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# The Importance of Community-Based Media for Building and Sustaining Lesbian Subcultures: The Role of Montréal's *Dykes on Mykes* Radio Show

Marie-Claire MacPhee  
The Simone de Beauvoir Institute  
[Concordia University](#)

Mél Hogan  
Department of Communication Studies  
[Concordia University](#)  
[www.nomorepotlucks.org](http://www.nomorepotlucks.org)  
[www.ckut.ca](http://www.ckut.ca)

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## Abstract

This paper was originally written for and presented at the *Lesbian Lives XIII: Historicizing the Lesbian Conference* in Dublin, Ireland in February 2006. The essay considers the history of *Dykes on Mykes*, a groundbreaking, lesbian and queer community-based radio program in Montréal, Canada. The authors, who are the show's current hosts and technicians, collected data by examining the show's archives and conducting individual and focus group interviews with *Dykes on Mykes*' past and present hosts. These data reveal that changes in *Dykes on Mykes*' programming and foci correlate closely with contemporary cultural and social developments among lesbian communities in Montréal.

## Alternative Radio: *Dykes on Mykes*

*Dykes on Mykes* was created in 1987 shortly after CKUT, Montréal's Community Radio Station, was founded. At that time CKUT was launching new programs and the station issued a call for program proposals. Local GLBT community activists responded by pitching the idea of hosting both a weekly dyke radio show and the men's *Homoshow*. Today, almost 20 years later, *Dykes on Mykes* is the longest running Anglophone lesbian and queer women's radio show in Montréal.

*Dykes on Mykes* never had a formal mandate but its unwritten goal was to serve the lesbian-queer community and give voice to local Anglophone lesbian culture. *Dykes on Mykes* aired lesbian and queer women's perspectives on politics, music, arts and culture. The show also promoted local artists and activists and provided Montréal's lesbian and queer women's community a forum where they could discuss all of these topics. This created a public space for lesbians and queer women. As lesbian and queer women's performance of their identities shifted over time, *Dykes on Mykes*' character also changed, yet the show never deviated from its original goal of providing a political and cultural outlet for the community.

## Queer Media Activism

As *Dykes on Mykes* and other community-based queer media provide their audiences political and cultural outlets they also enact a form of media activism that Larry Gross identifies in his book, *Up from Invisibility* (2000):

Ultimately, the most effective form of resistance to the hegemony of the mainstream is to speak for oneself, to create narratives and images that counter the accepted, oppressive, or inaccurate ones. While many groups and interests are ignored or distorted in the media, not all have the same options for resistance. The opportunities for resistance are greatest when there is a visible and organized group that can provide solidarity and institutional support for the production and distribution of alternative messages. (p.19)

Media activism plays exactly this role in queer Canadian history and rights movements, for queer media provide positive alternatives to mainstream representations of GLBT populations *and* provide these populations mechanisms that foster community building. For instance, queer radio resists hegemonic forces by facilitating discussion on issues of particular interest to dykes, issues that are underrepresented or misrepresented in mainstream media. Additionally, queer media's collaborative nature—its incorporation of multiple stakeholders into production and other roles in communicative processes—challenges mainstream media's established structure. If "doing" radio means establishing and maintaining links with a wide range of community members, "doing" *queer* radio means constructing as *participants* its diverse audiences, such as queer academics, youth, mothers, artists, and community organizers.

Radio also is an excellent tool for mobilization, networking and community building; hence, queer radio performs these functions for LGBT populations. Moreover, like the Internet, radio is a public medium that accommodates users' private needs and interests. Queer radio, for example, disseminates information to people who are closeted, in the process of coming out, or merely interested in queer women's culture.

*Dykes on Mykes*, which employs all these elements of queer media activism, contributes to creating and sustaining queer identities and community among Anglophone lesbians and queer women in Montréal.

## The Challenges of Representation

In October 2005 a focus group attended by past and present hosts of *Dykes on Mykes* yielded data that confirm the activist nature of *Dykes on Mykes*. Questions were open-ended and triggered discussion that lasted over four hours. This session revealed that an ideological shift demarcated *Dykes on Mykes*' founding and present generations and that this change parallels a similar generational split among Montréal's Anglophone lesbian and queer women.

These shifts were highlighted when focus group participants deliberated on the nature of their target audience and the character of "dyke content." When asked about target audience *Dykes on Mykes*' early hosts unequivocally stated that their guests were lesbian identified and that the show's content was interesting to dykes. One previous co-host explained, "We have one hour of air time every two weeks—so let's make it lesbian!" She added that to "make it lesbian" meant interviewing lesbians. But these interviews rarely centered on guests' sexual identity. Rather, they spotlighted lesbians' jobs, hobbies, and cultural production. The rationale for taking this focus was that if you were on the show there was no mistaking who you were. As one ex-host pointed out, "There is nothing ambiguous about the name of the show." Significantly, bringing attention to what lesbians were doing in the world primarily served to demystify lesbian lives during this early phase (the 1980s) of Canada's LGBT rights movement.

Focus group participants' answers to the question, "Who is listening?" illustrate how former hosts conceptualized their audience when they were producing *Dykes on Mykes*. One ex-host said:

Before I got involved in the show, when I first moved to the city, in my first summer here, I was just coming out and I listened to it every Monday. I listened to you (points to former host). And at the time there was a section called "Helen's Pick-Up Tips." She always recommended that going to the "tam tams" on Sundays would be a great place to meet girls, so I did.

This speaker also noted that hosts used to make announcements: "Before e-mail, we would announce everything and people would sit there with their pencils and paper and call in with questions."

Another participant agreed with her and said:

It's true, with the Internet, there are now so many ways of getting information. . . . But one thing that I know for sure is that over the years there were people who listened to the show when they were closeted, and it helped them come out. Once they moved to the city and closer to the action they tended to drop us. But there was a fringe period when we were really, really important in their lives. And you have to keep in mind that this was before the Internet, when radio was more powerful, and we were probably their only source of lesbian cultural information. We never really knew who was listening, but we knew that somebody was. I stayed in this town and ran into people that listened to the show, and at some point I began to understand that when people were confused about their sexuality, there was something really relevant about having a voice on air that they could tune into and listen to while trying to figure out their sexual orientation.

A third interviewee added:

Yeah, people are out there. *Dykes on Mykes* not only reflects a sense of community, but it *is* that community. I remember once, years ago, I was tuned in and you were talking about the Boudoir. There were actually people on the radio talking about this party. It was so cool. It gave a weight to the lesbian community for me. It anchored it. And I knew that there were other people around the city sitting in their kitchens listening to the same show. You'd always ask what people were wearing. Fashion was definitely the highlight. . . . And it meant that if people were flipping through the radio in their cars, or whatever they were doing, they were flipping past a station where people were talking about lesbians, about what lesbians do, and about their own experiences as lesbians, and there was nobody saying, "Shhh, don't say that." It was just there. And knowing that I was okay, and that everyone in my community was okay was one thing, but knowing that it was just out there for people to consume or not consume as they wished was something that was very powerful. . . . You're not going to find dyke stuff on other radio stations. You're just not.

An entirely new crew joined *Dykes on Mykes* in 2004 and they conceptualized the show's target audience differently. They made fewer assumptions about their audience and the character of "dyke content" than previous hosts. As a result, *Dykes on Mykes* departed from the identity politics practiced by the former generation. The new hosts still privilege having lesbians and queer women as guests but they are pushing for a broader understanding of what the community wants to hear.

While the current staff has not rejected *Dykes on Mykes*' early practices they balance what previous hosts built during the show's first 17 years with more explicitly political perspectives. Hence, the show now 1) maintains a distinct lesbian identity while also expanding and complicating the concept of lesbianism and 2) resists all forms of oppression (not just homophobia and heterosexism). The show also serves as a bridge between GLBT identities and a more diffusely defined queer identity.

### Lesbian and Queer Content

Such a bridge is needed in part because a queer identity movement is emerging in Canada that opposes mainstream straight culture and the GLBT rights movement's agenda of normalizing homosexuality. Normalization and working "within the system" have been the hallmarks of the Canadian GLBT movement, which has led the international struggle for equal rights and access to marriage. The GLBT movement often relies on strategies that are grounded in crisply defined, essentialized definitions of GLBT identity that are predicated on sexual practices and biological determinism. In contrast, the queer perspective is that sexual identity is politically grounded and does not reflect or depend on sexual practices. Hence, one of the ideological differences between these two movements hinges on their explanations of sexual identity. This creates vast divisions between the social, political and cultural activities and beliefs of GLBT and queer communities, especially with regard to how lesbians and queer women relate to these communities. For instance, lesbians tend to weave in and out of mainstream GLBT culture while queer-identified women take a political position against the mainstream whether is gay or straight.

Focus group participants considered these competing perspectives on subject constitution when asked, "What is *Dykes on Mykes* about?"

One ex-host said, "Ideally I would like us to play specifically lesbian or queer music on the show. Sometimes we want to cover an issue, but we don't have a queer spokesperson for a subject and that's fine, but at some point our show topics should relate back to dykes."

Another agreed, and stated, "Yeah, for me it's a prerequisite . . ."

Someone else had different opinion:

I fear assumption. I fear checking people at the door. What if we have queer, bi, or trans, people talking about topics of interest to the dyke community? We focus on catering to a dyke audience, but our audience base is expanding to include queer and trans identified people. I think that, yes, we should have dykes talking about stuff that is of interest to us, but I do get weary.

A different interviewee offered, "Okay, yeah, I wouldn't want to have a situation where it was strictly lesbians. But I would also hate to see it get to a point where it's enough that we're queer. . . . It's harder to maintain the lesbian voice. And there's added pressure to keep the lesbian voice."

One of the participants then asked, "What about separation? Aren't we all on the same team?"

Another quickly answered:

No. We're not all on the same team. We're not fighting for the same things or coming from the same place. I think that's what makes the show interesting. It's not a generic queer voice. Generic queer ends up being gay male. And it's part of CKUT's and *Dykes on Mykes*'

responsibility to cover stuff that's not going to be covered anywhere else, and, as we know, issues about the Anglophone lesbian community simply are not covered anywhere else.

The varying concepts of lesbian and queer identities that catalyzed these comments challenge the current Dykes on Mykes hosts and technicians and offer them opportunities to expand how the show defines audience and community. The new staff deliberately resist embracing certainties about sexual identity or assumptions about their target audience. This distinguishes them from Dykes on Mykes' founding generation and to some degree aligns them with queer activists. It also enables the new hosts and technicians to use the show to bridge differences between lesbian- and queer-identified female audiences, for ironically the new hosts' commitment to fluid notions of sexual identity prevents them from rejecting the possibilities and realities of LGBT (versus queer) identity.

### **Dykes on Mykes Archiving Project**

Tracing the history of Dykes on Mykes reveals the role that lesbian and queer women's perspectives have played in the show. This history indicates that there have been various shifts in the show's areas of interest and its hosts' ideological assumptions. Despite these changes Dykes on Mykes has always addressed issues that otherwise would have been overlooked on most community radio shows. There is no doubt that Dykes on Mykes simultaneously creates and documents Montréal's lesbian and queer communities. In other words, Dykes on Mykes raises questions and confronts challenges while also recording, documenting and mapping political and artistic shifts in the lesbian and queer community in Anglophone Montréal.

### **References**

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### **About the Authors**

**Marie-Claire MacPhee** is a student and staff member at the Simone de Beauvoir Institute for Women's Studies at Concordia University in Montréal, Québec. She is an activist whose work focuses on community-based research and media. She is a Communications Assistant for the *Canadian Women's Health Network*, a co-host and co-technician for CKUT Community Radio's *Dykes on Mykes*, and a researcher for [nomorepotlucks.org](http://nomorepotlucks.org). **Email:** [mcmacphee@gmail.com](mailto:mcmacphee@gmail.com)

**Mél Hogan** is an M.A . candidate in Media Studies at Concordia University. She is working on a SSHRC-funded project that examines the preservation of Digital Photography and social networking software. She also is a queer community activist, a technician for Dykes on Mykes, the founder of [nomorepotlucks.org](http://nomorepotlucks.org), and a freelance graphic designer. **Email:** [info@melhogan.com](mailto:info@melhogan.com). **Website:** [www.melhogan.com](http://www.melhogan.com)