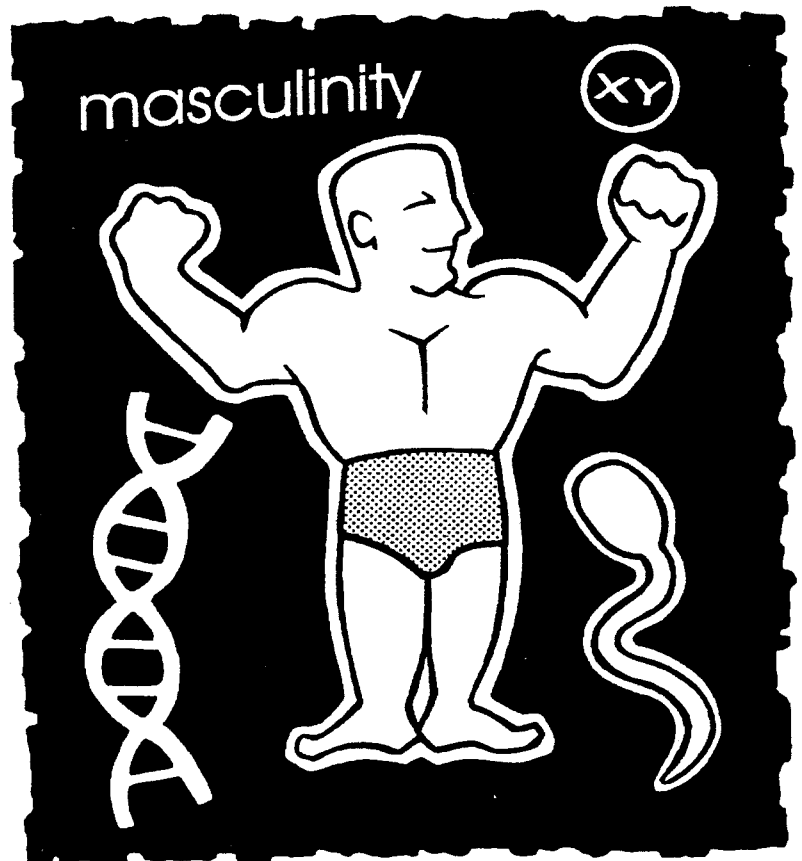


Pro-feminist Publishing: Delights and Dilemmas

Michael Flood

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One steady landmark on the political and ideological landscape of men's politics has been XY magazine, a pro-feminist men's magazine. Beginning in 1990, XY has put out 24 editions of analysis, discussion and testimony on men, masculinities and gender politics. What issues have been raised in the production of this magazine, and what have its contributions been?

I founded XY close to seven years ago, and acted as its coordinating editor until a few months ago. XY is focused on men and masculinities, and its editorial principles are as follows: "XY affirms a healthy, life-loving, non-oppressive masculinity, and supports the men's networks for change in Australia. XY is a space for the exploration of issues of gender and sexuality, and practical discussion of the hows and whys of personal and social change. XY is male-positive, pro-feminist and gay-affirmative. XY is a non-profit magazine produced by volunteers."

XY covers pretty much every gender-related issue under the sun, and publishes regular material on such areas as violence, relationships, health, feminism, fathering, sexuality, growing up and more. Each edition typically is 40 pages long and has about 24,000 words of content. We distribute about 800 copies

per quarter, to subscribers and readers throughout Australia. XY has also gone techno by setting up a site on the Internet.

After being published from Canberra for 6 years, the magazine has just been handed over to a new group in Adelaide. The Canberra editors had felt the pressure of other increasing commitments (jobs in other cities, babies, PhDs), and decided it was time to hand it on.

I have had a very passionate and personal involvement with XY, and in a sense it's been 'my baby'. I've been editing, writing, talking and dreaming XY for what sometimes feels like forever, and much of my heart and head has gone into it. XY has been a labour of love for all involved, and this baby could not have survived without its co-parents, the other members of the editorial group, and without the help of the many others who have supported and written for it. While for me it feels strange and scary to hand over XY to the new editorial group, I know it is the right thing to do and I fully trust that XY is in good hands. I and the other ex-editors are helping as much as we can with the transition, and several of us will continue to write for the magazine.

Michael Flood was the founding editor of XY magazine and is currently completing a PhD on 'Heterosexual Men and HIV/AIDS' at the Australian National University.

Spotlights on men

The context for XY's emergence is, of course, the general social and political shifts of the late twentieth century, which include the problematising of men and masculinity as 'social problems'. One expression of this is the men's movement, a loose network of men's groups and organisations around Australia. As I've argued in detail elsewhere,¹ those lumped together under the term "men's movement" include groups and individuals with both pro- and anti-feminist agendas, as well as a large number of men whose focus is personal growth or healing and a kind of individualised "men's liberation". XY was intended to reach men already involved in such self-consciously gendered projects of personal and social change. But it has always had a wider role too, in speaking to any men (and women) concerned about gender issues.

To be pro-feminist is to be committed to challenging women's oppression, sexism and gender injustice.

While public discussions of men and masculinity have a long history in Australia (in successive waves of feminism, in gay liberation, and in very different ways in right-wing rhetorics of family and nation), XY was the first magazine to concentrate on a progressive examination of these areas. For its first four years XY was the only substantial magazine on men's issues in Australia, although it existed alongside one or two long-running men's group newsletters, and it has been the first point of contact for many men who are wrestling with issues of what it means to be male. XY has published 373 articles by over 200 authors, and it is one of the longest-running pro-feminist men's projects in Australia.

XY has been 'before its time' too, in exploring issues and debates long before they became mainstream media topics. For example, we did a special feature on men's health at least two years before this issue hit the headlines. XY's coverage of such issues as the sexual abuse of men and boys, circumcision, anti-rape activism, men in prisons, homophobia and more has also been timely and insightful.

One of my goals in founding XY was to influence the character and direction of this newly emergent "men's movement", and I've often joked about my desire that XY achieve hegemony in these circles. Given its pro-feminist politics however, and the editors' unwillingness to compromise these, this achievement was always unlikely. Nevertheless, XY has been an important voice in these circles, and is widely recognised especially among pro-feminist men (many of whom count themselves as "outside" the men's movement).

Most of XY's 'marketing' efforts have been in these men's networks and events (such as the Sydney Men's Festival or the marches of Men Against Sexual Assault groups). But we have also always believed that XY had a role in the wider community as well, in spreading alternative ideas and images of manhood and accelerating the re-working of gender relations already under way. I have long been keen that XY also facilitate bridges between masculinity politics and other progressive movements and activists — especially feminist and gay/lesbian/bisexual movements, but also left-wing and socialist, anti-racist, peace, green, and so on. Regretfully, we did not have the

energy to do this as much as I would wish, but it remains an important part of a progressive men's politics. Finally, we never had an interest in going for a mass-market and mass readership (which presumably would involve substantial financial backing, mainstream politics and soft-core centrefolds!), but I continue to believe that XY's potential readership is far larger than its current level.

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Pro-feminist and male-positive

XY magazine's most important contribution to the field of 'masculinity politics' has been its articulation of a pro-feminist men's politics. XY has been a consistent and passionate voice for a pro-feminist *and* male-positive perspective, and combining these is perhaps one of the hardest, and at the same time most urgent, tasks for men's politics.

At its core, to be pro-feminist is to be committed to challenging women's oppression, sexism and gender injustice. It is to be aware of women's experiences, and to be informed by feminist analyses of society. For men in particular, being pro-feminist means trying to develop non-oppressive forms of masculinity and non-sexist relations with women. The current, dominant model of manhood or masculinity is oppressive to women, as well as limiting for men themselves. Men must take responsibility for our own sexist behaviours and attitudes and work to change those of men in general. And in doing so we claim to be anti-sexist rather than non-sexist, as the latter is unlikely if not impossible in a sexist society.

To be male-positive is to be affirming of men and optimistic about men; to believe that men can change; to support every man's efforts at positive change. It is to build close relations and supportive alliances among men. To be male-positive is to acknowledge men's many acts of compassion and kindness, to resist feeling hopeless about men and writing men off, and to reject the idea that men are somehow intrinsically bad, oppressive or sexist. Individual men are not responsible for, and can't be blamed for, social structures and values such as the social construction of masculinity or the history of women's oppression. This has to be balanced with the recognition that individual men are responsible for their oppressive behaviour (such as violence) and can choose to change it.

Male-positivity is balanced by pro-feminism. Being male-positive of course doesn't mean supporting whatever men do. We have to retain a sense of ethics or values, and to assess men and masculinities accordingly. Incidentally, the term "male-positive" has been replaced in the principles of at least one American pro-feminist men's organisation by the term "enhancing men's lives".

While other newsletters and magazines on men have also been male-positive or supportive of men, XY uniquely has tried to combine this with a concern with sexism and gender injustice. XY has attempted to respond to feminist politics and the challenge of undermining the ways in which many men are privileged over women, and to tackle hard issues like men's violence, rape, sexism and so on. And at the same time, XY has tried to keep central a fundamental compassion for men, a com-

mitment to exploring the realities of men's lives (even where these don't fit with existing feminist analyses), and a support for men's efforts at positive personal and social change. This pro-feminist and male-supportive politics is shared and advocated by other men and groups around the country, although in men's movement circles it is certainly in the minority.

I believe that in general XY has also done well in avoiding the potential excesses of either pro-feminism or male-positivity. On the one hand, we've avoided a guilt-ridden, negative and self-righteous approach, and on the other, we've avoided a naive feel-good approach to men which ignores questions of power or injustice or even goes so far as to represent men as the new victims.

XY's pro-feminist commitments have certainly lost it readers and support, both in men's movement circles and elsewhere. What strikes me in particular is how feminism and by corollary pro-feminism are perceived by many men to be "anti-male" or even "male-bashing". I would respond that both are anti-sexist, both are anti-patriarchal, but neither are anti-male. I have addressed this issue in detail elsewhere, but briefly, I understand the "anti-male" response to pro-feminist men's politics as follows. Firstly, it does have some slight legitimacy, in that pro-feminist men and magazines such as XY sometimes have been too focused on the negative without appropriate qualification or context. Secondly, because of the cultural context of both feminism and an "us and them" model of gender warfare, some men will hear any criticism of men's behaviour or masculinity as attacking and blaming. Thirdly, the label "anti-male" is a response to disagreements over how to understand men's position, and pro-feminism is more accurately described as anti-sexist or anti-patriarchal. Finally, the perception is expressive of a defensive reaction by members of a dominant group to criticism, in the same way that Aboriginal people critical of the racism or privilege of white people sometimes are accused of "white-bashing".

However, pro-feminist men have not done enough to acknowledge men's pain. We have drawn on feminist analyses of men's behaviour and men's institutions and their impact on women, and these have been and continue to be very important. However, such analyses miss important dimensions of men's experience, dimensions that are important for our ability to support men and to inspire men's commitment to gender justice. On the other hand, while mythopoetic and men's rights men have given more acknowledgment of men's pain, they misdiagnose its source as being women or the loss of masculine rights of passage or the success of the feminist movement (and in doing so, they misprescribe the cure).

Pro-feminist men, in XY magazine and elsewhere, are increasingly addressing areas of male pain and disadvantage: the poor state of men's health, violence against men, men's painful experiences of divorce and custody, and more. We acknowledge the reality of men's experiences in these areas. At the same

time, we are critical of the broader anti-women and anti-feminist agendas which have sometimes accompanied recognition of these issues, and we disagree with "men's rights" men about their causes, character and prevalence.³

Publish and be damned

The debates hinted at above also produce the greatest source of tension in producing XY, over what to publish and what to reject. XY's three editorial principles ("male-positive, pro-feminist and gay-affirmative"), its holy trinity, always guided our editorial decisions, but certainly did not guarantee the absence of conflict, and people's passions and politics were sources of both energy and dissent.

It may seem charmingly anachronistic to some, and even naive to others, that we relied on processes of consensus decision-making in dealing with such conflicts. This generally worked well, but we also had policies in place that allowed voting if consensus could not be reached after three meetings.

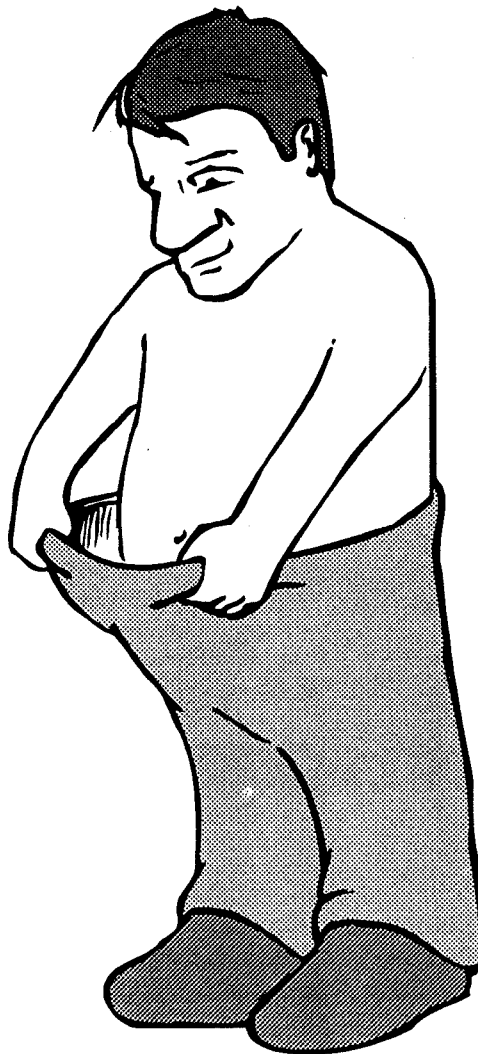
These debates within the group also raised broader issues about the politics of speech. I found myself sometimes torn between two contradictory impulses: first, a (perhaps unreflectively liberal) impulse to publish "diversity" and "debate", including material which was not particularly pro-feminist (but certainly not anti-feminist), and secondly, a more "hardline" impulse to only publish feminist-sympathetic material. I tended to favour the latter, in particular because anti-feminist men's voices and ideologies are widely available in this culture as it is and hardly need space in XY to gain a hearing, and because such material is offensive and harmful in itself. At the same time, considering these issues in the group also led me sometimes to re-think my kneejerk "that's anti-feminist!" responses to some men's issues and to arrive at more subtle positions.

Our decisions to refuse publication of some anti- and non-feminist men's material (and contacts for "men's rights" groups) predictably drew cries of "censorship" and "political correctness". Those crying censorship of course practise their own silencing of pro-feminist, feminist and women's voices and activities. It seems to me that for conservatives, often "censorship" is when material you support is criticised or (much more rarely) silenced, and when this material is published and affirmed it is "free speech". If "political correctness" refers to a willingness to consider the significance and impact of ways of speaking and understanding the world and to make ethical judgements about which of these will be supported, then XY happily stands guilty as charged.

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Not one but many

XY has made five other contributions to the field of masculinity politics. Firstly, through its special features on men and class, racial and ethnic diversity, sexuality, and young men for example, the magazine has encouraged an awareness of the



diverse and complex realities of men's lives. We have shown that there is not one way of being male, one "manhood" or "masculinity", but many, that these exist in hierarchical relations to each other and that gender relations intersect with other forms of social relation. This recognition is hardly unique, and it is taken for granted in the new critical scholarship on men and masculinities. But it is an important one, given the frequency with which other writers and speakers invoke "manhood" and "men" as if these were unitary, homogenous and indeed unproblematic categories. Coming to grips with this diversity is essential if we are to understand gender relations, if we are to speak to men themselves, and if we are to create an inclusive men's politics.

It is possible and indeed essential for men to act together to dismantle gender injustice.

Secondly, XY's "gay-affirmative" editorial principle embodies the recognition of the ways in which homophobia and heterosexism are fundamentally entangled in dominant constructions of masculinity.⁴ This principle could be rendered more accurately as, "anti-homophobic and affirming of sexual diversity". Some readers have felt that we publish "too much" gay-related content, while others have even taken XY itself to be a gay magazine. The perception of "too much" gay-related content is prompted less by the actual proportions of such content in XY, which are tiny, and more by the unfamiliarity and discomfort many heterosexual men experience around gay issues. And I understand the reading of XY as gay as a symptom precisely of this construction of homophobic masculinity, such that any challenges to this masculinity are labelled gay (as well as a reaction to the words "men" and "sex" on the front cover and the occasional images of half-naked men).

XY has been also an important forum for the analytical discussion of men, masculinities and men's issues. We have tried to make contemporary theoretical insights accessible and relevant to the readers—to translate academic theory into ideas that are useful and meaningful. Moving as I do between activist and academic worlds, I see the insights and tools of each as relevant for the other.

Fourthly, one of XY's particular strengths has been its humour and playfulness, in its cartoons, silly jokes and general irreverence. That funky old anarchist Emma Goldman got it right when she said, "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution." Laughing and playing are part and parcel of the development of alternative communities and cultures. And from my experience they're especially necessary in the men's movement, which is deeply earnest and sometimes painfully devoid of humour or joy. (Pro-feminist men thankfully have more fun, though we can be serious bastards too.)

Eek, male bonding

XY's all-male editorial group was itself an instance of progressive masculinity politics. I was already very familiar with pro-feminist groups composed of men, from eighteen months in an anti-sexist consciousness-raising group when I was 20-21, and from three years of involvement in Men Against Sexual Assault, a network of men's groups active against men's vio-

lence. When I set up the editorial group (after a year publishing XY by myself) I invited only men to join, on the basis of vague assumptions in my head about men taking responsibility and acting together for social change, and the group continued as all-male throughout its first six years. The issue of female editorial participation never came up in a practical sense in that no woman ever asked to join, although it cropped up as a topic occasionally. (And XY has always welcomed female writers.) For myself, I see no essential political problem with all-male activist groups *per se*, although of course there are important dangers to avoid and issues to remain aware of.

The Canberra-based editorial group included several close friends and several men who had been with me in that original men's group, and through XY existing friendships were strengthened and new ones formed. We managed to have over 100 meetings without thumping each other, and XY could not have survived and flourished without the support, energy and cohesiveness of this mini-community. We worked hard to maintain the group, recognising that its functioning and wellbeing were crucial to the magazine. And we made sure that we had fun and maintained connections: 'checking in' at the start of each meeting, going away for weekends, catching up on the gossip, and always being silly. Of course there have been conflicts within the group, and dealing with these respectfully has also been vital. None of this is to diminish the role of the networks of support and encouragement around Australia, without which XY could not have survived.

Eek, male bonding

In terms of political activism, groups such as this represent a delicate kind of politics, in embodying an attempt by members of a privileged group or category (in this case men) to undo the power and privilege of that same group. Certainly there are precedents for the development of anti-privilege politics and theory by members of privileged groups, and Sandra Harding in *Whose science? Whose knowledge?* offers an eloquent discussion of the ways in which we can adopt traitorous social locations and identities.⁵ I've long believed that it is possible and indeed essential for men to act together to dismantle gender injustice, just as it is for whites and heterosexuals to dismantle racial and sexual injustices. Doing so involves both opportunities and dangers, and these are frequent topics in XY magazine.

XY is only one part of a network of groups, strategies, texts and ideas which one might say together comprise a progressive and pro-feminist masculinity politics. There is very much to do and very much to learn. I hope that XY has played, and will continue to play, some role in the energising and enhancement of this politics.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Michael Flood 1996 "State of the movement", XY, 6(3), Spring
- 2 Michael Flood 1996 "Anti-male", XY, 6(2), Winter
- 3 For a detailed discussion of these issues, see Michael Flood's article "Responding to men's rights", in XY, 7(1), Autumn 1997.
- 4 See Michael Flood "Straightjacket", XY, 3(2), Winter 1993.
- 5 Harding, Sandra 1991 "Reinventing ourselves as Other: more new agents of history and knowledge", Chapter 11 in *Whose science, whose knowledge? Thinking from women's lives*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press