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From Bra-Burners to Bureaucracy: The Evolution of Second-Wave Feminism through NOW Newsletters

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FROM BRA-BURNERS TO BUREAUCRACY: THE EVOLUTION OF SECOND-WAVE FEMINISM THROUGH NOW NEWSLETTERS

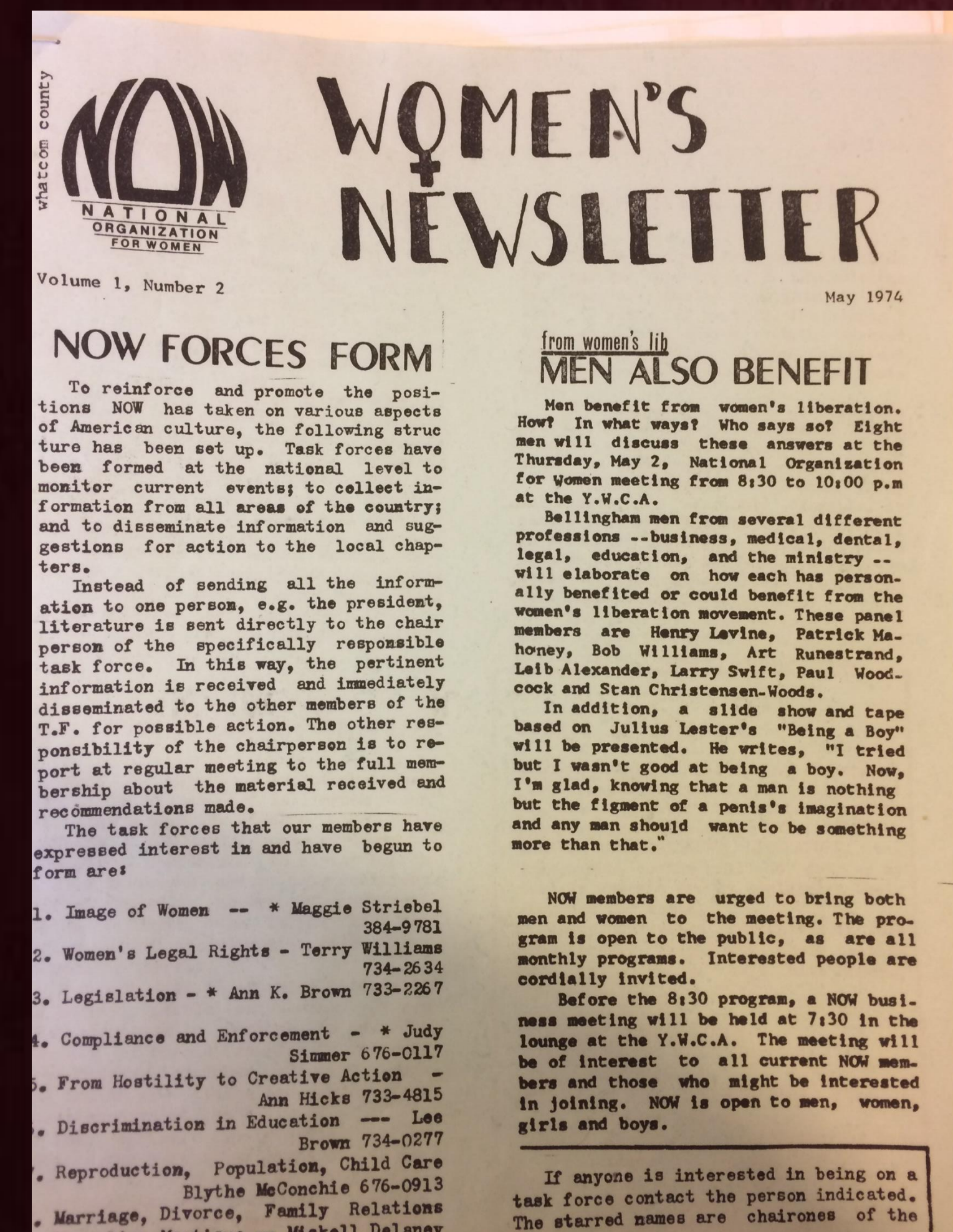
By Alexandria Baker

Abstract: The National Organization for Women (NOW) was an influential organization in the 1960s for furthering the agenda of second-wave feminists. The organization had many strategies for developing and controlling the national agenda for feminism, one of which was the production and dissemination of newsletters by local chapters of the group. This research paper analyzes the techniques used for legitimizing second-wave feminism to women who were unaffiliated with NOW, and the ways in which these newsletters interpolated new members into the group. The research involved conducting a textual analysis on a representative archival newsletter from the time period. This paper concludes that the use of local chapters of the organization and the publishing of local newsletters that contained information about the national goals of NOW created a streamlined national agenda that was able to legitimize second-wave feminism to new members.

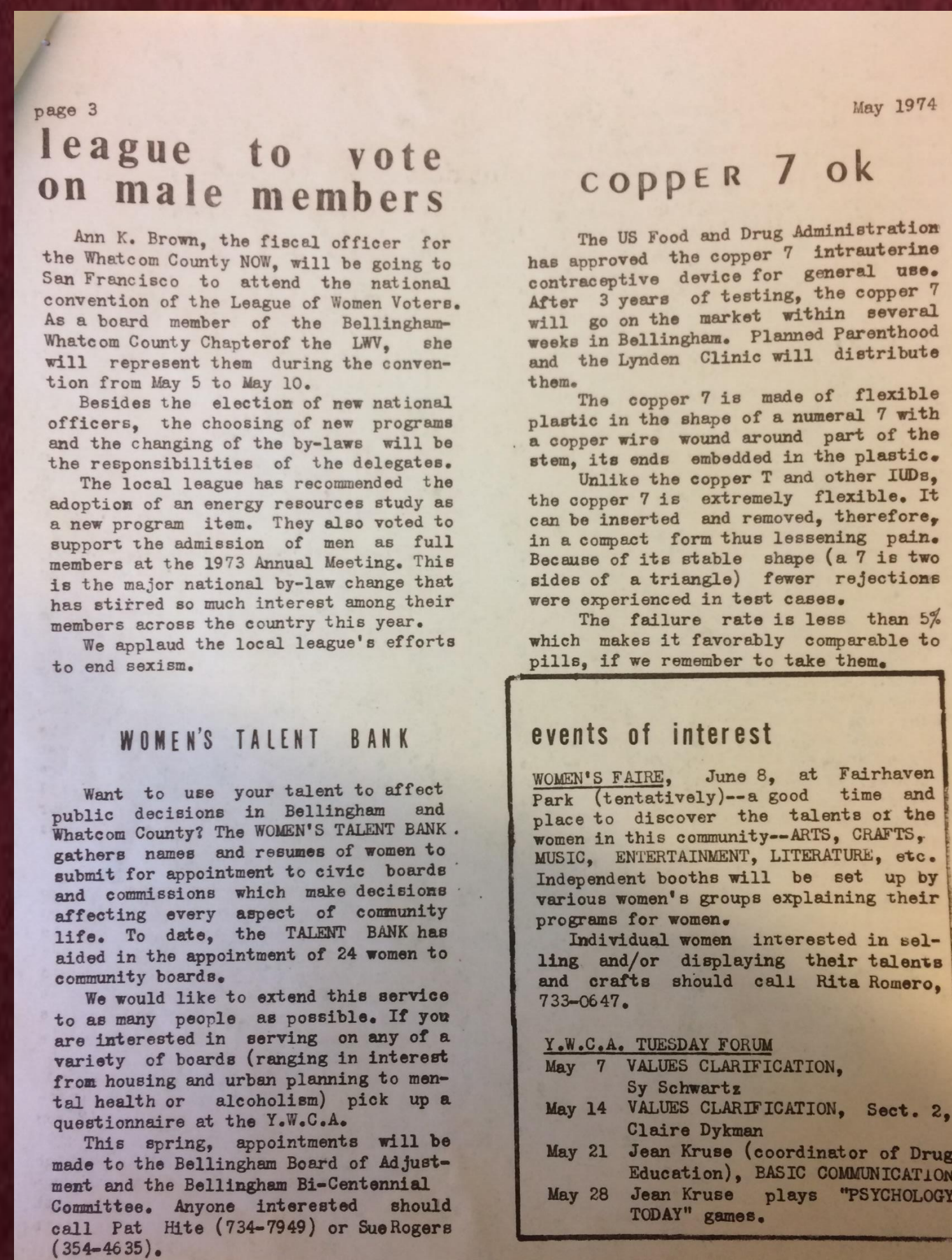
Methods: The primary method for this research was a qualitative textual analysis of a representative archival newsletter sample. The sample being used is an issue of the *Women's Newsletter* published for the Whatcom County NOW chapter in May 1974. This was shortly before NOW's bureaucratic restructure in 1975. At the time of publication, NOW was still mostly reliant on chapter newsletters to disseminate information, and this is evident in the number of contributors and the information included in the letter. The method for the textual analysis included examining both the content of the included articles, and the layout of the paper itself. Then, the underlying ideologies were extrapolated and synthesized into cohesive findings.

Research question: how did NOW's use of newsletters legitimize second-wave feminism?

Thesis: Through the use of local chapters that were accessible to women across the country, and the publishing of a regular newsletter that provided individual members with a sense of the organization's ultimate purpose, NOW created a streamlined national agenda and was able to legitimize second-wave feminism for new members.



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Second-Wave Feminism:

- Publicly perceived as a radical movement
 - Strong connection to "bra-burners" and other radical protests
- Suffered from lack of diversity and did not acknowledge intersectional perspectives
 - Was particularly inaccessible for women of color and impoverished women
- Created tangible change related to:
 - Equal pay, affirmative action, Title IX, the glass ceiling, men's only clubs, the concept of gender privilege, date rape, Roe v. Wade, and other issues

Historical context:

- The National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded in 1966
- Aimed to advance the cause of feminism on a national scale
- Originally the organization was driven by local chapter agendas
 - NOW initially utilized a tandem system of local grassroots chapters and a national branch of the organization
- In the mid-70s NOW underwent a bureaucratic restructure
- NOW's restructure consolidated the national agenda, and unified local chapters
 - This made it easier to campaign for feminist issues, while somewhat disengaging the issues various chapters may have cared about

Use of newsletters:

- Implemented to communicate which issues were important both locally and nationally
 - Highlighted local events and politics for members to be aware of
- Second-wave feminism wasn't oratorical, so newsletters were a good way to interpolate women into the cause
- Newsletters, buttons, and other objects were subtle ways for new members to learn about the then-radical movement
- The newsletters were often published anonymously, so women could maintain a public distance while still contributing to the movement

Findings: The newsletter constantly pushes for its readers to accept ideals of feminism, from the first page to the layout of the paper itself

Page One

- Orients the reader to NOW as an organization
- Presents articles related to bureaucratic changes in the structure
 - Legitimizes NOW as a national organization with concrete goals in mind
 - Professional, logical opening makes readers feel confident that NOW is a mainstream organization, not radical
- NOW's logo is secondary to the *Women's Newsletter* title
 - Less intimidating to women who don't want to be officially affiliated with a feminist group
- Use of the Venus symbol on the first page denotes that it is female-centric
 - Contrast between professional articles and visual elements help to bring in readers of all backgrounds

Page Two

- Mentions local events for women to participate in
 - A talent bank and a women's fair
 - Gives new readers casual ways to be involved in feminist activities
 - Further distances the movement from the bra-burners by offering productive ways women can push for feminism
- Also references the League of Women Voters
 - Creates a sense of the larger feminist community
 - Reassures readers that feminism is a coordinated network, rather than sporadic protests

Articles are kept short

- Short articles are easier to visually digest, and allow the newsletter to cover multiple subjects
- Length of the article also denotes its relative importance

Page Three

- Longest and most controversial article on the Catholic Church's stance on abortions
 - The article logically points out the flaws in the church's doctrine, and calls for readers to partake in a letter-writing campaign
 - Provided women a fairly anonymous way to participate in an issue of national importance
 - Urged the letters to remain logical and on-topic

The only article to get a page to itself

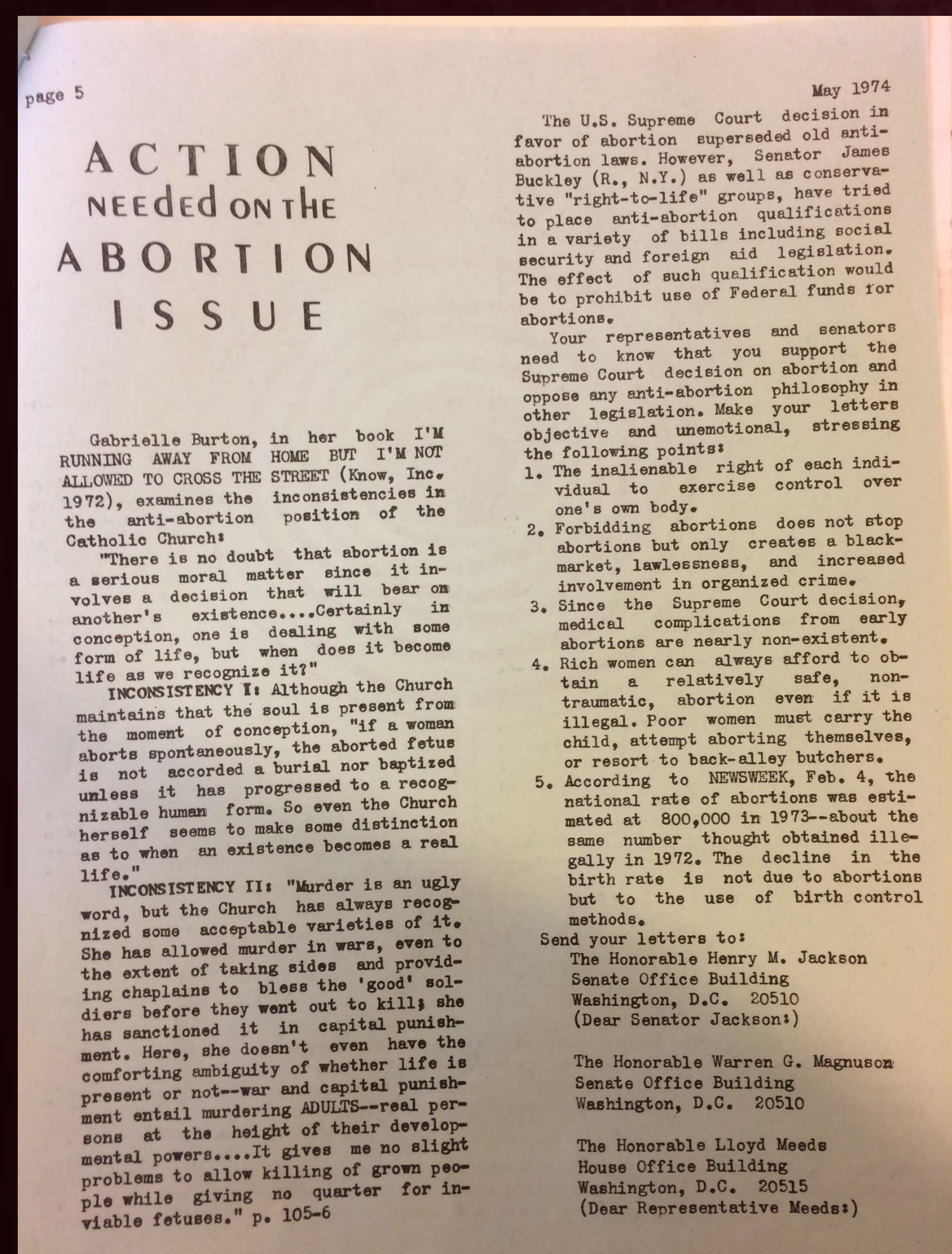
- Still utilized lots of space to be visually attractive
- Because it is much longer than the other articles, it is understood by the reader that it is more important

Page Four

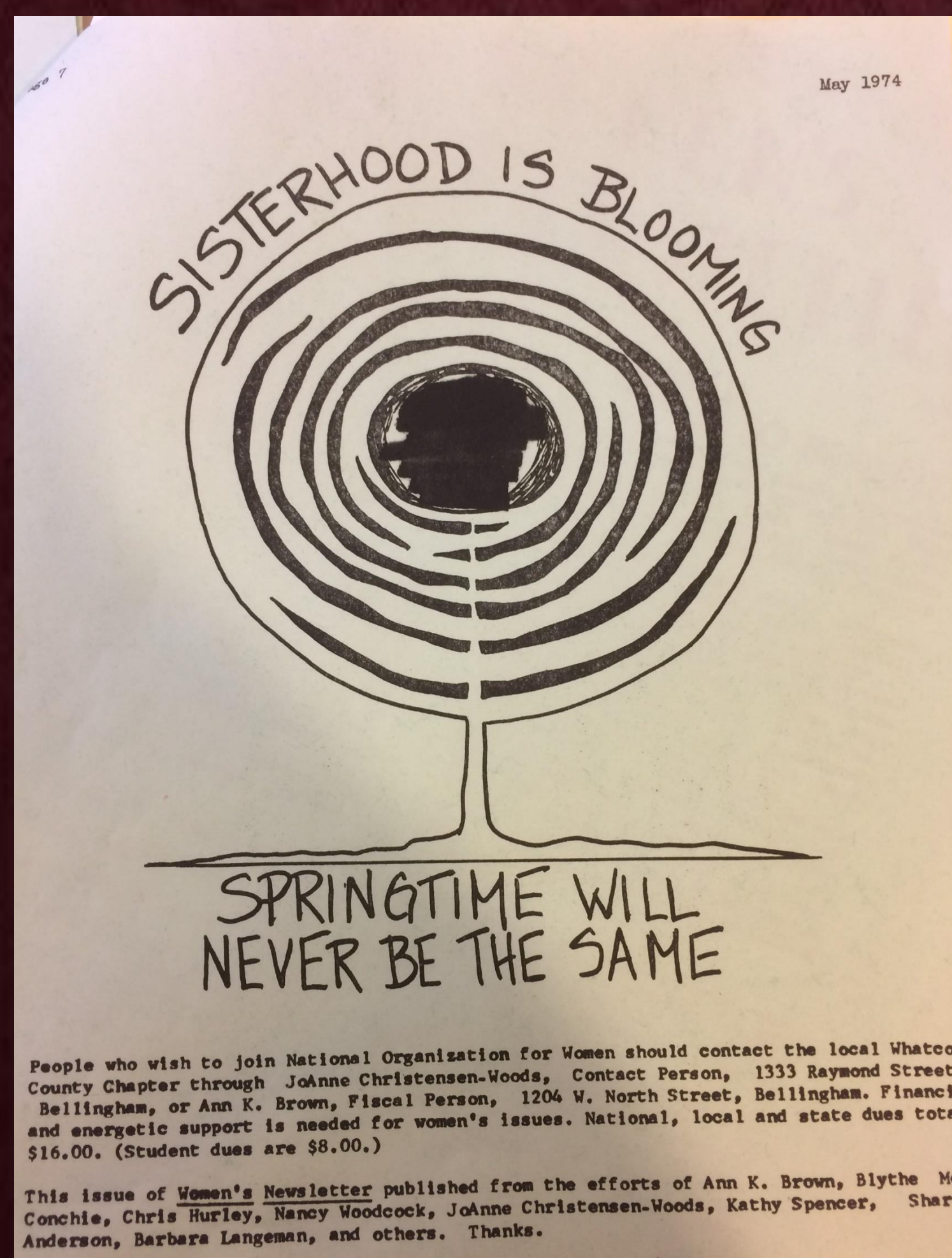
- Contained contact information for the group
 - After asking for increasing levels of participation, the last page gives women the information they need to become formal members of the group
 - Contact information is presented only after the reader has been exposed to increasing levels of feminist doctrine

Included an illustration of a flower, with the phrase "Sisterhood is blooming/springtime will never be the same"

- Makes the chapter approachable, since it is not a streamlined logo
- Speak to grassroots activism
- The juxtaposition of the flower with the contact information served to remind women they were joining a local group as well as a national organization



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