

Making Feminist Media: Feminist Media Activists Share their Views

with Jessica Hoffmann/Daria Yudacufski (*make/shift*, USA), Sonja Eismann (*Missy Magazine*, Germany), Jeanna Krömer (*AMPHI magazine*, Belarus), and Jenni (*Emancypunx*, Poland/international)

Compiled by Stefanie Grünangerl

Women's media production has played and still plays a crucial role for the feminist movement(s) by questioning given social orders, discussing gender regimes and opening up new spaces of engagement. But how do feminist media makers themselves see their commitment, the obstacles they face, and the questions of social change, participation, networking and feminist activism? The following compilation presents the views of activists involved in four different feminist media projects from Europe and the USA: Jessica Hoffmann and Daria Yudacufski are editors of *make/shift* magazine. Based in Los Angeles and launched in 2007 it aims to be a platform for contemporary feminist culture and activism by presenting all its manifold and vivid facets, by network building and by encouraging feminist engagement and participation in these multiple feminist communities. Sonja Eismann answered the questions on behalf of the German *Missy Magazine*, which was founded in 2008 to close a gap in the German-speaking magazine landscape by providing a feminist perspective on popular culture, politics and style especially addressing younger women and inspiring their interest in feminist ideas. Jeanna Krömer, founder and editor of the Belarusian web magazine *AMPHI* – which since 2008 has sought to spread discussions about gender equality and feminist thinking among a wider Russian-speaking community – talks about feminist (media) activism in post-Soviet countries. Finally, Jenni is a member of *Emancypunx Records* which started in Poland in the mid 1990s as a distro and today runs a record label, a distro and a zine library, organizes festivals (*Noc Walpurgii*, *Ladyfest Warsaw*, etc.) and tours, and above all is active in building and fostering DIY hc punk and anarcha-feminist activism and networks.

What kind of issues do you think need to be urgently discussed and taken up in the feminist movement(s) and in feminist media?

make/shift: We believe that feminist analysis and action needs to be applied to everything, including things like prisons, food, health, militarism, climate change, immigration struggles, education, poverty . . . on and on and on.

Image 1: Cover of Missy Magazine issue 02/12



© Missy Magazine 2012

Missy: The question of involvement of younger women – why do they so often think that feminism is something of the past and not needed by them? The gap between different feminist generations, branches and classes (older and younger feminists, feminists of colour and feminists with white privilege, queer feminists and straight feminists, feminists with or without children, working class feminists and economically privileged feminists) – we all need to reach out to each other in order to become a stronger, more visible movement again, and we need to argue with each other in a constructive way. The distribution of care work. The pay gap between men and women. Why traditionally “feminine” professions are still paid less than traditionally “male” professions. Why everybody is always talking about “die Frauenquote” [women’s quota], but nobody talks

about the fact that these highly paid positions are impenetrable for the vast majority of women. The question of sexism, sex work and pornography, the exploitation of (female) bodies, and why there are no simple answers like Alice Schwarzer's *PorNo* Campaign.¹ New beauty regimes and their effects on (young) women. The marginalization of Hijab-wearing women as mute "victims". The continuing oppression of women worldwide. And much, much more.

AMPHI: I think it is important to realize that feminism in Western countries and feminism in the states of the former Soviet Union have different historical backgrounds. While American and Western European women still struggled for example to be allowed to work, women in the Soviet countries not only had been working for quite a long time, but already were overburdened with it (the same can be said for issues like the right to vote or reproductive rights like legal abortion, which had already come true for Soviet women while women in Western countries only could dream of it). The Belarusian women have already been profiting from a lot of rights for a long time, but it's the duties that are still unequally distributed. Western feminist activists who want to deal with and engage in post-Soviet states must take this into account. Unfortunately quite often this doesn't happen and that's why a lot of good ideas and projects already fail at the beginning.

Another important issue which I would like to address is the issue of solidarity among women. Unfortunately, this solidarity – or rather lack of solidarity – still remains a problem, even among feminist communities: everybody is fighting on her own and not together.

Emancypunx Rec: As mentioned above, there are a lot of issues that need to be debated. It also depends much on the scenes, countries, etc. For example, within feminist environments based in Poland the issues of racism or ableism get almost no attention. Personally I would love to hear more debates about our own responsibilities. How we ourselves strengthen the status quo and what is our role in maintaining patriarchal and other oppressive regimes and social orders. I also miss a broader view on society's constructions and interdependency. Some people treat feminism as a way of self-realization only. There is this fear on my side that the feminist movement will end up as a "movement" of individuals and that the professionalization and "NGOization" will go further. I also see that a part of the feminist movement is highly competitive, as it's often linked to workplaces. So the ones who are getting access to those resources or/and to power positions (for example as representatives of a minority group) are becoming elitist and are sometimes not interested in involving others if they don't need them for some reason (for example as clients or a resource). Academic feminism is no exception.

¹ Alice Schwarzer is the founder and editor of the German feminist magazine *Emma* (since 1977) which is also known for its campaigns including the aforementioned *PorNO* campaign promoting a strict anti-pornography agenda (see <http://www.emma.de/kampagnen/grosse-themen-pornografie/>).

It would also be great to sometimes have a more international perspective and communication within feminist movements, but without the assumption that the situations or movement principles and beliefs are everywhere the same.

What are the biggest challenges in producing alternative feminist media (e. g. in relation to collaboration, self-organization, alternative economies, participation in terms of inclusion/exclusion)?

make/shift: We feel really lucky to be able to work in a partnership where we have similar sensibilities around process, what we want to represent, and everything. For us, the real challenge is time – balancing this volunteer/after-hours work with everything else our lives contain (work, family, etc.).

Missy: The lack of money. This is truly the most adverse issue that we are dealing with on a daily basis. Collaboration with other women is fine, sometimes nearly perfect; feedback from other media is a lot of times overwhelmingly positive, but there is never enough money or enough time to really devote yourself to your feminist media project, because you have to earn part of your money elsewhere. Big companies still do not want to place ads in a magazine that tells women they are beautiful in all colours and sizes, just as they are, instead of telling them to be insecure and to buy lots of commodities that will make them feel less imperfect.

AMPHI: The biggest challenge for us is the lack of money and also the need to arrange our feminist media activism with earning our living and our personal living circumstances. If my partner weren't an activist and feminist himself who supports me financially but also in having the time for the project and thus enabling me to work on our magazine, it would have died a long time ago. And of course this project is only possible because of various funds which from time to time have supported it financially – thanks to them.

Image 2: Logo of Emancypunx Records

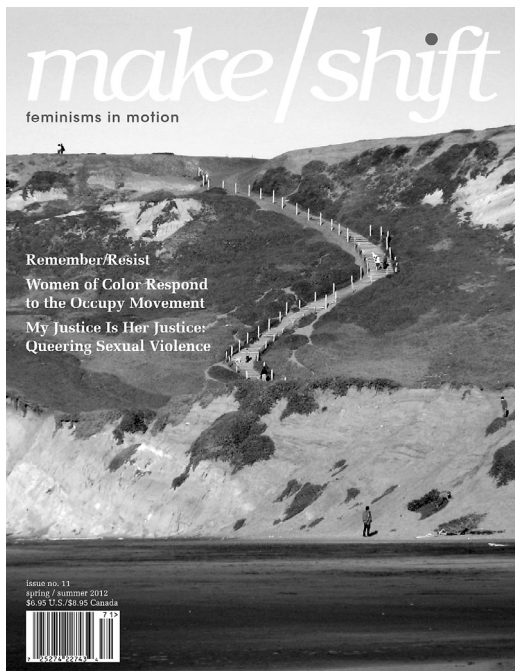


© Emancypunx Records

Emancypunx Rec: Networks are the core of independent publishing. Distribution networks like in DIY hc punk do not really exist in feminist environments. Also trades are not common; that's why money plays a much bigger role. This is definitely an excluding factor. The publishing houses usually use commercial channels or they distribute themselves, which means being a "center" with a group of "clients". Networking with similar projects is not that common. That also means that in the end those initiatives are mostly known rather locally, and interaction is limited and rather service oriented. A dream would be a DIY feminist network with a thin line between the ones creating, publishing, "consuming" and distributing. It would be great to have more sort of alternative models, where access to financial resources would play a smaller role. But of course it's a question of our goals: if we want to simply integrate feminism into the existing structures or if we want to create different sorts of economies and relationships among people.

Which role do you think feminist media do/should play in creating and negotiating participatory spaces and networks? Which strategies do you think would be most effective to create, maintain and strengthen these participatory spaces and networks? And in respect to your own project(s): how important is it for you to enable participation and to build up networks with others (media makers, activists, etc.)?

Image 3: Cover of make/shift issue 11, spring-summer 2012



make/shift: We feel that relationships and relationship-building are crucial. We started the magazine already having multiple kinds of relationships in different feminist communities, and have built more intentional relationships through the process of making the magazine. We hope we are providing a space for different feminist voices to be in conversation and to connect, and also to offer readers opportunities to engage in feminist action and to connect with each other through things like our “Participate” column, where we post many different forms of opportunities for involvement, from calls for submission to invitations to volunteer or join a feminist activity group. We don’t see ourselves as playing any kind of lead or expert role in building up networks, but we do try to document and connect networks that do exist, and to constantly participate in building relationships with readers, contributors, people and projects profiled in the magazine, and the many feminist communities of which we are all part.

Missy: This depends on the kind of media. As for *Missy Magazine*, with its focus on pop culture and DIY politics, it deems us extremely import to interact with our readers, to create (new) networks and spaces for feminist women, and to empower them to become (politically) active themselves. But I also believe in the power of reading theory, and forming the “bond of reading”.

AMPHI: Having the chance to get feedback from and to exchange experiences with other feminist media producers and activists about our project would be very important to us. We already do have this sort of exchange with other media producers from the Caucasian region and Russia, but the exchange with colleagues from Europe and America is still missing and not working so well. I would be interested in attending and also recommending to others conferences, workshops or training courses which enable such an exchange and networking with others and which promote and talk about feminist media production, and I wish I would have more opportunities (and time) to do all of this.

Emancypunx Rec: Concerning music and culture, one of the main attempts of *Emancypunx* was the creation of participatory spaces for feminist/queer voices, self-organizing, and networking. Such spaces are/were temporal like festivals and shows, but also continuing like the creation of a cultural center in Warsaw. Sharing knowledge is an important strategy to start and maintain change. For example, a lot of contacts and knowledge developed within *Emancypunx Rec* activities were transferred by cooperating with new people and also by establishing a cultural center in Warsaw, where people with no experience in those fields of activity could engage and work in new areas, as the responsibilities were rotating. It’s interesting to see new initiatives which use that knowledge. A precondition for development through knowledge sharing is of course that the people who get access to that shared knowledge do not privatize it again for one’s own sake.

Work sharing is another useful strategy that can be helpful when there are missing capacities. An example of a work-sharing strategy is the organization

of touring events, like for example the *FAQ! Festival* we organized in 2007. Through that it was possible to share a cultural program, artists with other places and organizing groups in Poland. The organizers only had to provide space and everything was mostly financed by the Warsaw event which was bigger and had more resources as the feminist scene is larger there.

The publishing of media is especially important in order to access people who we can't reach physically. *Emancypunk* as a label is pretty much international and reaches people from almost all over the world – from small villages to big towns. It's part of a worldwide DIY network. Music is not that much dependent on language, so that makes things easier. I also think it's important to publish music on records in order to keep a historical memory and to give a value to DIY cultural activities done by women/queers/feminists. Through all the years I can see that at least in the case of Poland there is a huge difference and the promotion of feminist culture was really successful.

How can feminist media production challenge and intervene into the status-quo and initiate and effect social change? Which strategies have you developed in your own project(s) to do so?

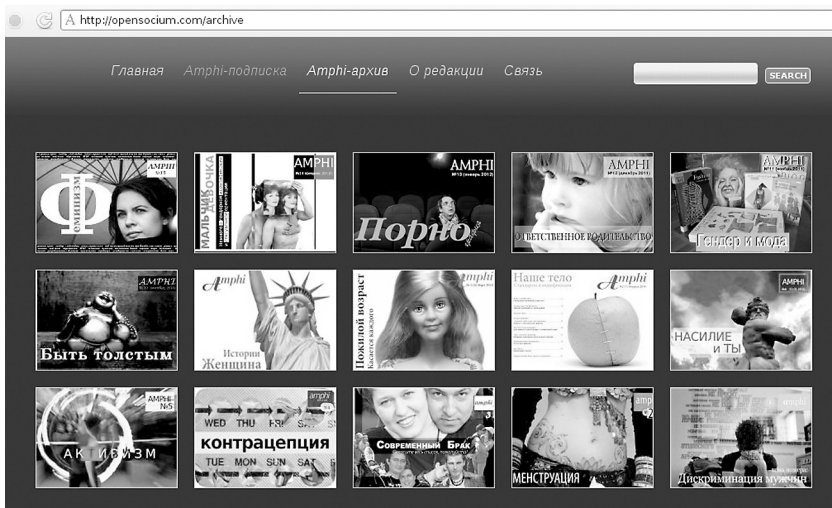
make/shift: One thing we are doing is documenting the challenges and interventions people are making in many places and in many ways. Also, radical, feminist media production in and of itself is an intervention, as we share and amplify voices and stories not found in dominant media – and the fact that we do it collaboratively, with a lot of skill-sharing and an emphasis on collective process and relationships, as well as a multiplicity of voices and perspectives.

Missy: By presenting alternative images of women/queers and empowering readers to look at their surroundings critically and to take action themselves. But we have to be realistic – we're publishers of a feminist magazine first, not activists or politicians, so the scope of our impact is somewhat limited by our job description.

AMPHI: We try to provide our readers with information and material that they otherwise couldn't get, either because it is ignored in other media (because it is too subversive, feminist, etc.) or because it had been published in foreign languages. In fact, 80% of the content of *AMPHI* are translations and 20% are self-produced texts. One example which may illustrate to you why this is important: when we worked on our issue about contraception we realized that all the information we found on Russian websites dealing with this topic was at least 3 or 4 years older than on English or German websites. We also try 1) to write as clearly and simply as possible in order that people who don't have any former knowledge about these issues still can understand what we are talking about; 2) to inform our readers, and not to judge certain developments; 3) if it's possible, to present more than one view on a specific topic; and 4) also to keep the magazine "attractive" in terms of layout and aesthetics. Our influence is rather limited, as for the

moment the magazine is only subscribed to by a rather small community on a regular basis (a little bit more than 1,000 readers). But our aim and also our dream is to publish *AMPHI* as a printed and free magazine that gets distributed in waiting rooms of gynecologists, at universities, in public spaces, etc. Unfortunately this is not possible at the moment, not only because it is too expensive, but also because in Belarus every independent activity is prohibited and threatened (with penalties, prison, and in some cases even with death). Not only political activists get persecuted, but also independent journalists.

Image 4: Screenshot of *AMPHI* magazine



© AMPHI magazine

Emancypunx Rec: Emancypunx Records is and was involved in really many projects, so I won't be able to mention all strategies. Also some of them were successful in certain times and contexts and would not have been successful in others. To put it short: one of the main strategies is to live and give examples of how life and society could work differently. In the case of record publishing *Emancypunx* tries to promote bands and cultural performances which break with traditional gender roles and transport political messages. It all goes step by step.

How do you see the relationship between political feminist activism and alternative feminist media production? How would you describe this relationship regarding to your own project(s)?

make/shift: We think they have to be in relationship – they work together. Feminist media is a form of feminist activism, and media made *about* feminist activism while not being connected to it doesn't feel like feminist media.

Missy: Especially in German-speaking countries, there is probably not a close enough relationship as of yet. Feminist media makers and feminist activists tend to work side by side a lot of times instead of together. If you are talking about the work of political parties, then it is a different story, since there are always attempts to embrace us and we are quite wary of being instrumentalized, as no party in Germany, Austria or Switzerland qualifies as being truly feminist in our view.

AMPHI: About a year ago some (former) editors, writers and active and interested readers of *AMPHI* formed a feminist activist group called *Krapiva Belaruskaya* ("Belarusian Nettle"), which aims to foster awareness and discussion about gender issues, violence, discrimination, sexism, etc. So there definitely has been a development from a "mere" media-project into a more activist and political project. This year, for instance, we awarded prizes for the development of civil society and for the fight against discrimination and sexism in Belarus, but at the same time contrasted these positive examples by awarding anti-prizes for exceedingly sexist, macho, discriminatory and homophobic behavior.

Emancypunx Rec: I agree that feminist media production usually is a form of political activism. *Emancypunx* was from the start a political project. The idea was to cause change, while at the same time avoiding the methods and language used by typical political activist environments. *Emancypunx* rather tries to document or create facts and communicate through cultural production, performances, emotions, images or music.

Links

AMPHI magazine

<<http://www.opensocium.com>>

Emancypunx

<<http://www.emancypunx.scenaonline.org>>

Fem.fm

<<http://www.fem.fm>>

gender_by

<<http://gender-by.livejournal.com>>

Krapiva Belaruskaya

<<http://krapiva-belarus.livejournal.com>>

<<http://www.facebook.com/groups/193158994062914>>

<<http://krapiva.org>>

LOUDmouth

<<http://calstatelasu.org/cccloudmouth>>

make/shift magazine

<<http://www.makeshiftmag.com>>

Missy Magazine

<<http://missy-magazine.de>>

Noc Walpurgii Festival

<<http://nocwalpurgii.wordpress.com>>

Biographies

Sonja Eismann is a journalist, a cultural theorist and university lecturer. She is one of the founders and editors of *Missy Magazine* and lives in Berlin with her partner and her daughter. She is also the editor of the book *Hot Topic. Popfeminismus heute* (2007).

Emancypunx was formed in the mid 1990s initially as a distro run by the anarchist feminist group *KDP* (later transformed into *Emancypunx group*, which ceased to exist in 2002). The idea was (and still is) to promote feminism, women's sexual and reproductive rights and sexual education, and to raise anti-homophobic consciousness in Poland. The record label was initiated in order to promote females and a feminist consciousness within a still male dominated hc punk scene. Today *Emancypunx Records* is not just a distro and record label; it's also active in many other areas such as festival organization (art, music, movies, performance), tour managing, running a zine archive and flying zine library, etc. *Emancypunx* participated and continues to participate in various feminist and anarchist feminist groups and projects. *Emancypunx* is and always was a non-profit, non-commercial initiative run on a voluntary and DIY basis.

Jessica Hoffmann is co-editor/co-publisher of *make/shift* magazine. She has contributed to numerous publications, including *ColorLines*, *AlterNet*, *Scholar and Feminist*, and the anthologies *We Don't Need Another Wave: Dispatches from the Next Generation of Feminists* and *Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity*. She is also a member of the *POOR Magazine* Solidarity Family. She has been engaged in activism around various issues since she helped organize a student walkout against the first Gulf War at her junior high.

Jeanna Krömer (Yamaykina) is co-founder and editor of the Belarusian e-zine *AMPHI*. She was born in 1980 in Belarus. At a young age (19) she married for the first time and became a mother, and thus experienced all of the inconveniences of living in the pro-patriarchal society of a post-Soviet country. She studied German (Minsk), journalism (Warsaw, Berlin) and sociology (Vienna). Since 2010 she has been living in Berlin, but as an activist she is still involved in projects in Belarus and in other countries of the former Soviet Union, including the Belarusian LJ blog *gender_by*, building up a Russian-speaking women's radio program (*Fem.fm*) and the feminist activist group *Krapiva Belaruskaya*.

Daria Yudacufski is co-editor/co-publisher of *make/shift* magazine. She is also the managing director of *Visions and Voices*, an arts and humanities initiative at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. She has worked at universities for almost 20 years, focusing on cross-cultural education and arts administration. She was formerly the publisher of *LOUD-mouth* and director of the Cross Cultural Centers at Cal State L. A.

