



Spare Rib and Underwater Livecams

Clare Brant

King's College London

<https://www.bl.uk/spare-rib>

1. Digital citizens of the future may have sorted a gender politics which works for everybody. A utopian hope, yes; in case not, and in any case, I would want them to know that in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, there was a worldwide women's movement full of daring thinkers and brave activists. So often history is written by the victors; web resources at least prolong the availability of alternative versions. What's known as second wave feminism worked largely through print and word of mouth, but is now partially recuperable through podcasts, oral history and digital archives.

My auto/biography joins up with this bigger history, through women's studies, feminist theory, anti-sexual harassment campaigning, Greenham, Reclaim the Night, Virago, Pandora, *Spare Rib*... I took part in numerous women's groups. I set up a couple too. There were complicated politics, liaisons, fallings-out, joinings-up, arguments, agreements, marches, policies, action. I still have a women's group (thank you Ros!) and I celebrate International Women's Day as a festival of achievements and a waymark of solidarity. There is still much to be done.

It's hard to single out just one resource—it might be the wonderful oral history project created by Margaretta Jolly and collaborators, <https://www.bl.uk/sisterhood/timeline>, featuring key figures—and ideas—from the 70s and 80s women's movement in Britain. Preserving ideas is a dull ambition compared to using them: I like to think of archives as seed banks, protecting intellectual biodiversity for the future. Like seed banks conserving genes, archives protect genres. The excellent Sammlung Frauennachlässe (Collection of Women's Papers) at the Institute for

History, University of Vienna keeps many diaries, profoundly moving in their double identity as personal and historical text; see <http://www.univie.ac.at/Geschichte/sfn>. How women wrote redefined what we thought of as literature. And women's writing was so important for second wave feminists in universities—we fought to have it recognised, read, and represented on syllabuses. It was said there was no women's writing, or if there was, it wasn't any good. But the classic works turned up for instance by Virago Press were astonishing—revelations continued on a small scale today by Persephone Books, <http://www.persephonebooks.co.uk/>. One pioneer group focused on early modern women's writing: <https://womensstudiesgroup.org/>. It's still ongoing, with a new generation of interested participants.

Sadly, much of the recovered knowledge is again dissipated. Digital assets are inspiringly listed in places like <https://www.onb.ac.at/en/research/ariadne/about-ariadne/> and <http://www.iisg.nl/w3v1womenshistory/archivesandlibraries.html>; there are print resources like the *Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms in Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries* eds Francisca de Haan, Krassimira Daskalova, Anna Loutfi (Budapest & New York: Central European University Press 2006). National and linguistic boundaries can be hard to cross—hence some of the value of International Women's Day: <https://inews.co.uk/inews-lifestyle/women/how-international-womens-day-is-celebrated-around-the-world/>. The marvels of digital—and *Google Translate*, however clunky—mean you can connect up women's movements in all kinds of new ways.

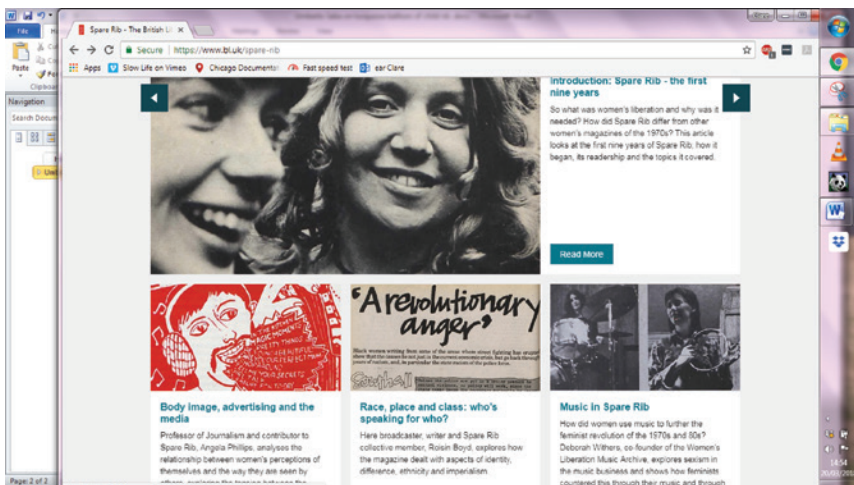
But the resource I choose is *Spare Rib*, <https://www.bl.uk/spare-rib>, a polemical, practical monthly magazine published in Britain from 1972 to 1993. It's available again, newly digitised at the British Library after a meticulous quest for permissions from all contributors. You can read the full run here <https://journalarchives.jisc.ac.uk/britishlibrary/sparerib>. I found it startling to see all those issues, their covers and contents looking familiar, antique, strange, vivid. I used to subscribe—a luxury on a student budget but well worth it for the education and inspiration. Besides, it injected the month with elation. We could change the world! Look! Here it was, happening. It broadened my horizons too, with articles by women who had lives quite different from mine voicing their experiences and concerns. Eventually second wave feminism foundered on those differences: I was sad, because for a while it seemed like race and class were not able to divide us. In the air was Adrienne Rich's dream of a common language: *Spare Rib* showed why it mattered and how it could work.

What I liked in *Spare Rib* was an activism that ran the spectrum from practical to theoretical. Patriarchy connected many forms of oppression: understanding how and why made change more possible. I admired and tried to emulate the writers' determination, persistence, bloody-mindedness: you need that if you set out to change the world. I liked too the humour, the drollery, the sense that wit could outwit reactionaries. I still have feminist friends who can magic up the combination of being angry at injustice and having a laugh. And *Spare Rib* was run by a collective. That was a new idea to me (I was seventeen), and it also gave out a message: equality worked.

I'd like to thank all those who made *Spare Rib* what it was, and those who have laboured to digitise it. Thanks also to Adrienne Rich whose integrity was rock, sea, part of those days:

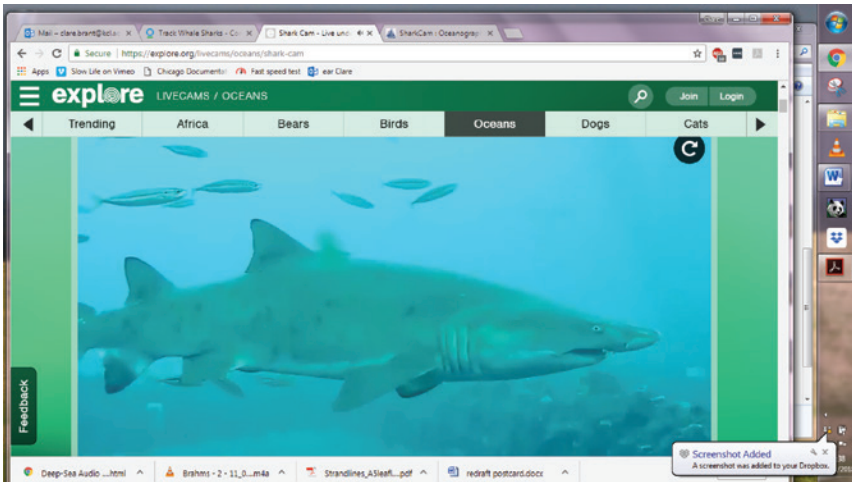
“Merely a notion that the tape-recorder
 should have caught some ghost of us: that tape-recorder
 not merely played but should have listened to us,
 and could instruct those after us:
 this we were, this is how we tried to love,
 and these are the forces they had ranged against us,
 and these are the forces we had ranged within us,
 within us and against us, against us and within us.”

(from *Twenty-One Love Poems* (1976), XVII)



2. I like to imagine that future netizens will know more about the oceans than we do. But they should know that some of their predecessors are passionately curious about life underwater, and that there were webcams which livestreamed from depths no human had seen before. In 2016, for instance, a US expedition relayed live video from the Mariana Trench in the Western Pacific: at 11 kilometres down, it is the deepest part of the ocean and a part of our planet about which almost nothing was known. I would have liked to show a screenshot but sadly the streaming has stopped. (There's more information here: <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/05/160506-mariana-trench-live-feed-oceanos-expedition/>) It shows how transient web knowledges can be. Underwater livecams have revealed everyday marine life species and activity in a variety of depths and locations—a summer one under Swanage Pier in Dorset, UK, lets children of all ages watch crabs, anemones, little blennies and other local species going about their lives without the intrusion of human presence. (Highlights from a nearby bay can be seen at <https://www.dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk/living-seas.html>) There's a similar one off the Dalmatian Coast in Croatia: <https://www.croatiaweek.com/5-metre-deep-underwater-webcam-goes-live-off-the-croatian-coast/>. Malta also has a couple. Livecams feel different from the innumerable diver videos viewable on YouTube, or the camera action of wildlife programmes: they invite a gaze which has to be patient and open to other ways of being.

Digital technology lets humans follow particular species through websites which display data from satellite transmitters—for example, whale sharks in Indonesia can be followed here: <https://www.conservation.org/projects/Pages/Track-Whale-Sharks.aspx>. Giving them personal, human names seems odd to me, but given the expense and challenges of running them, most webcams conform with some human agenda. I have one too, in caring about sharks. They've been around more than 400 million years—*400 million years!*—but many species are now in danger of extinction thanks to human activities like finning and habitat degradation. <http://www.whoi.edu/osl/sharkcam> goes to 600m following transponders attached to great whites; it has shown them sleeping, contrary to what was thought possible. <https://explore.org/livecams/oceans/shark-cam> includes sound, which is an important part of understanding underwater.



The screenshot shows a sand tiger shark, I think, with some fusiliers above. It's not all sharks: angelfish, wrasse, barracuda and others drift in and out; a shoal of something streams by; other fish flit. One common phrase in framing texts is that these webcams provide information new to science. It should say, new to all of us. Though marine sciences are obviously important for identifications, behaviours and contextualising, webcam footage can make us think about life at deeper levels.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clare Brant is Professor of Eighteenth-Century Literature and Culture at King's College London where she also co-directs the Centre for Life-Writing Research. She has published widely (and hopefully deeply) on literature, culture and gender. Her most recent book was *Balloon Madness: Flights of Imagination in Britain, 1783–1786* (Boydell 2017). She co-edits the Palgrave series *Studies in Life Writing*, and is an editor on the *European Journal of Life Writing*. She was a Co-Investigator on the European Research Council-funded *Ego Media* project at KCL (2014–2019). Her fourth collection of poems will be published by Shoestring Press in 2020. Email: clare.brant@kcl.ac.uk.