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

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Abstract: The National Organization for Women (NOW) was an influential organization in the 1960s for furthering the agenda of second-wave feminism. 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 uninitiated 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 restructuring 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.

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’s use of newsletters served to centralize and integrate local chapters
- NOW’s restructuring in 1975 consolidated the national agenda, and unified local chapters
- NOW’s newsletter was used to communicate with local chapters
- NOW’s newsletter was used to communicate with local chapters

Use of newsletters:
- Implemented to communicate issues of local importance
- Bulletin board, newsletters, and other articles were used for local chapters
- NOW’s newsletter was used to communicate with local chapters
- NOW’s newsletter was used to communicate with local chapters

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
- Logitizes 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

Page Two:
- Women’s Newsletter
- Includes features related to bureaucratic changes
- NOW’s newsletter is a national organization with concrete goals in mind
- Professional, logical opening makes readers feel confident that NOW is a mainstream organization, not radical

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

Page Four:
- Contained contact information for the group
- After asking for increasing levels of participation, the last page gives information on the initiatives taken by the local chapter 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 blossoming/growing time will never be the same”