Riot Grrrl’s Legacy: The Medium is the Message

Rosemary Larkin

BYU Spring Symposium 2016

Riot Grrrl appropriated traditional, even “feminine,” media platforms to encourage third wave feminism. They ignored a central message on purpose in lieu of loud mediums meant to disrupt the status quo instead of assert a new one.

Keywords: feminism, third-wave feminism, punk ideology, media platforms, zines, DIY aesthetic,
Riot Grrrl’s Legacy: The Medium is the Message

Mimicking mediums has long been a rhetorical strategy of feminist movements. Feminists matched their empowered counterparts by co-opting platforms such as essays, resolutions, and declarations to engage in intellectual discourse with a singular intended audience—men. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Emma Goldman, and other first wave thinkers sought to reason with established power structures. Logic, diplomacy, and social theory held the key, in their minds, to mutually beneficial solutions while emotional appeals would simply reinforce ingrained feminine myths. It wasn’t until third wave feminism in the 1990s that women rather than men comprised the target audience. Riot Grrrl and the fanzine community it spawned were perhaps the first feminist creators aiming their materials exclusively at women. However, abrasive and crude content about rape, sexuality, art, mental illness, and angry girl punk bands appealed to few demographics. But that was the point. This effectively accomplished the movement’s simple mission to “save the psychic and cultural lives of girls and women everywhere, according to their own terms, not ours.”

I argue that the mediums used by Riot Grrrl more effectively prompted independent thought in the “lives of girls and women everywhere” than the white noise created by their community. Riot Grrrl attacked cultural ideologies in the public realm but adapted traditional platforms in order to undermine systemic patterns of status quo feminine notions.

The punk movement tells an all-too-familiar story of how feminine myths reassert themselves. All primary sources confirm that women originally dominated much of the west

---

coast punk scene. San Francisco and Los Angeles scene members\(^2\) remember that “[. . .] female bass players were almost a requirement, and [. . .] it was often the women who dominated and controlled the Punk scene.”\(^3\) At the time, punk philosophies dovetailed perfectly with the frustration many women felt as they fought against cultural molds. A punk show often featured drawing straws to see which instrument each bandmate would play for that performance or spontaneously writing a song reacting to a social or political environment. By that logic, nothing was more punk rock than dismantling the monopoly of masculinity in mainstream rock. 1970’s LA celebrated a true breakdown of social mores. The popular millennial catchphrase “you do you” is basically the grandchild of early punk ideology. “In the late 1970s, punk initially had been very profeminist (the ideals of feminism fit in with punk's do-it-yourself ethic of self-empowerment and independence from authority).”\(^4\) But as the community grew, violent masculine undertones of anarchy became a message in and of itself. Women were pushed out. They became the outsiders.

Kevin Dunn and May Summer Farnsworth, authors of “‘We ARE the Revolution’: Riot Grrrl Press, Girl Empowerment, and DIY Self-Publishing,” sought to pinpoint reasons why women were motivated to find separate creative spaces. They agree that “[t]he initial punk scene was extremely diverse, drawing in males, females, transgendered individuals, straights, and homosexuals. Numerous bands contained women members and all female bands abounded.” However, punk fell prey to the establishment it sought to abolish. As the punk community

\(^3\) Ibid, 139.
became “largely male-dominated [...] by the 1980s,” it was “marked by pronounced sexism.”

Women were again being marginalized. In response, Kathleen Hanna, front woman of Bikini Kill, wrote the *Riot Grrrl Manifesto*. *Riot Grrrl* represented a publishing company, a zine, a community, and an attitude. More than that, the Riot Grrrl movement was purposefully offensive. It tore apart social conventions “[w]ith graphic language and hard-driving music,” and its punk bands “screamed with rage against male abuse, celebrated an independent female sexuality, and called for a grrrl-style revolution.”

Narrowing the definition of a grrrl-style revolution borders on impossible. With individualism constituting the core of *riot grrrl*, things like pragmatism were readily sacrificed for the cause. In fact, many believed that “over-organization would cost us the individuality we spend too much of the time fighting the rest of the world for.”

Thorough analysis of the principles, history, and varieties of the *riot grrrl* movement would potentially fill bookstores. Rather than unpacking the revolutionary rhetoric of these myriad messages, my interest lies primarily in the mediums the Riot Grrrl Press used to react to and separate themselves from mainstream culture (as well as the now hostile punk scene). Communication theorist Marshall McCluhan’s repackaging of modern communication coined the catchphrase “the medium is the message.” With such a simple and malleable message as self-representation, *how* Riot Grrrl attracted attention and spread their message had a more significant impact than the message itself. The medium needed to be *louder* than the message.

---

5 Dunn and Farnsworth, “We ARE The Revolution,” 137-138.
6 Front-woman of Bikini Kill.
Riot Grrrl founder Kathleen Hanna⁹ and her network of female artists prioritized finding mediums to disrupt the status quo but not to derail daily life, as popular interpretation held. Stepping off the stage, these musicians embraced a familiar strategy “in the long tradition of feminists spreading their word through grassroots magazines, pamphlets, and flyers.”¹⁰ Zines—homemade, poorly produced, and amateurly written—provided a forum to explore the changing meaning of feminist ideology. They gave voice to marginalized, suppressed, and frustrated girls and women whose needs were not being represented by the mainstream media targeting them. Until the founding of Riot Grrrl Press, it could be argued that manipulating the media as a message was an unintended benefit of zine publication. However, Riot Grrrl Press fostered this approach and the diversity that came with it. Harnessing their community to a powerful central message would undermine its purpose. And mainstream media missed the point completely. To such obtuseness, the most effective action was a subversive attack to the obstacles stalling impending social change.¹¹ They presented a popularized, mainstream “girl power” trend that spoke generically to girls across the country. “Despite Riot Grrrl’s […] feminist media production, or perhaps because of it, reporters from the mainstream press started to pay attention.”¹² Girl power became a commodity.

Grrrl punk bands condemned these depictions of women as shallow, flawed, and belittling: This move (responding primarily to the burden of blame for sexual behavior and sexual violence) sought to reclaim the female body from societal interpretations, and it was fuel

---

⁹ Lead singer of Bikini Kill, an all girl punk band.
¹¹ Ibid.
¹² Dunn and farnsworth, “We ARE The Revolution,” 141.
for much of Riot Grrrl’s early efforts. Naturally, the movement drew attention from both their intended audience—women—and the establishment they were criticizing. Mainstream media struggled to—or were unwilling to—conceptualize riot grrrl’s larger aims and latched onto this bite-sized mantra “girl power,” leading to dramatically different definitions. Riot Grrrl’s power meant publically tackling issues of “rape, domestic abuse, women’s health, sexuality, and, above all, female empowerment”¹³ whereas mainstream media extolled the virtues of feminine characteristics, feigning empowerment by ferreting out even the most obscure interpretations of autonomy from the crevices of fortified gender roles. The effects of this loosely organized media campaign are clearly represented by riot grrrl’s appropriation of traditional, even “feminine,” media platforms to disrupt the status quo. Riot grrrl targeted three: magazines were replaced by zines, homemaking skills by the DIY aesthetic, and media advertising by visuals with political and cultural commentary.

As riot grrrl gained notoriety and fell victim to mainstream media editorializations (sometimes provoking them), members “decided that in order to be in control of their own image they would create a zine distribution network so that their zines could speak for themselves.”¹⁴ It was an escalation of the “Manifesto’s” initial call to “take over the means of production in order to create our own meanings.”¹⁵ Definitions were ill-coordinated at best, and the simplified presentation of the movement seized the mainstream mouthpiece. Zines ultimately became the backbone of riot grrrl. Zines were the great equalizer, embracing an aesthetic that literally anyone could be part of. The low-fi juxtaposition with glossy magazines such as Seventeen

---

¹³ Dunn and Farnsworth, “We ARE The Revolution,” 140.
¹⁴ Ibid, 150.
created a Hegel-like conflict between the over processed prop and the raw individual. “Zines are created by prisoners, young girls, people with emotional and physical disabilities, [. . .] survivors of sexual assault, radical offspring of conservative politicians, [. . .] Native Americans, sexworkers, and anyone else who has ever felt that the voices speaking for them in the larger culture weren’t conveying their stories.”16 Social and racial “others” were naturally drawn to this inviting community. Rather like the punk scene that birthed it, a core riot grrrl tenet required variety. In theory, punk was open to any disenfranchised group not only because of its political activism but because punk was obsessed with fighting cultural alienation at every turn.17 Punk fought to remove the stigma of “otherness” by celebrating it. At least, at first. Riot grrrl maintained the diversity of its early punk origin. With no editors, no licensing, no bottom line, freedom of expression flourished in an unprecedented way, one without taboos and without bias. Open authorship in zine writing encouraged dialogue and responses within the community and this space weighted each contribution equally rather than carefully crafting an image to then support with content. The very concept of zines undermined the male dominated world of publishing18 (and it still does). Systemic censorship within zine publishing had no opportunity to take root as independent women and girls were collaborating with each other, connecting experiences and ideas, and publishing literally whatever they wanted on grainy xeroxes. Ironically, an industry driven by advertising and profits helped to craft its antithesis: publications that philosophically did not believe in leveraging a profit from individualism. Zines have even claimed a place in academia, revered as a one-of-a-kind medium in which third-wave feminism’s core belief finds its best self: self-representation without apology.

17 Dunn and Farnsworth, “We ARE the Revolution,” 148.
18 Ibid, 145.
Self-representation filtered beyond the lived experiences and ideals of riot grrrl’s adherents. The Do-It-Yourself (DIY) ethos, introduced first in punk, challenged the homogeneity of youth culture, creating a tangible exterior “other” to match its internal counterpart. And it started at home. DIY sought to deconstruct the traditional feminine skill set abundant in riot grrrl’s demographics; middle-class white girls were, as always, pressured to learn homemaking in preparation to be a wife and mother. Publishing zines about rape and cultural inequality, producing unskilled and unprocessed music, sewing “slut” and “whore” into clothes: none of these were avenues mainstream culture was comfortable associating with women. Yet again, riot grrrls distorted a fundamentally feminine pillar of mainstream life. Embracing these “girly” skills was an unexpected move. Punk encouraged women to shed stereotypical femininity in favor of gender neutral individuality. Riot grrrl instead redefined it. Employing feminine skills in support of self-representation eroded the stability of social institutions and of the status quo. The free exchange of uncensored ideas “creat[ed] a resistant feminist culture” (similar to an immune system fighting off infection and producing antibodies) and encouraged girls to connect rather than fall victim to a competitive social atmosphere popular in mainstream. Potential began to take a new form “BECAUSE I believe with my whole heartmindbody that girls constitute a revolutionary soul force that can, and will change the world for real” [sic]. DIY bled into the girl punk band scene, touting the reality that you can’t wait for someone else to change your world. Self-representation motivated riot grrrl because individuality was “a necessity for all

---

20 Dunn and Farnsworth, “We ARE The Revolution,” 145.
those wishing to challenge the destructive social forces—from patriarchy to corporate-controlled capitalism—within society at large.”

Pussy Riot, a Russian activist punk band, pushed for the free exchange of ideas by embracing visually arresting and loudly offensive performances. They still do. While they embrace the spectacle punk music has become infamous for, Pussy Riot favors targeted performances filmed with handheld cameras and containing inflammatory liberal criticism directed at Russia’s government and conservative orthodox culture. With homemade ski masks and rudimentary pyrotechnics, Pussy Riot uses spectacle as a delivery system for their core message. The DIY aesthetic, inspired by riot grrrl’s international reach, fortified Pussy Riot’s demonstrations. Their aesthetic connected to real people who could similarly appropriate everyday materials. Unsurprisingly, Pussy Riot was imprisoned in 2013 for their riotous displays of counterculture and derisive treatment of Russia’s political and religious dogma. Pussy Riot is an extreme example of anti-establishment punk if only because of the extreme reaction they provoked. While traditional punk encompassed a larger swath of concerns, Pussy Riot reinforces the common thread of riot grrrl movements across the world: reclaiming the social perceptions of women. Advertising campaigns and pop culture depictions of women consistently sparked a response from various riot grrrl entities.

In her “Riot Grrrl Manifesto,” Hanna identified capitalism as a core cause of this objectification: “BECAUSE we hate capitalism in all its forms and see our main goal as sharing information and staying alive, instead of making profits or being cool according to traditional standards.” And traditional feminine myths had the support on an industry and its silent

---

23 Dunn and Farnsworth, “We ARE The Revolution,” 156.
24 Ibid, 395.
majority. Individuality is often the first casualty of mainstream victories. As demonstrated in Pussy Riot’s unmistakeable social protests, the entrenched institutions that perpetuate feminine myths are comprised of intertwining political, social, religious, and economic elements. American riot grrrls found the same roadblocks to self-representation in their capitalist climate that Pussy Riot did in an oligarchical capitalist one. Self-representation motivated riot grrrl and its subsequent derivations because individuality was “a necessity for all those wishing to challenge the destructive social forces—from patriarchy to corporate-controlled capitalism—within society at large.”

Guerilla Girls similarly identified the destruction wrought by capitalist priorities when they accused institutions of commodifying women. As investment in art exploded in the ‘70s and ‘80s and brought mainstream attention to the art community, the value of a painting compared to the value of the women depicted within outraged feminist groups. Guerilla Girls’ mediums of buying billboards, distributing stickers, handing out flyers, etc., paralleled the very platforms used by advertisers. They closely tie their message to the content typically occupying the space, thus adding layers to the parody.

Pussy Riot and Guerilla Girls mark a present day shift in riot grrrl culture. It is slowly drifting away from the tactile DIY and into the cyber. The internet is the imagination’s playground; open source networks such as the online community Cybergrrrl create potential mediums for Riot Grrrl-like rhetoric that continues the print tradition of feminism in the new frontier. Web blogs, vlogs, social media accounts, forums, sites, databases, and so on, are in many ways the natural successors to zine culture. They are mediums that prize individuality, self-publishing, and the free exchange of ideas. If we agree that “Riot Grrrl’s main contribution

---

25 Dunn and Farnsworth, “We ARE The Revolution,” 156.
27 Orr, “Charting the Currents of the Third Wave,” 40.
to feminist change was its persistent opposition to the mainstream media and its call for women
and girls to publicly express themselves,” there is no better inheritor than open platform
communication. Social networks like Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, and Reddit allow for anyone to
interact with and have access to anyone else’s message. Whole communities have sprung up
simply because individuals can be exposed to content they never would be otherwise. This new
world of mass communication has the potential to bind women across distances, cultures, ages,
and get half of the population talking to each other. With limitless communication available and
new avenues opening up daily, third wave feminism has the opportunity to change the world
perspective.

But how? Even at Riot Grrrl’s height of production, their resources were severely limited.
They were the Spartans at Thermopylae. Outmanned and underfunded, zinesters didn’t try to
solve social issues as much as they tried to disrupt the routine of feminine myths. The
decentralized efforts of Riot Grrrl Press ultimately would struggle to find a foothold in the storm
of new media. In a way, the riot grrrl movement was waiting for the technological culture of
today. “Networking. There are a lotta people in this world and there are probably several who
would benefit from and/or enjoy reading our zines but haven’t had the opportunity. There are
also a lot of radical activists and groups that we really need to network with NOW ok?” At last
the dream is a reality with international communities and perspectives interacting daily online.
Our modern “zines” still serve the integral purpose of engaging individuals in a journey of self
determination. While internet culture leans toward an absolutist metric of either viral or fail,
lessons taken from early riot grrrl’s media war could reinvent the zinester/online culture. Zines,

28 Dunn and Farnsworth, “We ARE The Revolution,” 140.
29 Ibid, 153.
after all, “were not necessarily [presented as] final products but steps toward the process of self
discovery.”30

Riot grrrl is a culture of celebration, wanting to help new girls find new ways to express
their new (or old) ideas. “While networking was clearly an important facet of the zine culture,
perhaps a more important aspect was spreading the message of personal empowerment.”31 The
public realm has expanded beyond print, homemaking, and advertising; women carry the public
realm with them as increasingly large percentages of discourse is conducted online.
Contemporary riot grrrl communities are perfectly primed to reinvent cultural suppositions, and
online mediums provide the perfect launching point. It cannot be denied that widespread trends
infiltrate major content platforms.

Riot grrrl’s message was originally heard by manipulating mainstream mediums;
potentially, new mediums could extend beyond just disrupting the status quo to introduce new
levels of discourse to new audiences. Four women talking to each other can spawn zine
originality; harnessing thousands in instant interaction could potentially reinvent the feminine
myth.

30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
Works Cited


Strong, Catherine. “Grunge, Riot Grrrl and the Forgetting of Women in Popular Culture.” *The