

**NETWORKED PUBLICS, NETWORKED POLITICS:
RESISTING GENDER-BASED VIOLENT SPEECH IN DIGITAL MEDIA**

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a qualitative study of digital media that identifies and analyzes feminist responses to violent speech in networked environments across Canada and the United States between 2011 and 2015. Exploring how verbal violence is constitutive of and constituted by power relations in the feminist blogosphere, I ask the following set of research questions: How do feminist bloggers politicize and problematize instances of violent speech on digital media? In what ways are their networked interactions and self-representations reconfigured as a result of having to face hostile audiences? What modes of agency appear within feminist blogging cultures? This work engages with feminist theory (hooks, 2014; McRobbie, 2009; Stringer 2014), media studies (boyd, 2014; Lovink, 2011; Marwick 2013) and their intersections in the field of feminist media studies (Jane 2014; Keller, 2012). Drawing on interviews with the key players in the feminist blogosphere and providing a discursive reading of selected digital texts, I identify networked resistive strategies including digital archiving, public shaming, strategic silence and institutional transformations. I argue that feminist responses to violent speech are varied and reflect not only long-standing concerns with community building and women's voices in public context, but also emerging anxieties around self-branding, professional identity and a control over one's digital presence. This research underscores the importance of transformative capacities of networked feminist politics and contextualizes agentic modes of participation in response to problematic communication.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Confronting the unspeakable: a rationale for research

The goal of this dissertation is to explore the possibilities and limits of creative political subjectivities in the face of sexist and misogynist backlash. More specifically, I identify, contextualize, and analyze instances of gender-based¹ verbal violence and feminist responses to such violence² on digital media platforms across Canada and the United States from 2011 to 2015. In particular, I examine how feminist bloggers shape the boundaries and norms of mediated communications through reflexive self-presentations and publishing practices. My overarching interest here is to bridge feminist scholarship with media studies scholarship in order to attend to the dynamics of feminist digital self-publishing and explore how feminist bloggers resist, negotiate, and attach meanings to hostile and disruptive responses from their online audiences. Following scholars who have argued that young women use social media to creatively participate in new spaces of resistance (McLean & Maalsen, 2013; Rentschler & Thrift, 2015), I examine the shifting grounds of the feminist blogosphere to analyze the concrete forms this

1 A note on the terminology: *gender-based* violence usually refers to “violence that is either directed at a particular victim because of the victim’s gender or perceived gender or disproportionately impacts a particular group of people because of their gender or perceived gender” (Cantalupo, 2009, p. 620). I use the umbrella terms *verbal violence* and *violent speech* interchangeably to denote obscene, hateful, or vulgar speech produced with the intention to insult, intimidate, threaten, silence, victimize or otherwise inflict harm. When analyzing the interviews, I describe experiences of research participants by using their own word choices.

2 I am hesitant to use the term “hate speech” in relation to violent speech. The Criminal Code of Canada prohibits “hate propaganda” defined as advocating or promoting genocide of an identifiable group. The Code further defines an identifiable group as “any section of the public distinguished by colour, race, religion, national or ethnic origin, age, sex, sexual orientation, or mental or physical disability” (Criminal Code, 1985, c C-46 318 (4)). While the notion of hate speech is useful in some contexts, a number of misogynistic comments and hateful rhetoric will not constitute hate speech according to the legal parameters.

resistance takes. Textual, video, audio and mixed-media blogging formats are parts of networked sociality, and are forms of distributed communication that can facilitate political mobilizing around, and feminist articulations of, sexual politics and social justice. Such articulations, however, are often interrupted by hostile responses, which exceed normative limits of critique and can range from hate mail and harassment, hacking and spamming, to threats of rape and death (Filipovic, 2007; Franks, 2011; Herring et al. 2002; Humphreys & Vered, 2013; Johnston, Friedman, & Peach, 2011).

My line of inquiry is driven by a dissatisfaction with liberal self-help approaches to the so-called “reputation management” aimed at monitoring one's digital presence (see, for example, Ivester, 2011) as well as with conservative frameworks of digital safety that construct women as vulnerable Internet users in a need of protection. Governed by neoliberal logics of self-management, dominant approaches to gendered online harassment and violent speech narrowly focus on issues of personal safety, thus missing the importance of communicative and interactional contexts of digital media. I address this gap by situating the blogosphere as a communicative landscape where contradictory sets of ideas are negotiated and where disruptions reflect larger modes of social control. To guide my inquiry, I ask the following set of research questions: What modes of agency appear within feminist blogging cultures? How do feminist bloggers politicize and problematize instances of violent speech on digital media? In what ways are their networked interactions and self-representations reconfigured as a result of having to face hostile audiences?

In this introductory chapter, I provide the rationale behind my research and explain how I came to think critically about the interactive dynamics of digital media, first as a journalist and

then as a gender studies researcher. I draw on existing research at the intersection of media and gender studies to situate verbal violence as a long-standing problem with many damaging effects. More specifically, I locate current public reactions to feminist speech within the history of backlashes against feminism, and examine the concepts of backlash, agency, and resistance in relation to this project. I then outline each chapter's key ideas and explain how they contribute to the scholarly conversation on the interactional and organizational dynamics of the feminist blogosphere and online spaces more broadly.

My academic interest in the interactive dynamics and internal complexities of online self-publishing grew out of my background in mass communication. As a newspaper reporter seeking perspectives and opinions not readily available in Russian mainstream media, I started reading blogs as they grew in popularity during the early 2000s. When in 2009 I moved to Canada to pursue a graduate degree in gender studies, online media had already become an important element of my intellectual development. During my graduate studies at York University between 2009 and 2016 I further came to understand the blogosphere as a useful resource for research and teaching. While I read a wide variety of online texts, feminist blogs stood out as most helpful for navigating the then unfamiliar conceptual field of gender studies and contextualizing the various issues raised in feminist theory literature. Through these personal, professional and academic involvements with online media, I realized that the blogosphere is an important counter-hegemonic site of meaning-making and a productive space where ideas can be contemplated, where dominant and marginal sentiments become sharply visible and where diverse narratives of selfhood publicly come into being, diverge, and clash in debate.

The blogosphere's comment sections are communicative hubs often referred to as the “bottom half” of the Internet due to their frequent lack of civility (Reagle, 2015). While vitriolic exchanges and a quick-to-judge tone can be found in many parts of the blogosphere, the gendered meanings and sexist undertones of many online disruptions cannot be explained away by the blogosphere’s general antagonistic tone. In the Russian blogosphere, I observed how women often become targets of ridicule as a result of their public acts of writing: everything from a woman’s appearance to marital status is used as a justification to discredit and disregard her. When I started reading Western, English-language blogs on a regular basis, I expected more civility in gender politics conversations within the digital cultures of Canada and the United States since feminist scholarship in those countries has been institutionalized for decades and, compared to the post-Soviet space, publicly articulating feminist views seems to carry fewer negative social sanctions. Contrary to my expectations, the same familiar dynamics unfold in the English-language blogosphere: feminist bloggers are often targets of repeated insults, ad hominem attacks and gendered slurs. These observations further solidified my interest in understanding the dynamics behind verbal violence and violent speech directed at feminist bloggers.

Feral Feminisms (www.feralfeminisms.com), a peer-reviewed, online journal founded by a collective of graduate students at York University, where I volunteered as a Social Media Coordinator during my doctoral studies, was hacked while I was in the midst of my dissertation research on online harassment. The journal’s web address was made to redirect visitors to a pornography website and *Feral Feminisms'* functioning was disrupted for a few days. I do not know the identities or motives of the people behind this incident: it could have been an instance

of anti-feminist backlash, a random attack, or an act of revenge motivated by someone's antipathy towards the *Feral Feminisms* collective. It was anonymous, unexpected and seemingly unprovoked. Creating technological disruptions such as the hacking incident at *Feral Feminisms* is one among many ways of silencing and containing feminist speech. Although far less widespread than hostile comments and threatening messages, hacking disruptions can result in damaged reputation as well as material harm to online publishers. After observing several waves of harassment of feminist activists between 2011 and 2015, I learned that the pairing of hacking with threats of violence and sexualized insults have become a commonplace way to register disagreement with feminist work. Feminists often frame such disruptions as a “rite of passage” for writers when their work becomes visible enough to ignite a strong negative response since the more publicly visible a feminist blogger is, the more likely she is to encounter sexist backlash. In her “Girl's Guide to Staying Safe Online”, popular culture critic Sady Doyle (2011) points out the banality and ubiquity of death and rape threats directed at feminist bloggers:

As feminists go, I have it easy. I've only received one explicit death threat. I've gotten rape threats, but not many. No one has contacted me at home; I've received only one anonymous message warning me that I was being “watched.” Of the people who have called me gendered slurs or lied about me online, only one of them has done the same to my mother.

If this seems strange—being grateful for only a few threats, only minimal harm to my family, only a few dozen people who would like to see me raped or killed – then you're probably not a feminist blogger. (para.1-2)

As Doyle's (2011) passage illustrates, many feminist bloggers face harassment and invective as a routine part of their networked engagements. Throughout this dissertation, I examine how various techno-social aspects of online communication contribute to the proliferation of verbal violence directed at feminist bloggers. I analyze scholarly literature, popular media texts and personal narratives obtained through interviews, to explain how feminist bloggers and their interactive audiences – friends, readers, followers, and commentators – reassess the place of feminism in public discourse and establish new modes of political agency made possible by users who engage with the collective power of social media.

Backlash is a persistent feature in the history of feminist gender politics (Walby, 1993). While I focus my attention on networked relations, feminist writers and activists have been receiving hate mail since well before the era of digital communication. Examples of such anti-feminist backlash abound within “offline” popular press, mass media and academia (Superson & Cudd, 2002; Bean, 2007).

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1974), a philosophical encyclopedia on the history of women's status, which first generated controversies in France and later the United States of America, was derided by conservative critics and banned by the Catholic Church as “the incarnation of godlessness and immorality” (Laubier, 1990, p.17). In her memoir *The Force of Circumstance*, de Beauvoir (1965) mentions the hate letters she received after the publication of *The Second Sex* in France in 1949:

I received – some signed and some anonymous – epigrams, epistles, satires, admonitions, and exhortations addressed to me by, for example, “some very active members of the First Sex”. Unsatisfied, frigid, priapic, nymphomaniac,

lesbian, a hundred times aborted, I was everything, even an unmarried mother.

(p.197)

American journalist Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) in the decade that followed the English-language translation of *The Second Sex*. Her book critiquing idealized, submissive, and domestic femininity likewise stirred public controversy in North America. Historian Daniel Horowitz (1998) writes about the public's reaction to Friedan's feminist work: "men and women accused her of destroying marriage, undermining femininity and attacking the family [...] In one later instance, someone wrote her a letter threatening to bomb her and stating that she and Gloria Steinem had updated the Communist Manifesto" (p.229). Despite receiving hate mail accusing her of corroding American morals and family values, Friedan continued her career as a writer and established the National Organization for Women (NOW), the largest women's rights organization in the United States. Today *The Feminine Mystique* might appear to be a rather moderate critique of society, especially if it is considered alongside bolder calls for radical change expressed by socialist and separatist wings of the second-wave feminist movement. Yet, *The Feminine Mystique*, along with Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, continues to attract hostile responses. Their inclusion in the list of "Most Harmful Books of the 19th and 20th Centuries", determined by conservative news website Human Events' polling of policy makers and academics in 2005 (www.humanevents.com), illustrates as much; the trope that feminism is oppressive, unpatriotic, censoring, godless, even lethal and apocalyptic, continues to animate anti-feminist backlashes in the 21st century (Menzies, 2007).

While many feminist writers typically face some degree of anti-feminist backlash, women writing about marginalized sexualities often experience a heightened degree of backlash and

public outrage in the forms of homophobic verbal attacks, slurs, and explicit threats of violence. For example, American feminist writer Rita Mae Brown, whose coming-of-age novel *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973) is now commonly taught in university courses on gender and sexuality across North America, received death and bomb threats for her explicit depiction of teenage lesbian relationships.

A woman's work does not have to be explicitly feminist to make her a target for gendered slurs, humiliating and objectifying epithets, or sexualized threats of violence. For example, English professor at Princeton University, Elaine Showalter (1997), candidly describes the public outrage she faced in response to her book *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media*:

I didn't foresee that my editors at Columbia University Press would be called "cunt-sucking maggots to let this one slither through." I didn't anticipate that people would bombard me with hate mail, offer me blood transfusions, advise me to get a bodyguard, threaten to rip me apart, or warn me of assassination unless I recanted. (p. x)

Nor are women's collectives and scholarly institutions immune from anti-feminist backlash. Unfortunately, hate letters are just one kind of public expression of anger and discontent. Within academia, anti-feminist hostility takes varying forms, and can range from a "chilly" climate and the marginalization of feminist research, to bolder acts of denunciation. Posters advertising women's events are vandalized on university campuses, feminist publications are defaced in libraries, and women's studies departments receive threatening phone calls in response to their academic activities (Martin, 1999; Morgan, 2007).

The majority of sexist and misogynist speech acts against women have gone unrecorded until recently. As the Internet extends into everyday life, it has become possible to capture and analyze sexist speech in all its banality and pervasiveness. In September 2015, a user under the handle Kill Feminists posted graphic threats of violence in the comment section of BlogTO (www.blogTO.com), a popular website covering Toronto's social and cultural life. Kill Feminists' (2015) comment starts with what might seem to be a hyperbolic threat of violence targeting feminist professors and students:

The feminists who are rude to you at the University of Toronto should be shot to death and the remaining survivors tied to a tree with their throats slit with a dull knife. (n.p.)

The comment at first reads like an unrealistically exaggerated and violent yet banal form of misogyny, commonly found in many comment sections. Then, in a more sinister turn, the poster calls for mass-shootings in University of Toronto's sociology and women's studies classrooms. This part of the post is especially alarming on two grounds: first, it invokes a reminder of the 1989 Montreal Massacre where Marc Lepine, motivated by his hatred of feminists, killed 14 women at the École Polytechnique in Montreal; and second, given that several American mass shooters posted warning messages on the Internet before school killings (Bondü & Scheithauer, 2011), the comment on BlogTO could be read as a credible threat of real violence. In response to this threat, the University of Toronto increased campus security and Toronto police launched an investigation while a number of professors and teaching assistants publicly re-articulated their commitment to feminist work. Many community members also showed their solidarity with feminist scholars by publicly speaking against the threats of gendered violence.

Social media, along with digital archives of print media, have become increasingly important not only for recording, archiving and accessing the instances of sexist speech, but also for providing access to a wider discursive sphere where anti-feminist rhetoric is articulated. It is now possible to analyze the innumerable instances of anti-feminist disruptions that originate in men's rights³ organizations, which are grounded in shared opposition to feminist politics. Although the large part of men's rights activities takes place online, these groups are also involved in fund-raising, lobbying, and recruiting, thereby exerting their influence beyond forums and comment sections (Menzies, 2007). For example, Men's Rights Edmonton (www.mensrightsedmonton.com) distributed posters in 2013 attempting to discredit feminist scholar and Chair of Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Alberta, Lise Gotell, as allegedly incompetent and prejudiced. In response to an anti-rape awareness campaign implemented by Gotell's university, Men's Rights Edmonton (MRE) distributed posters that read: "Theft isn't black. Bank fraud isn't Jewish. And rape isn't male. Just because you're paid to demonize men doesn't mean rape is gendered. Don't be that bigot" (Raz, 2013, n.p.). The MRE website provides a fuller and more disturbing picture of its opposition to feminist work. Readers' comments cited below are prime examples of their claims that feminism is anti-men and anti-intellectual, a refrain I repeatedly encountered in the research on misogynist speech:

³To avoid unfair generalizations, it is important to note that some men's groups, such as the White Ribbon Campaign and The National Organization for Men Against Sexism, are opposed to sexism and actively working to end violence against women (Menzies, 2007).

By enabling these incompetent idiots to get vacuous high sounding degrees and then sustaining them with high salaries, simply because they have vaginas, tax payers are paying for their own destruction. (wtfwtf13, 2013)

The femi-nazi ignores the differences between men and women and condemn women who reject their concepts of heterosexlessness [sic]. (Essen, 2013)

In her research on students' resistance to feminist knowledge at a Canadian university, Michelle Webber (2005) suggests that feminist curriculum is routinely delegitimized and “relegated to the realm of the personal, of opinion, bias, grudge, and bitterness” (p. 192). Although some of de-radicalized feminist rhetoric around gender equality has been incorporated into mainstream Western politics through the neoliberal prism of individual empowerment (Kaplan, 2001; Mendes, 2012), the examples above are reflective of a persistent anti-feminist sentiment that exists in some parts of public discourses, which reject and vilify feminist ideas as harmful to various facets and functions of society, including family, childhood, education, citizenship, and freedom of speech.

It is important to understand such anti-feminist rhetoric because, as Robert Menzies (2007) points out, this rhetoric “threatens increasingly to normalize itself and shift the boundaries of contestation, through sheer repetition, shrillness, and oft-seeming omnipresence” (p.87). While digital media have become a fertile ground for the deliberations of anti-feminist groups and individuals, these deliberations do not stop at the level of discussions. As in the case of Men's Rights Edmonton posters targeting Gotell, or the anonymous threats published on BlogTo, anti-feminist rhetoric translates into concrete attempts to discredit feminist speech. Hate mail, harassment, and threats of violence that are underpinned by sexist, homophobic, transphobic, as

well as racist and ethnic prejudice, have been persistent features of the backlash against feminists and social justice activists. Given that there is a history of resistance to feminism, which developed alongside feminism, my dissertation reexamines that “old” problem that has resurfaced in today’s digital environments. What is new to anti-feminist backlash in networked environments is the way in which sexist and misogynist language is distributed and publicized, erased and archived, and brought to bear on the public identity of the hated feminist target.

1.2. Revisiting the concept of backlash

This section defines backlash as an object of study and, by drawing attention to the most abrasive and explicit instantiations of the “unspeakable” anti-feminist sentiment, explains how the focus of this research diverges from dominant conceptualizations of backlash as a re-signification of feminism in popular culture.

Much feminist scholarship on “backlash” during the late 1980s and the 1990s was preoccupied with the ways in which feminist discourse had been reframed to substitute an individual choice for social and political change. In this context, the terms “backlash” and “post-feminism” were used somewhat interchangeably to denote the changing representations of feminism in popular culture (Braithwaite, 2004). Within this line of thought, “backlash” would refer to the collapsing of feminist rhetoric with narratives of individual empowerment, individualism and personal responsibility. In *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* – the book that popularized the term “backlash” in the North America – Susan Faludi (1991) suggests that media plays a critical role in denouncing feminism and does so in ways more nuanced than by outright rejection. According to Faludi (1991), public commentators reframe the women’s movement as “women’s own worst enemy” (p. x) and women as “enslaved

by their own liberation” (p.2), that is, unhappy with themselves and alienated from men, precisely because of women’s gains in the public sphere. Anti-feminist backlash is, this argument goes, evidenced by positive depictions of domestic and submissive femininity as an alternative to a feminist identity (Faludi, 1991).

The late 1990s - early 2000s were marked by a shift in feminist discourse towards exploring the transformative possibilities in popular culture: the theme of anti-feminist backlash fell out of favor as it was seen to overshadow positive feminist transformations in news and entertainment media. Maintaining that the term “backlash” is conceptually reductive, Anne Braithwaite (2004) argues that feminist scholarship on backlash and post-feminism:

overlooks—indeed, it cannot see—how those examples of a supposed backlash against feminism might alternately be seen as illustrations of how much something about feminism has instead saturated pop culture, becoming part of the accepted, ‘naturalized,’ social formation. (p. 19)

Braithwaite's argument speaks to the current feminist media production in film and television. To date, the 2010s have been characterized by an increased sense of optimism regarding the visibility of feminist politics in popular culture. Celebrities such as Emma Watson, Beyoncé, Julianne Moore, Zooey Deschanel, Ellen Page, Meryl Streep, and others have self-identified as feminists and affirmed their feminist values in their media appearances. A number of television series, including *Parks and Recreation*, *Orange Is New Black*, *The Fall*, and *Girls*, feature strong and compelling women protagonists. In a piece titled “How Feminist TV Became the New Normal”, *The Huffington Post* contributor Zeba Blay (2015) tellingly argues that today's television is interested in approaching racial diversity through an intersectional feminist lens. For

Blay (2015) and scholars such as Braithwaite (2004) media have become saturated with feminist sensibilities, to the point where feminist identities, perspectives and concerns are normalized and reworked rather than resisted.

Representations of feminism found in film and television today do not easily align with feminist (dis)articulations in digital media, mainly because these mediums differ in what kinds of expressions and engagements they allow. Although reductive and stereotypical representations of gender still abound in mainstream media, explicit misogyny or unapologetic sexism on television or printed press is rare. While mainstream media becomes less receptive to sexist and racist speech, the Internet remains a network through which otherwise “unspeakable” discourse is made visible. Despite its tendency towards the centralization of online content, digital media remains heterogeneous and fragmented when compared to other forms of mass cultural production. Feminist networked publics are reshaping politics, and often through a more radical, counter-hegemonic lens than the versions of liberal feminism that mainstream media welcome. Digital media also affords a space for a more hostile and aggressive anti-feminist discourse and the backlash on the Internet often takes a far more literal turn than the subtle neoliberal re-signification discussed by Faludi (1991), McRobbie (2004) and other feminist scholars. In contrast to mass-media saturated with feminist and post-feminist rhetoric, social media offers less sanitized perspectives on feminism and, as I demonstrate in previous sections, houses explicitly negative attitudes towards feminist thought and organizing. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, I articulate backlash as hostile resistance to feminism in the forms of violent speech.

There is a rich body of scholarship exploring the nuances of the post-feminist discourse (Briathwaite, 2004; McRobbie, 2004; Stringer, 2014) but far less work has been done specifically on verbal violence and aggressive backlash against feminists and feminist collectives. In her work on gendered vitriol, Emma E. Jane (2014) argues that academic scholarship generally lags behind mainstream media in its coverage of gendered invective and profanity, in part because the most problematic parts of sexist discourse fall outside the norms of acceptable speech and, therefore, are “metaphorically ‘unspeakable’” (Jane, 2014. p.558). Jane (2014) argues that to fully understand the effects of violent speech on public discourse, it is important to provide accurate citations of vitriolic exchanges:

despite the risk of causing offense – this discourse must not only be spoken of, but must be spoken of in its unexpurgated entirety because euphemisms and generic descriptors such as ‘offensive’ or ‘sexually explicit’ simply cannot convey the hostile and hyperbolic misogyny which gives gendered e-bile the distinctive semiotic flavor. (p.559)

Scholars of digital cultures conceptualized online disruptions as flaming, trouble-making, misbehaving, trolling, cyberbullying, online gossiping, harassment, hate speech, cyber-mobbing, and e-bile, to name a few. A preoccupation with the practice of naming drives my analysis to some extent since each of these labels carries distinct connotations and brings into focus particular aspects of networked conflicts. It is important to bear in mind that the power embedded in naming practices is a site of feminist attention and contestation (Tirrell, 1998). Prior to the rise of the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s, issues of intimate partner violence and workplace harassment were largely absent from public discourse. In fact, the terms

“sexual harassment” and “date rape” can be considered “feminist linguistic innovations” (Ehrlich & King, 1994, p.50) that challenged existing discursive groundings and shaped them into political concerns through the naming of previously unarticulated problems. Guided by the understanding that “meanings can become a site of ideological struggle” (Ehrlich & King, 1994, p. 50), throughout this dissertation I unpack several labels typically applied to networked disruptions.

Media researchers have studied the interpersonal dynamics of digital cultures for the past twenty-five years. As early as 1994, Amy Bruckman presented an abstract on deviant behaviors in virtual communities, maintaining that:

where there are multi-user computer systems, there will be antisocial behavior. On bulletin board systems (BBSs), there are those who persist in being obscene, harassing, and libelous. In virtual worlds such as MUDs, there are problems of theft, vandalism, and virtual rape. (para. 1)

Yet until recently, little has been said about gender-based verbal violence on the Internet. Two recent events contributed to the surge of scholarly and public interest in violent speech and online misogyny. First, there was a streak of suicides among teenagers across Canada and the United States, where online abuse either by anonymous strangers and/or their own schoolmates, was a contributing factor. Publicity in mass media surrounding the cases of Jessica Laney, Amanda Todd, and Rehtaeh Parsons, girls who killed themselves after being stalked and harassed on social media, prompted a surge of policy initiatives around criminalization of cyberbullying. Second, there have been several waves of harassment directed at women active in gaming and technology industries. Anita Sarkeesian in particular was the most visible target of

harassment during this wave, targeted for her criticisms of gendered representations video games. I discuss her case in depth in Chapter 3. Blogger Kathy Sierra, game developers Zoe Quinn and Brianna Wu, as well as other professionals in IT and video game industries, were also targets of sexist backlash. The intensity and scope of harassment directed at these women contributed to an increase in scholarly attention towards online misogyny yet, despite a greater interest in online harassment, the ensuing literature tends to treat women as a broad category of analysis, and pays little attention to women's various positionings in relation to feminisms within digital cultures.

Despite the broad scope of media studies literature, the experiences of people on the receiving end of disruptive actions are rarely studied. Emma A. Jane (2012), having surveyed thirty years of research on online conflicts, argues that the ethical ramifications of online vitriol have been largely eclipsed by debates around the nuances and classifications of disruptive behaviors. In particular, the literature tends to de-emphasize, defend, or celebrate vitriolic disruptions while trivializing the experiences of online abuse victim (Jane, 2012). Even though online harassment and hate speech are well-established in Internet studies as problems, it is not uncommon to find academic discourse stipulating that women should tolerate, dismiss or ignore online attacks (Jane, 2012). Such sentiments are found in the media as well: columnist Brendan O'Neill (2011), for instance, wrote in the *Guardian* that feminists who strive to end online misogyny merely "suffer fits of Victorian-style vapours upon hearing men use coarse language" (para.1). The rhetoric normalizing violent speech continues to circulate in public discussions and, as I suggest, feminist bloggers use a variety of strategies to politicize, problematize and resist the verbal violence and violent speech directed towards them.

1.3. Entanglements of agency and victimization

Feminist bloggers respond to sexist speech in different ways and through a variety of channels. For this dissertation, it is important, however, to unpack and problematize the notion of feminist resistance to violent speech in relation to dominant discourses of agency and victimization. The feminist acts of resistance I examine necessitate moving beyond protectionist paradigms that posit victimization as a process inherent in Internet communication and warrant a critical exploration of how feminist bloggers destabilize oppressive patterns of social organization. Although there is a growing body of literature that investigates and underscores that gendered and raced harassment on the Internet is systemic (Levmore & Nussbaum, 2010; Jane, 2012), this literature too often homogenizes women as a unified category and too rarely brings into focus the backlash against politically-charged blogs or the impact of such backlash on bloggers' decisions around content production, self-presentation strategies and modes of interactions with their networked audiences. In this project I address this gap by attending to the nuances of blogger-audience dynamics, emphasizing blogger strategies of resistance to anti-feminist backlash.

Over the past four decades, feminism has offered multi-faceted approaches for thinking about violence and victimization as social problems reflecting vagaries of power. Since the victim-agent dichotomy underpins a number of feminist responses to gendered violence, it is important to point out its inherent tensions. Germinating in the 1970s and gaining momentum in the 1990s, the victim-agent debates can still be found in the feminist literature of today. While much feminist thinking has been generally attentive to the limitations of a victim/oppressor binary, there has been, indeed, a tendency in feminist legal theory to dichotomize active agents

and passive victims (Schneider, 1993). In response to victimhood claims invoking stereotypical assumptions of purity and submissiveness, a number of feminist writers, including Katie Roiphe (1993) and Naomi Wolf (1993), offered the notion “power feminism” emphasizing an individualized agency which was supposedly erased in so-called “victim feminism” (Schneider, 1993). The notion of “power feminism” operated as a part of post-feminist discourses, recasting sexual violence as a form of gender-neutral relationship trouble rather than a reflection of structural, systemic oppressions. Elizabeth M. Schneider (1993) problematizes the liberal premise behind the individualized notion of “power feminism” as relying on the notion of a social world consisting of “atomized individuals, acting alone, unconstrained by social forces, unmediated by social structures and systemic hardship” (p. 395-396) and draws on Martha Mahoney's critique of the agency discourse conceived of as a part of the agent/victim dichotomy:

agency and victimization are each known by the absence of the other; you are an agent if you are not a victim, and you are a victim if you are in no way an agent. In this concept, agency does not mean acting for oneself under conditions of oppression; it means being without oppression, either having ended oppression or never having experienced it at all. This all-agent or all-victim conceptual dichotomy will not be easy to escape or transform. (Mahoney, as cited in Schneider, 1993, p. 396)

Despite multiple understandings of victimization in feminist theory, there is still a tendency among some feminists to simplify and denounce the discourse of victimhood as backward looking while at the same time celebrating agency (Stringer, 2014). In her 2014 book *Knowing Victims*, Rebecca Stringer dissects the critiques of the so-called “victim feminism”, that

continue to permeate both the popular press and postmodern academic literature. Stringer argues that critics of “victim feminism” tend to oversimplify feminist theory by drawing selectively on feminist accounts of victimization while leaving out important conceptualizations of agency. Stringer mobilizes Sandra Bartky's (1990) scholarship as an example of theorizing that departs from a “passive victim” formulation on two grounds: first, it posits the experience of victimization as a potential source of knowledge; second, it explains how victim subjects can be involved in the victimization of others, and thus present a challenge to the construction of a completely passive and homogeneous victim identity. Importantly, Stringer points out that feminist anti-victim discourse overlaps with and provides a discursive support for neoliberal critiques of victimhood: both formulations value personal responsibility and view victimization as an internal process rather than an objective event rooted in multiple structural oppressions. In other words, neoliberal victim theory and feminist anti-victim discourses both assume that victimhood is an inner quality of the victim subject, a quality that needs to be overcome to reach the larger goals of personal growth. Within this mode of thinking, there is an artificial distinction between a “fake” victimization of Western women and a “genuine”, or legitimate, victimization of women in the Global South who face “spectacularly traumatic suffering and boldly direct discrimination” (Stringer, 2014, p.41).

Critiques of the contemporary anti-victim theorizing are important to this research for two main reasons. First, not all bloggers who receive hate mail feel or consider themselves victimized. Their ideas about choice and self-determination should be considered. It is also important to understand whether and how neoliberal and post-feminist narratives of personal responsibility are indeed implicated in bloggers’ narratives of online harassment and, if so, to ask

about the broader limitations of such discursive framings. Second, in any discussion of feminist resistance to violent communicative acts, one should be alert to the mechanisms of the widely used trope of “survivorship”. Drawing on the work of feminist blogger Emi Koyama (2011), Stringer (2014) argues that there is an expectation of progressive movement from “victimhood” towards “survivorship”. A “good” feminist subject, by this logic, is the one who is able to go beyond trauma and re-imagine oneself as strong, capable, tenacious, and even grateful for adversity. When the neoliberal ethos of self-help collapses with the “survivorship” paradigm, adversity is imagined as an opportunity for personal growth rather than a ground for a political action.

Informed by Stringer's (2014) critiques of neoliberal constructions of the victim/agent distinction, I reject a false dichotomy of identity as either a passive victim or a self-determining agent. While I focus my attention on feminist bloggers who resist online harassment through strategic actions, I recognize that their resistances and counter-narratives may not always bring about feelings of empowerment or positive social change. In the political climate where victims of violence are often blamed for their victimization and for their presumed lack of proactive actions, it is important to understand the limits and failures of feminist resistance to online harassment.

1.4. Chapter outlines

In this first introductory chapter I have discussed the aims of my research project, situated anti-feminist backlash in historical and contemporary contexts, and identified some of the theoretical debates informing the scope of this project. This section outlines the chapters to follow.

Rather than include a traditional literature review section in this dissertation, I weave the review and critique of the relevant literature with the analysis of interview transcripts and media texts. For example, I discuss theoretical framings of verbal violence as “trolling” in Chapter 3 and as “cyberbullying” in Chapter 4. More specifically, I analyze the discursive limitations of both terms when applied to violent speech directed at feminist bloggers. Although I consider alternative conceptualizations of violent speech, the goal of my work is not to propose the most encompassing or precise term for online abuse – this task is hardly worthwhile given the variety of means and channels of online communication. Rather, my goal is to examine broader political implications of feminist responses to sexist and misogynistic language proliferating on blogging and social media platforms.

I pursue two aims in Chapter 2. I aim to situate the blogosphere as a research field, and provide the rationale for my research methods and methodologies. I open the chapter with a description of my research design and highlight the methodological benefits and limitations of using video-conferencing software as an interviewing tool. While video-conferencing is often compared to interviewing by telephone, the crucial difference between these modes of data gathering lies in the fact that video-conferencing is embedded in the digital cultures, and specificities of these cultures bear upon the interviewing dynamics. Next, I explore the difficulties associated with recruiting research participants on social media networks. I examine how power operates within these networks during the research process by raising questions around my positionality as a researcher vis-à-vis social networks. Then, I identify key characteristics of the blogosphere and the challenges they pose for a study of digital media. The

chapter concludes with a discussion of speech communities and networked publics as analytical tools for exploring interactions in the mediated contexts.

In Chapter 3, I examine linkages between the backlash against two feminist bloggers, Anita Sarkeesian and Steph Guthrie. Placing an analysis of these incidents against a number of similar, but lesser known, cases of problematic speech across social media, I engage in wider conversations on the ways to counteract abuse and harassment within networked publics. In particular, I build on Guthrie's conceptualization of online misogyny in order to highlight socio-technical, contextual and structural elements of feminist resistances to violent speech.

In Chapter 4, I engage with the problematic points of cyberbullying and cybersafety discourses. In particular, I ask what effects these discourses have on public policies around preventing and penalizing online harassment. My key argument here is that cyberbullying and cybersafety frameworks run the risk of discounting women's contributions to public discourse, and are, therefore, counterproductive to the aims of bloggers who act as participants in broader political dialogues. Drawing on interview data, I highlight the extent to which bloggers grapple with the implications of making their identities public to provide insights on the relationship between visibility, pseudonymity and self-disclosure. My claim here is that the feminist blogosphere is becoming a new type of networked workplace fully embedded in the digital economy. Feminist negotiations of violent speech reflect not only long-standing concerns around free speech, community and, by extension, employment, but also concerns around the control over one's digital presence.

I draw on interview data to analyze a multitude of ways in which feminist bloggers manage their interactions – both disruptive and benign – with networked audiences in Chapter 5,

and discuss competing strategies around networked participation, including feedback mechanisms, moderation strategies and other ways to facilitate online conversations. In this chapter I attempt to showcase the diversity of blogging experiences and emphasizes concerns pertaining to the distinct feminist orientation of each research participant.

In Chapter 6, I show that aggressive and disruptive speech towards feminist bloggers is not limited to anti-feminist groups and individuals. While my primary research interest lies in analyzing feminist bloggers' responses to violent expressions of anti-feminist hostility, what counts as feminism and anti-feminism is open for debate. Therefore, considering internal conflicts within the feminist blogosphere is necessary. Chapter 6 underscores how major tensions *within* the feminist blogosphere can result in exclusionary communicative acts that should be viewed with some concern. These networked activities pose questions about what constitutes an acceptable mode of disagreement within feminist publics while certain networked practices serve to limit the range of feminist engagements. These conflicts illuminate the place of intersectionality in contemporary feminist discourse and shed light on ongoing contestations of race, sexuality and gender as issues integral to feminist organizing. They also point out the difficulties of sustaining pointed, yet ethical, modes of social critique.

In Chapter 7 I summarize my findings pertaining to bloggers' decisions around self-presentation, community building and publishing strategies in the face of violent communicative acts amplified through the viral capacity of social networks. I conclude the chapter by re-articulating the importance of understanding creative and oppositional narratives behind feminist blogging.

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGIES AND METHODS

2.1. Designing a qualitative study of digital media

The research project for this dissertation is a multi-sited qualitative study of digital media that provides a snapshot of Canadian and American feminist blogospheres between 2011 and 2015. The following blogs were key sites of analysis. Although my interviews with each feminist blogger are my primary source of data, I also quote from their blogs to provide additional detail and allow for alternate readings of their narratives.

Canadian-based blogs:

- ♣ Choice Joyce (www.choice-joyce.blogspot.ca)
- ♣ Emma Woolley's blog (www.emmamwoolley.com)
- ♣ Feminist Current (www.feministcurrent.com)
- ♣ Gender Focus (www.gender-focus.com)
- ♣ Jaspreet's blog (anonymous)
- ♣ Samantha's blog (anonymous)
- ♣ Steph Guthrie's blog (www.stephguthrie.com)
- ♣ The F-Word (www.feminisms.org)

American-based blogs:

- ♣ Feminist Frequency (www.feministfrequency.com)
- ♣ Jessica's blogs (anonymous)
- ♣ The FBomb (www.thefbomb.org)
- ♣ Victoria's blog (anonymous)

York University's Office of Research Ethics approved the interview component of this study in June 2013. Research participants were interviewed either by phone or video-conferencing between July 2013 and June 2014.

A multi-sited approach is particularly well suited for researching various genres of digital media. While it is certainly possible to observe user interactions within the boundaries of a single blog, a multi-sited approach is more appropriate for studying the gendered dynamics of several networked publics. This qualitative study examines various online communities and networks, yet it is not an ethnography since I was not immersed in these communities as an active member; still, I borrow a multi-sited approach from the current developments in ethnographic research. In contrast to a classic ethnography involving long-term participant observation combined with field techniques such as interviews and note-taking at a somewhat bounded field site, a multi-sited ethnography challenges these standards by enacting a "spacial de-centredness" of the research process (Falzon, 2012, p.2). In the introduction to *Multi-Sited Ethnography: Theory, Praxis and Locality in Contemporary Research* (2012), an anthology on unconventional ethnographic methods, Mark-Anthony Falzon (2012) underscores the non-linearity of decentered research projects:

The essence of multi-sited research is to follow people, connections, associations, and relationships across space (because they are substantially continuous but spatially non-continuous). (p. 1-2)

Blogs that are maintained as free-standing entities, without networked links to other blogs and social media, rarely attract a strong readership while blogs that are tightly integrated with digital cultures are more often read and commented on, thus more successful. Bloggers therefore must use multiple social media platforms to increase readership through self-promotion, commentary

and interaction with other users. This multi-sited research methodology is ideal for providing a grasp of these issues within the dynamism and innovative capacity of decentered networked publics. Although the focus of this dissertation is on dynamics within the feminist blogosphere, my research necessarily accounts for non-linear communicative processes that occur within a wider media sphere and among multiple networked audiences including Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Reddit and several other platforms.

I use the method of critical discourse analysis (CDA) from the discipline of critical linguistics to explore how media and interview texts draw on shared cultural meanings. Linguistics, as a discipline, approaches language as “an ideological filter on the world” (Ehrlich & King, 1994, p.45), meaning that people's lived realities become intelligible through the prism of linguistic choices that construct, rather than describe, perceptions of reality. Critical linguistics dissects the way in which dominant ideologies become constructed, rationalized, reflected and naturalized in textual practices by interrogating the interlinkages between language and sociopolitical institutions (Ehrlich & King, 1994). A linguistic analysis of representational practices in feminist research is not only instrumental for illuminating instances of sexism, but also for understanding how gender itself is constructed through language:

Feminist analysis aims to draw attention to and change the way that gender is represented, since it is clear that a great many of these representational practices are not in the interests of either women or men. Thus feminist stylistic analysis is concerned not only to describe sexism in a text, but also to analyse the way that point of view, agency, metaphor, or transitivity are unexpectedly closely related to matters of gender. (Mills, 1995, p. 1)

Critical discourse analysis similarly holds that language is symbolically and materially implicated in the reproduction of social relations (Fairclough, 1995). Discourses are understood as “practices that systematically form the object of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, p.49). In this dissertation I contribute to the understanding of how discourses around feminists as creative and political subjects are created and drawn upon by both bloggers and their networked audiences through an analysis of the meanings, silences, inconsistencies, thematic patterns, and value judgments in a variety of texts published in Canada and the United States of America from 2011 to 2015, including interview transcripts, blog entries, media commentaries and comment sections.

I do a close discursive reading of interviews I conducted with twelve feminist bloggers who were recruited through targeted solicitations, snowball sampling, and a call for research participants circulated via listservs and social media. Although my call for research participants was distributed through several social media networks, Twitter proved to be the most useful tool for participant recruitment since all research participants had either a personal Twitter account, a Twitter account associated with their blog, or both.

Open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted over the telephone and video-chatting software. Out of twelve participants, ten were located in Canada and two in the United States; ten identified as white, one as Latina and one as South Asian; all bloggers identified as women, and two of them as transgender women. All bloggers interviewed had either completed or were in the process of completing post-secondary education; several bloggers had undergraduate or graduate degrees in Women and Gender Studies. To my knowledge, the majority of participants had “day” jobs in addition to doing largely unpaid blogging work.

My open-ended interviews with bloggers went in many different directions. While all bloggers agree that harassment and verbal violence online are systemic issues embedded in preexisting gender hierarchies that are detrimental to public discourse, not everyone sees the problem of violent speech as central to their own networked participation. In fact, some bloggers emphasize having difficulty with other issues such as managing audiences, handling disagreements among feminists, or responding to legitimate criticisms within the blogging community. Therefore, it is important that the role of violent speech in the feminist blogosphere does not overdetermine further analysis.

It is possible that this research has inadvertently been shaped by a degree of selection bias. Since the call for research participants was circulated primarily through social media, it may not have reached feminist bloggers who have quit public writing online, whether as a result of online abuse or other life circumstances.

Prior to interviews, I familiarized myself with each blogger's public perspectives on gender politics. Although I prepared a set of questions prior to the interviews, I tailored additional questions to individual participants in order to reflect the particular leanings and narratives of each blog. For example, I asked bloggers to clarify certain themes found on their blogs or talk more about incidents I had witnessed in their social media interactions. In this way, the power relationship between myself and the interviewees was asymmetrical – while none of the bloggers knew me before the start of the research, I knew of them and had followed some of their blogs even before this project was conceived.

The sample reflects the diversity of bloggers and the breadth of blogging practices. Some blogs were updated daily, others weekly, and one blog in the study was updated only a few times per year. Blogs in the sample range from personal pages to professional multi-author platforms

that generally resemble a magazine format. During the time I conducted the interviews, the most popular blog in the sample, whose author chooses to remain anonymous, attracted twenty thousand monthly visitors while other blogs were only read by family and friends. All bloggers but one published their blogs under their full names, indicating a trend towards identifiable authorship discussed further in Chapter 4.

Over the course of my research I observed the transformation of many blogs in this study. Blogs such as Gender Focus and Feminist Current grew into web publications with regular contributors. Following feminist conflicts within the blog's participants, The F-Word embraced an intersectional approach to feminism. Others underwent little to no transformation. The FBomb maintained its scope and format, changing relatively little over time. Jaspreet's blog was dormant at the time of writing. Choice Joyce alternated between brief spikes of activity and periods of hibernation. Given the varying degrees of publicity and levels of blog activity, the intensity and incidence of verbal violence directed at feminist bloggers varied dramatically. Even different contributors to the same blog faced different amounts of harassment. While Nicole Deagan from The F-Word was shocked with the amount of hate mail she received, Caity Goerke's experience at The F-Word was positive. These differences attest to the dynamic and heterogeneous nature of blogging experiences and I caution against making definitive generalizations about interactive practices in the feminist blogosphere.

2.2. Securing access through networked structures of belonging

The question of power is central to feminist work on research methods and methodologies. In an attempt to democratize the power relations embedded in the research process, feminist scholars have proposed the term "research participant" as a way to acknowledge the active role that research subjects have as agents in creating – rather than one-

directionally transmitting – research data (Sieber, 1998). The term “research participant” is especially useful in participatory action research (PAR) projects where community members have an important role in setting research agendas and interpreting research findings. Outside of PAR methodologies, the term “research participant” is more a strategy of politeness and marker of respect rather than a reflection of a meaningful redistribution of power.

Although I distributed a call for research *participants*, the term “research subject” would be equally suitable since this project does not constitute participatory action research as bloggers whom I interviewed did not set my research agenda or interpret my findings. This research is, however, informed by feminist approaches to knowledge production. In particular, the methodological approach towards interviewing is based on principles articulated by Ann Oakley (1988, 2016), a sociologist who situated feminist interviewing in opposition to positivist notions of detached and objectivist research practice. Instead of seeing interviewing as a mechanical instrument of research process, Oakley's (1988, 2016) approach highlights a need for recognizing interviewees as knowledge-producing agents.

Oakley's (1988) work on feminist interviewing has been critiqued for relying on notions of shared gendered oppression without fully interrogating the power imbalances that can stem from differences *between* women. For example, concerns about interviewing vulnerable and marginalized populations – or “researching down” - center on how researchers can knowingly or unwittingly exploit and endanger marginally positioned research subjects. Another type of inquiry focuses on negotiating power when “researching up” or studying privileged groups such as policy-makers and business elites. In this project, I research “horizontally” rather than “up” or “down”, but this should not be read as suggesting that power is distributed evenly in such projects. Rather, power shifts throughout “horizontal” communicative encounters. Despite the

breadth of ethical issues covered within the field of Internet studies, the complexities surrounding a researcher's social location are rarely made explicit. Even though a number of feminist theorists have drawn attention to the importance of power dynamics within qualitative research settings (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1983; Devault, 1997), with a few notable exceptions (Morrow, Hawkins, & Kern, 2014; Senft, 2008), feminist media research continues to assume that Internet researchers are neutral “observers” within the fabric of networked spaces.

As a researcher, I use my interpretative authority to construct narratives and arguments based on what bloggers shared with me and what I infer from their public posts. However, my authority as a researcher is complicated by the dynamics of Internet research. In this research project, I have access to institutional power that allows me to design, conduct and eventually disseminate research through publications and conference presentations. Research participants, in turn, hold power in terms of the networked connections they have built through their writing and activist work. When I started this research project as an international doctoral student, I was a cultural and linguistic “outsider” within Canadian feminist networks despite my involvement in feminist publishing. Entering the feminist blogosphere as a researcher was not a straightforward process since the blogosphere is a territory with alliances and cliques, messy editorial politics, unspoken codes of conduct based on localized digital histories. Such practices are often invisible or unintelligible to outsiders. To appeal to prospective participants as a trusted researcher, I engaged in practices of self-editing to secure my participation, inclusion, and circulation in the feminist social media scene. In particular, I adopted what I now recognize as self-branding practices: emphasizing my institutional connections, listing scholarly interests in a Twitter bio, and extending my academic identity across several platforms.

As in life, power is unequally distributed in social networks. Some feminist Twitter accounts have more currency than others based on their content, reputation, and established affiliations. Feminists are likely to have on their radar Twitter users who have solid ties with “offline” academic, activist and media spheres. Participation on Twitter's digital marketplace further solidifies a user’s social capital. Feminist Twitter users employ hashtags and other conversational tools such as @replies to build their popularity by tweeting about conference travels, publications, and wider community involvement. They emphasize institutional and media connections via promoting news, blog posts, calls for papers and other information-rich content. Thus, a user’s brand travels along established knowledge networks, and dialogic Twitter practices serve to further legitimize and replicate patterns of exclusion and privilege already present in the feminist blogosphere at large. These asymmetries are captured poignantly by Rachel Leow (2010) in her critique of systematic exclusion of non-Western bloggers from the circles of Western feminist academics:

if there is in fact something singular and interconnected called “the feminist blogosphere,” it would seem to consist in the same hierarchies of popularity, reaffirmed by reciprocal linking and citations, and the same linguistically and culturally specific view of the “Top” that dominates real world academia. (p.241)

While my first few months on Twitter were unremarkable in terms of interactions, hailing other users into active relationship by drawing on shared cultural capital conferred legitimacy to my academic identity. Feminist bloggers started adding my profile to their lists and actively retweeting my call for research participants after I had accumulated approximately two hundred followers and had become a member of their digital feminist publics. After all, “networking only works if you are already somewhat inside the network” (Marwick, 2013, p. 92).

2.3. Publicness and confidentiality

Unlike ethnography, where researchers traditionally view data “as a gift from their informants, with all the implications of reciprocity that gift exchange implies” (Falzon, 2012, p. 1), a study of digital media does not presuppose a close relationship between a researcher and research subjects, and thus amplifies opportunities for surveillance and exploitation. Overall, my approach to digital media research reflects an attempt to find situated, context-specific and reflexive answers to the questions around protecting privacy within the publicity-oriented mediated communication. Each platform presupposes particular expectations around privacy and confidentiality. In this project I study publicly accessible blogs and social media accounts. Most bloggers have multiple social media accounts, and accounts in a “friends-only” format are not used in this research except when referenced in secondary sources such as news articles.

As the boundaries between digital texts are continuously redrawn by networked participants, so too are the processes for researching them. Research design determines the ethical parameters for conceptualizing networked users as either authors of public texts or research participants protected by ethical codes (McKee & DeVoss, 2007). To complete my research it was necessary to identify blogs suitable for analysis, which first required determining whether bloggers are best understood as research participants or as authors whose posts are intended as public texts. For the purposes of this particular research project, the bloggers I interviewed are considered research participants. Prior to interviewing, they were informed about the project’s research goals and asked to send a signed informed consent form by email. In light of the fact that some bloggers develop a consistent digital presence, either by using their real names or pseudonyms, I asked each blogger if they would like to remain anonymous or if they

prefer to be referred to by their names or the handles they use online at the same time that I clarified my commitment to ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of interviewees.

The bloggers I refer to who are not interviewed, but whose comments and posts are publicly available on the Internet, are considered authors. According to York University's ethical guidelines, if a site is reasonably assumed to be public, research related to it is not subject to an ethics review. Likewise, the recommendations issued by the Association of Internet Researchers state that "the greater the acknowledged publicity of the venue, the less obligation there may be to protect individual privacy, confidentiality, right to informed consent" (Ess & the AoIR ethics working committee, 2002, p.5).

2.4. Skype interviewing as a method

The majority of interviews for this project were conducted via Skype, a Microsoft-owned software providing voice calls, video-conferencing, file sharing and text chat services for individuals and businesses. Although a number of video conferencing software packages are available, Skype is one of the most widely used tools. In this research, the choice of video-conferencing over face-to-face interviews was practical because research subjects were located in various parts of Canada and the United States, which made travel by the interviewer or interviewees difficult.

In this section, I offer a self-reflection of the interviewing process, and suggest that Skype can reshape research inquiries by diverting attention, fragmenting presence and foregrounding the long-standing concerns around trust and confidentiality in the research process. For the past six years I have used Skype daily in my personal life, for maintaining transnational kinship ties, as well as in my professional life. Using this technology in both my personal and professional

life has led me to notice how it enables new relational processes and reshapes intimate communicative encounters across spatial boundaries.

Live video streaming is a cost-effective and convenient way to reach geographically dispersed research subjects. Although live video-conferencing interviews may seem a later incarnation of the earlier method of telephone interviewing, Skype is embedded in the new conditions of information exchange, and is, therefore, qualitatively different from its predecessors. As a mixed-media environment enhanced by synchronous chat functionality, video-conferencing provides a rich array of data for analysis by combining the aspects of a face-to-face interaction and a telephone conversation. Some of additional logistical benefits of video-conferencing include greater flexibility in scheduling interviews and fewer safety concerns since such interviews typically take place in interviewees' homes or offices (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013).

At the same time, the use of video-conferencing gives rise to a number of ethical uncertainties and practical complications. Prospective research subjects who are not familiar with videoconferencing technology are less likely to participate in research involving Skype interviewing (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013). In my sample, the majority of bloggers were familiar and comfortable with using video-conferencing. Given that many of them developed technological competency through their interest in "geek" computer cultures and video gaming, this is not surprising.

Participants may also be reluctant or embarrassed to have the interview be video recorded (Hay-Gibson, 2010). For my research, I only recorded voice tracks of the interviews. In fact, some participants preferred voice-calling over video-calling. Aside from personal preference, other reasons for opting out from video-conferencing include the lack of proper video-recording

equipment or an Internet connection too slow for video streaming. This preference should be discussed in advance during the stage of interview arrangements, so that the interviewer does not intrude with an unwelcome video call.

Technological disruptions such as pauses, abrupt disconnections, dropped calls and inaudible segments are additionally a matter of concern in videoconferencing (Seitz, 2015). I encountered several technological issues during interviews, some of which rendered one interview only partially usable.

Having situated some practical benefits and limitations of using video conferencing for research purposes, I turn to reflections on the intersubjective qualities of research encounters in Skype. My experience of conducting interviewing using Skype is in line with observations that communication mediated by videoconferencing can impede conversational patterns such as interrupting and taking turns, which can lead to speakers taking fewer turns and making fewer interruptions compared to face-to-face conversations (Fägersten, 2010).

By mediating visual and conversational exchanges, Skype exemplifies patterns of attention present in digital cultures. On the Internet, attention is most often partial and conversations are fleeting; they can be paused, dropped and suspended with ease (Balick, 2013), and one's attention continuously shifts as it moves between platforms, applications, notifications, messages, links, and updates. People tend to use social media in a mode of continuous partial attention, a term coined by technology expert Linda Stone (2008), which means that one's attention is on high alert and in a continuous state of flux. In Stone's (2008) words, it is a behaviour intended to "keep a top priority in focus, while, at the same time, scanning the periphery to see if we are missing other opportunities" (para.4).

For example, during my Skype interviews, I would catch a glimpse of an email notification popping up in the corner of my screen, distracting me for a moment. A few times, an interviewee would stop and say “let me look this up”, which would be followed by the sound of typing and a pause in speaking. In such moments, the process would be disrupted or distracted, but these disruptions also provided me, as an interviewer, an opportunity to think about the conversation I was having, to better phrase my next question.

One of Skype’s default features, picture-in-picture, is another example of how technological design can enable the dispersed and fragmentary continuous partial attention. During a video Skype conversation, not only does each speaker see a video of their conversation partner, but they also see a live video of themselves in real time, a picture of themselves within a picture of the other person. This picture-in-picture box can be minimized, enlarged, or dragged across the screen but, in certain versions of Skype, it cannot be turned off without disabling the video feed entirely. Thus, a user must agree to see the “mirror” of themselves as the condition of video broadcasting themselves to another person via Skype. Embedded in Skype’s technological design, the picture-in-picture feature functions as a distraction and as a mandatory tool of self-surveillance.

I can look at a digital, live “mirror” of myself during a Skype video conversation and, by looking at this mirror, engage in casting a normalizing gaze on myself: I check whether my facial expressions, gestures, and body language align with the context of the conversation. As Linda Layne (2010) points out in her work on feminist technology, “politics can be designed into the materiality of things” (p.ix). The politics of Skype incorporate compulsory self-monitoring consistent with the wider commercial digital context, which is marked by values of self-improvement and self-regulation. According to queries in online tech support groups, the picture-

in-picture feature appears to bother some users. The easiest “solution” to this discontent with the picture-in-picture feature so far is a “low-tech” one: a user can cover the video of themselves with a post-it note or another object. Through such practices, users actively resist the communicative path offered to them by the designers of Skype technology.

To a large degree, rapport on Skype is simulated and self-consciously performed rather than experienced. To draw on Jean Baudrillard's (1994) notion of hyper-reality, eye contact becomes a simulacrum, a representation without a referent. While conducting Skype interviews my attention is dispersed in several directions: it can be directed at the main video of the interlocutor, at the camera, at the small video of myself, or elsewhere on the screen, or beyond the screen entirely. In order to look at the face of the person I'm talking to, I need to look directly at the screen. To simulate eye contact with the interviewee, I need to shift the direction of my gaze and look at the camera and, since the camera is located above the screen, I lose sight of the other person. Thus, despite the abundance of visual cues, establishing eye contact on Skype, in its current format, is impossible. The act of looking into the eyes of another person becomes devoid of its power to acknowledge and validate the relationship in process.

Given its limited user agency, can Skype be a feminist technology? Can it lend itself to feminist research methods? Videoconferencing is superior in some ways to telephone interviewing because it enhances long-distance interviewing by providing a rich array of facial and bodily cues. However, given the fragmentary nature of attention Skype generates for its users, these cues are often difficult to read or even register when that attention is directed elsewhere. Coupled with a hyper-real practice of simulated eye contact, Skype videos disrupt and complicate the conversational dynamics of the interview process. Given that connection, or rapport, is often understood as a necessary component of feminist research, one should be

mindful of the difficulties video-conferencing platforms pose to establishing interpersonal connections.

More importantly, trust and confidentiality can be compromised in a Skype research encounter. During a video-conferencing call, the interviewer and interviewee usually only see each other from the waist up, and other people in the room may not be visible (Glassmeyer & Dibbs, 2012). Likewise, it is easy to take a screen capture or record a conversation without getting explicit permission to do so from the research participant. Paradoxically, Skype can become a space of uncertainty even if participants are located in the familiar spaces of their homes and offices. Since neither speaker is fully cognizant of the interview environment in its totality, it is quite difficult to ensure that the digital space is, indeed, confidential and conducive to establishing rapport.

Although Skype has become a useful tool for qualitative interviewing, it is important to remain critical of celebratory narratives of technological progress. While the affordances of Skype can enhance and expand multimedia parameters of research, they can also foster a particular type of communicative encounter that fragments presence and raises questions around trust and confidentiality in the research process.

2.5. Situating blogs as sites of cultural production

In this section I situate the blogosphere as a networked research field where collective dynamics are mediated by the socio-technical mechanisms of multimodality and interactivity. Drawing on the literature in media studies, I identify key characteristics of blogging as a communicative practice and highlight the ways in which these characteristics shape the directions of this research.

Over the past fifteen years blogging has become a routine form of digital self-publishing that branches into countless genres, technological formats, and thematic directions. The word “blogosphere” has become an accepted umbrella term for the sum of blogs that share similar cultural positions. When I refer to the “feminist blogosphere”, to underscore the networked nature of online self-expression actualized within the webs of reciprocal socio-technical relations such as linking, sharing, emailing, forwarding, and commenting, I mean a loose collectivity of self-identified feminist writers and their audiences. The boundaries of the feminist blogosphere are often difficult to define because creative expressions by feminist bloggers tend to exceed the boundaries of their blogs. Bloggers often publish commentaries and opinions pieces across a variety of media, promote their work on social networks, comment on other people’s writing, and maintain public profiles on institutional pages. For many bloggers, the act of online text making, rather than a commitment to a particular type of a web page, is constitutive of a blogger's identity (Baumer, Sueyoshi, & Tomlinson, 2008; boyd, 2006).

Blogs are apparatuses for identity construction, interactive spaces for consciousness raising, sources of alternative knowledges, and instruments for community building (Friedman, 2010; Keller, 2012; Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012; Wood, 2008). Given the varied forms of content produced by bloggers, I broadly understand blogging as an act of writing on the Internet, which encompasses video-production, micro-blogging and other forms of creative practice. This broad understanding of blogs as networked digital expressions is supported by Rosenberg's (2010) observation that online self-publishing was not invented as a stable genre at a particular moment in time, but evolved in a multitude of technological formats. The blogosphere, too, will be understood in porous terms as converging media which “allows for the networked, decentralized, distributed discussion and deliberation on a wide range of topics” (Bruns, Kirchhoff, & Nicolai,

2009, p. 2). In contrast to the common definition of “blogs” as web pages with dated entries that are arranged and archived in a reverse chronological order (Hindman, 2009; Rosenberg, 2010), the open-ended interpretation of blogs as forms of decentralized interactive self-publishing allows for a more flexible and creative approach to choosing research sites for the multi-sited inquiry this research project requires.

Most blogs share a number of common characteristics marking them a distinct, yet fluid type of many-to-many, distributed communication. Building on existing literature in media and Internet studies, I unpack five characteristics that I consider to be defining features of blogging as a digital practice: a relatively low cost of entry, incompleteness, multimodality, interactivity, and editorial freedom. Although these characteristics are present in earlier media forms, they have reached unparalleled levels of influence in the blogosphere, allowing for novel practices of self-expression.

The *cost of entering* blogosphere is relatively low compared to the cost of producing earlier forms of mass media such as network television, radio, or print materials. Access to the Internet is the only requirement for creating a blog, although sophisticated design and an increase in usability incur additional costs associated with specialized skills, software, and web hosting services. Initially the territory of technology enthusiasts and computer professionals, online writing became popular in the general public due to the lowering entry costs combined with the development of easy-to-use publishing software and managing tools such as RSS and permalinks that gave users control over editing, modifying and sharing their content (Rosenberg, 2010). As often happens with new technologies and other types of innovation, “newness” is commonly understood as impetus for social change. For example, the rapid rise of Blogger, LiveJournal, WordPress, and other new blogging environments engendered a wave of

scholarship seeking to capture what was thought to be the revolutionary potential of new media to become a democratizing force (Rosenberg, 2010). As this dissertation makes evident, the reality of blogging is far messier than either celebratory or pessimistic predictions.

There is a quality of *incompleteness* evident in digital architectures as well as in the types of relationships, interactive patterns, and reading practices that these architectures make possible. The Internet is a distributed communicative field, built through hypertext, a type of text that invites users to seamlessly move between digital pages, profiles, and websites. Publishing in a hyper-textual format means that each text is a step to elsewhere, a node embedded in multiple networked relations. The incomplete, texts-in-the-un/making, quality of blogs is not only evident in the hyper-textual, non-linear, ever-shifting landscape of the blogosphere, but also in the ways in which digital interfaces enable continuous change: blog entries can be edited, deleted or hidden from view, updates often stop without a warning and readers' comments might appear long after the blog has been abandoned.

Unlike traditional media, which are bounded by production and publishing schedules, the majority of self-publishing is intermittent and discontinuous. The reading process, too, involves constant monitoring of ever expanding digital streams of posts, comments, and replies. When a digital field of interest becomes too big to monitor, a user might choose to occasionally engage with digital streams without a linear start-to-fishing reading process. Microblogging services are emblematic of this tendency. They can be thought of as “awareness systems” that are “always-on” and can be moved from the background to the foreground according to the user's communicative needs (Hermida, 2010, p.301).

In addition to enabling flexible methods of media consumption and production, digital incompleteness makes possible types of expressions that are less formal compared to print or

broadcast formats. In her article on blogging and the academy, feminist historian Rachel Leow (2010) comments on the incomplete quality of blogs, calling them “rough repositories where what ought to be private is made unconscionably public” (p.235), where ideas are left in the making, raw and unrefined. In contrast to the dense prose of feminist academia, the language of feminist blogging is playful and informal, facilitating new lines of inquiry and initiating public conversations (Leow, 2010).

The incompleteness of digital texts can lead to methodological difficulties for researchers with regards to delineating research field parameters. While all research involves subjective, and often arbitrary, decisions around data collection, the incompleteness of online texts amplifies these difficulties by eroding the boundaries and end points of texts. How many comments should be included in the analysis of a blog? Is it ethical to quote deleted digital texts, or is it acceptable to use the Internet's retrieval capabilities? When a text is published on several platforms, which one of these platforms should be designated as the site of research and analysis? In each case, the answer must be contingent, and based on ethical and practical considerations.

The ever changing and incomplete quality of digital media poses additional challenges for researchers when blogs posts are deleted or significantly modified. If a researcher does not have screen captures of the blog, she or he can do little other than try to recover some of the deleted or modified blogs posts through the service The Internet Archive (www.archive.org). Comments managed by third-party applications are not always archived by this service and have thus become one of the most ephemeral features of online conversations.

Multimodality refers to the ways in which written, graphic and video formats converge within a digital text. Although multimodal elements can be found in earlier media formats, networked communication has intensified multimodal representations (Lim, Nekmat, & Nahar,

2011). The impact of multimodality is twofold. First, it allows for the creation of digital artifacts where subjectivity is constructed in unique and unexpected ways through the re-mixing of different media forms. To borrow the words of Niels van Doorn (2011), users in the multimodal mediasphere “write each other’s ‘digital body’ (i.e. their user profiles) into being” (p.535) to represent and reconfigure gendered and sexualized aspects of their embodied selves.

Second, the shift towards multimodality has led to gradual changes in semiotic modes of representation. In multimodal environments, visual and paratextual parameters of digital artifacts become important carriers of situated meanings. For example, social media users employ pictorial representations to make aspects of their identities visible when they change profile pictures to mark life events, to protest or support a cause. In one case, Facebook users applied a pink photo filter to their profile pictures in support of Planned Parenthood (Lazarro, 2015), while others have overlaid their profile pictures with rainbow colours to express their affinity with LGBT communities during Pride Weeks. One paradigmatic example of strategic visual self-representations is the “Feminist Coming Out Day” initiative where activists in several American universities, including Harvard University, University of Michigan, and University of Memphis, encouraged fellow students to change their Facebook profile pictures to a photo of a short slogan declaring their feminist identity. This campaign is noteworthy for conceptualizing a feminist identity as a source of anxiety kept hidden from a public view until a “coming out” moment. The idea of having a socially sanctioned, “closeted”, feminist selfhood intersects with the understanding that Facebook is an important platform for “coming out”, or publicly stating political affiliations that may previously have been held private. The performative practices of the “Feminist Coming Out Day” initiative, in terms of multimodality, show that a profile picture alone, without any accompanying changes in written speech, carries some political significance

for networked audiences. Thus, for researchers, the multimodality of online media translates into the need to develop a competency in visual analysis of its various interface elements, including post sequences, headings, avatars, and other “arbitrary” micro-texts, that, in fact, carry situated meanings.

The characteristic of online communication I examine most closely in this dissertation, *interactivity*, refers to a capacity for synchronous and asynchronous multi-way communication. Commenting, sharing, linking, and other multimodal interactive practices allow for a level of engagement not available in previous forms of media. In a general sense, interactivity is a feature of a medium that allows users to influence the mediated experience through changing its form or content (Lombard & Snyder-Duch, 2001). As this definition points out, an interactive capacity of digital media enables audiences to shape the form and content of online writing through human/computer configurations and inter-human dialogues.

Since a digital text is literally co-created by its author and its audiences (Kirby, 2009), its meaning “exists neither solely in the blog itself nor solely in the reader, but rather in the reader’s active interpretation of, and interaction with, the blog” (Baumer et al., 2008, p. 5). In the interactive environments constituted through blogger-audience performances (Wall, 2005), authorship practices undergo a transformation. As Niels Ole Finnemann (2014) maintains, “since digital texts are dynamic and historical in their inner nature, their provenance can only be established in the form of dynamically aggregated histories” (p. 106). Within the context of feminist research, these expanded modes of authorship reshape and redirect the ways in which feminists, their allies, and their opponents establish social ties, exchange information, and organize collectively.

Interactivity has been celebrated in media studies and feminist theory for opening up multiple conversations among spatially dispersed audiences. Due to their interactive affordances, blogs have been conceptualized as spaces for self-expression, collective production of meanings, and negotiations of social norms (Lövheim, 2011). However, the framing of interactivity as unproblematically beneficial for the mediasphere overlooks the fact that high levels of interactivity can lead to contestations over blog ownership by networked audiences. As evidenced by the dynamics on popular blogs, active participation in the comment sections allows users not only to develop a sense of belonging, but also a sense of ownership over the blog. This sense of ownership can manifest in disruptive displays of discontent such as boycotts and digital “walk-outs” when editorial decisions do not match audience expectations.

In her research on managing disruptive users in magazine forums, Amy Binns (2012) examines how a sense of collective ownership can have ambivalent implications for media producers whose interests come into conflict with the interests of their audiences. According to Binns (2012), online editors try to retain their audience through reader-centered content and interactive features such as comment sections, at the same time that they become concerned when readers transgress normative expectations of engagement:

Editors generally want the readers to feel that the magazine belongs to them, going to great lengths to feature readers through letters pages or make-over shoots. It is standard practice to “reflect the reader back at them” by showing people of the same demographic and background. This attracts buyers and site visitors. However, it also means users may feel they can do what they like on “their” site. (p. 549)

To state that interactivity is inherently productive is to overlook the multiple conflictual positionings it generates. The contested sense of ownership, coupled with gate-keeping

mechanisms through which participants establish relational boundaries and hierarchies, challenges the egalitarian framework of much existing media theory on interactivity.

Finally, the notion of *editorial freedom* refers to the possibility of publishing and distributing a wide variety of texts, many of which would have been previously constrained to an author's immediate circles of friends and colleagues. This freedom is for the most part enabled by the low cost of entry coupled with an absence of traditional gate-keepers – editors, publishers, and advertisers—who filter information based on their judgments about its quality, credibility, timeliness, commercial potential, political bias, as well as a myriad of other factors. There are, however, two critical points to be made about editorial freedom as a characteristic of the blogosphere: the first is that power dynamics inform all types of writing and the second is that there is a developing trend towards the professionalization of the blogosphere accompanied by a subsequent narrowing of acceptable forms of self-expression.

While online communication does allow for an unprecedented broadening of public discourse, it is important to note that editorial freedom is most often bounded and uncertain, even if the blogosphere may seem to exist independently of institutional constraints. In reality, the further a blog integrates itself into the interactive dynamics of commercialized digital economies, the more editorial freedom is constrained by interpersonal tensions within the blogosphere, bloggers' projections about their real and imagined audiences, and wider epistemic discourses that shape intellectual practices. As Ganaele Langlois (2013) observes in her examination the impact of governance logics on participatory platforms, communication is always interconnected with power in so far as “communicative practices enact specific assumptions about how things can make sense, and about the roles, hierarchies, and legitimate practices between authors/producers and readers/consumers” (p. 97). To illustrate Langlois's point, consider

practices in widely read feminist blogs and blogging collectives. Group blogs tend to cover a wider range of topics and attract a bigger audience than most single-author blogs (Cenite, Detenber, Koh, Lim, & Soon, 2009). User interactions in group blogs are managed through explicit and implicit editorial policies on preferred forms of self-expression, which popular feminist blogs tend to indicate in “comment policies” sections. Expectations around self-expression might include restrictions around sexist, racist, ableist or otherwise offending language. In addition, many feminist blogs include a policy on linking to graphic or sexually explicit content⁴.

The professionalization of blogging is evident in the abovementioned adoption of editorial policies, and is a part of trends in larger organizational changes. As blogs become more successful, they often transition into corporate entities or become integrated into larger organizations, if they did not emerge as newspapers' own platforms to begin with, all of which contributes to the institutionalization of the field (Shaw, 2013). The professionalization of blogging can result in blogs having access to consistent teams, content and revenue streams, but it puts constraints a blog's editorial freedom through advertising requirements, copyright and other legal and financial parameters.

While the five characteristics discussed above can be found in earlier forms of mass media, blogging expands these phenomena on a massive scale (Graves, 2007). These characteristics impact this research project because the costs of maintaining a blogger's digital presence, degrees of incompleteness of communication practices, variations in constraints on editorial freedom, affordances of multimodality and the demands of interactivity all influence the

4 For example, the term “trigger warning” originated in the feminist blogosphere as an editorial policy to warn readers about graphic scenes of sexual violence that might invoke painful memories among survivors of trauma.

ways in which bloggers choose to respond to violent, anti-feminist speech while navigating participatory dynamics of social media.

2.6. Speech communities and networked publics

In this section I mobilize the concepts of *speech community* and *networked public*. While the former is rooted in linguistics and the latter was developed in media studies, these terms complement each other by highlighting collective aspects of communicative encounters.

To understand how shared meanings emerge in the networked communicative spaces of the blogosphere, I use the notion of a speech community, which Halliday (1978) defines as: “a group of people who (1) are linked by some form of social organization, (2) talk to each other, and (3) all speak alike” (p.154). The concept of a speech community is useful for exploring the generative potentialities of language to embody and constitute social and cultural participation. It is important to note that Halliday's assertion that members of speech community “all speak alike” is reductive, and one needs to consider linguistic varieties present in speech communities (Hymes, 1995).

The notion of community has been problematized at different times as insufficient for analyzing the heterogeneity of variously positioned subjects. Normative ideals of community present social relations in a static binary of authenticity or inauthenticity: where authenticity stands for unity and face-to-face interactions, inauthenticity stands for alienation and isolation (Young, 1986). As Iris Marion Young (1986) maintains,

The ideal of community presumes subjects who are present to themselves and presumes subjects can understand one another as they understand themselves. It thus denies the difference between subjects. (pp.1-2)

The ideal of united community becomes unsettled by subjects who occupy multiple and conflicting subject positions. Feminist studies of digital media stage an intervention into this kind of discussion about community by emphasizing the messy intersections of identities and positionalities formed in online communities, and by examining the range of gendered and raced embodiments in digital (self)representations, and by critically interrogating the materiality of community building practices (Daniels, 2009; Paasonen, 2011). For example, research on queer online communities has shown that such spaces can be exclusionary to members whose race intersects with sexuality in ways that contradict common assumptions around whiteness as a default identity (Gosine 2007; Padilla 1998).

However, even a complex notion of community cannot account for certain shifts in how social groups are formed and maintained within what Manuel Castells calls “the network society” consisting of endlessly expanding clusters of connections. In recent years, there has been a conceptual shift from theorizing online interactions as happening in virtual communities to an emphasis on decentered and geographically dispersed social networks. Some have even suggested that the practice of community is an outdated, “closed” form of sociality that should be superseded by new “open” networks which create fleeting yet meaningful social encounters (Wittel, 2001). Rather than dichotomizing between communities and networks, I stress their continuity on a spectrum of networked engagements. A community model is helpful for understanding interactions in groups of people who are brought together by shared interests and who engage in regular communication. Practices such as micro-blogging and video-sharing can be better understood through the social network model since they thrive on fleeting, dynamic and heterogeneous interlinkages that do not require, yet do not preclude, an identifiable collectivity.

Online communities and social networks together comprise a networked audience, also called networked public or mediated public, in which members are connected to each other and to producers of digital content (boyd, 2010). A networked audience, in contrast to a broadcast audience with limited feedback mechanisms, follows a many-to-many structure, and has high levels of interactivity and complex social relationships (boyd, 2010). Networked audiences are temporary; they quickly assemble into “intimate publics” (Berlant, 2011, p.22), and collectively produce affective expressions in response to current events. Thinking about the blogosphere in terms of networked audiences helps illuminate the collective creation of discourses around verbal violence and anti-feminist violent speech.

In this chapter, I provided a rationale for research design and methods, elaborated on the ethical considerations of studying digital environments and situated the blogosphere as a research field. Finally, I briefly introduced the terms *speech communities* and *networked publics* as conceptual tools useful for analyzing groups of strangers and known others who form mediated relationships in the blogosphere and on social media. The subsequent chapters offer an analysis of how feminist bloggers grapple with interactive dynamics of networked publics that are often hostile to feminist agendas.

CHAPTER 3: POLITICIZING VIOLENT SPEECH

3.1. Bridging narratives across the blogosphere

This chapter is organized around two case studies involving harassment of feminist bloggers Anita Sarkeesian and Steph Guthrie. I identify their material and textual resistances to violent speech directed towards them, their productive effects and limitations. Although Sarkeesian's and Guthrie's feminist projects became visible through different channels and via different trajectories, there are several points of continuity in how their experiences reflect the problematics of gendered digital dynamics. When Guthrie and Sarkeesian publicly responded to online harassment, their responses resonated throughout networked publics and attracted media attention to the problem of verbal violence towards feminist bloggers. Their narratives of resistance to victimization became discursive sites through which bloggers, journalists, feminist activists, anti-feminist speech communities and other communicators responded to the complexities surrounding gendered aspects of violent speech. Collating their stories with discursive readings of similar narratives across the feminist blogosphere, I develop the claim that the routine dismissal of violent speech against feminist bloggers is buttressed by a post-feminist perspective on violence as a gender-neutral issue and the selective application the digital dualism framework. Then, I critically assess practices of archiving, virality and feminist visibility as tools to counteract problematic communication.

Anita Sarkeesian is an American-based media critic who became known in networked audiences for her YouTube series analyzing representations of gender in popular culture; she blogs at Feminist Frequency (www.feministfrequency.com) and maintains a Twitter account (@femfreq) followed by more than 500,000 people. Although this number of followers is rather modest compared to millions of people who follow high-profile entertainers and corporate

brands, it nevertheless represents a significant portion of feminist networked publics and makes @femfreq one the most popular feminist Twitter accounts alongside @GloriaSteinem, @EvrydayFeminism, @JessicaValenti, @Feministing and other collectives and media personae. Sarkeesian attained the status of feminist public intellectual through her digital media work, and now gives university lectures and interviews for such publications as *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*. Sarkeesian did not respond to my invitation to participate in this research, so I rely on her public tweets, blog posts and videos, as well as an array of secondary sources, to generate multiple interpretations of Sarkeesian's politics concerning violent speech in digital media cultures.

In 2012 Sarkeesian started a Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign (www.kickstarter.com) to raise money for the production of a project aimed at deconstructing sexist clichés in video games, *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*, which was met with extended harassment campaigns that included repeated hacking incidents of her blog and threats of violence directed at her. One of the most egregious examples of this abuse is the “Beat up Anita Sarkeesian” flash game⁵, which was posted on Newgrounds website (www.newgrounds.com) and circulated in direct response to Sarkeesian's crowd-funding initiative. The game, now deleted, opened with a flash button that read “click here to hit her”, and invited players to punch and bruise a photograph of Sarkeesian's face until her face appears disfigured. The game’s introduction read: “She wants to have equality. Well, here it is. There has been a disgusting larger imbalance of men who get beaten up in games. Let's add a lady to help balance things” (Spurr, 2012, n.p). This statement

5 A similar example of misogynist imagery is *Custer's Revenge* video game that simulated a rape of an Indigenous woman. Originally released in 1982 by Atari, it was remade and circulated online by **Mysticca Games** collective in 2014. Elizabeth LaPensee, Indigenous scholar and game designer, criticized the game on Twitter.

positions Sarkeesian as an agent who “wants to have equality”, yet mocks her political stance by referring to a “disgusting” imbalance of gendered representations of men as “beaten up in games”. The presupposition here is that to “balance things” requires inflicting violence and harm on women. This statement reveals that the game is not only a direct response to Sarkeesian's work, but also a cautionary tale for women who “want to have equality” or challenge the dominant representations of gender in video games. Feminist media critics have argued that video games portray women in a narrow range of stereotypical representations (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000), and within the anti-feminist speech community, this discourse is appropriated, stripped of its analytical acuity and turned against itself.

Sarkeesian's story has been framed in public discourse as a “small victory” over abusers (Reagle, 2015, p.117), and a successful feminist appropriation of negative publicity. It is a common retort by journalists that despite violent attempts of cybermobs to silence Sarkeesian, she surpassed her fund-raising goal, gained publicity as a speaker and employed herself full-time; in 2014, Feminist Frequency Youtube channel was viewed more than 5.7 million times (Sarkeesian, 2015a). However, the material and discursive implications of violent speech contradict the ethos of feminist triumph. In the time of the writing, two years after the initial mobbing campaign, the backlash against Sarkeesian continues at an intense pace. Threats of rape, death, and mass shootings have made Sarkeesian leave her San Francisco residence and cancel conference talks. When Sarkeesian was scheduled to receive an Ambassador Award at the Game Developers Choice Awards, event organizers received an email threatening to bomb and kill attendees (Crossley, 2014). At one point, to showcase the scope and severity of online harassment, Sarkeesian published screen captures of over 100 hateful tweets directed at her @femfreq Twitter account in one week between January 20, 2015 and January 26, 2015. Here

are a few examples of graphic insults and wishes of death that Sarkeesian have been receiving on the regular basis: “I hope every feminist get their head severed from their shoulders”, “I hope you fucking Kill yourself Get Ice Skates Split your throat And drink bleach”, and “you're a stupid fat cunt die pls?” (as cited in Sarkeesian, 2015b, n.p.). Her supporters are routinely harassed on social media as well: “I say a silent "I'm sorry" to myself every time I retweet or mention anyone on Twitter because I know dozens of harassers stalk my feed” (Sarkeesian, 2014).

The second subject of this analysis is Stephanie (Steph) Guthrie who is a feminist advocate and founder of “Women in Toronto Politics”, a grassroots organization facilitating women's involvement in Toronto’s municipal political scene. In addition to maintaining a personal blog (www.stephguthrie.com), Guthrie is active on Twitter (@amirightfolks). She has written or retweeted more than thirty thousand tweets, and has accrued approximately seven thousand followers.

In 2012 Guthrie, looking for a designer to create a logo for her “Women in Toronto politics” initiative, met with Gregory Alan Elliott, a Toronto-based artist whom she knew from Twitter, to discuss the project. Although the design project did not come to fruition, their interactions on Twitter continued. Eventually Elliott directed a number of harassing tweets at Guthrie who, in turn, resorted to taking legal action. Elliott allegedly sent an unusually large volume of tweets directed at Guthrie and her friend Heather Reilly, who also brought harassment charges against him. In the course of testimony, Guthrie said that although his tweets did not contain threats of physical or sexual violence, the volume and frequency of the Elliott's tweets led her to be concerned about her safety (Hasham, 2014). Although Guthrie and Reilly blocked Elliott on Twitter so he would not be able to contact them, he continued mentioning their user

names and used the hashtag #FascistFeminists to refer to them: “I don't hate women... I don't hate anyone... Oh wait, I *do* dislike these robotic #FascistFeminists idiots who say I hate women. #Topoli”(Elliott, 2012).

I analyze a transcript of my interview with Guthrie and use a number of digital texts, including a video recording of Guthrie's TEDxToronto conference presentation, news articles, and social media posts in order to understand her possible ways of curbing online harassment. In the interview, arranged through targeted solicitation and conducted over video-chat in November of 2013, Guthrie spoke about her experience facing harassment as a blogger whose feminist work is highly visible on social media:

I still get the occasional misogynistic comment, and certainly whenever something happens that puts me back on the radar of people who are keeping tabs on “feminazis”. Like, for example, if I am quoted in an article on men's rights (...) So whenever something like that happens, I can usually count on getting a couple of angry comments ranging from, like, the typical “that's misandrist feminazi bullshit” or whatever.... which, you know, is laughable... Occasionally I get something a bit more violent or creepy, but for the most part, I have found that that kind of stuff is relatively.... like the stuff that could count as death and rape threats... relatively few and far between. Most of it is still hateful, but maybe a bit more benign. (Interview # 5)

Guthrie's lawsuit is reported to be the first criminal case of online harassment over Twitter in Canadian legal history (Casey, 2014), and the interview was conducted when the trial was still in process. During the final stages of this research, after a three-year trial that was widely covered

in Canadian media, Elliot was found not guilty of criminal harassment. The verdict has led to a new wave of social media vitriol directed at Guthrie and feminists in general.

Anita Sarkeesian's story has become a point of reference in academic and media narratives around gendered violent speech while Stephanie Guthrie has been vocal in her support of Sarkeesian and active in raising awareness around online harassment. In this way, Guthrie's and Sarkeesian's narratives speak to each other, share similar concerns, draw on the common themes around online harassment and elicit comparable sets of responses from their networked audiences. These interlinkages allow me to weave their narratives together in a discussion of feminist resistances to violent misogynistic speech. In the sections that follow, I explore how Anita Sarkeesian and Steph Guthrie, as targets of anti-feminist backlash, negotiate their visibility within networked publics.

3.2. “Isn't this just a joke?” Legitimizing experiences of verbal violence

Stephanie Guthrie's response to the harassment she faced was multi-directional. Guthrie formally contacted the Toronto Police Service and took legal action, which resulted in charges of criminal harassment being laid against Elliott. As Guthrie explained in her interview, the police initially did not take her complaints of online harassment seriously:

I had one of them basically laugh at my face and say “isn't this just a joke?”

(Interview # 5)

While Guthrie's legal action eventually put a stop on harassment, the process of bringing the lawsuit forward was fraught with difficulty:

I have found that the police... like, beat cops who are front line people... are not very well inclined to understand, first of all, the severity of harassment, and the second of all, the Internet in general. They just don't get it (...) I was lucky that through my

online connections I was able to find a detective, not a beat cop, who specialized in social media and who could help me out. But in previous cases where I have called the police about, for example, not a prolonged campaign of harassment, but a single death threat, they were completely unhelpful. (Interview # 5)

Victoria, another feminist blogger I interviewed for this research, voiced similar concerns about the dismissal of online harassment in the US legal system:

I would really like to see providers take this seriously as well as law enforcement to take it seriously. To have your Twitter feed, your responses, your replies section filled up with hateful comments, rape threats, and death threats to be taken seriously. I think we are all at this point when we know that the Internet is not anonymous. So even though people create these anonymous throw-away Twitter handles to annoy, and threaten, and harass people... We know that Twitter knows who they are. They have to know. It is this fine line to kind of walk with online privacy issues. But I think once something rises to severe harassment, death and rape threats that should be that point where Twitter will say "OK, here is this person. Go for it", and police actually handled this as opposed to like "yeah, sure, whatever". (Interview # 7)

If the comment made by police officers in response to Guthrie's report of harassment on the Internet, "Isn't this just a joke?", is interpreted as a lack of awareness about the relational dynamics of social media, then an appropriate measure to remedy this lack would be better educating the police force. But this comment also conveys a particular interpretation of the Internet, which holds that certain aspects of networked communication fall outside legal parameters. According to legal scholars, online harassment is often overlooked and trivialized by

website administrators, internet service providers, and law enforcement officers when a complaint is made (Citron, 2009; Seelhoff, 2007).

To understand the ideological underpinnings behind the trivialization of online harassment and violent speech, it is necessary to briefly consider how current justifications of Internet-based harassment and earlier objections to anti-violence legislation rely on similar ideological grounds. Since the 1960s, women's movements across North America have made significant steps towards recognizing spousal rape, domestic violence, and sexual harassment as important social problems that should be addressed in the legal system. However, despite these achievements, remnants of earlier discourses around the naturalness and inevitability of gendered violence continue to circulate in public debates, often in the guise of “post-feminist” rhetoric, which constructs the issue of violence in gender neutral terms, depoliticizing it and placing an equal responsibility for violence on men and women (see, for example, Sommers, 1994). As Stringer (2014) points out in her critique of what she calls “the post-feminist victim theory”, neoliberal rhetoric and post-feminist discourses collide to dismiss feminist concerns about the victimization of women as superfluous; within this discourse, “genuine” claims of victimization become limited to forms of suffering that are the most traumatic, easily recognizable, and directed in a boldly hierarchical, top-down manner (Stringer, 2014). At the same time, online attacks on women are often regarded as “harmless teasing that women should expect, and tolerate, given the Internet’s Wild West norms of behavior” (Citron, 2009, p.373). Thus, I suggest that the impact of everyday experiences of sexism such as a tweeted rape threat, an unsolicited penis photo in a mailbox, or a disparaging “make me a sandwich” remark in an online forum, are often depoliticized and diminished as “just a joke”. A neoliberal post-feminist

subject is supposed to laugh at these jokes and play by Internet rules that celebrate unrestrained self-expression.

Old discourses of violence as natural, trivial, and gender-neutral have resurfaced in a new guise within the context of digital cultures. Renewed and amplified in mediated communication, these discourses hold that the decentralized structures of online interactions justify the “naturalness” and inevitability of online harassment, which is understood as fundamentally different from a person’s “offline” life. The *digital dualism* framework takes the specificity of online environments as its cornerstone, holding that “the digital” sphere is separate from the offline “real world” (Jurgenson, 2011). Originating in the cyberculture discourses of the 1990s, this framework maintains that the digital bears a limited influence on embodied, material reality. The following passage from *A Cyberspace Independence Declaration* captures the optimistic mood of the time:

We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth. We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity. Your legal concepts of property, expression, identity, movement, and context do not apply to us. They are based on matter, and there is no matter here. (Barlow, 1996, para. 9)

This view, however, does not hold up to scrutiny when considered next to the feminist scholarship that questions the offline/online dichotomy, reveals the salience of bodily materiality in supposedly disembodied, virtual environments, and highlights the significance of socioeconomic factors in shaping patterns of Internet access and use (Daniels, 2009; Dibbell, 1993; Nakamura, 2008; Shade, 2014). Still, digital dualism continues to discursively support

post-feminist rhetoric of gender-neutrality where users are discursively refigured as equal nodes in information networks.

Returning to my interview with Guthrie, I suggest that it is important not only to recognize the digital and the “physical” as co-constitutive – this argument has been already made (Jurgenson, 2011), but also to notice how embodied locations contribute to the selective application of dualistic approaches. In some cases, a harm incurred by violent speech is recognized as “real”, while in other cases binary logic is employed to dismiss or trivialize online attacks. The following interview excerpt illustrates how embodied social locations become important for bringing the problem of violent speech to the attention of “offline” institutions. Despite having faced many of the challenges typically associated with using legal channels to stop online personal attacks, Guthrie suggests that her social location, which is marked by privilege in several ways, made legal action a route accessible to her:

When it comes to women, I'm a pretty privileged one, right? I'm white, I'm middle-class, I have a graduate-level education, and I'm able-bodied. If they [the police] are going to listen to a woman, they are likely to listen to a woman like me. If you are a woman of color who is being harassed, or if you are a trans woman who is being harassed (...) I mean, I'm very sure that the police would not be helpful to them.

(Interview # 5)

Juxtapose Guthrie’s narrative with the recent case of Jennifer Pawluck, who was found guilty of criminal harassment on Instagram. In 2013 Pawluck posted a photo of street graffiti, drawn by someone else, depicting Montreal police officer Cmdr. Ian Lafreniere with a bullet in his head. Pawluck accompanied her social media post with the hashtags #OneBulletOneCop and #AllCopsAreBastards. In Pawluck's case, neither the judicial system nor the media operated with

a digital dualism paradigm. Quebec Judge Marie-Josée Di Lallo emphasized the “serious” consequences of speech on social media:

We must be conscious that a simple click from a smartphone or computer, that takes just a fraction of a second, can have serious consequences [...] At a time when social media is taking more and more place in our lives, we must be even more vigilant. (as quoted in Banerjee, 2015, para. 5)

Further, Di Lallo justified the verdict in the following way: “Seeing your face drawn, with a bullet in the head, one cannot help but feel threatened” (para. 12). The press personalized Cmdr. Ian Lafreniere as a father whose family suffered harm as a result of the picture posted on social media: “the image shook him up, scared his children and caused his wife to stop working for several months” (Banerjee, 2015, para.6). When Lafreniere, a man in a position of power, became the target of a violent representation of himself, the legal system treated the distribution of that representation through social media as a credible threat. Such pressing concerns rarely extend to the rape, death, and physical assault threats directed at feminist bloggers.

During my research, I came across an example of a positive police response to anti-feminist death threats. When Jarrah Hodge, founder of the blog Gender Focus, received her first death threat, reporting it to the police was a matter of principle even though the threat, according to her, was “not really super serious”:

One other serious incident I got was about a year ago. On one of my posts someone commented: “This is utter lies, and I hope someone kills you”. It was the first time I got a death threat. So the person's IP address was in Wisconsin, but I just decided, like... whenever you get a death threat, make sure you report it to the police... because if they do not take it seriously, they should. (Interview # 1)

She describes her interactions with the Vancouver police department:

I know a lot of people did not have a good experience trying to report stuff to the police, but I had a really good experience with the Vancouver police department. They came to my office, they looked up the person's IP address, and they said “we are going to contact his local police department to see if there are any other red flags that indicate that it might be more serious”. I mean, it was not really super serious, because he was not actually going to come up to Vancouver, but that was cool that they were, like, “Yeah, this is horrible. This is really wrong. We are going to check it for you.” (Interview # 1)

Hodge's decision to act on receiving death threats is one particular strategy to address online harassment. Rather than dismissing threats as insignificant, a blogger might report them to the police as a way to legitimize experiences of victimization. In Hodge's case, the police officers agreed that the threats posed no immediate danger, yet they investigated the warning signs. Hodge notes that getting such a proactive response was different from the experiences of other feminist bloggers who brought their concerns to the police.

In this section I examined how post-feminist discourse - amplified by a digital dualism framework - de-emphasizes gendered aspects of violent speech on digital media platforms. While a number of feminist publications examine the role of law in addressing online harassment (Ellison & Akdeniz, 1998; Citron, 2009), much research remains to be done on the necessity and effectiveness of police interventions into cases of Internet-based harassment, stalking, and hate speech. Marginalized subjects such as black women, women of color, and Indigenous women, are at a disadvantage in the criminal justice system as their experiences of sexual violence and victimization are often dismissed, minimized and otherwise delegitimized (Crenshaw, 1991;

Chan & Chunn, 2014). There is a clear need for an intersectional analysis of how sexuality, race and other markers of inequality play out in the legal handling of online harassment cases.

Although the problems of online harassment faced by racialized and sexual minorities are well documented, a fuller exploration of the interlocking structures of sexism and racism within the legal system lies outside the scope of my work.

3.3. Popular representations of “trolls”

Continuing the theme of depoliticization of violent speech in the public discourse, this section critiques the term “trolling” as a category of analysis. Since the early 1990s, academics and journalists alike have routinely mobilized the metaphor of “trolling”⁶ as a blanket term for online harassment. The “Beat up Anita Sarkeesian” game was discussed in terms of “troll” backlash; Gregory Elliott, the Twitter user who directed harassing tweets at Guthrie, has been called “a notorious Twitter troll” (O’Toole, 2013) and “a man with a reputation on Twitter for trolling Toronto feminists” (Cross, 2012). These linguistic choices are important because calling online harassment and sexualized invective “trolling” carries particular notions around the ethical boundaries of networked participation. Namely, as I discuss below, such framing recasts the issues of sexist and misogynist speech as gender-neutral online play limited to niche online communities.

Although widely used in media and academic literature, the term “trolling” is inadequate for capturing the gendered meanings behind verbal violence and violent speech. Here I provide a critical overview of the literature on trolling to unpack the problematics of this term. I identify

⁶ The origins of the term “troll” are contested. While some researchers argue that this term refers to a trickster archetype from the Scandinavian folklore (Hyde, 1998), another perspective holds that “trolling” is based on a fishing technique of dragging a lure across water to generate a feeding frenzy among fish.

three major perspectives: trolling as a form of identity play; as a subversive countercultural practice; and as a reflection of neoliberal discourses of personal responsibility. While these intertwined perspectives contribute to the understanding of online disruptions, they do not yield much insight into the dynamics of anti-feminist violent speech; thus, I turn to Guthrie's and Sarkeesian's narratives to offer critical alternatives to “trolling” frameworks.

Researchers often describe trolling as an act of intentionally deceiving users into thinking they are participating in a legitimate dialogue (Dahlberg, 2001; Donath, 1999). Commonly understood as a way to disrupt and divert online conversations for personal enjoyment, trolling has been the subject of research documenting its effects on user participation in online communities (Brail, 1996; Donath, 1999; Herring et al., 2002). In such discussions, a “troll” is usually an individual whose disruptive behaviors hold others back from participating in a community. In their study of managing disruptions in a feminist forum, Herring et al. (2002) provide a fairly typical account of trolling: a pro-gun activist visits a feminist website and disrupts ongoing conversations by drawing a large number of users in futile arguments. Herring et al. examine how responses to this trolling incident reveal competing approaches to managing an online forum. One is to prioritize what researchers call “libertarian” values of free speech. Another favors the view of online communities as “safe” spaces within a framework of “communitarian” values. The tensions between these two visions on managing online communities have been the leitmotif of much of the trolling literature.

While media researchers have focused on technological tools to curb trolling, psychologists have been preoccupied with classifying personality profiles of “trolls”. One survey of commenting styles identified a correlation between trolling behaviours and “the Dark Tetrad of personality”: psychopathy, narcissism, Machiavellianism and sadism. Of the four, sadism

correlates most strongly with self-reported enjoyment of trolling (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014). As Buckels et al (2014) put it, “both trolls and sadists feel sadistic glee at the distress of others. Sadists just want to have fun . . . and the Internet is their playground!” (p.5). Gender, however, is mentioned only in passing. The authors maintain that men report spending more hours commenting and have higher scores on the scale of Dark Tetrad variables (Buckles et al., 2014). While gender differences are measured and reported, this and similar studies (see, for instance, Shachaf & Hara, 2010) do not treat gender differences as analytical categories, thus yielding little insight on why trolling often takes a form of violent misogyny.

Within the broader spectrum of the neoliberal victim theory that understands violence against women as “a problem of criminality brought about by diseased individuals” (Stringer, 2009, p.41), trolling has also been deemed a manifestation of the so-called “Internet addiction disorder” or a narcissistic personality disorder (Gazan, 2007). For instance, the offender in an infamous LambdaMOO virtual rape has been called a “psychopath” engaging in “virtual sociopathy” (MacKinnon, 1997, p. 207). While such medicalizing perspectives are not representative of the literature on trolling in the field of psychology, they do speak to larger discourses of personal responsibility, the discourses that pathologize trolling behaviors and downplay social factors that make such behaviors possible, acceptable, and rewarding.

While the scholarship on trolling from the 1990s to mid-2000s primarily framed disruptions in terms of individual deviant behaviors informed by larger social dynamics, more recent approaches locate trolling and similar disruptive acts within a context of users promoting their digital selves as if they were commercial enterprises in a digital economy. Ilana Gershon (2013), for instance, examines how public speech is framed as a sphere of individual responsibility and how trolling, in particular, brings neoliberal risk discourse to the surface. In

particular, Gershon (2013) argues that trolls “adopt pedagogical projects in which they instruct others about how to use the internet as liberal subjects” (p.12). Echoing Herring et al. (2002) somewhat, Gershon identifies two competing understandings of networked publics. One assumes that a public consists of anonymous strangers and the other posits that publics are multiple and based on levels of access. According to Gershon (2013), the phenomenon of trolling exemplifies the clash of these different understandings: trolls favor publics based on anonymity while their strategic disruptive actions are aimed at “teaching” users about a “proper” Internet use:

Trolls self-consciously decide to embody the risk that a public sphere can represent when one refuses to engage in the public sphere as a liberal stranger. They are speaking from the position of liberal subjects critiquing people who aren’t anonymous strangers. (p.12)

Gershon's approach builds on and expands earlier discussions of the tensions between freedom of speech versus “safe space” perspectives of online communities. The significant aspect of Gershon's analysis is that it helps to move the discussion beyond the notion of individual pathology and instead examines how trolling is reflective of anxieties around the possibilities of risk in networked contexts.

Kelly Bergstrom (2011) articulates another intriguing, “false identity” perspective and points out that ascribing a “troll” identity to someone can be used to dismiss, ignore or punish those who transgress community rules. According to Bergstrom, users who engage in identity play tend to see themselves as creative rather than deceiving. When creative expressions such as alter-egos or fictional characters are labeled “trolls”, the label limits the range of acceptable expressions and stifles further deliberation of community norms around permissible self-

presentations. Since trolling is often equated with deception and being trolled with victimization, this label is often contested and rejected by networked participants.

Bergstrom's research falls within a small, but growing number of studies that look at trolling as a form of subversive and countercultural practice. Another example is the work of Whitney Phillips (2013), who studies trolling on 4chan (www.4chan.org). Phillips argues that trolls and mainstream media form “a cybernetic feedback loop predicated on spectacle” (p.494). Mainstream media frames the people who inhabit the transgressive space of 4chan as simultaneously pathetic and dangerous, and so-called “trolls” then take pleasure in their transgressions by responding to such media representations by mocking dominant institutions and narratives. Although Phillips's analysis of the feedback relationship between trolling and media is insightful, it evades questions of accountability for sexist and racist speech. Trolling-as-subversion perspective frame disruptions in light of playful transgressions and creative acts, and while such perspectives are useful for exploring the counter-cultural potentialities of trolling, they do little to interrogate violent speech directed at feminist bloggers.

In sum, scholars consider trolling as deviance, as identity play, or as a creative impetus towards subverting dominant representations of mainstream culture. While each of these perspectives enriches discussions of online dynamics, none of them fully explain the gendered dimensions of harassment and violent speech. For a more productive framework, I draw on Guthrie's conceptualization of online harassment to explain why the term “trolling” is inadequate to capture interactive processes in the feminist blogosphere.

When I asked Guthrie what she thinks about media framing of anti-feminist harassment, Guthrie replied:

My number one issue is the use of the word “trolling” to describe this behavior [harassment]. I think first of all, it suggests that this problem is specific and endemic to the Internet. It also suggests that we brush it off and ignore it. (Interview # 5)

To call someone a “troll” is to place a person outside the boundaries of normalcy. In a larger context of violence against women, such processes of othering correspond with a misplaced emphasis on “deviant” strangers as opposed to known others:

I do think that the word “trolling” implies a certain type of harasser, and I think that it is very much like how a lot of people have this impression that rapists are all crouching in a back alley with a knife, and they are not the boys we go on dates with who then ply us with a lot of booze and who have sex with us without our consent.

(Interview # 5)

Guthrie finds the term “troll” problematic on several grounds. First, as she notes in the passage above, the term speaks to a dualistic separation of the online and the offline, a separation which functions to conceal the scope and impact of sexist speech. Second, the term “troll” invokes a particular type of abuser – someone who is isolated, socially inept and immature:

It [the term “trolling”] dehumanizes the perpetrator. It gives this impression that the person who is doing this harassment is a basement-living troglodyte who lives with his mother and eats creamed corn for lunch or whatever. These are fathers, lawyers, doctors... These are regular people, people who are our colleagues. People we date. They are our brothers.... and our sisters – let’s not even pretend that it’s all dudes either. (Interview # 5)

“Trolling” behaviours are largely perceived as aberrations that are not perpetuated by legitimate public speakers nor representative of larger public sentiment. Guthrie further explains how the notion of trolling stalls the conversation on online harassment:

It allows us to believe that it is only a very small, narrow, specific slice of the population who is doing this stuff, and not that it is actually a popular point of view that needs to be tackled in a more substantive way. (Interview # 5)

This image of a “troll” as aberration places violent speech into a frame of reference where a particular “type” of person is identified as a harasser and online harassment is dismissed as a marginal issue rather than acknowledged as a social problem to be addressed on institutional, legal, technological, and cultural levels.

Popular representations of “trolls” are premised on the idea that individuals belonging to several overlapping social groups – teenagers, gamers, hackers and geeks — are prone to disruptive behaviors. Nor are academics immune to the power of stereotypes when they try to pin down sociological profiles of people likely to engage in online harassment. Amy Binns (2012), for instance, in her otherwise insightful analysis of managing online communities, suggests that incidents of online harassment are in decline because “regular” people now outnumber “computer geeks” in Internet discussions. Binns suggests geeks resort to “trolling” and other types of deviant behaviors due to their presumed lack of social skills. Simplistic, caricature-like representations of trolls as pitiful deviants do not reflect the experiences of many feminist bloggers who became targets of online harassment. As Sarkeesian (2012) writes on her blog, “often when we talk about online harassment we think of teenage boys in their parent’s basements and while I was attacked by some teenage boys, I was also attacked by thousands of grown men” (para. 25). Contrary to popular representations of trolls as loners who release their

frustration through harsh statements in comments sections, Sarkeesian describes her experience as being attacked by a cyber-mob – people who coordinated their efforts to make her telephone number public, vandalize her Wikipedia page and leave threats of physical assaults on social media. One smear campaign intended to discredit Sarkeesian by impersonating her via digitally altered tweets (Sarkeesian, 2015c).

Throughout this dissertation I maintain that online invective can neither be reduced to the actions of isolated individuals nor to particular kinds of communicative acts. Terms such as verbal violence and violent speech capture the systematic qualities and injurious effects of such communication. Yet the term “trolling” should not be abandoned altogether as it is firmly rooted in Internet culture and aptly describes certain ways of behaving on the Internet, namely engaging in identity play and other subversive behaviours. Its use, however, becomes problematic when applied to ideologically-based speech, such threats of sexual violence and elaborate misogynistic or racist rants.

In the next section, I elaborate on the possibilities of feminist resistance to verbal violence by placing themes teased from Guthrie's interview into the larger context of the feminist digital media landscape.

3.4. Catching fire on Twitter

In this section I draw on interview and textual data to examine Guthrie's networked media engagements as modes of resistance that make her oppositional views publicly visible and sharable. I situate Guthrie's perspective on online harassment in relation to ongoing negotiations of interactivity and virality within networked environments. In her 2012 TEDxToronto

presentation Guthrie identifies three affordances⁷ of online communication that are key to the proliferation of online hostility: social distance, performance and the lack of consequences. These affordances make possible, but do not determine, a number of networked actions, which leaves space for resistance, alternative forms of engagement, and new participatory mechanisms for making social media a critical site for feminist politics. Drawing on her experiences, Guthrie then suggests that social media users resist misogynistic online violence through visibility, virality and performance. In what follows, I explain how the theoretical framework that Guthrie lays out in her TED talk, as well as the insights she shared with me during our interview, resonate with and complicate current debates about interactive meaning production within networked environments. Her perspective is useful because it specifies techno-social features that are conducive to gendered aggression and outlines practical steps in response to anti-feminist harassment.

Guthrie begins her TED talk with a discussion of the role of *social distance*: the perception that online interactions, carried over spatial and temporal distances, are “less real” than embodied conversations. Social distance echoes the concept of *dissociative imagination*, a process by which users come to believe that their digital footprint does not reflect their “true” personalities and has no “real” impact on others (Binns, 2012; Gray, 2012). Both social distance and dissociative imagination emphasize the lack of personal accountability that is enabled by seemingly disembodied interactions on online platforms. Guthrie's rendition of social distance is useful for understanding networked expressions against social and economic changes that favor

⁷ The term “affordance” means “the feature of a technology that make a certain action possible” (Graves, 2007, p. 332). Although Guthrie does not use this term in her talk, it is useful for designating the relationships between the technological and the social without relying on an overly deterministic notion that properties of digital artifacts direct, rather than suggest, the ways in which these artifacts are used.

today's single-identity environments rather than anonymous exchanges. The notion of social distance has a broad relevance to the architecture of social media platforms which discourage anonymous communication and aid users to seamlessly blend their "offline" and "online" identities across various technological modalities.

Performance, or the tailoring of one's actions to elicit a reaction from an audience, is the next characteristic of social media that Guthrie describes as central to understanding online harassment. Performative exchanges in social media are realized through text, symbols, and a myriad of networked actions. In contrast to broadcast media, new media allows for interactivity and audience participation which, in turn, leads to a diversification – but not necessarily subversion – of performances and representations of gender (Humphreys & Vered, 2013). Guthrie demonstrates the workings of a performative exchange through the "Beat up Anita Sarkeesian" flash game in which players were asked to punch Sarkeesian's face until it appeared heavily bruised and swollen. Bendalin Spurr, the game's creator, not only targeted Sarkeesian, he also invited others to play the game and take part in his symbolic act of hatred and anger. Together Spurr and others created a participatory spectacle of ritualized misogyny.

The performative nature of online harassment underscores the situatedness of violent performances within webs of socially distant relations that are built on shared recreational activities. How do violent performances of misogyny become an acceptable part of networked activities? As Guthrie explains, transgressions of social norms are penalized selectively, making online spaces *consequence-free zones* for harassers. This observation raises questions about legal and social regulatory mechanisms suitable for addressing online harassment. Social media, however, are not a consequence-free zone when it comes to certain types of legal transgressions. While violations such as copyright infringement can lead to consequences ranging from the

removal of content to lawsuits, social media platforms are largely inactive with regards to identifying and curbing online harassment and violent speech.

Despite the reluctance of social media platforms to address the problem of gendered violent speech, feminist activists continue to target the platforms with petitions to prevent abuse against women. In 2012 Twitter introduced a “report abuse” button in response to feminist campaigns and promised to hire additional staff to handle abuse reports. In my interview with Guthrie, she was concerned with the effectiveness of the “report abuse” buttons:

The problem with the “report abuse” button as a solution ... I mean, this kind of thing can be used and will be used by misogynists, by trans-exclusive radical feminists. If you confront someone about their privilege, a lot of people who are not used to having these kinds of conversations will perceive it as abuse. I can easily see this “report abuse” button being used precisely to counter the kind of situation that it was introduced to help. (Interview # 5)

A concern about the misuse and appropriation of “report abuse” buttons is valid. Social media users often attempt to get feminist pages taken down by falsely reporting them as abuse or spam to the moderators who make decisions over content removal. For example, Sarkeesian's YouTube videos have been reported as terrorism (Reagle, 2015). Another research participant, Emma Woolley, also voiced concern about the inadequacy of abuse reporting:

I feel like that's [a report abuse button] helpful, but, I mean, it also provides these, you know, objectively terrible people with a button with which to falsely report other people simply because they do not agree with them. (Interview # 4)

According to blogger Jessica, the reporting of abusive messages can reignite harassment:

Its reporting mechanisms are woefully inadequate to the task of dealing with abusive users. For instance, to report on Twitter means (...) that you must reveal personal information to the person you are reporting. When I reported somebody on Twitter, for instance, they know I was the one to file that report, what my user name is, et cetera. That is not terribly constructive and it does not represent any kind of responsibility taking (...) if there are waves of harassment campaigns directed against an individual on Twitter, Twitter ought to take responsibility for the fact they running a premier medium through which that particular kind of attacks take place. (...) They don't want to be put in a position deciding which form of speech is destructive versus not et cetera, but I do believe that there are common standards that most reasonable people agree upon. (Interview # 11)

Even when “report abuse” buttons are used appropriately to inform content moderators about rape and death threats, there is no guarantee that appropriate action will be taken. When Anita Sarkeesian reported the following tweet from user @CoolDehLan: “@femfreq I will rape you when I get the chance”, Twitter reported back that such speech does not violate its policies (Greenhouse, 2013).

Although technical fixes such as “report abuse” buttons do not bear a significant influence on the prevalence of harassment, Guthrie explains that they can become discursive moves that put social injustices on the agenda:

When the platforms choose to introduce things like this, the good thing is that it sends the message. These platforms have a lot of power. When a platform chooses to address, you know, oppression that is happening on their platforms, it is a part of all these

aggregate messages that we are sending when we see harassment taking place. In that sense, this is good. (Interview # 5)

Ultimately, she adds, social environments, rather than technological features per se, shape the uses of technology:

But, on the other hand, I see tweaks to the technology itself... may be superfluous, because the thing is, we are technology. We are the ones who create it, who use it, who decide how it should be used, who set standards for its use, informally and formally. It is all just people. So Twitter the platform can make tweaks, but unless the culture of people who work at Twitter, unless the corporate culture of Twitter, is anti-sexist and anti-racist, that tool is not going to be applied effectively. (Interview # 5)

As this statement makes evident, technological solutions are not sufficient for reshaping patterns of communication. Guthrie's statements that "we are technology" and "it is all just people" can be understood within a paradigm of feminist science and technology studies. As Judy Wajcman (2010), a theorist best known for her articulations of social construction of technology, observes, "gender relations can be thought of as materialized in technology, and masculinity and femininity, and gendered identities and discourses as produced simultaneously with technologies" (p.7). The lack of consequences for sexist speech becomes a way in which gendered relations are materialized in technology. As long as violence against women is normalized within a wider culture, that violence will be reflected in social media in one form or the other; the tools created to counteract abuse will be used to silence and exclude those who challenge the status quo.

While social media platform moderators hold power as the enforcers of rules, power is also dispersed along social networks. Users have a capacity to enact change by creating and

contesting new social norms. In the following excerpt from her 2012 TED talk, Guthrie recounts her confrontation with Spurr and the public engagement that followed:

The conversation caught fire, and with an hour hundreds of Twitter users were participating in some capacity. When I documented the confrontation and Bendilin's response the next morning, the post spread like a wildfire, drawing thousands more into the discussion. On a massive scale, people were demonstrating where they stood on the matter. And in doing so, they were drawing new lines in the sand of our social interactions. (6:55)

As this statement suggests, social media is a changing, malleable terrain where new social norms are established through the demonstration of allegiances and public performances of political connectedness. On social media, where mechanisms of social and institutional control are not yet settled, the banal and the quotidian are most reflective of social change (Humphreys & Vered, 2013).

Guthrie's metaphor of tweets spreading "like a fire" speaks to the idea of rapid communication unfolding beyond the control of individual users and the network becoming more than a sum of its agents. In such systems, what is valuable and significant is defined by the combined effect of the information streams rather than by individual tweets or other communicative fragments. Twitter, for instance, engenders asynchronous "awareness systems" that allow people to maintain an awareness of news events, and changes in social environments (Hermida, 2010). Although the distributed nature of networked conversations allows users to be aware of current content without actively participating in its creation (Hermida, 2010), users are responsible for making feminist politics visible on social networks. As Guthrie states, "there is a lot of power in lurkers that has yet to be tapped" (Interview # 5).

Guthrie's vision of online environments is in opposition to what Geert Lovink (2011) terms the culture of detached engagement – networked environments where users avoid debate in favor of interacting within cohesive groups. Such cultures are presumably “echo chambers” that are detached from “real” and challenging debate (Garrett, 2009; Lovink, 2011). The view of social networks as “echo chambers” is reinforced by representations of young people as self-absorbed, indifferent, alienated and passive consumers of online content. Guthrie offers an alternative perspective that aims to strategically employ virality, intensify Twitter conversations, and engage “bystanders”:

Who I am most interested in reaching are the bystanders, are people who may be sympathetic to social justice principles, who are maybe equality-minded, but wouldn't explicitly identify as a feminist (...) So my goal is to politicize these people, to galvanize them, and maybe realize that this is a big problem, this is worthy of your intervention. (...) It is about getting people who are sympathetic, but silent, off the sidelines and into the fray. (Interview # 5)

She further notes the necessity of bystander intervention in cases of harassment:

We need to create a climate in which people feel a little bit more, like... even if I'm not the one who is being harassed and even if I don't share an identity group with a person who is being attacked, like, say, I'm a dude and there is a woman who is being sexually harassed, I should speak up about it. (Interview # 5)

Making an analogy between street harassment and harassment on the Internet, Guthrie suggests that, in each situation of harassment, bystanders have an opportunity to directly or indirectly intervene against oppressive acts and show support:

So with street harassment, for example, if the person who is doing the harassment is physically large and scary, and you don't want to get in their face, you can go over and stand between them and the person they are harassing, or just start a conversation with the person who is being harassed to express your solidarity. So the parallel situation to that on Twitter (...) OK, there is a woman who is being harassed, and you instead of tagging the Twitter account of the person who is harassing her, you just tweet at her, and you say “gosh, I can't believe all the things that this loser is saying to you”, like, “who do they think they are” or whatever. And if this person is waging a campaign of harassment, they will see those tweets. Even if they are not tagged in them, they'll see, especially if there is a bunch of people tweeting these messages. It is little things like that. (Interview # 5)

Engaging bystanders can have far-reaching implications. Here I quote Guthrie's description of how a “ripple effect” had impact outside of social media:

So my friend Jason, after having been subjected to many discussions about this joke on Twitter, was at work one day. They were having a meeting. One of his colleagues said “Oh man, we just got raped on our stats last quarter”. Jason said that a couple of months before he probably wouldn't have said anything, but he spoke up and said, “Listen, can we find another word to describe that? I'm really not comfortable with “rape”. [...] He was terrified that everyone in the room is going to be like “Oh, you're pussy”. But he said that a couple of seconds passed, and the guy was like “Yeah, for sure, sorry about that”. Then the meeting just went on, you know. So the ripple effect of those conversations about rape jokes encouraged Jason to speak up in that boardroom. (Interview # 5)

Twitter can thus function as a site that encourages feminist awareness and spontaneous consciousness-raising, which can create new discursive patterns of addressing violent speech.

3.5. Performance, visibility and virality

Guthrie draws on her experience of social media activism to urge audiences to intervene against ongoing patterns of online violence by confronting and challenging users who post misogynistic and sexist content. In particular, she suggests countering online harassment by creating a “ripple effect” through the discursive practices of *performance*, *visibility*, and *virality*. When taken together, these practices demonstrate how users collectively redefine patterns of networked interactions and how technological affordances are employed to create new social norms.

Guthrie characterizes *performance* as taking an active stance in a public forum as opposed to engaging in private communication over email. In both our interview and her TED talk, she draws a parallel between challenging hostility on the Internet and responding to street harassment: in both situations bystanders can intervene by providing support to the person under verbal attack. Another of Guthrie’s strategies to counteract online misogyny involves *visibility*, which is understood as a public presence of time-stamped and archived digital traces of violent speech; these traces are the records of sexism's systemic nature. To take Guthrie's argument further, I suggest that the visibility of sexist speech is amplified by the *fixity*, a notion I borrow from the work of Lucas Graves (2007), of online content. Fixity implies that mass media such as print newspapers and TV programs are ephemeral because they are not easily archived by ordinary users. Blogs, however, enhance public memory through archiving important speeches, document or accounts (Graves, 2007). Extending this line of thought, the fixity and visibility of digital content create archives of social history that document the scope of sexism in the

blogosphere and society at large. *Fat, Ugly or Slutty* (www.fatuglyorslutty.com), a website that collects and preserves screen shots of sexist comments made in online gaming communities, is an example of a user-generated digital archive that makes sexist speech visible. Similarly, Twitter accounts such as @FemBatSignal, @TrollHunter, and @EverydaySexism retweet reports of sexism and harassment. Although some of these Twitter accounts may be short lived as they fail to recruit a significant number of followers, they indicate an attempt to collectively raise awareness around the problem of online violence. One of the better known anti-abuse Twitter accounts is UK-based End Online Misogyny @misogyny_online, which positions itself as a global resource for women to share their experiences of online abuse. It relies on news sources and the personal accounts of Twitter users to highlight, challenge and start conversations around online misogyny. Its hashtag #shoutingback conveys an affective resistance to online misogyny, while its hashtag #WeBelieveYou counters discourses that victim-blame and dismiss sexual violence: “Social media makes misogyny more visible. It's why we're #Shoutingback. To make people hear & acknowledge the reality of daily harassment” (End Online Misogyny, 2014).

Guthrie maintains that *visibility* highlights the scope of sexist speech as well as the range of feminist responses to that speech. Guthrie's vision of social change requires that users make public the feminist aspects of their identities: to be visible as feminist is to manage self-representations to show allegiance to feminist social media accounts. Visibility as a discursive practice is important both in terms of having and making easily accessible feminist content that circulates on social media platforms, and in terms of having visible identities that mark feminist presence in networked spaces.

For Guthrie, the next tool for counteracting online attacks is *virality* – which is to say having the ability to go viral, of reaching large masses through the sharing practices of

networked audiences. Virality is a relatively new phenomena made possible by affordable mobile and wireless technologies. The bigger the audience, the bigger “the ripple effect” of the message is. Guthrie's initial response to Bendilin Spurr went viral – it was shared on Twitter approximately thirty thousand times. However, given the persistent skill and access requirements of, and resource inequalities in digital environments, I ask: whose work is likely to go viral and produce the ripple effect? Whose voice is heard in the clamour of conversations on social networks?

Virality is relational: it hinges on the connections users have with other users and serves as a marker of distributed subjectivity (Lovink, 2011). Dominant neoliberal discourses hold that viral popularity is meritocratic, that is, within the reach of any user who has entrepreneurial and creative abilities. Alice Marwick (2013), however, critiques this view and points out that networked hierarchies of popularity are disguised as innocuous social ties. It is therefore important to acknowledge that Twitter and other social media platforms have become linguistic marketplaces where users strive to maximize their visibility through the establishment of affiliations with relevant professional circles and corporate brands in order to gain socioeconomic success (Page, 2012). Marketing and promotion campaigns often precede virality in networked publics, so that users have a certain number of contacts to disseminate viral messages among their networks as a precondition to producing sharable content. Who gets to write and be read on the Internet is still shaped by traditional hierarchies of inequality despite the editorial freedom and seeming absence of gate-keepers online (Hindman, 2009). Messages from top-tier bloggers, also referred to as “power users” or “influencers”, are more likely to reach a broader audience than the messages of more marginally located bloggers. These patterns of exclusion and privilege also apply to the circles of feminist bloggers (Leow, 2010), which raises

the question of whether virality can actually be a tool for lesser-known bloggers whose networks may be smaller due to the persistent inequities of a linguistic marketplace that rewards already privileged subjects.

Counter to what Guthrie suggests, virality may not always be positive. The use of visibility and virality of feminist contestations can re-invoke backlash, thus re-victimizing targets of hostility (Jenson & de Castell, 2013). The overnight publicity that marks viral success is difficult to predict and manufacture, and it may not be welcome by those implicated in the virally distributed content (Payne, 2013), or it may not work as was intended. For example, in 2012, feminists used the viral Twitter hashtag #1reasonwhy to share instances of the sexism they faced in the gaming industry. Reaction to this hashtag included derisive, insulting, and dismissive comments directed at users who criticized the treatment of women in the technological scene (Jenson & de Castell, 2013).

In this section I examined how social distance, interactive performativity and the lack of social consequences can contribute to the proliferation of misogynist discourses in response to feminist articulations of gender politics. While visibility and virality can be useful ways to counteract violent speech by engaging larger audiences with feminist work, these affordances are more helpful to bloggers who have already built a strong network of connections. In other contexts, their effects of visibility or virality may be uncertain or even counterproductive.

CHAPTER 4: MODES OF SPEECH AND SILENCE

4.1. The failures of cyberbullying and cybersafety discourses

This chapter covers the various modes of speech and silence that exist in the feminist blogosphere. The first two sections offer an extended literature review, while the rest of the chapter draws on my interviews to examine the perspectives of feminist bloggers on networked communication. I start by discussing verbal violence that is discursively framed as cyberbullying⁸ in the context of broader anxieties around the “risks” of online networking. Here, I chart several problems that I see in cyberbullying discourses and consider why these discourses, built on the rhetoric of Internet safety, have gained traction in sociological, educational, and media discussions of violent speech. My claim here is that cyberbullying and cybersafety discourses persistently contextualize verbal violence as a “youth issue” and a “safety issue”. Cyberbullying and cybersafety discourses work to downplay acts of resistance to violent speech, homogenize women as potential victims, and obscure aggression within women-centered online environments. In other words, gendered prescriptions to avoid, prevent, and manage the violent speech of cyberbullying suggest that the invocation of “Internet safety” rhetoric is ideological.

Since concerns around anonymity are at the heart of cyberbullying discourses, I revisit the problem of anonymous disruptions, suggesting that curbing opportunities for anonymous speech does not necessarily eliminate attacks on women. Moreover, I argue that feminist bloggers increasingly choose single-identity blogging environments where they actively engage with networked publics. Feminist bloggers also de-anonymize harassers and strategically collapse contexts, bringing to the fore the possibilities of unexpected connections. Finally, although the chapter is built on a critique of

8 Cyberbullying is commonly defined as “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices” (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006, p. 152). While there is a dearth of research measuring the scope of harassment among adult bloggers, a number of scholarly publications quantifying the instances of online aggression among youths is growing, with the majority of studies focusing on cyberbullying in secondary schools (Li, 2007; Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2012; Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2013) and among college-age populations (MacDonald & Roberts-Pittman, 2010; Walker, Sockman, & Koehn, 2011).

disengagement, my concluding discussion of oppositional silence as a mode of resistance adds an important caveat to this critique.

Although the 1990s saw sporadic references to “cyberbullying”, the term rose in popularity during the mid-2000s when “Internet safety” discourses, which until then had been dominated by concerns about predators and sex crimes, began to articulate concerns about peer harassment on social networking websites. Some researchers argue that the term “cyberbullying” should be reserved for describing conflictual interactions among children and adolescents (Jameson, 2008); others employ it as synonymous with harassment and relational aggression on the Internet in general (Kelly, 2011). The term “cyberbullying” is used in workplace harassment research (Barlett & Barlett, 2011; Kelly, 2011; Piotrowski, 2012; Privitera & Campbell, 2009) and media commentaries on violent speech directed at women (Alter, 2015; “Twitter abuse”, 2013). Thus, cyberbullying, cybersafety narratives, and their encoded meanings are not endemic to discussions of interactions among minors on the Internet, but function within broader discourses around the social norms and other regulatory mechanisms of many mediated environments.

Concerns around cyberbullying reflect dominant understandings of digital cultures as “youthful” environments. It is worth noting that researchers tend to frame cyberbullying in terms of the “dangers” that social networking poses to young people (see, for example, the study by Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2013), which assumes that young people face external threats to their well-being rather than actively creating and maintaining sets of networked relations through their own activities. By using the language of “danger” and “safety”, academics engage anxieties around what is imagined to be the pathological nature of online communication; this anxiety a part of broader technophobic discourses that cast technology as a disruptive force capable of fundamentally reshaping social ties, making people narcissistic, detached, and alienated (Turkle, 2011). Yet, alongside the rhetoric of danger, cyberbullying is simultaneously trivialized as being “typical youth behavior” that has expanded

into digital spaces (Jones et al., 2013, p.65). Such framing conflates hateful, vitriolic Internet exchanges informed by race, gender, and sexuality discourses, and other types of casual interactions⁹.

As with the medicalizing perspective of trolling mentioned in Chapter 3, cyberbullying discourse is animated by the notion that pathology is individual. Cyberbullying researchers offer various “safety solutions”, or preventative measures, enacted on an administrative level, which include improved reporting of online abuse and the establishment of “social–emotional learning programs” to help students deal with conflict resolution and “anger issues” (Jones et al., 2013, p.67). Such solutions relegate cyberbullying to the realm of individual behavior and psychological deviations, obscuring structural causes of online hostility. On the one hand, the ideological workings of the cyberbullying framework frame digital technology as dangerous and, on the other hand, they position aggressive behaviour as simply individual pathology intensified by digital technologies.

There is much to say about the gendered dimensions of cyberbullying. Studies have shown that when compared to boys, girls are more likely to be targets of cyberbullying (Jones et al., 2013; Kowalsky et al., 2012; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008) and, as some researchers claim, more likely to be the perpetrators of cyberbullying (Jones et al., 2013). Among college-aged populations, women are reportedly more concerned with privacy on social media platforms compared to men (Levin et al., 2008). The explanations for these gendered disparities continue to rely on the assumption that there are stable and observable gender differences in how media is used. In particular, the “exposure” hypothesis suggests that women are more likely to use the Internet for social ends and, thus, are more likely to be exposed to bullying and other types of aggressive communicative acts online. Using gender as in this

⁹ The space of tension in the cyberbullying discourse lies in its construction of a “victim narrative” that does not necessarily align with how young people understand their experiences of being on the receiving end of vitriolic messages. In their research on online conflicts among teenagers, Marwick and boyd (2014) argue that young people largely reject academics and mental health experts’ cyberbullying repertoire, relying instead on the notion of “drama” when referring to various interpersonal conflicts. Calling conflicts “drama” is appealing to young people because this term assumes an agentic stance within a set of negotiations and performative exchanges (Marwick & boyd, 2014); in contrast to cyberbullying narratives that risk constructing passive, silent, or retreating victims of online abuse, “drama” implies a two-way communication where each side robustly asserts its agency.

way frames cyberbullying as a politically-neutral problem around Internet safety and exposure. The problem of gender-based violent speech is occluded.

Current cyberbullying discourses echo earlier linguistic framings of the Internet as both a misused tool and an unsafe space that requires careful navigation. These ways of understanding online sociality can be traced back to what Stephanie Schulte (2013) calls the “teenaged technology” discourses that can be found in popular media representations of the Internet and governmental policy debates during the late 1980s in the United States. These discourses are associated with the rise of American hacker culture and claim a need to regulate rebellious teenage users and “teenaged”, or emergent, computer networking technology, since both are capable of disrupting the conventional social order and posing a threat to national security (Schulte, 2013). Drawing on tensions in popular representations of computer technology, Schulte maintains that young users and emerging computer technologies were imagined “as needing the government to step in to regulate them like “parents” but not to the extent that their radical (and marketable) creativity is stifled” (p.41). And, although Schulte argues that the past twenty years have seen “teenaged technology” discourses superseded by the ideas that the Internet is a tool for productive workers in a globalized workforce, “teenaged technology” discourses remain in circulation. Their iterations can be found in the cyberbullying and cybersafety frameworks that construct social media as unruly, unbounded terrain in need of intervention from schools, governments and other regulatory institutions.

One incident involving a racist YouTube video and the subsequent misogynous backlash against it illustrate how cybersafety discourses can draw on the notion of “dangerous technology”, and erase issues of racism and sexism as matters of public concern. In 2012, a white 16-year old high school student from Turner Fenton Secondary School in Brampton, Ontario, posted a video in which she made a number of blatantly racist remarks about “brown people”. In her video, she said: “If you’re brown and watching this, go back to your own country. I’m getting really tired of you guys taking over my city” (RedaOfTime, 2012, 1:41). The video was shared widely online and was covered by CBC and

The Toronto Star media outlets. Networked audiences subsequently referred to the student who made the video as “the racist Brampton girl”, and she received death and rape threats from outraged viewers. Although the student apologized and removed her initial video, it had been copied and archived by other users. The video still attracts abusive comments several years later: “your attitude is what makes me wanna choke you until you die” (Syed Ziyad, 2014) or “ugliest bitch I've ever seen lol” (scorpgul, 2015).

This video would not be noteworthy if not for the way in which it was covered by the media and handled by the school officials. An analysis of media responses reveals a greater concern for cybersafety and managing the school’s and Canada’s reputations than about the racist and sexist speech circulating in Canadian networked publics. In their coverage of the video, *The Toronto Star* reporters reassured readers that no racial tensions existed at Turner Fenton Secondary School:

The video seemed to come out of the blue and doesn’t reflect on their school, which has people from all cultures and religions, students said. Everyone gets along, for the most part. Just two weeks ago, the school held a culture festival with presentations and food to celebrate its diversity. (Jackson & Hauch, 2012, para. 15)

Although *The Toronto Star* article establishes racism as an issue of concern, it frames it as accidental, atypical, surfacing unexpectedly, and as not reflective of the local community. Any potential harm caused by the video is minimized and readers are assured that students of South Asian descent are not bothered by it. Evoking the issues of racism, the article maintains that multiculturalism erases racism through the celebration of ethnic “difference” and festivals focusing on cultural elements such as food and music. Such a discursive move is reflective of “color blind racism” – a post-civil-rights ideology that is supported by the myth that we live in an equitable society and characterized by assertions that “discrimination has all but disappeared” (Bonilla-Silva, 2002, p.42) rather than a genuine concern for safety.

Institutional response to the incident was equally disingenuous. In her interview with the *Toronto Star*, the acting Manager of Communications for the Peel District School Board, Carla Pereira, said that Brampton's Turner Fenton Secondary School gave students a talk about the “appropriate” use of social media, and reminded them to follow the school's code of conduct (Jackson & Hauch, 2012). What can be gleaned from this talk is the idea that the problem with this incident lies with the “incorrect” use of technology rather than with racist video content or sexist discourses operating in social media commentaries. Both the media and school responses to the video attempt to secure the image of Canada as a multi-cultural country that is inclusive of “difference”. Sidelining racism and sexism, media and school representatives presented the video incident as simply a matter of an angry teenager poorly handling “dangerous technology” in a moment of bad judgment. This framing alerts us to ongoing dis-articulations of anti-racist discourse in favor of a “color-blind” perspective on race and ethnicity. Within a “colour-blind” framework, online “safety” does not mean safety from racist attacks, but safety from damaging one's reputation in the way that the student from Brampton's Turner Fenton Secondary School did by attracting negative publicity to herself and her school.

The rhetoric of “Internet safety” reflects dominant ideas of responsible self-management, and is commonly found in both popular and academic discussions of cyberbullying. Nancy Cornwell's (1998) work offers an alternative to the individualist ethos that often frames free speech discourses. According to Cornwell, the meaning-making properties of speech enable relationships between people rather than constitute an individual experience as “a right that is freely held at the level of autonomous individuality” (p.100). Cornwell's feminist ethics of care holds that communication is part of social relations between individuals and, consequently, bears implications on those relations. For the school or the media to apply an alternative framework to the abovementioned cyberbullying case would require having a difficult conversation with students about race as a category of inequality, and about stereotyping and the imagined boundaries of Canadian national belonging. A relational approach would require a discussion of how someone like the student who received numerous misogynistic threats in

response to her racist speech can occupy an oppressor and a victim category simultaneously. In order to address racist and misogynist discourses circulating in networked publics, critical commentary needs to move beyond technology's alleged dangers and into discussions of the systemic injustices that continue to be perpetuated under regimes of gender-neutrality and multiculturalism.

4.2 Vitriol as “juvenile communication”

Although it is routine, framing the Internet as the realm of youth culture limits the possibilities of thinking about violent speech and disruptive speech moments. In the same way that studies on cyberbullying among youths discussed in the previous section are concerned about “safety”, research on adults is similarly concerned about exposure to risk in social media and the “harms to which social media users may be exposed” (Brake, 2014, p.13). It has been suggested that young people need legal tools to protect them from the negative consequences of hasty actions that can be difficult to erase from public digital memory (Chander, 2010).

In the previous section I draw on Schulte's (2014) exploration of “teenaged technology” tropes to explain how current fears around “acceptable” and “risky” uses of online communication can be traced back to anxieties that require the regulation of anti-establishment, rebellious hacker cultures of the 1990s. The communicative landscape of today is still very much imagined as a juvenile and youthful space. Media theorists and policy makers alike share the view that online spaces encourage juvenile, rather than measured and meaningful, communication. American author and virtual reality scientist, Jaron Lanier (2010), offers a prime example of this view. In his book *You Are Not a Gadget*, Lanier argues that current digital media designs have engendered a culture that consists of “wave after wave of juvenilia” (p.182). Put another way, Web 2.0 design stimulates playful, irresponsible, or uncritical modes of communicative exchange, which are inherently juvenile digital expressions. Lanier invokes *neoteny*, a concept used in developmental biology, to describe the way in which adults can retain the characteristics of children, and *cultural neoteny* as a metaphor to describe emerging digital cultures as paradoxically innovative and conservative:

While it is easy to think of neoteny as an emphasis on youthful qualities, which are in essence radical and experimental, when cultural neoteny is pushed to an extreme it implies conservatism, since each generation's perspectives are preserved longer and made more influential as neoteny is extended. Thus, neoteny brings out contradictory qualities in culture. (Lanier, 2010, p. 182)

For Lanier, disruptive communication serves as evidence of "technological infantilism" (p.182). In particular, he argues, computer interfaces produced within the juvenile climate of Silicone Valley encourage immature expressions that are, on occasion, transformed into "collective ritual hatred" (p.62). Lanier gives the case of Kathy Sierra, a game developer and a blogger who in 2008 was harassed, hacked, threatened and relentlessly targeted with insults, as an example of such ritual hatred. Lanier suggests that the cause of the harassment that Sierra faced was that her "number was somehow drawn from the lot" (p.61), and implies that any communicative agent is as likely to become the target of collective hatred in a juvenile environment as any other. However, Lanier's argument presupposes that neither Sierra's position as a woman in the male-dominated field of IT, nor her criticisms of the Internet culture, were factors leading to her harassment. By claiming that there is no discernible reason why Sierra was targeted by the "culture of sadism" (p.62), Lanier's argument de-genders verbal violence, and overlooks the ways in which misogyny and sexism underlie the collective rituals of hatred.

Lanier's argument is salient because the idea that online disruptions are manifestations of juvenile communication features centrally in cyberbullying discourses. As I have explained, cyberbullying discourses do not focus exclusively on children, but retain their dichotomizing emphasis on juvenile speech versus speech that is adult-like, deliberate, and productive. Several manifestations of this kind of framing can be found in "The Offensive Internet", a 2010 collection edited by Saul Levmore and Martha C. Nussbaum exploring the legal and social regulation of vitriolic communication among young people. Despite focusing on college students and young adults, Levmore and Nussbaum

still privilege discourses of safety, protection, and youthful indiscretion. In particular, Levmore defines defamation and harassment as “juvenile” communication and repeatedly compares them to scribbles on bathroom stalls. Rather than a transient rhetorical move, this comparison drives his entire analysis, underscoring anonymity as the key similarity between these mediums:

The bathroom wall is a noteworthy precursor of the Internet, not only because such graffiti has surely decreased since the Internet came to life, but also because vandalism and defamation claims threatened those graffitists who could not be certain that they would remain unidentified. (p.53)

Levmore reiterates that “the Internet is the natural and well-developed successor to the bathroom wall” (p.54). For Levmore, the problem with offensive “juvenile” communication lies in the defamatory potential induced by anonymity, coupled with the propensity of “juvenile” communicators to “discourage and camouflage” valuable contributions (p.50). Levmore affirms the importance of the Internet as tool of self-expression, but seems to overlook the fact that such expressions always exist in relationship. Interactivity is a key feature of online communication, and what might appear to be a random anonymous comment should be read as a part of the social landscape. Furthermore, the communication that Levmore deems “juvenile”, immature, unsophisticated, and useless, proves fertile ground for critical analysis. For instance, Levmore uses the comment “Amy is a slut” as an example of “quintessentially juvenile” communication (p.52). He prematurely dismisses this comment as vacuous invective. Statements like “Amy is a slut” do, in fact, carry discursive functions that should be assessed critically. Although I do not know the full context of the comment, I still can suggest that, whether it is written on a bathroom stall or on an anonymous internet forum, “Amy is a slut” at minimum marks Amy in relation to discourses around promiscuity. Thus, the dismissal of offensive speech as “juvenile” obscures its discursive function as a means of social control. Here, feminist theory can be instrumental in politicizing the banal and the quotidian by drawing attention to gendered power relations inherent in hurtful comments that may first appear to be devoid of meaning.

The framing of online harassment in terms of “juvenile” expressions leans on a narrative of an inter-generational difference, which assumes that some groups, by virtue of their age, do not grasp the workings of mediated communication. Narratives of inter-generational difference, commonly constructed in media and policy discourses on mediated communication, hold that adults, in general, are less technologically adept compared to “digital natives” - young people who grow up with computers at home and who presumably use and navigate digital environments with ease (Prensky, 2001). For example, it has been suggested that there is a concern among researchers that cyberbullying among adults might increase because, unlike school-age children, they are not taught about “the dangers of technology” and are likely to underestimate the risks of disclosing the personal information that is presumed to be the basis of cyberbullying (Kelly, 2011). Articulated by Marc Prensky (2001), the metaphor that youth are “digital natives” homogenizes adults as technologically uninformed users and positions children as networked multi-taskers who prefer instant gratification to serious work. Although not without flaws, Prensky's work on “digital natives” has been cited more than ten thousand times, according to the search on Google Scholar. Prensky’s popularity testifies to the wide-spread acceptance of this inter-generational metaphor in structuring thinking about online technologies. The discursive category of youth as “digital natives”, critiqued by a number of scholars who point out persistent divides in computer use along class and gender lines (Jenson, Taylor, & Fisher, 2010), paradoxically co-exists with a competing notion of young people as “digital naives” – unsophisticated and easily manipulated media consumers whose digital literacy leaves much to be desired.

As identity labels, “digital natives” and “digital naives” are similar in how they locate a problem within the individual, eschew the heterogeneity of young people as well as the larger context that facilitates and structures digital communication. Both of these perspectives, while appearing diametrically opposed, invoke the ethos of internet culture as a sphere requiring special competency and knowledge that only some groups possess. Adults, especially those in positions of authority, are often framed as unwilling to understand the importance of social media in the lives of young people.

Similarly, youth, too, are seen as being “at risk” of behaving in a way that does not take into the account the structures, affordances and consequences of mediated communication.

Here I draw on the work of Ilana Gershon (2013), a media scholar who has written extensively on neoliberal underpinnings of networked self-expressions, to consider the implications of the abovementioned discursive constructions of risk around “dangerous” technology. According to Gershon (2013), the discourse of risk is most often mobilized in discussions of digital virality, where criticisms tend to be leveled at the sender of a viral message rather than the individuals, publics, and corporate entities participating in the transmission and circulation of viral media. The focus on individual responsibility transforms a multi-layered phenomenon of virality into a “cautionary tale” that “revolves around people who supposedly misunderstand the consequences of their actions” (p.4). Gershon's theorizing is useful here because it sheds light on common interpretations of online harassment as the product of “risky” interactional dynamics. In particular, discourses of risk are used to frame targets of harassment as lacking personal responsibility in respect to having shared information online and lacking an understanding of publicity as a phenomena involving “inevitable” hostile public reactions. Harassers, on the other hand, are understood as lacking the responsibility to behave online appropriately or to consider the implications of their actions. Thus, within these paradigms of risk, individual responsibility takes precedence over the social mechanisms that make verbal violence possible.

In my reading of the above-mentioned perspectives that imagine the Internet as a risky, “youthful” space, I connect cybersafety discourses with social anxieties surrounding young people's autonomy in digital communication. Academic and popular literature about social media presents the argument that online hostility is a youth issue, an argument that operates under the assumption that adults do not post harassing, threatening or abusive messages online. This assumption, however, runs contrary to research that highlights problems of racist and sexist speech in the online forums and

comment sections of political blogs aimed at adult audiences (Binns, 2010; Filipovic, 2007; McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012).

4.3. Reframing the problem of anonymity

The problem of anonymity is central to cyberbullying and cybersafety discourses, and assumptions around anonymous exchanges need to be reassessed. In this section, I suggest that, as a quality of networked communication, online anonymity is neither stable nor homogeneous. I call for a more nuanced feminist responses to violent speech by pointing out that anonymous and identity-based practices co-exist alongside each other within digital cultures. I also maintain that, while anonymous violent speech is a serious concern, issues around anti-feminist backlash extend beyond the “anonymity problem”.

A number of research participants addressed the issue of anonymity in my interviews with them. Nicole Deagan attributed the proliferation of “aggressive” and “dismissive” comments on feminist blogs to anonymity, noting The F-Word collective’s attempts to tweak the blog’s policy around anonymous commenting. Emma Woolley also shared these concerns around anonymity, yet pointed out that removing anonymity could have negative implications for those whose online activities are in any way transgressive:

I've had people who will... people who said cruel things with their real names. But I do think that being anonymous can fuel that, but a lot of people remain anonymous for other reasons. It's a protection from any number of things. You might want to engage in a space online that, if you, say, family or employers knew about, that would cause a lot of trouble for you. I don't know if removing anonymity is the answer. It feels a lot like a band aid solution. It feels a lot like treating the symptom instead of a disease. (Interview # 4)

Woolley, a blogger with published work in news media, stated that anonymous commenting impedes getting constructive feedback:

I think it [removing anonymity] might work for certain platforms. If you want to, say, comment on stories on a newspaper site, I feel like you can make the case that you have to be a real person with a real name so that people are only giving constructive feedback, but in terms of other networks, I just feel like that would take a lot of protection away from people who need it, and also a bit of the fun about being able to create pseudonyms and experiment with these spaces. (Interview # 4)

At the same time, however, people often post hateful messages while using their full names. Speaking of the misogynistic comments under her YouTube videos, Hodge said:

I could not even believe that hundreds of people, a lot of them under their real names, would go on and say those kinds of things. (Interview # 1)

Jessica, a transwoman who blogs about gaming cultures, said that she gets both anonymous and identifiable hate mail:

It's both. In my experiences over the years there have been more than a few people all too happy to leave real name, to leave IP addresses, email addresses, Facebook account, things like that attached to racist, sexist vitriol. Although usually the people who would say, like, you know, "eat shit and get raped and die you cunt" are more likely to be anonymous.

(Interview # 11)

She noted that readers who comment under their real names are more likely to be leave longer, more elaborate comments:

The people who go on longer disquisitions with racist conspiracy theories, misogynist renditions of history or the people who would go to town explaining exactly why transwomen are mentally ill, deluded, self-mutilating freaks of politically correct culture...

(Interview # 11)

Samantha, a transgender blogger whose writing is a combination of self-reflection and social justice commentaries, faced online harassment when she described barriers to medical access that transgender people are facing:

Someone would come in out of nowhere and just be incredibly rude, and taunting, and patronizing about transpeople, and transphobic, and so on. (Interview # 6)

While harassment made her publish some posts in a friends-only format, she did not remove any of her blog posts about transgender issues because a number of people found them useful and, in one case, instrumental in coming out.

Jaspreet said that people who left hostile comments do not necessarily hide their identities:

[anonymity] is part of the reason people can write very vicious things without being identified. But if you look, there are some people who have a picture, have their name... If you click on them, they comment on the variety of other people (...) They don't care. It seems like their only job is to go around and target certain posts. (Interview # 10)

Blogger Joyce Arthur, in her discussion of anonymity's role in facilitating abuse and hate speech, spoke about a recent case of "outing" a pseudonymous user who is known for harassing women and posting misogynistic content¹⁰:

This guy got it exposed. He would just go after women and just say the most awful things. His identity got exposed, and it turned out he was an average guy with a wife and a kid living in the States somewhere. Not a guy you would think would be some hateful misogynist.

...

¹⁰ Here, Arthur refers to Michael Brusch, or violentcruz, a moderator of Reddit's r/beatingwomen and r/jailbait subreddits, whose identity was made public in 2012 after having made numerous harassing attacks on women. The outing of violentcruz as Brusch, a military man who is a husband and a father living in suburban Texas, troubles the public imagination's view of "trolls". Brusch occupies a position of respectability that contradicts common imagery of trolls as immature, deviant, pathetic, and antisocial individuals.

And it made me realize: why did this guy do it? There are so many reasons. Anonymity of the Internet... They can just say whatever they want and figure there is no recourse for people who they are attacking. (Interview # 3)

Thus far, concerns around the disinhibiting effects of anonymity and pseudonymity have been central to discussions of online harassment and cyberbullying (Ellison & Akdeniz, 1998; Fox, Cruz, & Lee, 2015; Suler & Phillips, 1998; Turkle, 1997). Mass media accounts of anonymity tend to be sensationalist, focusing on cybercrimes, while emphasizing the link between anonymity and criminality, and advising the public to mistrust anyone who hides their “real” identity (van der Nagel & Frith, 2015). Anonymity enables de-individuation: the loss of self-awareness that results in a propensity to follow a group rather than assume personal responsibility for one's actions (Miller, 2012). Anonymity is a mechanism that enables cyberbullying and harassment, and without anonymity, they each argue, networked participants would not risk exposing sexist and racist views for fear of being held accountable for them.

A number of solutions to the “anonymity problem” propose either the complete elimination of anonymous exchanges or linking online profiles to offline identities through credit card data, digital passports, or other types of personal information. Internet critics of the 1990s might have dismissed such solutions due to the prevalence of cyber-libertarian frameworks at that time. Yet today, the domestication of computers, commercialization of online content, and widespread adoption of mobile technologies have resulted in discursive and material shifts that have made these solutions a reality. Corporate-controlled, single-identity, for-profit digital environments have in many ways solidified the tie between “real” and “online” identities, and have left users with limited opportunities to experiment with multiple personae or develop communicative agency beyond self-expression at the level of user-interface (Langlois, 2012; Lovink, 2013). For example, prior to 2015 Facebook mandated the use of “real” names and identifiable photos to be used for profile pictures. Other popular examples of single-identity platforms are Google+, LinkedIn, and Academia.

When the Facebook Connect plug-in first became available, it was touted as a solution to the problem of online vitriol. While the comments that make it past the Facebook Connect filter are, as promised, less intense, it is still not uncommon to see hateful comments from people using their Facebook accounts. Lack of anonymity may act as a deterrent to posting violent content but, it is not a significant obstacle to posting sexist speech, as the Tumblr pages Sexist Facebook Dudes (www.sexistfacebookdudes.tumblr.com) or Sexism! As Seen on Facebook (www.facebooksexism.tumblr.com), which monitor and archive sexist speech published on Facebook, demonstrate. My argument here is that sexist speech cannot be explained by a lack of sufficient accountability mechanisms.

The popularity of Whisper (www.whisper.sh), 4Chan (www.4chan.com), PostSecret (www.postsecret.com) and other platforms that either allow total anonymity or incorporate anonymous interactive elements in their architectures, suggest that anonymous and pseudonymous spaces remain important outlets for self-expression, despite the widespread adoption of single-identity policies by many social networking websites. Yet, the vast majority of online communities are neither fully anonymous nor fully transparent (van der Nagel & Frith, 2015). Most online communities, whether or not they use pseudonyms, find ways to identify a user, such as requiring an existing email address for registration. Pseudonymous environments typically encourage the development of online identities through profile descriptions, avatars, rewards systems, local meet-ups and other community-building mechanisms. Given the range of community-building practices in digital cultures, it is more productive to think about authorship in terms of an “anonymity continuum” with variations of disclosure rather than to dichotomize between full anonymity or full transparency (van der Nagel & Frith, 2015).

Practices of anonymity are undergoing transformations in response to wider changes in digital cultures. In 2011, Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg famously claimed that “having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity” (Helft, 2011, para. 3). Facebook's “real names” policy has faced various criticisms for its failure to recognize that a number of practices – from whistle blowing,

to political protest, to simply having a non-majoritarian sexual identity – necessitate some variations in authorship identification. Zuckerberg modified his perspective on pseudonyms in 2015. First, he announced the modification of Facebook's “real names” policy and then later added that Facebook will let users anonymously log into apps (van der Nagel & Frith, 2015). These changes demonstrate that anonymity does not have to be a blanket term. Elements of anonymity and pseudonymity can both be incorporated into otherwise identity-based communities.

As with anonymity more generally, anonymous disruptions are variable. Their shapes are transformed alongside larger changes in digital cultures. The phenomenon of transient, or “drive-by”, anonymity provides an example of contemporary anonymous disruptions. When he compared various communities where people use pseudonyms, Lanier (2011) noticed that not all pseudonymous communities have high levels of hate and intolerance but, rather, those communities where users have the option to quickly create and discard pseudonyms, the ability to have “drive-by” anonymity, tend to encourage disruptive behaviours. In contrast, websites where pseudonymous users must build their reputation and invest effort into earning virtual “rewards” for informative posts are less likely to house disruptive groups. Thus, reducing social distance through the maintenance of stable relationships over time, even between participants who remain pseudonymous, can reduce occurrences of transient anonymous online disruptions. However, high levels of internal group cohesion and sociality do not necessarily prevent violent speech directed at outsiders.

While users may be courteous to one another within a particular speech community, their civility does not necessarily extend to outsiders. TheRedPill subreddit (www.reddit.com/r/TheRedPill), with more than 100,000 subscribers interested in discussing men's “sexual strategies,” is an example of how such contextual civility operates. TheRedPill has a number of rules in place to ensure civil discussion. For example, ad hominem attacks against participants are immediately deleted. Yet TheRedPill users endorse and encourage the harassment of feminist bloggers. The use of insults like

“idiot,” “bitch,” “scumbag,” or “retard,” against feminists, who are considered outsiders and ideological enemies, is tolerated.

Online anonymity is associated with incivility because it makes possible speech that few people would utter in a face-to-face context for fear of confrontation, losing face, or ruining their reputation. Yet, as the discussion above demonstrates, anonymity remains a valued affordance of online communication, and mandatory measures to reduce anonymity through account verification and “real names” policies are likely to have a chilling effect on the public discourse. Moreover, as interviews with feminist bloggers and observations of interactions on social media make evident, a “real names” policy is weak deterrent of abusive behaviors.

4.4. Prescribing disengagement

There are several problems with cybersafety discourses besides misattributing anonymity as the root of disruptive communication. First, cybersafety frameworks shift responsibility for abuse from the perpetrators to the targets. Second, they construct a one-dimensional narrative of victimhood that invokes nostalgic visions of the public sphere rather than contextualize instances that victimize users online. For example, Kelly's (2011) article on workplace bullying illustrates how the victim narrative operates and is supported by “dangerous technology” discourses. In particular, Kelly suggests that limiting the input of personal information on public digital platforms can effectively prevent workplace cyberbullying:

There is no need to post a message when you have run to the bathroom or have gone to a boring meeting. Remember, once sent, thousands of people have access. Be cautious about how much information you share. Even if the information is not written, pictures tell much about a person. Do not give ammunition to potential cyberbullies. (p. 427)

Similar discursive articulations suggesting the adoption of a gender-neutral invisibility can be found on a variety of anti-bullying websites based in the U.S. and Canada, including websites of government agencies, universities and non-profit organizations. These recommendations, couched in online safety

frameworks, echo conservative strains of academic discussions on Internet privacy, which hold that a distinction between the private and the public in various mediated contexts is not only possible, but also desirable.

A number of non-profit anti-bullying organizations across North America have remarkably similar approaches to cybersafety. Most advise the minimization of a person's digital presence through various disengagement strategies. For example, the National Network to End Domestic Violence (www.nnedv.org) suggests running an Internet search for your name and removing any personal information that is revealed in the search results. The Canadian Clearing House on Cyberstalking (www.cyberstalking.ca) and Working to Halt Online Abuse (www.haltabuse.com) both instruct visitors of their websites to not blame "the online victim". Yet the onus to avoid abuse is on the victim of bullying, who is advised to remain invisible in interactive environments that demand visibility. The Working to Halt Online Abuse website (www.haltabuse.com) recommends lurking, using a gender-neutral username, and limiting the amount of information available on social media profiles. The website includes the following list of recommendations:

When you do participate, be careful -- only type what you would say to someone's face
Don't be too trusting online - don't reveal personal things about yourself until you
really and truly know the other person
Your first instinct may be to defend yourself - DON'T - this is how most online
harassment situations begin. (Hitchcock, 2012, n.p.)

Foregrounding the role of personal responsibility in maintaining safety from harassment, cyberbullying and cybersafety discourses delineate boundaries between audiences on the grounds of traditional characterizations of what is considered public and what is considered private. Recommendations to lurk, keep your life out of public view, and remain vigilant and careful in anticipation of possible harassment, are animated by assumptions that one is not invested into producing political speech. These recommendations are similar to concerns about so-called "oversharing" – the idea that young people on

social media share too much with too many people and lack respect for the normative boundaries between public and private life. Bloggers, too, are commonly accused of narcissism and oversharing when they share life narratives. Most often, these criticisms constitute the “nostalgic invocations of public spheres” to remain “non-polluted by the private” (Taylor, 2011, p.82). Recommendations to curb “oversharing” are especially problematic given that women's concerns, including reproductive choices, health, unpaid labour and sexual violence, have historically not been deemed worthy of public attention. Certain images of pregnant, post-pregnancy, breastfeeding and surgically altered female embodiment have been censored by social media platforms on the grounds that such visual representations do not align with the normative expectations of decency. Feminist blogs, especially when they operate as a confessional mechanism for self-reflection, rectify these exclusions and erasures.

Modes of networked engagements are more complex than cyberbullying discourses typically assume. Cybersafety frameworks present lurking, or consuming digital content anonymously without engaging in the participatory elements of digital media, as a “safe mode” of online engagement. However, this mode is not conducive to participation on social media platforms where information-sharing and interlinkages between past, present, familial, and professional, are increasingly expected. Disengagement strategies contradict dominant logics of identity-based social media, which encourage users to transfer their online contacts into social networks by adding relatives, colleagues, friends and friends of friends.

As more and more relationships begin and end on social networks – for example, beginning a formal relationship by request friendship on Facebook, or ending it with Twitter’s “unfollow” button - networks are increasingly the vehicles for securing and maintaining professional standing, as well as “new technologies for our intimacies” (Balick, 2013, p.xxviii). Having a digital presence that is easily searchable and streamlined across platforms is crucial when seeking career opportunities, especially for people who work in creative or IT sectors. LinkedIn, for example, has become a key platform for self-

promotion related to employment since maintaining a detailed list of achievements increases the likelihood of being recruited by prospective employers. The high value social expectations placed on being “always-on” and engaging social media, coupled with logics of accumulation and self-promotion, are reflected by the emergence of services measuring a person’s online influence in terms of their friends, followers, retweets and other connectivity metrics (see, for example, Klout, www.klout.com or PeerIndex, www.peerindex.net).

In sum, Internet visibility has become currency in both a person’s professional and personal life. Yet, however well meaning, cybersafety recommendations apply neither to the fabric of social media platforms nor to the political work of feminist bloggers. To further support this argument, in the next section I examine how feminist bloggers conceptualize their online presence and how they manage their digital visibility based on these conceptualizations.

4.5. Feminist blogging as a site of creative labour

Despite the ubiquity of cybersafety rhetoric that suggests disengaging from “risky” social networking is a solution to the problems of cyberbullying and violent speech, feminist bloggers continue to develop a visible digital presence as part of their efforts to build community and as an important step towards self-production. In this section, I re-situate feminist blogging as a new type of a networked workplace that is shaped by the economic parameters of digital cultures. I explore why some feminist bloggers develop this visible digital presence by writing using their full names rather than pseudonyms and explain how feminist practices emphasizing a professional public persona contradict cybersafety prescriptions. In my discussion of blogging as creative labour, I maintain that the techno-social fixes and disengagement strategies of scholars relying on cyberbullying and cybersafety discourses assume that targets of verbal violence consume digital content, rather than produce, disseminate, and rework it.

The labour involved in blogging is rarely financially compensated. Bloggers are overwhelmingly unpaid. Most of the blogs in this study collect little to no advertising revenue.

Bloggers write for free and invite readers to submit content in order to gain exposure and receive feedback in lieu of compensation. Yet in their interviews, research participants framed blogging in terms of “work”, “writing”, “journalism”, “a project” and “a career”. They stressed the effort and time required to produce and promote their blogs. They also spoke about the work involved in facilitating a continuous affective relation to their audiences, whether they are known or unknown, engaged or indifferent, feminist or ambivalent to feminism, supportive of social justice or strongly opposed to anti-oppression politics. Through the exploration of the networked agency narratives put forward by research participants, I suggest that feminist bloggers are public intellectuals who engage in creative labour within the confines of neoliberal market logics.

As a feminist writer and public speaker, Victoria maintains a blog that attracts approximately twenty thousand visitors a month. Her blog is the most visited blog in my research sample, second only to Anita Sarkeesian's Feminist Frequency. Victoria aligns the personal, the political, and the professional, and calls herself a “professional feminist,” which by her definition is a person, informed by feminist ideas, who is paid for consulting and speaking engagements. Although “professional feminist” is a contested term in feminist circles due to allegations it involves only elitism and complacency with the status quo, Victoria defends her choice of making feminism a career:

I come at professional feminism as this idea that the work I do is infused with feminism (...) This kind of model gets juxtaposed against those of us who are “working in the trenches” every day dealing with violence against women, who are helping women keep their homes, and fighting for x, y and z (...) There seems to be this divide between (...) ‘public intellectual’ feminists versus ‘on-the-ground-working’ feminists. What you are doing on the ground is feminism and what they are doing is feminism. We are all, kind of, professional feminists as long as we are doing our jobs with a feminist perspective, and a framework, and all those sorts of things. (Interview # 7)

The intellectual activities of feminist bloggers are consistent with Peter Dahlgren's (2013) characterization of “web intellectuals”. Dahlgren argues that web intellectuals act as opinion leaders and cultural producers, even if they lack the “elite” status of more “traditional” public intellectuals. Indeed, for Victoria, blogging is a way to expand what it means to do feminist work as a public intellectual outside of academia:

So when I have these conversations with other people, I feel like I'm trying to broaden what it means to “be a feminist” and “do” feminism. We don't always have to be sitting around the table theorizing about Judith Butler and Foucault and what does that mean. There is a place and time for that... It does not have to only be that for us to be doing feminism.

(Interview # 7)

Although Victoria prefers to remain anonymous in this study, she uses her full name on her blog and on a variety of social media platforms. In her interview, she reveals that the decision to move away from pseudonymous writing was a response to changing attitudes around the market value of networked cultural production:

I was blogging under a nickname, not my full name. I did that for kind of privacy reasons. You know, back in 2000 only crazy people had blogs. It wasn't something you put on your business card. Of course, now everyone has a business card for their blog. (...) Around 2006-2007 I started to do more writing professionally, and I thought that it was a good time to start a new blog, start it fresh with my name, so my work and my name would kind of go hand in hand. (Interview # 7)

Since the late 1990s blogging has moved from being a niche, subcultural, practice to being a normalized part of professional identity, which reflects “a shift from a working self to the self *as* work in the form of a self-brand with reputation as its currency” (Hearn, 2010, p.426, emphasis in the original). Victoria's decision to make blogging a part of her professional identity reflects a socioeconomic imperative to establish her digital presence in accordance with the market logics of

social capital. Her trajectory away from pseudonymity speaks to larger transformations within digital economies due to developments in strategies for the monetization of unpaid user participation.

Blogging, along with other types of content production, has become a way to anchor and develop a person's digital presence. Supported by liberal narratives about the need for digital inclusion and participatory politics, the idea of having a measurable and quantifiable digital presence first gained traction among business professionals and was later adopted by practitioners in other fields, including feminist activism and organizing. The self-branding pressures of market logics are not, however, a defining aspect of the narrative Victoria constructed during her interview. Though she uses several strategies to promote her blog, including the distribution of content through social media and selling branded merchandise, Victoria's decision to blog under her full name was a step towards asserting herself as a legitimate public speaker who is not silenced by hatred and verbal violence:

One of the things that really prompted me to.... to have my full name on there was this idea of not being scared anymore. You know, not being worried about anti-feminist people attacking me or anything like that. Six and a half years later, you know, nothing has happened in "real life". It is all been just these really disturbing threats online. (Interview # 7)

Victoria receives vitriolic messages in response to her pro-choice fundraising campaigns:

They [hate comments] are pretty generic. You know, "you are evil and you are going to hell, baby killer" kind of stuff. It is such a horrible message to open, but nothing has been too personal or too directed. (Interview # 7)

For Victoria, the benefits of open debate outweigh harms associated with receiving "stupid misogynistic comments" from "haters":

I think that blogging as a feminist is a great... It's a great thing. It's fun, it's great, you get to connect with other people online. This open debate is good. It's really good. Forget about the haters who just send stupid misogynistic comments. But when you really engage in the

community and if you can maintain respect and an open mind, you really are learning so much about what we can do with feminism in this country. (Interview # 7)

Interestingly, Victoria expresses more concern about being critiqued by fellow feminists rather than by anti-feminist “haters”:

I do have friends that get a lot of hate mail, hate comments and things like that over social media... I've been pretty lucky that is been pretty minimal with me. What is actually more scary is when you are challenged. It's easy to dismiss the haters, people who are just, you know, being jerks. But people who have honest, solid critiques of your work – this is a scary thing. (Interview # 7)

Victoria compares blogging to speaking in a classroom, signalling her understanding of the blogosphere as a space of heightened vulnerability where a speaker makes herself open to critique:

You think about when you are in a classroom and a teacher asks a question, it takes a lot of courage to raise your hand and say: “My opinion is this.” And that's what we are doing online. We are putting our hand up for the whole world to see and say “I think this is what is wrong with this country, or this world, or society, and this is the solution I propose”.

(Interview # 7)

Though Victoria’s blog has a relatively high level of readership, some of her blog posts get only a few comments while the majority of her posts receive no comments at all. Most of Victoria's conversations with other bloggers take place on social media. She clarifies:

There are only a few sites where the action is happening in the comments versus the action happening on social media. I keep in contact with a lot of other “small bloggers”, and we definitely have had lots of conversations over the last few years, three to five years, about “where did all our comments go?” (Interview # 7)

Within today's context of media convergence and monopolization, larger media tend to attract larger audiences and higher levels of user-generated content. Victoria points out that compared to her earlier experiences of blogging, current social media conversations are faster and more public:

Well, I do remember that we had some very long and great conversations in comments on my old blog. It wasn't as fire-powered as, you know, Twitter because it is just so fast (...)
And then other people are watching, and some people chime in, and jump in and say
“Yeah, I totally agree” or “Wow, no, I don't agree”. I think that conversations pre-Twitter, pre-social media ... I wouldn't say they were more robust.... but, contained. (Interview # 7)

Feminist comment sections generally thrive in large corporate-owned social media platforms or in independent, magazine-like, blogs that are established as media institutions in their own right. Due to a lack of vibrant comment activities on smaller blogs, some bloggers find it difficult to remember that networked audiences are not only imagined, but real. As Amanda Lenhart (2005) maintains, “bloggers sometimes forget exactly how public their blog really is” (p.138). Victoria similarly explains:

I think what is the most challenging is remembering that somebody is reading me. I'm not writing for a huge blog, and my blog doesn't have a million readers a day or anything like that. So when somebody emails me or especially when I meet somebody in person and they say something about what I wrote, or say something like “I really enjoy your writing” which is still, kind of, like, “Oh, what I'm writing is being read”. Even though the purpose of the blog is for other people to read it, there is this kind of disconnect sometimes. Those of us at smaller blogs kind of forget that people are reading. (Interview # 7)

Another research participant, Jessica, has a similar trajectory to Victoria's move towards identifiable authorship:

When I first began blogging it was with a pseudonym. That lasted for good... say, two and half... three years. Because at the time, it just seemed... it seemed like the done thing.
Having a pseudonym was a part of whole blogging experience. (Interview # 11)

For Jessica, pseudonymous blogging was akin to experimenting with a character creation, but eventually she began writing using her full name:

But I eventually started to use my real name... my legal name... because my writing was starting to become better known. I began to become an academic, publishing journal articles and things like that. I did not want to just abandon my website. I wanted to connect it to that public identity that I was building with the writing that was not connected to that blog....

...

This makes it sound a bit more calculated than it really was, but it was sort of a resume building exercise in w ay because I did not want that writing on my blog disconnected from my public professional persona. I stood by everything I wrote there. There was nothing on my blog that I wouldn't proudly put my legal name to, put my signature to. (Interview # 11)

Although other research participants did not self-identify as “professional feminists”, their blogs are nevertheless part of their professional identities. Joyce Arthur, for instance, explains that she did not want to write under a pseudonym because she already had a public presence as a pro-choice activist and sex workers' rights advocate:

I am a public person and I figured that because I'm already in public saying these things, it did not make sense for me to adopt an anonymous persona. Something about it did not seem right to me. I should not have to hide my views. So in this sense, I don't mind putting myself out there. (Interview # 3)

Arthur's public identity extends to publishing and commenting on various digital media:

When I'm blogging on a website like *The National Post* or wherever, I do feel a responsibility to let people know who they are talking to. I just feel some responsibility because I'm a public figure in my role. I don't feel it's right for me to hide, that's all.

(Interview # 3)

Several research interviewees similarly placed an emphasis on responsibility and accountability. Meghan Murphy, for instance, underscores the importance of her “real identity” for maintaining a relationship of trust with her audience:

I feel like having your real identity out there when you are writing is important. It is much more impactful in terms of how your readers can trust you and trust your experiences and relate to you because you are a real person, you are out there, you are making yourself vulnerable. (Interview # 2)

That blogging is creative work is even more pronounced in interviews with participants who work as journalists or use journalistic principles in their writing. Nicole Deagan worked in radio before she began blogging at The F-Word. For Nicole, blogging is an extension of her efforts to produce “healthy journalism”:

So we started a radio show with an intention of doing exactly that – just highlighting what is real feminist work, so that people could be educated about what is really going on. So when our blog started in 2010, it was an extension of our overall work which is to build community within the feminist movement and promote understanding and collaboration among feminists. And, you know, having more of a feminist voice out there and engaging into a healthy debate and healthy journalism around feminist issues. (Interview # 8)

Feminist bloggers write across media platforms both as working journalists and as commentators. Some, like Toronto-based blogger Emma Woolley, begin by writing for free and gradually transition into paid employment:

When I first started, I did a lot of writing for free, and that was at places like *The Huffington Post* and *Shameless*, and I only started writing for the *Globe* a few months ago. I've also done, you know, non-politically charged writing as a part of my living, but I've always had a day job in social media and that sort of thing. So all of my feminist work is

sort of my side project. It tends to ebb and flow. You know, sometimes I do more of it.

Sometimes I'm a little more quiet. (Interview # 4)

Woolley's writing for mainstream publications like *The Globe and Mail* takes on a dimension of resistance:

The reason why I do the work I do for *The Globe* is that I can talk about tech issues in a way that's comprehensive and lays out the facts as I see them. (...) It's an excellent way to subtly eject some feminism into a mainstream paper. (Interview # 4)

Unlike professional feminist writers Victoria, Nicole Deagan, Emma Woolley, or Joyce Arthur, contributor to *The F-word*, Caity Goerke, was an undergraduate student at the University of British Columbia at the time of writing. She was a novice who found personal meaning by sharing her writing with other people:

I love it [blogging]. It's a really important aspect of my life. [...] Writing has always been a really important outlet for me. [...] It just felt really great to have the opportunity to be able to share my writing with people. (Interview # 9)

In writing for *The F-Word*, Goerke has developed a more conversational writing style than is typical of academic feminist prose:

I'm finishing up my undergrad now, and you can get caught up in this academic jargon, so learning to write for a blogging format has really forced me to expand the ways that I can talk about certain issues... which I'm sure is helpful for my school work.... and I think it is really a place to brainstorm. It is really a place where I start sort of come to really understand my own position on certain issues, which than can be helpful when I'm doing assignments for school as well. (Interview # 9)

Since the networked self is in flux, so too is the practice of blogging. Victoria and Jessica, for instance, transitioned from pseudonymous to authenticated identities. Goerke, a young blogger, does not remember if she ever used an alter-ego:

well, I originally blogged... oh no, it had my name on it too.... I wanted my name attached to it because I was proud of the work I put into the blogging. If I received a lot of negative feedback I might consider writing under a pseudonym, but because I've been so lucky to have a positive experience so far, I haven't necessarily felt the need to. I put a lot of work and a lot of time into my blog posts, and I'm happy to have them there under my name.

(Interview # 9)

Goerke's digital presence as a writer has always been connected to markers that would identify her. Her primary concern is the transition from having a small initial audience of close friends and colleagues to having an audience of “complete strangers” who may not be receptive to feminist ideas:

[...] writing for The F Word has sort of opened my eyes to the idea that complete strangers are going to read what I'm going to say which is really new for me. And previously I had only written with my colleagues, and friends, and family as my intended audience. This is something I'm trying to grapple with – the idea that my work could be read by people I don't know, and by people who might not identify as feminist, which I think is really exciting. (Interview # 9)

Goerke was surprised by how quickly she reached a large audience through The F-Word and describes trying to reach several audiences at once as a balancing act: she tries to be academically engaging for her university peers while also providing accessible content for those who are not familiar with feminist ideas. Once her blog posts began to exceed the boundaries of a semi-intimate public, writing became a serious endeavor rather than “fun”:

When I started it, being all for fun, it was not anything that I expected would ever become a serious aspect of my life, and then I got a position with the F-word collective. [...] Yeah, I mean, just going on the site now and seeing statistics, and seeing that two days after it has been posted, it has been read 240 times... So that's the thing I was not expecting, how quickly it took off, and how quickly you can reach a fairly large number of people. I wasn't expecting that. (Interview # 9)

Blogging allows a high degree of user agency in relation to responding to an audience's uptake of the blog and individual performance. Blogging platforms allow authors to see page view and comment statistics, as well as statistics about the number of times the piece was shared and how; such quantitative insights are rarely available in print and corporate social media. In print media, for example, it is impossible to calculate how each individual article fares in comparison to the rest of the issue, whereas users on social networking websites are not provided with a data about how many people have read their posts, even though such data is available to platform's owners (Brake, 2014). This high level of agency also has its downsides. Though reaching a wide audience is “exciting” for Goerke, blogging about feminism under her full name puts her under additional pressure to produce high-quality content:

I feel a great pressure to make sure that what I'm putting out is something that I can stand behind one hundred percent. I would feel less of this pressure if I was writing through a pseudonym or maybe writing stuff that is not explicitly feminist. Definitely there is a lot of conscious effort on my part that goes into making sure that I can stand behind it even if people receive it negatively. (Interview # 9)

Anxieties around marketability and the possibility of being scrutinized by a critical public have a major influence on her writing process:

I think I probably spend more time sort of fact checking myself and really giving in-depth editing on my posts, than I do actually writing them. And this awareness that it is going with my name, especially with regards to the fact that we have to be careful with regards to prospective employers being able to Google my name and see that... so I'm very aware that.
...

I have experienced a sense of negativity in other way. In particular, I've applied for several jobs where I had to hand in writing samples. My blog posts are most relevant samples that I have, 'cuz you won't sent an academic paper for a marketing job. I've actually consciously

thought to myself what's the least feminist blog post can I send in, right? So that's the anticipation of a negative response that I myself is very often caught up in. (Interview # 9)

While Victoria, Murphy, Jessica, and Arthur position blogging as a continuation of their professional identities, for others, like Goerke and Jaspreet, feminist blogging has the potential to be an obstacle to professional opportunities, so they are especially careful about how they present themselves through their online writing.

Caity Goerke and Jaspreet share additional similarities in how blogging for them is an enactment of feminist knowledges. Each earned an undergraduate degree in Women and Gender Studies (albeit from different Canadian universities) and each started blogging as part of a community-based class project. Unlike Goerke, Jaspreet did not use her full name when she first began blogging. She was concerned that the political nature of her writing could be a barrier on the job market:

I was applying for grad school and I was applying for jobs as well, and you never know who is on the other side of the table. So I really wanted to kind of control that. (Interview #10)

Blogger Samantha experienced transphobic harassment when her online writing was used against her in a professional setting. In 2007 Samantha was writing about her experiences with a major Canadian student group which she criticized for alleged corruption, nepotism and unfair hiring practices:

When I went to a meeting... someone had printed parts of my journal, where I was very frankly stating my opinions about the organization, and then very much by surprise circulated them among the group. At that time, the blog also included my legal name change. While they were passing around my blog, they handed me documents to sign that were very much knowingly in the wrong name... [after the incident] I became very clearly aware that... people were sufficiently motivated in any sort of collective political setting to have power over me that they would use whatever they could in context or out of context. (Interview # 6)

Feminist Current's Murphy also voices a somewhat similar concern around the potential for surveillance by prospective employers:

I understand why women blog anonymously because in some cases it can impact them negatively in a professional sense particularly if your work has nothing to do with feminism and you are writing about issues like pornography and prostitution, issues that are controversial, if you are writing about really personal stuff Employers, when you apply for jobs, look you up online, right? So I understand why women blog anonymously. Also, it can be dangerous because women get threats and what not. (Interview # 2)

For some feminist writers, blogging anonymously is a way to avoid interpellation into processes that construct what Aaron Balick (2013) calls a “cobbled-together” identity, which is to say an identity that is aggregated from multiple sources by search engines (p.28-29). Since users have little control over external representations of themselves, blogging anonymously can be a way to resist such haphazard representations. Avoiding the creation of a branded digital presence, however, is ultimately antithetical to market logics of digital media. Non-anonymous feminist blogging and the building of social media profiles can construct a coherent and comprehensive digital presence, on a blogger's own terms, as part of a more effective resistance to a “cobbled-together” identity.

When it came to a choosing between pseudonymous and “verifiable” identities, the bloggers in this research suggest that maintaining a professional self-image is more of a factor than managing potential backlash or threats of violence. Their concerns about maintaining a professional digital presence is well founded and symptomatic of the changing ways in which relationships, including labour relations, are negotiated. Despite having different career trajectories, most research participants maintain varying degrees of what Alice Marwick (2013) calls “an edited self”, which is the performance of an authentic, yet “business-friendly,” subjectivity far from any discursive territories that could be interpreted negatively by present or future employers. “Professional feminist” Victoria offers a disclaimer on her blog that its content is not reflective the work she does for her employer.

Another research participant, Jarrah Hodge of the blog Gender Focus, emphasizes the partiality of her standpoint in an attempt to demarcate boundaries between her feminist work and other professional activities:

As to my personal standpoint and biases, I will try to declare them where I think it's relevant and don't think it's obvious (i.e. I'm not going to state I'm a feminist every single post). I am a member of and a former candidate for the NDP, and I work for a trade union. My views expressed on the blog are not representative of my employer or my political party. (Hodge, 2015, para. 6)

A positive digital presence that is streamlined across identity-based platforms is crucial for career opportunities, especially for feminist writers working in creative and informational sectors. In this context, feminist blogging is a new type of a hyper-networked workplace: semi-professional, informal, most often unpaid yet firmly embedded in the digital economy. The Internet, as previously mentioned, has become an archive where traces of multiple dimensions of self are stored, and a virtual marketplace where these traces are accessible to a wide range of actors. Yet despite this vulnerability, *not* using social media can be seen as unprofessional in a number of fields (Marwick, 2013).

It is important to remain critical of the relationship between feminist blogs and wider economic patterns of the blogosphere. In her research on anonymous blogs about their workplaces, Abigail Schoneboom (2008) argues that workbloggers, people who blog about their workplaces, produce content that is “their own spontaneous product” and, therefore, “the satisfaction of its creation essentially belongs to them and is not mediated by a commodity relationship” (p.17). Mobilizing conceptual tools in Marxist theory, Schoneboom (2008) defines this type of blogging as a “compromise between exploitation and exploitation” (p.19). The affordances of workbloggers’ anonymity are crucial so that their career paths are, for the most part, distanced from their online personas. In contrast to anonymous workbloggers, bloggers who write under their full names are more likely to manage their digital presence in accordance with market logics of commodification.

More and more, online media rely on low-paid or volunteer labour in an attempt to cut costs in competitive marketplaces. For example, *The Huffington Post* (www.huffingtonpost.com), a major liberal news website for which Jarrah Hodge, Emma Woolley, Steph Guthrie, Joyce Arthur, Julie Zeilinger and other research participants have written, does not pay its contributors. They are expected to monetize this volunteer work through increased traffic to their personal blogs. The trend towards the “Huffinization” of journalism, employing a revenue model built on unpaid user generated content, further entrenches already precarious intellectual labour and threatens certain journalistic genres like investigative writing and community coverage (Bakker, 2012).

While the gendered differences in access to computing are narrowing in developed countries, subtler inequalities pertaining to usage still persist (Robinson et al., 2015). For instance, although women comprise more than half of digital media users, they are more often than not represented and targeted as consumers of digital media, while men are represented as the producers of digital media (Royal, 2008; van Zoonen, 2002). By assuming that women are consumers and not contributors to the production and circulation of media texts, cyberbullying and cybersafety discourses further promote stereotypical expectations around the gendered dynamics of online networking. These discourses pull users away from the full range of networked practices that digital cultures have to offer and, as such, are counterproductive to feminist creative practices.

The disengagement strategies suggested by cybersafety and cyberbullying discourses, that is withholding information and narrowing the scope of a user’s interactions, run counter to the goals of most feminist blogs, the expectations of networked audiences, and the self-branding strategies of feminist bloggers. In sum, cybersafety and cyberbullying discourses do not reflect the realities of feminist blogging as creative work.

Recognizing feminist blogging as a site of creative work is important for this project on two grounds: first, it underscores the ways sexist speech can harm public identity, and second, it shows that bloggers can navigate hostile digital cultures while remaining visible to larger audiences. Discursive

constructions that position victims of cyberbullying as unsophisticated users inhabiting dangerous territories are not conducive to providing effective strategies of addressing violent speech. Therefore, new approaches to understanding the effects of verbal violence should be applied to the work of feminist bloggers as they are performative, creative, and sharing subjects who engage in context-dependent responses to problematic communication on social media.

4.6. De-virtualization: doxing, outing and public shaming

This section explores networked forms of resistance which de-anonymize violent speech. The practices of doxing, outing, and public shaming have emerged as tools of feminist resistance to verbal violence. Public shaming refers to reproaching people who engage in socially reprehensible actions. In mediated environments, outing is a means of exposing the identities of anonymous or pseudonymous Internet users to wider audiences, and doxing is the act of revealing and distributing private information obtained through hacking or deception. Although these networked practices are not synonymous and have different histories, they collide and feed into each other in the digital realm. Outing, for instance, can be facilitated through doxing and be followed by public shaming. As tools of feminist resistance, these practices raise several ethical issues and, I suggest, constitute new forms of social regulation.

Feminists have historically directed public criticisms at commercial entities, state institutions, or people in positions of power. The immediacy and speed of online interactions create a “culture of heightened awareness and accountability” (Horeck, 2014, p.1106) where not only public figures can be reprimanded for their misjudgements, but private individuals can be targeted through peer surveillance. Feminists who justify the outing of disruptive users draw a line between acceptable public shaming and the unacceptable practice of doxing. Doxing assumes a malicious intent to intimidate and silence through an unauthorized distribution of identifiable information such as addresses, phone numbers, social security numbers and employment details. Feminists who engage in disclosing identities of sexist speakers frame their acts as public shaming; the acts of de-virtualization and subsequent public shaming of a person behind anonymous misogynistic threats cannot constitute doxing since these

actions do not involve blackmail and nor do they publicize private information. Rather, information that is already available on the Internet is distributed and accountability is demanded from the person who produces violent speech. Feminist blogger Rebecca Watson (2014) defends public disclosure of the identities of online abusers as a logical response to their intrusive harassment:

while they go out of their way to investigate us, to find our addresses and publish them because we have the temerity to exist on the Internet, they can easily protect their own identity by simply not emailing us threats and harassment. (para. 13)

Watson suggests that she has no obligation to protect the confidentiality of hate mail:

If you harass women online, calling them slurs and threatening to rape and kill them, and if I find out your real name, I will publish it. (para. 14)

Despite this nuanced reading of public accountability, accusations of doxing have been used to discredit anti-harassment efforts of feminist bloggers. For example, the anti-feminist speech community accused Sarkeesian of doxing her abusers when she published hate mail without removing the IP address of its sender. These unjustified accusations of doxing become another punitive measure against feminist bloggers for violating the unspoken norms of Internet culture where individual expression – however violent and misogynist – is sanctified above civility.

While scholarly literature on doxing is scant and mentions feminists only as doxing targets (Mantilla, 2013), practices of public shaming and outing of anonymous users are matters of debate in the feminist blogosphere. Some feminists suggest that such practices are useful for redressing violent speech and there are a number of websites operating on “name and shame” principles of peer-based or lateral surveillance. Feminist Internet shaming can often be concerned with incidents that happen in public spaces, the kind that can be seen in submissions to Hollaback, a website dedicated to ending street harassment (www.ihollaback.org). Sometimes feminists publicize materials intended for private or semi-private consumption, such as content of email conversations, listserves and chats. Good examples of this are Alexandra Tweten's Bye Felipe Instagram page, which documents harassment on

dating websites (www.instagram.com/byefelipe), and Sexist Shaming, a blog that publishes screen captures of sexist and misogynist comments on social media (www.sexistshaming.tumblr.com). These websites are noteworthy because they crowd-source surveillance by inviting users to submit and share the questionable user-generated content they have witnessed, and subsequently subjects that content to public shaming. Public shaming within the feminist blogosphere becomes a form of collective “self-defense”, a way to raise awareness around the scope of misogynistic backlash and a step to deter further incidents.

The uses of lateral surveillance, doxing and shaming in the name of social justice are little researched. While feminist bloggers are often the targets of doxing, and many feminists may oppose doxing as such, this is not to say that feminists do not engage in doxing their opponents. This is problematic for a few reasons. Doxing, whether it is used for oppressive or social justice ends, relies on the rhetoric of manipulation to harm others by silencing, humiliating or getting them fired (Oluo, 2015). Discussing Racists Getting Fired blog (www.racistsgettingfired.tumblr.com) that publishes names, work and school addresses of people who write racist comments on social media, blogger Ijeoma Oluo asks whether the use of public shaming and doxing is ethically justifiable:

If our goal is to change an unjust society, to lift systematic oppression, is this focus on individual bigots—many of whom are barely into their adult years—a help or a distraction? (para. 12)

Although electronic billboards, hand-written signs, and print announcements have all been used as mediums for public shaming within the American justice system, to date there is no precedent that allows judges to order the use of social media to carry out shaming punishments (Goldman, 2015). While public shaming can be used to raise awareness around sexist attitudes, these practices are problematic since they attack the person rather than undo prejudicial attitudes. Although possibilities of being publicly outed and shamed might act as deterrents of violent speech, such practices contribute little to the systematic change in the collective unlearning of sexism. Besides, the possibility of making

a mistake, of misinterpreting a comment or taking sarcasm at face value, is high in digital media where context is incomplete. The potentially harmful and counter-productive effects can present another challenge to using shaming as punishment for social or legal transgressions. The American legal community, for instance, has been ambivalent towards shaming as a form of punishment due to its unpredictable effects: instead of feeling remorse, an offender might react to being shamed with increased aggression (Goldman, 2015). Additionally, public shaming typically humiliates offenders instead of providing them with an opportunity for rehabilitation and integration into a community (Goldman, 2015).

Public shaming is an effective means of social control under the condition that there is a community whose members know the person being shamed and express their disapproval of the alleged transgressions (Goldman, 2015). Shaming might not have a strong effect in mediated environments built on fleeting connections that are easily severed; therefore, to draw one's attention to instances of verbal violence, bloggers purposefully connect audiences that are normally separate. This strategy can be understood through the concept of *collapsed contexts*. The term *context collapse* originated in mass media studies to explain how multiple audiences hold varying expectations of news outlets (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014). Boyd (2014) applied the theory of context collapse to digital media environments, and reworked it into the idea of *collapsed contexts*. According to boyd (2014), the phenomenon of collapsed contexts refers to balancing different audiences. Collapsed contexts are commonly understood as situations to be avoided or, at the very least, carefully managed. Here, I suggest that rather than being objects on which processes of collapsed contexts are enacted, social media users choose to *strategically initiate* collapsed contexts by alerting employers about misogynist speech of their current or prospective employees.

For example, Steph Guthrie, whose story is discussed in the previous chapter, contacted prospective employers of Bendilin Spurr, creator of “Beat up Anita Sarkeesian game”. In a similar move, when Australian video game critic Alanah Pears was targeted with gendered slurs, she

strategically enacted what I consider to be collapsed contexts. Since the users who sent her abusive messages were mostly teenage boys, Pearce forwarded screen captures of their obscene messages to their mothers on Facebook instead of shaming them publicly (True, 2014). In this way, Pearce collapsed one context where misogynistic attacks are rewarded with a context where users are forced to face the consequences of their speech. As these episodes demonstrate, single-identity social media platforms collapse familial, professional and pseudonymous contexts, exposing misogynist messages to unintended audiences.

4.7. Oppositional silence as resistance

In this final section I identify possible uses of silence as a mode of resistance. The idea of silence as resistance may seem to contradict the argument developed above. While disengagement is generally counterproductive to feminist politics since silence often represents submission to dominant, patriarchal authority (hooks, 2014), in certain contexts, it can be a deliberate practice of resistance. However, there is a pivotal difference between forced silence and the oppositional, resistive, and potentially transformative silence that I discuss here (C. Keating, 2013). It is possible to distinguish *being silenced* as powerlessness and *being silent* as potentially empowering (Fivush, 2010). Resistive silence is actualized on a person's own terms in order to demonstrate opposition or to recuperate from ongoing struggles for recognition. One way to enact oppositional, or resistive, silence is to strategically and temporarily disengage from spaces that are rife with verbal violence, rejecting the terms of communication of those spaces. In 2013, feminists used the hashtag #TwitterSilence to organize a 24-hour digital “walk-out” from Twitter as a protest against gender-based abuse on social media. The walk-out, initiated by British feminist Caitlyn Moran, responded to a stream of rape and death threats that were directed at blogger and journalist Caroline Criado-Perez who led a campaign to place prominent women on new British banknotes. After the campaign succeeded with Jane Austen being put on the 10 pound bill, Criado-Perez and her supporters became targets of misogynistic commentary,

rape and death threats on Twitter. On her blog Moran (2013) explains the rationale for the hashtag #TwitterSilence:

You know – the popularity of social networking sites waxes and wanes with ferocious rapidity. Twitter might currently be the hot thing – but it only takes a couple of bad months for it to become the new Friends Reunited, the new MySpace, the new Bebo. Another ghost-town, left empty when women, and their good male friends, tire of this horrible clown caravel of rape and death and threat and blocking and antagonism and cynicism and the shrugging insistence that this is how it will always be. (para. 32)

Moran's initiative was criticized for seeming to accept the ongoing silencing of feminist activists. Critics suggested that alternative hashtags like #shoutback and #nosilence would amplify feminist voices and create shared meanings around feminist politics. As blogger and journalist Liz Jarvis (2013) tweeted, “the best way to stand up to bullies is to speak out. Which is why I'm not doing the #twittersilence. Let your voice be HEARD. #shoutback”. As critics of #TwitterSilence point out, the acts of resistive silence can be interpreted as a retreat from the public sphere due to pressures of anti-feminist speech communities. Instead of being silent, feminist users choose to actively pressure social media platforms to take action against abuse¹¹.

Another way to strategically employ resistive disengagement is to selectively carve out spaces of silence, which enables marginalized groups and individuals to speak out or put forward controversial work without having to manage the noise of disruptive comments. Disabling comments section is one such strategy that is widely used. After an initial period of enthusiasm about the interactive potential of comments sections, some news media have reconsidered their use. News agency Reuters

¹¹ One petition asked Facebook to remove pages with violent threats and demeaning content such as groups titled “Kicking Sluts in the Vagina” and “I know a silly little bitch that needs a good slap” (Raines, 2011). In a similar vein, in 2013 the Women, Action, & the Media (WAM) collective published an open letter urging Facebook to remove pages advocating violence against women. WAM also advised their audience to contact companies advertising on Facebook and ask them to withdraw their advertisements until Facebook bans pages promoting violence against women. These appeals to market logics proved to be effective for mobilizing networked audiences. According to WAM, their message was shared over 60,000 times on Twitter and supporters sent Facebook more than 5000 emails.

(www.reuters.com) has removed the comment sections under news stories, and only allows spaces for audience commenting on its blog and Facebook page. For a time, *The Toronto Star* (www.thestar.com) allowed commenting on most of its articles for 48 hours after publication, but eventually closed down comment sections altogether. In 2015, The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (www.cbc.ca) temporarily disabled comments on all its articles about Indigenous people due to the disproportionate number of hateful comments.

Santana's (2014) quantitative analysis of American newspapers has shown that articles on controversial topics are likely to be published without an open comment section due to a large number of uncivil comments. The scope of topics considered "controversial" is quite wide: accidents or disasters, crime, immigration, religion, celebrity gossip, as well as many social issues including civil and gay rights, abortion, race, and homelessness (Santana, 2014). One quantitative study of a midsize daily newspaper based in the USA estimates that one in five comments can be defined as uncivil as a result of name-calling, vulgarity, or accusations of lying and aspersions (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014).

As with major news media outlets, when some feminist bloggers find that incidences of violent speech have become unmanageable, they shut down their blogs' comment sections. This is a move that may seem counterproductive to the very act of blogging, yet, in these contexts, it is necessary to selectively create a space of silence in order to produce content without being hindered by moderating a constant stream of violence speech. This kind of disengagement is recuperative rather than explicitly resistive. Disabling comments can allow a blogger to continue self-publishing when the resources needed for comment moderation are limited.

Each of the blogs in the sample had a comment section. Some sections were active hubs of activity while others attracted very few comments. Jarrah Hodge's Gender Focus (www.gender-focus.com) typically receives up to one dozen comments per article. Hodge's YouTube channel, however, had been flooded with abuse until she decided to disable comments. Below is Hodge's detailed account of having to read misinformed and abusive comments on her work:

Yeah, it was horrible. It was actually really surprising. I've seen what happened to other people so I should not have been surprised, but... People were sharing my links on Reddit, on these men's rights activists' sites... So people were just coming... I would post a video and all these people would subscribe to my page. So 6 to 12 hours later I had like 60 people who did not like it... I did save a lot of the comments... Some of them were so stupid. There were a lot of comments like, oh boy, “you wear a lot of make up for a feminist”. People trying to get at you when they obviously don't understand anything about feminism. Lots of people trying to argue “you are a lying”, “you do all hate men”. People calling me a communist which I think is funny.... And a lot of just really gross stuff. So I got to the point where I was dreading opening my email every day, reading my email, so I had to take down the comments. I did not want to do that, I wanted to have a conversation with people. And some people, even if they disagreed with me, were willing to have a respectful conversation. And it sucks that it cannot really happen on YouTube, but there are just no way with the amount of trolls who just wanna be jerks. [...] Sometimes I can see that it is the same person doing it with different names... I don't think that the majority of people are trolls. They are just so loud and persistent and sneaky at their techniques and they make it seem more depressing that it actually is. (Interview # 1)

Due to the large number of harassing comments she received, Anita Sarkeesian disabled the comments on her Feminist Frequency blog as well as her YouTube channel, much to the chagrin of men's rights groups. Tellingly, Sarkeesian's interview on *The Colbert Report* is the only episode on the show's official YouTube channel where comments are disabled. Sarkeesian's move to disable comments and voting on her videos was an attempt to minimize harassment, yet it also engendered a new wave of backlash on forums that are hostile to feminism. As one Reddit user summarizes, Sarkeesian's anti-feminist critics believe that “allowing voting, at least, would rightfully humiliate her” (AlchemyPhoenix, 2013).

Shutting down comments sections can be read as “silencing the public and preventing public dialogue” (Santana, 2014, p. 151). However, as a form of selective disengagement, these silencing strategies serve as modes of resistance and self-preservation in the face of anti-feminist backlash. I put these forward as important contingent practices that provide alternatives to following the blanket recommendations of cyberbullying discourses. Rather than disengaging altogether, feminist bloggers choose when and how to enact modes of speech and silence.

In this chapter, I analyzed various modes of speech and silence in the feminist blogosphere. Namely, I examined how the discourses of risk, cyberbullying and cybersafety depoliticize the issues of violent speech. The depoliticized nature of cybersafety prescriptions relegates questions of power into the background, and favours individualized solutions over systematic approaches to the problem of violent speech, which is understood as the result of individual pathology. Since cyberbullying discourses are underpinned by the concerns around anonymity, I drew on the work of van der Nagel and Frith (2015) to suggest the need to rethink anonymity as a continuum. Drawing on interviews with feminist bloggers and case studies across the blogosphere, I reassessed the assumptions about online anonymity and explored how feminist bloggers to de-anonymize their writing in order to expand one's professional digital presence; I also examined also how they de-anonymize identities of people who harass them. While I aimed at showcasing active feminist resistances to violent speech, I also engaged with the possibilities of silence as a transformative practice.

CHAPTER 5: MANAGING PARTICIPATION

5.1. Relations of trust on social media

In previous chapters I have weaved the narratives of the research participants of my study with an analysis of violent speech in digital media. In this chapter I expand my discussion of feminist bloggers as web intellectuals facing particular challenges associated with managing networked audiences alongside anti-feminist backlash. I chose seven bloggers from the sample for my analysis: Joyce Arthur, Emma Woolley, Jarrah Hodge, Jaspreet, Caity Goerke, Julie Zeilinger and Jessica. Each has a section in this chapter, which begins with a brief introduction and considers key themes I have teased out from the interviews.

Feminist, pro-choice activist, and writer Joyce Arthur has maintained the blog Choice Joyce since 2006 (www.choice-joyce.blogspot.ca). The longest-running blog in the sample, Choice Joyce mostly covers issues of abortion access, sex work, and debates around hate speech legislation and the doctrine of free speech. In addition to maintaining a personal blog, Joyce Arthur publishes opinion pieces across various media platforms.

My interview with Arthur largely revolves around the dynamics of commenting cultures on social and news media. For Arthur, comments function as a means of feedback, validation, and interaction:

I really like the whole aspect of people being able to comment on your posts and so on. I like seeing the feedback, and it's nice to get praise and feedback on whether people liked it [the blog] and what they liked about it.

...

A lot of times I also get people making new points or other interesting arguments... or maybe I need to correct my article in some way... and I really value this kind of feedback. It's great for that... to get that discussion going.

(Interview # 3)

As Lovink (2011) rightly observes, “comment cultures are not self-emergent systems but orchestrated arrangements” (p.52). The role of moderator is crucial for sustaining commenting systems. In response to abusive comments intended to disrupt the blog’s conversations, Arthur changed her blog’s editorial policy from one involving post-moderation to one involving pre-moderation, which restricts user participation by only allowing approved contributions to be posted:

When I first started the blog I did not have my comments moderated, so I did have an issue with nasty comments being posted which I would delete sometimes. [Now] comments are moderated. No one can just post anything. It at all comes through me first. I don't get a ton of comments on my blog, but probably about half of what I do get, I delete. I don't publish them. They are kind of nasty, and sometimes just spam. (Interview # 3)

Arthur’s move towards pre-moderation is not at all surprising given that incendiary comments often derail blog discussions and alienate those commenters who prefer to attempt rational dialogue. Research on news media has shown that abusive and incendiary comments, along with defamatory statements harming a website's image, are substantial challenges to non-moderated and post-moderated commenting systems (Canter, 2013; Reich, 2011).

Although Arthur mentions that men are commonly the ones who “get mad” at feminist critiques, she distances herself from an essentialist understanding of gendered violence by affirming that women, too, can subscribe to anti-feminist ideologies:

Some of the hate mail I get is not from men. A lot of it is from women.

Women anti-abortionists out there can be just as misogynist as the next guy, right? This is very disappointing to see, but, unfortunately, it is a fact of life.

(Interview # 3)

Despite receiving hate mail and “nasty” comments occasionally, Arthur does not consider her experiences especially troubling when compared to the experiences of other feminists:

So I don't have a big problem with the trolling myself, personally. But I see it out there on the Internet (...) There are other women talking about it, and it is very, very concerning. (Interview # 3)

Arthur attributes not having a “big problem” with “trolling” to blogging primarily about women-centered topics, which tend to attract fewer negative responses compared to her posts on general political issues like free speech:

I've certainly read a lot out there about the trolls and how feminists get attacked, and I had a little bit of that. I haven't had really major problems with that, and I think there may be several reasons for that. One is that I blog on technically speaking, women's issues like abortion, and sex work, and so on... And the men out there who do not like feminists they kind of don't mind when feminists stick to their own issues. It's when women start talking about

politics in general or anything other than women's issues then men get mad.

This is what I perceived. (Interview # 3)

She also speaks about a gendered “gang mentality” that sanctions and normalizes violent speech:

[there is] also a gang mentality when men get together. They [men] support each other in attacking women or other people they perceive as weak or whatever, or they don't like. It kind of gives them a license to attack when other men are doing it as well. They would never do that on their own.

(Interview # 3)

The affirmation of hegemonic masculinity requires distancing an aggressive masculine subject from all realms coded as feminine, and violence against women historically has been used a means of securing group bonding when a woman is debased in the presence of other men (Razack, 2000). When verbal violence against women is performed for peer groups on the Internet, it mobilizes exaggerated misogynist imagery to degrade women:

A lot of misogyny and horrible stuff out there... is over the top. I doubt whether people really mean it in a sense. (Interview # 3)

Arthur is not deterred by having to face violent speech and actively engages with her networked audiences. In the interview, she emphasizes the generally respectable tone of comments on Rabble (www.rabble.ca), where she follows the comments under her articles and tries to respond to them. However, Arthur's active commenting is not always appreciated by moderators on news websites. For example, she was blocked from posting comments on news articles about abortion:

they [*The National Post*] have quite a right wing readership. So I really get attacked there. I've had it happen where I've been commenting and getting a discussion going on *The National Post* site. *The National Post* would cut me off. I'll be in the middle of replying to people and they would block me, wouldn't allow me to post anymore. It happened to me several times. I think it is just because I am posting a pro-choice view, making a strong case for it.

(Interview # 3)

Since Arthur comments on *The National Post* under her name rather than a pseudonym, she maintains that her identity as a pro-choice activist could be a factor in getting blocked:

I'm not being abusive or anything like that, but they just cut me off. It's very frustrating because I will be in the middle of discussion, and I would get emails from some of the people... taunting me, saying "Oh, I see you're not posting anymore. You gave up". It drives me crazy. It's the *National Post* editorial people who are blocking me... because of who I am, I guess.

(Interview # 3)

The heterogeneity of networked publics is another issue that stands out in this study's research interviews. Bloggers manage publics by allowing for various levels of access rather than simply addressing every anonymous stranger. Arthur, for example, is very active on Facebook and runs several pages, including one for the Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada. Yet her intensive engagement does not mean that she forgoes all privacy concerns:

With my own page I'm very careful. I have over seven hundred friends now, but they are all screened. Before I screen anyone I make sure that I know who they are or that they are an ally if I don't know them personally. I don't want any anti-abortion activists on my Facebook page. (Interview # 3)

Facebook facilitates the disclosure of information that is a step in identity construction and community-building (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008) but such disclosures are variously negotiated and performed along lines of trust, with the unspoken expectation that audiences will understand the context and meanings behind them. Sending, accepting or ignoring “friend” requests on Facebook are micro-practices of power that draw networked group boundaries. Arthur, for example, in an attempt to negotiate with her feminist politics, screens contacts and only adds people who appear to be “allies” at the same that time she tries to maintain personal connections to people who are resistant to feminist politics:

I have groups categorized. I have a group of friends and family, actual friends and family, who are religious and anti-abortion, so I separate groups and they don't see my posts. (Interview # 3)

Arthur states that her interactions on Facebook are based on relations of trust that are secured by expectations of privacy:

I trust everyone on my page. But there have been a couple of times when I unfriended people or I wasn't sure who they were. I discovered one guy later who was an anti-abortion activist so I unfriended him right away. So I make sure that I can trust all the people I have as Facebook friends, and I keep my page private. (Interview # 3)

Yet, Arthur's idea of trust is capacious: it includes seven hundred people who share political and personal affinities. Arthur screens and manages her Facebook networks to protect herself from the abusive comments of strangers, to avoid tensions with her significant others who hold feminist and abortion activism suspect. Arthur selectively tweaks the visibility of her content, negotiating her feminist identity within non-feminist milieus. Social media users likewise control access to their profile by different means, including selective friending, limited disclosures, and tweaking privacy settings (Ellison, Vitak, Steinfield, Gray, & Lampe, 2011). Feminist bloggers are no different in using these strategies to navigate between communicating with allies and less sympathetic audiences.

Arthur's narrative speaks to the fact that Facebook can be used for a variety of ends and, for many users, it has become a space to generate, witness, and propel political arguments with friends, colleague and acquaintances. Yet, since constant confrontations with sexist discourses can be exhausting and alienating, curating audiences and managing content visibility allows feminist bloggers to choose when and how to initiate difficult communicative encounters.

5.2. “Turbofeminist” Emma Woolley

When I interviewed Emma Woolley in 2013, she had been blogging about gender and technology for six years. She jokingly refers to herself as a “turbofeminist”. Woolley sees the feminist blogosphere as a space that appears safe but is actually truncated by hurtful comments:

A lot of feminist writers... you know... we like to write on our own blogs (...) and you think it is safe. And you have this ideal situation where only other feminists are going to read it and you are going to be OK, but you are not.

...

I feel that responses to pieces vary according to what I've written about.

Sometimes I can even write something that, you know, isn't overly feminist in nature and there will still be some hurtful comments on it. (Interview # 4)

When bloggers think of their audiences, they often imagine a mix of strangers and/or known others who are sympathetic to their work (Brake, 2014). A blogger's assumption of sympathetic readers does not always reflect their actual audiences' reactions. In her interview, Woolley claims that she receives an increased number of encouraging and hostile responses whenever she writes about a feminist issue:

You get a lot of positive support from people who are, for the lack of a better phrase, on your side. And then there is a lot of negativity and harshness and threats according to how feminist the writing is. (Interview # 4)

In 2012 Woolley published a Tumblr piece chronicling her experiences as a teenaged girl. Although it was not originally intended for a wide audience, the piece became popular on social media and was republished on *The Huffington Post* in both English and French. Woolley was surprised by its popularity:

in that piece I'm sort of... I went over all these acts of dominance, and sexual assault, and things that had happened. And at the end I basically put a call out for people to have more productive conversations with young men about sex,

and consent, and how to treat women and girls. It was a bit... It could have been a bit more nuanced in retrospect, but it wasn't.

...

It might be my most read thing I have ever written which is funny because I wrote it in my spare time on my blog, not thinking if it is really gonna go anywhere, and it did. (Interview # 4)

While bloggers attempt to maintain a space of trust on her Facebook page through screening contacts, such trust is shaky and easily breached, despite the best efforts of a blogger like Woolley, since the Facebook boundaries between “friends” and “others” are made to be crossed. Given the confessional nature of Woolley’s piece, it was especially difficult for her to receive dismissive comments about it:

The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and I think it really struck a chord with a lot of people. However, because it was so personal (...) I feel like I felt the negative comments disproportionately. There were some anonymous comments that came in through my Tumblr that said things like “I do not believe that all these things happened to you because you must be... you are either lying or you are, like, really, really hot”. I got another comment that said that I was way too ugly for all of that to happen. (Interview # 4)

Woolley also received Facebook messages from strangers and known others who went out of their way to accuse her of lying and hating men. They dismissed her capacity and credibility as a knower, enacting “testimonial injustice” (Fricker, 2007). One incident stood out:

there was actually a person from my past who really took offense to the piece and decided that, you know, telling my story was equivalent to hating all men. [He] went on this very long rant on my Facebook wall about times I've been drunk and incapacitated in an effort to discredit my stories even though I did not mention him or anything about that. It wasn't about him, but that subject matter tends to elicit those responses. People feel defensive and then they want to tear you down. (Interview # 4)

Since that incident, Woolley has disengaged somewhat due to the uncertainty of potential communicative encounters:

For a while, I just stopped checking Facebook “other” messages just in case... which was sad because I ended up missing a lot of really nice messages from people who wanted to talk about my piece and who really identified with it (...) even a few interview requests (...) I did not want to read. I did not want to risk it. (Interview # 4)

When I tried to recruit Woolley to participate in this research, her email address was difficult to locate on her website. Woolley's digital presence is in fact purposely curtailed in order to deter hate mail:

I don't obviously list my email anywhere. Like, someone would have to go to my site and search for it. It's up there. If you want it, you can find it, but I do make it so that people have to try pretty hard to contact me. That's in regards for my general privacy, but also to keep random angry people from threatening me.

...

In terms of Tumblr, I changed the settings so that you have to have an account to contact me. Like, you cannot contact me anonymously. I think I might have changed that a while ago when I got threats based on another piece. (Interview # 4)

Woolley now engages with comments selectively. She chooses her level of engagement depending on the medium, and is more likely to comment on platforms where she retains some control over the interactive process:

On my website, I'll respond to them. It depends on the content of the comments. If it is in my space, on my terms, or if it is a message that comes through Tumblr, I'll read those as long as they are not overwhelming, but for publications, like, let's say, for *The Globe and Mail*, I don't read them.

(Interview # 4)

In general, Woolley does not respond to aggressive comments that are meant to hurt:

I have a policy where if people are being cruel, I just don't respond, so that's just how that works.

...

I don't read comments anymore. I don't respond to them. Unless I feel it from a person who is actually looking for a productive conversation, I don't respond to any feedback. (Interview # 4)

Although Twitter is less sophisticated in terms of its privacy settings compared to other social media platforms, Woolley's experience on Twitter has not been marked by threats of violence:

Twitter was more or less pretty positive. And it's funny because when I wrote this [Tumblr piece] there was other stuff going on with Anita Sarkeesian and all these other writers. I put it out there and I was, like, “oh great, they are going to mount an assault against me next”. And I kind of put my head in sand. But, you know, nothing bad really happened on Twitter. I didn't get people threatening to come get me or anything on Twitter. (Interview # 4)

Yet Woolley is skeptical of filing complaints on commercial media platforms that are not particularly invested into curbing harassment. In particular, she refers to the profit-making and commodity logics behind user-generated content:

We are their [platforms'] product. They don't care very much for our welfare. And at the end of the day, I don't blame the platforms for the comments I'm getting. I'm blaming the people saying it.

...

On Twitter the other day I saw this women tweeting about how she reported this page someone made about her (...) Someone made a page “Should Miri¹² be murdered?” and she reported it (...) They came back and said it did not violate their community standards. So her tweet was, like, “Great to know, Facebook”. (Interview # 4)

As Barbara Tomlinson (2010) argues in the introduction to *Feminism and Affect at the Scene of the Argument*, feminist arguments are de-legitimized before they even begin. Clichés about feminism interpellate participants in the public sphere “as always already

¹² Miri Mogilevsky is a feminist blogger who has written on atheism, sexual violence, sexuality, and mental health.

antifeminist” (Tomlinson, 2010, p.1). Thus, to publicly identify oneself as a feminist is to claim an abject position and subject oneself to backlash. Woolley admits that she has changed the way she writes after the backlash to her Tumblr piece. She no longer writes as frequently, nor with the same affective strength:

I don't talk about the stuff as much as I used to, and I certainly don't get as visibly fired up on the Internet about everything as I used to.

...

I do feel like these experiences have... You know, they silenced me a little bit, but really the thing that keeps me going when I do write something or I do take up a cause is because I think it is important. I approach it with the sad knowledge that I'm gonna get some gross blow back. At the end of the day, you know, saying it is more important than not saying it. (Interview # 4)

In a moment of frustration with anti-feminist publics, Woolley took the word “feminist” out of her Twitter profile:

As someone who does identify as a feminist this really hurts me that I did this, but I took “feminist” out of my Twitter profile (...) If anyone asked me if I was a feminist, of course I would say yes, but I did not want people to be looking at this profile and immediately judging me which is funny because on my “About me” I call myself a turbo-feminist. (...) That's just one small example of a small way in which I feel I retreated a bit and approach things a bit more cautiously that I would like... That means they are winning, right? And that's not productive for anyone. (Interview # 4)

Woolley emphasizes, however, that sexist comments are not only directed at feminist bloggers, but at women in general:

Of course, if you are a feminist or write about feminist things you are going to get all kinds of terrible on your way, but I've seen women-identified writers who write about anything and if you go through the comments they get, they are just as sexist and awful. (Interview # 4)

She goes on to explain that while critiques of men's public writing do not usually take gendered dimensions, women's writing is often discredited by specifically referring to their gender:

if you are a man and you have an opinion, and people know that you are a man, if they disagree with you, then you are wrong or you are stupid or you made a mistake. Whereas if you are a woman, and you write something, and people disagree with you, all of the insults seem to be related to the gender somehow or... or they get suspiciously violent. I think that there is something there in the fact that it isn't just contained in this feminist bubble.

(Interview #4)

For a blogger to publicly communicate feminist politics outside of feminist circles is to make herself vulnerable to epistemic injustices and attacks on the basis of gender rather than on the quality of her work. Woolley's experience of the testimonial injustice led to a diminished creative output and disengagement from feminist writing; her narrative suggests that women's epistemic status as knowers and agents capable of producing reasoned arguments continues to be routinely undermined.

5.3. Growing ideas with Jaspreet

Jaspreet writes at the crossroads of academic feminism, community involvement, and introspective reflection. Her blog posts often blend feminist theory with personal experiences:

Usually my blog posts come from personal experiences. I start off saying “Oh, this happened to me” and I analyze it in a broader context through a feminist lens. (Interview #10)

In 2013 Jaspreet published her writing on Thought Catalog (www.thoughtcatalog.com), a popular online magazine that attracts over 20 million monthly visitors. In Jaspreet's words, the piece was “butchered in terms of grammar and writing” by website's editors. Instead of providing critical feedback, commenters made dismissive statements like “you should not write” and “this should not be published” (Interview #10). Other comments specifically attacked the article's feminist content.

In her interview, Jaspreet says that this experience of publishing was “upsetting” and she “could not believe that people can say such vicious things so openly” (Interview #10). When readers began posting negative comments on her article, Jaspreet tried to defend herself in the comment section but, comments continued to disparage her work regardless of what she said.

Bloggers whose careers are linked to feminism tend to be unapologetically and visibly feminist, but not all bloggers who write from a feminist perspective maintain feminist visibility. In this study, Jarrah Hodge, Steph Guthrie, Jessica, and Victoria are considered feminist career intellectuals whose digital presence is built on feminist

politics. Others, like Jaspreet, do not emphasize a feminist stance but write to engage people who may be receptive to feminist ideas though wary of a feminist subject position:

So the shift in my thinking has been that for me feminist politics might be the right thing, but others don't see it that way... I need to be strategic and... kind of strategic in playing out my politics, you know what I mean?

(Interview #10)

Although Jaspreet's negative experience did not deter her from developing a public identity as a blogger, she did reevaluate her approach towards political self-representation. In the same way that Woolley removed the word "feminist" from her Twitter bio, Jaspreet refrained from referring to feminism in her website address:

It [abusive comments] made me think about how I want my work to be out there and how I want people to access it. I had a Tumblr before, and the web address is potluckfeminist.tumblr.com (...) and I got hits. It's not like I did not get hits, but I could tell that whenever I would send someone that address, there would be an immediate reaction "oh, that's about feminism", "oh, it is really political". So this kind of "turning off and not wanting to read it" ... this is not helping me get my ideas out there. I had to be strategic. (Interview #10)

While hostile comments may have initially led Jaspreet to position herself less openly as a feminist, they did not ultimately change the scope of the topics she writes about.

Jaspreet was strategic in creating a blog that aims to cultivate feminist ideas within intersectional and anti-racist frameworks. Though it is not branded as an exclusively feminist resource, Jaspreet does not hide or apologize for her feminist views. Her writing

is, however, influenced by diasporic dynamics. Jaspreet considers how her writing will reverberate in a Punjabi community:

The only thing I am cautious of is being a woman of color, and being... I'm South Asian. I'm Punjabi. There are some things that I can't write about from personal experience even though I've had them without the rest of the community finding out and being kind of ostracized. (Interview #10)

Despite these concerns, Jaspreet reports that she does not censor herself based on expectations of anti-feminist backlash or hate mail. In fact, Jaspreet actively promotes her blog, incorporating it as a part of her professional online presence:

I'm not nervous anymore. Actually I've come to a place where I'm more open to putting my own name and my own face to what I'm writing on my blog.

...

I want it [the blog] to be in a space where I, like, appreciate my political views. And also it's a part of me. It's not something I want to hide anymore. I advertise the blog a lot more now. I have it on my LinkedIn profile. I really, really advertise it a lot more. (Interview #10)

Prolific writing does not necessarily result in a corresponding volume of comments, and Jaspreet is upfront about her desire to receive comments on her blog:

To be quite honest, I would want people to comment on mine [blog], but a lot of people who read it are my friends and family so they just kind of tell me what they think about what I'm writing. (Interview #10)

Jaspreet posts comments under Facebook articles, yet hesitates to comment on mainstream blogs due to the overall negative tonality of their interactions and tries to

“stay away from engaging in any sort of public forum in a space that I know can get out of hand pretty quickly” (Interview #10).

How is it that the majority of people, in Jaspreet's terms, “don't want to listen” to feminist speech? Jaspreet notes that some people either target feminists immediately or withdraw their attention when they see the word “feminist” in a blog title. She further stresses that feminist perspectives are not welcome in the discussions on social media:

On Facebook it happens so many times where you just say something ... even if you say something that is remotely feminist... you immediately get targeted and yelled at (...) So I try to stay away from it as much as I can. I don't think there is anything productive that comes out of it when you are engaging with people who don't want to listen, right? I don't like to comment anymore.

(Interview #10)

The term “epistemic violence” explains the refusal to engage with marginalized knowledge. Reciprocity, or understanding an interlocutor’s speech as it was intended to be understood, is a central tenet of successful communication (Hornsby, 1995). For reciprocal communication to happen, an audience should not only listen to a speaker but be willing to *hear* what the speaker is saying, regardless of whether the audience agrees (Hornsby, 1995). A lack of willingness to meet a speaker's communicative needs for reciprocity is a constitutive element of epistemic violence. Such violence is manifest in the refusal of a public to reciprocate a communicative exchange (Dotson, 2011; Spivak, 1998). Many anti-feminist discourses are characterized by epistemic violence, which makes sustained conversation about feminist issues difficult.

Jaspreet suggests that changing modes of listening and engagement can make comments more productive, which, in my view, has the potential to deflect epistemic violence:

I don't think we are socialized to have productive discussions about ideas. I think we are more socialized to prove a point, and that's what makes everything so hard. (Interview #10)

Oppositional thinking provides counterpoints to dominant narratives, and oppositional counterpoints are often articulated in the blogosphere. Yet, as AnaLousie Keating (2013) observes, “oppositionality saturates us and limits our imaginations” (p.3). Oppositional thinking, embedded in academic, political, and social justice work, can also prevent publics from making connections recognizing similarities across or despite ideological differences. Jaspreet suggests as much at the end of our interview, noting that she does not think that there is a single procedure or process that can be put in place to make comment sections more productive. Rather, as she maintains, a change in attitudes towards conversational collaboration can make comment sections – and digital cultures in general – productive civic spaces.

5.4. Moderating comments on Gender Focus

Vancouver-based feminist blogger Jarrah Hodge has been involved with politics and social justice since her teenage years. In 2005, at the age of 19, she ran in a British Columbia provincial election as an NDP candidate, coming in second (Hodge, 2013). Hodge's blog Gender Focus (www.gender-focus.com) was awarded the titles of Best Politics Blog and Best Activism & Social Justice Blog at the 2015 Canadian Weblog

Awards (www.canblogawards.com). During her interview, Hodge spoke of blogging as both empowering and challenging, particularly in regards to comment moderation:

Overall, it is really fun. I had a really great time blogging. It is something that, you know, is very empowering to be able to say what you think. I had a lot of really good feedback. It is difficult because you are putting yourself out there. It can be challenging. It really toughens you up really quick, and I feel like I've gained a lot from it. (Interview # 1)

Research suggests that occasional commenters are more likely to post vulgar content than users who comment frequently, as they tend to react only to particularly controversial articles (Coe et al., 2014). An analysis of Gender Focus supports this claim as it gets hostile comments most often from people who show little interest in engaging with the blog's feminist community:

I got a feeling that these are the people who are following certain terms on the Internet. For example, men's rights activists come when I post about men's rights activists. And they come and say troll-y things. Gun rights activists come and comment on gun control posts. They never comment on anything else. (Interview # 1)

Hodge also maintains a YouTube account where she posts videos about feminist issues, and, as was discussed in Chapter 4, she had to close down its comment section due to the large amount of harassing comments she received. Hodge shares her frustration with reporting abusive comments on social media:

Yeah, I definitely think that platforms need to be more accountable. On YouTube, for example, you can't report harassing speech against someone

else. They have to report it. So there are stupid rules like that, and even them, they don't take the stuff down, or the person just makes another account. I do think it just encourages the environment where the more privileged people have voice – they get attacked less, or they get resources to deal with it.

...

I submitted a lot of reports on YouTube. Some of the stuff would get flagged and taken down, but then usually the people would come back and be more persistent. Sometime other people would flag them and that tended to work a bit better, but then they would also come and flag legitimate comments. So it is just so much time to maintain. And it was frustrating. These people had profiles and they were going around all of these pages submitting similar comments. So it was not just me they were going after. They were going after a lot of other feminist pages or other things they disagreed with. (Interview # 1)

In the interview, Hodge details an incident where her picture was used on a mock anti-marijuana page without her permission. Without knowing who she is or what she stands for, Facebook users directed a barrage of hate comments at her. The passage below illustrates the casual misogyny of commenting cultures where women can easily become targets of sexualized threats and objectifying comments:

One of the worst things that happened was... Someone took my head shot without my consent and used it as a profile picture for this Facebook page which was, like, a joke page. I only got it, like, a month later after someone on Twitter was, like, “I saw your picture on this page”, and ... It does not

really make sense... They basically said that I was a Christian student who was against marijuana and so they were going to stoners' pages and irritating them but with my picture, so by the time I got there, people had defaced my picture with, like, mustaches like it was an elementary school or something... but there were also hundreds of comments how ugly I am, how I should kill myself, how much I need a good lay, how no guy would ever sleep with me. The next person would be, like, "I would fuck her". It was just so much, like, everything you could possibly say bad about women (...) based on nothing I have actually done. (Interview # 1)

While options for managing comments on corporately owned platforms such as Facebook or YouTube are limited, bloggers have more freedom to craft participation policies on their own blogs. Most comment policies encourage civility and discourage aggression. For example, in addition to listing the usual recommendations to post respectful and thoughtful comments, comment policies on Gender Focus advise readers to consider their place on the spectrum of privilege and to respect the narratives of contributors who speak about their experiences of marginalization.

Moderating decisions are not always clear-cut. While moderation on Gender Focus can be a cooperative effort between its editor and contributors rather than an authoritative process where an editor single-handedly approves content, Hodge is particularly careful about trying to distinguish between "legitimate", if somewhat aggressive, contributions from more vacuous comments intended to derail discussion:

When I get a comment that is really hostile or a personal attack, the first thing I'm trying to figure out if someone is actually trying to have a legitimate

conversation and they are doing it badly, or are they just trying to derail the conversation. On a case-by-case basis I decide whether that's worth keeping up and contradicting or whether I need to take it down because it should not be allowed to take space on my blog.

...

I try really hard to be reasonable.... It's been a bit of a wakeup call, because I do not want people believe the stereotypes that feminists are angry man-haters. It does make you question whether there is such thing as being too nice and whether you need to stop trying to... You know, I wanna be able to have legitimate conversations with someone or with people who don't agree with me, but how do you do that while not allowing space for the trolls? It's a challenge. (Interview # 1)

One may argue that audiences do not need to be shielded from violent speech and that a moderator can trust readers to be epistemologically competent subjects able to recognize racist speech and react appropriately to it by down-voting or rebutting problematic statements. Hodge's perspective is that keeping offensive comments can be a strategic move to showcase prejudice and mobilize audiences to linguistically counteract such attitudes:

When I just started blogging, I blogged a bit at another blog, and I had some really racist comments – not against me, but I was writing about Montreal massacre, and there were some really racist comments about Lepine, and it was really bizarre, and I was totally shocked. And the editor at that blog said “well, I wanna leave them up because we have to trust our audience to read

for themselves, and to know that that's not cool". So I try to balance that. I think that's fair. (Interview # 1)

It is important to note that leaving violent speech non-moderated only works when incidents of such speech are infrequent. Otherwise they are likely to disrupt legitimate conversations, and drive users away from the blog.

5.5. Well-received bloggers: Julie Zeilinger and Caity Goerke

Caiti Goerke and Julie Zeilinger are two bloggers in this study who did not face systematic harassment. Zeilinger is the founder and editor of The FBomb blog (www.thefbomb.org) that reaches teenage girls and college-aged women. In the interview, Zeilinger says that she tries to foster respectful conversations among her readers and that the community of young people on the Fbomb is “overwhelmingly supportive” (interview # 12). In her book *A Little F'd Up: Why Feminism is Not a Dirty Word*, Zeilinger (2012) briefly covers the issue of online harassment and recommends We Stop Hate website (www.westophate.org) dedicated to stopping cyberbullying among teenagers.

Adding to Caity Goerke’s narrative about managing her digital presence, discussed in Chapter 4, I provide more detail about her involvement in feminist blogging. At the start of her interview, Goerke speaks of her blogging team’s efforts to expand the blog's profile and increase its audience:

We [new F-Word contributors] are changing the website to make it a little bit more engaging for people in terms of maybe, like, adding images or something like that. We are talking about hosting fund-raising events. The collective has done it before, but I’ve never got to be a part of. So I think this

kind of stuff raises your community profile and maybe gets people talking about what you are doing a little bit more. (Interview # 9)

By her own admission, Goerke does not have many interactions with readers, which signals asymmetry in her writer-reader dynamics. Although Goerke reads a number of feminist media and is a contributor to a feminist blog, she does not post comments. For Goerke, posting comments on a feminist forum is an act that requires confidence to step into networked spaces overflowing with affect. She suggests that feminist comment sections can be attractive for their politicized humour and just as repulsive for their aggressive modes of critique:

I do read a lot. I get a lot of it [feminist blogs] through Facebook – I follow Jezebel, Bitch media, a lot of other major blog sites. That's a part of my day – I love waking up in the morning, and sort of going through the new, and reading through it I usually read through the comments really interesting, really hilarious or totally horrifying, but I've never actually commented back... I think... despite, sort of, often feeling like I have something to contribute. A lot of time comment sections on blog sites don't seem to be necessarily productive spaces, especially when they are starting to get negative. You get people on there just saying stuff that is meant for no other purpose than to be harmful or to be aggressive, I guess. I've never wanted to get myself lost in that, but I definitely find comment sections really interesting. Maybe I haven't been brave enough yet.

...

I can't say that I have a lot of interactions with readers. I guess we'd like to have more one day (...) I'd love it to become a part of my blogging. You know, conversations with readers. As of now it is my close friends from school that I end up talking to about it, but yeah... I mean, hopefully in the future I have more conversations. (Interview # 9)

The lack of a strong negative response to Goerke work has made her question the power of her writing:

I had this weird conversation with myself where I was thinking maybe what I'm writing is not important enough or edgy enough, or pushy enough that I've never had anybody mad enough to give negative feedback. That's sort of silly that I was framing online harassment is a rite of passage for feminist bloggers which is ludicrous. (Interview # 9)

While framing “war scars” of harassment as an indicator of worthiness might appear “silly” and “ludicrous”, to use Goerke's words, it points out to how violent speech has become a routine and expected part of feminist blogging.

5.6. Jessica: to never be silent again

Jessica is a doctoral student who blogs about gender and technology. She imagines that her readers are sympathetic to principles of feminism, but not necessarily identifying as feminists or well-versed in feminist theory. As a transgender feminist, she covers issues that attract a number of readers from trans communities. Although Jessica has considered herself a feminist since she was 13 years old, she developed a deeper engagement with feminist thinking through her experience of binary gender's oppressive

effects as well as her experience transitioning. For Jessica, blogging has become a way to assert the newfound sense of empowerment that accompanied her transition:

I became a blogger as a means of articulating that and living up to the promise that I made myself when I transitioned which was to never be silent again. Because that was something... one of the things that I suffered during my long experience with gender dysphoria was this sense that I could not speak.

...

If I was going to become a woman, she would be the strong woman. She would be someone that would not be silenced, whose views were going to be a part of a public conversation, who would be a responsible public speaker, but one that was nevertheless unafraid to be a part of that public conversation.

...

[blogging] was a way to be able to actualize the kind of woman that I wanted to be. (Interview # 11)

Jessica appreciates when people reach out to her to start a dialogue, and while audience feedback has had a negligible influence on the content of her blogging, it does help her formulating stronger, more compelling arguments. As her writing began to get noticed in the blogosphere, Jessica started to encounter more harassment and hostility. Ironically, she was most harassed when speaking out about the harassment of Suey Park, an anti-racist activist who started the hashtag #cancelcolbert that was decried by many as encroaching on the right to free speech:

The only thing that I said in my article was that two wrongs don't make a right. That if you disagree with Suey Park [activist who created the hashtag] that sending her racist, rape and death threats was not the way to express that disagreement. (...) There was a lot of support for what I wrote, but there were a surprising and shocking number of people that sent me explicitly transphobic and misogynist rants. One person I remember... he sent me something to the effect of... let me see what was it... said something like "I'm glad my tweets hurt your tranny feelings, you are so ugly, you don't even pass for a woman, you look like a man in a dress, I'd rather stick my dick in a blender than in you" et cetera. (Interview # 11)

Jessica collects harassing and hurtful comments to use as potential data for her doctoral research and popular writing. She screen captures abusive comments and puts them into a folder entitled "sexual harassment data":

I do that for practical and obvious reasons, but I also do it because there is one thing that I've noticed down the years that often stokes up further harassment. These men, what they want is the sense of individual empowerment that they summoned up their strength (...) and directed it at an outspoken woman that they hate and, with their individual minds, silenced her. That's their vision, their heroic self-conception of mighty masculine men standing up for free speech and justice et cetera... when you turn around and turn them into a social problem, not as individuals, but as a part of the collective (...) When you turn them into data points, when you contextualize them as these nameless, faceless group that is the exact opposite of this

heroic, mighty individual (...) That's infuriating to them. That's why they are so upset when women speak out about harassment. (Interview # 11)

Jessica emphasizes that there is a way to maintain a civil discussion without compromising benefits derived from disagreement and public deliberation. In particular, she speaks out against “niceness,” which she understands as conformity based on a fear of offending:

Niceness is a popular rejoinder of many people within, sort of, online activist communities (...) Niceness as a concept is something that is denuded of citizenship in many ways. When you use it as applied to the discourse of political forums, niceness cannot be the modus operandi (...) What I argue, though, is that there is a way to be challenging. There is a way to be unapologetic. (Interview # 11)

She further suggests that participants of feminist online communities are well positioned to model methods for ethical debate that welcomes constructive disagreement:

We [feminists] can demonstrate what it looks like to (...) constructively engage with our culture without compromising our core principles. Niceness contains the idea of never being offensive. Being constructive contains the idea that you can, indeed, offend the sensibilities of those in power but do so in a way that keeps the focus on ideas and not people. This distinction is important because so much of the online discourse becomes personal. There are so many ways that you could, for instance, attack the ideas of Sarah Palin. Why do you have to make a number of untoward comments about her appearance? (Interview # 11)

At the end of her interview, Jessica speaks about the psychological harms of being the target of verbal violence and the necessity of having some type of personal support network. By ending this chapter with Jessica's powerful words, I underscore the chilling effects of violent speech on networked participation and the public discourse generally:

No matter how resilient you are, no matter how strong willed or opinionated you are, anytime you get a threatening, vicious, bigoted harassment, it does make you doubt yourself, it does stick in your mind long after you get it. (...)

You have to do a lot of mental work to undo the damage and that requires taking refuge amongst the loved ones, amongst people who can remind you that you are not a tranny, not any number of vicious slurs that get hurled at you, and to remind you that you have an equal right to participate in these discussions. (Interview # 11)

CHAPTER 6: NETWORKED PRACTICES OF EXCLUSION

6.1. Mapping the myths of shared power

In this chapter I explore networked practices of exclusion within the feminist blogosphere. While the feminist blogosphere is most often understood as vibrant terrain set out in opposition to mainstream politics, the actual disagreements, conflicts, exclusions, and hierarchies *within* the feminist blogosphere are rarely the object of intersectional¹³ analysis in feminist media studies. Scholars like Lopez (2009) and Thelandersson (2014) point out that feminist bloggers can engage in exclusionary practices and be at odds with each another, but the lived experiences of these bloggers' conflicts are rarely explored. Feminist solidarity, in theory, ought to facilitate critical dialogue across differences and establish new points of strategic political alignments within the spectrum of feminist organizing. In practice, feminist solidarity is fraught with competing stakes behind competing claims of what counts as a feminist identity and what constitutes feminist action. In order to identify the discursive effects of these contestations, I provide case studies of two Canadian blogs: The F-Word (www.feminisms.org) and Feminist Current (www.feministcurrent.com). I examine how acrimonious contestations of feminist belonging can become disruptive and unwavering in the shape of calling out and hashtag harassment.

13 Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality continues to grow in popularity, but two limitations of its use persist in media research. First, there is a tendency to homogenize the experiences of marginalized populations and overlook the creative work done by doubly marginalized subjects such as, for example, black lesbian bloggers (Jordan-Zachery, 2012) or feminist Muslim bloggers (Kasana, 2014). Second, a product of black feminist thought, intersectionality tends to be equated with the concerns of black women to the exclusion of other categories of inequality such as class, citizenship, and ability (Glassman, 2012). Despite these challenges, intersectionality – as a critical lens and as a foundation of a feminist identity - remains central to feminist debates online.

When it was in its early days, feminist research on digital media had the tendency to overlook ways in which divergent versions of feminism impacted the structures, forms, and content of feminist blogging. As new media studies developed as a discipline alongside the rise of intersectional approaches to feminist theorizing, scholars began to name the mainstream feminist blogosphere's racist exclusions as such and highlighted the many important contributions to digital knowledge production made by women of color (Glassman, 2012; Rapp, Button, Fleury-Steiner, & Fleury-Steiner, 2010). The diversity within the feminist blogosphere means that contradicting perspectives are bound to clash and reveal the asymmetrical relations of privilege and belonging within feminist publics. The interactivity, accessibility, and immediacy of interaction on digital platforms circulate feminist disagreements throughout feminist social networks in highly visible ways. In her work on virtual communities, Ananda Mitra (2001) notes that online communication allows marginalized subjects to challenge dominant forms of knowledge production, which can lead to "a crisis of acknowledgement on the part of the dominant" (p. 21). This crisis can either be resolved through a recognition of power or lead to further marginalization: "the marginalized can call on the dominant and put the dominant in the difficult position of acknowledging the marginalized, or further distance the dispossessed by ignoring the call" (p.32). As the case studies in this chapter make evident, the crisis of acknowledgement often plays out in interactions between two loosely defined "camps" of feminist activists: on one side, there are anti-pornography, abolitionist radical feminists and on the other side there are intersectional feminist bloggers, sex workers and transgender activists.

A crisis of acknowledgement unfolds in ways that attest to the problematics of online feminist debates. The literature on online harassment overwhelmingly assumes that violent speech emerges and proliferates only in communities that are hostile to feminism. However, as my observations suggest, there are bitter disputes and much anger within feminist social media circles that exacerbate existing fissures among feminist networks.

Feminist organizing has always been rife with conflicts and competing claims. The existence of conflicts internal to feminist organizing dispels some myths about feminist leadership: that women readily share power, that women's decisions are inherently democratic and that women's groups cannot be exclusionary (Batliwala, 2010). Ti-Grace Atkinson, for instance, is reported to have commented on the animosity within the feminist movement, saying that: "sisterhood is powerful: it kills sisters" (as cited in Freeman, 1976, para. 16). Writing as Joreen (1976), Jo Freeman, editor of the national magazine *The Voice of the Women's Liberation Movement*, writes about the pervasive harassment, or "trashing," within the women's movement. As bell hooks notes in her reflection on the history of women's movement, many productive points in feminist conversations "were undermined by the fact that most of us had no understanding of how to manage conflict, reconceptualize power, while simultaneously creating a spirit of community" (as cited in Breines, 2006, p.177). The reluctance of some, mostly white, feminists to acknowledge the ways in which unearned privilege structures their politics was, and continues to be, a source of tension and conflict within feminist circles.

The internet makes visible disputes and rivalries that had previously remained within the confines of women's studies classrooms, conferences, and journals. Social

media platforms have become archives of the political work contemporary feminists do attempting to define the contours of feminist agendas. In analyzing discourses generated by networked feminist publics, I present an alternative to the celebratory, community building narratives that have been adopted by the majority of scholars writing about feminist digital media (Dixon, 2014; Keller, 2012; Pierce, 2010; Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012). I do not seek to classify the diverse strands of feminism that have found homes online, nor do I attempt to theorize the nature of the splitting itself since much of this work been done (see, for example, Hirsch & Fox Keller, 1990). Instead, I advance an understanding of the feminist blogosphere as a site of generative contestations at the same time that it is a social environment organized around alliances and disciplinary rhetoric.

6.2. The F-Word Collective and the limits of journalistic objectivity

In 2013 I interviewed Nicole Deagan, the journalist mentioned in Chapter 4, who produced a feminist radio show that aired locally on Vancouver Co-Op Radio CFRO 100.5 FM and was syndicated by non-commercial radio network Pacifica Radio. The F-Word blog was formed in conjunction with the radio show. Both platforms were intended to reach young women and counteract prevailing stereotypes about feminists:

Our collective was formed in 2007 to kind of build coalitions within the feminist movement. We felt isolated as feminists. A lot of young women were not identifying as feminist then. They were actually on board with feminist ideas, but they were not identifying as feminist. They had a perception of feminism as really extremist, angry, men-hating... So we really wanted to counteract some of that. (Interview # 8)

Drawing parallels with the transformative potential of feminist pedagogy in women's studies, Deagan maintains that feminist blogging can enact social change by broadening the scope of public conversations:

I really believe that through education and discussion change can happen similar to how somebody goes to women's studies class, they learn a bunch of things, or they get to debate and discuss things. That might change their opinion and what they do and how they see things. Media is accessible for people, and it can do the same kind of thing where you can be exposed to things you would not normally be exposed to. (Interview # 8)

The F-Word's vision of online feminist debate was challenged when the blogging collective received a wave of criticism after publishing a special series that featured diverging perspectives on the transgender movement and radical feminism. Rather than initiating a charged but productive dialogue, the blog was temporarily shut-down and the F-Word collective began to unravel due to reactions from feminist publics and transgender communities. The series was deleted as a result of the backlash, and only a description of the project remains online:

The F Word explores feminist debates and conversations around transgenderism and looks at why it's so difficult for media and feminists alike to cover these debates and have these conversations respectfully and honestly. Featuring interviews with Sheila Jeffreys, feminist scholar, political activist, and professor in Political Science at the University of Melbourne in Australia; Barb Besharat, the Healthy TransActions Project Coordinator at The 519 Church Street Community Centre (LGBTQ space) in Toronto; and Susan

Stryker, Ph.D. Director, Institute for LGBT Studies, Associate Professor,
Gender and Women's Studies, University of Arizona. ("Archives", 2012,
n.p.)

The F-Word's team attempted to frame their blog as a neutral medium. This decision highlighted relations of power and divisive politics internal to feminism, and audience reception backfired. In her interview, Deagan says that the editorial team had wanted to initiate a balanced debate between transgender scholars and activists, like Susan Stryker and Barb Besharat, and radical feminists, such as Sheila Jeffreys:

The idea behind that was that we did a radio show on that topic, and the intention was to look at that conflict as journalists and to be looking at this as open-minded as possible, to kind of explore what is the actual debate underneath all of that. Are there points of agreement and disagreement?

(Interview # 8)

The controversy was catalyzed by a blog post titled "Facing Our Fear: Transgenderism versus Radical Feminism," in which The F-Word contributor Meghan Murphy interviews Sheila Jeffreys, a radical feminist scholar who is known for her extreme views denying the rights of transgender people, going so far as to call transsexualism "a violation of human rights" (Jeffreys, 1997, p.55). As a radical feminist blogger interviewing a radical feminist scholar, Murphy did not question Jeffrey's perspective, nor did she indicate her own position on the subject. The blog's politics of objectivity, which implied that radical feminists¹⁴ and transgender activists are equally positioned along a spectrum of feminist

¹⁴ Encompassing several strands of theory that developed since the late 1960s, radical feminism typically conceptualizes female subordination to patriarchal power as the fundamental oppression that underlies

thought, failed to take the harm involved in providing a platform for transphobic ideologies into account. The F-Word case points out a conundrum in feminist journalism. The professionalization of blogging blurs the boundaries between personal platforms and mass media institutions. While the categories of journalism and blogging can overlap and the hybrid category of “citizen journalism” has aimed to combine the authenticity of blogging and the reporting speed of media institutions (Goode, 2009), journalism still implies a level of professionalism that distinguishes it from less formal types of self-publishing. Yet, in contrast to mainstream journalistic values of neutrality and objectivity, feminist journalism, as a form of inquiry, is necessarily explicitly political and oriented at dismantling the oppressive structures of social organizations¹⁵.

Relying on a conventional framework of journalistic objectivity, Deagan did not anticipate the personal attacks that followed the publication of the Jeffreys interview:

I was shocked because I never had this kind of aggression directed at me online previously. I've worked in a feminist movement for twenty years, and I expected a more mature conversation. It was just vicious. Like, it was attack, attack, attack... They were, like, “you lie, you are a jerk, you are not qualified to work in the feminist movement, you are not whatever”.

...

other forms of domination. Recent resurgence of radical feminism is associated with concerns around “mainstreaming” of pornography and the increasing sexualization of girls and women in the media (Thompson, 2015).

¹⁵ Feminist theorists have argued for understanding knowledge as partial and situated rather than objective (Haraway, 1988), and feminist politics, by virtue of its opposition to dominant discourses, implies the recognition of limits to objectivity

It feels like the blog culture is very much about being provocative and aggressive from what I've seen. (Interview # 8)

Besides rightfully pointing out the problems with Jeffrey's transphobia, commentators expanded their verbal attacks to the F-Word collective. Deagan felt that her intention to open a debate was misunderstood. She was "shocked" by the experience of being attacked and found it "frightening and uncomfortable" (Interview # 8). People posted harassing messages in the blog comment section on social media and sent letters to Deagan's employer:

I just thought wow, all these people, I don't know who they are... They were writing letters to my employer. [...] A lot of people slid out of their way to attack. They tried to make me unemployed, damage my life because of their misunderstanding of what I was trying to do with my group on that topic. I thought: who would go out of their way and actually try to damage someone else's life because they did not like something they wrote? It was very surprising to me that there was that much blind kind of anger. (Interview # 8)

Deagan considered reporting another feminist on Twitter for publishing her personal information:

I don't think we reported anyone on Facebook. But I did have to report another feminist on Twitter for publishing my personal information. I did not end up reporting her. I sent her a message that I would report her, and she removed it immediately. (Interview # 8)

With an increased volume of audience responses, management of the blog's comment section became labour intensive and time consuming:

I was just at work for the day, and in three days there would be about three hundred posts. I didn't have time. I have a life. So I eventually closed down the comment section, our collective broke apart because of it, and we had to rebuild after that, and I ended up pulling the whole blog off the Internet.

(Interview # 8)

Deagan has come to regret the decision of not using a pseudonym in a blogging culture that facilitates detachment and othering instead of compassion: “When I started the radio show I had no idea that maybe it would not be a good idea to use my real name. (...) I wish now that I had used it” (Interview # 8).

Only traces of this conflict remain online. Since 2012, The F-Word has undergone a shift placing an emphasis on trans-positive feminism and demonstrating a more intersectional and inclusive perspective. In contrast to its formerly ambiguous “objective” stance, the current team of The F-Word shows support of transgender people by explicitly not featuring artists who play at trans-exclusive events like the former Michigan Womyn’s Music festival and by stating that blog contributors strive to hold themselves accountable for the oppressions to which they may contribute (“About us”, 2015).

Meghan Murphy, the journalist who produced the interview with Sheila Jeffreys and whose other contributions had attracted the largest amount of criticism, has left the F-Word and continues to publish and develop her own blog, Feminist Current (www.feministcurrent.com). The rest of the chapter explores how public reaction to Murphy's radical feminism reflects the problematic aspects of feminist debates online.

6.3. Radical feminism and the legacy of feminist “sex wars”

Meghan Murphy is one of the most controversial writers in the Canadian feminist blogosphere and has developed a fairly large following through her blog *Feminist Current* and by publishing commentary in *The Globe and Mail*, *Ms. Magazine*, *The National Post*, *xoJane*, *Vice*, *The Vancouver Observer* and other media outlets. In addition to using my interview with Murphy, I analyze her blog and social media commentary surrounding her work between 2013 and 2015. The audience uptake of *Feminist Current* not only reveals tensions around the uses of intersectionality, but also sheds light on ongoing exclusions in feminist online debates. Murphy has been harassed by men's rights supporters for being a feminist at the same time that her identity as a feminist has been called into question or dismissed by participants identifying as sex-positive and anti-racist. These seemingly contradictory audience responses to Murphy's work reveal tensions within feminist digital publics and require an examination of broader debates around the goals, inclusions, and modes of critique of online feminism. The critical commentaries surrounding *Feminist Current* make evident the increasingly intersectional orientation of feminist bloggers yet also show that current forms of disagreement can cross a line between criticism and harassment.

Following the principles of feminist research, it is important for me to acknowledge the limits of my objectivity as a researcher. Writing this chapter was uncomfortable because I do not support many of Murphy's radical feminist views, including her anti-pornography arguments. Despite having strong disagreements with Murphy, I recognize that her voice is prominent and polarizing in the feminist landscape. Her visibility as a blogger is grounds for inclusion in this research. To reiterate, my goal

is not to validate Murphy's perspectives, nor to invalidate what I find to be very powerful criticisms made by Murphy's opponents. My goal is instead to examine emerging communicative practices within the feminist blogosphere that diverges far from its ideals of inclusivity.

Although Murphy writes about topics as diverse as body image, social policy, and gender theory, she is best known for her criticisms of the sex industry. Before I turn to my interview with Murphy, I briefly contextualize her work in relation to the broader debates within feminist theory. This contextualization is important because the public's reaction to Murphy's work reflects contestations around the origins and imagined futures of feminism that are articulated through various feminist lenses, including radical feminism, choice feminism, post-feminism, intersectionality and the feminist "sex wars". This brief exploration of competing feminist perspectives helps to explain the theoretical operating systems behind networked practices of exclusion.

In the current autobiographical profile published on Feminist Current, Murphy locates herself in, and in opposition to, contemporary feminism:

She [Murphy] is known for going against the grain and was the first to publish a critique of Slutwalk, back in 2011, and is one of the few popular bloggers who publicly articulates both a radical feminist and socialist position against the sex industry. Meghan's critiques of #twitterfeminism, burlesque, self-objectification in selfies, and choice feminism have brought both acclaim and attacks, but most of all recognition as a writer who isn't afraid to say something different, despite what popular feminism and mainstream media deem to be the party line. ("About", 2015, para. 5)

“About me” pages, online biographies, avatars, and other types of personal profiles are important channels for performative self-presentation and what is interesting about Murphy's profile is how it places her along the political spectrum of feminism as “one of the few” radical feminists who hold a socialist perspective. Murphy presents herself as a critic of popular feminism, someone who questions dominant trends and whose work contradicts what she calls “the party line”. This phrasing assumes that the major players in the feminist movement have adopted a certain type of politics, and that other dissenting feminists are too “afraid” to criticize these ideas. At the heart of this self-presentation is the notion that voices of radical feminists are excluded from feminism, and that Murphy is the one who must make their perspectives public. This biographical sketch also hints at the hate mail and harassment that Murphy has faced for challenging the feminist “status quo”.

Every decade of feminist organizing sees dissidents critiquing what Donna LaFramboise (1996) calls the “establishment feminism” of “people who are recognized by society at large as legitimate feminist spokespeople” (as cited in Steenbergen, 2011, p.342). Historically, who counts as part of the “establishment” changes depending on the prevailing concerns among feminist thinkers and activists of any given time. In her piece, “Feminism and Young Women: Still Alive and Kicking,” Candis Steenbergen (2011) provides an overview of the competing claims that shaped public discussions of feminism in the 1990s, a decade that was marked by voices of young, white, middle class, Western, women educated in women's studies who were concerned with the direction feminism was taking. Some of these young feminists distanced themselves from earlier feminist voices, proclaiming that they were “the new face of feminism” (Steenbergen,

2011, p.341), which they defined as more agentic, active, and fun compared to what they framed as the moralizing and restrictive ideals of earlier feminist generations. The dominant claim among “feminism's daughters” was that “women have made it” (Steenbergen, 2011, p.341), which is to say that they had achieved parity with men in social, economic, and culture matters. Now described as post-feminism, this set of ideas centered around dis-identification with the perceived shortcomings of “mainstream” feminism. Katie Roiphe (1993), Christina Hoff Sommers (1994), and other post-feminists of the 1990s and early 2000s, claimed that feminism had wrongly privileged victimhood over pleasure and collective conformity over individual choice and wrote against ideas articulated by radical feminists such as Catherine MacKinnon (1989) and Andrea Dworkin (1981). Today's young radical feminists, many of whom are also white, middle-class, and schooled in feminist theory, are returning to MacKinnon and Dworkin in an attempt to find new possibilities for social change in a neoliberal economy saturated with logics of personal responsibility and individual empowerment. If the post-feminists of 1990s lamented the dismissal of the individual choice, radical feminists of the 2010s argue that contemporary feminism is not revolutionary enough, not radical enough, and too complicit with commercial and popular culture¹⁶. Despite their ideological

16 The divisive debates around these issues are traced back to the so-called “sex wars” of the 1980s and 1990s whose echoes continue to reverberate today. On one side of the theoretical spectrum were “sex positive” feminists who understood sexuality as an important platform for the assertion of power and pleasure, especially through transgressive practices of sex work, pornography, drag and BDSM; these practices were said to subvert the dominant modes of heterosexist sexuality centered around reproduction and a state-sanctioned, monogamous family (Rubin, 1984). Built on the Foucaultian understanding of power as enacted through bodies, “sex positive” feminism of the 1980s and 1990s became a fertile ground for much of the contemporary queer theory.

differences, a narrative of loss, the idea that current feminism has lost ties to its roots and what “real” feminism should be about, unites these two strands of feminism.

Murphy (2011b) self-identifies as a working-class, socialist, radical feminist writer in opposition to the “popular feminism” or “choice feminism” that she suggests is “a co-optation of feminist language used for individual means” (para. 2). Coined by Linda Hirshman (2006), the term “choice feminism” refers to the idea that women's choices are valid as long as they are supported by feminist sensibilities. Developed in reaction to the exclusionary practices of earlier feminist groups, choice feminism reflects a reluctance to alienate potential allies and accepts that all choices can potentially be feminist and empowering (Ferguson, 2010). As a contributor to popular blog Everyday Feminism (www.everydayfeminism.com) states, “feminism is about supporting all women and their decisions” (Tatum, 2015).

Radical feminists’ rejection of “choice feminism” is an attempt to reclaim what they see as the revolutionary potential of feminism. Yet Murphy's articulations of radical feminism are in tension with transformative forms of post-modern, queer, performative feminism that focus on sexuality as a source of agency and empowerment. While I am oversimplifying the debate here, my goal is to provide context for public reactions to Murphy's work.

On the Internet, Murphy and other radical feminists are often referred to as “swerfs” (sex work exclusionary radical feminists) and “terfs” (trans-exclusionary radical feminists). The term “swerf” denotes a feminist who favours abolishing or criminalizing sex work. Murphy's abolitionist proposals, as well as her writing about (rather than with)

sex workers and transgender people triggers strong resistance in the feminist blogosphere.

A reader's comment under one of Murphy's articles articulates this discontent:

You are speaking about us [sex workers] presumably because you think we can't. I know it's nice to feel like a virtuous white lady saviour, but hookers are organized now and we expect you to listen to us. Please consider why you find it so hard to respect that sex workers who are the most impacted by violence: street based, poor, Aboriginal and trans can speak for themselves.

(Fournier, 2011, n.p.)

The “terf” label denotes feminists who are critical of trans identities, the participation of transwomen in women-only spaces, and the roles in feminist organizing of people who are transgender. It refers to a reactionary form of radical feminism, which holds that sex assignment at birth determines all subsequent socialization experiences which, in turn, shape women as a group (Tate & Pearson, 2016). Some radical feminists exhibit transphobic attitudes such as purposefully misgendering transpeople and accusing transwomen of “male privilege”.

One problem with the term “terf” is that, although few radical feminists self-identify as “terfs”, other feminists use the term as a pejorative rather than descriptive definitional short-hand. Its use on Twitter is associated with insults and threats of violence, including calls to hurt, choke and kill “terfs”.

Sarah Ditum, a contributor to Murphy's *Feminist Current*, is conversant on the uses of the term “terf”. Jezebel's (www.jezebel.com) writer Lindy West shared one of Ditum's tweets about domestic violence but after another Twitter user pointed out that

Sara Ditum is a “known TERF”, West retracted her retweet of Ditum's message. Below is Ditum's (2014) analysis of this incident:

Am I a TERF? West didn't have the time to check: avoiding any association with a tainted form of feminism took precedence over sharing a message about domestic violence. And she acted perfectly rationally in this: to associate herself with me, even by merely RTing a statement she agreed with, could be enough to make her a “known TERF” in turn and lead to her being similarly denounced in public. (para.6)

Here, I return to the idea of collapsed contexts, explored in Chapter 4, in order to understand the effects of the term “terf”. Forwarding users' status updates on Twitter – a practice called retweeting – stands out in the array of subjectivity-building digital tools due to their ability to simultaneously acknowledge, disseminate, and validate digital content. While retweets are popularly understood to function as de-contextualized nodes in information networks, research suggests that the act of retweeting confers privileges to the original producers of the retweeted content by making their identity visible across social networks (Recuero, Araujo, & Zago, 2011). Retweets establish one's affinity with relevant speech communities, and there are consequences to having such visible affiliations, especially when they are brought into public view. When a user is “liked”, “followed,” or “retweeted” in online networks, the content she produces is marked as meaningful and situated within a particular set of visible affiliations. This can hail a user as a legitimate participant in a given group and thus, in the eyes of some feminist bloggers, worth paying attention to. Or, for others, it can cast her as suspicious and potentially untrustworthy. Retweets function to structure belonging. Calling someone a

“terf” or a “serf”, regardless of whether or not a particular dispute relates to transgender rights or sex work, irrevocably marks them as a bad feminist, for whom belonging to wider feminist discussions is impossible. The insults “terfs” and “serfs” consequently shut down possibilities for discussion by excluding radical feminist subjectivities and assuming that they are fixed and anti-ethical to the feminist movement, when radical feminist subjectivities, like all others, are in flux and may in some ways be able to contribute to feminist movements.

6.4. Public vulnerability of an imperfect feminist

As the founder and editor of *Feminist Current*, Murphy writes using her real name in order to remain accountable for the ideas her blog promotes and to maintain the authenticity needed to build relationships with her audiences. Much like “professional feminist” Victoria (see Chapter 4), Murphy describes online writing as a career. She does not describe herself as a blogger, but as a writer and a journalist.

Although inspired by the journalism that connotes a certain level of objectivity and detachment, Murphy highlights the importance of personal voice in her own online writing. Murphy has pursued online writing as a career because she feels an inner imperative to understand the world, which she accomplishes by articulating her ideas and perspectives in writing:

Obviously, I write because I'm a writer. I feel like I cannot not write. I feel like that's how I sort through my own ideas and my own experiences. That's how I make sense of the world and formulate my own perspectives and opinions, process experiences and stuff like that. (Interview # 2)

Murphy's process of self-discovery through writing is tempered by a personal resistance to being vulnerable that has developed in response to the negative online publicity she has received:

At the same time, it's really difficult to be vulnerable publicly, to be honest about your contradictions, and failures, and even hypocrisies ... because it puts you in a position to be attacked, and criticized, and mocked. (Interview # 2)

However, Murphy repeatedly emphasizes her desire to be "real," and to reveal her inner self, even though it may not always align with expectations about her feminist identity:

When I am writing (...) I want to be real. I want to be honest. Also, this is my career, this is my work. I do journalism. I do writing. I want to continue doing that and I want it to be me, the real me. (Interview # 2)

For Murphy, "honest," authentic writing reveals a self that is not perfect, but is riddled with contradictions, failures, and "hypocrisies".

Feminist identity is constructed in response and opposition to sexist aspects of a larger culture, yet some these aspects become internalized despite one's best efforts to undo the effects of gendered socialization. With all these contradictions in play, it is not possible for Murphy to maintain the facade of a "perfect" feminist self who is immune to pressures from media cultures:

I feel like, especially with feminism, people expect me, for example, to be sort of over... over social expectations or not susceptible to sexist messages in the media and things like that. It's not just how it works. I live in this world. We all live in this world. We all live in this society that sends us really

hateful messages about women, teaches us to hate our bodies, it teaches us not to trust ourselves (...) We are all susceptible to that regardless of whether or not I am a feminist. (Interview # 2)

Murphy additionally finds it difficult to embody strength and self-acceptance that are regarded as fundamental to any “successful” feminist identity:

People have said to me like “Oh, you are so strong. You should not be insecure, you should not have issues with your relationships with men” because I am supposed to be over all that, but it is just not true. We are all human, we are all flawed, and I think part of feminism is acknowledging that and not being OK with it, addressing it, thinking critically about it, and trying to overcome that. (Interview # 2)

A writer's authenticity is bound to reveal her “flaws” or “failures” as a feminist, that is to say, holding a “wrong” aesthetic taste, affective response, or other relational and self-making practice, that does not neatly reflect feminist sensibilities¹⁷.

¹⁷ The idea that a feminist identity is not necessarily antithetical to mainstream gendered practices regularly surfaces on social media: pieces such as *XOJane's* “I’m a feminist, and I got breast implants” (Gold, 2014), *Bustle's* “Can you be a feminist and listen to misogynistic music?” (Sollee, 2015) and *Feministing's* “How to be a feminist sports fan” (Elise, 2015), to name a few examples of a wide selection of blog posts on the theme of “incorrect” feminism, all speak to uncertainty about reconciling a collective feminist identity with a self-definition constituted, in part, through engagement with consumer culture. A parody blog *Is This Feminist?* (www.isthisfeminist.tumblr.com) plays on these anxieties about the boundaries of feminist praxis and, by extension, feminist subjectivity. The blog asks whether mundane activists such as attending a concert or talking on the phone are feminist. Taking the deconstructive language of feminist theory to the level of absurdity, the blog not only satirizes academic feminists' preoccupation with deconstruction, but also exposes an impossibility of maintaining a “correct” feminist self in the context of contradictory discourses and multiple theoretical orientations.

6.5. Calling in and calling out

Murphy's account of how her missteps become a ground for online attacks resonates with recent debates about *calling in* and *calling out* practices that are used to register disagreement and discomfort with unwelcome speech. In a piece about feminist conflicts on social media, Thelandersson (2014) maintains that despite having potential for civil and inclusive debate, “much of the discussion is based around “policing” other participants about what they’re doing wrong instead of encouraging them for what is being done right” (p.528). The practice of calling out, or publicly challenging problematic statements, is based on a belief that listeners are complicit with the reproduction of oppression if they allow sexist, racist, or otherwise oppressive speech go unquestioned or unopposed. Calling out is not an ideal form of public deliberation since it runs the risk of excluding and alienating those whose speech is marked as undesirable (Ahmad, 2015).

One of the first bloggers to problematize the practice of calling out is Ngọc Loan Trần (2013), who introduced the idea of *calling in*, which is to privately express a discomfort with someone's views and, thus, enable a conversation rather than lead to a defensive confrontation or excluding someone from the debate. To *call in* is to invite into conversation rather than publicly denounce speakers as ignorant (at best) and intentionally oppressive (at worst). According to Trần, calling in is not meant to replace calling out. Rather, calling in suggests a more inclusive way to communicate disagreement.

Networked audiences do indeed call Murphy out about the limitations of her work. In her 2013 blog post “The trouble with Twitter feminism”, Murphy draws on

Trần's critique of calling out, and suggests that social media is, for the large part, counterproductive to feminist coalition-building because momentary online engagements are not conducive to users seeing one another as full and complex human beings (Murphy, 2013). In the interview, Murphy describes the often aggressive and hostile manner in which networked publics register their disagreement with her work:

A lot of the people who attack me or tell me that I'm evil, or responsible for murdering women, or crazy things like that, are women who are pro-sex work. A lot of the pro-prostitution people and pro-porn people. It's men and women. Often other women who might even identify as feminist who are saying really nasty things to me. And that's a bit weird because it isn't just men. (Interview # 2)

Murphy says that it is “a bit weird” that her work is attacked by other women, especially those identifying as feminist. Although Murphy expects feminism to unite women, feminism's communicative moments are rife with divisive hostility:

The really malicious, really angry, really nasty stuff... A lot of that comes from women, and sometimes even other feminists. So that's a bit disappointing, I guess. (Interview # 2)

Personal attacks are often anonymous:

You don't know who they are, you don't know where they are coming from, you don't know what their goals are, and they are saying hateful things to you or harassing you. (Interview # 2)

Although previous chapters suggest that the majority of Murphy's opponents would concentrate in her blog's comment section, the abusive messages targeted at her are more

often posted on outside platforms. The interactive dynamics on Feminist Current unfold in ways that prevent Murphy's critics from dominating discussion on the blog:

Most of the people who really have decided that they hate me a lot don't comment on my blog very much because the other commenters will not put up with that, and they know that.

...

They choose to attack me either privately or among themselves or by writing malicious posts on Twitter (...) or other places online. They don't do it on my blog that much because they know they won't get away with it. They will do it on other websites when I publish in other places. On Rabble, for example, they have supporters there and my commenters aren't over there. So my commenters won't keep them in check, and I don't want to waste a bunch of time and energy arguing. I can't spend my entire day having the same arguments over and over and over online. (Interview # 2)

Murphy's loyal supporters constrain disruptive commenters who do not "get away" with posting harassing messages. Her audiences are comprised of more than just readers, providers of feedback or even partners in textual conversations. They are supporters ready to mobilize and defend Murphy and the radical feminist discourse that has circulated within the Feminist Current blog.

Writers, editors, moderators and commentators play a vital role in shaping commenting cultures. Murphy's role as a moderator is another integral component of maintaining a space where thoughtful conversations can take place. Murphy, for example, encourages the use of real email addresses so she can contact a person about their

comment. She takes commenting seriously and, in doing so, cultivates a loyal audience and a type of discourse that is conducive to civility:

A lot of those people [commentators on Feminist Current] have been reading my blog and commenting there for a long time, so I feel like I know them a bit and we have a mutual respect. (Interview # 2)

Murphy's focus on steering conversations in productive directions sets her blog apart from many under-staffed moderating teams in mainstream media:

You have to be really careful and thoughtful about comment moderation and what kind of conversation you are trying to encourage and develop which is why big mainstream media websites will have just so many horrid comments because they don't have time to. There is nobody there (...) who has time to ensure that the conversation is a productive one. So I try to spend time and energy moderating so that people are encouraged to discuss issues in intelligent, and thoughtful, and respectful way as opposed to encourage people attacking each other. (Interview # 2)

While media scholars have preoccupied themselves with classifying the tools and principles of moderating principles, comment moderation as a form of labour is relatively unexplored. Journalists have drawn attention to the psychological and emotional costs of professional content moderating (Chen, 2014), while academics have largely ignored them. Like many other bloggers who face abusive comments, Murphy has “developed a thick skin”, that is, she has become less sensitive to online disruptions, yet not without some cost:

When I first started blogging, when I first started writing online, it [harassment] was a lot harder to deal with. I think when you are writing online, you kind of develop a thick skin. I mean, not all criticism is bad, right? It could be overwhelming when you are feeling like you are being swarmed or attacked, or when those kinds of insults and criticisms are just personal attacks as opposed to discussing the issues. In either way, it is hard to deal with.

...

At first I definitely had a couple of, you know, emotional breakdowns [laughs] over dealing with commentaries online and people attacking me online. And it can be really exhausting. It just wears you down, but... I mean, for one thing, I am just used to it now. It does not bother me as much. I just try not to put too much energy into the bad stuff. (Interview # 2)

When Murphy appealed to Twitter and Facebook to curb the harassment faced, the platforms were not helpful:

I've reported so many pages and so many people either for harassing me, or for harassing women I know, or for posting pornography. And they do nothing. They do nothing. You get the same response every single time with them saying that they haven't found anything... they haven't found any reason to ban these people, and that's so crazy. (Interview # 2)

Women's first-hand accounts about facing violent speech are often dismissed under the assumption that feminists are just not able to handle criticisms but, contrary to these stereotypes, many feminist bloggers, including those interviewed for this study,

appreciate criticism when it is delivered in a respectful way. Murphy, for example, says that she welcomes criticisms as long as they are not cruel or hateful:

People who have valid criticisms, I appreciate that because it is helping me to grow as a feminist and a writer. It helped to challenge my ideas, and it helped me develop my own ideas about feminism. So, you know, criticism isn't a bad thing at all. When it's just people being cruel, or hurtful, or hateful, I try to ignore it as best as I can. (Interview # 2)

Ignoring hateful comments while focusing on constructive feedback is one of the strategies bloggers use to productively engage with their audiences but the costs of doing so are high. Hateful comments are difficult to ignore when there are hundreds of them circulating through social networks. In the sections that follow, I analyze how one of Murphy's controversial pieces led to hashtag harassment, which turned a social justice and feminist mediasphere into a site of public shaming.

6.6. A crisis of acknowledgement

In May of 2015 Murphy published a critique of the nude magazine photo spread featuring Laverne Cox, an American Black transgender model and actress, that was produced for women's magazine *Allure*. Public feminist outrage, building on its history of discontent with Murphy's work, and reflecting an understanding that intersectionality should be central to feminist writing and feminist identity, exploded.

Depicting an image of a sexualized black transgender woman, this photo-shoot intervenes into a history of ongoing inequality and makes visible a type of gendered and raced embodiment that is rarely shown, much less in a positive light, in mainstream media. Cox's photo became a site for competing rhetorical readings. The first reading, by

Cox herself, accompanied the photo and explains why she had agreed to the photo shoot and why this particular type of media presentation is important to her:

I felt this could be really powerful for the communities that I represent. Black women are not often told that we're beautiful unless we align with certain standards. Trans women certainly are not told we're beautiful. Seeing a black transgender woman embracing and loving everything about herself might be inspiring to some other folks. (as cited in Siegel, 2015, para.1)

Many others also see the photo as a powerful and ground-breaking representation of an embodied black transgender identity that has historically been excluded from the realms of “acceptable” femininity.

Murphy, however, mobilized radical feminist theory to target the idea that there is any empowering potential in commodified images which she considers to be universally degrading. Below is an excerpt from Murphy's (2015) blog post, which was titled “Laverne Cox’s objectified body ‘empowers’ no one.” Murphy argues that the photo shoot represents the workings of the male gaze, disguised as “self-love”:

If women or transwomen were truly allowed to love themselves, I doubt they’d be spending thousands and thousands of dollars sculpting their bodies in order to look like some cartoonish version of “woman,” as defined by the porn industry and pop culture. The fact that Cox’s body is seen as “subversive” because she is trans doesn’t change that. Her body doesn’t look subversive. It looks like any other objectified female body, sculpted by surgery and enhanced by Photoshop. (para.8)

Here, focusing on the commodification logics of popular culture, Murphy rejects Cox's self-conceptualization as an empowered representative of a marginalized community. The intersectional context of Cox's gesture and the importance of having it, a positive representation of an embodied black transgender person, in a major women's magazine seems to be lost to Murphy. In response to the accusations of transphobia and racism subsequent to the publication of her piece, Murphy maintains that her vision of feminism is not about individual feelings or choices, but about collective actions. She contends that transgender women are not above a critique of their participation in patriarchal regimes of representation.

On Twitter, feminist publics took issue with Murphy's framing of Cox's photo as a “cartoonish” representation of femininity. A major criticism against Murphy was that such a linguistic choice draws on the pervasive, but wrong, assumption that an authentic or “essential” femininity exists and can only be expressed by women who were assigned as female sex at birth and continue to identify as women. As a result, any other performance of femininity is deemed misleading, false, inauthentic, or made-up. Murphy's choice of the word “cartoonish” perpetuates an ongoing history of anti-transgender bias in feminist movements. Murphy, however, argues that such a reading is a distortion of her work and that her analysis of objectification should apply to all women, whether cis or transgender.

Within this context, Murphy's framing of the photo shoot as disempowering is emblematic of radical feminists' refusal to engage with the politics of difference and fails to acknowledge Cox's claims of self-knowledge. Defining only one particular form of sexism, in this case a sexist photo shoot in a women's magazine, as the overarching sexist

oppression downplays the importance of listening to and acknowledging the experiences of differently positioned subjects. Thus, Murphy's position reflects ongoing resistance to intersectionality within the mainstream feminist blogosphere. A number of white feminist bloggers concede that the concept of intersectionality is important at the same time that they downplay its relevance by claiming that feminists should be united in struggle against shared experiences of gender-based oppression (Okolosie, 2014). Nevermind that gender is experienced differently according to race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, ability and other markers of identity. As a result, white feminists, and white feminist bloggers, often fail to listen to and recognize the voices of black women.

Murphy's opponents used social media and personal blogs to voice their critical takes on her work. Some called for boycotting in an attempt to close down the public channels available to Murphy, including the website where she worked as a contributor. For several years Murphy has been a contributor to Rabble (www.rabble.ca), a Toronto-based left-wing news website. In May 2015, Maggie's: Toronto Sex Workers Action Project started an online petition urging Rabble to fire Murphy. Signed by several well-known activist and media organizations, including Black Lives Matter Toronto and *Shameless Magazine*, the petition aimed to inform the website's editors about Murphy's alleged "racism and attacks on women who trade/sell sex or are trans" (Maggie's: Toronto Sex Workers Action Project, 2015, para. 4). While centered on an appeal to terminate radical feminist Meghan Murphy's employment, this joint petition exemplifies practical coalition building between networked publics and based on shared concerns around intersectionality as a central feature of modern feminism. Conversations about Murphy's views took place all over the feminist blogosphere and on social media (see, for

example, Sampath, 2015), and the voices of sex work and transgender activists were overwhelmingly critical of Murphy's work. At the same time, however, a petition in support of Murphy also circulated on social media.

To better understand dynamics of feminist online conflicts, it is important to examine the role of Feminist Current's commentators as well. The exchange below is suggestive of how debates on the Feminist Current comment section can take an anti-transgender turn. One commenter, for example, claims that transitioning "mutilat[es] healthy bodies because of psychological distress" (Ocean, 2015). Another user claims that "people are labeled "transphobic" for calling a spade a spade. Laverne Cox resembles a woman but he isn't one. Women aren't cock-less men for gods [sic] sake!" (Tonks, 2015). That such transphobic comments are neither deleted nor down-voted on Feminist Current indicates that the blog's radical feminist community approves of such views.

The Feminist Current comment policy states that "The most important thing to know is this: this is not a public forum" (Murphy, 2011a, para. 6). The editor has the power to decide whether or not comments are published:

Comment moderation is not up for debate and, in fact, trying to debate the comment policy is likely to result in your comment not being published.

(Murphy, 2011a, para. 8)

Thus, Murphy's decision to leave comments equating transsexuality with "mutilation" could mean either that she does not see them as inherently damaging and insulting, or that she regards them as potentially contributing to a productive conversation. Murphy enthusiastically endorses Sheila Jeffreys, who she calls "an incredible intellectual and a powerful voice in radical feminist discourse (...) one of the few who continue to make

radical arguments and challenge dominant discourse” (2015, para. 4), which supports my interpretation of Murphy’s decision to keep transphobic comments. In addition, even though Murphy does not deny the legitimacy of transgender identity in the way other radical feminists might, her tolerance for the transphobic attitudes in the comment section, combined with her endorsement of Jeffreys, alienates transgender people and their allies.

Given Murphy's highly contested status within the feminist blogosphere, social media reaction to her critique of Cox's photo shoot was prompt. At the time of writing, the hashtag #DropMM still circulates on Twitter. Like the petition, this hashtag urges Rabble to drop Meghan Murphy as a contributor. There was a range of responses from people engaging with the hashtag, most asking Rabble to fire Murphy. Many tweets are explicitly hostile and go as far as calling Murphy a “gender terrorist” and a “monster”. After Rabble declined to fire Murphy, networked audiences called for a boycott through hashtags #boycottrabble, #dropMM and #droprabble. The backlash surrounding Murphy's blog has also drawn the attention of anti-feminist users. Supporters of men's rights groups joined the hashtag to attack Murphy: “#dropMM feminism is anti-male. see heterosexuality as oppressing women, etc why act all surprised and megan murphy's bigotry?” (thewheel5950, 2015).

The practice of hashtagging has been met with a considerable interest among feminist media scholars who explore the ways in which social media enact and intervene into dominant discourses. Hashtags can function as a “collecting mechanism” that organizes related tweets and enables trending of content (Bruns & Highfield, 2014). Due to their capacity to widen networked conversations by indexing terms, hashtags are

sometimes put on a par with traditional sites of activism (Florini, 2013; Mclean & Maalsen, 2013). Hashtag Feminism (www.hashtagfeminism.com), for instance, curates popular feminist hashtags and analyzes conversations that happen around them. Hashtags can also be used to harass people and make it easier for networked participants to join in the harassment. So-called “bashtags” and “hashtag crashing” are practices that hijack and appropriate the hashtags of one's adversaries (Reagle, 2015). The hashtag #dropMM was not only used to display discontent with Murphy's politics and organize a massive call for boycotting. As it gained in visibility, it was used to escalate hashtag harassment by participants in the social justice blogosphere and anti-feminist groups.

Murphy continues to actively engage with social media, but she is skeptical of its transformative potential. Unlike bloggers in this research who conceptualize microblogging as an activist space, Murphy argues that Twitter is not conducive to feminist conversations. On her blog, she characterizes Twitter as a place fostering an oversimplification of debates that resemble hockey fights in the way users try to gain support from “fans” and divide audiences (Murphy, 2013). According to Murphy (2013), a networked subject should have particular qualities in order to thrive in Twitter discussions: she should not be a “wimp”, but someone who “won't back down” while making strong statements that mobilize the support of her audiences (para. 9).

The potentialities, boundaries and, to a lesser extent, exclusions of the feminist blogosphere have been debated in the feminist media studies literature since the mid-2000s (Jolly, 2006; Leow, 2010; Thompson, 2006). As I pointed out in this chapter, there are, indeed, networked practices of exclusion that narrow the field of feminist debates. However, it is necessary to acknowledge the underlying tensions behind these exclusions.

For some radical feminist bloggers, Twitter hashtag activism can represent a fragmentation of feminism, while for racialized, transgender, or queer feminists, hashtag activism can manifest the liberating aspects of social media (Loza, 2014). Although networked conflicts among feminists have been defined as “toxic”, the metaphor of toxicity is loaded with racial meanings and anxieties over imaginary losses of “safe” spaces (Risam, 2015, n.p.). The debate around the “toxicity” of digital feminism is largely based on racial inequities and the reluctance of white feminists to acknowledge their privileged positions:

the threats of intersectionality to hegemonic forms of feminism are consolidated in the figure of the toxic woman of color, shoring up the position of the good white feminist in opposition (Risam, 2015, n.p.)

Feminist blogs are part of a much larger political and intellectual landscape. As such, blogs can reflect, reproduce, and subvert long-standing power imbalances within feminism. The case studies discussed in this chapter shed light on the ongoing struggles over the directions feminist movements can take and the subsequent difficulties of sustaining feminist struggles and debates online while still adhering to feminist principles of inclusivity and respect. To conclude, I reiterate the critical importance of feminist struggles for securing the rights of marginalized populations, including those of sex workers and transgender people. The loci for a large part of these struggles today, social media can be used to advance debate or further existing feminist divides. It is, therefore, necessary to identify, name, and address the exclusions within digital feminism and call into question existing patterns of interaction that include the use of dismissive labels and hashtags as tools of public shaming, which limit the boundaries of feminist discourses.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

This dissertation approached digital cultures – and blogs in particular – as public spaces where women struggle for recognition as legitimate speakers while challenging what Judith Butler (1990) calls “highly rigid, regulatory frame” of normative gender (p.33). While some argue that feminist politics are being “undone” in, and by, public discourses of self-empowerment and personal responsibility (McRobbie, 2009), my research has shown how various forms of online feminist cultural production act as a counterweight to such undoing. Contrary to claims that feminist concerns bear little relevance to young women who embrace neoliberal consumer citizenship at the expense of inter-generational connections and collective forms of activism (McRobbie, 2009), this work corroborates several recent studies suggesting that feminist movements are changing rather than disappearing (Reger, 2012; Schuster, 2013). Young women increasingly move their collaborative efforts online and into the blogosphere, a territory governed by its own ethics, rules of engagement and stylistic conventions separate from more established forms of feminism.

As Geraldine Finn (1982) observed in her discussion of feminist organizing in Canada, feminism “does not speak with one voice” (as cited in Steenbergen, 2011, p.340). This study of digital cultures is a testimony to the diversity of feminisms. Bloggers interviewed for this research write for variety of audiences on a number of topics, including technology, reproductive rights, gender theory and popular culture. In addition to providing critical commentaries on current events, their blogs illuminate how feminist subjectivities are constructed and negotiated in everyday life. Finally, this dissertation examined conflicts and disagreements within the feminist blogosphere,

showcasing the central role of intersectionality in contestations of feminist identities and agendas.

Yet feminist networked interventions have been met with considerable backlash that often takes a form of violent misogyny. This dissertation drew a parallel between the trivialization of online harassment and the de-legitimization of the earlier forms of gender-based violence; in doing so, it situated the current problem of online harassment within a history of discursive patterns used to justify and normalize violence against women. Violence, whether it is embodied or symbolic, is a social problem that is simultaneously extraordinary and banal. In some forms it can interrupt daily life and fascinate people, while in others it goes on unnoticed or unrecognized as violence (Tyner, 2012). Though several large-scale harassment campaigns have brought public attention to the problem of online violence, the majority of abuse happens on a small scale and is still regrettably routine. Violent, or injurious, speech humiliates and degrades its targets through the use of naming practices that objectify them. It enacts testimonial injustice, silences marginalized perspectives and forcefully excludes women from public discourse. Additionally, by virtue of its sheer pervasiveness, violent speech normalizes misogynist language.

By making observations across the blogosphere, I provided a broad picture of the various modes of oppositional and resistive meaning-making that exist within mediated feminist formations. I have argued that disengagement strategies offered by “Internet safety” paradigms foreclose active engagement with networked publics and have a limited applicability to the work of feminist bloggers. The depoliticized nature of these prescriptions relegates questions of power into the background; cyberbullying and

cybersafety discourses favour individualized solutions over systematic approaches to the problem of violent speech, which is understood as the result of individual pathology. Rather, I have argued that framing blogging as a site of creative work is central for understanding a range of feminist resistive practices. Focusing on experiential accounts of feminist bloggers, I have examined how feminist bloggers shape their publishing strategies, community building practices and personal decisions around self-presentation as web intellectuals.

Deborah Cameron (2006) suggests that feminists who theorize problems affecting women should “ask not only what explains the existence and nature of this problem’ but also ‘what is to be done?’ ” (p.18). This dissertation explores what bloggers have done in response to problematic communication and what can be done further to curb digital expressions of violent misogyny while cultivating vibrant mediated cultures. I present a list of the communicative, personal, and organizational resistive strategies that feminist bloggers employ to counteract the damaging effects of online verbal violence. Given the multifaceted nature of feminist concerns and varied methods of social change, it is important to remember that feminism can accommodate “radically different understandings of how change happens, of what constitutes social change, and thus of the goals and purposes of feminism itself” (Hogeland, 2011, p. 110). Therefore, this list is not intended to be exhaustive or definitive; bloggers' resistive efforts not only reflect different perspectives on feminist action, but also occur within digital publics that are in flux and from which new possibilities for connection continuously develop. This project identified a number of ways in which violent communicative acts can be resisted and their harms minimized in networked environments operating within the frameworks of

digital presence, visibility and self-branding. Rather than attempting to cover every possible reaction to problematic or violent communication, I outline the interconnecting practices that speak most strongly to the politics of assembling and transforming feminist networked publics.

1. Meaning-making through critical commentary

Resistance to online violence is embodied in the discursive practices of users who set feminist agendas and draw public attention to the problems of sexist speech. When feminist bloggers write about their experiences of mediated violence, they share their frustrations and commiserate with each other. As this dissertation makes evident, they open routes for critical conversations and offer fresh perspectives on gender politics, extending their thinking beyond conventional narratives of deviance and victimization. In particular, through deliberations about power in digital cultures, they emphasize the relational, performative and systemic qualities of violent speech.

2. Reconfiguring digital archives

On the premise that blogs are the digital archives of social history, I have examined practices of digital archiving that capture fragments of violent communication in mediated social spaces. The ways in which feminist bloggers create, curate, and annotate digital archives of violent speech underscore the pervasiveness of misogynist and sexist discourses online and in society writ large. Feminist bloggers engage with these archives in three ways:

- maintaining private digital collections of screen captures and messages;
- creating stand-alone collective archives of peer-aggregated content;

- engaging in decentered archiving on social media through the use of Twitter hashtags.

The archival work that feminist bloggers do is important in documenting online harassment because, while pervasive, it is elusive and ephemeral. The various moderation practices employed in social media mean that obscene utterances can be removed from public view as quickly as they can proliferate. Acts of feminist digital archiving have many purposes. The public preservation of communicative moments raises awareness about ongoing gendered inequities; demands accountability from social media participants; and unites feminists in their opposition to abuse. In using feminist hashtags to maintain digital collections and circulate critical feminist perspectives, bloggers can transform the practice of digital archiving, previously the realm of professionals with an access to information storage resources, into a collective practice based on temporal affinities across the spectrum of feminist mobilization.

3. Networked public shaming

Mediated environments have become sites where public shaming takes place through the use of public opinion. Feminists can use social media to publicly shame pseudonymous or fully anonymous harassers by disclosing their identities, thus strategically collapsing contexts in order to inform a wider community about their harasser's damaging speech. The effectiveness and ethics of public shaming, however, remain debatable. Those who wish to appropriate shaming in service of social justice goals should be aware of its limitations. Shaming punishments can stigmatize and humiliate, and thus inflict harm rather than redress it. It is not possible, once initiated, to control the scope of online shaming, which could lead to extreme moral outrage and harassment that exceeds the

severity of a given transgression, thus risking a disproportionate response. The psychological effects of shaming are also unpredictable, and have the potential to lead to further unwanted aggression, trauma, or other lasting harms.

4. Mediated expressions of solidarity

Within feminist networked environments, bloggers continue to articulate their commitments to feminist politics by speaking out against verbal violence and extending their support to the targets of harassment. They express solidarity against abuse through embodied interactions, networked affinities as well as through the practices of down-voting violent utterances, reporting abuse to moderators, and using other techno-social tools to manage networked dynamics. While the issue of community building has always been an important part of blog studies (Keller, 2012; Lopez, 2009; Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012; Wood, 2008), the ongoing changes in the blogosphere make it necessary to further consider the interconnected nature of networked activism. As blogs are becoming further integrated with social media, more opportunities emerge for studying feminist solidarity and coalition-building across platforms.

5. Curating digital presence and feminist visibility

Writing under one's full names *as feminists* asserts one's commitment to working towards gender equity. The idea of actively constructing and performing one's relation to feminism is not new: women have made their feminist identities visible through a variety of aesthetic and performative choices designed to make feminist identities easily recognizable to feminists and outsiders alike. Markers of a feminist identity are still legible online in profile pictures, photos, and videos, but they are also enhanced through visible interpersonal connections online such as with friends, followers and group

memberships. Feminist visibility on the Internet is produced through the creation of visual representations, the remixing of feminist content into mainstream materials, and establishing affiliations across the spectrum of feminist networks (Rentschler & Thrift, 2015). A woman's act of writing *as a feminist using her own name* can constitute a “coming-out” moment that makes both her and her commitment to anti-oppressive politics visible. In the context of this research, feminist visibility is a way to provide necessary counter-narratives to discourses insisting on the irrelevance of contemporary feminism and to establish an active feminist presence on platforms that are not necessarily intended as sites of feminist political action.

6. Developing comment cultures

The culture around commenting is one of the most interesting features of the blogosphere because it emphasizes most clearly the relational nature of mediated communication. Although comments in social justice and feminist publics are still undertheorized, this dissertation contributes to the nascent field of comments culture research (Canter, 2013; McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012; Reagle, 2015; Reich, 2011). I have shown that comment sections offer spaces for various conflicting messages about feminism and feminists to come into dialogue with each other: these dialogues can range from cautious and cordial to intense and blunt. Feminist bloggers cultivate civil and inclusive comment cultures by employing a variety of moderation practices and comment policies. They establish and maintain comment sections in ways that are contingent on bloggers' theoretical leanings, interactive preferences and situational needs. Whether they are prolific commentators or cautious posters, feminist bloggers emphasize the importance of

comment sections for testing ideas, receiving feedback, generating insight, and creating networks of readers around their blogs.

7. Practising access control

Although the feminist blogs examined in this study are by default public, this does not mean that bloggers abdicate their right to privacy on their social media profiles. Feminist bloggers control access to their social media pages by screening contacts and restricting the visibility of their posts to known communicators in order to exclude hostile publics from their networked audiences. This strategy is limited as it relies on bloggers' individual actions and depends on the range of privacy settings determined by media platforms.

8. Transforming institutional practices

Social media users continue to circulate gratuitous representations of violence against women, and feminists continue to petition platforms to change their organizational policies around reporting and removing abusive content. In opposition to a neoliberal ethos of personal choice, feminists conceptualize the publics assembled through social media as significant social formations that should be made more inclusive through collective action. They meet with little success since dominant discourses hold that participants in commercial digital spaces voluntarily submit to the rules set by social media platforms in exchange for content (Andrejevic, 2013). A number of feminist activists have challenged existing social media policies and advocated for a greater attention to the problems of online abuse and the lack of consequences for publishing misogynist speech.

9. Carving spaces for oppositional silence

Some feminists selectively disengage from networked communication by closing down comment sections on their blogs. A temporary, deliberate, recuperative disengagement does not mean disconnection, but allows bloggers to produce and circulate feminist content without having to manage a stream of abusive comments. Another way to enact “silence” is to collectively boycott the social media platforms that are reluctant to address anti-feminist harassment. The long-term transformative potential of boycotting is limited in the social context of today, since social media has become a hegemonic vehicle of communication. Despite its limitations, boycotting nevertheless represents a collective action aimed at drawing public attention to the hostile climates within digital cultures.

10. Turning to the legal system

When all else fails in curbing violent speech, feminists report the death and rape threats, stalking, and harassment to the police. Few bloggers, however, choose this route due to limitations in existing legal frameworks concerning criminal harassment, and to structural flaws pertaining to the treatment of victims in the criminal justice system. In addition, cases of online violence are rarely successfully prosecuted for many reasons. The police in Canada and the US often fail to give priority to such cases or treat them seriously. Jurisdictional ambiguity complicates questions about where violence online is committed and where it should be tried. The anonymity of abusers online makes them difficult to track down. Finally, social media platforms have no incentive to help in cases of online violence since they have immunity from liability for user-generated content (Marwick & Miller, 2014). All these factors discourage feminist bloggers from seeking help within the legal system.

As bell hooks (2014) states in her discussion of “talking back” as a form of defiance, “finding our voice and using it, especially in acts of critical rebellion and resistance, pushing past fear, continues to be one of the most powerful ways feminist thinking and practice changes life” (p.xi). Following this line of thought, the focus of my work has been on the resistive practices of feminist bloggers in the face of sexist, misogynist and otherwise oppressive speech. I have emphasized their creative ways of responding to online harassment and only sketched, but did not sufficiently explore, the regulatory role of social media platforms in shaping user dynamics. Future research will need to analyze the effects of techno-social control mechanisms on user participation.

Providing contextual insights into the generative, transformative capacities of networked feminist politics, this research underscored the importance of agentic modes of participation in response to problematic communication. I have demonstrated that feminist bloggers have diverse and fluid understandings of digital cultures that translate into creative ways of counteracting disruptive moments. This interdisciplinary research is itself an attempt to resist ongoing patterns of exclusion by contributing to an emerging field of study that identifies, contextualizes, re-situates, and problematizes violent speech within digital networked publics.

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APPENDIX A: CALL FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

I am a PhD student at York University in Toronto, and I am doing research on online harassment, hate speech and other forms of abusive communication. For my doctoral dissertation, I am looking for bloggers from the US and Canada who identify as feminists and who would like to be interviewed about their blogging experiences. The interview takes approximately 30 minutes via Skype or telephone.

The goal of my work is to qualitatively explore how self-identified feminist bloggers experience, resist and attach meanings to disruptive responses from their audiences. I ask participants to share their experiences of encountering negative responses which may include sexist comments, harassment or hate mail. I also ask bloggers how they deal with these kinds of disruptions.

This research has been approved by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines.

I can be reached at [email] or by [phone]. I will be glad to address any questions and provide more information about the research project.

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APPENDIX B: LIST OF RESEARCH INTERVIEWS

Interview # 1

Jarrah Hodge. Interview by author, July 10, 2013.

Interview # 2

Meghan Murphy. Interview by author, July 15, 2013.

Interview # 3

Joyce Arthur. Interview by author, August 2, 2013.

Interview # 4

Emma Woolley. Interview by author, October 7, 2013.

Interview # 5

Steph Guthrie. Interview by author, October 13, 2013.

Interview # 6

Samantha. Interview by author, November 25, 2013.

Interview # 7

Victoria. Interview by author, December 9, 2013.

Interview # 8

Nicole Deagan Interview by author, August 10, 2013.

Interview # 9

Ciety Goerke. Interview by author, August 26, 2013.

Interview # 10

Jaspreet. Interview by author, June 6, 2014.

Interview # 11

Jessica, Interview by author, April 23, 2014.

Interview # 12

Julie Zeilinger, Interview by author, June 6, 2014.

APPENDIX C: SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How long have you been blogging?
2. What motivates you to blog?
3. What is it like to blog as a feminist?
4. What audience do you write for?
5. Do you interact with your readers? If yes, how?
6. Have you ever encountered hostile responses to your online work?
7. How often do you encounter disruptive responses?
8. On your blog, what kinds of topics are more likely to attract negative attention?
9. Do you know people behind hate mail and online harassment?
10. Describe a particular situation when your blog activity elicited hostile responses (sexist, racist, homophobic, threatening, offensive, or disturbing). How did you react?
11. Do you keep track of negative responses? If so, how and why?
12. In general, what is it like dealing with negative responses?
13. Did you report abusing messages?
14. Did the platform moderators respond?
15. How did you come to the decision to moderate (or not to moderate) the comment section of your blog?
16. Why do you blog under your legal name (pseudonym)?
17. Over the years, have you experienced any change in the way interactions happen on your blog and in the feminist blogosphere?
18. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Study Name: Participatory cultures, participatory feminisms: a study of disruptions in women's political blogging

Researcher: Veronika Novoselova, PhD Candidate

Graduate Program in Gender, Feminist and Women's Studies

York University, Founders College 206, 4700 York University, Toronto, M3J 1P3

Purpose of the Research: The primary goal of this work is to qualitatively explore how self-identified feminist bloggers from Canada and the United States experience, resist and attach meanings to disruptive responses from their audiences. I will consider whether the nature and scope of such responses constitutes a backlash against feminist blogging, and whether the term 'backlash' is an appropriate conceptual tool for understanding dis/engagements in affective participation that occurs in the feminist blogosphere. The research will be presented at a conference and reported in the forms of a doctoral dissertation and journal articles.

What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research: you will be asked to participate in an open-ended, semi-structured in-depth interview which will take approximately 60 minutes. You will be also asked for the permission to digitally record the interview to ensure the accuracy of data. If you prefer, handwritten notes will be taken instead of recording.

Risks and Discomforts: You will be asked to share experiences of managing negative responses which may include sexist comments, harassment or hate mail. Recounting these responses could produce an emotionally negative response. You may withdraw from the study at any time. Please note that you can contact York Counseling and Disability Services, Room 110, Bennett Center for Student Services.

Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You: You have the benefit of participating in a study on blogger-audience dynamics and the opportunity of speaking to someone about online harassment that you might have experienced.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. You have the right not to answer questions and you may choose to stop participating at any time.

Withdrawal from the Study: You can stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason, if you so decide. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions, will not affect your relationship with the researcher or York University. In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible.

Confidentiality: All information you supply during the research will be held in confidence and unless you specifically indicate your consent, your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. Only the researcher (Veronika Novoselova) and research supervisor (Dr. Jennifer Jenson) will have access to this information. The

data in the form of digital recording will be password-protected and archived on the hard drive of the researcher's personal computer for 5 years. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

Questions About the Research? If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact me by [email] or [phone] or my Graduate Supervisor - Dr. Jennifer Jenson either by [phone] or [e-mail]. You may also contact the Graduate Program in Gender, Feminist and Women's Studies, 206 Founders College, Keele Campus, York University. This research has been reviewed and approved by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact the Sr. Manager & Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5th Floor, York Research Tower, York University.

Legal Rights and Signatures:

I _____, consent to participate in “Participatory cultures, participatory feminisms: a study of disruptions in women's political blogging” conducted by Veronika Novoselova. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Signature
Participant

Date

Signature
Principal Investigator

Date