represented in the mainstream. The content presented through alternative media is typically produced by non-commercial entities that are challenging power structures and attempting to transform social roles.

B. The media products are constructed in a way that supports audiences to enact interpretive strategies. This means that audiences, when they consume these FMPs, feel pleasure in knowing that they are consuming something that diverges from the status quo.

C. It is created under alternative production, and thus outside of media conglomerates in economically strained conditions, often containing content from distinguished authors, and using the internet by soliciting content directly from the audience of the media product (2011). By examining trends in the construction and delivery of FMPs, this MRP will assess whether these media products can thus be categorized as alternative media.

Lievrouw (2011) describes her Genre Framework for Alternative and Activist New Media as a broad sketch rather than a "faithful map of the territory" (p. 59) of the common themes and characteristics that emerge in alternative and activist media products, specifically in the online context. According to Lievrouw, there are three key categories of characteristics, or themes, for alternative media. These include **Scope, Stance**, and **Action/Agents of Change**. In

terms of the **Scope** of activist media products such as FMPs, Lievrouw is referring to both the scale of the projects, as well as their collaborative nature (Mayor, 2013). She argues that these types of projects or products tend to reject mass production. Additionally, there is "the assumptions of community, interactivity and participation in their design, organization, and operation (Lievrouw, 2011, p.62). The author states that the products are typically created and maintained by a small group of volunteer staff members and borrowed or donated equipment, and that it is often the case that many of the most popular alternative blogs or publications are maintained by one person or tiny teams of people. Like Atkinson (2011), she argues that it is perhaps as a result of a lack of access to large reliable amounts of funding to support something that is larger scale. In addition to these qualities, the author states that the producers of the products also reject consumer culture and consumption, and that they have an inherited distrust and hostility towards large-scale dominant powers (2012). The scale of alternative media projects may be limited because the audience for them may be small, especially in the early stages. However, this small scale can give visitors and contributors a sense of familiarity: being an "insider" that knows the players personally and hence developing a tight knit community. Lievrouw also argues that because they are so small scale, they tend to be collaborative: a group effort rather than individually produced work. In terms of **Stance,** Lievrouw argues that the media projects tend to have a sense of separation from the dominant culture and mainstream social belief, acting heterotopically as spaces or countersites for expression, affiliation, and creativity (2012). She emphasizes that the success of these products lies in the fact that their actors demonstrate and exemplify new, alternative, and other values and practices for society, out of a desire to "erect communities conceived as a refuge within an increasingly thicker social network," (p. 64). These products have been created as "mediascapes" where participants can

congregate and share minority or marginalized views, and can serve as counter-public arenas where groups who have been traditionally marginalized can articulate their exclusion in solidarity with one another (p. 64). When referring to **Action and agency**, Lievrouw is referring to the extent to which projects are conceived of as agents of change, or in other words, the extent to which they are interventionist, in that they want to interrupt or alter existing conditions within a specific societal issue. Often this is done through the invitation or encouragement of intervention. Lievrouw's three key categories will be used in order to assess to what extent the model is universal within the construction of FMPs.

Lievrouw (2011) has also developed a framework for New Social Movements (NSM). This elaborate model builds on the previous work of both Melucci (1996), and Touraine (1971). NSM theory argues that social movements such as the labour, the anti-war, and the civil rights movements gave way to smaller scale, more precisely focused movements, such as environmentalism, anti-globalization, the women's movement, LGBTQ rights, and others (Lievrouw, 2011). What is of particular interest here, is that it has been noted that those actors now involved in social movements "tend to be drawn from the ranks of better educated, creative workers, who frame their grievances in symbolic or cultural terms," rather than from the working classes as has been the case in the past (p. 42). An evaluation of contemporary FMPs and their producers will ascertain whether this is the case in regards to FMPs.

Part Two: The Nature of Feminist Media Production within Activism

A brief overview of the history of the four waves of feminism is also needed in order to contextualize Feminist Media Production. Both Looft (2016) and Baumgardener (2011) argue that First Wave Feminism, lasting approximately from 1840 – 1920, grew out of the abolition of slavery movement, and focused on women's rights drawing from the "ideals and

disappointments of the new democracy," (paragraph 6). Women were very active in the move to abolish slavery and their limited legal status gave a big push in the foundation of the suffragette movement (Baumgardener, 2011). During the Second Wave, commencing in the 1960s and onward, women fought for greater access to men's spheres, with emphasis on equality. The Second Wave was also characterized by splintering within the movement, with women of color, lesbian and bisexual women, and others, critiquing the broad philosophies of the movement. Third Wave Feminism became more individually driven. It was characterized by the emergence of intersectionality, the reclaiming of vocabulary typically used to put women down, and a push for transparency in the sharing of experiences. According to Looft (2016), Fourth Wave Feminism, emerged in 2008, and has been characterized by the general understanding that intersectionality is the common thread that links together various groups under the blanket term of feminism. Looft states that a common and distinctive trait of the movement is the usage of social media and technology in order to have a global, rather than a local, or even national reach. Scholars (Looft, 2016; Baumgardner, 2011) describe fourth wavers as being known for their technological savvy, specifically in the use of social media tools in order to continuously address the various issues that continually crop up related to issues of women's rights. Looft argues that in terms of the actual issues themselves, the defining boundaries between waves are not necessarily "the wars that are waged but the tools that are used." (p. 894). Baumgardner (2011) emphasizes that for fourth wavers, the online experience has been a part of life rather than something new that was dropped upon them, and that perhaps in place of zines, members of the Fourth Wave are creating digital equivalents by creating blogs, twitter campaigns, and other online media such as podcasts and magazines (paragraph 20).

In order to understand the intentions that feminist media producers have around the creation of alternative, participatory spaces for their users, it is important to understand how FMPs are typically constructed and used. Steiner (2012) writes that for the feminist movement, mainstream media has always been suspect, guilty of sexism and misrepresentation. Regardless of this, feminists have used each new medium that has emerged, including platforms available through the internet, in order to "to carve out space in which to share women's news and feminist perspectives among themselves and with wider publics," (p. 182). Piano (2002) investigates Third Wave Feminist subcultural production and its use of language and technological practices in ways that counter dominant mainstream and economic values. She posits that these technologies assist feminist producers in building alternative economic practices, that "through writing, editing, distributing, and consuming texts and other goods, they become better technologically equipped and increasingly informed about issues that are pertinent to women," (paragraph 8). One of the most notable studies to date in the area of feminist media production is Zobl & Reitsamer's (2012) "Feminist Media Production in Europe: a Research Report." In this work, the scholars provide a solid review of how feminists have used media throughout history in order to inform, motivate, and mobilize political action, framing this within Lievrouw's Genre Framework for Alternative and Activist media. They describe feminist media production as allowing for the "development of creative, analytical, and literary skills within a cycle of analysis, reflection, and action," (2011, p. 21), and state that, in terms of production, FMPs do not require large initial costs, especially outside of institutionalized settings.

Many scholars also emphasize that FMPs present views opposing the status quo, in fact effecting social change, and that this might be one of the driving forces for the creation of these alternative media outlets (Zobl & Reitsamer, 2012; Grunangerl, 2012; Chidgey, 2014).

Grunangerl's (2012) interviews demonstrate that the producers of FMPs feel that they do this by documenting the challenges and interventions that they participate in, and by amplifying voices and stories that are not present in the dominant media. They also present alternative images not seen in the mainstream and provide information on subjects that are taboo or seen as "too subversive," (p. 116). Chidgey (2014) also argues that producers of FMPs feel that their products can affect lives and create change. Zobl and Reitsamer (2011) found that FMPs were in fact a participatory alternative media that can give an alternative stance on issues that cannot be found in the mainstream, that networking with alternative media producers is important, and that they are characterized as interventionist proponents of social change that interrupt or alter existing conditions, with the heterogeneity of the voices involved in creating content is one of the crucial components. The authors argue that (print) FMPs are characteristic of Third Wave Feminism, as they fit into to Garrison's (2000) suggestion that the use of new media technologies for communication, cultural production and political activism, as well networking between women of different age cohorts are defining features of this movement.

Part Three: How do alternative media function as Participatory Spaces

Jensen et al. (2006), in writing about new media's ability to support it, defines participatory culture as one with "low barriers" and therefore high access to "artistic expression and civic engagement," (p. 3), with support for both the creation and distribution process, informal mentorship usually through information exchange, and a sense of community, or some degree of social connection with one another. This sense of community is characterized by feelings of inclusion, belonging, connection and being heard, and that a participant's contribution matters. Jensen et al. also note that for a participatory space to work, not every member must contribute to the community, but all must feel like they "are free to contribute when ready and

that what they contribute will be appropriately valued," (p.7). Lievrouw (2011) states that "new media has allowed its audiences to become both users and participants within complex ecologies of divides, diversities, networks, communities, and literacies, has created new opportunities for expression and interaction," (p.1), and have become powerful tools for challenging views presented by the mainstream. Lievrouw goes on to state that the power of new media lies less in the information that it presents, but in the potential communities that it can create (2012).

Sandoval and Fuchs (2009) present a critical theory of alternative media, in which they give an overview of how it can act as a participatory space, by acting as participatory media. The authors also examine whether participation is a suitable concept for defining alternative media. They state that if participatory media stresses that if media production is made available to a broader audience, democratic media potentials can be reached (2009). Coudry also writes that the ability and potential of alternative media to open up media production to a broader public, the existing ideas of what is presented in the mass media can be challenged through the presentation of other versions or perspectives on reality. He also argues that participatory media has the ability to challenge the concentration of symbolic power in terms of the representation of ideas (2003). Sandoval and Fuchs also allude to various possible benefits of participatory media, through the work of Servaes, who argues that it can be an agent for "social change, culture development, and democratization," (1999, p. 269). Additional scholars, including such as Couldry (2003), Carpentier (2007), Dagron (2004), Girard (1992), Janikowski (2003), and Rodriguez (2003) all argue that components of participatory media "empower ordinary people by giving them a voice," (Sandoval and Fuchs, 2009).

A participatory space is space that allows a participatory culture to thrive. In their introduction to their seminal work, *Feminist Media - Participatory Spaces, Networks, and*

Cultural Citizenship, Druecke and Zobl (2012) explore how feminist media products and producers create, negotiate, engage spaces that support participatory practices, and the numerous case studies in this volume offer a variety of answers, largely focusing on FMPs produced in Europe. They have found that there is typically far less hierarchy in production, consumers can also be producers of content, which helps to create participatory spaces or a participatory culture (Chidgey, 2014). Druecke and Zobl (2012) argue that these FMPs do not co-modify mass media, but rather, operate outside of it. They focus on knowledge and information exchange, they spread concepts that can help to liberate and emancipate those who have been systematically oppressed, and they envision and encourage social change. Additionally, Reitsamer and Zobl (2014) state that alternative media, such as FMPs, offer a space for critical making, to reflect on one's own position in society, and to advance social change.

Grunangerl (2012), in interviewing founders of FMPs asked what role they think that feminist media do/should "play in creating and negotiating participatory spaces and networks, and which strategies do they think would be most effective to create, maintain and strengthen these spaces," (p. 111). She also asks how important it is to the founders or creators to enable participation for their users. Generally speaking, the respondents felt that it was important to build relationships with their users, to provide a space for feminist voices, and offer readers an opportunity to engage in action and connect with likeminded people. Additionally, it appears to be very important for the creators to interact with readers and to create participatory spaces for various voices that allow or facilitate self-organizing.

Sandoval and Fuchs also outline the benefits on society of the participatory production process by referring to the work of Servaes (1989) and Carpentier (2009). They outline Servaes' argument that participatory media is an agent for social change and democratization, and

Carpentier's view that fostered alternative participatory media strengthens civic attitude, and allows citizens to be "active in one of the many (micro-) spheres relevant to daily life and to put their right to communication in to practice," (Sandoval and Fuchs, 2009, p.142). Sandoval and Fuchs also point out that according to Couldry (2003), Carpentier (2007), Rodriguez (2003), and Dagron (2004), participatory media challenges the concentration of symbolic power, that it empowers ordinary people by allowing them to be heard, and helps them to live a self-directed life. This MRP will look at whether digital FMPs continue to support this.

Research Questions

The review of the literature has resulted in the formulation of three overarching Research Questions for this MRP. These are as follows:

RQ1: How do digital FMPs align with recent definitions of "Alternative Media," including that of Lievrouw's Genre Framework for Alternative Media and Framework for New Social Movements (2011), and Atkinson three definitions of alternative media (2011)? This question will chiefly explore whether existing definitions of Alternative Media are sufficient to describe FMPs, or whether there are additional considerations that might be added.

RQ2: What chief characteristics are prevalent within English language North American (within Canada and the U.S), digital FMPs, not just in terms of content, but also in terms of media type, and what is its relevance to alternative media?

RQ3: How do FMPs function as participatory spaces for their users? This question will focus on the various participatory components that FMPs might include that permit a consumer to also become a producer, thus actively participating in the movement's community.

Although there has been much investigation on the nature of FMPs in Europe, there is a gap in the literature in regard to FMPs in the U.S and Canada. My MRP will attempt to fill this gap.

Methods

Qualitative Content Analysis

Qualitative Content Analysis was chosen in order to collect information pertaining to all three Research Questions. Content analysis was chosen as a research method, as it typically identifies clear categories that showcase or point to important messaging or function of a media product, although the categories that fall within content analysis are quite diverse, and vary from study to study (Jupp, 2006). This is because categories to be evaluated depend largely on the research question that the researcher would like to answer, and therefore, categories specific to research question must be designed with care (Bryman et al., 2012). Content analysis was chosen for this MRP because it has several advantages. It is an unobtrusive way of analyzing textual information (Colorado State University, 2018), and can be used to measure value positions (Bryman et. al., 2012). Another benefit of content analysis is that a large amount of content can be reduced to a small number of codes that can be analyzed mathematically. It is a method that allows the researcher to learn about a media's production policies, target audience, politics, and financial support. It is also easily replicable (University of California, n.d), hence, quite fitting in terms of the stated RQs of this MRP.

Data Collection

Sampling methods and criteria
    a. *Selection Criteria:* For the purpose of this MRP, the following sampling criteria were used:

- The FMP must be produced in the United States or in Canada

- The FMP's primary language must be English, although the inclusion of additional languages does not void inclusion in the study

- The FMP must have produced new content in the last six months

- The FMP must identify as feminist or present feminist values

- The FMP must be delivered through a digital, although the type (magazine, blog, podcast, etc.,) can vary

b. *Selection Method***:** The list of FMPs was developed in April 2018. A master list of FMPs was created by using the Google search engine using the following terms:

i. "Feminist" and magazine and Canada

ii. "Feminist" and magazine and United States

iii. "Feminist" and blog and Canada

iv. "Feminist" and blog and United States

Additionally, several articles were found, within existing FMPs, that recommended other FMPs, for example, Ellenthal's "8 Totally Rad Feminist Zines you Need to Check Out," (n.d), published in BUST Magazine. When not already present as a result of the Google search described above, FMPs listed within these articles were added as well.

Initially, a list of 86 FMPs was created, however, as the data analysis process began for each one, many ended up not qualifying for inclusion due to the sampling criteria described above. Two criteria in particular that contributed to the elimination of FMPs originally listed were the location of production (outside of the U.S. and Canada), and the currency of the content (last article or media item published more than six months ago).

Due to the scope and timeline associated with this MRP, and the considerable time that it took to analyze each FMP for the designated content, the decision was made to limit the convenience sample size to 50 FMPs.

Data Analysis

A content analysis schedule and manual was constructed, in order to collect data consistently. Both data collection tools were tested, and adjusted accordingly. During this test period, numerous categories not considered before, for example, information regarding social media activity, was added. It was also discovered during this tool testing period, that it was quite time consuming to collect all relevant data pertaining to each FMP, with times ranging between thirty and forty five minutes.

Typically, when constructing categories to evaluate, researchers will aim to devise them in such a way that captures favorable or unfavorable attitudes (Jupp, 2006). This was not the case for the purposes of this MRP, as it was the goal of the researcher to tabulate various components of the FMPs to facilitate their description, and to analyze the stated aims of the producers of a cross section of FMPs, rather than their attitudes towards specific topics. In addition to measuring the frequency of a variety of features that FMPs contain, the qualitative content analysis collected data contained within the "mission," "about," and "goals," or similar sections of the FMPs. There was potential here to assess the typical position that feminist media producers hold in regard to purpose that their FMPs provide. Data regarding the general themes or topics that the FMP focused on was also collected, in order to ascertain the how FMPs fit into various models of alternative media. It should be noted that various components of the research design have been borrowed from two studies. The first is Zobl and Reitsamer's *Feminist Media*

Production in Europe: A Research Report (2012), and Coulson's *Exploring the Canadian*

Feminist Blogosphere (2012). The categories for analysis were largely borrowed from the latter.

Description of Data Categories, Collection, and their relation to the RQs

Once the list of FMPs was compiled, data coding and analysis began. The following

information was collected for each FMP:

i. **Basic descriptive information**: FMP name, url, and media type (online magazine, blog,

podcast, zine, website, or other, with "other" being specified when found), along with location

(United States or Canada). This information was included for identification purposes, and to

assess the scope of types of FMPs that are commonly being produced.

ii. **Funding:** In order to evaluate whether FMPs fit into Lievrouw (2011) and Atkinson's (2011)

definitions of alternative media, information was collected about support for production. This

included information around funding models, including advertising, sponsorship or donations,

and monthly memberships/subscriptions as a means of support for production. Additionally, data

was collected to denote whether the FMP is for or non-profit, as this plays a factor in whether the

FMP can be considered alternative media.

iii. **Authorship and Audience:** In order to evaluate whether FMPs can be described as

alternative media, both authorship and audience had to be examined. As such, information for

each FMP was collected in the following categories:

Authorship: whether the FMP was authored or produced by an individual, many authors, an

organization, or a collective. Data was also collected as to whether author biographies are

available, demographics for the authors where the author self-disclosed as part of a minority

group, the level of education that the authors of the FMP have, and whether they are

professionals, specifically if they were professionals working within media. Data around authorship and demographic was collected in order to evaluate who is producing the FMPs, who has access to the means of production, and whose voice is being heard. These are all important components of both Atkinson's and Lievrouw's models. Gathering this data allows for comparisons of what is apparent within the production of FMPs in relation to the universality of those models.

Audience: the audience was largely determined when analyzing the mission/about statements of the FMPs, as this is typically where this information was stated.

iv. **Subject areas**: In order to get an understanding of the general topic covered by the FMPs, again, to assess the prevalent characteristics of these media products, and to further establish whether FMPs can fit into the above mentioned definitions and models of alternative media, specifically in relation to alternative content.

v. **Mission/About sections and alternative media**: The mission and about sections are also analyzed in order to assess whether the FMP producers are conscientiously creating alternative media. Again, the textual content of these sections is analyzed using Voyant, a textual analysis software that creates an index or corpus, in order to identify consistent vocabulary that might indicate motivation.

Participatory features: In order to assess how FMPs function as participatory spaces, as defined by Jensen et al., data was gathered to assess the prevalence of features that allow the audiences of FMPs to participate within a community, rather than just passively consume content. First, textual information was gathered from the "mission" or "about" sections of the FMPs. The data

was run through Voyant, in order to determine to what extent the producers of the FMPs intend

to create participatory spaces or communities. Additionally, the following data was gathered:

a. Frequency of publication - in order to assess how frequently the audience can engage

   with new content

b. Ability to comment on content and the prevalence of discussion - in order to assess

   whether the audience can contribute their own insight, and whether they are using this

   feature

c. Prevalence and popularity of social media channels including Twitter, Facebook, and

   Instagram - including the number of followers, interaction with last post to assess

   whether the discussion is happening through these channels

d. Call for submissions to assess whether the audience can also contribute content as a way

   of participating

e. Contact information - to see whether the audience can engage directly with the producers

   of the FMPs as a way of participating in the commuting, similar to the way that audiences

   write "letters to the editor" in more traditional print publications

f. Opportunities for internships or volunteering in order to further assess to what extent

   participation is possible.

g. Events listings, including those that may be listed through Facebook, again to see

whether the audience can participate within a broader community.

h. Ability to sign up for a list-serv or a RSS feed in order to be notified of new and stay up

to date with content

i. Audience: Again, within the mission or "about" section, assessing who the target

audience for the FMP is, as this re-emphasizes the creation of a community. The FMPs,

for the most part, are clear who they are reaching out to. For example, BUST Magazine

states that:

BUST addresses a refreshing variety of young women's interests, including celebrity
interviews, music, fashion, art, crafting, sex, and news. Hip, humorous, and
honest, *BUST* is a cheeky celebration of all things female and a trusted authority on up-
and-coming trends among discerning, educated, and culturally aware women (n.d.).

In this case, the target audience would be young women who are culturally aware.

Once data was coded, analysis was carried out by category. Findings and Discussion have been

organized by research question, in hopes of clearly outlining the results.

Findings and Discussion

**Research Question One: How do FMPs fit into two contemporary models of Alternative
Media?**

Many of the characteristics that comprise FMPs are in line with the definitions that Atkinson (2011), and

Lievrouw (2011) present, however, upon examining the data gathered through the categories outlined

above, there is also some deviation. Both models have been applied with the results outlined below.

A. **Atkinson's Three Definitions of Alternative and Feminist Media Production**

Several categories outlined in the methods were contributed in order to assess to what extent FMPs can be defined as alternative media according to Atkinson's three definitions. They are broken down here by the definitions.

1. Alternative Content

In order to assess whether the content of FMPs can be defined as alternative to what is usually contained in the mainstream, the following categories were examined: Authorship, Subjects, Mission Statement, and Media Type. Additionally, whether the FMPs were not-for-profit was also considered, as Atkinson states that alternative media is typically produced by non-commercial entities that are challenging power structures and attempting to transform social roles.

Authorship

In considering Atkinson's definition for alternative media offering alternative content, is that it is not only the subject matter that can be alternative, but also the voice through which it is delivered. It is interesting that 70% of the FMPs examined included author and staff biographies, whether in a separate section within the platform, or at the end of the entries or articles that the authors may have published. There are numerous reasons why FMP producers would want to include the biographies of their staff or authors as part of their content. A biography that includes background and experience can often tell the reader what they can gain from reading something that is written by that person. In addition to this, a biography can help to establish credibility about the information being delivered (Patel, 2017). Another major reason why biographies might be included is that FMPs tend to reach out to those that are marginalized by the mass

media. It may be the case that knowing someone's background and experiences may generate relational feelings in the reader: a sense that their story can be told through the voice of someone with similar backgrounds or experiences.

The data collected anecdotally indicates that members of traditionally racially marginalized groups, and groups that have been marginalized due to sexual orientation do have the opportunity (and appear to take it) to create content. Self-disclosed demographic data was collected in order to track whether minority groups were active participants in the creation of FMPs. More than 50% of the FMPs disclosed that at least one active author or producer connected to the product identified as a being part of a minority group, in addition to being a woman. Figure 1 displays the findings, demonstrating that numerous minority groups are in fact represented.
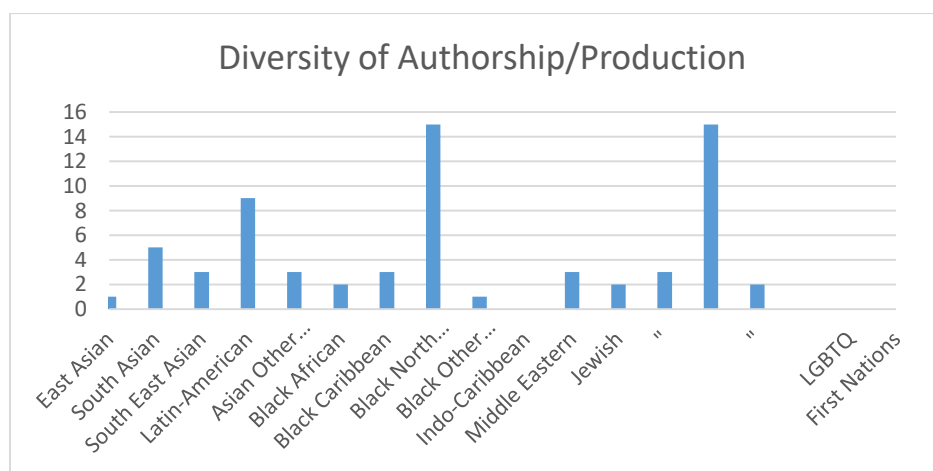

Figure 1: Self-reported minority groups within FMP Production

In terms of Atkinson's definition, this indicates that the content that is presented by FMPs is in fact alternative, because it is presenting a perspective that is not typically seen in mainstream media.

Goal and Mission Statements

In analyzing the texts of the mission or goal statements that are prevalent on each FMP, it was noted that in numerous instances, the producers of the FMP referred to it as independent alternative to the mainstream. There were three major themes that emerged here that help to define FMPs as alternative media, according to Atkinson's definition.

First, was a description indicating that the FMP is a response or an alternative to mainstream media. Perhaps one of the most poignant example of this is *Bitch Media's* mission statement. The FMP states "Bitch Media is a nonprofit, independent, feminist media organization dedicated to providing and encouraging an engaged, thoughtful feminist response to mainstream media and popular culture." The story also lies in the title of *Bitch Media*'s magazine: Bitch, A Feminist Response to Pop Culture. Other FMPs also indicate that they are a reaction to the mainstream. *For Harriet's* mission is "to provide a thoughtful, collaborative alternative to mainstream media representations of Black womanhood." In their mission statement, *Liisbeth* emphasizes that they are an independent media voice. In reading about the history of *Ms. Magazine*'s history, as outlined in their about section, the producers of the FMP state that

> *Ms.* was a brazen act of independence in the 1970s. At the time, the fledgling feminist movement was either denigrated or dismissed in the mainstream media — if it was mentioned at all.

Another common theme that has emerged through the analysis of the mission and about sections of FMPs are that they are primarily trying to give a voice to the voiceless: groups that have been traditionally marginalized, and continue to be marginalized by the mainstream media. *Bitch Media* seeks to be a "revitalizing voice in contemporary feminism, one that welcomes complex arguments and refuses to ignore the contradictory and often uncomfortable realities of life in an unequivocally gendered world," (n.d.). *Shameless* calls itself a "gutsy voice in today's

media landscape, dedicated to exposing under-the-radar stories," (n.d.), while *Black Girl Talking*

"wants to amplify the voices, experiences and expressions of queer and trans people of color,"

(n.d.). This need to "amplify" is also shared by *Femsplain*, who "inspires discussion and

connection through storytelling by amplifying the voices of trans/cis women, and gender

nonconforming individuals," (n.d.), while Lilith is concerned with amplifying Jewish Women's

voices, "creating a woman-positive Judaism." Minola Review "features all women and is

carefully curated for only the strongest, fiercest, most honest voices," (n.d.). *The Establishment*

states that the conversation is "more interesting when everyone has a voice," (n.d.). The FMP

Feministe, offers a clear outline of how they intend to foster a dynamic feminist community.

Amongst the many points they make, they state that they want to prioritize women's voices and

center discussion in "pro-feminist, anti-oppression, and broadly intersectional social justice

worldviews;" they want seek new voices with "diverse feminisms and lived experience," (n.d).

Within the mission and about statements promoted by the FMPs, the theme of diversity

frequently arises as well. *Feministe* emphasizes the need to solicit diverse guest bloggers in order

to "expand the range of views expressed" through the FMP. *Herizons* aims to reflect a

philosophy that is diverse while remaining relevant to the experiences of women's daily lives,

(n.d.). *Sophomore Magazine* works hard in order to elevate the "voices, works, and faces of

different genders, sexualities, ethnicities, abilities, and other intersections of identity, through

intelligent, engaging long form content and bold visual language," (n.d.). *Wear Your Voices*

wants to provide unique insight into daily experiences in order to "incorporate diversity into our

lives," and offering "refreshing perspectives," (n.d). In looking at Atkinson's first definition of

alternative media, the various but consistent themes emerging from the mission and about

statements of the FMPs, it is clear that the perspective from which the information is presented is what defines the product as alternative media.

Subjects

An obvious category for analysis in terms of alternative content is in looking at the subjects that FMPs typically publish on. In her study, Coulson (2016) devised various categories of subjects that are discussed by Feminist blogs, and assigned a major theme to each blog that she examined. Similar categories were used to assess the topics covered by the FMPs, however, a general theme was not selected unless noted in the FMP's mission. Instead, every subject category was noted for each FMP analyzed. On average, it was assessed that each FMP offered unique perspectives on 16 various topics, ranging from gender identity, race, reproductive rights, social justice, and a multitude of other subjects that are related to women. Gender equality was the most prevalent subject amongst the FMPs examined, which perhaps isn't surprising, as feminism's primary concern lies with gender equality. Please see figure 2 for a list of categories used, and how frequently they appeared as a topic covered within the FMP. Additional topics emerged as well. These included the idea of self-care, beauty, romantic relationships, sex work, technology, poverty and homelessness, environment, education, mental health, pregnancy, food, advancing in the workplace, indigenous issues (specifically in Canadian FMPs), entrepreneurship, classism, human rights, celebrities and Hollywood, sports, and numerous others.

Frequency and Breadth of Subjects

Subjects/Topics (vertical axis), from top to bottom:
Police Brutality, Disability, Body image, Activism, Gun violence, Women's march/slutwalk, Immigration/migration, Culture, Art, Anti-oppression, Parenting, LGBQT, Popular culture, Abuse/sexual assault/rape, Personal stories, Law/policies, Representation of women in thd media, Social Justice, Gender Identity, Reproductive Rights, Women's Health, Politics, Feminism, Sexuality, Race, Gender Equality

Horizontal axis: Frequency of Appearance (0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60)

Figure 2: Subjects by Frequency of Appearance

In her *Blog this! An introduction to blogs, blogging, and the Feminist Blogosphere,* Tobias described several categories of feminist blogs including personal, topical, collaborative, political, corporate, and advice blogs (2005). In many cases, Tobias' categories, broadened here to encompass all FMP media types rather than just blogs, can also be applied. According to Tobias, topical blogs focus on either a general or specific theme, or can also focus on both (2005). Many of the FMPs within the sample size can be described as focusing on a general theme, meaning that they include various articles or entries that broadly fit within the FMP's mission. What emerges, however, is that many of the FMPs, more broadly categorized under feminism, focus on a specific theme. *Adios Barbie*, for example, self describes itself as a "one

stop body image shop for identity issues including size, race, media, and more," (Adios Barbie, n.d.). The entries published here, focus on topics closely related to body image, for example, eating disorders, aging, and disability. Another example of a thematically specific blog is *Geek Feminism*, a multi-author blog that "exists to support, encourage, and discuss issues facing women and non-binary people in geek communities, including science and technology, gaming, SF fandom, and more," (*Geek Feminism*, n.d.). Many of the blog entries here focus specifically on women's and non-binary peoples experience in technology fields such as computer programming.

A flaw of the data gathering process for this MRP is that there was no effort made to examine whether these topics are covered extensively in the mainstream press. It is clear from the analysis, however, that FMPs present information on topics that can be described as either controversial, or that is of interest to those that might have a harder time in accessing it from mainstream sources. What is more important is that even though the topics may be covered by mainstream media, FMPs present information on the topics from a perspective that is not typically present in mainstream channels. Thus, the subjects covered by FMPs fit into Atkinson's first definition of Alternative Media. FMPs have allowed for increased opportunities for expression among activists, including the feminists that are behind the creation of FMPs. Coulson (2016) argues that media platforms allow for the creation of a space for marginalized groups, such as those fighting for women's rights, to declare their opinions and perspective. She states that the "feminist blogosphere may be an important political tool because it provides another outlet for voices of resistance that are typically silenced by the mainstream media," (p. 6). In 2005, Tobias referred to blogs as a "modern manifestation of our First Amendment rights," providing both a voice and an audience for those who create them, including feminists.

For Profit versus Non-Profit

78% (n=39) of the FMPs examined describe themselves as not-for-profit. It should be noted that there is some debate in the literature around the benefits and detriments of operating as a media not-for-profit. The benefits for not-for-profits is that they are eligible for numerous tax exemptions, and can also apply for grant funding. The detriment is that they cannot engage in political activities, such as endorsing a political candidate (Gronenveld, 2016). Some FMPs are very conscientious about this and have chosen a status with this in mind. Liisbeth, for example, an FMP that focuses on Feminism and Entrepreneurship, states that they are an incorporated for profit social enterprise, which means that they are "free to advocate politically," (Liisbeth, n.d.). This shows that even when an FMP choses to be commercial, they may be doing so in order to be able to enact social change in a more effective way. Other well established commercial FMPs, such as BUST Magazine emphasize that they do not have a parent company or corporate backers, regardless of the fact that they are for profit. This data indicates that FMPs can fit into Atkinson's first definition of alternative content, as FMPs tend to be non-commercial entities that present alternatives to the mainstream structure.

2. **Enacting of Audience Strategies**

Atkinson's second definition describing alternative media is that the products themselves are constructed in a way that support audiences to enact interpretive strategies. This means that audiences, when they consume these FMPs, feel pleasure in knowing that they are consuming something that diverges from the status quo. The categories analyzed in order to assess as to whether this is the case include the targeted audiences of the FMPs, as well as components of their mission statements.

Audiences and Missions

In analyzing the FMPs, it was discovered that many of the products did make it clear in their

missions that they are targeting a particular audience. Audience can be typically identified in the

mission statements of the media products. The FMPs tend to define audience groups by age,

ethnicity, sexual orientation, profession, or by a specific area of interest. The common theme

throughout was a concern with issues impacting women. By identifying a particular audience and

providing them with information that they would likely be unable to attain through mainstream

media, the FMPs are supporting their audience in enacting their interpretive strategies. There are

numerous examples of this. In its mission statement, *Autostraddle,* a trans-friendly FMP, states

that it aims to be:

> an accepting and supportive environment for lesbian, bisexual and queer trans women.
> Although Autostraddle is a website created for and primarily aimed at lesbian, bisexual
> and queer women, as the community evolves we also are starting to include work by and
> about non-binary-identified people too……. We seek to be a fresh, energizing voice for
> lesbian, bisexual and queer women, one that takes the reader seriously and encourages
> intelligent discourse, one that entertains with funny, uncensored and brutally honest
> conversation and content (n.d.)

This statement tells the targeted audiences that they are consuming something especially created

for them, with a new perspective that is not in keeping with the status quo of the mainstream.

Geek Feminism, for example, targets women and non-binary people in what are considered

broadly as "geek communities" such as science and technology, gaming, sci-fi fandom, and other

areas, in hopes of supporting, encouraging, and facilitating discussions for that particular group

(Geek Feminism, n.d.). *Hook and Eye* has been developed with women working within the

Canadian academic system in mind, describing itself as an intervention and invitation. *Brown*

Girl Talking (for South Asian women by South Asian women), *For Harriet* (an online

community for women of African ancestry with story-telling being a "vehicle for community

building and environment,") and *Reappropriate* have been developed for specific minority

groups, as a reaction to underrepresentation in mass media, providing a space to enact

interpretive strategies to its audience. *Minola Review* and *Witches be Bitches* are literary FMPs

that publish the work of women only. Robin Richardson, the founder of *Minola Review* writes:

> I created Minola Review, named after Katherine Minola, the shrew who is arguably
> broken by men in Taming of the Shrew, in an attempt to resuscitate that stifled voice.
> Minola Review features all women and is carefully curated for only the strongest,
> fiercest, most honest voices. Minola Review is a space for us to inhabit our full female
> selves, to be messy, real, goofy, angry, and bewildered without worrying about censoring
> for or pandering to the visions and opinions of men.

Here, Richardson is clearly outlining that the space that she has created is an alternative to

anything that might exist in the mainstream in terms of giving women an opportunity to publish,

allowing the audience to imagine that they are really supporting something going against the

status quo. *Shameless* magazine describes itself as "fiercely independent and proudly subversive,

representing those that are underrepresented in the mainstream. *FEM* dedicates itself to

"perspectives that might be otherwise marginalized, erased, or silenced in the mainstream

media." They also aim to offer perceptive critique of pop culture, report news and current events

that we believe are essential to the feminist cause, and provide a space for creative feminist

work, (n.d.). It appears that in many cases, FMPs position themselves very openly as alternative

media, and promote themselves as an alternative to the mainstream. *Feminist Current states*

> We provide a unique perspective on male violence against women, pop culture, politics,
> current events, sexuality, gender, and many other issues that are often underrepresented
> or misrepresented by mainstream, progressive, and feminist media sources (n.d.)

The fact that this is prevalent amongst FMPs fits into Atkinson's second definition of alternative

media: that of interpretive strategies for audiences. The FMPs are making it clear to the audience

that by consuming this media product, you are reading the alternative to what is appearing in the mainstream.

FMPs also allow their audiences to enact interpretive strategies based on their themes. In terms of thematic FMPs, it is evident that some focus on specific topics related to issues that impact women through a specific lens, one not represented elsewhere in the mainstream. *Adios Barbie*, for example, fights to

> broaden the concepts of body image to include race, gender LGBTQ, dis/ability, age, and size. And while that's a mouthful, we believe that body image, like identity, happens in the mind. In fact, a person's body image has very little to do with one's actual body. Rather, it comes from external influences, beliefs, habits, and conversations (n.d.).

By stating that they handle the topic of body image from an intersectional perspective, the producers of this particular FMP can persuade their audience that they are going against the grain by consuming it. This is line with Atkinson's definition of shaping interpretive strategies, because they emphasize how they diverge from the mainstream, therefore qualifying them as alternative.

3. **Participating in Alternative Production**

Atkinson argues that alternative media can also be defined as such if it is created using alternative production, and thus outside of media conglomerates in economically strained conditions, often containing content from distinguished authors, and using the internet by soliciting content directly from the audience of the media product (2011). In order to assess whether FMPs participate in alternative production, the following categories were evaluated: Funding models, authorship, and as well as the "call for submissions" participatory feature.

Funding Models

Funding information was collected for each FMP in order to determine to what extent it fit into Atkinson's definitions for alternative media production. As with other traits examined, there was a diversity in the funding models used by the FMPs, including advertising, donations (including monthly donations), sponsorship, and grant funding. What follows is a breakdown of some key financial characteristics, with commentary on the implications for Atkinson's definition.

As mentioned above, the majority of FMPs appear to be not-for-profit (78% of the 50 examined, or n=39). This makes them eligible for certain tax exemptions, as well as for certain grant funding, although not-for-profit status also hinders political participation (Gronenveld, 2016). Those that choose to be for profit (such as *Liisbeth)*, do so for that very purpose – so that they are free to advocate politically. 52% of the FMPs examined also outlined how donations could be made in order to support the media product. Some FMPs are creative in structuring donations. *Guts Magazine*, for example, asks for specific amounts for very specific purposes. They are adamant about paying their contributors, and therefore ask $50 donation to sponsor a visual artist, a $100 donation to sponsor an issue contributor, and a $500 dollar donation in order to co-sponsor and issue. What is also interesting is that 64% of the for-profit FMPs also accepted donations. *BUST Magazine* states the following in this regard:

> During these troubling political times, independent feminist media is more vital than ever. Here at BUST, we have no parent company and no corporate backers, which means we can publish exactly what we think about the incoming administration without censorship. But because we're an indie, we're really struggling financially right now, and we need your help to survive (n.d.).

54% of the FMPs accept advertising funds while the remainder choose not to. Some scholars have outlined that engaging the commercial marketplace is fraught with challenges for FMPs (Groneveld, 2016). The concerns are two-pronged. First, those that find a measure of success

are sometimes accused of selling out to corporate entities, which takes away from the legitimacy of their interpretive strategy for audiences (Atkinson, 2011). Atkinson argues that one of the qualities that can classify a media product as alternative is its ability to stir in the audience the pleasurable feeling that what they are reading is divergent from the mainstream (p.17). If an FMP is seen to "sell out" as a result of the advertisers that they take on, they may lose credibility amongst their audience, and may, eventually, lose their audience as well. A second issue that can arise is that of controversy around advertising choices. For example, in the mid-1990s, Sassy Magazine, which has been described as "being inflected by feminism unlike any other girl's magazine," (Groenveld, 2016, p. 25), as a result of running a condom ad, was the target of a massive boycott by the right wing, and was eventually forced to pull content that was considered too sexually charged. It was observed that some of the FMPs are very conscientious regarding this. The podcast "Call your Girlfriend" states the following in their mission statement:

> We believe in giving people credit and paying people fairly. We also believe in paying ourselves, which means we accept advertising dollars and sell merchandise and tickets to our live events. We recognize that all money is dirty, but we also apply an ethical framework to our decisions and make every effort to work with businesses that consider the ethical implications of their choices, too.

This statement implies that the founders behind the publication indicate that they choose advertisers wisely.

It appears that some of the FMPs use sponsored content as well, similar to their mainstream counterparts. Sponsored content often mimics the qualities of the platform that it is delivered through, taking the same form and qualities of original content that is presented. It is usually presented in such a way as to favorably influence the perception of the sponsor brand in the eyes of the audience (Sonderman and Tran, 2013). Some of the FMPs, as in the case of *Brown Girl Magazine*, are very transparent in this regard. Others, like *Bustle*, are not. In many cases, it is

impossible to tell whether a content is sponsored or not, especially if the FMP chooses not to disclose this. There may be an ethical concern with the inclusion of sponsored content within FMPs, which is also similar when it is included in mainstream media. According to Moore, this is because the inclusion of sponsored content blurs the lines between editorial and advertising, and can fool the reader into thinking that the products or services described are being directly supported or promoted by the editorial team, specifically when no disclaimer is displayed. If a disclaimer is displayed (as in the case of *Brown Girl Magazine*), the reader is less likely for readers to be tricked in believing that the written piece is editorial, when in fact it is advertising. This is a common strategy taken by media in the mainstream. It is difficult to determine the reasoning behind this for FMPs without further investigation involving direct contact with producers, and perhaps an area for further investigation. One assumption might be that FMPs are adapting this technique in order to survive economically.

Many of the FMPs analyzed have a monthly membership model in place, including *Shameless, Bitch, Autostraddle, Liisbeth, Feminist Current, Wear Your Voices*, and numerous others. The cost of monthly membership varies, and there are numerous monetary amounts available, as low as $3. Incentives are sometimes given for membership. Autostraddle, has the "A+ program," which states that it gives member access to additional, behind the scenes content, insider newsletters, and a discount for merchandise. Many of the cases for membership also emphasize that monthly support will ensure that the FMP will remain free for its consumer. Some FMPs employ the use of a service such as Patreon, a membership platform encouraging patronage, in order to generate operational funds. There are numerous benefits to using a membership model, as many charities have been using it for decades. Primarily, it offers a steady and predictable source of income for the FMP, and is easy and inexpensive to administer

(Canada Helps, 2014). Additionally, it was found that in 72% of the FMPs, content was not restricted from a financial perspective, meaning that the audience could access all content free of charge. Also, except for in the case of *Make/Shift Magazine*, FMP producers made at least some content available free of charge for the audience, which is something that mainstream media does as well. It was also found that some FMPs chose to seek out sponsorships in addition to other sources of income. *Liisbeth*, for example, has a sponsorship opportunities that vary from Community Partner ($5000 annually) to Advocate ($500 annually), all with varying benefits. Additionally, many of the FMPs appear to operate as a result of grant funding, including *Room, Guts, Minola Review, Shameless, and THIS Magazine*, the last actually receiving operational funding from the Ontario Arts Council. In many cases, however, the grants are one time only gifts.

From the various funding models present within the 50 FMPs that were examined, it becomes quite clear that the majority of producers rely on income that is unsteady in terms of delivery, and thus can cause economic strain on production. The exceptions here would be FMPs such as *Broadly* that are funded through media conglomerates like Vice (in which, incidentally, Disney has a 10% stake), as well as *Bustle*, which is part of a large media conglomerate, Bustle Digital Group Publications, which also includes *Romper, Elite Daily, and the Zoe Report,* and reaches about 80 million millenial women a month. The impact of this economic strain is discussed in more detail below, in the "Call for Submissions" section.

It should be pointed out that because there are exceptions to the idea that FMPs must be produced under economically strained conditions in order to be considered alternative, Atkinson's (2011) claim can be considered inaccurate, and in fact, exclusionary. Just because a

publication has economic means, or uses a business model that produces successful results, this should not exclude it from being considered alternative, both in its scope, and its practice.

Authorship and Production

Upon examining the small sample of FMPs for the purposes of this MRP, it was found that the majority (96% or n=48) were collaborative in nature, meaning that both production and authorship was a shared responsibility amongst more than one person. In terms of definition of the categories, the FMP was classified as individual if there was only one person responsible for the content, although even here, the producer would integrate either the work of well known feminists, as in the case of *Angry Girl Feminist* who incorporates the writings of bell hooks, and Valerie Solanas, or would from time to time include guest entries from other writers, as in the case of *Reappropriate*. This was actually not often the case. The vast majority (82% or n=41) of the FMPs examined can be described as having a small core staff, relying on either a group of regular contributors, or reaching out to contributors through crowdsourcing. There was also a small percentage (14% or n=7) of FMPs that could be described as being produced by organizations or collectives. These typically relied on the same contributors, and may have been a component of a larger organization.

In regard to the FMPs as framed by Atkinson's definition for production, there is some digression here. Atkinson states that a common feature of alternative media is a decentralization of production: that one person is responsible for multiple roles simultaneously. Numerous FMPs did not appear to use this structure. In the cases of *Adios Barbie*, *Autostraddle*, *Bitch*, *Feminist Wire*, *Shameless Magazine*, and numerous others, it appears that each staff member or volunteer

is responsible for a specific task. Some FMPs, like in the case of *Brown Girl Talking*, do not make this information readily available. Others, such as in the case of *Wear Your Voices*, which describes itself as an intersectional feminist magazine, staff members are charged with several tasks. For example, one listed staff member is tasked with Audience Engagement Management as well as being a contributing writer. Additionally, Atkinson states that FMP producers would often rely on previously published works to be distributed through the FMP in hopes of gaining a following, however this was the case in only one FMP, *Angry Girl Feminist,* as mentioned above.

Call for Submissions

58% of the FMPs examined have an open call for submission, meaning that presumably, any member of the FMP's audience (or consumer), can also become a media producer. According to Atkinson, this is a major production trait of alternative media: soliciting content via the internet (2011, p.23), as a means of cutting costs. In the case of FMPs, in many of the circumstances, token payments were offered in exchange for stories that would be published.

B. **Lievrouw's Genre Framework for Alternative and Activist Media and Feminist Media Production**

Data was also collected in order to examine how various traits and characteristics of FMPs fit into Lievrouw's Genre Framework for Alternative and Activist Media, which consists of Scope, Stance, and Action and Agency.

Scope

In terms of Scope, Lievrouw describes activist projects, such as FMPs, as small in scale. She also refers to them as tactical media, or "small interventions rather than coherent, carefully

planned campaigns." However, there was no concrete way of measuring the scale of a project in terms of the FMPs. Additionally, Lievrouw argues that activist media or projects tend to be ephemeral, and of a short duration. Anecdotally, it does appear that the FMPs do not fit this component of Lievrouw's definition. Although there were some instances where media products were recently defunct (Geek Feminism, Make/Shift Magazine, after a ten year run), it appears that the majority of the FMPs are highly planned out with an intent of scaling up rather than down. Many of them have been around for more than ten years (BUST, Shameless, BITCH), and some FMPs have been described not just as media products, but as media enterprises (Gronenveld, 2016, referring to *BITCH Media*).

In defining Scope in her Model for Alternative Media (2011), Lievrouw states that alternative or activist media or projects are frequently created by small teams groups of volunteer staff members, and that it is often the case that many of the most popular alternative blogs or publications are maintained by one or a very small team of people. In analyzing the production teams of the FMPs, it appears that there was a substantial range in the production configurations, specifically in terms of staffing, position, or volunteer numbers. In very few instances (4%), the FMP was produced by a staff of one. This was the case for two personal blogs: Reappropriate, and Angry Girl Feminist. In many cases, the model as described by Lievrouw is accurate - FMPs, as examples of alternative or activist media, do typically run as a result of a small staff (<10), which in very many cases, includes volunteers. *Minola Review*, a literary magazine that "fosters the conversation between women, publishing strong, honest work safe from the gaze of patriarchy," (Minola Review, n.d.) that publishes eight digital issues a year, is the work of one chief-editor, a fiction editor, and a social media strategist (a recent position). *Feminist Current*, a well-established FMP with 28.5K followers on Facebook, also only has two staff members.

Other FMPs have extended staff or volunteers that run their projects. *Autostraddle*, for example, has thirteen full and part time staff members, but also a very long roster (80+) of writers and contributers. *BITCH Media*, which was established in 1996, has 26 full time employees, while BUST Magazine, which was founded in 1993, only has two staff members. It is therefore difficult to assess whether a small team is an appropriate characteristic of FMP production, or what might determine this.

Lievrouw states that the scale of alternative or activist projects may be small, because the audiences are likely to be small. Again, this does not appear to be the case with the FMPs examined. Besides looking at the mission statements for the FMPs, popularity was established through the FMPs' social media presence. Although some FMPs did appear to have a small audience, many had a very large following as well (see table 1 below). According to the findings in the small sample for the purposes of this MRP, it appears that there is a greater range in terms of the audiences for these products, contrary to what Lievrouw implies.

Table 1: Most popular FMPs, as ranked by Facebook likes

Top 15 FMPs, by Facebook likes	
Bustle	1,753,722.00
Smart Girls	1,644,563.00
Everyday Feminism	571,349.00
For Harriet	522,252.00
Bitch Magazine	359,856.00
Ms. Magazine	314,801.00
Stuff Mom Never Told You	289,450.00
Feministing	278,460.00
brain child	237,200.00
Broadly	234,560.00
BUST	162,234.00

Feminist Frequency	108,624.00
Feminist Wire	89,860.00
Autostraddle	72,612.00
Black Girl Dangerous	62,328.00

Table 1: Most popular FMPs, as ranked by Facebook likes

Stance

To recap, Lievrouw (2011) argues that alternative media projects usually have a sense of separation from the dominant culture that is prevalent in the mainstream media, and that these products act heterotopically as spaces or countersites for "expression, affiliation, and creativity," (2011, p. 63). Their success lies in the fact that their producers demonstrate and exemplify new, alternative, and other values and practices for society, out of a desire to "erect communities conceived as a refuge within an increasingly thicker social network," (p. 64). She argues that these projects are "mediascapes" where participants can congregate and share minority or marginalized views, and can serve as counter-public arenas where groups who have been traditionally marginalized can articulate their exclusion in solidarity with one another (p. 64). Much of this is expressed in the mission statements of the FMPs that have been examined.

When the missions of the FMPs in order to identify any emerging trends around community, one trend that emerged immediately was that of "space," as well as "community," where a respectful dialogue can emerge, and where participants feel safe to express themselves. Because the FMPs are digital, this space, of course, is digital as well. *The Crunk Feminist Collective* states that it aims to create:

> a space of support and camaraderie for hip hop generation feminists of color, queer and straight, in the academy and without, by building a rhetorical community, in which we can discuss our ideas, express our crunk feminist selves, fellowship with one another, debate and challenge one another, and support each other, as we struggle together to

articulate our feminist goals, ideas, visions, and dreams in ways that are both personally and professionally beneficial (n.d.)

Additionally, *Crunk Feminist Collective* also refers to the FMP as "a forum where we seek to speak our own truths," again, instilling that the purpose is a community where the user can feel safe to be themselves and present their views. The FMP *Feministe*, similarly aims to create a "discussion space where readers feel comments are productive and not bigoted, nor marginalizing," implying that those who comment, or participate in the discussion, are the "community." *Autostraddle* makes a similar statement around community. They want to "build community by eradicating shame and showing open doors towards pride. A strong community of self-confident and self-aware women who feel comfortable with each other and with themselves? That's what we call revolution." *Everyday Feminism* also instills the idea that the FMP is a space where a user or participant can feel safe to be themselves, and where the audience is encouraged to embrace their identity. They state:

> We seek to create a more just world where we can accept ourselves for who we truly are, where we respect each other's right to self-determination, and where we nurture and are nurtured in loving communities.

This is again reemphasized by *Adios Barbie*, the FMP that is primarily concerned with body image. In their mission, the state that they are committed to creating a world where everyone is safe and comfortable with who they are. *Femsplain* also reemphasizes this. The producers of the FMP state that

> We believe stories are most powerful when people feel safe enough to authentically share themselves - that's why we are building an inclusive space for everyone. Diversity, in identity and opinion, are crucial to building a strong community. We practice our beliefs by respecting: the experiences of our storytellers, cultural diversity in beliefs and giving our community multiple ways to connect, discuss and support one another.

It becomes clear that FMPs are concerned with creating a space or a countersite where participants can freely expression themselves. Coupled with the many expressions of mission and goal statements indicating that the FMP is a space where alternative voices can be heard, it becomes clear that in terms of Lievrouw's Stance, the FMPs examined fit in.

The participatory category of "Commenting" was also considered here. One way of facilitating participation and having the voices of the audience heard is through the commenting feature that is frequently provided. Commenting features, features that allow users to give feedback on stories or ask probing questions, are analogous to discussion boards: an online "bulletin board" where the user can both leave and receive responses on a specific topic (Rouse, 2011). Although this feature was available in 50% of the FMPs examined, it had been turned off in numerous instances, and hence could not really be considered under Lievrouw's Genre Framework. For a more fulsome discussion, please see findings under Research Question Three, below.

Action and Agency

In referring to her third characteristic of the Genre Framework for Alternative and Activist Media, Action and Agency, Lievrouw is referring to the extent to which projects are conceived of as agents of change, or in other words, the extent to which they are interventionist, attempting to interrupt the existing societal conditions. Once again, in examining the mission statements of the FMPs, it becomes clear that although not with the same frequency, the FMPs explicitly refer to interventionism: the interference or interruption of existing conditions under the status quo. *Feministing* states that "for over a decade, we've been offering sharp, uncompromising feminist analysis of everything from pop culture to politics and inspiring young people to make real-world feminist change, online and off," indicating that the long term goal of

the FMP is to inspire real change in the world. Meanwhile, *FEM* is dedicated to "furthering the application of intersectional feminism to dismantle structures of oppression," (n.d). They attempt to do this through a critique of popular culture and politics – especially those that are crucial to the feminist cause, in order to provide a space for feminism and its work. The FMP *Lilith* describes itself as a change agent for the Jewish community, working towards a woman-positive Judaism. *Ms. Magazine*, whose print counterpart was founded in the 1970s, writes that it:

> was the first U.S. magazine to feature prominent American women demanding the repeal of laws that criminalized abortion, the first to explain and advocate for the ERA, to rate presidential candidates on women's issues, to put domestic violence and sexual harassment on the cover of a women's magazine, to feature feminist protest of pornography, to commission and feature a national study on date rape, and to blow the whistle on the undue influence of advertising on magazine journalism. Ms. was the first national magazine to make feminist voices audible, feminist journalism tenable, and a feminist worldview available to the public.

This was all in hopes of altering structures that were oppressive to women. Although there may not be a concrete way of measuring the impact the *Ms*. or other FMPs have on infrastructure and politics, bringing the issues to the forefront with an alternative perspective, in the very least, exposes them to a broader audience. In a sense, all of the FMPs are interventionist: all go against the grain of what is presented in the mainstream media, and demand that voices that have been typically marginalized now be heard. Due to the timeline and nature of this FMP, it was not possible to do a content analysis at the entry or article level, however conducting such a study may further reveal this tendency.

There is clear alignment in the fact that at least a proportion of the FMPs analyzed have an interventionist component fitting into Lievrouw's Genre Framework. The producer(s) of the FMPs seek to, in the very least, interrupt, or change existing social conditions, "introducing noise into the signal," (Dery, 1993). The FMP *Feministing* is very clear about this. They state:

> Our diverse collective of writers cover a broad range of intersectional feminist issues–
> from campus sexual violence to transgender rights to reproductive justice. We serve as a
> gateway to the feminist movement for young people, giving our readers ways to take
> concrete action, as well as connecting them with feminist organizations and grassroots
> activists. We elevate the work of emerging feminist thinkers by providing an open-
> platform Community where anyone–from teens to national non-profits–can make their
> voices heard, (n.d).

It is clear here that the FMP not only wants to give access to information that can be consumed

passively by the audience, but also wants to inspire and facilitate change against oppressive

systems. It should also be considered that giving a voice to the voiceless can be seen as an action

of social change.

Lievrouw and the New Social Movement Theory

Lievrouw's (2011) framework for NSM argues the actors now involved in social

movements "tend to be drawn from the ranks of better educated, creative workers, who frame

their grievances in symbolic or cultural terms," rather than from the working classes as has been

the case in the past (p. 42). An evaluation of contemporary FMPs indicates that this is, although

anecdotally, the case. When examining the demographic makeup of the FMP authors and

producers, data was collected around education levels as well. This was done in order to

investigate whether Lievrouw's statements and descriptions of the producers of alternative or

activist media held true: that it is the members of the educated and creative classes that are now

producing this media. It was found, that when producers self-disclosed around education, they

did reveal that they were college educated, and in many instances, they held advanced degrees, in

some instances, as advanced as PhDs. Because the disclosure in this area was not consistent, the

finding is of course, anecdotal. In her characteristics for new social movements (2011), Lievrouw

states that the actors, and the media produced do not have institutional affiliations. As discussed

under Atkinson, the vast majority of the FMPs operate as independent not-for-profits, without any sort of organizational affiliation.

Research Question Two: FMPs, Media Types, and Alternative Media

Although many categories have been discussed in relation to the various characteristics and traits of English Language FMPs that are produced in North America, there are several additional consideration that contribute to their general understanding, and their definition, specifically in the context of alternative media. These include Media Type, Frequency of Publication, and Location.

Media Types

In an effort to establish the broad characteristics of FMPs, the decision was made to be inclusive in regard to media category type, rather than focusing on one type. In examining the convenience sample FMPs gathered, there are several media types that emerged. The most popular included blogs (n=36 or 72%), magazines or e-zines (n=20 or 40%), and podcasts (n=11 or 22%). 38% of the FMPs examined integrated media type categories outside of the ones originally established for classification, categorized as other. These categories included video channels, also known as vlogs, newsletters or newswires, resource directories, events directories, literary journals, and one instance of a wiki.

Additionally, 68% (n=34) of the FMPs incorporated more than one media type as part of its platform. For example, a digital magazine typically also incorporates a blogging or podcast component. The dominant media type to emerge was the blog, with 72% of the FMPs offering this component within their platform. Blogs, in short, are websites that contain posts analogous to articles, and that are usually time stamped. They can be maintained by one or more person

who makes entries available on a regular basis (Tobias, 2005). Another very popular format type when it comes to FMPs is the online magazine. Online magazines, sometimes referred to as e-zines, like their print counterparts, are usually periodicals with content being published on a regular basis. The content itself is usually posted by subject category. Additionally, for the purpose of this MRP, FMPs were categorized as a magazine when the FMP description section indicated that it was such. This may be the case even if content is not published on a regular basis as one might expect with a magazine. What is notable is that in terms of the online environment, the feminist magazine, much as the print feminist magazine had in during the Third Wave, uses similar layouts that are typical to commercial women's magazines (Gronenveld, 2016). In examining this category of FMP, at least some of the producers continue to produce a print version of the magazine itself. For example, *Shameless Magazine* prints three issues yearly, while *Bitch* publishes a print version of the magazine quarterly. In some cases, the FMP allows for free access to all content. *Guts Magazine*, for example, makes their content completely available. Others only allow access to the table of contents, while providing access to other content on the platform through a media type like a blog, as is the case with *Shameless Magazine*.

The third most popular media type to be found was the podcast with 22% of the FMPs including this component. For the purpose of this MRP, an FMP was categorized as a podcast if it is an audiofile that is created and published on a regular basis, and that allows for subscriptions through a service such as iTunes or Soundcloud. Although some definitions of podcasts include video (Deal, 2007), this was not the case for this MRP.

26% of the FMPs examined could be simply described as websites in terms of their media type. These FMPs typically offer other content, such as links to resources, tool kits, and

other information relevant to the women's issue or feminist theme that they are exploring.

Examples of this includes the *Fembot Collective*, which although it also hosts a blog and journal,

offers links to additional sources including the *Fembot* Toolkit and other resources, which focus

on fighting against online harassment. Other FMPs classified as websites include *Hollaback*, and

Feminist Campus. *Hollaback* describes itself as a people powered movement to end harassment,

and while it offers a space where stories of harassment can be shared, its focus is to give access

to information and resources that help to develop strategies that mitigate harassing behavior

towards women and those who identify as LGBTQ, for example, a technical safety guide, a

social media safety guide. Another FMP, *Feminist Campus*, a prochoice student network, offers

resources for organization of campus groups, information on specific campaigns, and other

information pertinent to educating oneself about reproductive rights. Another example of an

FMP that can be classified as a website is *Finally Feminism 101*, which presents as an

educational resource about feminism with entries that are very topic specific. Many of the entries

appear to have multiple sources that the user can further explore.

     38% of the FMPs contain media types that do not fit into the above categories, which

include video channels, newsletters or wires, resource directories, events directories, literary

journals, and in one instance, a wiki. The variety of the formats that even a small sample of

FMPs present indicates that there is no clear definition that can be applied within this category.

Additionally, 68% of the FMPs delivered content using more than one media type. For example,

an e-magazine could also have a blog and a podcast, as in the case of *Shameless*, *Bitch*, and *Guts*

magazines. As such, and as described by Gronenveld (2016), FMPs may also be described as

multimedia enterprises, rather than just one media type.

The media types presented through their new media platforms of the FMPs also allows them to function as alternative media. Lievrouw (2011) examines the potentials of the internet in the context of new media and how it distinguishes itself from mass media, is that it is a network of networks that is continuously reorganizing and unfolding: "point-to-point webs of technologies, organizations, and users." Where mass media are built under the assumption that there is a linear path, in terms of the message, between the producer and the consumer, the networked architecture of new media allow consumers to "connect and disconnect from the network, as different uses and purposes require," (p. 12). In terms of production, the platforms themselves allow for participation. This new media allows for the production of alternative new media, which employ or modify the "communication artifacts, practices, and social arrangements of new information and communication technologies to challenge or alter dominant, expected, accepted ways of doing society, culture, and politics," (p.19). The creators of FMPs, through the nature of the platform infrastructures themselves, can offer interactivity to users, and where users can in turn "resist, critique, and intervene in prevailing social, cultural, economic, and political conditions," (p.19). The engagement and opportunity for participation that FMPs can now offer would not be possible without the "the proliferation and convergence of networked media and information technologies," (p.1). The platforms and media types have allowed for increased opportunities for expression among activists, including the feminists that are behind the creation of FMPs. Coulson (2016) argues that media platforms allow for the creation of a space for marginalized groups, such as those fighting for women's rights, to declare their opinions and perspective. She states that the "feminist blogosphere may be an important political tool because it provides another outlet for voices of resistance that are typically silenced by the mainstream media," (p. 6).

Additionally, the inclusion of a variety of media types, for example, a podcast integrated alongside a blog, can be considered inclusionary, as it considers the various ways that users might want to consume information. It considers people's preferences for learning new information. Just as each person learns in a slightly different way, each person has a preference in how they consume information. Not everyone might have the time to read articles, as this requires a high level of attention. However, a podcast, and in some instances, video logs can be consumed while walking, commuting, doing chores or errands, or working out (O'Brien, 2017). By including a podcast or a video blog as a media type rather than offering just static text and images, the user can get at the content on their own terms.

Gronenveld (2016), in writing about print media, points out that there are many parallels between third/post wave feminist magazines and mainstream women's magazines, largely because layout and sections may be similar in appearance. This is certainly true of digital FMPs as well, many of which have a highly glossy, professional feel. Gronenveld, argues however, that what differentiates the FMP is not only the content that is covered, but also the perspective from which it is covered, for example, independent music/art/culture as well as critiques of popular culture and politics, using a feminist lens. In addition to Atkinson's definition of alternative media, the defining factor that makes FMPs alternative media, is the scope of the voices that cover the topics from a fresh, new, and frequently marginalized perspective. *The Establishment*, an FMP that publishes dozens of voices from a range of marginalized voices, states that their mission is to:

> provide a platform for voices we seldom hear in the media, and our content creators offer up so much of themselves to our readers, so that readers may see things a little differently when next they look at the world (n.d.).

What makes the media alternative, is not necessarily the subject matter, but the perspective from which the subject matter is presented, as well as the audience that it is written for.

Research Question Three: How do FMPs function as participatory spaces for their users?

This final question focuses on the various participatory components and features that FMPs might include that permit a consumer to also become a producer, thus actively participating in the FMP's participatory space, as defined by Jensen et al. (2006). A variety of participatory components allow for users of FMPs to potentially actively engage within the community that the platform is attempting to create. These participatory components include the ability to comment, the provision of contact information, calls for submission, the ability to participate through social media, and the possibility of subscribing to content. On closer examination, media type can also contribute to the participatory nature of an FMP as well.

Commenting

Commenting features are a way of facilitating participation and giving a voice to the FMP's consumer. This feature can lead to feedback, questions, and extensive discussion. Approximately 50% of the FMPs examined for the purposes of this MRP offered the ability to comment on content. What is interesting is that for the most part, with the exception of the *Feminist Current*, this feature was not typically used by the audience. Also, many FMPs, even when they do give access to a commenting feature, have chosen to turn this feature off.

Additionally, numerous FMPs have chosen to post a code of behavior for those who intend to use the commenting feature, amongst them, the *Feminist Current, Reappropriate, Finally Feminism, Geek Feminism, and Feministing*, just to name a few. In the case of *Feministing*, the producers state that the various participatory features (community blog,

comment threads, related social networking sites) exist in order to "better connect young

feminists online and off, further feminist dialogue, and encourage activism." (Feministing, n.d.).

The producers outline that:

> sexism, racism, classism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and hate speech have no place here. While we can't guarantee a completely safe space on Feministing, we can strive for an accountable one. And though we love differences of opinion, there's a way to disagree respectfully and thoughtfully. We expect civility, generosity, and patience for your fellow readers and for this space. Please remember that we are all here to grow and learn from each other.

It also appears that when FMPs do have an active comments feature, that moderation is

necessary. Feministing, for example, requires that the user create an account before contributing

comments, and mentioned that all comments are screened before they go live. They explicitly

state that comment that are racist, sexist, ageist, transphobic, sizeist, ableist, homophobic, victim

blaming, fat shaming, attacks of a personal nature, and silencing will not be tolerated. The

authors also note that this is not an exhaustive list in terms of comments being flagged

(Feministing, n.d.).

In the case of *Feminist Current*, similar standards have been put in place. The producers

stated that decisions around whether a comment is posted happens at the discretion of the

moderators, and that this is not up for debate. Additionally, comments "that are nasty, repetitive,

antagonistic, trolling (i.e. clearly not left in good faith), or that engage in anti-feminist slurs may

be removed," (Feminist Current, n.d.). Additionally, the producers go on to say that

unpublishable comments should not be considered censored, as the FMP is "our space, and we

are trying to curate a productive conversation that (for once) centers women and women's

interests. We aren't interested in wasting women's time with the same kind of nonsense

comments that dominate every other comment section on the internet," (Feminist Current, n.d.).

The founders of the FMP *The Establishment*, layout clearly the reasons why they have made the decision to disable comments on their platform. First, they state that the confusion around a no comments policy on a platform that is seemingly dedicated to discussing issues and promoting dialogue is completely warranted. They also state, however, that all founding members were against the idea of commenting. This was primarily because they feel that although debates and rebuttal can often lead to intellectual growth, online comments sections rarely provide the thoughtful feedback that they were designed for. They also state that comments sections can "legitimize abusive behavior," and behavior can devolve quickly into personal attacks. Nikki Gloudeman, co-founder and editorial director of the FMP states that the space that the FMP creates, and the comment section itself should act as a critical space that allows marginalized voices that might otherwise be denied a platform to be heard. She argues though that a comments section, by its very nature, also provides a space to those who have always been heard. In the case of *The Establishment*, the founders feel that a comments section is risking providing a platform for bigotry. Tulshyan, a contributing editor writes that "Writers who are also women of color encounter particularly damaging vitriol, mostly ad hominem, when they write about minority issues at the intersection of gender, race, and class," (n.d). She states that the FMP does not want to legitimize abuse, as "assholes already have plenty of platforms from which to abuse women, people of color, disabled people, sex workers, the poor, and the LGBTQI community. We won't provide one here." (The Establishment, n.d.).

The frequency with which codes of behavior appear, in combination with the number of FMPs that have chosen to disable their commenting features are a clear indication that FMPs, like so many other online spaces (many mainstream media outlets have also chosen to turn off their comments sections), appear to suffer from trolling behavior. This type of hateful or abusive

behavior, typically demonstrated as a reaction to ideas presented that are contrary to the status quo, however, further indicates that it is exactly that these types of spaces offering alternative views are in fact needed.

The fact that so many FMPs have found it necessary to turn off their comment sections is unfortunate because in the sense, these sections function in the same way as a "letter to the editor" might have in the context of a Third Wave feminist print publication. Gronenveld states that the letter to the editor sections denote the generative behavior that the print FMPs inspired, the debates it inspired. She also denotes that even having access to these letters allowed her to feel as if she herself was actively participating in the debates as part of a community of "cool feminists who were reading and thinking about the same thing that I was, who were participating in the shaping of feminist discourse," (2016, p. 2).

Contact information

80% of the FMPs include contact information, so that the users of the website can potentially contact those that are responsible for its creation and maintenance. Additionally, 74% of the FMPs included direct contact information, meaning, an email or a web form that would reach a specific person associated with the FMP, meaning that a user, should they desire to, could reach out directly to address something that they wanted to get across. It should also be noted that because such a high percentage of FMPs also have social media accounts, even those FMPs that do not offer direct contact information on their platforms, still permit for contact between themselves and their users. By including this ability for users to reach out, the users may get a sense that they are part of a greater community.

Calls for Submissions

As mentioned above, 58% of the FMPs examined have an open call for submission, meaning that

presumably, any member of the FMP's audience (or consumer), can also become a media

producer. According to Atkinson, this is a major production trait of alternative media: soliciting

content via the internet (2011, p.23). According to Sandoval and Fuchs, this action of

democratizing the production process so that anybody has the potential to contribute, makes it

participatory media, and therefore a participatory space. The authors also quote Coudry, who

indicates that the benefit of alternative media to open up the production process to a greater

public may allow for the challenging of what is being presented in the mass media, because it

gives other versions of reality an opportunity to be presented (Sandoval and Fuchs, 2009).

By including the opportunities to submit stories, the FMPs are creating a participatory

space, as defined by Jensen et al. (2006), because in a sense it has low barriers – anyone is

welcome to submit a piece of writing. Additionally, this ability to submit work allows for access

for both artistic expression, and civic engagement, supporting the creation process. The FMPs

themselves, because they are digital, also support the distribution of ideas and content. Jensen

also states that for a participatory space to work, not every member must contribute to the

community, but all must feel like they "are free to contribute when ready and that what they

contribute will be appropriately valued," (p. 3), and the ability to submit their own work certainly

can reinforce this.

Of course it should be noted that not everyone that writes and submits an article will be

published, but the FMPs are typically very clear in outlining the type of content that they are

looking for. *Shameless* is perhaps the best example in giving their audience a very clear outline

of what is required in a pitch for a story, and states the following regarding rejected stories, which explains to potential contributor, the various reasons why their contribution may not be accepted.

> Because our time and space is limited, and we are looking for such specific things, many *Shameless* pitches never become stories. We know that getting rejected is tough — most Shameless editors are also writers, and we have all had stories rejected. It can be hard not to take a rejection personally. Stories are rejected for all kinds of reasons, many of them beyond your control — maybe we recently published a piece about a similar topic, or the section you are pitching to is already packed. Maybe we made a mistake. A rejection doesn't mean that we don't like you, or that you're a bad writer or reporter or person, or that you will never get published. If your pitch is not accepted, think about turning your pitch into a great post for your own blog, or sending it to another magazine. Keep writing, for us, for another outlet, or at least for yourself. Send us another pitch, (Shameless, n.d.).

By including this information about the various possible reasons for rejection can go a long way in making the user feel like they still belong to that particular community. Lievrouw (2011) states that "new media has allowed its audiences to become both users and participants within complex ecologies of divides, diversities, networks, communities, and literacies, has created new opportunities for expression and interaction," (p.1), and have become powerful tools for challenging views presented by the mainstream. Lievrouw goes on to state that the power of new media lies less in the information that it presents, but in the potential communities that it can create (2011).

Social Media

All of the FMPs examined used at least one of the three most popular social media channels: Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. 86% of FMPs, in addition to their own platform, also use Facebook and/or Twitter, while 82% of FMPs use an Instagram account. Social media channels are typically used by the FMPs are typically used to push out content. Whenever there is an

update to the content on the FMP platform, there tends to be a post on the FMP's social media

channel. As many of the FMPs had their commenting features disabled, it was difficult to tell

how engaged the user was with the content. With the social media channels, engagement could

be measured clearly, through the number of likes, comments, and shares of the content. The

social media channels also allow the ranking of the FMPs in terms of popularity, however, this

was outside the scope of this MRP. One way that the social media channels were consistently

used was for the posting and advertising of events organized by the FMPs. Whereas in most

circumstances, events were not advertised through the FMP platforms, they were listed in the

social media channel. It is not surprising that like any other brand, the FMPs are using both their

platform/website, as well as a social media channel like Facebook. Audiences are spending their

time on Facebook, and if they subscribe to the FMP's updates (which is the default when they

like a page), they get reminders of the existence of the FMP in their newsfeed. This is in contrast

to a user making a concentrated effort to visit the website or platform of the FMP itself

(Halbrooks, 2018).

RSS Feeds and Subscriptions

68% of the FMPs have a way for audiences to sign up for either and RSS feed or a

listserv in order to receive notification whenever new content is published. According to

Martinson (2017), subscriptions and RSS feeds are important because they trigger an email to the

user, notifying them of the new content, and often, delivering the link to the new content itself.

When a user is brought to the post, it is within the platform, and as a result, they may also

interact with other content that is present (Martinson, 2017). Allowing a user to subscribe is a

participatory feature, because the user is notified when a new item of interest is available.

Media Type

Piepmeyer (2009) argues that blogs are participatory media: "spaces in which individuals can become creators rather than simply consumers of culture," (p. 13). She continues to say that like zines, they give marginalized women of all ages a voice (p. 13). Additionally, Peterson writes that the interactive nature of blogs gives both those who blog and those who read blogs a sense that "they are participating in something important and that they are making a difference," stating that blogs have democratized the information age (Peterson, 2004). Essentially, as a result of the platforms themselves, the "audiences" and "consumers" of the FMPs are also users and participants as well, with unprecedented opportunities for expression and interaction (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 2).

Community in Mission Statements

The trends within the FMPs around community building fit into Jensen et al. (2006) definitions for participatory culture. Many of them emphasize that their goal is create a safe space where users can express themselves openly, and participate in civic engagement. The FMP mission statements indicate that they are attempting to create a sense of community, or some degree of social connection with one another. They want their users to feel included, to feel like they belong, that they are connected, and that their voice will be considered and heard, that their contribution matters, all characteristics of a participatory community, as defined by Jensen et al. (2006). There is also a sense of mentorship, as the FMPs also emphasize information exchange, whether it is to educate oneself on a topic from someone who has a unique perspective on it, or whether to it is to get information about how to mobilize action.

This overview indicates that on average, every FMP has various components that facilitate a participatory space for their audience. These components are varied, however, they can contribute to a sense of community for those consuming the FMP.

Conclusion

Contribution

The contribution of this document to the current understanding of FMPs that are produced in North America area is manifold. First, it examined and applied two standardized definitions of alternative media, as described by Atkinson's Three Definitions of Media (2011) and Lievrouw's Genre Framework for Alternative Media and Framework for New Social Movements (2011), in order to assess whether any additional considerations should be added, and found, in comparing various characteristics, that the definitions needed to be expanded. It found that Atkinson's definition can be expanded upon – that it is not necessarily the content of a media product that makes it alternative to the mainstream, but the voice or perspective from which it is told and then in turn, heard. Alternative and mainstream media may cover the same subjects, however, the alternative media product will offer a perspective that is not typically heard. FMPs also tend to conscientiously identify as alternative media, a fact frequently cited in FMP mission and vision statements. Many of the FMPs indicate that they are a response to what is being discussed in the mainstream. The FMPs also appear to focus on presenting a diversity of intersectional perspectives, rather than focusing on the perspective of women alone. In addition to this, FMPs are varied in the audiences they target – no one FMP might meet the needs of all feminist audiences, but anecdotally, there appears to be a broad range of selection available to those seeking this kind of product. The fact that many FMPs in fact emphasize that they are

going against the mainstream grain, meaning that they may be intending to be persuasive in their approach to audience interpretive strategies. They use a variety of funding models and income streams indicating that they are often operating under economic constraints. This is not true of all FMPs however, and some of the sample appear to be quite successful commercially. Some use similar advertising techniques to mainstream media, including sponsored content, in order to generate income.

Anecdotally, there appears to be a diversity of voices represented within the FMPs, and in accordance with Lievrouw, that these creators to tend to fit into the creative and educated classes. The study also adds to the definition of alternative media because it diverges from Lievrouw's model, as many of the media products/projects have been around for long periods of time (some over 20 years), rather than being ephemeral in nature, as Lievrouw has stated regarding characteristics defining activist and alternative media. Additionally, some FMPs are created by very large teams, rather than the small crews described by Lievrouw. Mission statements do outline that they are heterotopic mediascapes that act as countersites for minority or marginalized views. In accordance with Lievrouw's findings, the FMPs are frequently designed as agents of change. Many indicate that they want to inspire change both on and offline – to help to dismantle various oppressive infrastructures. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between a women's magazine and an FMP, but that only re-emphasizes the fact that it is the perspective presented on the topic that makes the FMP alternative.

Additionally, the MRP also looked at how media types can contribute to the definition of alternative media. The MRP also investigated what features allow FMPs to function as participatory spaces, or participatory media for their users, according to Jensen et al.'s definitions. It was found that the nature of new media platforms allows for audience participation

and therefore contributes to the creation of participatory spaces. The creators of FMPs frequently integrate interactivity for the audience. The integration of a variety of media types is also inclusionary as it allows the audience to decide how they will consume the content. Various features that are part of the new media platforms themselves are also crucial in creating participatory spaces, including the ability to comment, the ability to contact producers and authors, the opportunity to submit their own writing, and the notion that one can interact with social media all contribute to a sense of community, and potential to be heard.

Amongst the numerous characteristics present in FMPs that emerged, perhaps what was most poignant was their diversity in format, content, and focus. This is important because the range of FMPs available (even though this finding is anecdotal due to the sample size) indicates that audiences have a place to turn to get perspectives that vary from that which is presented in the mainstream. It does not appear that there is one definition of an FMP, other than that they all are striving towards promoting the ideals of feminism in hopes of shifting the status quo. FMPs most definitely fit into the descriptions of alternative media. What links them together is their ability to give voices to the voiceless, and to function as a space for discussion and dialogue not present in mainstream media. Additionally, it was found that the majority of FMPs contain participatory elements that can further contribute to a sense of belonging and community, as defined by Jensen et al. (2006).

Direction for Future Research

As some FMPs are far well more established than others, it would be interesting to conduct a case study of an example that has been around for a significant amount of time (such as *Shameless* or *Bitch* magazines). It is one thing to examine the online contents of FMPs in order to assess their value, however, what would make this study more complete is an evaluation

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of the intentions of the producers in developing FMPs, framed within the needs of their users.

What do they intend to do, for what purpose, and what are the challenges that are encountered?

An additional stream of research would be to conduct a study of how users are actually

consuming the FMPs, and whether there are any suggestions for improvement.

Additionally, there does not appear to be any current directory of FMPs in existence. As

such, it is also hoped that as a creative component, an initial directory will be created, using the

data collected, in hopes of beginning the groundwork for an eventually comprehensive directory

that can serve as an online resource for those interested in reading and contributing to FMPs.

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