Virtual Feminisms:
Girls' Blogging Communities, Feminist Activism, and Participatory Politics

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Abstract:

While feminist media scholars have recognized the growing importance of feminist blogs, such as *Jezebel*, *Racialicious*, and *Feministe*, to contemporary feminism, the contribution of girls to this feminist blogosphere remains understudied. In this paper I address this research gap by investigating the complex and diverse ways that girls are using blogging communities to participate in a feminist political activism that reflects their needs as contemporary young feminists within a neoliberal cultural context. My analysis draws upon two case studies of popular blogs by teenage feminists, and interviews that I conducted with four girl bloggers who participate in these two communities. I argue that through the practice of blogging, teenage girls are actively reframing what it means to participate in feminist politics, drawing on opportunities that the Internet provides to embrace new understandings of community, activism, and even feminism itself.

Keywords: feminism, girls' studies, new media, blogging, activism

When eighteen-year-old Janelle(Endnote1) graduated from high school in the spring of 2010, she did what many other teenage girls do to prepare for prom and graduation ceremonies – she turned to *Seventeen Magazine* looking for hair and makeup advice. But unlike her peers, Janelle was surprised by the magazine's stereotypical views on teenage femininity. She conceived *The Seventeen Magazine Project* (http://www.theseventeenmagazineproject.com) as a tongue-in-cheek response, purchasing a copy of the June/July 2010 issue of *Seventeen* and vowing to live for 30 days by the suggestions offered up by the magazine and its complimentary website. Everyday Janelle blogged about her day, detailing what

magazine tips she followed and the outcome. The blog became an instant success, attracting readers from around the world and significant mainstream media attention due to Janelle's witty blog posts and insightful media criticism.

Almost a year before *The Seventeen Magazine Project*, sixteen-year-old Jessica launched the *FBomb* (http://thefbomb.org), which is she describes on the website as a 'blog/community created for teenage girls who care about their rights as women and want to be heard.' The blog allows any teenage feminist – both female and male – to submit posts and comments, creating an online forum where young people can explore contemporary feminism and articulate their own perspectives about what it means to be young feminist. The *FBomb* has since gained an international audience, with bloggers and readers from countries such as India, Canada, England, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States, and encompasses discussions on a wide range of topics from a feminist perspective, including popular culture, violence, reproductive rights, transnational feminisms, racism, and sexuality. Jessica has since been hailed as an example of the future of feminism, getting attention from mainstream magazines, radio programs, and even book publishers.

In this paper I will draw on the above two case studies as examples that highlight the complex and diverse ways that girls are using online spaces to participate in a feminist political activism that reflects their needs as contemporary young feminists within a neoliberal cultural context. I will argue that through the practice of blogging teenage girls are actively reframing what it means to participate in feminist politics, drawing on opportunities that the Internet provides to embrace

new understandings of community, activism, and even feminism itself. However, despite the new opportunities provided by online media, I want to position my discussion of girls' blogging as part of a lengthy history of feminist activism by women and girls, and will attempt to draw connections between older activist practices and contemporary blogs. While I am unable to provide a comprehensive discussion of the rich history of feminist activism, I am hoping that my discussion will provide a starting point for thinking about the connections between the history of feminist activisms and online participatory politics.

I will begin my analysis by outlining the ways in which feminist cultural studies scholars have theorized activism and political participation within the contemporary neoliberal cultural climate, drawing on subculture and feminist theories while also pointing out the limitations of these theories for our current cultural moment. I will then specifically address how online media production, including blogging, has been understood as exemplifying what media scholar Henry Jenkins calls 'participatory culture' and why Internet cultures may be particularly appealing for girls as a 'counterpublic' social group (Fraser, 1992). Finally, I will discuss the case studies of the *FBomb* and *The Seventeen Magazine Project*, demonstrating how girl bloggers are actively reframing feminist activism, including issues of community and public space. My analysis draws on open-ended email, phone, and in-person interviews I conducted with four girl feminist bloggers in the fall of 2010, and I also employ a discursive textual analysis to both websites in order to supplement my ethnographic interview data (Endnote2). I will conclude my discussion by advocating for the importance of understanding girls' blogging

practices as significant political contributions, key to recognizing the intersection between changing technology, neoliberal culture, and political activism.

Disruptive Voices: Girls, culture, and third wave feminism

Early cultural studies scholarship examining youth activism has often focused on subcultures, issues of resistance, and class-based politics, generating a comprehensive body of research that allowed researchers to understand the diverse ways that youth exercise political agency (Harris, 2008a). While these studies from research centers such as the Chicago School and the Birmingham School have been very useful in theorizing resistance, particularly in relation to class structure, much of this research focused exclusively on boys and young men, ignoring the ways in which girls also act as cultural contributors and political agents. Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber were the first to problematize girls' exclusion from subculture theory, arguing in their 1978 article 'Girls and Subcultures' that the subcultural practices of girls may look different than that of boys, but that they are equally important and worthy of attention. Their articulation of what they call 'bedroom culture,' which characterizes girls' cultural practices within their bedrooms as being an important site of resistance to authoritarian control, was foundational in encouraging feminist scholars to examine alternative *spaces* where girls' resistance and agency may be found.

While the emerging field of girls' studies has since provided increasingly sophisticated understandings of girls' agency in both their public and private lives, the relationship between girls, cultural agency, and resistance remains a space of

tension amongst feminist scholars. One of the primary sites of this tension has been popular media, a significant part of contemporary popular culture, and the roles that girls take up as producers and consumers of media culture. Mary Celeste Kearney (2006) argues that we have ignored the practices of girl media producers in favor of viewing girls as consumers of culture, enforcing the binary which positions women as passive consumers to men's active production. Kearney challenges this notion, asserting, 'Through their insistence to be both seen and heard, girl media producers are a disruptive force, and we do well to consider the changes to popular culture and dominant society their presence is provoking (13).' Likewise, Anita Harris (2010) advocates for viewing media production as an increasingly important site where girls are enacting political agency and blurring the lines between producing and consuming media culture, such as in the practice of blogging. This research encourages us to see media as a space that holds potential for girls to be active producers of culture, and that this cultural work has the *potential* to have political effects.

This point, however, is one of contention within the literature, and points to a longstanding debate about resistance within cultural studies. Put simply, what counts as political resistance? And more specifically to my discussion, what counts as feminist activism? In the introduction to her book, *Next Wave Cultures: Feminism, Subcultures, Activism,* Harris (2008a) takes up this question, arguing that third wave feminism has helped to redefine notions of feminist resistance and activism, with cultural and political action taking on new forms that 'may be unrecognizable if interpreted through more traditional paradigms of activism' (7). This shift,

according to Harris, is in part due to a neoliberal cultural climate, marked by individualization, globalization, consumer citizenship, and a breakdown of both class-based identifications and more traditional forms of protest politics. Thus, the notion of 'resistance' as elaborated by foundational cultural studies scholarship such as Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), can no longer explain the ways in which youth exercise political agency.

More recent scholarship has focused on fluidity, variety, creativity, and hybridity of youth cultures, using frameworks such as neotribes, lifestyles, scapes, scenes, networks, communities, and citizenships to understand the resistant practices of youth (Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004, Nilan and Feixa, 2006, Harris, 2008a). Harris (2008a) argues that many of these frameworks complicate what it means to be political, and do not necessarily organize themselves around a single resistant identity or try to position themselves against the dominant culture in an overtly activist way. For example, rave culture has been taken up by several scholars as an example that offers the *potential* of a cultural politics to young people (McRobbie, 1994, Brabazon, 2002). Additionally, McRobbie (1994) argues that these new youth cultures mark a disappearance of a rigid divide between subculture and the mainstream, complicating understandings of youth politics as existing outside of popular culture. Indeed, my own discussion will be framed around new conceptualizations of communities and networks as central to a feminist activism that crosses between the mainstream and a subcultural social movement space (Garrison, 2010).

Feminist scholars have been particularly important in bringing a gendered lens to these recent discussions of youth cultures, as well as analyzing the interplay between them and a new style of feminist politics referred to as 'third wave' feminism. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a comprehensive discussion of third wave feminism, it is important to recognize how the third wave coalesces with the ways in which political activism is being reconceptualized by scholars. Harris (2008a) argues, 'As with new theorizing about subculture, third wave feminism seeks to expand notions of resistance. In particular, straightforward ideas of feminist resistance to patriarchal oppression are rethought by third wavers because gender identity is not experienced by them as a monolithic, categorical, or even primary position... A fixed dichotomy of dominant versus subordinated groups becomes harder to identify because people can occupy a shifting range of positions in a power structure owing to their multiple subject positions' (6-7).

A more fluid understanding of identities has also led to a diversity of activist practices, and many of these strategies use technology in ways that both extend historical uses of technology by feminists, while also using it in new ways to address contemporary concerns, especially in regards to community-building and networking. Ednie Kaeh Garrison (2010) describes third wave networks as being 'technologic,' signaling a particular practice of communicating information over space and time, the creation of temporary unified political groups made up of unlikely collectivities, the combining of diverse technologies to construct oppositional cultural expressions, and the construction of feminist politics of

location 'weaving between and among the spaces of race, class, sexuality, gender, that we all inhabit' (187).

Thus, third wave networks imply a kind of 'messiness' that complicates the notion of a unified social movement with a clear agenda and boundaries. Although the reality of most social movements, including feminism, have been far from the ideal unified collective we often imagine them to be, the shifting alliances facilitated by third wave feminism and its diverse networks through both traditional and new media does seem to be unique from older activist politics. Garrison encourages scholars to examine the third wave feminist activist politics,

> in spaces that cross over and between what is called the 'mainstream' or what is recognized as 'a social movement.' We need to consider the potent political movement cultures being generated by feminists... who are producing knowledge for each other through the innovative integration of technology, alternative media, (sub)cultural and/or feminist networks, and feminist consciousness raising. Such dispersed movement culture spaces are vital as are the networks constantly being formed and reformed among them (397).

I will now turn to the specific ways that scholars have understood girls' Internet use in relation to a feminist activism influenced by the third wave.

Girls Go Online: Participatory culture in a digital age

While feminist scholars have highlighted the ways in which online technologies have played a key role in facilitating a fluid and diverse third wave feminism, it is essential to interrogate the relationship between girls and the production of online media and Internet cultures. The Internet has been a key site of study for girls' studies scholars, with the Internet begin described by Takayoshi,

Huot, and Huot (1999) as a potential 'clubhouse for girls' and Reid-Walsh and Mitchell (2005) calling girls' homepages a 'virtual room of one's own.' Why have girls, more so than boys, gravitated towards producing online media, particularly blogs (Lenhardt and Madden, 2005)? And what might these blogging practices mean in relation to girls' political participation and feminist activism?

In her article 'Young Women, Late Modern Politics, and the Participatory Possibilities of Online Cultures' Anita Harris (2008b) argues that scholars must, 'take seriously young women's styles of technology-enabled social and political engagement, as they represent new directions in activism, the construction of new participatory communities, and the development of new kinds of public selves' (482). Harris' (2008b) discussion of online DIY cultures and social networking exemplifies this idea, as she argues that these online participatory communities allow girls to articulate what she calls a 'public self' that she argues is the first step in viewing oneself as an agential citizen and political actor. By linking participatory media with the notion of a 'public self' and citizenship, Harris (2008b) articulates a framework that allows us to understand the connection between blogging communities and feminist activism.

This idea of 'participation' has been central to scholars' theorizing about online media. Henry Jenkins' foundational concept of 'participatory culture,' which understands media interaction as being marked by both consumptive and productive practices, is particularly important for thinking about girls' use of new media technologies. Participatory culture complicates earlier conceptions of the media fan/audience as a passive receptor of culture (and often gendered female),

instead reconceptualizing the media consumer as active and able to negotiate and participate in the construction of cultural texts. Additionally, it also challenges notions of neoliberal consumer citizenship, which posits that young people can best participate in life as citizens through the consumption of consumer goods (Harris, 2004). Girls' participation in blogging communities, as both bloggers, readers, commenters, and re-posters, exemplifies participatory culture as space that may offer girls more political agency as cultural producers than other more traditional spaces for political activity, such as youth caucuses or other formal organizations, which are often directed and ran by adults.

This is a key point which has often been overlooked in scholarship addressing girls' online practices and in fact, may provide an important insight into the appeal of online spaces for girls. Girls have been active participants of online culture in part because of the unregulated nature of online space that nonetheless remains a *public* way to connect with peer communities and express personal interests outside of adult intervention (Harris, 2008b). Often times, these independent activities have been trivialized as lacking political rigor or problematized, as in the current moral panics surrounding girls' Internet use (Harris, 2008b, Taft, 2011). Girls then often occupy a precarious position where they are encouraged to be political in 'appropriate' adult-approved and supervised ways, while ultimately being excluded from the formal political arena due to age-based exclusions and patriarchal constructions of activism that privileges formal political activities (Harris, 2008b, Taft, 2011).

Girls' historical exclusion from feminism may also drive girls' desires to participate in feminism through online media. Kearney (2006) notes that girls have historically turned to subcultures such as punk and hip hop in order to express alternative gender politics because of the adult-centric approach taken by mainstream feminism. She also notes that this was especially true for African American girls, who were marginalized from normative feminism due to their age and race (and sometimes, class) and that hip hop subcultures allowed them the space to carve out their own alternative gender politics that aligned with their identities as *black girls*. I am positing that online spaces may work in similar ways to these subcultures, providing girls with the space to reframe feminist activism according to their own lived experiences. Thus, this use of online space by girls can be seen as an agential staking out of their own feminist activism, and while adults may be present on these sites, it is girls that are responsible for setting the agenda, marking out issues and ideas that are important to them.

In this sense, girl bloggers can be viewed as a 'subaltern counterpublic,' creating a forum for debate and exchange of socially engaged ideas while being marginalized within mainstream political debate (Fraser, 1992, Harris, 2008b). Fraser's (1992) articulation of multiple counterpublics is also significant, as this more complex articulation of public life 'better promote[s] the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public (122).' Furthermore, these counterpublics actively work to recast their needs and identities in order to reduce the extent of their disadvantages in official public spheres, and thus, must be viewed as agential and creative, two qualities that my case studies will highlight.

While I position girls as a counterpublic, I want to stress that this does not necessarily indicate a simple binary between a mainstream public and all girls. Indeed, my articulation of counterpublic must also be viewed through the lenses of identity (as girls are far from a unified collective, positioned differently according to their race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, abilities, etc.), and new articulations of youth cultures, including communities and networks (ENDNOTE3). Thus, while the concept of counterpublic remains useful in acknowledging that power inequalities and social structures continue to shape our lives, we must also recognize that a multiplicity of counterpublic positions may be taken up by girls who live within societies marked by a dispersal of power that complicates a rigid binary between oppressor and oppressed (Harris, 2008a).

As the following two cases studies reveal, there is no singular definable online girls feminist community, but instead a global network of girl bloggers that participate in feminist activism in multiple ways, providing spaces for girls to articulate themselves through political subjectivities, including that of a feminist. The following discussion is based upon open-ended interviews with four girl feminist bloggers, three of whom live in the United States and one who lives in the Middle East. This sample is not meant to be representative of all girl bloggers, but instead I aim to privilege the voices of girls by making their ideas and stories the focus of my analysis.

Dropping the F Bomb: Building online feminist communities on the *FBomb*

When the *FBomb* launched in the summer of 2009, it was the only blogging community specifically devoted to teenage feminists amidst a growing number of feminist blogs addressing young adult (and adult) women. This is significant, as it points to a lack of representation of teenage feminists as a social group online and the marginalized position of girls within popular feminist blogs such as *Jezebel*, *Feministing*, and *Feministe*, all of whom are written by adult women. This feeling of exclusion was articulated well by Natalie, a 17-year-old contributor to the *FBomb*. She notes the isolation that many teen feminists feel by saying that, 'The first challenge for teen feminists is community – finding a supportive environment, and that's where things like the *FBomb* come in. The Internet lets girls reach out and fills the void that 'zines used to, although it's a lot more accessible to blog than to make a 'zine.' In drawing the connection between 'zines and blogs, Natalie is aligning blogs as a method for both networking and community-building amongst feminist teens and positioning girls' blogging practices within a lengthy history of girls' media production and feminist activism.

Natalie's comment also suggests that community is crucial to the fostering of girls' feminist identities and ability to engage in feminist activism. Community has always played a role in feminist activism, and feminist communities have often been kept intact due to the circulation of feminist media, such as the suffrage pamphlets of the first wave or the mimeograph publications common in the second wave (Piepmeier, 2009). Thus, the connection between community-building and the production of feminist media is significant, despite not being a new phenomenon. All three of the *FBomb* bloggers I interviewed see online spaces as uniquely accessible

to a diversity of girls, particularly those who may live in conservative towns or those raised by parents who do not embrace feminist principles.

FBomb contributor Helen considers herself one of these girls. Living in the Middle East, Helen says that she had always been upset by the ways in which women are treated in her native country, such as the practice of honor killings, and as a preteen, became immediately interested when she heard that there was something called feminism. Her initial exploration of feminism involved a lot of online reading about the movement – away from the watchful eyes of her conservative parents - an experience that became central in her taking on the feminist label. 'It [feminism] is definitely more of a taboo subject here. I learned about it all through the Internet. This feminist blogosphere is really really important – especially for people that might not have access to that sort of knowledge from people around them.' Helen's experience highlights the relative safety that online feminist communities can offer girls who may not have the ability or opportunity to join a feminist organization or take a women's studies class, allowing girls to explore feminism through anonymity if desired, and through minimal commitment and risk.

This idea of online communities as requiring what I'm calling a 'minimal commitment' has been a point of critique for some scholars. For example, Theresa Senft (2008) is critical of the ability for online social networking to build meaningful friendships and connections as successfully as past feminist strategies, such as 1970s consciousness-raising and 1990s 'zine culture, arguing that online communities are based upon merely 'clicking a button' with little interaction between people or commitment to the community (7). While this is a common

complaint levied at online activist communities, *FBomb* bloggers illustrate a more complex picture of the community and networks that the site facilitates.

FBomb founder Jessica confirms that, 'The most important connections [made through the website] to me are the ones that have actually turned into friendships – there have been a few girls who continuously submit posts and we've gotten to know each other and now they're really good friends.' In this sense, Jessica is making a distinction between perhaps casual contributors and those that are more active on the site, people that she may be in contact with outside the *FBomb* itself (for example, via email). This indicates that while the girls all use the word 'community,' there remains a diversity of connections that they forge through the online environment, and that these connections create networks that serve different purposes, whether it be close friendships, anonymously sharing of useful information about feminist issues, or a relationship that falls in between.

These girl bloggers are articulating an online feminist community that not only consists of a range of networks and connections, but also a diversity of voices, goals, and interests that characterize the third wave. *FBomb* bloggers do not consider themselves working toward a singular goal with other community participants, but instead, emphasize dialogue and competing ideas as foundational to their own feminist politics. Similar to other blogs, the *FBomb* allows users to comment on blog posts and often times it is in the comments section where significant dialogue occurs between both the blogger and commenters, and amongst commenters.

Helen emphasizes the importance of the comment section in her own blogging practice, telling me, 'The only thing I enjoy more than the articles [blog posts] is the comments. I like reading about what people think and why they might disagree. I like the dialogue that goes on between the writer and readers.' Helen is an active commenter herself, but usually only comments on *FBomb* posts, rather than on the other feminist blogs that she also reads. When I ask her why she replies, 'I guess it's because we're all young and the *FBomb* is just a great community. Most of us are all high school or college students and I think that creates a good common ground between us.' Her comment indicates her higher comfort level with *FBomb* readers due to age, and perhaps educational status, highlighting girl bloggers' position as a counterpublic within Internet culture broadly and the feminist blogosphere more specifically.

Natalie agrees that the comments section of the *FBomb* is a productive space to build community through the sharing of personal experiences, functioning in a similar way to the consciousness-raising circles popular with feminists in the 1970s. She says, 'I think some [comments] are very useful for dialogue, and I see great dialogues happening in the comment sections. And I mean, that's where the real community-building happens. When girls and women from all over the country feel isolated – or they just might want a forum to talk about stuff – the comment section is where that happens.' Natalie mentions that a posting she wrote about rape jokes garnered thirty-two comments and sparked a useful dialogue about the problem of rape and the experiences of rape survivors. Several rape survivors wrote in to share

their stories and readers were able to offer their support while addressing ways to end sexual assault.

Interestingly though, Natalie says that while the comments section is useful she doesn't often participate herself in the forums. 'I guess I'm lucky enough to have feminist dialogues going on in real life so I don't necessarily have to participate online. But I always read the comments.' These responses from Natalie and Helen point to the different needs that *FBomb*-ers have in regards to community aspect of the *FBomb*. While some girls, such as Natalie, see their participation as one outlet in their feminist network, others, such as Helen, use the community as their sole feminist community, and may therefore be more invested in the dialogue aspect of the site.

In *Talking Back, Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* bell hooks writes, 'In the world of the southern black community I grew up in,..."talking back" meant speaking as an equal to an authority figure. It meant daring to disagree and sometimes it just meant having an opinion.... To speak then when one was not spoken to was a courageous act – an act of risk and daring (5).' I'd like to borrow this idea from hooks to discuss a form of political activism that I'm calling 'talking back.' I am conceptualizing 'talking back' as the writing process itself and the feeling of power that the girls get from translating their thoughts, ideas, and emotions into a public blog post. Writing has long been used by girls as a practice of agency and form of expression, and often times this expression is political in nature, despite often being overlooked as such. (Kearney, 2006). (ENDNOTE4) Thus, while girls' blogging practices on the *FBomb* may not seem like a traditional form of political

activism – such as signing a petition or attending a city council meeting, my conversations with the girls revealed that connecting their personal experiences to the larger social, political, and cultural context is indeed both personally empowering *and* fostering a broader form of feminist activism.

I ask Natalie about how she decides what to write about and her answer is particularly revealing. 'I'll write about something that really gets my attention – or gets me really angry! When something provokes a strong emotion, that provides the best fodder for writing because when you're passionate about something it brings out the best [in you].' Thus, Natalie's topics often find her, developing out of experiences in her personal life. To wit: the aforementioned rape joke posting was the result of hearing a male acquaintance make a rape joke and witnessing female friends laugh in response. Leaving the boy's house upset and angry, Natalie went home and slept off her anger and the next morning awoke clear-minded and sat down at her computer to channel out her thoughts in her blog post. This example also points to the therapeutic aspects of blogging as an empowering way to 'talk back' to a culture that often leaves little public space for teen girls to do so.

Like Natalie, Helen's blog topics also often spring from seeing something that makes her angry in the media. After seeing a YouTube video that depicted the sexual double standard, she got mad and blogged about the unfair position that girls are put in with regards to sexuality. When a friend sent her an article about honor killings from a local magazine that she disagreed with, she decided to blog about that as well. Thus, many of the *FBomb* blog posts show an impressive engagement with media criticism and critical thinking skills, which have been two important

components of feminist activism and are arguably increasingly important within a heavily mediated popular culture.

When thinking about these instances of 'talking back' I'd like to draw attention once again to the space in which this is happening – an exclusively online space. As previously mentioned, much of the public discourse surrounding girls and the Internet has been one of fear and moral panic – the vulnerability of girls in chat rooms to sexual predators, the lure of the porn industry's cam girl cash opportunities, and the potentially life-threatening cyber-bullying girls are now thought to be engaged in. However, my conversations with girls reveal the positive space the Internet also provides to 'talk back' and find one's voice in a culture that often doesn't value the voices of girls. Jessica summarizes this nicely when she tells me that,

> The online aspect allows us to learn a lot from each other – the *FBomb* is read in over 190 countries and the diversity of perspectives that emerges from that type of environment is really evident and valuable. People often focus on the Internet as an unsafe space, but in this sense it can be the most safe option for girls looking to learn about feminism. I've had girls from Middle Eastern countries write posts, and they say that this is the only way for them to express themselves as feminists. While they still write the posts under fake names, they feel that this is the only way they're able to explore their feminist identity.

This reframing of the Internet as a space of opportunity, public engagement, and feminist activism for girls allows us to productively rethink of girls as active agents, cultural producers, and citizens rather than passive victims and cultural dupes in the online world.

**'Hey Mainstream Media!': Reframing feminist networks and 'playful activism'
through *The Seventeen Magazine Project***

Like the *FBomb, The Seventeen Magazine Project* also functions as a

community activist space for girls to 'talk back,' and it extends *FBomb* bloggers'

interest in media criticism in a unique way. The format of the blog is different from

my earlier case study: it is written by a primary single author rather than multiple

bloggers, is a defined thirty day project rather than an ongoing community, and,

interestingly, is not marked as an explicitly feminist blog anywhere on the site,

rather than overtly presenting a feminist identity as the *FBomb* does. However, my

analysis reveals that, like the *FBomb*, *The Seventeen Magazine Project* reframes

feminist activism in creative ways, constructing a diverse community through local

and global online networks, and demonstrating how blogging can carve a space in

the public sphere for girls' voices.

Readers of *The Seventeen Magazine Project* will find a variety of topics

addressed during the thirty days of the project, including: fashion and beauty,

girlhood, femininity, advertising, race and representation, and sexuality, amongst

others. While Janelle humorously blogs about her manicure one day, readers will

find an in-depth discussion of racial representations in *Seventeen* the next, and it is

this mix of fluffier fare sandwiched between more serious political analyses that I'm

calling *playful activism*, a defining feature of *The Seventeen Magazine Project*'s

feminist activism. Interestingly, Janelle's comments to me indicate that this playful

activism is the result of a deliberate negotiation. She says that, 'I think it had to be a

little bit playful in order for it to be interesting to the mainstream. If you talk about

feminism in a way that is too serious, people mark you as "over-sensitive" and "militant." I hate this, but it's true. If you want to get a message to the mainstream, you have to market it to the mainstream.' This comment reveals that despite functioning as part of a marginalized counterpublic, teenage feminist bloggers are not necessarily satisfied with remaining on the margins, and instead seek to enact a feminist activism that is widely available and part of mainstream public dialogue.

While some feminist scholars such as Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (1997) have recognized this type of negotiation as being particularly indicative of third wave politics, I would like to complicate this assumption by recognizing the ways in which feminists have always used negotiation as a strategy in order to incorporate feminism into mainstream spaces. For example, Amy Farrell (1998) calls *Ms. Magazine* of the 1970s and 1980s an 'inherently contradictory text' and argues that the 'popular feminism' promoted by the magazine is indicative of negotiations between the editors, their readers, and commercial culture (3). Thus, Janelle's negotiation signals a larger historical struggle within feminism to appeal to a diversity of people while retaining feminist goals and values.

In addition to what is specifically present in the blog content, particular absences are also necessary to pay attention to. For example, my analysis of *The Seventeen Magazine Project* reveals a noticeable lack of specific references to feminism. Here, I am speaking of the words 'feminism' and 'feminist' as opposed to content that seems feminist or potentially feminist. While Janelle says that she sees the project as a feminist initiative, it 'just happened' that she didn't employ the word feminism in her postings. 'I'm very on record about being a feminist in my personal

life,' she explains. She also suggests that the feminist label remains significant. 'I think it's super important for young girls (and boys!) to embrace the feminist label. As long as women are treated as less than and held to absurd standards, there is a need for feminism. Frankly, though, I can't wait until the day feminism is outdated!' Janelle says.

Janelle's enthusiasm for feminist politics alongside her lack of incorporating the word into her blog raises several interesting questions for feminist media scholars. How important is the word 'feminist' for contemporary feminist politics? Should feminists avoid the word if they want mainstream sympathy? Or is the word not even necessary if girls are merely, as Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (2000) suggest, 'living feminist lives?' While it is impossible to answer these questions definitively, *The Seventeen Magazine Project* suggests that feminist activism may not need to be announced as explicitly *feminist* in order to function as such.

While *The Seventeen Magazine Project* may share some similarities with its earlier print counterparts such as *MS.*, the online format of the publication also distinguishes it from other feminist media initiatives. An obvious feature of online activism is its ability to be distributed widely within a very short period of time. Unlike (paper) zines, which have to be mailed or bought at a store/concert, or films, which have to be edited and distributed via a company or independently, online content can be spread with a click of key (Endnote5). This feature is very apparent when examining *The Seventeen Magazine Project*. For example, many commenters on the blog said how they found Jamie's project, revealing an interesting web of

online connections. Commenters found *The Seventeen Magazine Project* through other feminist blogs, such as *Jezebel*, *Feministing*, and *Bust*, through mainstream media outlets, such as *NPR*, *The Vancouver Sun*, and *USA Today*, and through social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter. The diversity of these media sources points to the ways that online networks have the potential to bridge the mainstream with more subcultural texts, such as *The Seventeen Magazine Project*, a distinguishing feature of online feminist activism, as outlined by Garrison (2010) and a benefit that earlier print publications did not have. This has significant implications for spreading feminist content to people who may otherwise not have come in contact with it (Endnote6).

Online activism also alters traditional understandings of space, allowing for content to transcend some borders (for those with Internet access) with significant ease. This is also evident from *The Seventeen Magazine Project*, which received comments from people living in Argentina, Canada, Hong Kong, Mozambique, the UK, and Australia, to name a few. Commenters also ranged in gender, race, ethnicity, and age, indicating not only the broad appeal of Janelle's experiment, but also pointing to a certain amount of accessibility attained by the project (Endnote7). Based upon this information, it seems safe to say that the Internet has made the dissemination of feminist initiatives, such as *The Seventeen Magazine Project,* quicker and easier, resulting in them becoming more accessible to a wider, and more diverse audience than in the past. It also points to the potential that the Internet holds in allowing girls' voices to enter the public sphere as agential citizens and political actors.

It is also important to think about *The Seventeen Magazine Project* as creating an alternative space for girls' voices, apart from *Seventeen Magazine* itself. By positioning her critique outside the institution of *Seventeen,* Janelle maintained control of her work without having to abide by the structure of *Seventeen*. The ramifications of this are significant, in that Janelle has – if only temporarily – altered the power relations between corporate *Seventeen* and girls by providing a space for girls (and others) to speak about the magazine and its messages and reaching a large audience while doing so. Girl media producers have engaged in this practice in both their zine and film production, and in this sense, Janelle's project continues this often overlooked part of feminist activism (Kearney, 2006).

In *The Seventeen Magazine Project* commenters function as more than readers, but as contributors to a conversation about media representations from a feminist perspective. Janelle makes this clear when she tells me that she chose to use the blog format for this project because, she says, 'I like the commenting function. It facilitates a discussion, as opposed to just an 18-year-old girl ranting with no feedback. I don't think people would have latched on to my ideas as much if they couldn't contribute their own. I don't have much authority." Similar to the *FBomb*, her comments points to the importance of dialogue in *The Seventeen Magazine Project* and notes left by readers seem to agree that the comments section is an important space for conversation. For example, a comment left by an anonymous poster after a post about privilege, says, 'Upon reading two posts, just HAD to share it with my friends… I want to thank you for writing about stimulating topics, and encouraging smart discussions (This blog actually led to a lengthy

discussion with my friends about privilege)… I sincerely thank you for taking a project about a teen magazine to WHOLE other level.'

In addition to facilitating conversation and debate, the comments section on Janelle's blog also occasionally functioned as a space for the dissemination of information related to marginalized groups as well as support for these communities. For example, Janelle's post about the lack of queer representation in *Seventeen* produced an interesting discussion about asexuality in the comments section and the ways that both straight and LGTB communities often marginalize asexuals. An anonymous poster writes, 'Here's a really good website and forum on asexuality. Browsing the forum really helped me figure it out for myself http://www.asexuality.org/home/.' Another anonymous commenter shared their own experience feeling invisible as an asexual and congratulated Janelle for opening up the conversation and asking people what they think.

These examples reveal that the comments section of *The Seventeen Magazine Project* also functions as a site for feminist community building and consciousness raising between readers. While Janelle was the sole author of the blog itself and received all of the media attention in relation to the project, the above comments complicate the idea that *The Seventeen Magazine Project* belongs solely to Janelle, and instead highlights the way the blog works as a feminist community activist space, fostering dialogue, spreading information through global networks, and allowing personal experiences to be shared and validated.

Conclusions: The Future of Feminism?

Since my I began my research in the spring of 2010, several more teenage feminists have started blogs, including *Experimentations of a Teenage Feminist*, *GrrrlBeat*, and *Star of Davida*. Many of these blogs have gained devoted readers and it's become common practice for these girl bloggers to include each other on their blogrolls and promote each other's feminist projects on their blogs. Thus, the sense of community that the bloggers I interviewed articulated appears to be growing as more girls are participating in blogging communities as readers, bloggers, and both. This development indicates that feminist blogging is not merely a passing trend, but may represent a significant practice for the future of feminism. Consequently, scholars must take the work of these girls bloggers seriously and recognize the political agency that girls are enacting by 'talking back,' forming communities to share personal experiences and creating global networks where feminist information can be spread.

My discussion also highlights the need to recognize the diversity of girls' blogging practices and the variety of feminist activism they produce, without trying to categorize them as sufficiently feminist or not. Janelle's witty critiques of *Seventeen*'s summer fashion advice may appear very different from Natalie's discussion of rape jokes, but both bloggers are holding a feminist lens to social and cultural phenomenon, producing critiques that highlight gender inequalities in different ways. Thus, while I have positioned girl feminist bloggers as a counterpublic, I don't want to imply that they are a monolithic group, but instead occupy shifting positions of limited power and agency while living in a culture where girls continue to be excluded from formal politics and citizenship rights.

Furthermore, it is necessary to recognize that structural inequalities continue to prevent some girls from participating in blogging communities and other online practices. For example, Helen tells me that she recognizes that her privileged class position allows her the material resources to blog, as well as the leisure time to do so – a luxury that many girls in her country do not have. In addition to these inequalities existing on a global scale, race, class, and location inequalities continue to shape girls' access to communication technologies in Canada, the United States, and other Western countries. While the "digital divide" is still understood as an important issue, S. Craig Watkins (2009) further complicates the notion that social inequalities dictate access to technology by arguing that "digital gates" operate to maintain class and race hierarchies online, even when a diverse group of young people have access to the Internet. Further research into the ways in which inequalities shape the practice of feminist blogging specifically must be an important focus for future research, which will allow us to better understand whose voices come to represent contemporary feminisms.

I'd like to conclude by returning to a question I raised early on in this paper, namely, what counts as feminist activism? I suggested that Harris (2008b) provides a useful framework which understands activism as not necessarily outcome-oriented, but instead based upon the creating a public self, which is the first step in seeing oneself as a citizen. The girl bloggers I interviewed are engaging in establishing public selves through the dissemination of their voices through their writing, and furthermore, are establishing public selves that challenge gender norms and ageist assumptions that youth are uninterested in social change. By creating

public selves through 'talking back' and integrating these selves within larger communities and global networks, girl feminist bloggers are reframing what it means to be a feminist activist and in doing so, are becoming role models for other girls.

This research challenges prevailing moral panics about girls' use of the Internet, as well as popular assumptions that position girls as shallow consumers, retreating from public issues through their use of social media. Instead, I suggest the opposite – that participation in blogging communities often allows girls a space to become *more* engaged in public life. Thus, I advocate for an ethnographic approach to studying girls' online practices, which has the ability to uncover the complexity of blogging practices and place girls' feminist blogging as part of broader changes in technology, social activism, and feminism itself.

Endnotes

(One) All names are pseudonyms in order to protect the privacy of my respondents.

(Two) Two of the interviews were conducted via a series of emails, one was conducted in person, and one was conducted in a phone conversation.

(Three) It is important to recognize that despite the continual spread of new media technologies, the 'digital divide' remains a reality for many people both inside and outside of the United States. Issues of access to technology continue to be important for scholars to consider, as well as the ways in which unequal access impacts what kinds of content we see (and do not see) online.

(Four) Jane Hunter (2002) provides a fascinating discussion of girls' writing in school newspapers advocating for women's suffrage during the late 1800s. This type of girls' engagement, despite being overtly political, is often overlooked as feminist activism.

(Five)I am referring here to films distributed by traditional means, such as DVD and not films posted to online video sharing sites, such as YouTube. Online distribution of films would fall into my discussion of online content.

(Six) Research such as that done by Sonia Livingstone, Nick Chouldry, and Tim Markham (2007), indicate that one's civic engagement online is significantly influence by offline demographic factors. However, this research does not focus specifically on feminism, and thus, more audience research specifically related to feminist websites needs to be done in order to determine how – or if - online feminist content reaches non-feminist readers.

(Seven) I am basing this statement on self-descriptions by commenters. For example, commenters would occasionally mention their race or ethnicity (black, Jewish), their gender, or their specific age. I do not want to imply that the Internet is accessible to everyone and I recognize the barriers that the digital divide creates, both nationally and internationally. Additionally, *The Seventeen Magazine Project* may not be accessible to those who do not speak English or those not familiar with *Seventeen Magazine*, for example.

Acknowledgments

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