

Book Review | *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies*, by Cait McKinney (Duke University Press, 2020)

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At a virtual event hosted by the ONE Archives in celebration of their caringly provocative book *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies*, author Cait McKinney ended their presentation with a photo of a lavender pencil embossed with the phrase “lesbians invented the internet.”¹ Though McKinney was deliberate in reminding the audience that this statement is not factually true (as they also make clear throughout the book itself), this tongue-in-cheek assertion cleverly signifies the book’s intertwined intellectual, methodological, and community-oriented contributions to studies of queer information. Additionally, this pencil—created by McKinney’s partner, artist Hazel Meyer—playfully gestures toward not only the affective and erotic relationships (in Lorde’s sense) that underlie lesbian-feminist organizing, but equally important, the material practices like handwritten records and marginalia that structure these archives themselves. As a contemporary object referencing historical artifacts by artists and activists, the pencil further comments on contemporaneous efforts to revive, recontextualize, and remediate lesbian-feminist visual and material cultures via social media (a topic McKinney references throughout the book and particularly in the epilogue). Which is to say: there are many ways to read this excellent book—as pre-history of the internet, as re-engagement with lesbian-feminist activism, as an intervention into present-day digital cultures, and beyond—but McKinney’s strengths are in queerly refusing neat conclusions.

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Though lesbian feminists may not have literally invented the internet, the information activism that McKinney theorizes compellingly counters not only dominant narratives of computing history, but also resoundingly rejects the concept of invention outright. McKinney meticulously analyzes a number of activist networked and databased information practices, demonstrating how these mundane and messy projects complicate understandings of the internet as we know it. In challenging simplistic notions of invention, McKinney's media archaeological work also highlights divergent epistemological and applied approaches to many ongoing digital predicaments, including access, privacy, labor, maintenance, obsolescence, compression, searchability, user autonomy, and information overload (to name but a handful). Still, McKinney's book is not just an account of minor figures or multiple internets, but functions as a call to rethink the role of information infrastructures within social movements and the values that structure historic and present technologies.

One of McKinney's key contributions in disrupting such invention narratives is to introduce the titular concept of "information activism," a community-based approach to documenting and distributing difficult-to-come-by information via ever-evolving social techniques and technologies. The book specifically traces the under-acknowledged collective work of lesbian feminists in the United States and Canada, beginning in the 1970s and extending through the present moment. McKinney's conceptualization of information activism thus incorporates a range of projects and platforms, including community archives, newsletters, hotlines, bibliographic indexes, websites, and social media. However, with such a capacious definition, it is easy to imagine how other researchers in fields of information, media, communication, and/or technology studies (and intersecting humanities and social sciences) might apply information activism to other minoritized communities or contexts. Indeed, while McKinney pays close attention to both lesbian feminists' vernacular vocabularies and the specificities of the disciplines just enumerated, their work also makes a subtle-but-clear case for transdisciplinary approaches to researching digital technologies.

In particular, McKinney highlights the often idealistic and imperfect values that structure these different avenues of information activism during historical periods in which there was virtually no media or political representation for queer women. Such precarity necessitated not only the development of content about diverse lesbian experiences but also structures to store, organize, and disseminate such information—which McKinney smartly locates in projects like the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA), the research newsletter *Matrices*, and the Lesbian Switchboard. (Indeed, these projects' own formal and informal archives, alongside interviews with their participants, provide the basis of McKinney's research.) Much of this work was, and continues to be, rooted in beliefs about lesbians having rights to both produce and access information about community history

and resources, across generational, geographic, and other differences. For example, McKinney highlights the pre-digital emergence of network metaphors in feminist and gay/lesbian communities, noting their attention to shared learning and labor through community archiving and publishing, as well as distributed forms of care, fundraising, and resource sharing via print newsletters. In chapters on indexing and archival projects, McKinney examines commitments to access that prioritize making materials *usable* by other lesbians rather than meeting arbitrary technical standards (such as through a makeshift audio digitization setup), and categorize materials using community-oriented language rather than the normative terms adopted by larger institutions.

McKinney also documents deep commitments to values like transparency, consent, and privacy in how decisions are made to preserve and digitize materials, particularly given changing expectations around safety and visibility over time. These commitments are especially apparent in the ongoing work of the LHA, which maintains its own “archive of the archives,” and often informally documents many of its own historic processes. McKinney notes a unique understanding of revision as feminist method across several projects, rooted in intergenerational and futurist orientations toward classifying information in ways that remain open as terminologies, cultures, and politics change. Still, McKinney routinely acknowledges the ways in which many information practices are hardly systematic but instead emerge as improvisational responses to limited resources (such as a volunteer joining with the time or skills to take on a project) or dynamics like group conflict and personal burnout. Relatedly, they pay careful attention to the challenges, compromises, and failures of living up to such ideals, including historic breaches of trust in how information is shared and with whom, as well as experiences of harmful exclusion through essentialism or misclassification, particularly impacting women of color and trans people.

If McKinney’s primary intervention is in theorizing information activism, their other key contribution is in an engagement with legacies of second-wave lesbian feminism through the lenses of queer, trans, and anti-racist activism. While many scholars and activists seem to fall into the trap of either romanticizing earlier feminist movements or writing them off altogether, McKinney manages to find a middle ground that simultaneously respects lesbian-feminist activists’ real cultural and political contributions, holds individuals and institutions accountable for oppressive dynamics, and most significantly, explores historic counterexamples of solidarity. Noting that lesbian feminists were not monolithic in identity or ideology, McKinney argues that despite numerous high-profile instances of trans-exclusionary rhetoric and actions, many service-oriented projects like hotlines in fact often served trans individuals in an everyday capacity. In the case of the Lesbian Switchboard, for example, call logs suggest that many callers may have been misgendered—though with evolving terminology and non-standardized

notation, it is often difficult to tell. Still, McKinney cautiously embraces this ambiguity while also pointing to evidence that several trans clients were indeed served by this project via trans-specific resources collected by the organization. Similarly, the LHA eventually established technical protocols to allow for revision of participants' names in ways that, again, strive to reflect the shifting identities and language used by individuals whose experiences are documented. In responding to these cases and others, McKinney engages feminist historiographic methods of speculation and direct service to the LHA, to address these gaps in minoritarian archives and gain greater insight into the relationships and processes that structure them. As they note, these forms of engagement are uniquely important in studying print cultures, which are limited in their abilities to capture affective entanglements across diverse constituencies. Such fleeting counterexamples may still leave much to be desired, but as McKinney notes, they further situate lesbian-feminist information activism as a process of tension, ambivalence, and continued becoming, rather than a moment of invention or conclusion.

As such, McKinney's *Information Activism* reinforces why information activism matters: that, when carefully attended to as part of social movements, information and communication practices are not merely discursive but profoundly material. That is, the information activism practiced by lesbian feminists has helped to establish embodied relationships, negotiate shared values, develop political positions, provide direct forms of care, connect individuals to material resources, and engage other important tactics that are central to, not separate from, movement organizing. There is a contemporary urgency to McKinney's work as well, particularly for students and scholars of today's social movements and social media—especially many of my students who seem preoccupied by slogans like “representation matters” or alleged dichotomies between materialist and performative activism. Put simply, McKinney's analysis of lesbian-feminist activism offers one example of the ways in which attention to media and information may be part of broader movements, with the understanding that such practices are often challenging, labor-intensive, and hardly glamorous. In their epilogue, McKinney directly addresses connections between earlier efforts and many contemporary intersectional queer, trans, and feminist digital practices, noting subtle differences between present activism and more superficial and nostalgic attempts to engage this history. Ultimately, however, McKinney's work does not feel wholly bound to either the past or present. Like many meaningful queer projects, it is oriented toward a sense of futurity: a perpetual process of improvisation, revision, and worldmaking.

Note

¹ The book launch event, “Queer Archives, Queer Terrains,” held on October 18, 2020, via Zoom, featured McKinney discussing *Information Activism* alongside Jen

Jack Gieseeking discussing his book *A Queer New York: Geographies of Lesbians, Dykes, and Queers* (NYU Press, 2020), with commentary by Karen Tongson. A video can be found here: <https://one.usc.edu/program/queer-archives-queer-terrains>.

Author Bio

Harris Kornstein is an Assistant Professor of Public and Applied Humanities at the University of Arizona whose research and art practice focus on digital culture, surveillance, data and algorithms, media art/activism, and queer/trans theory. Harris served as the *Catalyst* managing editor for several summers.