

HOOSIER WOMEN AT WORK

STUDIES IN INDIANA WOMEN'S HISTORY

Session 3

April 2017

Gender, Labor, and Technology in the Making of a Patient Newspaper (1987-1993)

ELIZABETH NELSON*

Studies of patient journalism in psychiatric institutions have traditionally asked: were newspapers disciplinary technologies, or did they provide a forum for self-expression or even protest? Attending to disability, technology, labor, and gender in an analysis of *The DDU Review*, a newspaper created by dual diagnosis (developmentally disabled and mentally ill) patients at Indiana's Central State Hospital from 1987-1993, this paper provides a history of psychiatry "from the middle," rather than "from above" or "from below." It does so by highlighting the ambiguous place of front-line, non-medical personnel within the power structures of the state mental hospital, as these workers acted both as therapeutic instruments and mediators of patient voices.

As part of a recreational therapy program, the "newspaper club" that produced *The DDU Review* promoted patient literacy and self-confidence through journalistic exercises. As a sort of assistive technology, *The DDU Review* allowed patients to take up new subject-positions as authors and reporters, and it helped readers to recognize the personhood of individuals within a stigmatized population. However, the newspapers were not the vehicles of unmediated patient voices, but rather the product of polyphonic interactions: interrogation, dictation, and structured conversations between therapists and patients who often could not read or write independently. The production cycle externalized "technologies of the self" that were essential for institutional discipline (though the culmination of such technologies was the patients' release into the community). Moreover, given the gendered construction of recreational therapy and the marginalized position of non-medical, mostly female therapists within the world of the mental hospital, the newspapers were an activist intervention. Distributed to legislators, advocates, and families, the newspapers were intended not only to improve living conditions for patients but also working conditions for women.

* Elizabeth Nelson serves as Director of Public Programs at the Indiana Medical History Museum.