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# Risky *Ms.*-ness? The Business of Women's Liberation Periodicals in the 1970s

*Abstract: When the first mainstream women's liberation periodical Ms. landed on the racks in January 1972, responses from the feminist community were mixed: some activists perceived the magazine's commercial co-optation of ideals drawn from the women's liberation movement as an 'exploitative and cynical' exercise designed to advance the careers of Gloria Steinem and her so-called 'fancy-schmancy' colleagues, while other commentators such as Onka Dekkers recognized that 'a strong women's media' would be at the vanguard of any future feminist revolution. From the outset, the mainstream marketability of the new women's liberation periodical was a matter of great and urgent speculation. How would Ms. uphold its political principles while maintaining its economic viability? As one concerned correspondent from Harvard Business School advised in a letter to the editors, Ms. represented a substantial public relations risk, as well as a commercial one: 'it is vitally important that Ms. should succeed as a business—first, because business success will justify and confirm the relevance of the ideas and convictions which brought it into being; second, because business success will mean an unmistakable crack in the stereotyped belief that women cannot organize and manage a business'. In this paper, I investigate how Ms. itself was 'organize[d] and manage[d]', asking how the political goals of women's liberation disrupted and facilitated the business of running a magazine in the 1970s. Through specific reference to the 'Women and Money' issue of Ms. from June 1973, moreover, I examine the ways in which Ms. presented its feminist business practices—alongside other models of feminist working and entrepreneurialism—to a readership that was, according to a 'subscription notice' published in a 1971 issue, looking for ways of 'humaniz[ing]' business and politics 'in the home, the community, and the nation'.*

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*Keywords:* Feminist periodicals, women's liberation movement, Ms., affective labour

In this article, I investigate the risky prospect of the mainstream feminist magazine in the volatile media marketplace of the 1970s. Recent accounts of the women's liberation periodical *Spare Rib* (1972–93) have provided valuable analyses of how the relationship between politics and profitability operated in a British context (see Delap 2021), but *Ms.* magazine perhaps offers even sharper insights into the challenges and opportunities presented by feminist business in the age of liberation. Unlike *Spare Rib*, which had been launched on a shoestring budget of £2000—a sum made up of private donations from the friends and families of its founders, Marsha Rowe and Rosie Boycott—*Ms.* debuted with the financial backing of a major publishing corporation, in the form of Warner Communications. As a result, *Ms.*'s commercial viability and visibility exceeded that of *Spare Rib*. Although the magazines would experience similar problems raising funds from 'ethical' sources, *Ms.* ultimately managed to survive the vicissitudes of a misogynistic business environment, while its British counterpart was forced to fold in 1993.

Making reference to a range of reflective editorials, reader correspondence, features and advertisements I argue that *Ms.*'s ability to monetize the 'affective labour' of feminism (in its appeal to readers) is mitigated by 'feminist' business practices that limit the income that the magazine is able to generate from certain lucrative revenue streams. In other words, one central aspect of the *Ms.* project (creating a profitable business) is at odds with another (maintaining the feminist integrity of that business). *Ms.*'s commercial predicament, I argue, presents a significant opportunity to interrogate the concept of 'success'—and the criteria that are deployed in its assessment—as it pertains to feminist business. Can a business that fails to post a profit be successful? If so, by what criteria?

In *Entrepreneurial Ethics and Trust* Yakubu Zakaria proclaims that 'the *sine qua non* conditions for successful enterprise are sustainable profits, growth and perpetuity', while 'debts, shrinkage, and closure of business [are] the yardsticks of failure'. Measured in such terms *Ms.*, like many feminist ventures, is a precarious prospect. Rarely in profit and routinely under threat of collapse, the magazine, in its five decades, has nonetheless demonstrated a remarkable ability to withstand the vicissitudes of late capitalism. If, as Zakaria contends, there is usually a 'positive correlation' between 'the age of a business and [its] profitability', then this is a correlation that *Ms.* systematically subverts: it survives in spite of its unprofitability (Zakaria 1999: 181). While the longevity of *Ms.* might confound

the conventional algorithms of profit, its endurance over half a century is scarcely mystifying to readers. As its tagline acknowledges, *Ms.* is a metonym for feminism in the US; it is ‘more than a magazine, a movement’. When *Ms.* was threatened with closure in 1989, it was its ‘movement’ credentials that enabled its reincarnation as a subscription-based advertisement-free not-for-profit publication. As the *New York Times* Deidre Carmody opined at the time, the *Ms.* enterprise had ‘never been profitable’; by the same token, it had a substantial, ‘committed [and] involved reader base’ that had mobilized to generate an ‘extraordinary groundswell of letters’ petitioning Dale W. Lang, the owner of the magazine, to support its continued not-for-profit existence in the future (Carmody 1990: 9). While this article takes the vibrant decade of the 1970s as its central focus, the fact that *Ms.* still exists today—as a print quarterly with a circulation of 65,000, an estimated readership of 160,000, and an associated website with page views exceeding 4.3 million in 2018—provides a context for understanding how the magazine has negotiated the relationship between politics and profit since its inception. By prioritizing its politics over its profit margins, *Ms.* has maintained its credentials as a feminist brand, functioning as a forum for debate, an engine for activist campaigns, and a model for ethical and feminist business practices.

*Ms.* was cofounded in 1971 by Gloria Steinem, a columnist at *New York* magazine, Patricia Carbine, the editor of *McCalls*, and Elizabeth Forsling Harris. According to the inaugural editorial, or ‘Personal Report’, the idea of a glossy, mass-circulation monthly that would mediate the work of the women’s liberation movement—both in the U.S. and beyond—was the product of a collaboration between women writers, editors and activists. As the editorial describes, the writers felt the work they were producing for mainstream periodicals was ‘unconnected’ from their lives, and the activists were ‘trying to raise money for an information service and self-help projects, particularly for poor or isolated women’. As a shared response to these seemingly discrete problems, the women wondered whether a ‘publication’ might ‘serve to link up women, and to generate income as well?’. What the founders envisioned was a ‘publication created and controlled by women that could be as serious, outrageous, satisfying, sad, funky, intimate, global, compassionate, and full of change as women’s lives really are’ (‘A Personal Report’ 1972: 4–5). Harris pronounced that the magazine would ‘communicate the commonality of feeling among women around the country’, reassuring readers that they were ‘not alone in their anger and frustration’, and that ‘the same feelings [were] being experienced by all sorts of women’ (Harris qtd. in Farrell 1998: 30). As well as magnetizing ‘women everywhere’, *Ms.* would also operate as a model for feminist business, developing policies and practices

that would—if successful—revolutionise the landscape of the publishing industry and, ultimately, society at large (Farrell 1998: 35).

From the outset, the mainstream marketability of the new women's liberation periodical was a matter of urgent speculation. What would a mass-circulation feminist magazine look like? Was it commercially viable? How would it operate as a 'feminist' business? Could a 'feminist' business survive in the competitive world of mainstream publishing? As one concerned correspondent from Harvard Business School advised, *Ms.* was not only a commercial gamble; it also represented a substantial public relations risk for feminism:

it is vitally important that *Ms.* should succeed as a business – first, because business success will justify and confirm the relevance of the ideas and convictions which brought it into being; second, because business success will mean an unmistakable crack in the stereotyped belief that women cannot organize and manage a business. (qtd. in Farrell 1998: 46–7).

An abbreviated 40-page preview issue of *Ms.* landed on the racks in late-1971 as a free insert included with *New York* magazine. In articles that now occupy the status of minor classics in feminist circles, the preview issue stylishly showcases the magazine's politics. Amongst the best-known features are Judy Syfers' 'I Want A Wife', Letty Cottin Pogrebin's 'Down with Sexist Upbringing', Susan Edmiston's 'How to Write Your Own Marriage Contract', and Jane O'Reilly's 'The Housewife's Moment of Truth'. There are also articles on lesbianism, childcare centres, the intersecting oppressions of gender, race and class, and workplace discrimination. Across its varied content, the preview issue attempts to engage directly with a nascent feminist readership. There is, for example, a cut-out-and-keep selection of children's stories (which would later become the regular series, 'Stories for Free Children'), as well as information about 'Where to Get Help'. The first issue also contains Barbaralee Diamonstein's double-page spread 'We Have Had Abortions', which features the names of fifty-three women who admit to terminating pregnancies illegally. Printed alongside the names is a self-declaration coupon that readers are invited to complete and return to *Ms.* as part of the campaign to extend women's access to legal abortion in the years preceding *Roe vs. Wade*.

The issue of *New York* that included the *Ms.* insert broke all of the magazine's previous sales records; when the first, full stand-alone issue of *Ms.* was released in Spring 1972, all 300,000 copies sold out within days. Responses from the feminist community were mixed: some activists

perceived the magazine's commercial co-optation of ideals drawn from the women's liberation movement as an 'exploitative and cynical' exercise designed to advance the careers of Gloria Steinem and her 'fancy-schmancy' colleagues (Howard 1972: 44). Other commentators recognized that 'a strong women's media' would be at the vanguard of any future feminist revolution (Dekkers 1972: 19). Whatever the response from movement insiders, the commercial success of the first issue allayed investors' anxieties about the mainstream marketability of feminism, and *Ms.* quickly secured a million-dollar investment from Warner Communications to develop its operations. Steinem and Carbine brokered the deal with Warner on the basis that they would retain a controlling share of the stock, and thus safeguard their freedom as writers and editors. This editorial freedom was the cornerstone of the *Ms.* enterprise; through it, the magazine's writers would ensure that their commitment to the cause of women's liberation would not be undermined by the commercial demands of publishers and advertisers.

As soon as *Ms.* had established its market potential, it invited readers to share in the various elements of its business. The first of the magazine's editorials, or 'Personal Reports', appears in July 1972. Published without direct attribution, but probably authored by Steinem, it describes the exhausting process of bringing *Ms.* to publication. The creators had 'many' meetings where they developed 'big plans, long lists of article ideas, a mock-up of illustration and design, proposed budgets [and] everything', before spending 'many months making appointments, looking for backing from groups that invest in new ventures—and just as many months getting turned down'. According to Steinem, prospective investors objected to every aspect of the enterprise, from the risks of financing a 'national magazine controlled by its staff' and the 'downright crazy' proposition that *Ms.* would set 'aside some of the profits (supposing there were any) to go back into the Women's Movement', to the fact 'there are probably only ten or twenty thousand women in the country interested in changing women's status anyways' ('A Personal Report' 1972: 4). What the editorial describes is a labour of love; *Ms.* exists because of the hard work of its founders, who believe in it in spite of the male establishment's resolute scepticism. This first 'Personal Report' sets the tone for subsequent editorials, charting the magazine's changing fortunes through combined reference to signal metrics (including circulation figures, spiralling printing costs, and inflation rates), staff morale (highlighting 'low points and worries' as well as the victories of the '*Ms.* No-Stars' softball team), and appeals to readers for 'additional support' in times of struggle (January 1973: 114; June 1973: 75).

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## *Affective Labour*

While affect has been subjected to rigorous academic scrutiny in the past decades, systematic delineations of affective labour are more elusive. In this article, I am interested explicitly in exploring how the concept of affective labour can illuminate key aspects of the *Ms.* enterprise: what kinds of affective labour does the feminist business of *Ms.* entail? How does the magazine represent and engage with the concept of affective labour in its content and style? Is the act of reading *Ms.* a mode of affective labour? To what extent is *Ms.* able to leverage the economic potential of feminist affect? Alternatively, do the magazine's 'affective' identifications with movement feminism actually limit its ability to make a profit? If so, how?

The conceptual roots of affective labour lie in autonomist Marxist discourses about late capitalism, and find their most influential account in *Empire* (2000), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's pathbreaking critique of neoliberalism. In one of their sharpest interventions into debates about labour in the age of global capital, Hardt and Negri identify 'affective labour' as a species of 'immaterial labour' that is mobilized in the 'production and manipulation of affects [and which] requires (virtual or actual) human contact' (293). It is ineluctably identified with 'women's work', the unacknowledged 'caring labour, kin work, nurturing and maternal activities' that women in industrial societies have tended to undertake, unpaid, within the private precincts of the home (Hardt 1999: 97). While feminists have long speculated about the financial value of women's unpaid *material* labour through 'Wages for Housework' campaigns and other initiatives designed to evaluate the contributions that homemaking and childcare make to the economy, the financial value of *immaterial* affective labour—with its elusory mechanisms and outcomes—is impossible to calculate. As Melissa Gregg observes, affective labour is, explicitly, 'meaningful and productive human activity that *does not result in a direct financial profit or exchange value*, but rather produces a sense of community, esteem and/or belonging for those who share a common interest' (209; emphasis added). The value of affective labour lies, in part, in the fact it is performed without the expectation of financial remuneration. It is an expression of the individual's authentic commitment to people, communities, ideas, and things that is not assimilable to the logic of economic necessity. Although, as Gregg argues, capitalism cannot ascribe a 'direct' value to affective labour, its unleveraged economic potential is a tacit concern within this field of scholarship. Hardt and Negri inaugurate affective labour as the generative source of supposedly intangible 'products', including 'information, knowledges, ideas, images,



relationships and affects', that circulate within the economy (2004: 65), while Maurizio Lazzarato—in his earliest account of affective labour—foregrounds its role in producing 'the information and cultural content of the commodity'. Lazzarato advises that affective labour elicits feelings—positive and negative—that exert a powerful, if stealthy, influence within the public sphere, 'defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion' (133). Hardt, too, draws attention to the various ways in which affective labour has been 'incorporated and exalted' by late capitalism as 'one of the highest value-producing forms of labor' (90). In other words, capitalism has come to know the economic value of affective labour. At the same time, it recognizes that the elusive, 'immaterial' qualities of affective labour that produce its value are also the dominant impediment to its monetization. Certain qualities of affect *cannot* be systematised to capitalism, and these qualities acquire, in turn, the highest currency.

### *Affective Activism in Feminist Periodicals*

As a magazine, *Ms.* leverages affective labour in a number of direct and indirect ways. In the first place, it is a product of women's activism, which might—in some sense—be understood as affective labour in its 'raw' form. The affective labour that Hardt and Negri and Lazzarato acknowledge as providing 'cultural content' might be illuminated in the case of *Ms.* through reference to an emergent cluster of scholarship that examines the meaning ascribed to 'labour' in the digital economy. In her recent research into online feminist campaigning, Jessamy Gleeson analyses activism as a form of affective labour, drawing valuable attention to the invisible work undertaken by activists who 'willingly donate their time' to initiatives in which they are emotionally invested, but in doing so place themselves 'at risk of burnout due to their emotional labor' (Gleeson 2016: 79, 82). Gleeson's work usefully implies the 'purity' of activism as a mode of affective labour, in that it is voluntary, it is unpaid, it involves activities that are not necessarily recognized as 'work', and it is propelled by the altruistic desire to effect social change. This kind of affective labour is exemplified by the work of early grassroots periodicals, which—as non-profit ventures—are recognizable products of affective labour. Through reflective editorials that foreground the physical and emotional strains of working for a women's liberation magazine, and negotiating its progressive organizational and financial policies, *Ms.*, too, presents itself as an activist (and affective) product. By emphasizing its 'activist' status—albeit within the profit-driven world of mainstream publishing—*Ms.*



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finds a way to harness the value of its affective labour, appealing to readers as a magazine that appears to have the courage of its convictions.

Activism runs on feeling, and in many of the earliest publications to emerge from the women's liberation movement feeling is both the subject and the mode of the writing. As Victoria Hesford reflects in *Feeling Women's Liberation*, it is feelings that mobilize movements. In the context of feminist history, anger, in particular, has operated as a 'radicalizing emotion that could shake women free of their attachments to the myths and illusions of political machismo, normative femininity, and the heterosexual contract' (96). Just as consciousness-raising groups were real-world sites where women's feelings could be shared, analysed and politicized, the vibrant feminist periodical culture that sprang up in the late 1960s and early 1970s used the premise of shared feeling to build coalitions between women that would propel collective action and, ultimately, facilitate social change. The work of articulating feeling thus became central to the business of periodicals; describing the affective impact of discrimination—guilt, shame, fear, rage—directly, and in personal terms, was one of the key means via which the producers of feminist magazines attracted and politicized readers. In the editorial that opens the second issue of *No More Fun and Games* (1968–73), for example, the writers acknowledge 'frustration, anger, [and] depression' as legitimate, and even inevitable, responses to the seeming intractability of women's grim situation ('What Do You Women Want?' 1969: 6).

These feelings fuel the editors' compulsive attempts to document the realities of women's situation: 'the obsessive, uncompromising exposure of the oppression is our way of heading toward liberation', they explain. Infuriating, frustrating, and seemingly endless, the work of activism is as exhausting as it is exhilarating; and, in the case of *No More Fun and Games*, as well as most other feminist periodicals, it is not undertaken with any expectation of financial profit. Rather, the affective labour of producing feminist periodicals—and activism more generally—is a hopeful investment; by moving and mobilizing women, these labours will—at some indeterminate point in the future—bring about a change in women's circumstances. Robin Morgan is similarly cognizant of feminism's emotive power in her trailblazing article 'Goodbye to all that'. Published in February 1970 in the special 'women's issue' of the underground magazine *Rat* (1968–70), Morgan rounds off her scathing indictment of the sexist Left with a compelling (and threatening) call to feminist arms. Here, it is the propulsive force of the feelings that women, as a subjugated class, have repressed that will ultimately energize the dramatic fight-to-the-death for liberation that Morgan excitedly envisions:

We are rising, powerful in our unclean bodies [...] stuffing fingers into our mouths to stop the screams of fear and hate and pity for men we have loved and love still; tears in our eyes and bitterness in our mouths for children we couldn't have, or couldn't *not* have, or didn't want, or didn't want *yet*, or wanted and had in this place and this time of horror. We are rising with a fury older and potentially greater than any force in history, and this time we will be free or no one will survive. (7)

The 'we' that Morgan deploys here is a staple feature of feminist journalism in the 1970s, recognizing the collective nature of the feelings that women experienced under patriarchy. In the first issue of *The Furies* (1972–73), a grassroots newspaper that made its debut within the same month as the preview issue of *Ms.*, Ginny Berson's editorial identifies a similarly direct correlation between anger and activism. Drawing on the nomenclature of Greek mythology, Berson designates the founders as the 'Angry Ones', the 'avengers of matricide [and] the protectors of women', recognizing, in doing so, that anger and outrage are necessary to collective activism:

We call our paper The FURIES because we are also angry. We are angry because we are oppressed by male supremacy. We have been fucked over all our lives by a system which is based on the domination of men over women. (1)

However personally exhausting these feelings might be, they are essential, rather than secondary, to social change. While, as Agatha Beins notes, the majority of these early feminist periodicals 'emerged from small, grassroots collectives and were not formally connected to national organizations', nor invested in the idea of capitalist enterprise, *Ms.* is distinctively associated with the 'mainstream for-profit media industry' (21). Despite its sleek aesthetics and ambitious business plans, however, the work of *Ms.* is mediated in terms that resonate with the rousingly emotive rhetoric of *The Furies*, *No More Fun and Games* and Morgan's earth-scorching rallying cry in *Rat*. In 'Sisterhood', from the preview issue of *Ms.*, Steinem draws on her experiences of women's meetings to identify the rewarding labour of liberation:

We share with each other the exhilaration of growth and self-discovery, the sensation of having the scales fall from our eyes. Whether we are giving other women this new knowledge or receiving it from them, the pleasure for all concerned is enormous. And very moving. [...]

[W]hen we're exhausted from dredging up facts and arguments for the men whom we had previously thought advanced and intelligent, we make another simple discovery. Women understand.

The affective labour of activism is similarly emphasized in multiple articles from the early years of *Ms.*, including Ingrid Bengis's 'On Getting Angry' (July 1972), Gloria Steinem's 'But What do We Do With Our Rage?' (May 1975), and Joreen's 'Trashing—The Dark Side of Sisterhood' (April 1976).

While Gleeson's work explores the risks and rewards of unremunerated activism, Tiziana Terranova explores the murkier convergences of labour and leisure in online spaces, speculating that 'the digital economy is an important area of experimentation with value and free cultural/affective labor'. This, she argues, encompasses 'forms of labor we do not immediately recognize as such: chat, real-life stories, mailing lists, amateur newsletters, and so on':

These types of cultural [...] labor are not produced by capitalism in any direct, cause-and-effect fashion; that is, they have not developed simply as an answer to the economic needs of capital. However, they have developed in relation to the expansion of the cultural industries and are part of a process of economic experimentation with the creation of monetary value out of knowledge/culture/affect.

Long before the digitization of the capitalist marketplace, however, *Ms.* was conducting similarly pioneering investigations into the currency of affect. Like the digital products that Terranova takes as her focus, *Ms.* relies on mobilizing its readers as 'productive subjects'. As the overwhelming number of letters received by *Ms.* indicate, readers take an active role in shaping the magazine (as they are repeatedly invited to do), not only directly—through their contributions to the correspondence and fiction pages—but also indirectly, in their reflections on advertising policy and editorial content. *Ms.*'s potential as a commercial enterprise resides in its status as an activist endeavour, and, more specifically, in its ability to produce a range of affective responses in its readers. To adopt Hardt's terminology, *Ms.* represents the intangible, intellectual and interpersonal exertions that 'produce collective subjectivities, produce sociality, and ultimately produce society itself', building a (virtual) community based on the feelings that its creators and consumers experience and mediate (89). The intimate tone and content of many of the articles in *Ms.*, where personal pronouns abound, means it is often impossible to establish where the reflective work of personal consciousness-raising and liberation ends and

the (paid) work of journalism begins. In this sense, *Ms.* seems to pre-empt the problematic convergences of life and work, or paid and unpaid labour, that are now the focus of critical discussions about the digital economy. It exists, to use Terranova's terminology, in a 'mutually constituting interaction with late capitalism' (43). In other words, it is not forged in a fantasized subcultural zone that is somehow external to market forces, but 'originat[es] within a field that is always and already capitalism' (38–39).

### ***Women's Work?***

The affective labour associated with 'women's work' is one of the topics through which *Ms.* consistently seeks to spark connections between different constituencies of readers, across markers of racial, geographical and socio-economic separation. Lois Gould's 'If Your Husband Makes the Bed, Must You Lie in It?' (January 1973), Gabrielle Burton's "'I'm Running Away from Home": A Housewife Goes on Strike' (February 1973), Madalon Bedell's 'Supermom' (May 1973), and Phyllis Rosser's 'A Housewife's Log: What She Really Does All Day' (March 1976) audit and analyse the affective toll of women's domesticity. Gould takes up pages of column inches ruminating about the reasons behind her husband's poor bedmaking because, she notes, 'the lumpy bed' is a 'political symbol': 'I found it had raised seven major issues, merely by having a spread on sideways, and only one corner of its blankets tucked in'. She proceeds to work through the various questions presented by her husband's signal showcasing of his (apparent) domestic incompetence: 'Why did he make the bed badly?'; 'why can't I just ignore the lumps?'; 'why don't I point it out to him in a *gentle* way [...]?'; 'How would I have felt if he'd done the job perfectly?' (92–95). In 'Supermom', Bedell, a married working mother, charts the wearying process of 'unmaking [...] a Super Mom'. While housework is exhausting, Bedell discovers that establishing a fairer division of domestic labour in the home is—initially, at least—only slightly less so. As Bedell attempts to share the burden of domesticity with her husband and three children she notes that 'divorce seemed imminent. [...] I was so overwhelmed by feelings of guilt and fear. Did I really want to be an independent woman if this was the price I had to pay?' (100). Bedell's story struck a chord with readers. A letter to Bedell printed in the correspondence pages of a subsequent issue thanks her 'for telling my story, even though you hid my identity by using your name, your children, and your husband' (August 1973: 8).

The preview issue of *Ms.* likewise acknowledges the affective labour associated with various kinds of 'women's work' alongside the affective

labour of liberation. Jane O'Reilly's 'The Housewife's Moment of Truth' wittily conjures a series of scenarios in which she and her friends have experienced a 'shock of recognition' at the apparent invisibility of their work, their needs, and their humanity. In one anecdote, a friend of O'Reilly asks her husband to assist her with some of the housework so that she can pursue a career, but he replies that this would only be plausible 'if the wife is really contributing something, brings in a salary':

For ten years, she had been covering furniture, hanging wallpaper, making curtains and refinishing floors so that they could afford the mortgage on their apartment. She had planned the money-saving menus so they could afford the little dinners for prospective clients. [...] All the little advances in station [...] had been made possible by her crafty, endless, worried manipulation of the household expenses. 'I was under the impression', she said, 'that I was contributing something. Evidently my life's blood is simply a non-deductible expense'. (55)

Forced to cast her 'contributions' to the household in business terms, the housewife realizes that all her efforts—despite their cost to her personal wellbeing—amount to a 'non-deductible expense' in the eyes of her wage-earning husband. As a thought experiment, O'Reilly proceeds to enumerate the financial value of a suburban housewife through a hypothetical couple, Fred and Alice. 'According to insurance companies', Syfers speculates, 'it would cost Fred \$8,000 to \$9,000 a year to replace Alice's services if she died'. As 'an average ideal suburban housewife', Alice 'works 99.6 h a week—always feeling there is too much to be done and always guilty because it is never quite finished. Besides, her work doesn't seem important'. In her references to Alice's constant feelings of anxiety, guilt and worthlessness, as well as to the endless cycle of mental gymnastics performed by her painter friend—whose planning, budgeting, worrying, and anticipating has facilitated her husband's enjoyment of various bourgeois comforts—O'Reilly acknowledges that the housewife's exertions are not only physical but also psychological, with the latter being no less exhausting for their apparent intangibility. Housework is, as O'Reilly puts it, '*on our minds*' (57; emphasis in original). Through her carefully selected pronouns (personal and plural) and accessible anecdotes, O'Reilly's article strikes an intimate chord. She uses the affective labour of housework as a shared point of reference that is designed to generate affective identifications between *Ms.*'s constituencies of readers and writers. Her practical advice for shifting the gendered division of labour in the home is no less

cognizant of readers' feelings: *Think revolutionary thoughts; Never give in; Do not feel guilty* (58–59; emphasis in original).

O'Reilly's article is printed around Judy Syfers' 'I Want A Wife', which shines a complementary light on the desirable—but peculiarly unheeded—work performed by wives. 'I want a wife', proclaims Syfers, 'to take care of my children [...] who will keep my house clean. [...] who will keep my clothes clean, ironed, mended, replaced when need be, [...] who will plan the menus, do the necessary grocery shopping, prepare the meals, serve them pleasantly [...]. I want a wife who will care for me when I am sick [...] who is sensitive to my sexual needs [...] and who understands that my sexual needs may entail more than strict adherence to monogamy'. Again, the cooking and cleaning and shopping and fixing are only a fraction of the wife's undertakings. A larger ratio of her responsibilities involves the management of emotions. She must be 'sensitive' to her husband's moods, enraptured by 'things that interest' him, resistant to bothering him with 'rambling complaints', and telepathic in her attendance to his sexual needs. 'My God', she exclaims at the end of the article, 'who *wouldn't* want a wife?' (56; emphasis in original).

In line with the affective logic of the markets, the intimate content and tone of the preview issue instantly magnetized a latent constituency of sympathetic readers who at once identified with the magazine's progressively politicized critique of women's everyday lives. While the substance of this critique was not dissimilar to that disseminated by grassroots periodicals including *The Furies* and *No More Fun and Games*, *Ms.* eschewed the more didactic editorializing of these contemporaneous publications, packaging its version of liberation in a familiarly glossy format that owed much to the aesthetics of mainstream women's magazines. Where *The Furies* hailed lesbianism as a 'political choice which every woman must make' to 'end male supremacy' (Berson 1972: 1), and *No More Fun and Games* advised readers to remain single, avoid pregnancy, and renounce their 'patriarchal names' ('What Do You Women Want?' 1969: 9–10), *Ms.* adopted a more inclusive approach to liberation, inviting 'all women [...] who want to be a fully female person and proud of it' to 'join us at *Ms.* and reserve a subscription now' ('*Ms.* Subscription Notice' 1971: 113). The preview issue prompted an initial influx of 20,000 letters. As Steinem recalled, '[l]etters came pouring into our crowded office [...] literate, simple, disparate, funny, tragic and very personal letters from women all over the country. [...] They wrote about their experience and problems. They supported or criticized, told us what they needed, what they thought should be included or excluded, and generally spoke of *Ms.* as "our" magazine'. The letters eventually evened out to 200 a day, 'more than are received by Establishment

magazines with 20 times [the] circulation [of *Ms.*]', exclaimed the *Ms. Collective* in the 'Personal Report' from January 1973 (96). The correspondence pages of the August 1972 edition ring with feeling, as readers try to communicate their complicated responses to the magazine. One reader observes that it 'is difficult to express the sense of exhilaration I experienced upon finding in print the ideas which have been smouldering in my semi-rebellious soul for some 40 years. It is comforting to know one is not alone' (Schramm 1972: 7). For another, *Ms.* is 'the most exciting literary event of my adult life'; 'if it were feasible, I would have the issue gold-plated' (Hillard 1972: 7–8). Even when the content of the magazine evoked more ambivalent emotions, reflective readers recognized that discomfort was going to be an inevitable part of personal growth and political change:

'I loved your preview issue [...] The article 'Can Women Love Women?' upset me. Which is good, in a sense, because I can begin to question myself and perhaps raise my awareness [...] I'm trying to get myself together and you and your staff are going to be a big help to me' (Anon 1972: 8).

### ***Working for the Man?***

One of the key ways in which *Ms.* promotes feminist enterprise in the 1970s is through its grim depictions of the corporate workplace. Certainly, the world of paid work is anything but a refuge from the trappings of domestic exploitation. '[N]o job', cautions Louise Berkinow in the preview issue, is 'safe from the perils and humiliations of sex discrimination ... pick your weapon and join the battle' (123). After evoking the plight of checkout workers 'dead on their feet, struggl[ing] against the routine flirtation of male customers, the impatience of female customers and the pathetic barbarism of every crazy coming off the street', Berkinow advises readers about their rights as employees, concluding that the 'root problems of discrimination are the social training of women which causes them to accept their own second-class positions, society's need for an exploitable labour force, and the state's power to define "work" and to pay wages only to the labour force that conforms to its definition (thus excluding the "free" services of women who keep house, have children and care for them)'. For men and women alike, most work is 'miserable' and 'alienating', and hope for the future lies primarily in 'the swell of alternative structures—from the four-day work week to family collectives—through which people are trying to find new and more human ways to work', and in '[e]very woman joining her sisters to complain, file suit or



strike' against sexist employers (125). In an article from *Ms.*'s 'Women and Money' special edition in 1973, Jeanette Mabry Reddish paints a particularly nightmarish portrait of the New York Stock Exchange. On arrival, Reddish is advised by her male guide that no women work on the trading floor because they would be 'eaten alive'. She then looks on as traders boo and bray like animals in a zoo; douse each other in cologne and talc; and perform fraternity-style hazing rituals on new recruits (Reddish 1973: 46–49). In another feature from the same issue, Lisa Cronin Wohl interrogates Wall Street executives about their failure to recruit women to well-paid managerial posts, and Alix Nelson uses her soul-destroying experience at a 'major publishing firm' as a basis for analysing the effects of workplace discrimination on the wellbeing of women employees (Nelson 1973: 41).

Such visions contrast sharply with Steinem's description of the *Ms.* office in her inaugural editorial, or 'Personal Report', in July 1972.

We just chose not to do anything with which one of us strongly disagreed. And we didn't expect our more junior members to get coffee, or order lunch, or do all the typing, or hold some subordinate title. [...] As women, we had been on the bottom of hierarchies for too long. We knew how wasteful they really were. (5)

Here, the *Ms.* office resembles a feminist idyll, where decisions are made 'communally', hierarchies are abolished, and work is divided equally amongst staff.

Steinem's rosy account does not register the inequities and conflicts described by certain of her colleagues. In response to being chastised for failing to meet a deadline, Margaret Sloan, one of the few black women working at *Ms.*, writes an excoriating memo to the collective in which she identifies her (white) colleagues' inability to understand how her personal circumstances impact on her capacity to work:

gloria says they are struggling. they have an east side office with outdoor carpeting so your feet can feel good before going inside. i want to struggle like that. [...] the article wont be ready because i am not ready. you may be dealing with an irresponsible black woman but i want that right too i suppose. (qtd. in Farrell: 94)

On the other hand, Steinem's evocation of a supportive, egalitarian and respectful work environment is consistent with the testimony of the editor Harriet Lyons, who reflected that women worked at *Ms.* for love, rather than financial remuneration (qtd. in Farrell 1998: 96). Certainly,

*Ms.* paid its staff far less than *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies Home Journal* and *Family Circle*, who offered rates of \$2000 for an article, as opposed to *Ms.*'s going rate of \$500 to \$750, meaning that *only* those who could afford to work for 'love' were able to stay at *Ms.* for any length of time (Farrell 1998: 97).

### ***Feminist Business***

Within the women's liberation movement, which had its roots in the countercultural and leftist movements of the 1960s, the concept of 'business' was irrevocably tainted by its negative ideological associations with capitalism, the shadowy twin of patriarchy. In many ways, the founding of *Ms.*, and the questions about for-profit enterprise with which its editors and contributors wrangled, predated many of the early debates about feminist business. As Alice Echols explains in *Daring to Be Bad*, there was scant discussion of feminist businesses until 1973 when Helaine Harris and Lee Schwing published an article in *The Furies*, 'Building Feminist Institutions', in which they made the case that the development of feminist capitalism would be 'part of a solution to our goal to achieve power for women' and a 'step towards a feminist society' (2) What Harris and Schwing envisioned was a system in which women of financial means would establish businesses that would ultimately support women to whom capitalism presented far fewer opportunities. As Judith Peraino summarizes, '[t]he critique of capitalism as exploitative was exchanged for an exploitation of capitalism as a way to empowerment and liberation (163). So controversial was the article that the paper printed a counterstatement from Loretta Ulmschneider and Deborah George, two other members of the collective, who admonished Harris and Schwing for not querying the 'relationship between alternative businesses and capitalism' and for advocating a change in feminist strategy that would necessarily favour middle-class women (3).

As Joshua Davis explains in his history of activist businesses in North America, business was regarded with such a degree of suspicion in the 1970s that feminist entrepreneurs were discouraged from 'characteriz[ing] their work as capitalistic, or even as business'. By way of example, he notes that the proprietors of A Woman's Place, a prominent feminist bookstore in Oakland, California, described their work as 'servic[ing] the needs of the community according to ability and personal interest and thereby qualify[ing] for a reasonable share, small but adequate food, shelter, clothes, but without interest in or ambition towards personal accumulation of wealth and useless possessions' (145). Junko Onosaka

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makes a similar observation, reflecting that many feminist entrepreneurs 'did not see their ventures as "businesses" to support themselves, as they were not primarily motivated by profit' (43-44).

The ambivalent feelings associated with feminist enterprise are likewise emphasized by Heidi Fiske and Karen Zehring in a *Ms.* supplement from 1976 entitled 'How to Start Your Own Business', which promises guidance for 'the practical entrepreneur as well as for feminist visionaries seeking alternatives to the existing economic system' (55). In a section by Toni Carabillo and Judith Meuli entitled 'Towards a Feminist Business Ethic', the authors identify the 'six basic principles' of feminist business. These include: the orientation of business towards products and services that advance the cause of feminism; the even distribution of profits among workers; and the development of working practices that promote collective, democratic relationships between colleagues. What is most striking about these principles, perhaps, is the extent to which they derive from women's attempts to manage and negotiate 'difficult' feelings—especially guilt: 'Few feminist entrepreneurs', the authors caution, 'have escaped other feminists' accusations of profiteering, living off one's sisters, exploiting the Movement, and commercializing its symbols—even when the entrepreneur has created them. [...] The critics first gave us a painful guilt trip, but finally did us a service. They compelled us to search our souls and our practices' (69). The spectral image of the feminist profiteer haunts the pages of *Ms.* as a reminder of 'bad' business, evoking the exploitative operations of big corporations.

Profit thus emerges—here and elsewhere in the magazine—as a signal site of feminist conflict. Carabillo and Meuli are quick to advise that profit should be calibrated to 'ensure the survival of the enterprise but not so large that one becomes a guilt-ridden profiteer' (70). Certainly, feminist business models—such as those proposed in 'How to Start Your Own Business'—tended to operate on the principle that the majority of profits would be channelled back into the business and/or used to help finance initiatives taking place within the women's movement. Morgan, for example, who compiled the bestselling *Sisterhood is Powerful* (and later took over as the editor of *Ms.*, following its brief hiatus in 1989), used the profits from her anthology to fund various feminist businesses. By 1973 she had donated a total of \$27,000 to feminist causes. Morgan was one activist who was quick to identify feminism's tendency towards 'failure vanguardism'. With characteristic élan, she professes that 'to succeed in the slightest is to be Impure. Only if your entire life, political and personal is one plummet of downward mobility and despair, may you be garlanded with the crown of feminist thorns' (qtd. in Echols 1989: 275). While Morgan's glossing of feminism's 'failure vanguardism'

is typically hyperbolic, it nonetheless captures a dominant tendency within feminism to render financial success commensurate with political compromise. At the same time, of course, such anxieties were not unfounded. As Echols points out, ‘radical feminists’ scepticism about “success” stemmed not only from the conviction that American society needed to be overhauled rather than reformed, but from an understandable (if at points paralytic) fear of co-optation’ (275).

While some commentators proposed a separatist model for feminist businesses, in which movement businesses would operate outside of other capitalist enterprise, drawing their resources from within the women’s movement, others, such as Heather Booth and Naomi Weisstein, speculated about the risk of ‘us[ing] up all our miniscule resources to construct and maintain [feminist] institutions’, suggesting that the energies of activists would be better deployed in ‘making claims on the vast resources of large institutions in society which should be providing us with what we need’ (qtd. in Echols 1989: 280). Funded by Warner, *Ms.* was always and already ‘enmeshed’ within the profit-driven systems of late capitalism. Many of the *Ms.* staffers would have shared Booth and Weisstein’s scepticism about economic separatism, but they understood, equally, the formidable challenges faced by women who tried to reconcile the principles of feminism to a system that took profit as the sole indicator of value. What fate awaits, after all, when your business does not make a profit?

### ***Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Advertising ...***

If *Ms.* represents, to some extent, the co-option of feminism’s ‘pure’ affective labour by the capitalist market, its business policies nevertheless register the magazine’s feminist resistance to the economic imperatives by which that market is driven. The uneasiness about profiteering from the women’s movement carries through directly into *Ms.*’s radical advertising policy. While Steinem and Carbine’s original business model projected eventual profits from advertising revenue that could be funnelled back into the women’s movement via the Ms. Foundation, this revenue never materialized. Despite the favourable projections in the ‘Personal Report’ from January 1973, in which the collective announced that their 145,000 existing and 30,000 pending subscriptions meant that they were ‘doing better than their own predictions’, the magazine would not reach its ‘financial break-even point’ until it had been publishing for a whole year. While *Ms.*’s impressive ‘rate of growth’—from an initial print run of 300,000–530,000 in three months—was a good indicator of its overall health,

advertising had, '[a]s expected', been 'slowest to develop' (96). In these early days, especially, the editors shared with readers that 'purveyors of [...] "unfeminine" items—stereo equipment, airline tickets, insurance policies, mutual funds, gasoline and the like' refused to advertise in *Ms.* This left only 'classically "feminine" products'. Editors excluded some of these on the basis that 'they may be harmful' or because they 'perpetuate an image of women that looks like a parody in the context of this magazine' (97).

Following the publication of the preview issue, it became evident that readers would gauge *Ms.*'s business practices and political integrity through its policy on advertising. According to an editorial from 1974, of the many letters *Ms.* received in response to its preview issue, 8000 concerned the advertising. Some praised the 'ads that presented women as human beings' or 'that were less stereotyped'. Others criticized those 'that presented women and our motives for buying in limited or silly ways'. In reality, *Ms.* had not secured the advertising for this preview issue—the vast majority of which was for wine and spirits—but the influx of correspondence persuaded staff that its readers were going to 'take advertising very seriously'.

In response, staff developed an 'ethical' advertising policy that imposed self-limiting restrictions on the income it could generate from a revenue stream that was usually very lucrative for women's magazines, which—as the collective notes—had largely functioned as little more than glorified catalogues ('A Personal Report', 1974b: 56-58). Firstly, *Ms.* would not publish complimentary copy for advertisements, and nor would it moderate its editorial content in response to advertisers' sensitivities or demands. Secondly, the magazine would set the proportion of advertising to editorial at one to three, rather than two to three (which was the standard for mainstream women's magazines at the time). Thirdly, *Ms.* would print only those advertisements that treated 'women as people' and which accurately reflected the 'way women spend our hard-won consumer dollars'. Sometimes, the collective explained, 'we found ourselves gritting our teeth and saying "no" to considerable amounts of ad revenue'. In a dramatic illustration of this, the collective reveals that *Ms.* refused \$80,000 from Virginia Slims cigarettes to run one of the advertisements from their 'You've Come A Long Way, Baby' campaign because staffers 'objected to the implication that social justice had already been achieved, or felt that Virginia Slims was somehow taking credit for what progress there was'. Finally, and most ambitiously, perhaps, *Ms.* hoped to use its readers and sales teams to put pressure on companies to effect permanent changes in the representation of women within advertising. As women had not traditionally 'been employed to sell advertising', *Ms.*'s 'female salespeople would themselves be a small "inside" revolution in the publishing world' (58).

*Ms.*'s scepticism about the advertising industry was reciprocated. While the magazine's circulation base rate rose past 400,000 in 1974, potential advertisers remained reluctant to engage in negotiations with *Ms.* In a 1974 editorial about *Ms.*'s advertising policy, the author recalls an appointment in which an account executive looked at the copies of *Ms.* and reader surveys spread out on his desk, spat on them and left the room (59). As a consequence of *Ms.*'s stringent position on advertising—which sometimes came down to gut feeling—the image of the target consumer that materializes in the first few issues of *Ms.* is a chain-smoking, booze-swilling libertine. The majority of advertisements are for alcohol, cigarettes, 'edgy' books, and other periodicals. In an attempt to expand its pool of advertisers, *Ms.* solicited letters from readers about the magazine's advertising, which were then shared with advertisers. The *Ms.* sales team recognized the currency of this kind of qualitative data, and informed readers that their letters were 'attracting many new kinds of advertising' and bringing about 'increased cooperation and creativity in the new campaigns of the more specifically women-oriented products' ('A Personal Report', 1974a: 82). Over time, the texture of the advertising in *Ms.* did evolve along the lines the editors envisioned; advertisements for cars, technology, hi-fi equipment, telephone companies, gasoline, credit cards, and mutual funds are mainstays of the magazine by the middle of the 1970s. Regardless of this, *Ms.* never generated enough revenue from advertising to funnel profits back into the women's movement as per its original business model. Despite the shifting advertising landscape and the magazine's consistently dedicated readership, the rising costs of publishing meant that *Ms.*'s existence was fairly precarious throughout the 1970s. By the mid-to-late 1980s, *Ms.* was operating at a loss. In 1987 it was bought by Fairfax and placed under the editorship of Anne Summers and Sandra Yates, who subsequently bought it themselves later on in the year. Seeking to capitalize on their investment, Summers and Yates strategically sought to lower the volume of *Ms.*'s feminism in order to attract advertisers who were increasingly keen to exploit the magazine's educated, independent and financially secure demographic. Ironically, this manoeuvre dented the magazine's loyal readership, and Robin Morgan was quickly called in to put the magazine back on track. In order to regain the respect of its readership, and to reaffirm *Ms.*'s longstanding commitments to the women's movement, Morgan printed a cover that made explicit the magazine's stance on reproductive rights, which were being placed under threat by *Webster vs. Reproductive Health Services*, a Supreme Court decision that would allow individual states to restrict women's access to terminations. Printed in July/August 1989, the black cover of the 17th-anniversary edition of *Ms.* was emblazoned with the blood-red headline 'It's

War'. While the July/August issue represented a striking return to political form for *Ms.*, with its circulation rate rising to 550,000, advertisers immediately withdrew their sponsorship of the publication; by December the sales teams could only find ten companies willing to advertise within its pages. Such instances in the history of *Ms.* bring into focus the tightrope on which activist publications are destined to pivot, forever balancing the needs of readers and contributors with the harsh economic realities of the marketplace.

How, then, do we judge the success of a feminist business? If we assess *Ms.* on the basis of its profit margins, then its success is negligible. Despite impressive sales figures that topped out at 550,000 in 1989, the magazine has rarely been in the black during the past half-century. The fact *Ms.* has survived into the twenty-first century is a triumph of the powerful feelings and meanings that it evokes. Since 1971 *Ms.* has been a training ground for women in the publishing industry; a forum for new talent; a bridge between the women's movement and the mainstream; a signature symbol of popular feminism; a catalyst for political mobilization; an inspiration for—and supporter of—feminist enterprise; a voice of resistance; and an agent of change, both within and beyond the publishing industry. It is when we assess *Ms.* in terms of these 'soft' or non-numerical impacts that its purpose and power are most readily discernible. As its readers and contributors testify, the value of *Ms.* has necessarily exceeded the limits of its tight financial margins; while the magazine's latest by-line belongs to the twenty-first century, its sentiment rings true for the 1970s: *Ms.* was, always and already, 'more than a magazine'.

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