



Fig.1. Editorial Illustration. *LesbiaNews*, April 1995.



University of Victoria

“IN SEARCH OF COMMUNITY:” DEBATE AND SOLIDARITY IN VICTORIA’S LESBIAN FEMINIST NEWSLETTER *LESBIANNEWS*, 1989-1996

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What is *LesbiaNews*?

LesbiaNews was a lesbian-feminist print newsletter launched in Victoria, B.C. in 1989. The newsletter was volunteer-run and produced to “provide a supportive forum for Victoria lesbians.”¹ *LesbiaNews* came after two previous attempts to create a longstanding lesbian newsletter in Victoria, titled WAVES² and FLAGRANT,³ had failed due to financial difficulties. Over the course of seven years, issues ranging from twelve to twenty pages were distributed on a monthly basis. By April 1995, the grassroots newsletter had an estimated 800-person readership.⁴ All 75 issues consulted for this research are accessible through the University of Victoria’s Special Collections.

The Canadian Feminist Print Literature Movement

LesbiaNews emerged within the Canadian feminist print literature movement (1960s–early 1990s), which challenged male-dominated publishing and created alternative public spheres. Historian Barbara Marshall argued that feminist print media carved out spaces for identity formation and political engagement, balancing internal solidarity and external opposition to male hegemony.⁵ These feminist discourses functioned as oppositional political practice.⁶ *LesbiaNews* reflected this dynamic by fostering lesbian-feminist solidarity while encouraging activism against broader societal oppression.

Lesbians played a central, yet often overlooked,⁷ role in shaping feminist politics.⁸ *LesbiaNews* contributors understood themselves as part of a broader feminist and lesbian intellectual tradition. Contributors reviewed and debated thinkers and cultural works (see Fig. 2), while simultaneously constructing feminist politics and lesbian community through their own writing.

What Is Community?

In 1993, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis documented how mid-twentieth-century lesbians built community through bars, friendships, or private house parties.⁹ These visible, working-class lesbian communities worked to oppose heteronormative expectations and led to the formation of networks that preceded formal politics. Barbara Freeman identified *LesbiaNews* as central to Victoria’s lesbian community’s communication network, though she argued that fragmentation increased in the 1990s.¹⁰ Scholar Gerard Delanty contended that community emerges from shared belonging amid adversity and is strengthened by diversity.¹¹

My findings concur with Delanty that debate (see Fig. 3), fragmentation, and negotiation were not signs of failure but were rather evidence of vitality and are all generative within a community.



Fig.3. The Thirteenth Opinion (A Column for Letters to the Editor). *LesbiaNews*, May 1995.



Fig.4. Covers of *LesbiaNews*, February 1996, October 1992, July/August 1995.

Lesbian-Feminism and the Sex Wars

The sex wars encompassed a series of political and cultural battles over sexuality and censorship during the 1980s–1990s that exposed deep divisions between feminists.¹² Feminists supported or challenged anti-pornography and desexualizing strands of lesbian-feminism. Some argued that reducing lesbianism to political sisterhood erased erotic life, stigmatized butch/femme and sadomasochism (S/M), and reproduced forms of moral regulation within the lesbian community and among feminists.¹³⁻¹⁷ In Canada, these debates had concrete legal implications. In the 1992 *Butler* ruling, the Supreme Court upheld obscenity laws while redefining their application, which scholars have argued effectively merged feminist anti-pornography arguments with state censorship.¹⁸ Scholar Gary Kinsman argued this fostered a “respectable” queer politics aligned with neoliberalism and disproportionately targeted queer materials.¹⁹

These broader cultural debates shaped how sexuality, respectability, and politics were negotiated within lesbian-feminist communities such as *LesbiaNews*.

WARNING! THIS STORY CONTAINS S/M IMAGERY WHICH MAY NOT BE SUITABLE FOR SOME READERS.

Fig.5. S/M Content Warning (for an S/M story). *LesbiaNews*, July 1994.

Findings

- **Contributors were deeply devoted to understanding what community meant to them.** Various accounts described the lesbian community in Victoria as “elusive”²⁰ or “amorphous,”²¹ “exclusionary,”²² “friends who only have sexual preference in common,”²³ a “process as well as place,”²⁴ “responsible to personal growth and change,”²⁵ and a “coming together of diverse personalities.”²⁶ All of these understandings participated in the newsletter’s collective dialogue. By providing a space for debate about community, the newsletter helped create it. Subgroups such as social clubs were often framed not as fractures but as “communities within the community.”²⁷
- **The newsletter challenged racism and classism** within Victoria’s predominantly white, middle-class population.²⁸ Classism and poverty were discussed, with themed issues addressing financial inequality²⁹ and misconceptions about poverty.³⁰ Contributors acknowledged “shade racism” and tokenism,³¹ and promoted anti-racism workshops.³² However, some contributors simultaneously employed a quasi-ethnic model of community, for example, by comparing lesbians to Chinese or Jewish communities in Victoria.³³ This strategy risked flattening distinct cultural histories of racialized groups and intersectional identities.
- **Internal debates intensified around sexuality.** Conversations about public nudity during a women-only camping trip,³⁴ Pride visibility,³⁵ S/M practices,³⁶ and erotic literature reflected broader lesbian-feminist sex war debates. Connie Hunt’s 1994 S/M short story, “The Heat of the Island Sun,” (see Fig. 5)³⁷ sparked passionate responses, encouraging conversation between anti-pornography feminists³⁸ and pro-S/M or sex-positive lesbians.³⁹ An anti-censorship event organized to protest the seizure of queer erotic materials by Canadian Customs also caused mixed reactions.⁴⁰ These debates situate Victoria’s local conflicts within continent-wide censorship battles and feminist debates.
- **Opinions about lesbian-feminism appear throughout.** Debates about lesbian identity questioned internal “lesbo police,”⁴¹ straight and lesbian stereotypes,⁴² and butch/femme roles.⁴³ Contributors critiqued separatist lesbian-feminist views on the exclusion of bisexuals or heterosexual allies,⁴⁴ and of transgender women.⁴⁵
- **The newsletter documented the cultural creativity of lesbian life in Victoria.** *LesbiaNews* featured poetry,⁴⁶ comics,⁴⁷ local music,⁴⁸ art collectives,⁴⁹ dances,⁵⁰ and performances.⁵¹
- **Coming out stories and visibility were emphasized,** especially since sexual orientation was not protected under the Canadian Constitution until 1996. Violent incidents, such as the stabbing of a lesbian of colour in Rumors bar in 1995,⁵² underscored the reality of homophobic and racist danger, further solidifying community solidarity.

Conclusion

LesbiaNews demonstrates that a forum encouraging generative debates enabled the consultation of diverse viewpoints and served to strengthen the community as a whole. The newsletter functioned as both a reflection of and a forum for local lesbians. Through its editorials, letters to the editor, classifieds, and cultural coverage, *LesbiaNews* reveals that **lesbians in Victoria simultaneously negotiated and produced community** during a period shaped by lesbian-feminism, the sex wars, censorship debates, and increasing queer visibility.

References Available Through QR Code:

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