

Breaking the Archives: *Leaping La Crosse Newsletter* and Genre

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the June issues of the lesbian newsletter *Leaping La Crosse News* from 1980-89, specifically focusing on how the newsletter developed as a genre system during its first decade of production. I use a thematic analysis framework alongside genre studies to explore how the subgenres of *LLN* came together to create a cohesive genre system. I also explore how this work in archival genre studies changed my relationship with La Crosse and influenced the style of my research. Lastly, after exploring *LLN* in reference to the past, I discuss queer communities at present and how we move throughout our environments and build community.

INTRODUCTION

If this were another paper, I'd be detailing an extravagant heist complete with an assortment of queer women with months of time on our hands, but alas, this research is not interested in recreating the most low-stakes version of *Ocean's 8* ever conceived.

I began work on this project back in 2021 when I wondered how a lesbian newsletter distributed through the driftless region sustained itself. *Leaping La Crosse News (LLN)* began circulating in 1979 and was produced by Mary F. O'Sullivan alongside many active members of the La Crosse lesbian community for nearly forty years (UWL Digital Collections). Original issues of almost every single volume of *LLN* are housed in two acid-free archive boxes in Murphy Library's Special Collections at the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse. I'm there too, sitting next to the window, plucking away on my keyboard, thinking about how this project has changed in its 18-month life span. While my research is still concerned with the newsletter's lifespan, I've also become interested in how the act of manipulating genre facilitates a more community focused writing within *LLN*, and after spending time in the archives, how archival genre studies has the potential foster more personally centered writing. I wanted to know more about newsletters, *LLN*, and the history of La Crosse, and so, I began to read.

Literature Review

Newsletters and bulletins are not part of a strict genre: they are specific to the organizations that produce them, and the purposes they produce them for. Though the field for newsletter studies is small, there are still decently documented genre rules newsletters follow. As Kent MacDougall observed in 1963, newsletters are usually brief, shared through the postal service on a consistent timeframe, contain a lot of information, and lack any, "distracting ads" (21). Newsletters are also extremely simple to produce, and because they don't often work with advertisers, communities are able to produce them with little restriction on included material (21). MacDougall also covers turnover rates for newsletters as well noting that while about 350 newsletters would begin production in a given year, another 250 would fail (21).

Later in the 90s, Wesley Dorsheimer explored the same topic of newsletters and discussed the importance of relevance and remaining when writing a newsletter (756). Dorsheimer notes that newsletters should be organized in nature, and while newsletters can fluctuate in genre to meet conventions, it is usually the content, not the format, which often sees that personal experimentation (756). Sadly, the majority of this genre research is rooted in helpful tips to produce newsletters rather than exploring how to study them, and so I turn to Wendy B. Sharper's work on the U.S. Women's Bureau's bulletins.

Sharper begins with a discussion on Mikhail Bakhtin's work on genre, specifically his understanding of utterances as, "structured, styled, and thematized in a way that emulates the areas in which they operate" (6). There are tensions between the genre system and the genres they are creating and producing, and in order to stick with genre rules, you may affect the community and its boundaries and conversations. If you start with community, the

genre in turn will fluctuate and remain fluid within the genre system. These tensions are everywhere, and often, they inform each other. For example, in the present day of the broadband router, cooking magazines can respond to online trends and larger pools of consumer data in order to produce interesting articles that remain steadfast in the much more stable genre of the cooking magazine. Carolyn Miller echoes this tension in “Genre as Social Action” where she notes, “a theoretically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action, it is used to accomplish” (24). Sharper explores this claim within the boundaries of her Women’s Bureau bulletins and notes how even though the bulletin was meant to advocate welfare for women, it was also, “not expected to promote particular social policies” (10-14). By exploring this specific tension, Sharper re-emphasizes the importance of bringing context into genre analysis, and the importance of identifying what the genre text is being, “used to accomplish” (Miller, 24).

And now, in my own genre of archival research, I turn towards queering to negate studying some dead thing, instead understanding my research as an active practice which includes both the text and my being alongside my decisions, and histories. In an interview transcription with Susan Stryker, she recalls:

“As Henri Bergson reminds us in *Matter and Memory*, we remain capable of initiating voluntary motor actions that introduce the potential for change and creative expression that emanate within but depart from received patterns of movement. There is more than a prescribed social choreography, in other words; there is an improvisational ontological dance, which is inherently queer or trails to the extent that it crosses and disrupts old patterns and bends our movements, both personal and collective, toward new and previously unrealized ways of being.” (Arondekar et al. 213)

The state of the world has changed in the past 40 years, and the ways we facilitate and cultivate community has rapidly shifted over the past number of decades. This “dance” between past and present, personal and political is required for us to more fully understand our texts, and not using some frivolous nit-picking on language, but rather, how did we, as queer people, come together in community? What did *we* entail, who did we exclude, and what can we learn about cultivating community for the present day, both with the written word and present in the same spaces?

METHODS AND STANDPOINT

For this research, I used genre analysis to dive into the subgenres employed by the newsletter’s individual sections and explore how they come together to create *LLN*. Exploring the newsletters, I observed three specific themes coming through which correlated to three main genres: *Articles*, *Events*, and *Ads*. I then used these genre trends and analysis to explore what these texts are “used to accomplish” (Miller 24). Although *Leaping Lacrosse News*, began in 1979, Murphy Library’s collection begins in 1980 so that’s where I began with my research. And because this analysis primarily took place over the course of a semester, I focused my research on the June issues from 1980-1989.

In my second part of this research, I explore the relationship between the history of the texts and how the genre system of queer La Crosse appears today partially by visiting locations mentioned in *LLN*. This section will expand my analysis by observing how spaces where queer people exist have changed both thanks to increasing acceptance of queer identities, but also, the slow extinction of lesbian bars and other queer spaces. We no longer have lesbian bars or queer bookstores. Our communities are digital: both more expansive, but looser knit. While this work is centered in the historical it does expand to include analysis of how the city of La Crosse has changed over the years.

We’ll explore that idea of queer connection more later, but for now, it may be best to situate my standpoint within this research. To borrow from Sandra Harding’s concept of standpoint theory, I recognize that my identities have and will continue to influence how I view and produce this research and being forthcoming with those identities can help further contextualize this work to my audience. I am a white man, a semi-lapsing practicing Catholic, and a Queer, gender studies scholar. My areas of study relevant to this research are rooted in Black feminism, post-feminism, and fat studies.

A final note on this archival work: because *LLN* is a newsletter written by lesbians for lesbians in the 1980s, some language has fallen out of younger queer people’s vernacular, and in some queer communities, attempts to reclaim certain pejoratives like “dyke” have fallen fairly out of fashion over the past forty years. That being said, my genre analysis is not concerned with discussing the ethics of lesbians using these words, and I will be pulling quotes which will include words such as *dyke* when needed.

Commented [DT1]: No caps for field of study.

ANALYSIS

Events

First and foremost, to understand *LLN* as a genre system, we'll begin at that issue from June 1980, the earliest in the archival records. As previously discussed, the newsletter ran under another name, *NLFO*, and followed those well-trodden genre rules for how a newsletter traditionally operates. It's sparse, mostly composed of a calendar, and opens up with a poem. The primary function of this calendar is to promote events, which in turn promote community among newsletter readers. But *NLFO/LLN* still manipulates this simple genre of *calendar* to fit its diverse needs.

The calendar is in chronological order, dividing specific events by location. Most of the events are located in La Crosse, but others take place in Minneapolis, Milwaukee, and Madison. The third page also includes an ad for a lesbian support group, an announcement on the gay Rites of Spring celebration, and a map to a monthly potluck (O'Sullivan, "*LLN 1980*"). The rest of the newsletter is typed, but the map is hand-drawn, tucked away in the bottom right corner. Why? Because it continues to elaborate on the information offered to us with the calendar. It creates a genre uptake where the text included in the event works to gain a specific response from the readers, in this case, convincing a number of people to come together in community. Later issues continue to expand the genre of the calendar with some including an additional, separate softball calendar complete with teams from each of the lesbian bars in town: Mother's and Tattoos. The calendars began as a strict, typed pillar, right on the front page, but as the newsletter expanded, they were relegated to the back, under the banner "ANNOUNCEMENTS" (O'Sullivan, "*LLN 1983*").

The events *LLN* promotes don't just function to communicate a gathering time, but also gathering spaces where lesbians can assume they are, at least in specific instances, welcome to inhabit. They are written to say this is where we can exist within our community and here are the opportunities to do so. Some events include much more information, expanding into a kind of editorial piece (eventorials if you want to sound fun), expanding past times, locations and contact information into detailed plans, purposes, and schedules for the event. When they take up more space, event promotions act as a sales pitch of why one should attend, such as, say, the thirteenth Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (O'Sullivan, "*LLN 1988*").

These events and their inclusion in *LLN* offer insight not only on how the members of *LLN* saw themselves, but also how they interacted with and within the greater La Crosse community. For example, in 1985, *LAGA* (*Lesbian and Gay Association*) and *Lesbians United* offered a pride festival called G.L.A.D. (Gay & Lesbian Awareness Days) which features locations such as the lesbian bar Tattoo's II, a couple parks, and, for three hours of sessions, the local Newman Center (O'Sullivan, "*LLN 1985*"). This is the one time the Newman Center popped up in my research, but it stopped me in my tracks when I noticed it.

Upon further archival research, I found that the priest at the time, James E. Mason, was assigned to Newman in 1981 (BishopAccountability.org, Gay). The same year he was found guilty of sexually assaulting a student by the Chippewa County Court (Gay). While acknowledging the systemic violence Catholic clergy have enacted, I also find it important to note that I used the Diocese of La Crosse's website to cross check this information and I accessed it quite easily through a link on their front page (dioc.org). I also learned there are no records of abuse from any priest's time at Roncalli Newman, and that in the mid 80s, engaged in a lot of community outreach including supporting Cambodian refugees in La Crosse, and "supporting the idea" of a festival of lights held in August 1985 (*Growing through the Years*). In the present, I wish these acts of community support weren't the most surprising thing that I learned while researching Roncalli.

But back in 1985, Roncalli Newman, on the same page as a party at Tattoos and a community softball game at the park, became a space that allowed the gay and lesbian community of La Crosse to exist authentically. These events in the *LLN* create the backbone of the newsletter by noting the times when lesbians can come together to build and foster community while also noting the places where this community development happens. The essential questions events answer in the quest for community within the genre system is *what* and *how*, and as *LLN* and their promoted events developed as a genre system, so did the ads businesses paid to include within the newsletter's pages.



Figure 1. G.L.A.D. insert, *LLN* 1985

Ads

Specifically in the early issues of *LLN*, what differentiates a paid ad from an unpaid event notice is fairly nebulous. Each genre attempts to do the same thing: promote something, and each take cues from the genre system to create successful texts. In the 1985 issue from my corpus, the newsletter includes information for advertisers on how *LLN* defined the different sizes and characteristics of ads which I adopted as a basis for my thematic analysis of advertisements (O'Sullivan). As described by the newsletter, ads take up the space of either $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{2}$, or a whole page (O'Sullivan, "LLN 1985"). Ads always promoting some business or service, and often have some monetary transaction attached to them. Functionally, they are similar to an event, but for this analysis, ads are often labeled and usually bordered.

As MacDougall previously discussed, ads are not common in newsletters because they are designed to be distracting (21). This is absolutely the case in *Leaping La Crosse News*. They are often large and distracting, and yet, included ads usually take the existing genre system into account when businesses write them. Take this ad for the bar Tattoos:

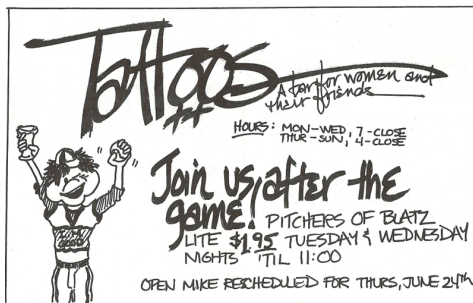


Figure 2. Tattoos ad, *LLN* 1982

Handwritten, promoting some post-softball deal, the Tattoos ad is doing exactly what the calendars do: community events for the lesbians of La Crosse. Tattoos isn't the only business to focus on community events either: the majority of businesses advertising in the *LLN* promoted community-based gatherings. The main product Tattoos is trying to sell is community, and once consumers gather, they'll also sell the beer. Ads, like events,

emphasize very specific gathering places to foster lesbian community and identity, but it is the articles of the *LLN* that define who that community includes.

Articles

In its early years, *LLN* was short, brisk, and likely fairly cheap to produce, filling only two or three pages, but after a few years, present events and information take the front page of the newsletter. By 1984, the newsletter had whole pages dedicated to topics such as premenstrual syndrome, local lesbian Joy Holthaus' state council appointment, and pastoral care for people with AIDs. These articles on diverse, lesbian-centered topics led to *LLN* functioning similarly to the texts of feminist consciousness-raising groups from the second feminist wave in America where women would gather to discuss their problems alongside feminist writings and find community, support, and calls to action to address raised issues. The pastoral care for people with AIDs articles call for compassion and open dialogues between lesbians and homophobic community members, and Holthaus' council updates kept lesbians informed on local government policies, each being good things to take up and discuss as a community (O'Sullivan, "LLN, 1986").

As *LLN* aged, the newsletter expanded to include reviews and summaries of past events, on occasion using printing space to cover micro, newsletter-specific topics. For example, in the issue from June 1989, an eighth of the second page is taken up by an announcement about a couple's beagle's name, responding to a prior call for names (O'Sullivan, "LLN, 1989"). The beagle had attended the May potluck and was important enough in the community to be mentioned in the next issue rather than waiting until the next potluck, or other gathering event to share the news.

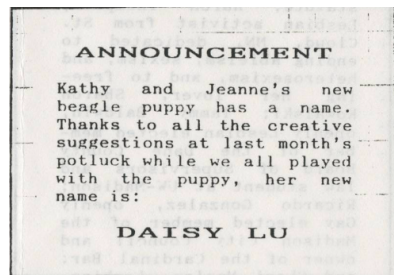


Figure 3. Dog name announcement, *LLN* 1989

Even though there was more space and opportunity to discuss broader topics as the newsletter grew in size, that didn't mean *LLN* broadened their scope when speaking about identities other than the narrowest concerns of lesbian identity. In June 1984, we get the first instance in this corpus of *LLN* covering an identity separate from sex and sexuality. I use the term sex very intentionally, because while the newsletter does cover topics specific to gendered oppression, the conversations do not expand to discuss anything beyond the cisgendered. It is strictly binary; it is strictly *woman*.

To return to the matter at hand, in June 1984, there's an event promotion for a "Fat Dyke Celebration" as part of the Doe Farm Summer Workshop Series (O'Sullivan, "LLN, 1984"). The event was promoted as, "A gathering for fat dykes and their friends, and dykes who are interested in fat dyke politics," and seemed like a lovely time (O'Sullivan, "LLN, 1984"). However, unlike other events rooted in discussions of womanhood or sexuality, this gathering included a fee and was facilitated by a business. The next inclusion of another intersecting identity is on the same page where Doe Farm promotes a workshop specifically for aging lesbians. Both remain article-like ads (advertisements) promoting paid events for a business.

Outside of that, there is one article reviewing a conference which also discusses race, but it appears in the June of 1989. The article promotes embracing people of different all marginalized identities, specifically racial, but it is telling that in my corpus, mentions of race and other identities besides sex and sexuality are rarely included (Leetree). If the other two sub-genres highlight the spaces lesbians inhabit in the *LLN*, articles explicitly map the boundaries of those spaces.

Fieldnotes

For the majority of my initial reading and research, I worked with a copy of my decade-long sample, scratching notes on texts of interest. I probably could've made a more succinct project without ever stepping foot in the archives, but I did so I could further contextualize the newsletter as a historical object. The first thing I noticed while studying the original newsletters were creases from when they were simply folded and sealed for sending, addresses on the backside of the paper. Then I noticed the holes in the upper left-hand corner of the pages left from staples. These issues were not flashy, and up until the end of 1981, they were just sent out from what I assume was O'Sullivan's home address instead of from a P.O. box included on later editions.



Figure 4. Sidewalk outside of original distribution location

The physical composition rapidly started changing with each passing issue during the first half of the decade. For example, in 1982, the volume shifts from single-sided to double-sided paper with a softball calendar taking up a whole sheet on its own. I wonder how many newsletter recipients took that page and stuck it on their fridge, if the calendar was designed to have no back for that purpose. In 1983, the newsletter became more like a bulletin with folded, specially sized paper. There are no crease marks on this issue, nor any addresses. Ads also take up a lot of visual space, but as discussed before, they are primarily centered on community concerns. 1985 debuted a new format with much smaller, specially sized paper. The page promoting the previously mentioned G.L.A.D. event is the only page without a back, similar to the calendar, and easily could have been repurposed from a magazine insert to a flyer. In the archives, these texts and concerns became more tangible, but they were still positioned as strictly historical until I broke out.

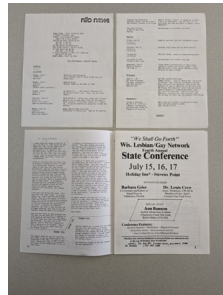


Figure 5. LLN 1980 (above) in comparison to LLN 1983 (below)

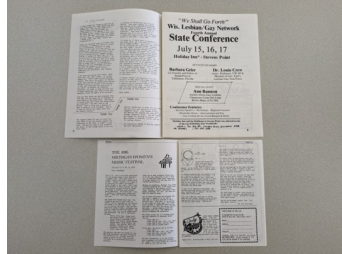


Figure 6. LLN 1983 (above) in comparison to LLN 1985 (below)

On April first, while drafting this research, my queer friend finally dragged me downtown for an hour with some other more socially active queers. We went to a bar playing muted new clips on a projector and 2000s hits through the speakers, and it was fun, but it wasn't a queer space. There's still one queer bar in La Crosse, but the two most prominent bars in LLN both closed by 1989; neither made it a decade (*Recollection Wisconsin*). Like all the other friend groups, we carved out a small space in the bar and screamed along to the songs we knew. And like most times I get a drink in me, I started to think about this current research. My fellow queers and I were all able to fade into that state of *being* that makes dancing so much fun, but the community we fostered that night was micro in a space implicitly designed for white college students with no conscious attempt of welcoming any other specific identities.

The next afternoon, that same friend and I went on a lesbian tour of La Crosse designed and led by me. We followed a list of addresses I had compiled in the archives, and as we drove to each stop, I noticed how different our city was compared to the one that had produced the newsletter. There were no more lesbian bars, fewer softball diamonds. As discussed before, I do not feel as though Roncalli Newman fosters community with people outside of its clergy. It is after visiting these spaces that I found myself further centering spaces and my own experiences in this research. Times have changed, spaces have changed, but queer folks are present in La Crosse: they are my friends and mentors, and together, we work to have difficult conversations in order to both grow and be better as a community.



Figure 7. Me at a softball diamond in Carol Park



Figure 8. Me in Powell Park, no softball diamond

DISCUSSION

Miller has historically advocated for studying genre as strategy rather than something to be understood, and *LLN* highlights this idea throughout all of its subgenres (Bawarshi & Reiff 2). *Events*, *Articles*, and *Ads* each have unique, but often overlapping goals within the *LLN* to achieve some sort of goal. They exemplify uptake and the need for community-engaged texts to engage their community. Most newsletters failed after a year or two, but by effectively addressing the needs of their constituents, *LLN* lasted for nearly four decades.

Understanding how your writing functions in relation to genre and audience is a strong path towards effective, community-facilitating texts, but like in any other community, it's important to recognize where exactly the borders between our communities are. *LLN* was written for a specific audience in a specific area and the majority of texts it includes supports the genre system as a whole. The newsletter also acts as a sticking example of how to market to specific communities within hyper-specific mediums, and overall, the components which made up *LLN* are the reason it was able to grow and last for as long as it did.

And personally, I learned archives work better when we break them, allow their histories to leak out, and contextualize them with the current world. The *LLN* is no longer with us, but queer communities still exist in La Crosse within their own genre systems. This research helped me contextualize our histories in tandem with our presents and blending archival work and genre studies was pivotal to my learning and growth. Finally, the *LLN* fostered a surprising direction in the style and presentation of this article, molding the genre of the academic article to fit my needs rather than me fitting the traditional genre needs, and after all the work and time I've spent on thinking about these decisions, I think they were good ones.

I came into this research after a pandemic changed the ways we communicate and share community immensely. I spent my first year in La Crosse as a transfer student in a pandemic, playing Minecraft online with friends from high school, all of us sharing a Discord server to exchange news and memes and times we'd be on our shared Minecraft server. Some of us were queer, and we'd talk about different movies or music or philosophy we thought were worth discussion, but as our world changed, as our community changed, our Discord changed. We hardly use it anymore, instead spending more time cultivating the relationships we've built in the places we reside.

Most of the few relationships I had at La Crosse at the time of this Discord creation were also primarily between queer people facilitated by online sessions of Dungeons and Dragons, again housed on Discord and whatever messages we shared between those sessions. As the years passed, we've all drifted away and have been able to more easily find and join communities away from keyboards and away from the writing we produce. As I close out this research on a queer newsletter that ceased production more than fifteen years ago, I think about those Discord servers.

There is so much space and so many avenues to further explore the *LLN* as a genre system and beyond. I hope future researchers focus more on the more micro details of a specific genre, different decades, and further contextualize the *LLN* against certain national trends and events, but for now, I leave you with my exploration and overview of the genre as a whole alongside my self-designed lesbians of La Crosse tour: Roncalli Newman Catholic Church (the location of two G.L.A.D. events in 1985), Lueth Park (the location of past softball games), 1542 Rose

St. (the past location of Tattoos), 610 Main St. (the past location of the queer bookstore Red Oak Books), 207 Pearl St. (the current location of The Pearl Ice Cream Parlor near the past location of the lesbian bar Mother's), Carroll Field (another location of past softball games and the only one with diamonds in 2023), Powell Park (a third softball location), and Goose Island Shelter Three (location of early pride event).

This is our past, breaking out from the archives. Use the archives as reference for better writing and even better, stronger communities. Use our histories for better futures.

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