Framing Issues, Fomenting Change, 'Feministing': A Contemporary Feminist Blog in the Landscape of Online Political Activism

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Abstract. The practice and popularity of blogging, as a particular form of online activism, has exploded in recent years, leading to a burgeoning field of scholarship on its implications for mainstream media discourse. As one of the most visited feminist blogs on the internet and recent winner of the 2007 Bloggers Choice Award for Best Political Blog, Feministing stands at the epicenter of debates around the politics of third-wave feminism and online activism. In this paper, I argue that Feministing, through employing third-wave feminist strategies, contributes to substantially reshaping conventional political discourse though has yet to exert direct influence on politics or policy. As blogs continue to grow in number and impact, these findings are essential in shaping the way we interpret discursive strategies and their ultimate effect on activist outcomes. I examine Feministing's origins, community, discursive strategies, and outcomes as these relate to the broader fields of blogging and online activism. Utilizing a distinctly feminist methodology, I draw on diverse types of third-wave feminist literature while also exploring blogging through popular and academic sources. Moreover, I reinforce the prominent feminist notion that 'the personal is political' throughout, most notably by drawing on my own experiences as a reader of Feministing.

1 Introduction

As the recent winner of the Bloggers Choice Award for "Best Political Blog 2007", Feministing[1] stands at the epicenter of the contemporary political phenomena of online activism and third-wave feminist identity politics. On Feministing, feminism and activism work in tandem: the writers' and readers' own feminist identities translate into in a form of online political activism which has been both critiqued and lauded in media and academic sources. Focusing on the debate surrounding the effectiveness of online political activism, this paper will place Feministing within the larger contexts of third-wave ideology and the so-called blog revolution. Through a review of academic literature as well as popular sources, in this paper I will argue that the blog Feministing, through employing third-wave feminist ideology and strategies, contributes to substantially reshaping conventional political discourse, though has yet to exert direct influence on politics or policy.

In the last several years, blogs and blogging have become a staple of online political activism. A web log, or blog, is a webpage with periodic, reverse chronologically ordered content, posted by an individual or group. Depending on the writers, updates on blogs can range from extremely frequent to very infrequent. The blogging phenomenon is so recent that the formal language we use to describe it has only just developed: in 2004, 'blog' was Merriam-Webster's word of the year, meaning it was the online site's most looked-up word that year (Su, Wang, & Mark, 2005). In the following year, Merriam-Webster included "blog" in its paper edition for the first time. Given the cutting-edge nature of this dimension of internet media, few major academic articles exist on blogging's influence and implications, although scholarship on the issue is burgeoning. This paper aims to contribute to a body of literature which is currently unfolding, one that is vital in shaping our understanding of emerging internet medias and their impact – real and potential – on broader political systems and structures.

Through focusing on Feministing in particular, I fold into this analysis of blog activism the third-wave feminist strategies and rhetoric utilized on Feministing, which themselves function as a type of political activism. Through their modes of reporting, the content selected for the site, and their links to other blogs and organizations, we see the emergence of Feministing's distinctive third-wave approach. The course of my argument follows the third-wave strategies found on Feministing and evaluates the scope of this form of activism. As Feministing receives accolades for its status as a political blog (and as the nature of feminism has remained enduringly political since its conception) exploring the ways in which third-wave feminism both promotes and impedes broader political activism stands as an essential task most relevant to activist developments online. Through examining one of the most popular feminist internet sites, I intend to also

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1 www.feministing.com

contribute to the feminist literature that probes questions about the nature of activist movements, linking them to the most contemporary platform for activism: the internet and its media.

In this introduction, I will offer a brief description of how I understood third-wave feminism in this paper, followed by a section outlining my personal motivations for this particular project. My paper will then turn to the origins of Feministing, linking its specific impetus with the broader structural motivations of the blogging movement, which resulted in the current explosion of blogging as a political medium. From here, I explore third-wave feminism's explicit connection to blogging, thus contextualizing Feministing's beginnings within a wider framework that particularly emphasizes online activism as an extension of third-wave feminism. Next, I examine issues of community and related questions of inclusion, both within third-wave feminism and internet technologies.

A section on the strategies employed by Feministing to accomplish its political objectives will follow, explaining the nature of its language, tone, and content as embodying characteristics of third-wave feminism. Finally, a section on the ultimate outcomes of Feministing examines how its activism is both effective and not so, ultimately concluding that largely because of its utilization of third-wave strategies and ideology, Feministing has contributed to reshaping how we imagine political discourse, but has failed to directly influence politics or policy.

2 Third-Wave Feminism in Context

Because this paper addresses third-wave feminism in its evaluation of the blog Feministing, it is important to understand upfront to what I refer by this term. As authors such as Henry (2004), Hooks (2000), and Baumgardner and Richards (2000) have noted, third-wave feminism can be understood both as a generational indicator (targeting young women) and as an ideology distinctive from other waves of feminism. The complexities and overlap between these two interpretations of third-wave feminism result in diverse and complex understandings of the term.

Importantly, I envision third-wave feminism as an ideology and not a structured movement; "An ideology without a movement", as articulated by E. Ann Kaplan at a 2002 conference (Gillis & Munford, 2003). Rather that forming a nationalized, unified, and highly mobilized social or political movement, Henry (2004) argues that "third wave feminism is more about textual and cultural production, local forms of activism, and a particular form of feminist consciousness than it is a large-scale social justice movement" (p. 43). From this perspective, I view third-wave feminism as spurring diverse movements based on its fundamental ideology, but not as constituting a movement on its own.

For the purposes of this paper's case study on Feminsting, I have identified two main frames through which to view the third wave: the nature of its community

and its use of particular strategies. In exploring the third-wave nature of these, it is helpful to broadly define third-wave feminism in contrast to its predecessors, first- and second-wave feminism. As Alfonso and Trigilio (1997) explain, first- and second-wave feminism were marked by large, distinct activist movements, in the respective areas of women's suffrage (first-wave), and the deconstruction of sex roles and struggle for equal rights (second-wave). Like other feminist scholars, they argue that no similarly large, distinguishable movement characterizes third-wave feminism, but rather that it is marked by postmodernist constructions of identity and of the individual (Alfonso & Trigilio, 1997).

Other scholars, including Bailey (1997) and Garrison (2000), agree that third-wave feminism is generally defined in negative terms; that is, it defines itself by negating certain traits of first- and second-wave feminism rather than embracing its own. Virtually all of the themes addressed in this literature review are components of what third-wave feminism rejects: for example, an emphasis on intersectionality affirms the multi-dimensionality of identity and the inherent value of diverse identities, and therefore discards the dominance in other waves of monolithic constructions of identity and the dominance of white, upper-class women as agents of the movements. Likewise, the popularity among the third wave movement of subverting the dominant paradigm (patriarchy) in highly visible, public ways and utilizing popular conduits to do so (mass media, pop culture, etc.) moves the feminist agenda out of the ivory tower and onto the streets, thereby rejecting earlier premiums on formal, academic feminism (Hooks, 2000).

Even if born out of a rejection of past standards of feminism, scholars agree that certain broad themes compose the pillars of third-wave feminism. In recognizing these widely accepted theoretical components, scholars point out, it is important to note their decentralized nature as opposed to the hierarchical, structured movements of feminism in the past (Hooks, 2000). With no organized, concrete list of objectives, Alfonso and Trigilio (1997) report that third wave feminism acts through disseminated, variable sites and methods. This conceptual framework will inform the discussion of third-wave feminism throughout this paper.

3 Personal Motivations

As a third-wave feminist and online activist, understanding online activism through third-wave ideology held both personal and academic significance for me. As I received emailed copies of Thomas Friedman's recent notorious column on "Generation Q"[1] through my various networks online – usually accompanied with frustrated remarks – I began to think more analytically about the cumulative

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1 http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/10/opinion/10friedman.html

outcome of my own avenues of activism: all the online petitions I'd signed, the blogs I read and commented on, email lists to which I subscribed. Through analyzing one of my favorite websites, one that is both feminist and activist, I hope to address some of these very timely questions through a probing academic lens, thereby gaining personal insight into my own strategies and methods of activism.

4 Origins

To date, the blog Feministing receives about 100,000 unique visitors per month, marking it as one of the internet's most popular US feminist blogs (Cochrane, 2006). In operation since April 2004, the site's contributors blog daily on a wide array of issues and news items from a feminist perspective, often encouraging specific action such as emailing complaints to companies or contacting legislators.

In Feministing's first blog post, creator Jessica Valenti (2004) wrote,

> Too often, young women's voices aren't heard, whether it's in school, in the media, or at the dinner table. But most importantly, our input is absent where it matters most: on issues that affect us directly. … Feministing will be an interactive space for young women to stay on top of the news and issues that affect us, and to exchange thoughts and ideas with each other. It's time for women of our generation to have their chance and a place to make their voices heard.

Valenti described the motivations of her blog as a reaction to the mainstream perception of young women as apathetic and disassociating with feminism. "That was all we ever seemed to hear – from colleagues, from the media. And we just thought, who are they talking about? I know young women all over the place who do feminist work." A lot of feminism has this academic base that can be off-putting. And so we thought, let's put something out there that's not dry and academic, but lively and fun" (Cochrane, 2006, p. 1). Indeed, Feministing's mission statement echoes these thoughts, describing the site as "a platform for us [young women] to comment, analyze, and *influence*" (Feministing, 2004). As third-wave feminist writers like Walker (1995) and Henry (2004) have recounted, third-wave feminism is distinctly and inherently political in nature, yet not claimed by any specific group or political party. Consequently, Feministing first emerged as a distinctively political blog with aims rooted in creating awareness and serving as a platform for commentary on broad political issues.

Paralleling Valenti's motivations to start Feministing, it is widely thought in both academic and popular literature that this same sort of alienation from the mainstream originally spurred the rise of blogs more generally. In their survey of the differences between political and personal blogs, Su, Wang, and Mark (2005) charted the reasons bloggers and readers preferred a particular kind of blog. In their discussion on reader motivations, they observe that

> Political blogs also provide a forum for discussion on topics that are expected to be political. Such forums can be especially valuable for people who feel alienated from the dominant

culture and feel that there are scarce channels to express themselves. Through expression in a blog, one can align oneself with like-minded people though one's local community may express contrary views (p. 12).

Lakshmi Chaudry (2006) similarly observes that alienation most certainly birthed the political blogosphere. She explains further that, "The galvanizing cause for the rapid proliferation of political blogs and their mushrooming audience was a deep disillusionment across the political spectrum with traditional media—a disillusionment accentuated by a polarized political landscape" (Chaudry, 2006).

Judging from Valenti's comments on the impetus for Feministing, Chaudry's observation rings eminently true. Further, in 2004, the Bush administration's so-called "War on Women" (signifying an anti-women agenda such as decreasing social services spending and anti-reproductive rights policy) waged on, which in combination with the US's conservative hangover from 9/11 created an especially hostile media environment for feminists and feminism (Flanders, 2004). Through situating Feministing within the general blog movement's origins, as well as the political context of the era of its creation, we see the complex, alienating factors at work which ultimately resulted in this alternative space for feminist news and politics.

4.1 Women and Blogging: Extensions of the Third Wave

The emergence of Feministing must be contextualized by the larger gender trends shaping the blogosphere. In an article on female blogging, *Herizons* magazine reported from blogher.com, a site that promotes blogging among women, that 55% of current bloggers are female (Watt, 2006). They also observe that women start more blogs than men and are more likely to keep them going for a longer time (Watt, 2006). *In These Times* reported that in 2006 women and people of color constituted the fastest-growing segment of the blogosphere—a trend which reflects Feministing's growing audience and reach on the web (Chaudry, 2006). However, in spite of these encouraging statistics, female bloggers remain less visible on the internet: only two of the top ten most visited blogs are women's (Watt, 2006).

In explanation, researcher Melissa Gregg (2006) posits that the content of women's blogs may be "perceived by some to be less noteworthy than men's, by nature of their often domestic and personal sphere of reference, whereas men's blogs are often seen to be more engaged in political debate, especially when the notion of what counts as political remains undefined" (p. 85). This last point is especially relevant to Feministing. While the writers often refer to their personal spheres of reference, the site's content is overwhelmingly political in nature. This pairing creates a dynamic fully in line with third-wave feminist politics, but one that others may question due to contestations about what constitutes the 'politics'. As Gregg (2006) sums up: "Generalizations therefore serve to confirm ingrained notions as to the proper participants in, and issues appropriate for, the public

sphere," (p. 85) which thereby implicitly limit women's contributions in this arena. This appears to be a challenge Feministing has been relatively successful at overcoming, considering their recent Best Political Blog win.

In Cochrane's (2006) article, interviews with feminist bloggers indicate blogging (and associated forms of online activism) as unique to third-wave feminism, distinguishing it from previous waves which lacked availability of such technology. Feministing creator Valenti, remarks that "There's always been this sense among second-wave feminists that young women just aren't interested. That's never been true though: they just didn't know how to reach us" (Cochrane, 2006). Likewise, Rebecca Traister (2004) of Salon.com's women's blog Broadsheet comments that

> People are always saying the feminist movement is dead, but I've never believed that. What I think is that it's taking a modern, technological form, and that, from now on, feminism will be about a multiplicity of voices, growing louder and louder online… There are so many authentic voices out there that it's really invigorating.

Tellingly, Traister says that if a young woman asked her about feminism, she'd point her to the blogosphere (Cohrane, 2006). Given this evidence, even as negative gendered stereotypes have so far prevented many women's blogs from gaining popular and critical attention, Feministing belongs within a burgeoning feminist blogging movement which employs particular third-wave strategies to engage readers politically.

5 Community: Who is an activist on Feministing?

In this portion of the paper, I refer to the broad community that is associated with Feministing, either through writing posts, commenting, reading, or linking to the site. Out of the diverse and plentiful literature on third wave feminism emerges the concept of intersectionality, essential to an analysis of Feministing's community. Intersectionality gives insight into who is included in the Feministing community and, because the blog's content is naturally written by and for this community, for whom the content is written.

Questions of inclusion within internet media on a broader, global scale logically follow this discussion of the politics of community on Feministing. After a brief review of the literature representing both sides of these debates, I will place Feministing within this broader context of accessibility.

5.1 Community on Feministing

The current seven contributors to Feministing are all young women under 30 who write for the site without financial compensation. They are writers and activists by trade, working for such organizations as NARAL Pro-Choice America and writing for sites like Alternet.org, as well as publishing books such as *Full-*

Frontal Feminism and *Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters*. Jessica Valenti, Vanessa Valenti, Jen Moseley, Celina de Leon, Samhita Mukhopadhyay, Courtney Martin, and Ann Friedman represent various ethnicities; three of the seven are women of color. Further, several of the women speak of working-class backgrounds. All are college graduates and at least half hold or are working towards graduate degrees in Women and Gender studies (Feministing, 2007).

Unfortunately, it is difficult (or perhaps impossible) to track or interview the readership of Feministing, considering the anonymity screen names afford commenters and the constant flux of readers. From anecdotal evidence, it seems as if a majority of Feministing's readers are young, un-married women either in college, graduate school, or early in their careers. Certainly, older women also contribute to conversations on the site, often declaring their status as "second wavers" and expounding on their life experience as it pertains to a certain issue. It is also important to note that feminist men comprise an active part of Feministing's readership, often commenting on posts they agree or disagree with and making their gender identity known.

Another aspect of Feministing's community is represented in the blogroll listed on the site, which is the list of blogs Feministing supports and to which they provide links. Most are feminist sites or written by people who identify as feminist, with a special emphasis on blogs written by women of color and blogs tackling issues relating to identity, whether racial, sexual, or gender-oriented. All of these components of Feministing's community – writers, readers, and the blogroll – point to a third-wave understanding of intersectionality.

5.2 Academic Literature on Intersectionality

By intersectionality, most scholars refer to the conceptual practice of maintaining and experiencing multiple identities in the context of multiple, larger systems of oppression (Bailey, 1997). Intersectionality calls for all people to recognize their inherent dual roles as both oppressed and oppressor, and for identity to be acknowledged as situated in the interstices of these opposing identities and roles (Bailey, 1997 and Hooks, 2000). Practically, this most salient aspect of third-wave feminism means that, rather than incorporating traditionally unrepresented women (women of color, homosexual women, working-class women, disabled women, etc.) into existing ideology, third-wave feminism seeks to fundamentally alter its ideology based on the multi-layered identities held by all women (Henry, 2004). An intersectional analysis involves undertaking larger structural change of the movement, as informed by this new, problematized and complicated version of identity (Alfonso and Trigilio, 1997).

Rebecca Walker (1995) famously characterizes third-wave feminism's surge towards an inclusive ideal, with complex models of identity. In her book, a series of essays sheds a third-wave light on everything from motherhood to sex work. Writing on Walker's book, Bailey (1997) observes that "The diversity of voices

that arise from younger feminists, whether they call themselves members of the third wave or not, can be expected to complicate and enrich feminism… Complexity, multiplicity, and contradiction can enrich our identities as individual feminists and the movement as a whole" (p. 26).

Noted feminist intellectual and cultural critic Bell Hooks (2000) features intersectional analyses as a crucial component of her work. Hooks argues that sexism, racism, classism, capitalism, and colonialism in the US promote oppression by idealizing oppressive values and characteristics. Most important here is her acknowledgement and inclusion of varying types of oppression, and the implicit understanding that women may experience any or all of these oppressions, thereby more accurately reflecting individual identity. Significantly, Hooks (2000) critiques the increased entry of white, upper-class women into the workforce by claiming their gains in the corporate realm do not reflect overall success for the feminist movement in gaining greater economic power. Rather, the corporate successes for a relatively few women, and parallel success attributed to feminism, point to the co-option of feminism by capitalism, and more importantly, the division of women's interests along class and racial lines. In this way, Hooks emphasizes power struggles within a third-wave feminist movement. Furthermore, Hooks attributes multiple, complex, and shifting identities to all women, showing how these often translate to struggles between well-educated, wealthy women and less privileged women.

The concept of intersectionality functions on Feministing. In addition to the diverse group of writers, Feministing's blogroll represents a spectrum of perspectives and identities, some explicitly labeled from the outset, such as the blog AngryBrownButch[1]. The content posted on Feministing further reflects the writers' intersectional understanding of feminism. A feature of the website, Saturday Interviews[2], consistently selects traditionally under-represented women for interviews, such as Tiona M., a black lesbian film producer who just finished a documentary on lesbians of African descent living in the U.S. Other recent interviews have included Tatiana Suarez Pico, Tara Lopez, and Aurin Squire, who collectively produce a comic strip about growing up in Brooklyn, titled "Bodega Ave." Routine blog posts often reflect distinct anti-racist as well as feminist themes: Feministing documented the Jena, Louisiana crimes and the subsequent national reaction, as well as the Megan Williams case in West Virginia, in which a young black woman was tortured and raped by white men. Moreover, news items on civil unions and gay rights are frequently critiqued and posted. In all of these ways, the community and content on Feministing represent an understanding of the role intersectionality plays in third-wave feminism.

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1 http://www.angrybrownbutch.com/

2 http://www.feministing.com/interviews/

5.3 Debates of Internet Accessibility

With the emergence of the internet has come constructed paradigms through which we have come to understand this new medium and its implications. One familiar internet paradigm is that it functions as a democratizing force, evening the proverbial playing field by allowing users to participate in political discourse and social activism like never before. Another paradigm (which doesn't necessarily stand in direct opposition with the later but simply adds another dimension to it) is that the internet is characterized by a digital divide which favors the wealthy, developed, English-speaking parts of the world at the expense of billions of people who either lack access to the internet, the material resources needed to procure access, or the knowledge of how to negotiate the two.

Since Feministing maintains a largely North American-based readership, these global questions of access may not apply directly to the site, although the systems and structures which create the digital divide are certainly at work in the US. These exclusive factors determine what kinds of women are able to access, read, and contribute to the site (for example, women working three jobs may not have time for the site, or women in isolated areas may lack the social capital or know-how necessary for first accessing the site).

Certainly, questions of intersectionality become folded into these debates. Although definitive answers to these essential questions are impossible to know and document in this paper, as we explore the political nature and impacts of Feministing, it is crucial to conceptually incorporate intersectionality into debates around access and community. As a way to sum up the debates around how internet accessibility, Coleman writes, "If there are democratic claims to be made for the internet, their realization is closely linked to the capacity of ordinary people to enter, shape, and govern it to a greater extent than with any previous communication medium. It is as an extension of media freedom that blogging should be taken seriously" (p. 280). Indeed, these issues profoundly affect Feministing and its readership.

6 Strategies: How does Feministing accomplish its goals?

This section will explore the areas of language, content, and analytical scope as they relate to third-wave strategies employed at Feministing. The content of the blog ranges from media analysis, to political commentary, to frustrated rants about pop culture. Posts address diverse topics in an engaging and witty way. News items such as the increasing gendered wage gap in the UK, the US

Congress repealing the Global Gag Rule[1] imposed by President Bush, and the conservative cultural phenomenon of promise rings[2] are covered with insight into their meaning for women everywhere, communicated by believable language which includes slang and curse words.

In a discussion of strategies, it is important to note that the language employed by Feministing writers functions specifically (intentionally or not) to move perceptions of feminism and feminist thought away from the academic realm and into the popular, a broadly recognized pillar of third-wave feminist ideology (Hooks, 2000 and Alfonso & Trigilio, 1997). As Valenti remarked in an interview, "A lot of feminism has this academic base that can be off-putting. And so we thought, let's put something out there that's not dry and academic, but lively and fun" (Cochrane, 2006). These following examples of posts and the language utilized show how feminist thought is expressed in what seems an everyday conversational tone.

A debacle at Southwest Airlines has earned many posts in recent weeks, which encouraged visitors to take action by emailing their comments directly to Southwest. The incidents in question involved the airline ordering two different female passengers to change out of their clothes, which were deemed to be too revealing and distracting to other passengers, in order to remain on their scheduled flights. Both women complied at the time of the requests, but now at least one of them is suing Southwest on the basis of discrimination. Feministing bloggers included a picture of one of the woman in the offending clothes: "*Scandalous*, no?," they mock. "How dare she walk around in 100-degree weather wearing that?!" (A. Friedman, 2007).

Many posts on Feministing critique the mainstream media's perpetuation of gender stereotypes and, in particular, the pervasive hypersexualization of women. Recently, Feministing bloggers linked to an article in Britain's *Daily Mail* which featured a male reporter's account of "being female" for a day, which he achieved by shaving his legs, talking about relationships, buying women's magazines, and cleaning his house. "So did Michelson take a pay cut and endure street harassment? Balance work and family?" Valenti (2007a) asks. "I'm a woman, and if my life was composed of that inane bullshit, I'd kill someone," writes a commenter.

Finally, in addition to its blogroll, the site also features sidebars which provide myriad links to all sources of information and news about women and feminism.

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1 Officially termed the Mexico City Policy, the Gag Rule – so termed because it limits free speech on abortion-related issues – is a set of restrictions that mandate that no U.S. family planning funding can be provided to foreign NGOs that perform abortions in cases other than a threat to the woman's life, rape or incest; provide counseling and referral for abortion; or lobby to make abortion legal or more available in their country.

2 In this context, promise rings refer to rings given to daughters by their fathers or religious leaders which are to be worn until the time of marriage and symbolize the young woman's commitment to abstinence until that time.

The sidebar displays a list of progressively-minded, if not explicitly feminist blogs, ranging from more established players like Racewire, an offshoot of *Colorlines* magazine, and Margaret Cho, the famed feminist comedienne, to grassroots projects like Tennessee Guerilla Women, a group of progressive, radical women whose blog works to "raise the voices of Tennessee women".[1] Feministing's sidebar also includes a list of news sources, once again running the gamut from the relatively well-known – Ms. Magazine, UN Women Watch – to the edgier or more politically radical like Alternet.org and Bitch Magazine. Other categories of links include women's organizations, violence against women, work, legal organizations, reproductive rights, international, political, and women's studies programs. Notably, Feministing seems to make a conscious effort to include widely varying types of blogs, news sources, and organizations, mirroring the site's commitment to all types of news and analysis.

6.1 Pop Culture and Gender Analysis on Feministing

Feministing's bloggers declare in interviews their commitment to reaching the widest possible audience by injecting their brand of feminism into every type of news item and cultural event. As Hooks (2000) speaks of moving feminism out of the academic realm and into the streets, on Feministing, everything is up for debate: the mainstream, the grassroots, the academic, the pop culture—all are represented and critiqued on the blog. Here, I look at two components of this broad focus, pop culture and broad gender analysis (versus women's issues), as they relate to overarching strategies to engage people of all backgrounds and identities.

Feministing's posts which pertain to recent pop cultural phenomenon or events, such as advertising campaigns and new music, are particularly helpful in situating the site within the broader landscape of online political activism. Taking on such topics as mainstream TV and movies positions the site as a conduit of third-wave feminist activism, targeting a young, progressive, third-wave audience, which concerns itself with a wider scope of political analysis.

Further, third-wave feminism aims to be as inclusive as possible, and in fact intentionally reach out to non-traditional audiences with its broad arc of observation and critique. Pop culture analysis, as observed on Feministing, serves an important role in this process. Hooks (In Valenti, 2007c) explained the intersections between pop culture and intellectual analysis during a New York University conference on media, in a presentation entitled "Cultural criticism and Transformation: Why study pop culture?":

> With my students from different class backgrounds and ethnicities…I found continually that if I took a movie, and said well, did you go see this movie? How did you think about? And if I related something very concrete in pop culture to the kind of theoretical paradigms I was trying

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1 http://guerillawomentn.blogspot.com/

to share with them, people seemed to grasp it more and it became much more exciting and interesting for everyone. Popular culture has that power in everyday life. Whether we're talking about race or gender or class, popular culture is where the pedagogy is, it's where the learning is. [It's] the primary pedagogical medium for masses of people globally who wanted to understand the politics of difference.

As previously detailed, Feministing bloggers regularly critique and otherwise comment on mainstream media and popular culture. Both *The Slate* and *Daily Mail* posts are examples. Others include recent posts on a female actress calling her new movie sexist, and offensive advertising campaigns which objectify women's bodies.

In addition to pop culture analysis, coverage of broad gender issues widens the scope of analysis on Feministing. Within third-wave ideology, conceptions of feminism as engaging or affecting only women, common in the first and second waves, are rebutted by an emphasis on 'gender dynamics' rather than 'women's issues'. This shift in approach has manifested itself not only in Women's and Gender Studies class (and department) titles and curricula content, but even in the upper echelons of global and national governance. Speaking to this and describing what she perceives as a definable new phase of feminism, Gayatri Spivak (2000) observes that this shift is reflected in the change of inter-governmental organizations' jargon: we now hear of "gender and development" rather than the older "women in development." On more local levels, the conceptual shift to broader, more inclusive gender analysis means engaging men in social welfare programs and community initiatives, and soliciting their input in gender publications, forums, and networks. By way of explaining the roots of this broader scope of analysis, Dicker and Piepmeier (2003) make clear how third-wave feminism is complicated by a quickly shifting and ever-complex reality, which distinguishes it from prior waves. They explain that "We no longer live in the world that feminists of the second wave faced", they write; instead, we live in, "a world of global capitalism and information technology, postmodernism and postcolonialism, and environmental degradation…[we] are therefore concerned not simply with 'women's issues' but with a broad range of interlocking topics" (Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003, 14).

On Feministing, this shifted and broadened focus on gender issues becomes apparent through blog posts on a wide spectrum of gender-related issues, and not only those traditionally affecting primarily women, such as birth control, child care, and equal pay battles. Posts follow news stories which represent the broad spectrum of gender and sexual identities and every imaginable related topic: legal updates on civil unions, environmental notices affecting reproductive health, and, recently, a new book out on pornography and its adverse affect on masculinity. In accounting for Feministing's wide scope of analysis as represented in its pop culture content and broad gender focus, Feministing contributor Courtney Martin remarked,

> I think that Feministing is representative of third wave feminism in the way that it approaches a global range of serious issues in a personal, often humorous, and sometimes outraged way. I also think it's representative in the sense that it mixes pop culture critiques with hard-and-fast news summaries. We prove that young women care about a whole range of things and want to process through entertaining, uplifting critique, not totally depressing, supposedly "objective" news (Martin, 2007).

As Martin observes, Feministing's content, language, and tone all draw on third-wave conceptions of community and commentary to accomplish the blog's goals of stimulating discourse and including a diverse array of people within its readership.

7 Outcomes: What is the political activist force of a blog like Feministing?

The course of this paper has so far covered the origins of Feministing and the broader blogging phenomenon, the nature of the blog's community and debates of accessibility around the internet itself, and finally, the ways Feministing's strategies work to achieve its goals. All of these various segments of the argument ultimately determine the activist outcomes of Feministing. This section explores how various sources – both academic and popular – evaluate the activist potential of blogs, and how these findings relate specifically to Feministing. Here, I approach arguments in the framework of 'quiet' activism (Thomas Friedman's term for ineffective virtual activism) versus echoing activism, borrowed from scholars who believe blogs constitute an important "echo chamber" for politics and activism.

7.1 'Quiet' Activism?

In a recent opinion column in the *New York Times*, Thomas Friedman criticized various forms of online activism as mere "quiet" activism which did not translate to off-line developments. The column was the most e-mailed article on the Times' website for over a week, and Friedman received much attention, both good and bad, from other publications and journalists for his remarks. In the column, entitled "Generation 'Q'", Friedman remarks he's "impressed because they're [college students] much more optimistic and idealistic than they should be. I am baffled because they are so much less radical and politically engaged than they need to be" (Friedman, 2007). He goes on to reflect on how engaged he sees students as being, whether working in New Orleans or for Teach for America, but Generation Q "quietly pursu[es] their idealism, at home and abroad … Generation Q may be too quiet, too online, for its own good, and for the country's own good" (Friedman, 2007). In assessing online activism, Friedman (2007) writes:

America needs a jolt of the idealism, activism and outrage (it must be in there) of Generation Q. But they can't e-mail it in, and an online petition or a mouse click for carbon neutrality won't cut it. … Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy didn't change the world by asking people to join their Facebook crusades or to download their platforms. Activism can only be uploaded, the old-fashioned way — by young voters speaking truth to power, face to face, in big numbers, on campuses or the Washington Mall. Virtual politics is just that — virtual.

In this excerpt, we see the crux of Friedman's argument: being online, no matter how active, won't cut it in the "real world"; young online activists must close down their laptops and pick up picketing signs.

It seems natural that few scholars who research blogs would agree with his claims, given that they've deemed blogging important enough to pursue as a research topic. But some do recount the weaknesses of the blogging sphere and online activism in their work, just as many mainstream journalistic sources openly question the impact of the medium. In Drezner and Farrell's (2004) important work, they recount upfront the limited readership of blogs as measured by mainstream media and more technical surveys. Compared to other political actors, such as specialized interest groups, political action committees, government bureaucrats, and the mainstream media, blogging holds little relative power or visibility; even the most popular blog receives only a fraction of the web traffic that major media outlets attract (Drezner & Farrell, 2004). An article in the *New York Times* concluded, "Never have so many people written so much to be read by so few" (Hafner, 2004).

One particularly cited study performed by the Perseus Development Corporation claimed that of the 4.12 million new blogs since the birth of the medium in 1999, less than 50,000 are actually updated and maintained. "The typical blog is written by a teenage girl who uses it twice a month to update her friends and classmates on happenings in her life. It will be written very informally," the study finds (Henning, 2003). Graham (2001) experienced similar results in producing his blog: "Total circulation: Two. Mom. Dad" he describes (p. 35). Such studies and articles discount the otherwise pervasive notion that blogs are revolutionizing communication. "Let's get this straight. Blogging is not a revolution" claims Talbot (2001, p. 130). He likens blogs to the short-lived internet phenomenon GeoCities, a collection of personal web pages, in that they're "badly built and ill-conceived" (Talbot, 2001, p. 131). Further, instead of celebrating increased access to publishing of information and commentary, Talbot (2001) argues that many such publishers, or bloggers, are not informed enough to make worthwhile contributions, thereby simply adding to the "junk" found on the internet.

Returning to the potential activist power of online activism, particularly through blogs, remains an elusive and difficult question. While Feministing writer Martin believes commenters like Friedman "underestimate the conversation going on online", she also admits he may be "spot on in terms of how this conversation usually doesn't translate to social action and risk-taking… It's a little too easy to

sit in front of your computer and feel like that equals involvement I worry about the fundamental link to political action. I think we are still straining to figure out how to make Feministing a site that leads to real civic engagement. It's important to all of us" (Martin, 2007). Journalism on feminism and blogging similarly reports that the links between feminist blogs and off-line activism are only "nascent" and "emerging" (Watt, 2006). Overall, this line of critique focuses on blogs' limited readership, lack of overall professionalism, and weak connection to off-line activist efforts.

7.2 Or Echoing Activism?

The clear majority of scholarship on blogs declares their power to alter political discourse and inform mainstream media sources. The question then becomes whether these outcomes comprise an important type of activism, as real as, say, Friedman's visions of anti-Vietnam marching. Hewitt (2005), a law professor and zealous advocate of blogging, begins by critiquing the Perseus study. Even if only 50,000 blogs are updated daily, he says, a change from zero blogs in 1999 to 50,000 active blogs in 2005 constitutes the entrance of a meaningful new internet medium. Again in rebuttal to studies like Perseus, scholars argue that it does not matter how many people read blogs but, rather, who reads them. And, as Drezner and Farrell (2004) find, powerful and influential individuals in the mainstream political and media fields rely on blogs for new information and grassroots commentary.

Bloggers' ability to influence mainstream media coverage is one most salient aspect of their activist potential. In his analysis, Friedman apparently overlooked that many of his peers refer to blogs in order to chart up-and-coming news stories, or what people are interested in talking about. Drezner and Farrell (2004) report that prominent journalists from *New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times*, *ABC News*, *Newsweek* and *Time* indicate that blogs comprise part of their information-gathering activities (p. 14). Another indicator of the connections between mainstream media and blogging is the crossover of writers from one to the other: notably, Noam Chomsky has given blogging a shot, while bloggers like Mickey Kaus and Andrew Sullivan have been hired by mainstream media companies to analyze and comment (Drezner & Farrell, 2004). Even further, mainstream sites have acknowledged the power and popularity of blogging by instituting their own blogs on their sites. Newspapers with blogs include *Chicago Tribune, Christian Science Monitor*, and the *Guardian*, while the websites of *Fox News*, *ABC News*, and *MSNBC* also host blogs (Drezner & Farrell, 2004).

Through influential readership, the crossover between blogging and mainstream journalism, and the incorporation of blogs into mainstream news sites, blog content affects mainstream media coverage. Drezner and Farrell (2004) conclude that bloggers' activist outcomes are "less important because of their direct effects on politics than their indirect ones: they influence important actors

within mainstream media who in turn frame issues for a wider public…they have a first-mover advantage in socially constructing these interpretive frames for understanding current events " (p. 23). This has recently proved true for Feministing when Fox News covered a recent post criticizing girls' underwear being sold at Wal-Mart imprinted with the phrase "Who needs credit cards?". Due in part to Feministing readers' emails and the Fox News coverage, Wal-Mart removed the underwear from their shelves days after the Feministing post. In this very timely example, we see how blogs can succeed in framing issues for the mainstream media and how, considering Wal-Mart's actions, this can directly translate to real-life activism.

Scholars also discuss the advantages blogging maintains over more conventional media sources, and how this enhances their potential for activism. DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, and Robinson (2001) highlight the versatility of the blogging medium. They argue that by integrating different kinds of content (like text, audio, video, visual images) forms of communication embedded in internet technology "will be implicated in many kinds of social change, perhaps more deeply than television or radio" (p. 308). Kahn and Kaplan (2003) agree that new internet technologies like blogs constitute a fundamentally new type of communication. They suggest that blog technology "makes possible a reconfiguring of politics, a refocusing of politics on everyday life" (p. 3) which figures in their conclusion that "to a meaningful extent, the new information and communication technologies are revolutionary, they do constitute a revolution of everyday life being presently enacted by internet subcultures [i.e. blogging]" (p. 3). Feministing, of course, utilizes all the diverse types of content referred to by DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, and Robinson (2001) and, through its focus on everyday topics like pop culture, certainly reconfigures politics to include a wider scope of political analysis.

Finally, scholars like Coleman (2005) and Kahn and Kaplan (2003) connect blogging's activist impact to the way the practice subverts the dominant media paradigm. As they point out, mainstream media maintains the structure of provider/consumer, in that editors and journalists produce news for a wide audience, and non-journalists consume the news via these mainly corporate sources. Blogs, and Feministing in particular, with its everywoman authors and active comments section, engage in both news production and consumption, often at the same time. When a Feministing contributor posts on a certain subject, readers in the comments section will often give their own critiques (thus producing news) or post related links and articles (re-producing their own consumption). Instead of the static relationship a reader might have with nbcnews.com, for instance, wherein they simply read articles, on Feministing readers can actively engage with news items by joining a community of commenters adding their own two cents. In this way, blogs like Feministing

contribute to creating an entirely new media dynamic, subverting the conventional provider/consumer paradigm.

Whether through framing issues for republication in mainstream news sources, informing journalists of popular or important news stories, or allowing readers to engage with their news, blogs have ultimately presented a challenge to mainstream media modes of discourse and are beginning to fundamentally shift former media standards. Even erstwhile blogger Graham vows to continue his blogging efforts because it presents "an opportunity to learn, a license to explore, and a sense of community" (1999, p. 38). In spite of this potential for creating a long-term, fundamental shift in political discourse, creating stronger links to more direct forms of real-life activism remains a challenge for bloggers. Feministing writer Martin comments that "I don't believe that protesting (a la 1960s) is particularly effective in this day and age, so I think we all need to get off our asses and figure out a way to create social change after we've put in our couple hours dialoguing and reflecting online" (personal interview, November 15, 2007). Summing up the arguments captured here, Kahn and Kaplan (2003) conclude that "The political battles of the future may well be fought in the streets, factories, parliaments, and other sites of past struggle, but politics is already mediated by broadcast, computer, and information technologies and will increasingly be so in the future" (p. 14).

8 Conclusion

Through the course of this paper, I have addressed the blog Feministing in context of its origins, strategies, and outcomes as they relate to third-wave ideology and debates about the effectiveness of online activism. Through exploring the ways Feministing's origins correlate to those of the larger blogosphere, I have demonstrated how political disillusionment and alienation from the mainstream functioned centrally to push bloggers to begin electronically publishing their own takes on news and current events. In this vein, I also discussed the recent burgeoning of feminist bloggers, and some of the gendered stereotypes which persist in largely keeping women out of some political spheres online.

In a section on the blog's strategies, I examined aspects of Feministing including its use of slang and informal language and its attention to pop culture analysis and broader gender dynamics. With its stated goals of stimulating inclusive political discourse and activism, I explained how these strategies incorporated third-wave ideology and worked to accomplish these aims. In analyzing the of the outcomes of Feministing and other similar blogs, I utilized both academic and popular literature to explore arguments that blogs – and related internet technologies – comprise nothing more than "quiet", watered-down activism, or if they were actually the origins of an echo chamber, through which

their content and opinions reverberated through mainstream media, ultimately reshaping our conventional political discourse through their interactive nature.

Finally, I conclude here that Feministing has not contributed to direct political change or action, largely due to the nature of its third-wave strategies, which emphasize individual thought and action while not comprising a structured movement. As recounted in the brief literature review of third-wave themes in my introduction, third-wave feminism is understood as an ideology, not a movement, and as such, becomes manifested in diverse and diffused ways.

Even as the complex, ideological nature of third-wave feminism limits Feministing's ability to make unified, direct political impacts, I argue that the blogging movement – especially activist sites – has in fact begun to fundamentally change the conventional media paradigm of provider (usually corporate and mainstream) and consumer (us, reading the newspaper). In contrast, interactive sites like Feministing contribute to a broader shift in the way we view media and our role in its production and consumption. It seems Feministing will not elect a candidate or push specific legislation, but will instead result in longer-term fundamental changes in how political discourse and activism is carried out and communicated. And that, it seems, is an accomplishment of which third-wavers can be proud.

9 Acknowledgements

10 References

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