

How to Start and Sustain a Feminist Magazine

By Sheba White

It started with the publication of one letter to the editor. When I was sixteen years old and living in the then bohunk town of Minneapolis, I read what most black sixteen-year-olds in the 80s read; classroom textbooks, *Ebony*, *Essence*, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton books smuggled from the library, and my mother's secret stash of soft core porn. We, like most poor families then, never received magazines on subscription and primarily read what was left behind in physician's waiting rooms and the lobbies of welfare offices. So the idea of reading anything beyond "What a Sister Can Do with Her Hair in Ten Minutes or Less" was incomprehensible to me.

But then one of my punk friends handed me *Maximum Rock N' Roll*, a magazine for punks and by punks. The magazine was sold at record stores and primarily through word of mouth. It was printed in greasy, cut and paste 8 by 11 newsprint with random fonts. I was hooked immediately, and it showed. I began writing letters to the editors, which in turn prompted hundreds of response letters to be sent to my very own, previously empty, mailbox in the middle of that bohunk town.

It wasn't so much the magazine that kept me hooked as it was the thought that with a little bit of time and a crappy copy machine in a friend's basement (or a connection at Kinko's) a person could have their very own magazine, a vehicle to share ideas and opinions, meet other people from around the world through an exchange of words, and best of all, get your name and ideas across to people you'd never met. This was a very attractive idea to a sixteen-year-old living in what she perceived as the middle of Nowheresville.

So I began to create little broadsides and photocopied vanity zines in my high school's graphic design department, mostly having to do with growing up in the bohunk town and dealing with the racism, the sexism and the consumerism in the Reagan Era Midwest. I sent these broadsides out, for free, to the people I had received letters from and from there received equally haphazardly put together broadsides and zines back from people around the world, which was exhilarating and fueled my love of zines so much that I began picking up and buying little zines here and there.

But soon, like most half-hearted efforts, I grew tired of staying up late into the night with an X-acto knife, some glue, and waking up with a slew of random fonts stuck to my face in the morning. That, and I was spending a fortune, my small pittance of a telemarketer's wage, on purchasing zines and postage for my little projects. I gave the zine idea up. But I never got over the idea that one day I would run my very own magazine, and what's more, it would be about and for women and minorities, or both, and their ideas on culture and politics and art, as at the time *Maximum Rock N' Roll* was clearly a testosterone-tinged publication.

Sometime in the mid-90s I came back to the idea of publishing my own feminist magazine. It began with the startup and success of several feminist magazines: *Venus*, *Fabula*, *Sassy*, *Moxie*, *Bust* and *Bitch*, to name a few. These magazines were aimed at women like me, third wave feminists who grew up with a savvy knowledge of pop culture, a disdain for beauty and home décor magazines, and a general political stance that was liberal at the least, but primarily radical. These magazines were a direct response to the seemingly antiquated women's magazines at that time: *Ms.*, *Essence*, *Ebony*, *Ladies Home Journal*, etc., all of which focused on women who were primarily concerned with having children and buying their condos, or so they seemed to be saying. At the time, I was in my 20s, living in an urban city

and working for underpaid wages as a young, hip single woman of color. I was as far removed from the lifestyles in these traditional women's magazine's demographics as a person could get.

Two of the magazines, *Bust* and *Bitch*, gave me great hope because both began as zines and blossomed into pop cultural and social institutions. And too, both came from feminist-minded individuals, who, like my sixteen-year-old self way back, and my twenty-something self at the time, had no idea how to run a magazine. They simply had a desire to create something out of what they liked and went for it.

Debbie Stoller, cofounder and editor-in-chief of *Bust*, talks of this in the summer 2003 issue:

...Myself and Marcelle Karp—started hatching the idea to put together a magazine. A magazine that would be unapologetically feminist, and would celebrate the new grrrl culture that was springing up across the country. A magazine that would be fierce and funny. One that would tell the truth about what we gals were going through, in all its rough, unpolished glory. A magazine in which nothing was sacred and everything was permitted. We'd call it *BUST*: a name that was both sexy and aggressive.... And we hoped that it would, one day, take its place on the newsstand beside the *Cosmos* and the *Glamours* and *Vogues* of the world. It was a grand scheme. The only problem was, we had no idea how to get it done...neither of us had magazine backgrounds, let alone business savvy. But we had chutzpah, and we had lots of friends. We asked

them to write stories and make art for our magazine, and we asked our designer friends to lay out the pages on their computers. Then we surreptitiously made 500 copies, late at night, at our corporate offices.... Of course, you wouldn't quite call what we had a magazine exactly—it was really more of a 'zine: a self-published rag filled mostly with self-indulgent first-person rambling and laid out in a cut-and-paste style. But it was ours, and we loved it, and we believed it had something important to say.¹

Andi Ziesler, cofounder and editor at *Bitch*, had a similar beginning. However, it should be noted that these personal zines did not stay zines for long because these women always had an eye towards the future of their projects. In an e-mail interview on November 8, 2004, Ziesler said:

It started in 1996 as a zine, but Lisa Jarvis, my cofounder, and I were really enamored of magazine conventions and tried to make it look and read as much like a magazine as possible, with short front matter, a features well in the middle, and reviews and ephemera in the back. We printed 300 copies and took them around to area bookstores, where they were sold on consignment.²

The most important aspect of the two magazine's backgrounds for me was that all of the founders had little to no experience in magazine publishing and little to no money. The prevailing thought is that to begin a project of this magnitude, one has to have both. But, and perhaps this is because of the D.I.Y. background that all of the founders came from, this is not necessarily the case. One simply has to have a desire

to produce a magazine; the time to commit to it, and the business savvy to market it to the population one is aiming for. Ziesler reiterated this point when she stated:

Both Lisa and I had very little concrete publishing experience—very little journalism experience, for that matter. We both came from creative writing backgrounds, but had been interested in magazine publishing through our teen and college years. I worked as an intern at *Sassy* magazine for several months when I was 17, and then volunteered at a Chicago literary magazine in college. The main thing I garnered from these jobs was that publishing a magazine was fairly arduous and not very well-paying, so it was important to a) really love what you're doing, and b) have a viable alternative source of income.³

The biggest obstacle, both Stoller and Ziesler stated, was finding alternative sources to support their, then, side projects, that, and the time that was necessary to nurture these projects, because all of the founders continued to work their day jobs. Stoller stated:

Little by little, a real magazine was starting to come together. We opened a bank account, and when we had enough money from subscriptions and ads to print another issue, we'd print one. We kept our day jobs, and worked on *BUST* on nights and weekends. That's pretty much how we chugged along for the next seven years. The magazine kept getting bigger and bigger, our circulation kept growing.... Yet, it was still an all-volunteer effort. Like crime, we'd

joke, *BUST* doesn't pay. But suddenly it wasn't funny anymore. Our day jobs had evolved into careers, and juggling *BUST* and our personal lives was overwhelming. *BUST* was going to have to become our full-time job, or we weren't going to be able to do it anymore. The thing is, we couldn't figure out how to make that happen.⁴

Stoller and Karp chose to allow a larger publishing company to invest in their magazine in order to gain capital for their growing publication. This, however, proved to be disastrous. As Stoller stated:

Our first year was a dream. Our parent company pretty much left us to ourselves, allowing us to make the magazine we wanted. But by the end of the year, the stock market had tanked and the ad sales market was drying up. Our publishers had us stop making *BUST* while they tried to corral the funds they would need to make *BUST* bigger and better.... We'd already seen it coming by the time our parent company closed its doors in mid-October.⁵

The only reason why *Bust* survived this crushing blow was because Stoller and Laurie Henzel [who replaced Karp when Karp became pregnant and left the company] took a page from their humble D.I.Y. backgrounds and raised money through various events to buy back their magazine and illicit the aid of their subscribers, who by that time were a monolithic mass of savvy D.I.Y. women who maintained a strong allegiance to the magazine on its web-site. In a November 15, 2001 article in *The Phoenix*, Nina Willdorf stated:

While the magazine's future remains, at best, in doubt, its bulletin board is hopping like never before; some women have even set up an alternative location, just in case Razorfish Studios [the parent company that purchased *Bust*] kills off their beloved site without warning. As they learned the news of the mag's demise and organized their possible escape route, posters' emotions ran from weepy to angry, disappointed to driven.⁶

Ziesler and Jervis chose a different route. They eventually quit their day jobs to work on *Bitch* full-time. It was a big step that was buoyed by the innovative programs they created to booster the magazine's small income. For instance, Ziesler and Jervis created a subscriber-based donation program for the magazine, increased their percentage of advertising and hosted various money-raising events around their home base in San Francisco.

As can be seen from the *Bust* experience, sustaining a feminist magazine in a an increasingly commercialized, profit-driven publishing climate is often harder than starting one, and many D.I.Y tactics and alternative methods have to be employed to do so. Ziesler commented on how *Bitch* stayed afloat in the midst of this climate:

Because the Bay area is a very D.I.Y.-friendly atmosphere and very supportive of small press, there was a lot of word of mouth that garnered us distributors and mentors. Financially, Lisa and I and our first art director, Ben Shaykin, all had day jobs that allowed us to be pretty flexible in terms of taking time out to work on the magazine, but also paid enough that we weren't dependent

on *Bitch* as any kind of a moneymaking source. We were lucky enough to get contributors and editing/proofreading volunteers, too. We traded ads with other small magazines, got very involved in the small-press scene here, and used whatever word of mouth we could get. So we grew quite organically, and were able to expand our circulation with each issue. We [also] worked pretty closely (and still do) with an awesome nonprofit called the Independent Press Association, which is a resource for small press media and gives technical-assistance grants and holds workshops and things like that.⁷

Even when employing the subversive tactics of Stoller and Henzel and Jervis and Ziesler, there are obstacles to be met. Ziesler commented on this, “I think the biggest ones have been the boring technical things like postal regulations, paper costs and availability, and things like that.” For Stoller and Henzel, the biggest obstacle was obviously having to buy back their magazine, but Stoller has also stated that the magazine’s successes far outweigh its challenges. This includes meeting stars, getting interviewed by various media and interviewing your lifelong heroes, appearing on television shows as an expert in a small field, and producing something of value for an underrepresented part of the population, despite the various obstacles.

And the readership should not be forgotten. The ability to communicate with like-minded individuals is the primary reason why I began my little zines in my bohunk Minneapolis home all those years ago. Obviously this is the reason why the people at *Bitch* and *Bust* continue to produce their magazines as well, despite the fact that so many other feminist magazines, like *Fabula* and *Moxie*, have folded for

various reasons, mostly having to do with funding. Producing a feminist magazine is a labor of love and purpose fueled by a need to reach out to a similarly minded group of women, even if the readership base changes over time.

Ziesler commented on the changing face of her readership and how it made the magazine's trials and tribulations all worthwhile in the end when she stated:

When we started, I think we expected most of our readers to be more or less like us—post-college aged, vaguely academic, TV-and-magazine obsessed geeks. It's definitely changed—we still have plenty of those readers, but we also have lots of 30-and-40something women and men, and—very gratifying—a fair amount of teenaged girls just discovering the sting of gender inequity and its effect on their lives.... The successes have also been unforeseen and pretty random—most of them just have to do with visibility, discovering that we mean something to people, that professors are using the magazine as a text in their classes, and that we've inspired people to start their own publications or do something else in the way of media activism.⁸

Tom Person, in his article "Surviving Small Press: Starting a Magazine," has this tip to offer for starting any magazine: "Work on someone else's magazine before starting your own." Person says that doing this for pay, or as an intern, is the best way to start a magazine because it gives you the experience and connections you will need later on. He adds, "Apprenticeship is really the only way to get hands on experience without putting yourself at risk. Do lots of research on the competition, get someone

to teach you the ropes, and have a business plan to get you through the start-up period.”⁹ And Mary Ann Mohanraj in her article “So You Want to Start a Magazine,” says, “The first thing you need to do is ask yourself some questions,” which for Mohanraj include: print or electronic; pro, semi-pro, or amateur; what about start-up costs like salary and advertising; who is your staff; what kind of timing will your publication have—quarterly, monthly, etc; what about paying for articles and; where do I get the money?¹⁰

But this is if you have a concrete desire to start a feminist magazine. You could always use the model described by myself, Ziesler and Stoller, and begin with a feminist zine. This is especially possible in the age of cheap desktop publishing software and with a Kinko’s stationed on every corner.

The real problem a person who wants to run a feminist zine or magazine will face is how to sustain one. And it’s becoming more difficult as the general public becomes increasingly saturated with slick and savvy D.I.Y. marketing techniques online and offline. Word-of-mouth tactics may not work in this new technology-driven age either, so it’s equally important to keep in mind, according to Ziesler and Stoller, that the majority of your time will be spent in garnering funding for your projects and employing successful marketing strategies, which may be easier than it was at the time that Ziesler and Stoller began their work, because of all of the work they, and women like them, put into starting feminist magazines and organizations and the increasing awareness of the internet as a marketing tool.

A few tips from Ziesler’s rulebook might also help:

- 1) Keep your circulation low, especially in the beginning. Shoot for 500 copies, then build up as your readership grows.

- 2) Ally yourself with non-profit organizations that can help you to sustain your endeavors and keep those connections no matter how successful your magazine becomes, you never know who you will need later on.
- 3) Use every single connection you've made to its fullest: friends, family, other people in the business, to help construct your first issues. Both Stoller and Ziesler used their connections with their artist friends for otherwise costly procedures like layout and printing. If you don't have these connections, consider going to a school and querying students, they're often far cheaper than professionals and will sometimes do things for free for the credit of having worked on a magazine.
- 4) Don't forget your readership base, handwrite notes to them when possible and get them involved in a personal level with the magazine, say, have a letters page and respond to each letter in an editorial notation or write them a thank you note. Believe it or not, it's those personal responses from the editors that will bring in the long-term subscriptions.
- 5) And last, but not least, don't quit your day job until you are well into the black for at least three years, you never know what can come. As Ziesler stated, "go slow."

To that end, she also noted:

We saw lots of people around us doing start-up magazines that began with good intentions and a large amount of capital, only to fail almost immediately because they gave themselves no time or budget to learn from mistakes, and were too concerned with costs to make their content really original and special. I think our process, which was always

slow, content-driven, and sort of ad hoc, sort of served us well in that sense—we didn't go into it thinking it would be an overnight success, we welcomed input from anyone more seasoned who wanted to give it, and we knew we had to be flexible.¹¹

One more thing: the age of zines is not dead. One just has to note the recent success of Chicago's zine-to-magazine, *Stop Smiling*, to see that the possibility of a zine moving into magazine status is still an option for those with publishing dreams. And there is always room for one more feministic magazine with an unusual slant, as the cultural savviness of the general population is constantly changing.

For instance, in my personal research on feminist magazines I noticed that there are no magazines for women of color like *Bust* or *Bitch*.^{*} And judging from the letters section of each issue in these magazines, there is a market for this. Someone simply has to go for it. That someone could be me. I have desktop publishing software, I have a friend at Kinko's, I have an empty social calendar and I see a need for a magazine like this, maybe....

Endnotes

¹ Deb Stoller, "Ten Years of Bust: We've Come a Long Way, Baby," *Bust* Summer 2003: 36-37.

^{*} The recent launch of *Suede*, a magazine by and about Black women with a somewhat feminist-leaning stance shows some promise with its hip, urban content and youth-oriented demographics. But judging from its first few issues, it's building its template on a younger *Essence* or black *Jane* crowd, with colorful graphics, indeed, but very little issue-related articles or serious content.

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- ² Andi Ziesler, e-mail interview, 8 November 2004.
- ³ Ziesler, e-mail interview.
- ⁴ Stoller, "Ten Years of *Bust*" 36-37.
- ⁵ Stoller, "Ten Years of *Bust*" 36-37.
- ⁶ Nina Willdorf, "Bust Goes Bust," *The Phoenix* 15 November 2001, 14 November 2004
<<http://www.thephoenix.com>>.
- ⁷ Ziesler, e-mail interview.
- ⁸ Ziesler, e-mail interview.
- ⁹ Tom Person, "The Surviving Small Press: Starting a Magazine," *Laughing Bear Newsletter* 1999, 110.
- ¹⁰ Mary Anne Mohanraj, "So You Want to Start a Magazine," *Strange Horizons* 1 January 2001.
- ¹¹ Ziesler, e-mail interview.