Editorial Essay: 
Resources for Feminist Research/Documentation sur la recherche féministe: The Importance of Context  

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In 1972, I was working at The Financial Post newspaper when I read in the Toronto Star that a women’s centre had opened up on Dupont St. I decided to go take a look, and came to the conclusion that I liked it a lot better than the grey-suit environment of the newspaper. It was a time when women’s centres were springing up all over the country, and most of them published newsletters. In the next year or so, the women’s centres were followed by women’s bookstores, rape crisis centres, legal clinics, women’s studies courses, and more. These were the hubs of the nascent women’s liberation movement, and the newsletters covered the activities of all of them.  
It was during this fertile moment in history that a couple of young feminist academics at the University of Waterloo, Margrit Eichler and Marylee Stephenson, discerned the need for a newsletter that would serve as a resource for the new women’s studies course curricula. There needed to be readily accessible information on course outlines, books, book reviews, works in progress, abstracts, research projects and articles that could form the bedrock of feminist university programs. It was called The Canadian Newsletter for Research on Women, and it was a very popular endeavour.  
Over 40 years later, it still survives, though with a different name and in a new context. But in those first years, it was very homespun, like all the others of the day. Eichler recalls sitting in her kitchen with a group of volunteers (no paid staff!), manually churning out the newsletter, cutting, pasting, collating, and stapling, then sorting for the mail, and attaching stamps. It was actually fun – doing important activist work, while socializing with other feminists.  
When Eichler moved to OISE at the University of Toronto she brought the newsletter with her, and obtained funding from the senior administration to support it. In the early 1980s, it was renamed Resources for Feminist Research/Documentation sur la recherche féministe (RFR/DRF), to reflect the movement away from providing lists of tools to featuring full-length articles in educational practices and pedagogy, though still within a feminist framework. It also changed from an 8x11” Gestetnered document, to a perfect-bound magazine format. The hope was that the newly named and formatted RFR/DRF would reflect its community roots while...
highlighting the work of scholars and students doing feminist research. This approach, focused on both scholarly and activist knowledge production, was not without a certain amount of tension as it entailed maintaining a balance between these two approaches to meet the requirements of the many feminist communities that formed the basis of our readership. RFR/DRF maintained the traditional magazine format for over 20 years, but in the mid-90s, when it switched to a smaller scholarly journal format, it clearly signalled a more firm focus on peer-reviewed feminist scholarly content in the form of research articles. It was important that this was done without abandoning RFR/DRF’s original mandate of publishing both academic and activist feminist content. Around that time, the journal joined the newly formed Canadian Association of Learned Journals (CALJ), an organization formed to foster and represent the interests of Canadian academic periodicals.

When I came to OISE and joined RFR’s staff in 1987, the journal was under the supervision of Principal Investigator Jeri Wine, at the time chair of the psychology department. During those days, the journal was run by a hands-on editorial board of women who were involved in the day-to-day operations of producing and editing the journal, and carrying out administrative duties as well. It was a good way of getting a lot of work done, and it came out of the collective sense of shared, equal responsibilities of early feminist thinking on the organization of work. But as a model it had its problems. First of all, not everyone liked or was good at all the necessary types of work. Then there was also resistance to the unpaid volunteer work of women that was the traditional model. Even though the journal’s volunteers were mainly well paid academics, not all were, and it was an uncomfortable fit for many feminist activists. Two things happened. One was that at the time there was an abundance of available funding (something that is now hard to believe) and the journal for once could hire enough staff to do all the work involved in the production process of the journal. Gradually the editorial board’s responsibilities shifted, it now did less of the behind the scenes work, and board members were expected to be more involved in the work of manuscript review and policy formulation. The second came out of the tension created by having a faculty PI who was no longer actually involved in the journal work that the staff editors had taken on. This separation of responsibilities caused problems for the staff in dealing with the OISE administration, the funders and, at times, even the readers. We firmly came to believe that the decisions should be made by the people who did the work. When Jeri Wine stepped down from the Board, the OISE Publication Board agreed that the journal editor, a staff member and not a faculty member, could now be its Principal Investigator. I became the journal’s PI in 1991, and remained so until I left the journal. This feminist model of organizing our publishing process, placed priority on recognizing those who actually did the everyday editorial labour of the journal. Due to a number of institutional pressures
and mechanisms the older model would be reinstated later; this meant that the journal's PI would again necessarily have to be a faculty member. Luckily for RFR/DRF, the journal's PIs, like the current PI, Jamie Magnusson, have been fully engaged faculty members and not absentee supervisors.

The belief that fails to recognize the actual hard work that it takes to produce a quality scholarly journal seems to be a prevalent feature within the academy. And it is reflected in the apparent belief that journals are to rely on an overworked faculty who acts as PI or editor-in-chief and is supported by the very part-time labour of a managing editor who is to be responsible for the everyday activities of the journal. I believe that many of those within university administrations and even within funding bodies fail to realize the amount of work it takes to put out a consistent, quality journal. During my tenure as the PI and editor of the journal I was involved in every aspect of publishing RFR/DRF, from editing and the manuscript review process, to dealing with printers, Canada Post, our distributor and funding agencies, to writing funding proposals, and final reports, and in one case writing a legal affidavit in a well-known Canadian journalist's class action suit against Canadian publishers, to creating and managing budgets; in short, keeping the journal going. In some cases I had help, in others not.

Early on in my tenure, I noticed that the manuscript review process was not very well developed at RFR/DRF. Most manuscripts were read and vetted by staff and board, but without any external review to speak of. CALJ, the newly formed journal association, sent around a survey of different review protocols in place at Canadian journals. I was amazed at how complex their various processes were, and worked with a new staff editor at RFR/DRF to get our practice in line with others. A process emerged that covered the necessary requirement of anonymous peer review, a process that is still in place today.

In addition to identifying ways of improving the various editorial and publishing mechanisms of the journal, we as editorial staff, board members, and PIs paid attention to the wider feminist context and its transformations. In the late 1980s for example, the intersectionality of race and gender became an important issue and produced many struggles within feminisms, feminist publications like RFR/DRF were also impacted and influenced. It was a time of intense transformation throughout the women's movement, from women's hostel, women's bookstores, to feminist presses, and others, and the journal made attempts, even if somewhat halting and incomplete at the time, to address the demands raised by the new struggles of gender and race intersectionality within the feminist movement. This included looking at both the composition of journal staff and board to create an inclusive space in terms of gender, race, and sexualities and in terms of the kind of content published within the pages of the journal. The transformations occurring within the feminist movement influenced the journal and RFR/DRF and continued to shape our engagement with our readers and contributors.
As mentioned, in addition to our original approach of including research and activist tools as a priority content within the journal, we also focused on scholarly research papers which were generally organized by themes that reflected the political and scholarly concerns of our board and readers. First and foremost in the 70s and 80s was an understanding of the role of Quebec in the area of feminist research and activism. RFR/DRF was a bilingual English/French journal and a great deal of effort was made to ensure that the French language was used throughout. We had the fortune to include on our Board francophone scholar and novelist/poet Marguerite Andersen, whose high standards kept the rest of us in line.

In the first decade or so, the journal’s theme issues tended to be of the “Women and...” variety: Women and Education, Women and Science, Women and the Arts, Women and the State, etc., reflecting the need to insert women into the discourse, something that was glaringly missing, not just in mainstream literature, but in all journals and disciplines everywhere! It was extremely important work to draw attention to the role and work of women overall. And some of those issues were the journal’s most popular. But in later years, journal themes became more indicative of the increasing sophistication of women’s studies, and the emergence of the field of feminist research as a category all its own and not exclusive to RFR or other feminist journals. Topics such as “Race, Gender and Knowledge Production,” “Colonialism, Imperialism and Gender,” “Women in a World of War and Militarism,” all reflected a desire to broaden the debate and understanding of the political process. Later issues, like “The Nature of Feminist Science Studies,” and “Decolonizing Spaces,” took the journal in yet other directions. As a regular practice, RFR/DRF editors relied on the expertise of guest editors to formulate a particular theme issue, and to work with the board to find appropriate external peer reviewers, and to work with contributing authors. It was up to staff editors to bring it all together, and actually produce the journal.

In recent years, this has become increasingly difficult, for a number of reasons, albeit reasons that are interconnected: changes to our funding structure, and the trend towards open access, online publishing. Back in 1995, when the World Wide Web and the “information highway” were buzzwords, I worked with our graduate assistants first to build our own journal website, and then to research the ways we could bring RFR/DRF online. For all involved in the process of going online at the time, it was regarded as something that entailed both advantages and disadvantages and so had to be seriously considered. Board members for example pointed out that it was important to keep in mind that a transformation of this nature had to consider all the variables of production involved in the production and funding of journals, including online journals. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), the main funding agent for scholarly journals in Canada, adopted a policy of Open Access, and changed their funding structure from covering not the whole process
of administration, production and editing of the journal based on the journal’s own cost estimates, to covering only the final editing of each manuscript. The focus on funding only the editing of research articles, instead of the whole production process involved in publishing academic journals, left many journals with a serious gap in revenue. To make matters more difficult, universities who had traditionally financially supported academic journals recognizing their importance for both field and individual knowledge production and dissemination, did not make up the lost funding. In many cases, universities also pulled their financial support from journals further exacerbating the situation. Left with the diminished awards from SSHRC (for those journals that were successful in getting the award in the first place) and pretty much with a new model that almost expected academic journals to compete in the marketplace as mainstream magazines, many journals were faced with the prospect of changing their production models which increasingly for us meant doing much more with much less. Additional concerns revolved around the question of the increasing availability of digital open access material online and how this would impact the much needed subscription revenue on which small, independent journals like RFR/DRF were now more than ever counting on to support the growing expenses associated with publishing a quality academic, peer-reviewed journal.

On the other hand, there was also a great deal to be said for publishing online. It’s where researchers and potential readers were increasingly expecting to find us and where more and more journals were finding themselves. In terms of the production process, the review and manuscript editing process is more streamlined and, of course there is a lower cost of production as compared to print. This is not to say that there are no costs of production, particularly for non-mainstream, independent, feminist journals like RFR/DRF but only that they are indeed less when compared to print formats. The costs of online scholarly journal production however, are still considerable. So we came up with a variety of ideas for ways of managing the shift to online including: splitting the production into two, with print journals still available to subscribers, along with the online version; no print version and putting in place a moving wall of subscription costs for online version, say charging for the current year, and making the back issues freely accessible; to completely no charge, open access, digital version with no more print versions available but only if this was doable, meaning that ways of funding the whole production process would have to be found which would probably entail various levels of fundraising and applying for grants which, in turn, would add considerably to the work of editors and board.

Going online represents a huge shift in publishing circles, both academic and mainstream. Since publications everywhere are shutting down for want of sufficient funds, it is not surprising that small, independent, scholarly publications like RFR/DRF are also feeling both the centrifugal and, centripetal forces of digital publishing. But given the impossible costs
of print production along with the tremendous reach capacity and connectivity of online publishing it seems we are now fully embracing this new reality. We have encountered obstacles and transformations before and this represents an exciting new chapter in the journal’s long history. We are lucky to have a very competent and efficient editor, Lorena M. Gajardo, an involved and committed PI, Jamie Magnusson, and board members whose dedicated collaboration ensures that the journal’s journey to the online universe will be a successful. It is the journal’s history, as one of North America’s first academic, peer-reviewed, scholarly journals that has shaped the commitment of all those whose work is reflected in the pages of the journal. And, it is thanks to the labour of all those involved with RFR/DRF that the journal can now continue as an online feminist journal. I am glad to have been part of this history and to see that the journal is in the capable hands of women who care as much as I do for the important work of feminist scholarship and activism.