COMMUNITY-SPONSORED LITERATE ACTIVITY AND TECHNOFEMINISM:
ETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY OF FEMINISTING

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This dissertation presents a selected version of the story of Feministing, a primarily online community of young adult feminists, and builds conversations about how and why feminists are, and are not, using literacies of technology to enact feminist activism in a digital age. My findings build out of ethnographically informed methods: interviews with three members of the Feministing editorial team, surveys completed by seventeen registered users of Feministing, and observation and coding of over nine hundred pages of text from the last eight years of the Feministing archives. I situate this data within larger historical contexts and exigencies of digital literacies and feminist activism, particularly in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Likewise, I join scholars (Blair, Collins) who argue material conditions are key components in understanding women’s (but for me, feminists’) texts and literate practices. My analysis combines aspects of material rhetoric (Collins) and rhetorical genealogy (Queen) to model a way to study digital texts and literate practices and, as a result, I argue for the importance of design and literacy sponsorship for Feministing while also highlighting ways design can challenge traditional notions of feminist space as non-hierarchical and uncensored. My analysis also demonstrates how to use rhetorical ecology as a theoretical framework to trace digital texts’ circulations across other spaces and time and, as a result, I complicate discussions of trolling and theories of invitational rhetoric and argue the importance of technofeminists knowing feminist histories, including very recent histories beginning to unfold in digital spaces. In addition to these findings, I call for feminist writing studies scholars to recognize that literate
activities within/of certain communities or people exists within larger continua of literate activity and to lend, among other skills and knowledges, awareness of the importance of writing not only as a tool for activist work but also as a crucial component of continua of literate activities that help to build feminist histories and which must be remembered and learned from. This project adds to conversations that challenge notions of digital space as inherently democratic or more inclusive of traditionally marginalized populations and to conversations of digital space/activities as distinct from offline space/activities.
For (techno)feminist (techno)rhetoricians.
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CHAPTER 1: GENDER, TECHNOLOGY, AND LITERATE ACTIVITY

“A third vista [in feminist rhetorical research] is linked to both textual and contextual concerns in keeping with the multimedia/multimodal texts that are now being increasingly produced within ever-changing technological environments and the need to critique not only these contexts, products, and processes but also the impacts and consequences of technologies on the scope, nature, and contours of theoretical enterprises” (150)
– Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch

“The issue is no longer whether to accept or oppose technoscience, but rather how to engage strategically with technoscience while at the same time being its chief critic” (107)
– Judy Wajcman

Writing studies scholars have investigated the complexities of literate and rhetorical practices in feminist communities online and off (Jack; Queen; Sheridan-Rabideau) and have taken feminist approaches to studying digital communities that are not necessarily feminist (Blair; Gerrard; Haas; Takayoshi). And as much of people’s daily lives continues to take place in or crosses over into online spaces, feminist scholars in the humanities and social sciences (Stabile; Wajcman) encourage study of the reciprocal relationship between women’s use of digital technologies and societal shaping and understanding of those same technologies. A consistent call in the work of Judy Wajcman and other technofeminist scholars is to acknowledge and promote women’s agency in relation to technology rather than to adopt overly pessimistic or technologically deterministic views. At the same time, technofeminist scholars also caution against an overly utopic view of technology as an inherently liberating space for women (Hawisher and Selfe; LeCourt and Barnes; Wajcman).

These studies of feminist and/or digital spaces follow a call within the field of writing studies for scholars to focus not only on writing outside of the academy, or the “extracurriculum,” but also to school-sponsored writing. As Anne Ruggles Gere explains in her
1994 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) chair’s address (reprinted in *College Composition and Communication* 45.1), studying the “extracurriculum of composition” involves attention to “accounts of literacy practices outside the walls of the academy” (80) in hopes of no longer neglecting important accounts of literacy practices that reach across lines of race, gender, and class. This wider perspective on writing practice and instruction, Gere explains, uncouples literacy from schooling, acknowledging that writing pedagogues take the form of more than classroom teachers (e.g., women’s writing groups, magazine articles with advice about how to write). In promoting this wider perspective, Gere’s goal is that writing studies scholars “avoid an uncritical narrative of professionalization and acknowledge the extracurriculum as a legitimate and autonomous cultural formation that undertakes its own projects” so that they may “tap and listen to messages through the walls, to consider how we can learn from and contribute to composition’s extracurriculum in our classes” (86). This dissertation, then, similarly to the feminist and technofeminist studies mentioned previously, heeds Gere’s call to tap and listen to messages through the walls—and, in fact, challenges the presence of walls altogether—as I focus my attention on the various types of literate activity of feminist rhetors/activists within *Feministing* (http://www.feministing.com), a primarily online community of young adult feminist activists, in order to better understand these practices and to theorize about writing practices that happen outside of school-sponsored literate activities.¹

Like Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher’s work in *Literate Lives in the American Age*, one component of my project is investigating how people—in my case, the editors, contributors, and

¹ My use of the term “literate activity,” like Sheridan-Rabideau’s, draws on Paul Prior’s argument that we should move from talking about “writing” to talking about “literate activity,” which is a term he believes more accurately depicts the complexity of what writers do as they draw on “a confluence of many streams of activity: reading, talking, observing, acting, making, thinking, and feeling as well as transcribing words on paper” (*Writing* xi). This term is discussed at greater length later in this chapter.
registered users of Feministing—acquire and develop, or do not develop, literacies of technology. As Selfe and Hawisher explain, literacies of technology entail “the practices involved in reading, writing, and exchanging information in online environments, as well as the values associated with such practices—cultural, social, political, and educational” (Literate 2), and they distinguish this from “computer literacy,” which they and I understand as the skills necessary for operating computers. Additionally, like cultural studies scholars Radhika Gajjala and Yeon Ju Oh, I am interested in the blurring of boundaries between online and offline life, which is related to the concern of feminist rhetorical scholars Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch that feminist writing researchers move beyond public/private divides “to a more fully textured examination, especially given emerging technologies, of what constitutes private, social, and institutional spaces” (150). Concern about recognizing the blurring and overlapping between online and offline life transcends the boundaries of writing studies scholars, notably in social media theorist Nathan Jurgenson’s work, which challenges the “digital dualism” he sees in work like Sherry Turkle’s. Jurgenson uses the term “digital dualism” to refer to theorizing that sets up a binary between a person’s online and offline activity and life.

My own work with Feministing, then, builds on the work of these scholars in order to further conversations about how and why feminists are, and are not, using literacies of technology to enact feminist activism in the digital age. My findings draw on ethnographically informed methods: interviews with three members of the Feministing editorial team, surveys completed by seventeen registered users of Feministing, and observation and coding of more than nine hundred pages of text from the last eight years of the Feministing archives. I situate this data within larger historical contexts and exigencies of digital literacies and feminist activism, particularly in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Likewise, I join
scholars (Blair, “Complicated”; Collins) who argue material conditions are key components in understanding women’s (but for me, feminists’) texts and literate practices. My analysis combines aspects of material rhetoric (Collins) and rhetorical genealogy (Queen) to model a way to study digital texts and literate practices and, as a result, I argue for the importance of design and literacy sponsorship for Feministing while also highlighting ways design can challenge traditional notions of feminist space as non-hierarchical and uncensored. My analysis also demonstrates how to use rhetorical ecology as a theoretical framework to trace digital texts’ circulations across other spaces and time and, as a result, I complicate discussions of trolling and theories of invitational rhetoric and argue the importance of technofeminists knowing feminist histories, including very recent histories beginning to unfold in digital spaces. In addition to these findings, I call for feminist writing studies scholars to recognize that literate activities within/of certain communities or people exist within larger continua of literate activity and to lend, among other skills and knowledges, awareness of the importance of writing not only as a tool for activist work but also as a crucial component of continua of literate activities that help to build feminist histories and which must be remembered and learned from. This project adds to conversations that challenge notions of digital space as inherently democratic or more inclusive of traditionally marginalized populations and to conversations of digital space/activities as distinct from offline space/activities.

Working the Intersections: New Ways of Looking and New Places to Look

Investigating and working at the intersection of rhetoric and feminism is, at this time, a well-established activity. Many scholars of rhetoric have argued (Ede, Glenn, and Lunsford; Foss and Griffin; Bizzell) for the benefits of, to use Lisa Ede, Cheryl Glenn, and Andrea Lunsford’s
phrase, “standing on the borderlands of rhetoric and feminism” (418). Ede, Glenn, and Lunsford explicate some of the similarities between the two fields, including the emphasis on process, the linking of theory and practice, the recognition and valuing of “local and applied knowledges,” and a concern for “public values and the public good” (439). Rhetoric scholars have also highlighted various possible benefits of working on the borderlands of rhetoric and feminism, including the availability of new, useful heuristics (Ede, Glenn, and Lunsford), the ability to uncover previously overlooked gaps or limitations (Foss and Griffin “Feminist”), and the ability to produce important (though not uncontested) scholarly knowledge that could not have been created in any other way (Bizzell).

Additionally, in our current digital age, the study of rhetoric—with or without considering feminism—often involves paying attention to the ways computers and digital technologies affect rhetorical practices, which has been the focus of the subfield of computers and writing for more than thirty years. This attention to computers intertwined with feminist rhetorics can, undoubtedly, complicate methods and methodological frameworks for scholars carrying out research in this area. Undoubtedly, the intersectional position from which I conduct this research—focusing on literate activity, gender, literacies of technology, and activism—offers a specific, situated perspective from which I am able to see certain things more clearly or immediately while others may be blocked from view entirely. This is similar to Kenneth Burke’s explanation of “terministic screens,” which he argues “direct the [at]ention . . . into some channels rather than others” and in doing so, both select and deflect different parts of reality (1341, emphasis in original). In addition to recognizing that my own positioning causes certain aspects of my research—and really, certain aspects of the world more generally—to appear in
focus while hiding others from view, I also conduct this research with recognition of multiplicities—that is, feminisms, feminist theories, rhetorical theories.

While the positioning from which I undertake this research, like all, contains limitations and biases, there are, nevertheless, important findings to be discovered here—findings that will continue to advance feminist rhetorical studies, and findings that will help the field of writing studies continue to move forward in its critical studies of literate activities outside of classrooms. For instance, as Selfe and Hawisher argue, despite the growing importance of literacies of technology, scholars know “very little about how and why people have acquired and developed, or failed to acquire and develop, the literacies of technology during the past 25 years or so. Nor do we know the historical, cultural, economic, political, or ideological factors that have affected, or been affected by, people’s acquisition and development of these technological literacies” (Literate 2). My work with Feministing, while obviously limited to a specific group of feminist activists, helps to build this as yet underdeveloped knowledge base about literacies of technology Selfe and Hawisher refer to. Additionally, as indicated in one of the epigraphs that begins this chapter, Royster and Kirsch identify our always-in-flux technological environments as one of four important “vistas,” crucial areas of engagement and inquiry for contemporary feminist rhetoricians. My work with Feministing, then, answers their call for scholars to “critique not only these contexts, products, and processes but also the impacts and consequences of technologies on the scope, nature, and contours of theoretical enterprises” (Royster and Kirsch 150, emphasis in original). And yet another reason I argue for the importance of working at this particular intersection of gender, technology, and literate activity stems from long-running conversations about the inherent activism in feminism. In the digital age of feminist activism, questions about
what counts as activism and about what/whose activist practices are privileged/accessible remain important and even acquire renewed vigor and therefore demand renewed attention.

In the rest of this introductory chapter, I introduce and situate my dissertation. First, I discuss definitions of some key terminology used in my project. Then, I introduce the site of my study—Feministing—and, as called for in feminist methodology (Kirsch Ethical; Mortensen and Kirsch), detail my own position in relation to that site. Next, I position my dissertation within the field of writing studies, both highlighting major points and overlaps in scholarship at the intersections of feminist rhetoric and feminist work within computers and composition and illustrating the research gaps this dissertation fills. This chapter concludes with discussion of my research goals and questions as well as overviews of the remaining four chapters.

**Negotiating Terminology**

In his 2012 plenary talk at the Qualitative Research Network (QRN) at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), Paul Prior emphasized the importance he gives within his own work to the ongoing challenging and redefining of terms. For instance, as briefly mentioned before, in his book *Writing/Disciplinarity*, Prior proposes the phrase “literate activity” in place of the term “writing,” as he feels the latter has become oversimplified in people’s minds to refer precisely to the moment and action of transcribing words onto paper or, as he added in his QRN talk, the screen. In another of his texts, “Re-Situating and Re-Mediating the Canons: A Cultural-Historical Remapping of Rhetorical Activity,” Prior and co-authors Janine Solberg, Patrick Berry, Hannah Bellwoar, Bill Chewning, Karen J. Lunsford, Liz Rohan, Kevin Roozen, Mary P. Sheridan-Rabideau, Jody Shipka, Derek Van Ittersum, and Joyce R. Walker further this work of challenging and redefining long-used and accepted terminology. As
the title of their text indicates, they work to resituate and remediate the traditional rhetorical canons. I agree with Prior that scholars should remain vigilant about their implicit perceptions and explicit definitions of the terms they use and should, when it seems appropriate, propose new terms or definitions. Furthermore, I follow Mikhail Bakhtin in my understanding of language as highly contextualized within a particular historical and cultural moment. As Bakhtin explains, “semiotic material is specialized for some particular field of ideological creativity. Each field possesses its own ideological material and formulates signs and symbols specific to itself and not applicable in other fields” (“Marxism” 1213). Different fields of ideological creativity, then, use signs and symbols in ways that mean something specifically in relation to each particular field, meaning two different fields may use the same signs and symbols in different ways. Moreover, Bakhtin expounds, words can be imported into one person’s lexicon from someone else’s and consequently acquire new meanings while still retaining and echoing (“Problem” 1244) the uses and meanings of that other person’s—and, it would seem, their particular field of ideological creativity (“Marxism” 1213) or social circle’s (“Problem” 1244). For these reasons offered by Prior and Bakhtin, I find it important to now offer some explanation of the negotiations and uses of key terms within my own project.

Literacy, Multiliteracy, Technologies of Literacy

The term literacy, like rhetoric, can sometimes seem to mean almost anything. Literacy scholars, however, have argued for various specific definitions. Walter Ong, for instance, in *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, juxtaposed literacy with orality, emphasizing the written or transcribed aspect of literacy. Writing just a few years later than Ong, literacy scholar James Gee shifts the focus to what he sees as the inherently social aspects of
literacy, emphasizing its ideological dimensions. In fact, Gee argues that literacy cannot be defined without first defining “discourse,” which he conceives of as inherently ideological, “intimately related to the distribution of social power and hierarchical structure in society” (2), and thus tied intimately to culture, identity, and power. Scholars who view literacy this way—that is, “focusing not so much on acquisition of skills . . . but rather on what it means to think of literacy as a social practice” (Street 77)—have become known as New Literacy scholars. And as Brian Street explains, New Literacy Studies (NLS) “entails the recognition of multiple literacies, varying according to time and space, but also contested in relations of power,” and it “takes nothing for granted with respect to literacy and the social practices with which it becomes associated, problematizing what counts as literacy at any time and place and asking ‘whose literacies’ are dominant and whose are marginalized or resistant” (77). In fact, numerous literacy scholars, along with Gee and Street, have challenged writing studies scholars to remain critical and to present more complex renderings of what “literacy” means—and whose literacy means—in varying social contexts (e.g., Barton; Brandt; Heath; Hull).

In my own work, then, literacy refers to the use of a symbol system, typically alphabetic text, to interpret and interact with the world, which requires the acquisition of certain skills. However, I also follow NLS scholars in seeing literacy not as a monolithic entity constant across time and space but rather as socially situated and certainly tied to ideology and power. Like the New London Group and Stuart Selber, it makes sense to me to talk about multiliteracies, recognizing that different cultures define literacy differently, and especially as technologies change, which is significant as my research project takes a multimodal digital community as its focus. And as mentioned previously, like Selfe and Hawisher, I will often use the terms “technological literacy” or “literacies of technology” as “all-encompassing [phrases] to connect
social practices, people, technology, values, and literate activity, which, in turn, are embedded in a larger cultural ecology” (Literate 2). And also like Selfe and Hawisher, I see literacies of technology as more than “computer literacy,” where that phrase is understood as the skills necessary to use a computer, or what Selber would call functional literacy.

Technology

In discussing technology in relation to literacy, so far, I likely seem to have conflated the term “technology” with digital tools or computers. However, as scholars like Richard Enos and Walter Ong have demonstrated, writing itself is a “technology” that grew up alongside literacy. As Ong explains, “writing (and especially alphabetic writing) is a technology” because it “[calls] for the use of tools and other equipment” (80–81, parentheses in original). Likewise, as Enos argues, “writing is a technology and, in ancient Greece, the alphabet was the essence of that technology” (11). As these scholars demonstrate, definitions of technology can be traced back at least as far as the advent of writing, despite contemporary uses of the term that typically equate technology with computers. It is important to remember, then, that definitions of technology—like definitions of literacy—vary across time and space. And because my project draws on technofeminism (defined below), it is important to remember that contemporary conceptions of technology are often limited in that they conjure images of, for example, male computer hackers rather than women computer programmers.

Literate Activity, Writing, Rhetorical Activity

I place my use of the terms “literate activity” and “writing” alongside the definition of “literacy,” particularly because I follow Prior’s use of the term “literate activity” in place of the
In Prior et al.’s text “Re-Situating and Re-Mediating the Canons: A Cultural-Historical Remapping of Rhetorical Activity,” the authors include literate activity as part of their larger act of remapping rhetorical activity, one that involves looking at “literate activity” within “functional systems” that are within “laminated chronotopes” (“Take 2”) rather than looking just at the traditional canons of rhetoric: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. Under the label “literate activity,” Prior et al. include production, representation, distribution, reception, socialization, activity, and ecology (“Take 2”). In order to better represent this remapping, I include the chart Prior et al. created (see Figure 1.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literate Activity</th>
<th>in</th>
<th>Functional Systems</th>
<th>in</th>
<th>Laminated Chronotopes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Production</td>
<td></td>
<td>People</td>
<td></td>
<td>Embodied</td>
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<tr>
<td>Representation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Artifacts</td>
<td></td>
<td>Represented</td>
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<tr>
<td>Distribution</td>
<td></td>
<td>Practices</td>
<td></td>
<td>Embedded</td>
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<tr>
<td>Socialization</td>
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<td>Institutions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td></td>
<td>Communities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ecology</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ecologies</td>
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Figure 1.1: Prior et al.’s “Remapping Rhetorical Activity: Take 2.”

In addition to expanding the scope of traditional rhetorical activity, as Sheridan-Rabideau explains in *Girls, Feminism, and Grassroots Literacies: Activism in the GirlZone*, this shift in terminology—from “literacy” and “writing” to “literate activity”—signals a shift in defining literacy, a shift which diminishes individual, decontextualized skills and foregrounds literacy as a social activity embedded in situated, cultural-historical contexts (3). Because I follow Prior’s use of the term “literate activity” within a cultural-historical activity theory framework, I also agree...
with Sheridan-Rabideau’s call for “new methods to analyze literacy” that “investigate the issues surrounding participants’ practices . . . and the issues surrounding literacy itself” (Sheridan-Rabideau 4), or in other words, studies that mediate “macro and micro levels of analysis” (Sheridan-Rabideau 9).

Already, though, it is necessary to note that while I share the belief that “literate activity” more appropriately conveys the complexities in the ways people produce and consume texts, I also find it hard not to use the words “writing” or “literacy,” especially as I draw on rich and useful scholarship that does so. Nevertheless, in all cases of my use of these terms, the focus is on the complexity and situatedness of literate activity, writing, or literacy.

**Feminism, Cyberfeminism, Technofeminism**

Finally, I wish to offer some distinction between the terms “feminism,” “cyberfeminism,” and “technofeminism.” As noted previously, as I draw on feminist theory, I am mindful that the intersections of rhetoric and feminism are well-established at this point in both writing studies and communication studies scholarship. I am also mindful that feminist theory has been debated within higher education for many years. In fact, the first women’s studies department was established over forty years ago at San Diego State University in 1970 (“History”). “Feminism,” however, does not mean the same thing to everyone, even to people who call themselves feminists or to feminist scholars within writing studies. There are, of course, various factors in the differing definitions of feminism, among them age, race, and nationality. One commonality I identify across various feminist approaches, though, is continued emphasis on critiquing societal inequalities based on gender with the intention of eradicating them.
A common way of discussing differing feminist approaches in United States feminism is characterized by the wave metaphor, with the first wave referring to feminists active in the mid-nineteenth through early-twentieth centuries, the second wave to feminists active during the U.S. Women’s Movement in the mid-twentieth century, and the third wave to those active during the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. However, in noting these wave-based categorizations, I agree with Astrid Henry’s warning that “all of us who attempt to chronicle contemporary feminism, myself included, must be wary of this division of decades and how it inevitably ends up reproducing an all-too-pat vision of generations and their political consciousness” (20). Yet while taxonomies and categories can be misleading, they also provide a much-needed way to continue to discuss the past, so I proceed with my discussion of feminist waves with these cautions in mind.

As someone born in the mid-1980s who came of age during the 1990s, I fall into the third wave, which, despite the variety present in all waves, often defines itself as heterogeneous, focused on multiple issues, and unwilling to prescribe what a feminist should think or do (Third Wave Foundation; Walker). The third wave is also often defined in relation to the second wave, particularly in resisting expectations to follow agendas set forth by second wave feminists and in responding to perceived failures of the second wave (Baumgardner and Richards; Walker). Concerns often identified as unique to the third wave are queer theory, postcolonial theory, intersectionality, and transnationalism.

Of course, another obvious change occurring between the second and third waves is the introduction of computers and digital networks. Noting the societal changes accompanying

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2 The brief discussion presented here cannot do the rich history of feminisms and feminist theories nearly enough justice. Among the numerous excellent texts that exist, readers looking for more detail on feminist history from the perspective of rhetoric and writing may see Gray-Rosendale and Harootunian and Royster and Kirsch; from a communications perspective, see Kroløkke and Sørensen and Foss, Foss, and Griffin; and from a history/women’s studies perspective, see Freedman. Additionally, for challenges to the wave metaphor, see Naples “Confronting.”
computers—read, men’s dominance within the realm of computers—caused some feminists to declare themselves “cyberfeminists” in the early 1990s. The term “cyberfeminism” has been fraught from the start, though. As Maria Fernandez and Faith Wilding explain, “Heir to both postfeminism and poststructuralism, cyberfeminism has neither welcomed a definition nor a clear political positioning within feminism” (18). This nebulous characterization, they state, was originally an attempt to “attract women from diverse backgrounds and orientations, particularly young women unwilling to call themselves feminists” (18). However, Wilding argues elsewhere that a lack of definition is actually detrimental: “While refusing definition seems like an attractive, non-hierarchical, anti-identity tactic, it in fact plays into the hands of those who would prefer a net quietism: Give a few lucky women computers to play with and they’ll shut up and stop complaining. This attitude is one of which cyberfeminists should be extremely wary and critical.” While pinpointing one definition of cyberfeminism is purposely impossible, there have been undeniable artistic and performative aspects to much cyberfeminist work. This can be seen in print publications like Domain Errors or Cyberfeminism: Next Protocols and web publications like subRosa (http://cyberfeminism.net) and refugia (http://home.refugia.net/).

Sociologist Judy Wajcman follows these conversations of cyberfeminism with her introduction of what she calls an “emerging technofeminist framework” (7, emphasis in original) to be used for critical analysis of intersections of feminism and technology/technoscience. Like parts of cyberfeminism, technofeminism also draws on feminist theory, but as Wajcman explains, a technofeminist framework combines a feminist perspective with approaches in the social studies of science and technology, which she argues have typically overlooked issues of gender. This combination of the social studies of science and technology and feminist theory is one way technofeminism can be distinguished from cyberfeminism. Because of this “cross-
fertilization,” Wajcman argues that a technofeminist framework “conceive[s] of a mutually shaping relationship between gender and technology, in which technology is both a source and a consequence of gender relations” (7). And perhaps more importantly, she argues, this type of framework allows “space for women’s agency in transforming technologies” (Wajcman 7), consequently opening up “fresh possibilities for feminist scholarship and action” (Wajcman 8).

As a writing studies scholar, I appreciate Wajcman’s goal to infuse issues of gender into social studies of science and technology, which is a field that writing studies sometimes draws on—for instance, when using actor-network theory. Additionally, I see her emphasis on opening space for women’s agency as beneficial to feminism. Nevertheless, I feel it important to temper my enthusiasm for technofeminism with some critique of Wajcman’s portrayal of cyberfeminism.

Discussions of feminist views of technology, Wajcman’s and otherwise, often produce oversimplified, tidy narratives, despite a feminist propensity toward both/and rather than either/or and despite third wave claims to multiplicity, complexity, and intersectionality. As Susanna Paasonen so eloquently states, “Overviews of feminist critiques of technology may produce narrative trajectories from the denial to the embrace of technology, from alliances with nature to those with culture, from essentialism to constructionism (or, to personify, from the discourse represented by Mary Daly to that represented by Donna Haraway)” (parentheses in original). Painting these broad strokes to historicize various feminist strands is a tactic Paasonen criticizes, drawing on many other feminist scholars (Ahmed, Butler, de Lauretis, Sandoval, Spigel), as intended to “recontextualize” the past in order “to affirm the present, implicitly suggesting the ‘‘progress’ of contemporary culture’ and its ‘hip attitudes.’” One charge for feminist scholarship (and really, all responsible scholarship), then, is to continue to press for ways to talk about past feminist movements and scholarship without creating “a model where
feminisms lose their plurality and become articulated as tales of progress, encompassing antagonistic—or even dialectical—struggles” (Paasonen). Unfortunately, Wajcman sometimes falls into this trap of recontextualized, oversimplified articulation of past feminist ideas. That is, Wajcman lumps all cyberfeminists into one large group she has categorized as overly utopic. My own reading of cyberfeminist work, however, presents a richer, more nuanced picture, particularly as texts on cyberfeminism are continuing to be published (e.g., Gajjala and Oh).

Nonetheless, without discrediting cyberfeminism and cyberfeminists who continue to produce much insightful and inspirational work, I align myself more with a technofeminist framework because of its materialist and sociohistoric emphases, which, as a writing studies scholar, I feel better suited for than for the more artistic and philosophical emphases of cyberfeminism.

Within this discussion of the terms feminism, cyberfeminism, and technofeminism, I have explicitly woven in some of my own positioning within the larger feminist movement. This purposeful move follows calls that feminist researchers pay attention to their own positioning as they carry out and write up their research. For instance, Kirsch explains, “The goal of situating ourselves in our work and acknowledging our limited perspectives is not to overcome these limits—an impossible task—but to reveal to readers how our research agenda, political commitments, and personal motivations shape our observations in the field, the conclusions we draw, the and research reports we write” (Ethical 14). As Kirsch continues, the work a researcher does to situate herself does not guarantee “more thoughtful and sensitive work,” but it does “help readers understand (rather than second-guess) what factors have shaped the research questions at hand,” and it “helps ground the research report in a specific cultural and historical moment” (Ethical, 14, parentheses in original). Because of this, my own positioning will continue to be woven throughout this dissertation.
Positioning: Setting the Scene

Site of Inquiry

In addition to positioning myself as the researcher of this study, my feminist methodological approach also encourages me to provide details about my research site and my own relationship to that site. The site where I carry out my research, Feministing (see figure 1.2), is a community of feminist bloggers and activists established in 2004. The story of their creation as told on their website explains, “Back in 2004, Jessica [Valenti] was working for a national women’s organization and was feeling like the mainstream feminist movement wasn’t really interested in hearing younger women’s voices. So after a prompting by her then-boss (founder of LiberalOasis), she founded Feministing along with Vanessa [Valenti] and two other women she worked with (who have since left the site)” (FAQ, parentheses in original). While anyone can register on Feministing in order to participate in the comments and community sections, there is currently a core group of five editors and eight contributors who write the blog posts for the main page.³ These posts address a range of feminist issues, from discussions of politicians and pending laws to reviews of film, television, and books to invitations to various feminist events. In addition to original text, this core group of writers also links to other news and websites, posts images and videos, and circulates online petitions; therefore, Feministing is a highly multimodal site. Feministing also has or has had a presence on Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, and Flickr, which contributes to their mission to give young feminists an Internet presence.

³ As of April 2013.
While it is not possible for me to ascertain the exact number of people who actively or passively take part in Feministing, the site’s editors report over half a million readers every month (Martin and Valenti) and their number of followers on Twitter is currently 35,898, with 14,740 people “liking” them on Facebook. As points of reference, Seventeen, a magazine popular among teens, currently has 320,843 followers on Twitter and 1,137,108 “likes” on Facebook, and Feministe, which self-identifies as “one of the oldest feminist blogs,” has 8,771 followers on Twitter and 2,339 “likes” on Facebook. So while Feministing’s audience is not as large as Seventeen’s, Feministing has become rather well known for an online feminist publication. In fact, according to Vanessa Valenti, Feministing has “become the largest feminist community in the world with over 500,000 unique readers every month” (“Feministing”).

In the seven years following Feministing’s founding, Jessica Valenti became more well known and, as a result, left her position as editor in order to keep with the community’s original
mission of bringing attention to younger and underrepresented feminist voices. Feministing continues to grow in size and scope by adding new editors and contributors and by adding new forums on its site. One such addition is the blog called “Community,” added in 2008, which “allows readers to post on the site and start a discussion, further fostering the community of feminist-minded individuals where they can connect, engage and mobilize” (Vanessa Valenti “Feministing”). Another such addition is a blog for coordination between Feministing’s writers and college campuses, aptly titled “Campus,” which exists “to highlight and strengthen the efforts of campus feminists to effect change at the grassroots, national, and global levels” by providing students with “opportunities and resources to engage in productive dialogue with their peers, raise awareness about their cause, develop their leadership and organizing skills, and be connected with other feminist actors and movements” (“About Feministing Campus”). The campus sub-community exists via a subsection within the larger Feministing site as well as physically through Feministing’s editors’ visits to various college campuses.

The members of the Feministing community presumably share some common goals with feminists and feminisms in the early twenty-first century. While many third wave feminists have long touted the need to acknowledge multiple feminisms rather than attempt to adhere to a monolithic feminist agenda, as stated previously, those who define themselves as feminists can be assumed to share the goal of working to eliminate gender-based societal inequities. Additionally, Feministing has clear expectations of those who wish to be part of their community, as expressed in the following statements from their “Community Standards” document:

Feministing is an online community for feminists and their allies. The community aspect of Feministing—our community blog, campus blog, comment threads, and
related social networking sites—exist to better connect feminists online and off, and to encourage activism. We hope that the Feministing community will provide a forum for a variety of feminist voices and organizations. In order to maintain a progressive and safe discourse on the site, anti-feminist comments, posts, and profiles are not permitted; the Feministing editors believe that racism, classism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and hate speech constitute anti-feminism and have no place on the site.

Nevertheless, I do not wish to suggest that Feministing is a harmonious and conflict-free gathering place, nor will I suggest that it should be. Furthermore, Feministing has not been free of critique both from within and outside the feminist community, particularly for its previously interpreted lack of attention to issues of race. In fact, a common critique of the feminist blogosphere is that it, like the U.S. Women’s Movement, has been dominated by white, middle class feminists.

Choice of Site, Researcher Relations to Site

I specifically chose one online feminist website as the site for my proposed study because I hope to provide sustained, in depth, complicated and complex descriptions of the literate activity and rhetors who create/are created by and who interact within this space. This is, of course, a different approach than attempting to study what happens in technofeminist space, or technofeminism, broadly writ. While larger, more comprehensive studies of these concepts are also beneficial, my more narrowly focused project provides some of the research scholars like Barbara Warnick and Laura Gurak call for. Warnick, quoting from a study by Gurak, argues, “it is important to move away from generalizations about life in cyberspace and begin to analyze
specific instances of computer-mediated communication, not only as a way of understanding patterns of current discourse but also as a method of building theory” (74). My pursuits, then, go forward in this vein: not as a generalization about all life or rhetorical practice in cyberspace, but specifically as an examination of the literate activity of feminist rhetors writing for and interacting on Feministing. Additionally, my work seeks to build on well-known and respected research projects and consequent scholarly texts, such as Deborah Brandt’s as well as Selfe and Hawisher’s (Literate) studies of 80 and 350 United States citizens respectively, that continue to investigate studies of literacy—both print and digital—acquisition and development.

My familiarity with Feministing, then, contributed to my choice of this specific research site. I have been an active reader of Feministing since 2008, but I have largely limited my participation to reading rather than writing. Part of the reason for this is that I typically check the site quickly when I am already on my computer and have only a few minutes of downtime between scheduled tasks, or as has happened recently, I access the site through the web browser on my smartphone. However, in addition to frequently reading posts on the site, I have also participated by discussing the posted-about issues with friends and family. Further, I have participated by signing and circulating various petitions I found on or through the Feministing site and by responding to calls to contact local representatives via phone or email to voice my feminist concerns about different legislative procedures or bills. Unfortunately, the majority of the Feministing events are held in New York City, far from where I live, so I am not able to attend. However, I did attend Jessica Valenti’s talk when she visited my college campus in 2010.

In addition to my familiarity with Feministing, I was prompted to choose this as my research site for the following reasons
• As stated, members of Feministing desire a strong connection with colleges, which I assumed would be advantageous for me in getting participants and for them in helping to create more connections.

• The site is public and has archives that date back to their first posting on April 12, 2004, making it possible for me to access any of their posted materials.

• The site is well established at this point, so I was interested to find out about changes that have occurred and why they occurred.

• Many of the postings on the site are multimodal, and I was curious to hear members discuss how they do or do not consider this multimodal aspect as they participate.

• This is a site that other writing studies scholars have not yet studied.

**Positioning: Influential Scholarship**

Having positioned myself in relation to my research site, I now turn to positioning myself within larger and ongoing scholarly conversations that influence my work. While I have already briefly provided some context for the intersections of feminism and rhetoric, I will now offer more detail about the scholarship produced at that intersection. Additionally, I offer discussion of some key feminist works within computers and writing.

**Feminist Rhetoric**

In Feminist Rhetorical Theories, Karen A. Foss, Sonja K. Foss, and Cindy L. Griffin provide a succinct overview of feminist scholarship’s inclusion in and impact on rhetorical studies. They identify five “threads” that have significantly shaped feminist perspectives in rhetorical studies: “(1) radical beginnings; (2) efforts to include women as communicators and
women’s topics in the discipline; (3) critiques of the discipline from feminist perspectives; (4) labeling and refining of feminist perspectives; and (5) reconceptualizations of constructs and theories in rhetorical studies from feminist perspectives” (14–15). After briefly describing these themes, they discuss nine feminists who have significantly altered “traditional rhetorical theory,” women who illustrate the diversity of feminist rhetorical theories. While Foss, Foss, and Griffin approach feminist rhetorical theory from the discipline of communication studies, their work continues to be widely influential to writing studies, too.

Many of the scholars studying women’s rhetoric continue to note the extent to which women were originally excluded from rhetorical education, public discourse, and the history of rhetoric (or the rhetorical canon). As Marsha Houston and Cheris Kramarae explain, excluding women is a way of silencing women (388). Houston and Kramarae also point out, however, that in addition to exclusion, another way women have historically been silenced has been through men shaping and controlling what women say or write. In “Speaking from Silence: Methods of Silencing and of Resistance,” Houston and Kramarae outline eleven ways men have garnered and exercised this control. As their title suggests, though, they also discuss seven specific actions (many of them rhetorical moves) women have taken to speak out against these methods of control.

Helene Cixous advocates and practices some of the methods of resistance Houston and Kramarae outline (i.e., reclaiming, elevating, and celebrating “trivial” discourse; truth-telling; taking control of language) in her own writing, particularly in “The Laugh of the Medusa.” Cixous saw the need for women to write for and about themselves, which again speaks to the historical tradition of women’s voices and texts being excluded. For Cixous, “writing is precisely

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4 These women are Cheris Kramarae, bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, Mary Daly, Starhawk, Paula Gunn Allen, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Sally Miller Gearhart, and Sonia Johnson.
the very possibility of change” (1526, emphasis in original). Specifically, Cixous believed that by writing, women could break out of silence. Although Cixous’ writing, like all writing, responds to the particular society in which she lived (e.g., mid-70s French feminism, the U.S. Women’s Liberation Movement, psychoanalysis), it continues to have great influence on feminism/feminists and rhetoric/scholars of rhetoric, especially because of its emphasis on women’s writing, women’s bodies, and the overlap of the two. At the same time, however, she explicitly denies the ability to define a feminist writing practice with the use of a phallocentric system (which includes discourse), though she clarifies this does not mean such practice does not exist. Susan Jarratt, drawing on Mary Jacobus, recognizes Cixous’ claim that feminist writing practice cannot be defined in phallocentric language and claims, “Displaced woman is ‘either unrecorded in accessible ways, or recorded in terms of man’” (75). Cixous’ and Jarratt’s points provide a glimpse of the frustration feminist scholars have expressed over the tradition of women’s perspectives and women’s lived realities being excluded and/or misrepresented.

Another way of looking at the exclusion of women in rhetoric is to view how their positioning on the margins of society affected their rhetorical practices that have since been rediscovered, reclaimed, and retold. In “Ethos as Location: New Sites for Understanding Discursive Authority,” Nedra Reynolds notes feminist writers’ recognition of “marginalization that has historically imposed silence” and these writers’ and other feminist scholars’ subsequent attempts not to argue for a move to the center but, instead, to “change the structure altogether, so that authority can be claimed even by those whose differences are marked, and whose distance from the center is considerable” (330). These feminist writers, then, argue for the benefits of being positioned on the margins, and thus introduce the need to call explicit attention to a rhetor’s position, which is certainly a characteristic of current feminist research methodologies.
The spatial metaphor does not end there for Reynolds, though. Not only does she argue that ethos is located on the margins, but it is also located in “the betweens” (332–36). Reynolds indicates the significance of this emphasis on location: “By emphasizing where and how texts and their writers are located—their intersections with others and the places they diverge, how they occupy positions and move in the betweens—we can retain the spatial metaphors of ethos without limiting it to arenas of spoken discourse and without assuming that those gathering places are harmonious or conflict-free” (333, emphasis in original).

As Reynolds calls for more inclusive understandings of ethos and authority, Jane Donawerth as well as Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin similarly call for more inclusive definitions of rhetoric. As Donawerth explains, when considering women’s rhetoric historically, we need a broader definition of rhetoric if we wish not to exclude women from discussions of rhetoric. Using a definition like that of Aristotle, which is based on argument and persuasion, or using a definition that looks solely at public speaking excludes the women theorists who did not treat argument or persuasion, as well as the women who were unable to practice these skills publicly (as women were banned from rhetorical education, public speaking, preaching, and defending themselves in courts of law). By forming a broader definition of rhetoric, Donawerth argues, we will not only be able to include women in the canon, but we will also be able to see how they used conversation as a model of public and private discourse, how they collaborated with audiences to create meaning, and how they used “dialogic forms for teaching and reflecting about rhetoric” (xv).

Foss and Griffin also make two slightly different arguments for broadening the definition of rhetoric. One way they do this is by arguing for the recognition of “invitational rhetoric” in addition to an agonistic rhetoric based on persuasion. They argue that “an equation of rhetoric
with persuasion . . . is only one perspective on rhetoric and one . . . with a patriarchal bias” (Foss and Griffin, “Beyond,” 2). While recognizing various definitions of feminism exist, they explain they have chosen three feminist principles to serve as the starting place for invitational rhetoric: equality, immanent value, and self-determination (Foss and Griffin, “Beyond,” 4). As such, invitational rhetoric does not take persuasion as the assumed end; instead, rhetors are open to their audience and do not anticipate resistance. Ultimately, Foss and Griffin identify the goal of invitational rhetoric as “[providing] the basis for the creation and maintenance of relationships of equality” (“Beyond” 13). The second way these women argue for a broader definition of rhetoric is through their comparison of the rhetorical theories of two markedly different rhetoricians: Kenneth Burke and Starhawk. This comparison, they explain, is meant to reveal the limitations and patriarchal biases of Burke’s theory, which is so dominant in studies of rhetoric. Foss and Griffin carefully acknowledge, though, that their purpose is not to denigrate Burke’s contributions; in fact, they show the limitations of Starhawk’s theory, too. Starhawk’s theory, they purport, best describes “a rhetoric that characterizes the communication that takes place in an atmosphere of equality, support, and affirmation,” while Burke’s theory is better at “describing intersystem rhetoric, rhetoric that seeks to cross boundaries in order to generate identification when none appears to exist” (Foss and Griffin, “Feminist,” 345). In this discussion, they ultimately urge others to recognize the boundaries, limits, and theoretical scope of all rhetorical theories.

One place some of the limitations of all rhetorical theories have been revealed is in discussions of public and private, which in the history of rhetoric have rarely if ever been simple or uncontested. In fact, Kate Ronald argues that classical rhetoric “worked in the tension between personal and public domains” (37). Debates about public and private are, in fact, too numerous
Sharon Crowley recently noted that the distinction of public and private in classical rhetoric, specifically Aristotle’s *On Rhetoric*, can be seen in the current day. However, Crowley questions the viability of maintaining this distinction, noting that “civic arenas” have always included a variety of venues such as “dinner tables, street corners, break rooms, classrooms, church basements, pubs, women’s clinics, dentists’ offices—wherever people debate issues of state policy and civic conduct” (19). A surprising omission from Crowley’s list is online space. Today, conversations occurring online are, in many cases, instances of both public and private civic discourse.

An online feminist community is, of course, one site of the extracurriculum where such public discourse is occurring. In thinking about *Feministing* as a present-day *agora*, then, my findings from a diverse online space juxtapose the heterogeneity of the ancient Greek *agora*. In considering this present-day site of public discourse, I substantiate Crowley’s claim that “new or countering beliefs are more likely to be heard and considered by subalterns . . . That is to say, counterhegemonic beliefs may be taken up more readily among those who are not included in a dominant subjectivity” (192). However, I also complicate Crowley’s claim, in part because Crowley emphasizes women in the group she identifies as more open to counterhegemonic beliefs while my findings focus on feminists of various gender identities, and in part because I want to place more emphasis on how intersectionality and rhetorical listening affect the taking up or even consideration of counterhegemonic beliefs. A related claim I challenge is Crowley’s assertion, “Once one becomes a member of a desired community, the community itself offers little internal impetus for change . . . Rhetorically speaking, insiders engage chiefly in epideictic

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5 I do not wish to suggest, however, that I intend to completely ignore issues of digital divide and to overlook those who still do not have access to online civic arenas.
discourse . . . Deliberative rhetors, on the other hand, risk becoming outsiders” (195–96). Again, Crowley examines a different community than I do, but my research shows that even once members have demonstrated “insiderness” within the community, they are likely to engage in deliberative rhetoric, as those who interact on the Feministing website make it their goal to frequently challenge each other – to varying degrees of productiveness and success.

One of the most recent examinations of feminist rhetorical scholarship is Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch’s 2012 book Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies. In addition to providing their perceptions of how feminism and feminist theories have historically shaped the field of rhetoric, they outline “an enhanced inquiry model” they argue shapes, and should continue to shape, the work of contemporary feminist rhetoricians. They assert that their framework “offers a multidimensional mechanism for engaging with metacognitive awareness in inquiry processes, in terms of inquiry frameworks, tools, and leverage points that combine dynamically to enhance sight, insight, and interpretive power” (148). In their conclusions, there is a noticeable emphasis on technology, which they identify as a new vista for feminist rhetorical scholarship, as the quote that began this chapter illustrates. Along with arguing that the third of these four vistas for the future of feminist rhetorical work must focus on critiquing the “contexts, products and processes” of our constantly changing technological environments, they argue feminist rhetoricians must also assess “the impacts and consequences of technologies on the scope, nature, and contours of theoretical enterprises” (150, emphasis in original). The fourth vista they identify also focuses on technology in their concern that we “direct attention not just to public-private divides but also to a more fully textured examination, especially given emerging technologies, of what constitutes

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6 It’s also worth noting here that Crowley, unlike Foss and Griffin, does proceed with the understanding that change is the desired end, at least in the type of civil, civic discourse she has in mind.
private, social, and institutional spaces” (150). One goal for Royster and Kirsch, then, is to acknowledge the great work feminist rhetorical scholars have done, but also to carry out new work in addition to the three Rs (rescue, recovery, [re]inscription) feminist rhetorical work has been known for.

**Feminist Work in Computers and Writing**

As feminist rhetorical scholars have rescued, recovered, and (re)inscribed accounts of women’s rhetorics, a persistent concern has been the “risk” of essence or essentialism (Blair; Ritchie; Ritchie and Ronald; Schell; Skeen), which Diana Fuss says is “most commonly understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the ‘whatness’ of a given entity” (xi). Typically, feminist rhetoricians’ discussions of essentialism draw on the work of social and feminist theorists, such as Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Gayatri Spivak, and identify a spectrum with essentialism on one end and social constructivism on the other. Essentialism and constructivism are not a simple either/or, in other words. As Ritchie explains, “The essentialist position leaves women trapped in a separate, idealistic, but ultimately powerless position as ‘other’; the constructivist position leaves women in an eternally fluid position of indeterminacy or in a position of negativity, constantly rejecting and deconstructing but also risking invisibility and the possibility for action and change” (85). Rather than an either/or, then, many scholars promote a both/and approach, which acknowledges the complexity inherent in discussions of essentialism and feminism.

Ritchie and Ronald illustrate this both/and position in the introduction to *Available Means: An*

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7 “Both/and” rather than “either/or” is a common mantra in feminist scholarship. Another example occurs when Kathleen J. Ryan identifies a shift in approach in feminist rhetorical scholarship with the acts of recovery and gender critique, noting an early propensity for either/or giving way to both/and, highlighting the well known debate between Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Barbara Biesecker as evidence that recovery and gender critique cannot be neatly separated (91).
Anthology of Women’s Rhetoric(s) in their acknowledgement that the selections of women’s texts they chose to include in their anthology might “seem to essentialize women’s rhetoric or conflate women’s rhetoric with feminism” (xxii), but ultimately maintaining that “[i]t is difficult to separate the history of women’s rhetorics from the history of the struggle for women’s rights because the desire/demand for rights so often becomes the impetus for writing” (xxii). The essentialist-constructivist conversations illustrate well some of the paradoxical tensions inherent in feminism. As Ritchie notes, though, “The strength of feminism is its ability to hold in tension an array of theoretical and practical perspectives and, thus, to arrive at a clearer understanding of the varied nature of women’s positions” (85).

The discussion of essentialism and constructivism has also been taken up in conversations within computers and writing studies. One notable discussion of essentialism and computers and writing took place between Thomas Skeen and Kristine Blair. Skeen—commenting on articles by Katrina Powell and Pamela Takayoshi and by Angela Haas, Christine Tulley, and Kristine Blair—initiated this particular discussion of essentialism with his published assertion that feminist articles in Computers and Composition tended to take the “‘risk’ of essence” (Skeen drawing on Fuss) in complicated ways, both forwarding feminist projects by using essentialism productively while also “[becoming] stagnant because the authors’ uses of essence might not lead to new gains for women” (Skeen 211). Blair responded to Skeen, arguing that Skeen himself was essentializing technofeminist research projects by drawing only on two articles confined to one academic journal. Blair also noted the extent to which technofeminists must, in light of Skeen’s accusations, be careful to delimit their research goals and tactics. Additionally, Blair argues that Skeen and others would benefit from “a materialist approach, one that bridges the gap between constructivist approaches by questioning both the ways in which
political, material, and social conditions impact women as a class of individuals and the extent to which inequities can and should be transformed through feminist action in classrooms and communities” (“Response” 131). Blair extends her discussion of Skeen’s critique in her chapter in Writing Studies Research in Practice: Methods and Methodologies, arguing, “Inevitably, the story of technofeminist work is much more robust in theory and practice because of a complicated triangulation of voices to articulate the role of technology in women’s and girls’ lived experiences, including our own experiences as teachers and researchers” (“Complicated” 68). As evidenced here, Blair’s work continues to emphasize the importance of women’s voices and of women speaking for themselves, particularly through narratives about their technological literacy acquisition and surrounding material conditions that simultaneously enable and limit such acquisition.

Elsewhere, Blair and Tulley acknowledge the ability of feminist research methodologies to “foster deeper collaboration among researchers—and among researchers and subjects,” noting, “More traditional definitions of research do not acknowledge either the theoretical or practical possibilities of conducting feminist research in digitally mediated spaces” (306). This distinction between more traditional definitions of research and feminist research in digitally mediated spaces is another theme in technofeminist scholarship. When it comes to studying language use and rhetorical practices on the web, researchers cannot assume traditional definitions and research practices will easily translate into these new spaces (discussed more in the “Methods and Methodology” section below).

In studying digitally mediated spaces, feminist scholars have, for some time now, argued that technology is not neutral.8 As Jordynn Jack succinctly writes, “As with any technology,
blogging is not neutral, but a part of a network of social, political, cultural, and material forces” (329). In a similar vein, many scholars highlight the extent to which the cultural arrangements that exist in face-to-face (f2f) communication/space also exist in online communication/space. Mary Hocks, drawing on Anne Balsamo, notes that “all technologies are reproductive technologies” (107). Additionally, many of these scholars advocate a critical stance, including “cautious optimism” as Anna Everett calls it (1284). In other words, in addition to noting the lack of neutrality of online spaces, many scholars also critique overly enthusiastic claims that these spaces will automatically or easily empower marginalized groups. Joanne Addison and Susan Hilligoss are two scholars who attempt to complicate claims about women being empowered in online spaces. Commenting on an earlier study by Gail Hawisher and Patricia Sullivan—a study in which both Addison and Hilligoss participated and in which they felt their experiences and position as lesbians were not fully understood or recognized—Addison and Hilligoss advocate the use of postmodern lesbian and gay theory and material feminist critique in order to enrich and complicate our views about women and computer-mediated-communication (CMC).

Like Addison and Hilligoss, Lisa Gerrard seeks to challenge the stories of women and technology that circulate in popular discourse. In “Beyond ‘Scribbling Women’: Women Writing (on) the Web,” Gerrard challenges sensational representations of women as victims of cyberspace or as passive participants in cyberculture. Her discussion of various feminist websites provides for a richer, more nuanced representation of feminists in cyberspace, particularly highlighting aspects of social reform/activism, responsibility, reclamation, encouragement, and validation. Gerrard ends her article with a list of questions one might consider when studying

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the late 80s and early 90s, and Donna LeCourt and Luann Barnes’ discussion of both positive and negative aspects of hypertext in helping readers and writers work toward a “feminist textual politic.”
feminist culture on the web: “What opportunities do these sites give women, both as site owners and visitors, that they might not get elsewhere? How might the sites affect these women’s lives? What images of women do the sites promote? How do the verbal and visual rhetorics create this image?” (311).

As indicated in Gerrard’s list of questions and thus far in the review of scholarship on feminist rhetorical theory and practice in digital spaces, when studying women’s rhetorical practices on the web, one cannot simply rely on previous research methods, cannot assume they will provide sufficient frameworks or will transfer unproblematically to these new terrains. As such, Jordynn Jack and Mary Queen each provide careful explanation of their own research approaches. In discussing the need for new methods and methodology in digital research, Queen draws on work she did for her own dissertation and introduces her methodological term—“rhetorical genealogy”—in both “Transnational Feminist Rhetorics in a Digital World” and “Consuming the Stranger: Technologies of Rhetorical Action in Transnational Feminist Encounters,” albeit with slightly different focuses and analyses. To use Queen’s words:

Rhetorical genealogy is rhetorical analysis that examines multiple processes of structuring representations, rather than seeks to identify the original intentions or final effects of structured (and thus already stabilized) representations. A genealogical investigation works to uncover not only the meaning of meaning, but the structuring of meaning, that is, the cultural practices and rhetorics through which particular representations and interpretations gain validity and power. (“Transnational” 476)

By using Internet archives to examine past versions of websites, Queen discusses various reincarnations of specific websites over time, with careful attention to transformations and
interactions as well as what might have prompted them and what their consequences were. As she nicely summarizes a key point of her argument, “The mobility of electronic texts and the presentations embedded in them are crucial sites of rhetorical action and, thus, crucial sites for feminist rhetorical analysis” (“Transnational” 485).

Queen’s focus on contextualization and decontextualization as well as the transformations and interactions of digital texts and actors on those texts builds on the work of Vicki Tolar Collins, who advocates material rhetoric as feminist methodology. As Collins explains, “The task of material rhetoric as methodology is to penetrate and examine the layers of rhetorical accretion, reading each one closely not only for the nature of its own rhetoric but also for how it colors the ethos of the core text and what it, along with the modes of production and distribution, indicates about cultural formation in the larger discourse community” (548). Equally important, Collins claims, building on work by Jennifer Wicke, “Looking at the ‘material-based conduct of human activities’ through the lens of gender” (547) creates “a feminism that insists on examining the material conditions under which social arrangements, including those of gender hierarchy, develop” (Wicke qtd. in Collins 547).

Similarly to the texts in the previous subsection on feminist rhetorical practices, many of the texts concerned with feminist rhetorical theory/practice in online space also focus on the body—on women’s bodies. This focus is certainly not unexpected in Michelle Kendrick’s “The Laugh of the Modem: Interactive Technologies and l’Ecriture Feminine,” which overtly draws on Cixous’ work. Kendrick considers how “hypertext boys” George Landow, Richard Lanham, Jay Bolter, and Michael Joyce have discussed hypertext in ways similar to Cixous’ discussion of ecriture feminine (e.g., associative, non-linear, non-hierarchical, playful, full of jouissance), but dwells on one major difference she sees: the hypertext boys have erased/left out the body,
emphasizing instead the (male, scientific) mind. Hocks, too, writes about the body in relation to technology, noting previous scholars who have considered “how women’s bodies are manipulated, obscured, or fundamentally changed by technological environments and the discourses of new technologies” (108). Of course, one would be remiss not to mention Donna Haraway in a discussion of feminism, technology, and bodies. “Cyborg imagery,” Haraway argues, “can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves” (“Cyborg” 182). Furthermore, Haraway believes we are indebted to scholars like Mary Douglas who helped us to see the intricate connections between body imagery, worldview, and political language.

In their work on civic rhetoric, W. Michele Simmons and Jeffrey Grabill point to the necessity of work at the interface level in order to make digital texts accessible and understandable to all citizens. Similarly to Crowley, Simmons and Grabill emphasize theories of invention (Crowley discussing paths of invention for enacting civil discourse; Simmons and Grabill arguing that for nonexpert citizens to be effective, they must have robust invention—and performative—theories). “A civic rhetoric for technologically and scientifically complex places,” Simmons and Grabill argue, “must concern itself with the day-to-day rhetorical practices of ‘everyday people,’ not exclusively with the concerns of The State . . . Such a rhetoric, in other words, must be empirical” (439). In this statement, I see concerns that overlap with feminist researchers’ concerns that researchers must collaborate with and make more room for the voices of their research participants, with attention to “everyday people” and their concerns.

Continuing Conversation: Project Goals and Contributions
While this discussion of scholarship is not meant to be exhaustive, it does illustrate that, as indicated previously, scholars have already documented various benefits of working at the borders of rhetoric and feminism. Additionally, feminist scholars and computers and writing scholars have increasingly taken up issues of technology. Now, as writing studies scholars continue to heed Gere’s call to examine the extracurriculum, this project seeks to fill some of the space Sheridan-Rabideau has argued is still empty—that is, “situated studies of community organizations—sites where, from the ground up, people imagine what they want and what structures they need to achieve their desire” (Sheridan-Rabideau 3). Although Sheridan-Rabideau does not specifically identify online community organizations, the study of such a space has much to offer Sheridan-Rabideau’s call, as well as those of scholars like Warnick and Gurak who call for more contextualized and specific studies of the Internet. Further, in Gere’s foundational work about the extracurriculum as well as in scholarship by others writing about the extracurriculum (Brandt; Fishman, Lunsford, McGregor, and Otuteye), scholars refer to “self-sponsored” writing people do, a term which seems to exclude the community-sponsored aspects I see inherent in the term “literate activity” as Sheridan-Rabideau and Prior use it to study socio- and cultural-historic activities and networks. This dissertation, then, in addition to collecting specific information about one community on the web, which adds to our studies of the extracurriculum of composition, uses this vantage point at the intersection of rhetoric, (techno)feminism, and computers and writing to interrogate ideas of self-sponsored and community-sponsored literate activity.

I undertook this dissertation project with the following goals in mind (specific research questions come next):

- to better understand literate activity in a digital feminist space (*Feministing*),
• to explore the idea of community-sponsored literate activity and consider how this activity contributes to community building in digital spaces and, in turn, how community shapes literate activity (while being careful not to suggest Feministing is typical of all digital spaces/communities or even all feminist digital spaces/communities),

• to make larger claims about researching in digital spaces (again, being careful not to suggest Feministing is typical of all digital spaces/communities),

• to make a case for Feministing as important space to study (considering the preservation of texts and defining and expanding what counts as scholarly research space/text), working to address Cixous’ Jarratt’s, and Sullivan’s frustration over the tradition of women’s perspectives and women’s lived realities being excluded and/or misrepresented, and

• to think about Feministing as an in-progress archive, and to create an archive of my own to document my research process, which I plan to build on in the future.⁹

Research Questions

The following questions guided my research:

1. What is the range of literate activity that occurs within the Feministing community (including literate activity that I cannot “see”—i.e., is not posted to feministing.com)?

2. What are the impetuses for (exigency) this literate activity?

⁹ Here it is worth noting that “archive” is a word with many meanings; it is both a collection of historical documents as well as the place that those documents are housed. In rhetoric and composition, the word “archives” has often referred to the collections of primary historical artifacts that shape our understandings of how composition has been taught, including teachers’, students’, and institutions’ materials (e.g., textbooks, essays, and course catalogues). However, as in Feministing’s use of an “archive,” the word can also refer to a focused collection of materials, similar to the archives print newspapers have had. Scholarship from Kirsch and Rohan; Ramsey, Mastrangelo, Sharer, and L’Eplattenier; and the May 1999 College English section “Archivists with an Attitude” speak to various concerns of “archives” in rhetoric and composition.
3. What aspects of this community as well as society more broadly foster and delimit contributors’ literate activity?

4. How do these aspects foster and/or delimit contributors’ literate activity?

5. Where does this literate activity seem self-sponsored, and where does it seem community-sponsored? (underlying question: can the two be differentiated?)

While Gere argues we should be studying the extracurriculum of composition in order to “learn from and contribute to composition’s extracurriculum in our classes” (86), writing studies scholarship includes a varying explicit and implicit focus on how researchers’ findings translate into their classrooms and their own teaching practices. Although what I learned will undoubtedly benefit and influence my teaching practices, this project ultimately focuses on analysis of the literate activity in Feministing rather than on making explicit pedagogical application of my findings. With that in mind, I outline the remaining chapters of this dissertation.

Chapter Descriptions

The second chapter provides discussion of the methods and methodologies I adopt in this research project in order to ground my project within the field and within larger discussions of feminist research and of digital research on literate activity within communities. The chapter includes a description of the research site as well as discussions of how the participants were selected, how I carried out my ethnographically informed data collection methods, how I analyzed and interpreted my data, and how and why I applied digital postcritical and feminist methodologies.

Chapter three focuses on the internal landscape of Feministing, which includes thick description of the site as well as places it within the context of the larger blogosphere,
particularly the feminist/social justice blogosphere.¹⁰ I begin with discussion of the founding of Feministing.com and then move to discuss the changes and expansion of Feministing from 2004–2012, with attention to Queen’s concerns for rhetorical genealogy and Collins’ concern for materiality. By moving between thick description and analysis of Feministing and larger considerations of rhetorical genealogy and materiality, I mediate macro- and micro-levels of analysis Sheridan-Rabideau argues is necessary in literacy research. I argue for the importance of feminist design and feminist literacy sponsorship and discuss how shifts in the commenting policies expose differing expectations of what a digital feminist space is or should be (i.e., open to everyone and all opinions vs. moderated) and challenge traditional notions of feminist space as non-hierarchical and uncensored.

Chapter four also includes local and historical framing as I turn my attention to more external aspects of Feministing. In this chapter, I address questions of what fosters and delimits Feministing members’ literate activity and argue for the benefits of using rhetorical ecology to understand the complexities of community and community building in digital spaces. I demonstrate how the public nature and accessibility of Feministing’s webspaces (i.e., the various digital spaces they have inhabited or do inhabit such as Facebook, Twitter, Feministing.com) lead to increased interactions with uninvited/unintended audiences. Consequently, I consider how trolling functions as a rhetorical strategy, and I consider how Feministing complicates theories of invitational rhetoric. Additionally, I reveal that long-running debates among feminists about race and intersectionality carry over into digital space, which both affects

¹⁰ I refer to “the feminist/social justice blogosphere” throughout the dissertation. Although this is a term that is used by several people (including Feministing users and other bloggers I discuss throughout the dissertation) and is convenient to use as a shorthand way to refer to several diverse but similar digital spaces/texts, there is always a chance that people I write about as belonging to the feminist/social justice blogosphere would not identify themselves the same way. Further, referring to this space singularly (the feminist/social justice blogosphere), might suggest similarity or agreement exists across this space, which is neither true nor what I mean to convey.
Feministing members’ literate activity as well as various literate activities dispersed across adjacent rhetorical ecologies within the feminist blogosphere, which in turn also shape the literate activity within/of Feministing.

Chapter five highlights three key themes that emerge throughout my dissertation: visibility, amplification, and continua of literate activity. In discussing these three themes, an additional three terms come up—terms that have not yet been focal points but that will guide further research and data collection as I continue to work with this project in the future: the complicated relationship of economics and feminism, embodiment and emotions, and rhetorical listening in digital spaces. In this final chapter I also return to my final research question—where does the literate activity of Feministing seem self-sponsored, and where does it seem community-sponsored (underlying question: can the two be differentiated)?—in order to call feminist writing scholars’ attention to the overly positive and/or vague ways we often use the term “community.” In addition to calling for feminist writing scholars to interrogate their use of the term “community” and to acknowledge the negative aspects of community building, in this chapter I also recommend that feminist writing scholars bring their knowledges of literate activity to the important conversations of feminist history that feminists must continue to have with one another and teach to others.

The work I do in these five chapters overtly builds on Selfe and Hawisher’s work (Literate, which in turn prominently builds on Brandt’s) on literacies of technology and on Sheridan-Rabideau’s work with community-based feminist activism and literate activity. Just as Sheridan-Rabideau’s work with the feminist organization GirlZone examined an offline community organization, my research follows in the vein of her work as a project that, although completed primarily online and over a shorter period of time, seeks to:
• add to the studies of literacy outside of classrooms in order to disrupt “telling cases” that have become commonplace and, consequently, “[flattened] theoretical appraisals that offer predictable answers” (Sheridan-Rabideau 8),
• add to the studies of women’s literate activity that occurs outside of classrooms, and
• mediate “macro and micro levels of analysis by combining a cultural studies approach that examines large-scale political understandings of praxis with cultural-historical approaches that examine the complexities of local praxis” (Sheridan-Rabideau 9).

With this dissertation, then, I build on existing studies of literacies of technology as part of the extracurriculum in writing studies, and I take a technofeminist research approach to do so.

Within this particular niche, I work to address a few gaps. One gap pointed out by Sheridan-Rabideau is that scholars who are studying the extracurriculum have largely focused on work and home but have “paid far less attention to situated studies of community organizations” (3). My research site actually blends work, home, and a community organization, but I still believe my work fits this gap Sheridan-Rabideau has identified. As previously noted, Warnick and Gurak have noted another gap in scholarship about online rhetorics and communities, which is why they call for more contextualized studies of online spaces rather than studies that aim to generalize about all life in online space. Then, as Selfe and Hawisher point out in their studies of literacies of technology (Literate), writing studies scholars have much left to learn about how and why people have acquired and developed these literacies. And then as Blair notes, there is still work to be done in the process of migrating offline goals and methods for studying women’s literacy to digital spaces: “In an era in which women’s literacy experiences are as much online as offline, migrating these goals and the methods accompanying them into virtual spaces is a
priority for technofeminist rhetoricians seeking to make online spaces hospitable to women’s social, professional, and political goals” (“Complicated” 65).

A final gap my study addresses is a familiar one for feminist work, the gap between theory and practice that scholars like bell hooks have argued praxis can fill. By immersing myself in theories of literacy, rhetoric, and feminism and at the same time in the literate activity of Feministing, I inhabit a space of praxis in order to write a dissertation that addresses theory and practice without reinscribing a binaric relationship between the two. Ultimately, I saw that the members of Feministing are using a digital space to foster their advocacy of feminist ideals, and they are relatively well-known for what they do, so I was interested in learning about how they got there—how their lives and positionings within society both fostered and limited their opportunities to develop and even be interested in literacies of technology. In doing this, I was not looking for a simplistic narrative of technological literacy acquisition; rather I wanted—and received—richness, layers, and complexity, which builds on work done by Brandt and by Sheridan-Rabideau, who aim, respectively, to complicate the “myth of literacy” and to “disrupt telling cases” of women’s literacy.
CHAPTER 2: AT THE EPICENTER: METHOD, METHODOLOGY, AND EPISTEMOLOGY

“Because methods are not rigid things written about in books but flexible practices meant to be understood and adapted for present needs, we in writing studies should learn the histories of the methods we adopt, but we should also feel confident to adapt these methods so they are appropriate to our forums, uses, and practices.” (82)  
– Mary Sheridan

“We need to recognize that sometimes things do not go according to plan, and we need to start approaching the research process like we do the writing process: more reflectively and more holistically and with the understanding that maxims and rules may need to be altered to best answer a research question given specific individuals, problems, and contexts.” (266)  
– Rebecca Rickly

It is no secret that scholars studying writing enact a variety of research methods, approaching those methods from different modes of inquiry and applying to them different frameworks for interpretation. These pluralistic, multimodal approaches to research have been well-discussed within the field of writing studies for many years and to various ends (see, for example, Johanek; Kirsch and Sullivan; Lauer; Lauer and Asher; McKee and DeVoss; McKee and Porter; Mortensen and Kirsch; Nickoson and Sheridan; and North). Stephen North, writing in 1987 in his well-known book *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*, focuses on the problematic aspects of the diverse methods within the field. North applies the metaphor of a battle, seeing various “power plays” with one methodological community trying to assert dominance over others. Other scholars in the field, however, focus on the benefits of pluralistic and multimodal research, promoting a variety of best practices to be used as part of any method, mode, or methodology rather than insisting upon any singular approach. For example, Janice Lauer argues for the benefit of focusing on problems rather than particular methods, noting that respect for and use of multiple modes of inquiry will allow researchers to avoid being “trapped in the pretensions of a single mode” and will, instead, “empower” them and “[enable] them better
to investigate the complexity and consequences of written discourse within its academic, social, and political contexts” (54). Similarly, Lisa Ede argues for mutually influential habits of critique, self-reflection in relation to both methods and limitations, and dialogical relationships between theory and practice and between theoreticians and practitioners. Gesa Kirsch provides perhaps the strongest rebuttal to fears of methodological pluralism in claiming, “Only by understanding the nature and assumptions of various research methodologies can scholars and teachers in composition make informed decisions about the relevance, validity, and the value of research reports” (“Multi-vocal” 247–48).

Some of the most recent edited collections dedicated to writing studies research (McKee and DeVoss; Nickoson and Sheridan) continue to show a growing acceptance of multiplicity of methods and methodological frameworks as well as increased attention to studying writing in digital spaces and/or with digital tools. Even in studying a narrowed section of writing studies, as in Heidi McKee and Dânielle DeVoss’ edited collection Digital Writing Research, readers see a variety of methods used (e.g., time-use diaries, experience sampling, and video screen capture) as well as various theoretical frames (e.g., articulation theory, hermeneutic phenomenology, and feminism). Despite the research approach taken, though, all researchers must devote attention and care to methods and methodologies used in planning, carrying out, and writing up research. As Peter Smagorinsky notes, it is not acceptable for a methods section of a research write up to feel as though it were simply tacked on as an “afterthought more than a driving force in authors’ presentations of research reports” (390). Further, attention to research methods and methodologies can provide a solid foundation on which the rest of the research write up can be built.
Following Smagorinsky’s calls for more explicit attention to methods, this chapter explicates my dissertation’s research design, placing my work and voice into ever-evolving conversations of writing studies research. I turn now to discussing research terminology that is fundamental to my own project, which includes situating my research with Feministing as ethnographically informed, technofeminist, and postcritical digital. Using those explanations as a backdrop, I then explain the methods I used to gather data as well as my use of grounded theory to manage that data and to draw conclusions from it.

Research Paradigms

Like Sandra Harding, I differentiate methods, methodologies, and epistemologies. Simply put, methods are techniques used to gather data, such as observing behaviors, interviewing people, or examining archived materials. A methodology is “a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed” (Harding 3). Epistemology is “a theory of knowledge” that “answers questions about who can be a knower . . . what tests beliefs must pass in order to be legitimated as knowledge . . . what kinds of things can be known . . . and so forth” (Harding 3). The distinctions between these three terms are not simple, though. One reason is that a particular theoretical framework a researcher uses (e.g., Marxism, feminism) both affects and is affected by methodology and epistemology, making it difficult to draw clear lines between the terms. Additionally, it is difficult to determine where terms like “theoretical framework,” “worldview,” and “philosophical underpinnings” fit into the larger method-methodology-epistemology frame. Acknowledging these difficulties, I press forward using Harding’s distinctions as a guide and attempting to offer additional explication when possible or necessary. Additionally, I view these terms as well as the boundaries between them as flexible. Like Mary Sheridan and Lee
Nickoson, I view research methods and methodologies as “heuristics, fluid models that can help researchers best address their research needs” (5). I see them not as inflexible things in which to get stuck, but instead as guides to combine and use to help me navigate this messy process of investigating the types of literate activity members of Feministing participate in and how they acquired and developed those practices and what this means for feminist activists and for writing scholars.

At root, this is an ethnographically informed, technofeminist, and postcritical digital research project. Before discussing each of these terms in detail, I wish to provide an overview of my research process. To reach my research goals, I analyzed more than 900 pages of Feministing’s archives (located in Feministing’s archives and/or via the Wayback Machine11), interviewed three members of Feministing’s editorial team, and surveyed registered users12 of the site (for interview questions and the survey instrument, see Appendices B and C respectively). Ultimately, I triangulated the data gathered by these three methods in order to generate my findings. Drawing on grounded theorists’ use of research memos and multiple rounds of data coding, I used a research blog to systematically keep track of my findings, responses, and questions. After having collected these notes and transcripts and continually reading and reflecting on them, I also drew on grounded theory methods to allow themes and patterns to emerge from my data in order to provide for continued narrowing and focus of my coding and analysis.

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11 The WayBack Machine is Internet Archive’s (a non-profit company) project that collects screenshots of over 150 billion websites, dating back to 1996.
12 When I began this study, Feministing had four editors and seven contributors. Editors and contributors are the people who contribute the posts on Feministing’s main page. There are also many other registered users, though, who leave comments on the main page and who contribute to the community or campus blogs also available on the website. I note specifically that I researched with registered users and not just any observer or passerby on the site because in order to comment on the site, one must be logged in, which requires registration.
Ethnographically Informed

“Although ethnography continues to provide powerful resources for understanding the cultures of bounded spaces, virtual experiences oblige a reassessment of some of its practices” (146)

-- Beatrice Smith

I use the term “ethnographically informed” and not “ethnography” in the same way that J. Green and David Bloome characterize it: “using ethnographic tools such as interview, time-activity charts, document content analysis, and digital sound recording, allows for ‘the use of methods and techniques usually associated with fieldwork. These methods may or may not be guided by cultural theories of questions about the social life of group members’” (qtd. in Sheridan “Digging”). Although I have studied the history of ethnography and although my technofeminist approach lends the “cultural theories of questions” about group members’ social lives, because my project did not allow me the full and lengthy immersion ethnography requires, I use the term “ethnographically informed” in hopes of representing my work and intentions more accurately.\(^\text{13}\)

Like much ethnographically informed work, my research is qualitative and empirical. As Bob Broad notes, a typical distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods are that quantitative studies focus on numbers while qualitative ones focus on words. However, Broad also nicely complicates this useful but oversimplified definition in two ways: first, by echoing scholars who argue for the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, and second, by offering examples of how he has used quantitative methods while maintaining his primary allegiance to qualitative work. While my research includes the use of numbers (e.g., how many participants responded a certain way, or how many times a theme occurred in interview transcripts), my emphasis is not on the numbers. To borrow from Broad again, as a qualitative

\(^{13}\) See Sheridan for pithy discussions of the history of ethnography and of critiques trained ethnographers have of writing studies scholars claiming to do ethnography.
researcher, I use “the other kind of data”—numbers—“in ways that are noticeably more basic than, and secondary to, [my] primary methodological commitments and goals” (198). That is, I am more interested in looking beyond the numbers to what surrounds them, to the contexts they are created in and the contexts they create. Additionally, reading quantitative work has shown me that quantitative researchers sometimes focus on terms like “validity” and “reliability” in ways that are not comfortable for me—namely, to suggest that the people conducting the research and the context in which they conduct it are, at worst, insignificant or, at best, less important than agreement amongst numerous researchers.

Broad also discusses what it means for research to be empirical. He explains, “Most of our English studies colleagues take published written texts as their main pool of data . . . for analysis, and this is what distinguishes them as textual-qualitative researchers. By contrast, the data that most keenly interest empirical-qualitative researchers are drawn from things people do, say, and write in day-to-day life” (Broad 199, emphasis in original). Broad articulately sums up my opinion on the divide between textual and empirical when he states,

We cannot usefully distinguish among ourselves according to which kinds of data we use, since we all use both kinds. We can and should, however, be distinguished by the kinds of data and kinds of analyses that lie at the heart of our research projects. Looking into the heart of things, we usefully and meaningfully separate out the context-freeing (objectivist, experimentalist, quantitative) from the context-preserving (interpretive, naturalistic, qualitative) methods of analysis, and among those using words as our chief kind of data, we distinguish the textual researchers from the empirical. (199, emphasis in original)
As with the quantitative-qualitative divide, calling oneself an empirical researcher does not mean that published written texts cannot be used as part of that researcher’s data. The point here is that I distinguish my research from something like literary or textual analysis, not to privilege one approach over the other but rather to more accurately represent my work.

Referring to my work as “qualitative” and “empirical” suggests the largest and vaguest impressions of what lies at the heart of my research, but by referring to it as “ethnographically informed,” I can reveal a more specific picture of what I do and how I represent myself as a researcher. Mary P. Sheridan notes there are various paradigms of ethnographic research that are “shaped by many factors, such as the purpose/questions being asked, the data collected, and the audience expectations for such research (80). She also highlights that despite these varying paradigms, “what most ethnographies share is long-term participation, with information gathered through multiple methods, in order to understand various participants’ perspectives and then to locate these perspectives within larger social, economic, and political forces” (Sheridan 80).

Again, it is largely because my project does not meet the “long-term participation” qualification that I refer to it as ethnographically informed. However, I do gather information through multiple methods—interview, surveys, and observation and analysis of the content on Feministing’s website. Additionally, by reading broadly about feminism, feminist rhetoric, online activism, and technology in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, I place my participants’ perspectives into a larger framework of social, economic, and political forces. Therefore, my project, like Sheridan’s ethnographically informed literacy study with a community organization for young feminists (Sheridan-Rabideau), mediates both macro and micro levels of analysis as I simultaneously attempt to understand the work that members of Feministing do on a personal level as well as how that fits into a larger social picture of feminist activism in the early twenty-
first century. My work has also been informed by the ethnographic work of writing and literacy scholar Shirley Brice Heath—especially in her well-known work *Ways with Words*—who has built on the work of NLS scholars like Brian Street in encouraging writing studies and literacy scholars to move away from autonomous models of literacy toward ideological ones. That is, as Sheridan succinctly puts it, to no longer think that “literacy *in itself* can effect other social and cognitive practices” but rather to see literacy as “a socially situated practice with multiple components—aural, visual, performance, multimodal—that work with and against a range of other social and cognitive practices” (75, emphasis in original). The ethnographic work Heath has done to challenge autonomous models of literacy aligns with my feminist ideals of challenging hierarchies and master narratives.

Of course, my research differs from much well-known ethnographic work in writing studies, such as Heath’s, because the community I study exists primarily online. My experience conducting digital, ethnographically informed research syncs with Beatrice Smith’s argument that while ethnographic work that happens in digital spaces builds on approaches of ethnographies done in non-digital spaces, there are important differences. For one, there are new spaces to negotiate access to and to navigate. In my project, I negotiated access to the *Feministing* community entirely online, so I spent considerable time crafting the documents that would serve as the initial point of contact—my consent documents and the recruiting email and blog post (see Appendices A and D respectively)—in order to portray myself and my work in the most positive and honest way. I struggled to find wording that would build rapport with these feminists I had never met and who knew nothing about me and that would simultaneously satisfy the expectations of HSRB. For instance, in my recruitment email, I initially felt it important to reveal I was also a young adult feminist in hopes of building rapport with *Feministing* editors,
contributors, and members. However, in previous experiences with HSRB review, I knew they typically viewed revealing this sort of information as unnecessary and inappropriate. Therefore, I eventually chose to condense the personal information I revealed about myself in that document in hopes of gaining HSRB approval more quickly so I could move forward with my project.

Negotiating access to participants this way—from afar, solely through digital contact—also made me feel considerably less confident than I have in previous non-digital ethnographically informed research projects where I could negotiate access face to face. To begin this research, I had to contact a variety of possible participants for the type of project I wanted to do, which meant emailing all Feministing editorial team members. Some of them did not list contact information on their Feministing profiles, which required additional Internet searching. Even after finding email addresses for all eleven of them, I had no way of knowing if the addresses were current or how often they checked their email. Receiving no response after a couple weeks, I contacted the editors of another online feminist blog, Feministe, as a potential alternate research site. However, I never received responses from any of them either. It finally occurred to me to contact the Feministing editors and contributors through Twitter, and fortunately, I received responses from several of them rather quickly. During the time I spent waiting to hear from people, though, I was thinking how much more quickly I could have determined if anyone was willing to participate if I had been able to approach them in person.

In addition to negotiating access to people, ethnographers also negotiate access to space. Of course, accessing the space of Feministing’s website did not require negotiation; anyone with Internet access who knew the URL could enter that space. However, I wanted to let editors, contributors, and members know I was conducting this research, even if they were not
participating. While negotiating access to additional spaces such as editors’ and contributors’ emails, their instant message chats, and their annual retreat may have enhanced my project, I feared asking for such access may have jeopardized my ability to gain access to anything other than the main website, as I may have seemed suspicious or malicious. I felt the need to gain participants’ trust first, so for future work, I hope to negotiate access to more of the parts of the community that are, as Jos, one of my interview participants refers to them, more “behind the scenes” (i.e., emails, chats, the annual retreat).

In addition to negotiating access in different ways, conducting ethnographically informed research digitally also requires researchers to navigate different spaces and to navigate space differently. Fieldwork in ethnographic research has traditionally consisted of a researcher visiting with community members in person in shared spaces; however, the Feministing community does not have shared non-digital space. There is no central or shared office even for editors and contributors; instead, they are spread across the United States. While they do have an annual retreat in New York City, I did not know about that event in time to try to negotiate access to it. Further, while editorial team members occasionally run into each other at conferences or other speaking engagements, this was not something I could coordinate or observe firsthand during the time of my research. I did, however, find video footage and written transcripts of some conference presentations they had delivered. Of course, there is far less information available to me in these videos and transcripts than if I had been at the conference with them. Nevertheless, these digital recordings represent important space for my project. Although I cannot say non-digital ethnographically informed work would not have also made use of video recordings and

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14 This desire stems from me viewing my research as primarily person-based rather than text-based. For me, this means that even though posts on feministing.com are public documents, they were not published with the intent of being used in research, so I felt it important to let writers know I was not only viewing their posts as a feminist but also as a researcher hoping to gain permission to use their texts for my own scholarly purposes. For excellent discussion of this complicated issue, see McKee and Porter “Rhetorica Online” pp. 157-64 and Ethics Chapter 4.
typed transcripts, these texts represent a different type of space for my project—space I knew only through the audio and visuals on the video—as well as space that I had to navigate differently (i.e., from afar, in two dimensions, unable to choose where or how to focus). Undoubtedly, then, I read these spaces much differently than I would have if I had been conducting primarily face-to-face research, if I had been at those conferences in person.

An additional difference I encountered was in negotiating the roles of insider and outsider. While I agree with Nancy Naples’ argument that no one is ever entirely an insider or an outsider (Feminism 49–66), I was in many ways an outsider to the Feministing community. Having to introduce myself first as a doctoral student hoping to conduct research within what I assume to be a very personal space to many people certainly positioned me as someone not entirely inside the community, especially because researchers may still be thought of in a more positivist sense as distant, removed, and other. Moreover, by revealing this part of my identity first, others may have assumed that was the part of my identity I most privileged. This concerned me because my own experiences reading about feminist theory and living feminism have demonstrated to me that academic feminists are sometimes viewed suspiciously, seen as not feminist enough or perhaps not the right type of feminist.¹⁵ In fact, this is an opinion that came through during one of my interviews, though I did not perceive the interviewee as intentionally hostile or hurtful. While I suspect this affected the ways I existed along the insider-outsider spectrum, I also suspect being involved solely through digital means affected how I was perceived by my participants, reinforcing the perception that I was, at best, rather distant and

¹⁵ For instance, as bell hooks writes, “By internalizing the false assumption that theory is not a social practice, [some feminists] promote the formation within feminist circles of a potentially oppressive hierarchy where all concrete action is viewed as more important than any theory written or spoken” (65-66). She reveals that she has “[i]n many black settings . . . witnessed the dismissal of intellectuals, the putting down of theory” (66).
removed as someone invisibly observing their space and actions and, at worst, a lurker who was invading their space and privacy.

Technofeminist

“[T]o situate ethnography as a ruin/rune is to foreground the limits and necessary misfirings of its project . . . Placed outside of mastery and victory narratives, ethnography becomes a kind of self-wounding laboratory for discovering the rules by which truth is produced. Attempting to be accountable to complexity, thinking the limit becomes the task, and much opens up in terms of ways to proceed for those who know both too much and too little” (202–03) -- Patti Lather

Because the terms technofeminist, feminist, and cyberfeminist were discussed at length in chapter one, I will not recap that entire discussion here. In sum, a technofeminist framework builds on feminist theoretical and political approaches but calls attention to how technology is embedded in social networks and how technology and social order between the sexes is reciprocally shaped. It also promotes women’s agency and acknowledges feminist politics rather than assigning agency primarily or solely to technology. As Kristine Blair argues, questions that technofeminist researchers must address are, “1) how and why women access technology in their daily lives, 2) what larger material constraints impact that access, and 3) what methods best enable opportunities for women to make their lived experiences with technology more visible” (“Complicated” 65). As someone interested specifically in women’s uses of technology, I label myself a technofeminist researcher. However, because I am also interested more generally in eradicating inequalities based on gender, not always in relation to technology, I switch back and forth between my use of the terms technofeminism and feminism.

As someone who chooses to be feminist in day-to-day life, I find it impossible to separate my research from a feminist framework. That is, feminism is a primary terministic screen
(Burke) through which I see life, so I automatically notice power and gender in what I observe. This recognition is not to suggest a feminist approach is the best approach for this community or data; undoubtedly, others could look at the same community and data I am using and draw different conclusions using different frameworks. Nevertheless, I find a feminist framework compelling because of my larger life goal of challenging inequalities based on gender.

Various definitions of feminist research exist (Fonow and Cook; Harding; Kirsch and Ritchie; Rheinharz), just as various definitions of feminism exist. The following list compiled by writing studies scholar Gesa Kirsch catalogs qualities of feminist research:

- ask research questions which acknowledge and validate women’s experiences;
- collaborate with participants as much as possible so that growth and learning can be mutually beneficial, interactive, and cooperative;
- analyze how social, historical, and cultural factors shape the research site as well as participants’ goals, values, and experiences;
- analyze how the researchers’ identity, experience, training, and theoretical framework shape the research agenda, data analysis, and findings;
- correct androcentric norms by calling into question what has been considered ‘normal’ and what has been regarded as ‘deviant’;
- take responsibility for the representation of others in research reports by assessing probable and actual effects on different audiences; and
- acknowledge the limitations of and contradictions inherent in research data, as well as alternative interpretations of that data (Ethical 4–5)

Additionally, Kirsch and Joy Ritchie explain that feminist researchers take women’s lives and experiences as their focal point while working to positively effect changes in “women’s social
and political realities” (20). Guiding questions include: “Who benefits from the research/theories? What are the possible outcomes of the research and the possible consequences for research participants? Whose interests are at stake? How and to what extent will the research change social realities for research participants?” (Kirsch and Ritchie 20).

As identified in each of these lists, the relationship between the researcher and the research participant is a key concern in feminist research, particularly that the researcher recognizes the potential of the participants both to help shape the project and to benefit from it. Therefore, in my research design, I left space for my research participants to shape my research in ways that are meaningful and beneficial to them and invited them to be as involved as they would like during the recursive phases of data gathering and analyzing.16

In discussing the involvement of research participants, Kirsch draws attention to Thomas Newkirk’s point that researchers often wait until the end of their project to make judgments. Responding to this acknowledgement, Kirsch voices her concern that “by engaging in critique and reflection only in the final report, scholars deny participants the opportunity to receive valuable feedback throughout the research process and to benefit from researchers’ insights and knowledge—the very reasons that motivate many teachers and students to volunteer in research projects in the first place” (Ethical 28). Kirsch’s point about participants’ motivation applies even though I am not researching with students and teachers because not only did I want to offer participants a chance to benefit from my insights and knowledge as I went, but I also wanted to offer them the opportunity to actively co-construct this knowledge with me, which I feel benefits them and me. Therefore, I made my developing judgments and findings available to my participants.

16 In fact, I sent an email to the editors and contributors who agreed to participate to ask them explicitly how I might shape my project in ways that would be beneficial for them and/or for Feministing. Unfortunately, I received no responses. Additionally, at this point, my participants have not yet requested or suggested any ways I might reshape the project to greater benefit them. I hope to continue working with Feministing in the future and to get more feedback about how my work can benefit them, too.
participants by keeping a public research blog and inviting participants to view and comment on it as they would like throughout my research process. At the same time, I kept in mind that my participants’ time was already limited. My use of a blog was intended to be a convenient and unobtrusive way to share my findings with participants, especially because they were already familiar with blogs and did not need to invest additional time and energy to learning how to read and respond to my research blog, and because they could check the blog as much or as little as they chose. Additionally, I invited participants to contact me at any time with additional comments or questions, sent the editors and contributors transcripts of our interview to comment on or make changes to, sent follow-up emails to clarify things as necessary, and established a connection with some of the editors and contributors on Twitter.

Another concern in feminist research arises in relation to a perceived lack of objectivity. Donna Haraway addresses concerns that feminist research is not objective at all or not objective enough because of its admission of researcher positionality and subsequent influence on research. For Haraway, though, these concerns about objectivity are unfounded because those claiming to be objective are, instead, falsely alleging the ability to entirely remove themselves from a situation and to view it without interest or investment. Instead of pretending to be able to do this or even that to be able to do this would be desirable, Haraway argues for acknowledging partial, situated knowledges:

We seek those ruled by partial sight and limited voice—not partiality for its own sake but, rather, for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible. Situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals. The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular. The science question in feminism is about objectivity as positioned
rationality. Its images are not the products of escape and transcendence of limits (the view from above) but the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position that promises a vision of the means of ongoing finite embodiment, of living within limits and contradictions—of views from somewhere. (“Situated,” 590, emphasis added)

Like Haraway, I do not pretend to be able to remove myself from feminism or my interest in Feministing and other recent attempts to reinvigorate feminist and social justice activism. We are indeed all somewhere in particular whether we like it or not. Moreover, I do not see that as harmful to my project; rather, I see it as inevitable influence. At the same time, however, I have taken care throughout my work to consider multiple perspectives and points of view, seeking out a range of positive and negative reactions to and portrayals of feminism, feminists, and Feministing. I reemphasize Haraway’s understanding of objectivity as positioned rationality and find beneficial the understanding that we all present and represent views from somewhere, as we all live within limits and contradictions.

Ethnographic and Technofeminist Approaches: Limitations when Combined

“To split yourself in two is just the most radical thing you can do”
-- Ani DiFranco

“Like ‘poems,’ which are sites of literacy production where language too is an actor independent of intentions and authors, bodies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic generative nodes. Their boundaries materialize in social interaction. Boundaries are drawn by mapping practices; ‘objects’ do not preexist as such. Objects are boundary projects. But boundaries shift from within; boundaries are very tricky. What boundaries provisionally contain remains generative, productive of meanings and bodies. Siting (sighting) boundaries is a risky practice” (“Situated,” 595, emphasis in original)
-- Donna Haraway
Ethnography, as it has developed into something that complicates the insider/outsider binary (Naples) and the straightforward-seeming nature of research (Lather), appeals to me as a feminist researcher working to complicate master narratives in general and especially master narratives about literacy acquisition and development in particular. However, combining ethnographic/ethnographically informed methods and feminist methodologies, while not new (e.g., Kirsch; Lather; Naples; Sheridan-Rabideau), remains difficult, particularly considering researcher-participants relationships. Katrina Powell and Pamela Takayoshi reveal some of this difficulty in quoting Diane Wolf: “Fieldwork as a research method poses particular challenges for feminists because of the power relations inherent in the process of gathering data and implicit in the process of ethnographic representation” (407). Furthermore, Powell and Takayoshi demonstrate how feminist researchers’ attempts to create collaborative projects informed by the participants sometimes end up reinscribing power relations. On the whole, feminist researchers wish to create “nonhierarchical, reciprocal relationship[s] in which both researcher and researched learn from one another and have a voice in the study” because of their desire to “[eliminate] power inequalities between researchers and participants” and because of “a concern for the difficulties of speaking for ‘the other’” (Powell and Takayoshi 395). Yet difficulties arise, Powell and Takayoshi explain, when researchers cannot think outside of their predetermined roles for their participants, when the researchers are unwilling to form relationships with participants that are truly reciprocal rather than merely collaborative. The relationship between researcher and research participants, then, cannot be treated as “another variable for [the researcher] to control” (Powell and Takayoshi 404).

As Powell and Takayoshi and others (e.g., Lather; Naples) have demonstrated, despite feminist researchers’ good intentions, the difficulties and tensions inherent in feminist
ethnographic research remain. This was especially obvious in my own research in that no matter what I did, I was always the researcher, always the one who would be writing up a dissertation based on my research, and I was always uncomfortably aware of inhabiting this role. I was uncomfortably aware I would ultimately be the one speaking about and for this community, and like Linda Alcoff, I continually had reservations about my right and ability to do so. Importantly, I do not speak for these people because they are unable to do so for themselves nor do I speak for them to keep them from speaking. Feministing members have a very public presence and have worked hard to make their own and other young feminists’ voices heard. Moreover, these are intelligent, hard-working feminists, so in purporting to speak for and about them, I worry it may appear that I want to disempower them by implying that their own voices were not enough—that an academic text was needed, and that an academic needed to come in and start drawing boundaries to make sense of things. I cannot deny that I have done these things; I have come in and drawn boundaries in creating and carrying out this research project. Like Haraway, though, I recognize that as the one sighting/siting the boundaries for this project, I am engaged in a risky practice. A goal, then, has been to remain focused on the provisionally generative and productive aspects of these boundaries by remembering that boundaries are always shifting and that boundaries vary depending on who is drawing the map. In other words—words more postmodern and feminist—there is no Master Map, meaning there is no Master Theory that can explain everything. No matter what methods or methodologies one uses, there are limitations, things that remain unseen or overlooked. For me, as for Haraway and other feminist researchers, this lack of homogeneous view is not lamentable; rather we attain “objectivity” in our research when we not only recognize the presence of many partial, situated truths and our own positionality in relation to forming and understanding but also when we compare those truths with others’ truths. Like
Haraway, I argue for emphases on vision, splitting, and situated knowledges. As she eloquently argues:

The split and contradictory self is the one who can interrogate positionings and be accountable, the one who can construct and join rational conversations and fantastic imaginings that change history. Splitting, not being, is the privileged image for feminist epistemologies of scientific knowledge. “Splitting” in this context should be about heterogeneous multiplicities that are simultaneously salient and incapable of being squashed into isomorphic slots or cumulative lists. This geometry pertains within and among subjects. Subjectivity is multidimensional; so, therefore, is vision. The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another. (Haraway, “Situated,” 586, emphasis in original)

In spite of reservations about speaking for other members of the Feministing community, then, I work to combine voices and compare visions and truths. This is why I insisted on having interviews and surveys in addition to my own analyses and points of view, and it is why I insist on including many others’ words and voices in my work.

Yet as Kirsch argues, multi-vocal and collaboratively authored texts introduce problems of their own for feminist researchers (“Multi-vocal”). For instance, Takayoshi cautions writing studies scholars against essentialist notions of women and uncomplicated, uninterrogated, or incomplete stories of women’s interactions with computers. Takayoshi is particularly concerned about stories, reminding us of Kirsch and Ritchie’s claim that “researchers ‘need to recognize the
impossibility of ever fully understanding another’s experiences and to question their motives in gathering, selecting, and presenting these stories”” (Takayoshi 129). Therefore, Takayoshi calls for multiple versions of stories and, more importantly, for the use of stories as heuristics rather than as supposedly tidy or totalizing explanations. This was something I had in mind when seeking multiple participants to provide multiple stories so that I could triangulate observations, surveys, and interviews. However, I knew including multiple voices was not a simple solution to the complicated problems of authority and authorship. On the one hand, I wanted my text to be multi-vocal, knowing it would not be possible to write it collaboratively at this point, because that seemed like a way to be respectfully, postmodern-ly feminist in my research practices. Yet at the same time, I recognize that in making this work multi-vocal, I am still the one choosing the multiple voices to include as well as which of their comments to give space to. I am less troubled by one of Kirsch’s primary concerns, though, which is that authors of multi-vocal texts may be putting too much interpretive responsibility on their readers. Why I am less concerned is partly due to the thick descriptions required by ethnographically informed work and partly due to the analytical work required by grounded theory. However, like Haraway again, I recognize that no matter how many voices I put into this text, each one would remain situated and limited. And although I have taken responsibility for presenting and representing my participants and their voices here, this is not the only place these voices exist; these people also speak for and about themselves outside the context of my research, which readers can explore on the Feministing website as well as numerous other publications about and/or by these feminists.

_Postcritical Digital_
“For the study of writing technologies, we advocate a view of research as a set of critical and reflective practices (praxis) that are sensitive to the rhetorical situatedness of participants and technologies and that recognize themselves as a form of political and ethical action” (ix) -- Patricia Sullivan and James Porter

“Pursuing ethical research practices involves a continuous process of inquiry, interaction, and revision throughout an entire research study, one involving and inviting regular critique; interaction and communication with various communities; and heuristic, self-introspective challenging of one’s assumptions, theories, designs, and practices” (28) -- Heidi McKee and James Porter

Just as moving ethnographic work into digital spaces requires reconsideration of research methods, so too does studying feminist rhetorical practices on the web call for reconsideration and reshaping of methods. To do so, my work blends two approaches of writing studies scholars: Patricia Sullivan and James Porter’s postcritical methodology and Heidi McKee and James Porter’s rhetoric- and casuistry-based Internet research ethics (IRE). The earlier instance of this reinvention of methods and methodologies—Sullivan and Porter’s work on postcritical methodology in *Opening Spaces: Writing Technologies and Critical Research Practices*—was an attempt to encourage more collaboration between three camps of writing studies scholars: computers and composition, professional writing, and rhetoric theory/history. Sullivan and Porter’s book was largely an argument for the importance of studying writing technologies and for doing so with methodologies that are rhetorical and see “critical practice (or praxis) as key to the development of knowledge” (10). Porter later summarized the goal of that book as “an invitation—a plea—for computers and writing researchers to reinvent method in ways that would allow them to conduct nuanced, complex, and useful studies” (xv). In order to do so, he argues, “You have to begin by massaging, adapting, reshaping, and remaking both the methods and the methodologies—and to do that you have to be critically self-reflective about methodology” (Porter xv). In explaining postcritical research, Sullivan and Porter argue that it “does not have...
an a priori aim in mind” (42), by which they mean that there is no desired ending established at the beginning of the project; rather, the end emerges as the researcher and the participants work together to define it throughout the research process.

Key components of Sullivan and Porter’s methodology are reflexiveness and situatedness, or contextualization. As the quote that opens this section illustrates, Sullivan and Porter emphasize critical and reflective practices that attend to rhetorical situatedness and acknowledge politics and ethics. Furthermore, they stress that “this research perspective sees knowledge as local, as contingent, and as grounded not in universal structures but in local, situated practices” (Sullivan and Porter 10). Research is “a set of critical and reflective practices (praxis)” in that theory/theorizing is an integral component of it17 and that researchers remain “vigilant,” constantly interrogating things such as their own positioning and motivation, valences of power, divisions of labor, material conditions, and historical dimensions. In other words, the researcher vigilantly contextualizes, as fully as possible, the entire situation under study. Sullivan and Porter also carefully acknowledge that “critical” moves beyond typically negative criticism and, instead, involves “critical reflection, challenge, and then positive action” (21). This leads into the latter part of the first definition of their methodology cited above, which is that this approach recognizes itself as a form of political and ethical action.

The emphasis on not having an a priori aim in mind fits well with a grounded theory approach to data analysis. And while postcritical digital methodology does not exactly meet the criteria for feminist research summarized above (Blair and Tulley; Harding; Kirsch and Ritchie; Kirsch), particularly because it does not emphasize women, it certainly aligns with feminist and technofeminist research methodologies. For instance, postcritical research “problematises

17 This understanding is used to challenge the binary Sullivan and Porter argue is often constructed between empirical research (taking knowledge generation as its aim) and critical theory (taking critique as its aim); their methodology argues for integration of the two.
agency” by recognizing “multiple and shifting subjectivities that enable opportunities for change, at least at local levels” (42). Also aligned with feminist and technofeminist methodologies are the ethical and political aims Sullivan and Porter have outlined: “respect difference,” “care for others,” “promote access to rhetorical procedures enabling justice,” and “liberate the oppressed through empowerment of participants” (110–28). Sullivan and Porter distinguish their work from feminist work, however, in noting their belief that feminist researchers are not always self-critical or ironic, which they identify as “key components to [their] notion of praxis” (63). They also argue feminist researchers generally lack the type of continuous, reflective critique they feel is necessary for postcritical digital research.

Porter builds on his methodological work with Sullivan in his collaborative work with Heidi McKee, particularly in their book *The Ethics of Internet Research: A Rhetorical, Case-Based Process*. In this text, McKee and Porter argue for the applicability of rhetoric and casuistry in approaching Internet-based research, which they argue is inherently ethically complex. While arguing IRE must be approached rhetorically and with case-by-case considerations, McKee and Porter also provide heuristics (based in rhetoric and in casuistic ethics) they believe will be widely applicable for Internet researchers, from the inception of a research project to its write up. They argue rhetorical approaches lend “an emphasis on situational context . . . and on the discursive interactions and communication exchanges between stakeholders” as well as offer “analytic procedures called heuristics that assist the discovery of arguments” (McKee and Porter 13). Casuistry, then, adds “a practical mechanism for addressing complex issues by helping to distinguish between clear-cut matters (paradigmatic cases) and more sticky problems, and between general principles and their application to particular circumstances” (McKee and Porter 13). Recognizing the limitations of all methods and
methodologies, McKee and Porter add that although IRE should be largely influenced by rhetoric and casuistry, it also needs “the corrective perspectives of feminist and critical theory, which acknowledge the power differentials and oppressive ideologies present in any communication situation” (13).

In short, this scholarship on digital research methods calls for complicated, multi-faceted understandings of the relationships between people and technology as well as critical, reflexive stances toward methodology. These approaches fit well with the ethnographically informed, technofeminist, grounded theory framework I have constructed, yet they also offer additional criteria or add emphasis to existing criteria. Adding Sullivan and Porter’s work with postcritical methodology to my framework places more explicit attention on self-critical, reflective critique and on writing technologies within critical rhetorical theory. Adding McKee and Porter’s work on IRE emphasizes the rhetorical nature of research and provides numerous useful heuristics to guide me through complicated issues such as determining how public and private certain aspects of my research site are, what role I inhabit as researcher, and who my various audiences may be.

**Gathering Data**

While writing studies scholars are currently quite accepting of varied methods and methodologies, they are not accepting of neglected or ill-conceived connections across the various parts of research (i.e., theoretical framework, methods, analysis, interpretation, findings). As Smagorinsky writes, “One of the most prevalent problems I find in manuscripts that I review is a lack of alignment across the major sections of the paper” (405). And even though scholars like Broad argue that we should acknowledge the role a researcher’s “passion” plays in selecting specific methods, Broad and others maintain that another important aspect of the methods
researchers choose is the ability those methods have to answer the researchers’ questions. Table 2.1, then, provides a visible correlation of my research questions, as listed in chapter one, and the research methods I used to collect data. Following the table, each of these methods is discussed in more detail.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions (RQ)</th>
<th>Data Needed to Answer RQ</th>
<th>Methods of Data Collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What is the range of literate activity that occurs on <em>Feministing</em>?</td>
<td>• Firsthand observation of texts created/used by the group</td>
<td>• Interviews with <em>Feministing</em> editors and contributors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What literate activities of the <em>Feministing</em> community occur that I cannot “see” on their website (i.e., are not happening via text—broadly writ—posted to feministing.com)?</td>
<td>• Opinions of people in the group on what texts they create/use</td>
<td>• Surveys completed by registered <em>Feministing</em> members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <em>Feministing</em> community members’ discussion of literate activity connected to <em>Feministing</em> but not posted on the website</td>
<td>• Observation and analysis of texts and activities on <em>Feministing</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What are the impetuses for (exigency) this literate activity?</td>
<td>• Firsthand observation of what is produced and why</td>
<td>• All listed for RQ 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Opinions of people in the group</td>
<td>• Secondary research on literate activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Previous scholarship (on socio-historical present and perhaps also historical exigencies for feminist literate activity)</td>
<td>• Secondary research on feminism, particularly regarding textuality, and technology (broadly) and the Internet (specifically)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What aspects of this community as well as society more broadly foster and delimit contributors’ literate</td>
<td>• Firsthand observation of what is produced and why</td>
<td>• Secondary research on online activism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Opinions of people in the group</td>
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activity?

5. How do these aspects foster and/or delimit contributors’ literate activity?

- Previous scholarship (on community and literacy/rhetoric)

- Attempts to differentiate between/better understand “self-sponsored” and “community-sponsored” literate activities

- Previous scholarship on the extracurriculum and self-sponsored writing

- All listed for RQ 1

- Secondary research on extracurricular and community writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2.1. Aligning Research Questions with Methods</th>
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</thead>
</table>

**Interviews**

One of the methods I used to collect data was interviewing. In particular, I interviewed one editor and two contributors from *Feministing* for approximately one hour each. I contacted all editors and contributors for recruitment in two ways: 1) through email and 2) through Twitter. Some declined, indicating they did not have time, some never responded, and four people expressed interest in participating. For those who were interested, I sent them a consent form and my set of interview questions (Appendix B) so they could decide if and how they would like to be interviewed. My first interview was a phone interview with contributor Pamela Merritt, aka “Shark-Fu,” my second was with editor Jos Truitt, and my third was with contributor Anna Sterling. Pamela is a thirty-nine year old black, working class, queer, Midwestern American. In addition to writing for *Feministing* for the past four years, her full-time job is as an e-organizer for Planned Parenthood, and she also writes for her own blog (http://angryblackbitch.blogspot.com/); does freelance writing for *The Guardian, Salon, and The*
Chicago Sun Times; is a staff writer for RH Reality Check; and is a contributor to Shakesville’s “Shakespeare’s Sister.” Jos is a white, trans woman, queer, feminist and social justice blogger, and community organizer who is twenty-seven and who, in addition to editing for Feministing for the past year, is also a full-time graduate student and regularly takes part in public speaking events, such as conferences and school and community events. Anna is a twenty-four year old Filipino woman from the Bay area who also works as a bartender and was just beginning a new internship at the time of our interview.

With Pamela and Jos’s permission, I recorded our interviews using Recorder, an iPhone application created to record phone conversations. The Recorder application allowed me to download our conversations as digital files, which I could then play back in order to transcribe the conversation. My interview with Anna was also conducted over the phone, but there were technical problems with the Recorder application, so I was unable to retrieve and transcribe her interview in its entirety. After transcribing Pamela’s and Jos’s interviews and writing up detailed notes of Anna’s interview, I sent the transcripts/notes to my interview partners to read over and make any corrections, clarifications, or other desired follow-up actions. I also immediately reflected on the interviews in my research blog, which, as previously noted, is something accessible to my participants, too. This sharing of information and request for participants’ input stems from my feminist proclivity for the co-construction of knowledge and from my feminist understanding that I do not “own” the data or the knowledge created from it nor am I any more capable of theorizing about it than are my participants. All interviews were semi-structured (as opposed to structured or unstructured) so that I had a list of questions prepared in advance—with a combination of open and closed questions, leaving room for participants to provide as much detail as they desired—and had spent time carefully considering how I wanted the interview to
go. Additionally, I began with the same set of questions for each interview; however, due to time constraints and how the conversations went, I did not end up asking exactly the same questions to each participant. For instance, when talking with Jos, her response to an early question already answered my later question “What do you feel are the best aspects or parts of Feministing, and why,” so I did not ask her that question again where it appeared in my interview script.

Part of my reasoning for conducting semi-structured interviews is that I felt it important to have a sense of where the interview would go, but I did not want to have to stick exactly to the script in case I wanted to ask follow-up questions or stray from the prepared set of questions as time and conversational content suggested I should. I did not use the more open-ended, conversational interview approach feminist writing studies scholars Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher (“Exceeding”) promote for a few reasons. First, I knew I would likely have only one relatively short interview with my participants, and I wanted to ensure I included questions that would get at what I was most curious about. Also, I assumed using a semi-structured interview script would make it easier for me to listen during the interview, knowing where the interview was headed rather than constantly worrying about forgetting to ask something important. Additionally, I wanted to respect the time of the people I interviewed, and I assumed a semi-structured interview would allow for a more focused and coherent conversation.

My interview approach draws on the argument Selfe and Hawisher make for “structured or semi-structured” interviews that are constructed “as conversations . . . in which all participants—researchers and informants—understand that they are engaged in mutually shaping meaning and that such meaning necessarily is local, fragmentary, and contingent” (36, “Exceeding,” emphasis in original). They argue these types of interviews produce the “intimate and richly situated information” that provides the “powerful, vernacular sense of what social
change looks like from the perspective of individuals in their own experiences and lives, in their relations with other humans” (Selfe and Hawisher, “Exceeding,” 36). Like Selfe and Hawisher, I believe this type of collaboratively generated, “intimate and richly situated” data challenges what has been called by Haraway the “god trick” and by Susan Bordo the “God’s eye view.” As Patricia Sullivan explains, Bordo uses the term “God’s eye view” to explain a perspective that does not exist to researchers; by this she means that no one’s view is ever “undistorted by human perspective” (Bordo qtd. in Sullivan 56). Similarly, Kevin Eric DePew quotes Haraway’s definition of her term “god trick,” a likewise unavailable view, which she defines as “the standpoint of the master, the Man, the One God, whose eye produces, appropriates, and orders all of indifference” (54). DePew adds that the god trick is often “the absence of methodological self-awareness” (54), which he uses to support his argument that the single research method of textual analysis is not sufficient for understanding digital texts. Instead of relying only on my own interpretations of the text posted on Feministing’s website, I saw it as necessary to engage with editors and contributors about their writing and the contexts in which they write. In triangulating my own perceptions with what my interview participants shared with me, I have attempted to usefully subvert parts of traditional research—such as the “God’s eye view” and the “god trick,” which feminist researchers have now long critiqued.

**Surveys**

Surveying members of the Feministing community serves as an additional source of data that can be triangulated in order to disrupt the “God’s eye view” and “god trick.” As Daniel Anderson, Anthony Atkins, Cheryl Ball, Krista Homicz Millar, Cynthia Selfe, and Richard Selfe acknowledge in their article “Integrating Multimodality into Composition Curricula: Survey
Methodology and Results from a CCCC Research Grant,” composition researchers (a part of the larger field of writing studies) have conducted hundreds of surveys in order “to answer a range of questions, gathering information about a large population by questioning a smaller sample” (60). They also note in their discussion of two large-scale survey studies that, like all research methods, surveys have their strengths and weaknesses, which they discuss in light of questions Janice Lauer and William Asher asked about survey studies: “who is the population, what methods were used for sampling, how were the questions theorized and written, what kind of data was collected, how many from the sample responded, and what conclusions can be drawn from the data?” (Anderson et al. 61). I turn now to addressing my survey in relation to these questions, saving the conclusions to be drawn for later chapters.

The population for my survey is registered members of the Feministing community. As mentioned in chapter one, it is not clear how many people are members of Feministing. While Vanessa Valenti states that Feministing has “become the largest feminist community in the world with over 500,000 unique readers every month,” a “reader” and a “member” are not the same thing. Anyone with an Internet connection and screen could be a reader, but in order to post to the website, one must be a registered member. And for the purposes of this study, I was interested in finding out more about the people who have gone through the act of registering as members of the Feministing community, which does not necessarily include everyone who reads the page, as many read the page simply to get an idea of a feminist view on current issues or to criticize feminists. All of this was important information when considering how I would select survey participants. Because I could not ascertain information about all registered users, I could not select a probability sample; that is, I could not select survey respondents who would be representative of the entire population of Feministing members. Additional reasons I could not
use a probability sample were that my only means of contacting members was through
*Feministing*, and I had nothing to offer them for their participation in my survey. Therefore, my
sample relied on volunteers, who I solicited by posting an initial call for survey participation to
*Feministing’s* Community blog on April 12, 2012 and through follow-up calls on May 7, 2012
and August 22, 2012 (for recruitment post see Appendix D).

Initially, seven people responded, and in total, I ended up with fourteen respondents.
Even without knowing the total number of registered users, one can assume this is not a
statistically significant sample size. However, this is not a problem for the type of claims I want
to make. Rather than using the survey responses in attempts to convey some conclusive Truth
about all *Feministing* members, I use these surveys as additional means to complicate my own
readings of text on the *Feministing* website and of the text from the interviews with the editors
and contributors.

While not statistically significant for making claims about all *Feministing* community
members, my respondents do represent diversity in age, nationality, gender, sexuality, and
occupation. Respondents ranged in age from twenty-one to fifty (Figure 2.1). Respondents’
nationalities included American, British, Canadian, and Indian (Figure 2.2). Gender included cis
female, lesbian, female, cis male, male, and two people who identified as female or woman but
with follow-up explanation including, “I try not to, often selecting ‘other’ when the option is
available. When pressed, I choose female identified,” and “I am a woman” with the explanation,
“I feel like I have to modify what that means. When I say I’m a woman, I mean I am an

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18 It’s worth noting that the number of people who read the “Community” page is likely much lower than the
number of people who read the main page. One reason is that accessing the “Community” page requires one to click
on the appropriate link to navigate there. Another reason is that the “Community” page was added after the main
page had already been established for some time, so some may still be unaware of it or may not have integrated it
into their reading habits. Additionally, my survey respondents indicated accessing the main page much more
frequently than the “Community” page.
educated, straight, mostly self-sufficient, liberal woman” (Figure 2.3). Occupations varied, including a lawyer, students, a domestic worker, an AmeriCorps VISTA, a sales representative, a software engineer, a charity worker, an environmental professional, a special education teacher, a temporary employee, and someone in travel publishing.

Figure 2.2 Number of Survey Respondents Correlated with Age
Figure 2.3 Survey Respondents’ Nationalities

Figure 2.4 Survey Respondents’ Genders
Observation

The third way I collected data for triangulation was through observations and analysis of texts (broadly defined to include alphabetic text as well as visual and aural components and to include main posts as well as comments) posted to Feministing. Based on my calculations, Feministing editors and contributors have been posting an average of 151 times per month over the past 94 months, since April 2004. However, this average number only accounts for posts on the main Feministing page, not those on the “Community” or “Campus” pages. Because of the time constraints of this project, it was not in my ability to read and code all text on the Feministing site. Therefore, I used Random.org (http://www.random.org) to generate a random sampling of fifty dates between April 12, 2004 (the date of the first post on Feministing) and May 31, 2012, to use for my coding and analysis (for the list of dates, see Appendix E). I excluded Saturdays and Sundays from the list of dates that could be chosen as there is typically only one post per day on Saturdays and Sundays.

As mentioned previously, recruiting participants for surveys and interviews was not easy, but for me, it was a crucial piece of this research project. Like DePew, I believe triangulation strategies are “conducive and desirable for studying multiple features of a rhetorical situation, especially for digital writing studies” (52). That is, instead of relying solely on the researcher’s close reading of the products of some communicative situation, digital research is enhanced when it also considers “the rhetor’s intentions,” “the audiences’ response to the text,” and “how local contexts shape this interaction” (DePew 52). Although there is more than enough text on the Feministing website I could have focused on solely, I support DePew’s argument that we should also find ways to consider the rhetor’s intentions (addressed through interviews), the audiences’ response to the text (addressed through surveys), and how local contexts shape this
interaction (addressed through interviews, surveys, and secondary research). Like Selfe and 
Hawisher (*Literate Lives*), I also found it important to consider the larger contexts of *Feministing*
community members’ lives and use of writing technologies, which is another reason the 
interviews and surveys were vital. This triangulation of data contributes to my feminist approach 
in that it allows me to privilege voices other than my own and to present multiple points of view 
that may not always be in agreement, portraying a more complicated and nuanced view of 
*Feministing* and of feminist activism’s use of writing technologies.

**Analyzing and Interpreting Data: Grounded Theory, Coding**

“I am seeking ‘a fertile space and ethical practice in asking how research based knowledge 
remains possible after so much questioning of the very ground of science’ . . . I believe that in 
feminist hands [grounded theory] . . . can help provide such fertile spaces and ethical practices” 
(“Feminism” 361)

-- Adele Clark

Like other writing studies scholars (e.g., Brandt; Broad; Neff) who seek to analyze and 
interpret data in a way that is systematic and lends credibility to my ethos, I turned to grounded 
theory. As Broad explains, grounded theory offers “the critical and creative leeway favored by 
humanistic and textual researchers while also providing the analytical transparency and the 
rigorous validation processes characteristic of traditional, quantitatively oriented, experimentalist 
methods” (204). Much more has been written about grounded theory than I have space for (see 
Charmaz; Glaser and Strauss; and Strauss and Corbin), so I will offer brief definition, generally 
explain what grounded theory entails, and discuss specifically how I employed it.

As Joyce Neff explains, grounded theory is a “systematic methodology for qualitative 
research and for the ‘discovery of theory from data’” (125). It is iterative and reflexive and 
involves multiple rounds of data coding because the researcher is hoping to group data and name
their relationships after finding the groups of categories of findings that emerge from the data. In addition to coding data, researchers taking a grounded theory approach also compose research memos. As Corbin and Strauss explain, “memos are the running logs of analytic thinking; they are the storehouses of ideas generated through interaction with the data” (108). Grounded theory originated in the 1960s, and at this point has various iterations. However, Melanie Birks and Jane Mills note that grounded theory is typically chosen by researchers who intend to “generate theory that explains a phenomenon of interest,” when the purpose of the study is to move “beyond simple description through exploration” to explanation (17). Birks and Mills also identify nine key features of a general grounded theory research design, which include:

- initial coding and categorization of data
- concurrent data generation or collection and analysis
- writing memos
- theoretical sampling
- constant comparative analysis using inductive and abductive logic
- theoretical sensitivity
- intermediate coding
- selecting a core category
- advanced coding and theoretical integration (9–12).

In my own work, I have enacted most of these processes, but I have also leaned toward a situational analysis approach to grounded theory as laid out by Adele Clarke (“Situational”). I will briefly recount these processes and describe how I infused them with situational analysis.

Once I gathered my data through interviews, surveys, and observation of archived text, I read through everything and, using the comments function in Word, annotated the text,
beginning to create initial codes and categories. This did not happen as concurrently as I would have liked if I’d had the chance to conduct more than one interview with each participant. As I was coding, I was also writing memos in my research blog and in additional Word documents. There were, of course, far more codes generated than I could focus on in this project alone, but as I moved into the intermediate coding phase, I began to focus on themes that seemed most compelling to me and/or my participants. Themes that were most compelling to me (discussed in chapters three and four) undoubtedly were influenced by my positioning as well as by the methodologies I had identified for this project. I had not initially chosen to rhetorical genealogy and rhetorical ecology as definite frameworks for this project, but as my codes developed, these theories seem well suited for what I was finding; I felt these theoretical frameworks would help me to understand and explain what I was seeing. As I explain in chapter five, however, additional themes emerged throughout the process of reflecting on this project. Therefore, in future work, I look forward to employing theoretical sampling to gather additional data about those emergent themes.

In addition to grounded theory, I drew on Adele Clarke’s situational analysis, which she developed as a more postmodern version of grounded theory intended to disrupt grounded theory’s lingering “positivistic recalcitrancies” (“Situational” xxi). As Clarke explains, situational analysis uses three guiding approaches:

1. **Situational maps** that lay out the major human, nonhuman, discursive, and other elements in the research situation of inquiry and provoke analysis of relations among them;
2. **Social worlds/arenas maps** that lay out the collective actors, key nonhuman elements, and the arena(s) of commitment and discourse
within which they are engage in ongoing negotiations—meso-level interpretations of the situation; and

3. **Positional maps** that lay out the major positions taken, and *not* taken, in the data vis-à-vis particular axes of difference, concern, and controversy around issues in the situation of inquiry. ("Situational" xxii, emphases in original)

Clarke describes situational analysis as an approach meant to supplement traditional grounded theory approaches, specifically in order to “[enhance] our capacities to do incisive studies of differences of perspective, of highly complex situations of action and positionality, of the heterogeneous discourses in which we are all constantly awash, and of the situated knowledges of life itself thereby produced” ("Situational" xxiii). Importantly, situational analysis aims to simultaneously address voices and discourses—“narrative, visual, and historical” ("Situational" xxxii)—as well as the materialities that surround them and the histories and power dynamics in which they are situated. As its outcome, situational analysis aims to produce “thick analyses” to parallel the “thick descriptions” ethnographers have long sought to produce. Like postcritical and feminist and methodologies, situational analysis also emphasizes reflexivity and partiality (in recognizing all views as partial and also recognizing the researchers’ partialities). Further, situational analysis posits, “*The conditions of the situation are in* the situation. There is no such thing as ‘context.’ The conditional elements of the situation need to be specified in the analysis of the situation itself as they are constitutive of it, not merely surrounding it or framing it or contributing to it. They *are* it” ("Situational" 71, emphases and bold in original). This view fits well with a technofeminist emphasis on the reciprocal shaping of technology and society.
In addition to the grounded theory steps I detailed above, then, I also employed mapping strategies of situational analysis. Drawing on white boards, using digital tools, and by hand, I created maps to help me make sense of the various actors, visuals, texts, histories, and nonhuman elements involved in the situation I studied—*Feministing* members’ acts of performing feminist activism and carrying out various literate activities from 2004–2012 (see chapter four, Figure 4.4, for example).

A primary reason I use a grounded theory/situational analysis approach is because it encouraged me to begin my project with well-defined questions but discouraged me from entering my research with predetermined notions of what I will find. Further, it pushed me to remain attentive to my participants’ ideas and points of view alongside my own discovering. I agree with Broad in his assertion that:

> [g]rounded theory is the qualitative method that does the best job . . . of meeting qualitative researchers’ most urgent responsibility: to actively seek out interpretations contrary to what they might have hoped or expected to find, and to ensure that interpretations and findings are “emic,” that is, that they are deeply rooted in the interpretive framework(s) of research participants. (204)

However, the use of grounded theory is not immune from critique. Without naming it as such, Smagorinsky critiques the way that researchers write up their explanation of using grounded theory to code and analyze data. He likens the generic write up he frequently sees—“In the first reading, I generated provisional categories to guide my subsequent readings. Then, I read the data and refined these categories, looking for themes and patterns. Upon further reading I created the ultimate categories used for the analysis. And now, my Results” (393)—to a useless recipe that could be for “a casserole or a pie” which could have “spices that are Indian or Thai” and
could be heated in “an oven or a fondue pot, or much else” (393). His concern, then, is with explication to the details of each step, especially in how codes were selected and refined, which I have already addressed in the previous paragraph.

Another concern about the coding in grounded theory sometimes comes in the form of questioned reliability—how reliable and valid are the codes? To address this concern, some grounded theorists train another person in their coding system, have that person code a subset of the data, and then check to see how much agreement exists between the two coded sets of data. Smagorinsky claims this is an appropriate measure, one that he uses, with scarce mention of poststructuralist critiques, like Harding’s, that this is yet another move toward the “god trick,” toward pretending to be able to access some objectivist truth within the data. Therefore, instead of relying on a second rater to code my data, I have relied on Stuart Blythe’s three recommendations for coding: 1) “perform at least one test run on a subset of your sample,” 2) “consider using a spreadsheet program to record your codes,” and 3) “perhaps most important, keep a journal” to “[r]eflect on your progress and note potential problems or interesting dilemmas that arise” (218). Yet, I agree with Blythe’s concern about coding in relation to critical research (Sullivan and Porter), “If commitment to others forms the core of your methodology”—which is true for me as technofeminist, postcritical researcher—“you may simply have to acknowledge that data coding may be most vulnerable to critique” (224), specifically because the coding does not typically offer research participants any direct support.

Those familiar with grounded theory may question its suitability for a feminist research project. As Clarke explains, the “formal theory” grounded theorists seek did originally refer to “the modernist sense of social theory, aiming at ‘Truth’” (“Feminism” 346). Like Clarke, though, I come to grounded theory as something that has developed since Glaser and Strauss originally
introduced it, particularly altered by the postmodern and feminist theorists that have taken it up in their research. While I understand some of the more positivist and naturalist roots of grounded theory, I appreciate that is has largely shifted away from those roots today. More importantly, though, I recognize, with Clarke, feminist propensity within some of the tenets of grounded theory:

(1) its roots in American symbolic interactionist sociology and pragmatist philosophy emphasizing actual experiences and practices—the lived doingness of social life; (2) its use of George Herbert Mead’s concept of perspective that emphasizes partiality, situatedness, and multiplicity; (3) its assumption of a materialist social constructionism; (4) its foregrounding deconstructive analysis and multiple simultaneous readings; and (5) its attention to range of variation as featuring of difference(s). (“Feminism”347)

For these reasons, I disagree with concerns that grounded theory is not suited for feminist projects.

**Method and Methodology into Findings**

Taking a cue from Mary Sheridan’s quote that opened this chapter, my work with *Feministing* includes historical understanding of the methods I adopt—ethnographically informed and grounded theory methods. Further, I base my work in historical understanding of feminist and technofeminist and postcritical digital methodologies and epistemologies. All the while, however, I have worked to keep my methods flexible as I researched with/in a feminist community primarily in digital spaces. Having clearly articulated my goals, theoretical framework, and research questions, I was then well prepared to remain vigilant, to note and
respond to complications and contradictions as I carried out my research. I have learned to better design my project through the act of researching; as Jeffrey Grabill succinctly states, “We can only learn how to do research by researching” (217). I have, then, also attempted to take Rebecca Rickly’s advice to conduct more research more rhetorically—more reflective, more holistic, and with the understanding that I may need to make adjustments based on specific people, problems, and contexts. That is, I have worked to remember that the relationship between methods, methodologies, and epistemologies is somewhat fuzzy and fluid, though not something to take lightly. The “methods section” is, as Smagorinsky puts it, the “epicenter” of the work I have done to investigate, with Feministing community members, literate activity, literacies of technology, and feminist activism in the early twenty-first century, and this was true from the very moment the project began to take shape in my mind.

Nevertheless, I acknowledge that it can be difficult to negotiate the need for explicit yet succinct explanations of research and the messiness of research. As Grabill argues, “Our methodological literature is too well defined, too clean, too well lit. The stories we tell each other are difficult for me to square with experience” (217). I agree that we often tell stories that neither mesh with experience nor accurately represent the messiness of research. And in designing my research project, I purposely made things messy by attempting to complicate binaries—through blending offline and online research and through blending research on/with humans and on/with texts. Therefore, in the telling I do in this and later chapters, I attempt to include what went according to plan as well as what did not, where my careful planning served me well as well as where I was unprepared.

Having outlined my methods and methodologies in detail, I now turn to discussing the findings that emerged from the triangulation of observations, interviews, and surveys. In chapters
three and four, I take up the theoretical frames of rhetorical genealogy and rhetorical ecology to make sense of some of the themes that arose in my data. In chapter three, I use rhetorical genealogy to understand the themes of design and redesign—in particular, what *Feministing* looked like at various times and how and why this look changed over time. In chapter four, I use rhetorical ecology to understand the themes of interacting with various audiences, invitational rhetoric, and in-fighting among feminists across the feminist blogosphere.
CHAPTER 3: THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF *Feministing* AND THE FEMINIST BLOGOSPHERE

In order to understand women’s rhetorical products and practices, Vicki Tolar Collins argues we need to pay attention to not just written texts but also to “how the rhetorical aims and functions of the initial text are changed by the processes of material production and distribution” (547). Collins develops a methodology of material rhetoric to focus on those production and distribution processes, meant to study what she terms the “rhetorical accretions,” or the “process of layering additional texts over and around the original text” (547). Collins focuses on eighteenth century Methodist texts, so the rhetorical accretions often come in the form of additions and alterations made by male editors and publishers. “With each accretion to a text,” Collins argues, “the speaker of the core text is respoken” (548). I agree with Collins this is especially significant when studying texts initially written by dead women, but I also argue it is important when studying digital texts whose authors are still living, possibly even still making changes regarding production and distribution choices. Collins’ attention to penetrating and examining layers, then, can be usefully combined with Mary Queen’s methodology of rhetorical genealogy, which is intended for digital texts. Queen explains her methodology as “a process of examining digital texts not as artifacts of rhetorical productions, but, rather, as continually evolving rhetorical actions that are materially bound . . . rhetorical analysis that examines multiple processes of structuring representations rather than seeks to identify the original intentions or final effects of structured (and thus already stabilized) representations” (476, parentheses in original). Rhetorical genealogy focuses on not just meanings but also on “the structuring of meaning, that is, the cultural practices and rhetorics through which particular
representations and interpretations gain validity and power” (Queen 476). Importantly, the aim of rhetorical genealogy is to “[reconceptualize] and [make] visible the multiple interactions between electronic texts and the material realities from which they emerge and through which they circulate” (Queen 476, emphasis added).

This chapter combines the frameworks of rhetorical accretion and rhetorical genealogy and applies them internally—within the Feministing website. I combine Collins’ emphasis on materiality and on the layering accretions of texts and Queen’s on the materialities from which electronic texts emerge and in which they are transformed in order to discuss the ways Feministing’s website changed from 2004 to 2012 and analyze the significance of these changes. I begin this analysis by discussing the changing landscape of Feministing during this eight-year period, specifically major changes the editorial team made to alter the site’s physical appearance and their significance. I first discuss the launch of Feministing.com, offering thick description of the site, its founding members, and its goals. Then, I trace the major physical changes that have occurred on Feministing’s website, which includes several smaller adjustments to the site’s content and design as well as three major redesigns. These changes demonstrate how Feministing’s editorial team serves as “crafty pilots” (Wilding) navigating and continually learning how to best use the male-dominated domain of cyberspace for feminist rhetorical work. The redesigns in particular demonstrate the editorial team’s increasing recognition of and attempts to create a more collaborative, decentered environment, manifested through increased attention to the site’s design and aesthetics in addition to its purpose. In discussing these changes, I also consider how they fit into larger shifts in the feminist blogosphere or the genre of feminist blogs that has been developing over the past eight years. In considering what has and has not changed for Feministing, I argue that Feministing’s editors have played an important role
as digital literacy sponsors by openly acknowledging their own struggles with technology as they carry their feminism into digital spaces. In modeling digital literacies as collaborative, requiring ongoing learning and negotiation, and not always easy or error free, the Feministing editorial team’s role as digital literacy sponsors ultimately serves the goals of the larger feminist movement by encouraging greater visibility of feminists and feminist activism. Nevertheless, I also discuss that the Feministing editorial team could not fully anticipate how the website/community would develop, and I consider one particular example of conflict and struggle within this collective venturing into unchartered digital territory in my discussion of how the comments section on Feministing (a more immediate enacting of rhetorical accretion than Collins considers) introduces challenges to traditional conceptions of feminist space as nonhierarchical and uncensored.

In this chapter, then, I look to the architecture/design of the Feministing website as one internal explanation (i.e., contained within the Feministing website rather than external to it) that begins to answer two of my research questions: What aspects of this community as well as society more broadly foster and delimit contributors’ literate activity, and How do these aspects foster and/or delimit contributors’ literate activity. By discussing the design (and redesigns) of the Feministing website, then, I also begin to identify part of the answer to two other related research questions: What is the range of literate activity that occurs within the Feministing community and What are the impetuses for (exigencies) these activities. That is, the acts of designing and redesigning the website generate a partial list of the literate activities that occur within the community, and as I argue, the exigency for those activities—which the editorial team discovers gradually as the function of the site begins to shift slightly over time—is to allow the physical space of Feministing to better support the community building functions that are
especially useful/necessary in order for a digital space to engender feminist activism and advance the larger feminist movement.

**Situational Mapping**

“All maps are abbreviations of the world . . . It is a truism that maps of the Internet are out-of-date even as they are inferred. The map changes before it can be completed as the geography of the Internet grows through a nervous high-speed tectonic process . . . It is easy to mistake a map for a representation of things when it is in fact a representation of relationships and dispositions.”

-- Nicholas Packwood

A situational analysis approach to grounded theory focuses on not only subjects and actions (in my case, members of the Feministing community and performing feminism in/with a digital community) but also on the larger situation and discourses within which a given action exists. Therefore, my internally focused description and analysis of the Feministing community necessarily begins by scoping out and by considering the larger landscape in which Feministing exists, by creating a larger map. Like Sheridan-Rabideau, I believe it is important to consider analysis at both the micro and macro levels (4, 9). In presenting the following three vignettes, I am, in a sense, sketching a portion of a map that begins to portray the larger digital landscape within which Feministing exists: “the blogosphere”—the large collection of blogs and bloggers that exist—and especially the feminist and/or social justice blogosphere. Yet as I go forward in this chapter to discuss aspects of Feministing’s development from 2004–2012, developments that sometimes reflect changes in the larger blogosphere, it is important to remember that, as Nicholas Packwood argues in the quote above, maps of the Internet are immediately outdated, are always partial, and represent relationships and dispositions, not things. Nevertheless, these vignettes help to form a part of the backdrop to keep in mind as I continue with my description
and analysis of *Feministing* because, as Sheridan-Rabideau and others like feminist rhetorical scholar Rebecca Dingo have argued, it is not enough to look at one specific moment or setting of rhetorical activity; instead, we must look at how those smaller moments and settings fit into larger scales of economies, politics, and cultures. How these smaller moments fit into larger ecologies will be developed in both this chapter and the next.

Vignette 1: From Technorati’s “State of the Blogosphere 2011”:

The Blogosphere is constantly changing and evolving. In 2011 we are seeing bloggers updating their blogs more frequently and spending more time blogging. The type of information influencing blogging has shifted from conversations with friends, which was the primary influence in 2010, to other blogs, which for 68% of bloggers are having more of an influence in 2011 . . .

Roughly three fifths [of bloggers] are male, a proportion that holds true over all blogger types. Not surprisingly, a majority of bloggers are in the 25–44 age range—but a third are over 44 . . . U.S. bloggers are pretty evenly distributed across the country.

![Figure 3.1 Images from Technorati’s “State of the Blogosphere 2011.”](image)

Vignette 2: Courtney Martin writing for *The Nation*:
In late February of [2011], Lamar Outdoor Advertising unveiled a billboard on Sixth Ave. and Watts in SoHo, not coincidentally right around the corner from a Planned Parenthood, featuring the picture of a young black girl and the words, “The most dangerous place for African Americans is in the Womb.” The ad was sponsored by the Texas anti-choice group Life Always. An editor at Feministing posted about the billboard on February 24, featuring an excerpt from an inspired statement by SisterSong and the Trust Black Women Partnership, along with the contact information for Lamar. Readers expressed their outrage, and the billboard was taken down the very same day.

Figure 3.2: Screenshot of Feministing’s anti-choice billboard post (Feministing.com).

Vignette 3: Emily Nussbaum writing for New York Magazine:

It’s the first day of October and I’m at SlutWalk NYC, a rally in Union Square. Nearly 1,000 women surround me, jubilant, most in their twenties. Some wear bras or corsets, but most are in T-shirts, a few with marker scrawled on their arms: WHORE; PUTA; CAN’T TOUCH THIS. A few feet away, a woman in
jeans stands frozen, arms by her sides. A circle of bystanders raise their cell phones to collect images of the signs taped to her in front and back, which read, “What my best friend was wearing / When she was raped.”

SlutWalk launched in April, sparked by the outrage of Canadian activists after a cop told female students to “avoid dressing like sluts” in order not to be victimized. The idea was to take the sting out of the insult with a Spartacus-like display of solidarity, to put blame back on the attackers. Since April, there have been marches all over the world, including in Mexico, Germany, and South Africa, but this Manhattan march feels fired up with local frustration, the climax of a year of scandals, from the acquittal of the “rape cops” to the [Dominique Strauss-Kahn] case to a series of unsolved assaults in Brooklyn’s South Slope—just the day before, there was a news report of a policeman warning women that skirts might suggest “easy access.” . . .

We march down University Place, chanting all the old familiar “hey, ho” alternatives, plus some new ones like “Rapists! Go fuck yourselves.” (Marchers lock eyes and grin; it’s so percussive and playful.) In college in the eighties, I’d gone to my share of rallies, but this reminds me more of ones I’ve read about: the 1970 sit-in at *Ladies’ Home Journal*; the Atlantic City “zap” at the Miss America Pageant, when activists crowned a sheep; and my personal favorite, the 1968 “hex” cast on Wall Street by the collective WITCH—Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell—when women in pointy hats spooked the brokers so badly they reportedly made the Dow drop.
These events weren’t polite demands for legislative change; they were raw and sloppy theatrical displays, ecstatic bonding experiences that managed to be at once satirical and celebratory, alienating and illuminating. Not coincidentally, they were also the kind of protest that was hard to ignore, since they were designed to capture the camera’s (and the media’s, a.k.a. my) eye. And SlutWalk is more public still: Even as we march, it is being tweeted and filmed and Tumblr’d, a way of alerting the press and a way of bypassing the press. I am surrounded by the same bloggers I’ve been reading for weeks. And though bystanders cheer us on (two gray-haired women dance topless in a window), this is very much a march for young women, that demographic that has been chastised throughout history for seeking attention—and ever more so in recent years, as if publicity itself were a venereal disease, one made more resistant by technology.

These excerpts help to demonstrate Feministing as part of a much larger historical moment for feminists/feminism and a much larger public blogosphere that consists of millions of blogs.\(^\text{19}\) Although it is well beyond my scope to discuss the entire blogosphere, it is important to recognize that Feministing is affected by and contributes to this larger network of blogs and bloggers who have been collectively constructing the blogosphere since the end of the twentieth century (for a brief history of blogs, see Blood). As the first vignette suggests, people’s blogging habits continually change, and this is undoubtedly due in part to other aspects of the Internet developing and influencing bloggers’ behaviors, in part to the pool of bloggers changing over time (though it is also important to note that the majority of bloggers are still male), and in part to people continuing to develop various blog genres and therefore redefining or altering expectations. Feminist blogs are certainly one genre that has been established and continues to

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\(^{19}\) NM Incite, a Nielsen/McKinsey company, reported over 181 million blogs at the end of 2011.
develop. A current part of this development, which the second and third vignettes demonstrate, is that people within the feminist blogosphere have come to expect their work within that digital space can and will have direct influences offline, and that there will be a reciprocal relationship between online and offline feminist work. This was not always the case, and as I discuss in both this chapter and the next, feminists are still learning how the Internet can best support and enhance their activism—rhetorical work with histories that begin much earlier than the blogosphere—which is exciting but challenging work.

**Feminist Histories, Feministing’s History: Beginnings and Revisions**

“*The entire history of women’s struggle for self-determination has been muffled in silence over and over . . . Each feminist work has tended to be received as if it emerged from nowhere; as if each of us had lived, though, and worked without any historical past or contextual present*”

--- Adrienne Rich

“*By arguing for the importance of the knowledge of history I am not interested in invoking nostalgic homage to moments of past glory. If cyberfeminists wish to avoid making the mistakes of past feminists, it behooves them to know and analyze feminist histories very carefully.*”

--- Faith Wilding

In *Rhetoric Retold*, Cheryl Glenn uses the aforementioned Adrienne Rich quote to preface her argument that women have long been erased or ignored in histories of rhetoric. This argument that women have continually had to work as if they had no “historical past or contextual present” can be juxtaposed with another message feminists receive, as the quote from Faith Wilding illustrates: the necessity of knowing feminist history in order to advance the feminist movement. This mixed message feminists receive of, on the one hand, how difficult it is to know feminist histories and, on the other hand, how important it is to know those histories in order to advance the feminist movement continues to be seen in the recent work of writing studies scholars. For instance, in *Radical Feminism, Writing, and Critical Agency: From*
Manifesto to Modern, Jacqueline Rhodes chastises composition scholars for overlooking the textuality and agency of radical feminists in narrating histories of composition and feminism, yet at the same time, she acknowledges the difficulties in locating the work of radical feminists’ from the 1960s and 1970s likely contributed to this problematic, forgetful historicizing of composition and feminism. Similarly, Sheridan-Rabideau explains that her book, Girls, Feminism, and Grassroots Literacies—which recounts her work with a community-based feminist organization in the late 1990s—is a reaction to a lack of records from and texts about the grassroots activist organizations that resulted from the “youthquake”—a movement of young activists—that arose during the 1990s. It is, then, also partly in light of these concerns about erasure and missing history that I offer this account of Feministing’s history, which is also meant to continue building writing studies scholarship on feminist blogs and other digital feminist communities.

In the eight years (2004–2012) Feministing has thus far existed, the site has undergone three major redesigns, and the editorial team has grown from four to fifteen—the team is currently comprised of six “editors” and nine “contributors.” Tracing these changes shows the editorial team’s increasing focus on design/aesthetics and on creating and fostering feminist community within the space of Feministing but also beyond its digital borders.

Beginnings: Establishing Space and Tone

In a 2011 article in New York Magazine, Emily Nussbaum claims, “the blogosphere has transformed the feminist conversation.” For one, she notes, some conversations from early feminism have reappeared (e.g. reproaching sexual violence), but many new ones have surfaced, too (e.g., lobbying for gay marriage). Just as importantly, she notes how the upsurge in feminist
bloggers since 2004 has transformed conversations about feminists—about who and where they are and what they’re doing, which helped to erase the once-frequent question within the larger blogosphere, “Why don’t women blog?” Undeniably, when Feministing first launched on April 12, 2004 at 6:08 p.m. with Jessica Valenti’s first published post (see Figure 3.3), the blogosphere was, as Nussbaum acknowledges, dominated by men, and particularly left-wing men. However, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, numerous feminist and/or social justice blogs emerged alongside Feministing. As Feministing itself has undergone redesigns, its consistent presence has actively contributed to the changing landscape of the larger blogosphere in claiming the Internet and blogs as a place for feminist people, ideals, and actions.

![Screenshot of the first post published on Feministing's blog](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Figure 3.3:** Screenshot of the first post published on Feministing’s blog (Wayback Machine).

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20 Text and images from Feministing 2004–2011 were retrieved via the Wayback Machine. Text and images from Feministing in 2012 were taken from feministing.com

21 For example, Feministe and Reappropriate in 2001; Pandagon in 2002; Racialicious, Bitch Ph.D., Shakesville (previously Shakespeare’s Sister), and I Blame the Patriarchy in 2004; Black(k)ademic in 2005; Jezebel in 2007; The F Bomb in 2009; and The Crunk Feminist Collective in 2010.
In discussing Feministing’s conception and redesigns from a rhetorical point of view, it is important to consider how the architecture and content of Feministing has promoted certain (inter)actions and ideals while simultaneously limiting others.\(^\text{22}\) From the outset, the editorial team focused on promoting young women’s feminism through playful (informal, humorous) but critical discourse. This was demonstrated in part by their original mission statement: “Young women are rarely given the opportunity to speak on their own behalf on issues that affect their lives and futures. Feministing provides a platform for us to comment, analyze and influence” (see top right corner of Figure 3.4). Additionally, the use of playful but critical discourse meant to engage young feminists was demonstrated by the writing of the site’s four original editors, Jessica Valenti, Vanessa Valenti, Hannah Taylor, and Lauryn Fraas. The women introduced themselves to readers not only through the posts they published but also through brief biographies they included on an “About” page, which gave readers a sense of these feminists’ educational backgrounds, jobs, and interests while also suggesting their informal, personal, and humorous writing style. For example:

Jessica is a 25 year-old feminist writer/teacher/overall bad-ass. She has a Masters degree in Women’s and Gender Studies from Rutgers University and has worked for organizations such as Legal Momentum (formerly NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund), Planned Parenthood, the Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) and Ms. Magazine. Jessica is also a volunteer at Mount Sinai’s Sexual Assault and Violence Intervention Program

\(^{22}\) Writing Studies scholars have for some time thought about how interfaces affect people’s literate activity and enforce certain ideological views (Selfe and Selfe), and they continue to think more about how space affects people’s literate activities, as evidenced by studies of how classroom, online, and writing center design affects student learning and writing (e.g., Miller-Cochran and Gierdowski; Blair and Hoy; Brizee, Sousa, and Driscoll) and by the 2012 Computers and Writing Conference’s focus on “Architecture: Composing and Constructing in Digital Spaces,” Anne Wysocki’s keynote address about how space affects memory.
(SAVI) as an emergency room advocate. She lives in Brooklyn with two roommates and a tremendously overweight cat.

Vanessa is a 23 year-old feminist and graduate of the BA program in Women’s and Gender Studies at Rutgers University. She has worked with the Mount Sinai Sexual Assault and Violence Intervention Program and the Innovative Learning Center. While Vanessa’s expertise is varied, she has recently become interested in the politics of sexuality, specifically concerning teenagers. Though not in a gross-pedophilia type way. Vanessa lives in LIC, Queens with a couple of hippies and will be attending graduate school in the fall.

Figure 3.4: Screenshot of Feministing’s original layout (Wayback Machine).
The first post on *Feministing* established several goals for the site: 1) it would serve as a place to make young feminists’ voices heard, 2) it would serve as a vehicle for getting young feminists to “lay claim to” issues that directly affected them, even if the issues were not yet identified as pertaining to young feminists, 3) it would help young feminists stay well informed on news and events, 4) it would help young feminists interact with one another directly, 5) it would spark needed discussions, and 6) it would bring additional voices into these conversations. The story about how/why *Feministing* started is also captured in the original mission statement, which several of my research participants say (via interviews and surveys) they feel has remained the same over time. Additionally, in January 2008, Jessica Valenti recorded herself discussing how *Feministing* got started, and she posted the video to YouTube, which includes this explanation:

> I thought it might be fun to tell you guys a little about how Feministing started because it’s something that people ask me a lot, and kind of how Feministing came to be born [not through a vagina] and where we got the idea for it. I was working for a national women’s organization right out of grad school, and I was really excited and really idealistic about working in the national women’s movement, and I thought it was gonna be fabulous, and it turned out it wasn’t so fantastic [it sucked]. And the thing that kind of irritated me about it was that it seemed like younger women were getting all this lip service, and whenever there was a conference, we would be trotted out in the front like, “Look, we have young women,” and if you were a woman of color, then you’re in the front, like, “Look, we have young women of color who are working for our organization,” but at the

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23 Content in square brackets indicates Valenti’s subtitles included in the video, which again illustrate her informal and humorous style.
end of the day, we weren’t in any decision-making positions; our opinions weren’t necessarily valued. And around the same time, there was all this media hoopla over girls gone wild and younger girls were going crazy and they’re promiscuous [whores, all of ‘em] and all of that kind of stuff, but it was irritating because it seemed like they were never interviewing younger women for these pieces; they were just talking about us and talking about what was wrong with us without actually talking to us.

In talking with current editor Jos during our interview, I also learned that part of the original impetus for Feministing came when co-founders Jessica and Vanessa did a Google search for “young feminists” and found only a defunct page from the National Organization for Women’s (NOW) website. The purpose of Feministing, then, has long been one of representation and creating/claiming space, much like Virginia Woolf’s often-quoted argument that in order for a woman to be successful, she needs a room of her own.

Even the name of the site and its visual representation originally conveyed the combination of serious and playful feminist work the editorial team has promoted since its beginning. As seen in the header of the blog (Figure 3.4), the title “feministing.com” originally appeared in two different colors: “feminist” in white and “ing.com” in blue. This choice seems a deliberate attempt to convey the meaning of the site’s title as future editor Courtney Martin explicated it several years later in an interview with Brian Lehrer. When he asked her to unpack the meaning of the title of the site, Martin answered, “We’re just turning feminism into a verb. So, we’re not just feminists; we’re doing things.” This combination of serious and playful work coupled with attention to how the design of the site conveys meaning to its readers positions Feministing’s editorial team as the type of “crafty pilots” cyberfeminist Faith Wilding has argued

24 Using Google to make this search now returns 6,260,000 results with Feministing as the second one.
are necessary if feminists are to productively navigate digital channels (par. 12). As Wilding argues, computers “are the master’s tools”—they were created by men and have a history of serving men’s purposes. When feminists navigate digital spaces, then, they must remain cognizant that their actions exist within a larger patriarchal system. Feministing’s editors demonstrated their awareness of this fact with their selection of a site logo. Shortly after the initial launch of the site, an image was inserted beside the title of the site at the top of the webpage to serve as the site’s logo (Figure 3.5). The editors have explained the image as a reappropriation of the sexist image of a woman that sometimes appears on the mudflap of trucks; in Feministing’s version, the woman is holding up her middle finger in an act of defiance and assertion of feminist space amidst a blogosphere that was then largely a boy’s club. As Helene Shugart argues, appropriative rhetorical acts are a feminist rhetorical strategy that “problematises hegemonic discourse and its embedded, oppressive ideology, thus creating space for critical awareness” (227). In appropriating this typically sexist image, the Feministing editors slightly alter it visually, calling readers’ attention to such small details and ideally encouraging them to likewise bring feminist critique and digital/design skills together to, as Shugart would say, perform their own appropriative counterhegemonic acts.

Figure 3.5: Screenshot of Feministing’s original logo (Wayback Machine).

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25 Both Wilding and Rosi Braidotti also note the importance of irony, parody, and humor in technofeminist rhetorical activity, all of which feature prominently on Feministing but are not key focal points of my analysis.
26 For an overview of scholarship for and against appropriation as effective rhetorical strategy, see especially Shugart 212–13.
The original design of *Feministing* was typical for a blog in 2004 (again, much of this can be seen in Figure 3.4). At the bottom of the website, there was initially the text, “Special thanks to John Donahue and Bill Scher” with links for each of the names.\(^\text{27}\) The site was divided into two main columns and three rows. Across the top of the entire site spanning both columns was the header, including the name of the site with a navigational menu directly below the header, and at the bottom of the entire site spanning both columns was the footer, where the main navigational links from the top of the page were repeated along with the site credits. In the left of the two columns and taking up the majority of the page were the posts, which appeared in reverse chronological order, with each entry including a title, body text, a line to indicate who wrote the post and when, and a list of tags the author used to indicate the type or topic of content in the post. In the right of the two columns, a narrower column than the left one, were—from top to bottom—the mission statement, an area for upcoming events to be posted, a list of links organized into various categories, a calendar with links to each day of posts, a list of archived posts, and a search tool so readers could search the site for specific content.

The editors published forty-eight posts during April 2012, the first month of *Feministing*’s existence. Posts ranged from 11 to 631 words, with the average length of 191 words, and covered a diverse range of topics including the lack of women in the music industry, the presidential race, young feminists of color, how pop culture affects women’s body images, Rwandan rape survivors, advice for applying to grad school, servicewomen in Iraq, advice for negotiating the gender wage gap, facts about sexual assault, domestic violence in Saudi Arabia, promotions for various fundraising or awareness events, gender neutral insurance, and the FDA postponing the availability of Plan B. Posts in that first month included anywhere from zero to

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\(^\text{27}\) Bill Scher was Valenti’s former boss, a left-wing male blogger, who recommended she start her own blog; John Donahue presumably helped to design the original site.
eight links. The majority of these posts summarized recent news stories or events and included links to the original source of the information. Some posts are written in a traditional journalistic approach where the author excludes personal opinion and presents seemingly objective facts for readers to interpret, as in the following post from Fraas on April 15, 2004 titled “Electronic Tags for Domestic Violence Offenders”:

Scientists at the Salvador Velayos Institute in Madrid have developed an electronic tag to protect victims of domestic violence, reported The Guardian. The tag would establish whether an offender is approaching a former victim’s house or a high-risk area such as a school. If the offender violates the 500-meter court order the tag immediately triggers an alarm at an emergency center.

The Institute has a functioning prototype and plans to have a version ready for the market within six months.

The Madrid government funded this research and purchased the industrial rights to the electronic tag. In Spain an estimated 100 women are killed each year by their partners. Government officials hope this new technology will curb those numbers.

Perhaps women in the US can benefit from this emerging technology as well. The Bureau of Justice reports that in the US 32% of all women killed were victims of intimate partner homicide. While the Bureau notes that there has been a decline in the total number of these homicides, everyday three women are killed by an intimate partner in the US.

Other times, authors included mainly their own commentary, as in the following post from Jessica Valenti on April 14, 2004 titled “Countdown to April 25th”:
Naturally, Feministing could care less about which celebrities will be attending the April 25th March for Women’s Lives.

But just in case you feel like doing some star watching that day, the Feminist Majority Foundation has released a list of over 100 celebrities who have signed on to the March, in addition to the almost 1,300 organizations that are co-sponsoring the event.

Who knew that Christina Aguilera and Meredith Baxter (no more Birney?) would ever work together? I can see the joint video venture now . . . Family Ties Me Up, perhaps. It would be the greatest celeb pairing since Michael Gross and Vanilla Ice teamed up for Cool As Ice. (ellipsis in original)

In fact, it has always been rare to find a post that did not suggest some personal opinion on the part of the author, even if these were just brief comments peppered into longer, more report-styled posts as in the post from Jessica Valenti on April 16, 2004, titled “US Women in Iraq Part 1: Where Do They Belong?” where she follows six paragraphs of reporting on news about military women in Iraq and one paragraph of quoted material from the President of the Center for Military Readiness with the comment, “Lovely. And how considerate to use a rape scare tactic to justify blatant discrimination,” and then four paragraphs later, in the final paragraph of that post, she explicitly includes her opinion when she writes, “No matter how you feel about the war, women have proven themselves just as capable as men—and just as willing to sacrifice.” These comments demonstrate the site’s characteristic personal, informal, and humorous—or, perhaps more accurately, snarky—style. In my interview with Jos, she explained, “the attitude of Feministing is . . . snarky and irreverent and in your face and . . . you know, poking fun at the patriarchy,” and she posited, “why Feministing [was] successful, why it became popular in the
first place, was because Vanessa and Jessica were funny, and they weren’t what everyone was saying feminists were; they were talking like funny, snarky young people who were doing feminism.”

Before discussing the three major redesigns of the site, I want to note some of the smaller changes that occurred during the first year. Aside from the addition of the logo, one of the first notable changes to Feministing was altering text in the footer from “Special thanks to John Donahue and Bill Scher” to “Because bad-ass and brainy can be one in the same,” which happened on August 4, 2004. Then, some time between September 4 and September 9, 2004, that text changed again to “By and for young feminists,” which remained in the footer of the site until the second major redesign in 2008. Whether this disassociation with Donahue and Scher was an intentionally feminist rhetorical choice, this change of words does shift the focus from the men who presumably helped to provide the motivation and, likely, code literacy necessary to create Feministing in the first place. As Claudia Herbst argues, “code literacy”—knowledge of computer languages—represents “a new form of literacy as the sustaining principle of power” (135) in the digital age. That is, “Online code literacy translates into authority and into the ability to back up words with action” (Herbst 137), a point I discuss further later in this chapter.

In addition to changing the website’s footer, the editors also added several items to the right column of the site during that first year, some serving to build the ethos of the site and its editors. For instance, in July, they added a “Feministing Kudos” section with quotes of praise about Feministing from well-known authors and bloggers. Additionally, in December, the editors added a “meet the ladies” section with links to biographical information about themselves as well as links to all the posts they had written and a list of links to some of their favorite things (e.g.,

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28 When Jos started writing for Feministing, Vanessa and Jessica Valenti were still there but Fraas and Hannah Taylor had left several years prior, which is likely why Jos only names Vanessa and Jessica here.
people, bands, sports teams), which reinforced their combined ethos of seriousness and play. Also, over the course of that year, the list of links in the right column grew from 39 links organized into 5 categories (news, organizations, blogs, politics, and women’s studies) to 157 links organized into 10 categories (news, blogs, women’s organizations, violence against women, work, legal organizations, reproductive rights, international, political, and women’s studies), again serving to build the ethos of the site and of its editors as well-read, informed, and connected.

In addition to the changes in the right column, the site’s header changed slightly on July 15, 2004 when an additional link, “donate,” appeared alongside “home,” “about,” and “contact.” This introduced a concern that still continues to affect the site and its editors today: money. After its first year, the site has increasingly included advertisements. In fact, in March 2005, the link “advertise” was added to the header alongside “home,” “about,” “contact,” and “donate.” This addition was accompanied with a post that explained:

So after a lot of thought (and talking about what exactly constitutes “selling out…”) we’ve decided to take ads on the site. As traffic has increased for Feministing, we’ve had to upgrade numerous times and it’s all out-of-pocket costs. We’re hoping that taking on ads will let us continue the site without going totally broke! SO if you want an ad up, or know someone who might, we would really appreciate the support! (And frankly, they’re not very expensive…).

(emphasis, ellipsis, and parentheses in original)

Then, in July 2005, the site changed from a 2-column to a 3-column layout (Figure 3.6), presumably to create balance as the list of links in the right column continued to grow longer and as the number of advertisements also increased. Additionally, by moving to a 3-column layout,

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\(29\) Advertisements and funding continue to be issues of conflict for Feministing. This is discussed more in chapter 4.
the advertisements could be separated into the far-left column, distinct from the rest of the site’s content. In August 2005, the site added an area to the right column that allowed people to search for feminist jobs by state simply by typing the name of the state into a search field. Finally, in December 2005, a logo for MySpace appeared in the right column with a prompt for Feministing’s readers to join the Feministing MySpace group. As these preliminary changes demonstrate, after launching Feministing, the editors continually made small adjustments to the site as they learned more about blogging and their readers’ expectations and as the blogosphere and digital culture changed around them. The original architecture and content of the site worked together to promote a playful but critical approach to feminist literate activity, actively promoting a multimodal approach that blended visual, textual, and sometimes aural practices. Yet while the initial design of the site allowed for people other than the editorial team to write and interact on the blog, the emphasis remained primarily on the editors’ literate activity, which occupied the majority of the site in the form of published posts (though from talking to later editors, I do know that many other literate activities go into the editors’ posts, such as reading other blogs or media, talking with friends via email or instant messaging, and drafting and revising). Nevertheless, my readings of the comments section from that first year reveal that the site’s readers and frequent commenters were beginning to form relationships with each other and were themselves actively constructing the space of Feministing through their presence and their written words. In the editorial team’s redesigns of the site over the next seven years, then, they show increasing recognition of and attempts to enhance the interactive and decentered aspects of the site.
Revisions: Three Major Site Redesigns

Following these initial, smaller changes to the look and feel of the site during its first year, three major redesigns have occurred—in March 2006, June 2008, and July 2010. Each of these redesigns was initiated by the editorial team and undertaken in coordination with technologically savvy insiders (such as later Feministing editorial team member Jen who facilitated the second redesign) or outsiders (such as the web design team that facilitated the third redesign). Describing and providing images of these redesigns seems, at first, to materially demonstrate the architectural mantra “form follows function,” or as I would put it for this particular instance of literate activity and emergent feminist rhetorical work, content/function precedes design. While it’s obvious from previous descriptions of the site’s mission statement, purpose, and title that the editorial team has long held a clear view of the site’s function—to carve out digital space for and foster young feminists’ voices and interaction—it took longer for
them to hone the site’s use of design to promote that function. Yet at the same time, by altering the design of the site, the editorial team also illustrates a desire to alter the function of the site somewhat, too, gradually moving away from a focus solely on blogging as feminist rhetorical action with the realization that blogging is just one part of larger action- and community-driven feminist rhetorical work in a digital age.

The first large site redesign happened March 31, 2006 (see Figure 3.7 for before and after screenshots). This redesign greatly changed the aesthetic of the site. Major changes included a redesigned header, a new color scheme, a less boxy appearance due to removing the black borders around individual posts and the list of links, and removal of the mission statement from the main page so it instead appeared only on the “about us” page. Overall, the first redesign made the site look a bit busier with the lack of borders and the increased amount of content, despite a cleaner look contributed by the larger and more centered and symmetrical header.

Smaller changes that occurred after the time of the first redesign (March 2006) but before the second redesign (June 2008) included:

- the several long lists of links moved from the right to the left column,
- a link to sign up for the newsletter was added to the right column,
- a section highlighting Feministing interviews was added to the right column, and
- the Myspace logo/subscription prompt was replaced with an image and link to subscribe to Feministing’s YouTube channel.

As is evidenced by this list, this redesign emphasized connectivity through the addition of the newsletter and the expansion into various social media sites such as Myspace and YouTube. This increased attention to connection with readers in various ways and across multiple platforms.
foreshadows even greater future emphasis on building feminist community with/for
Feministing’s many readers, a major focal point for both the second and third redesigns.

Figure 3.7: Before and after screenshots of Feministing’s first major redesign (Wayback Machine).

The second redesign was implemented June 30, 2008 (before and after in Figure 3.8). As the screenshots in Figure 3.8 demonstrate, this redesign was focused less on aesthetics and more on the increased community capabilities of the site as the editors began using Movable Type\textsuperscript{30} to manage the blog.\textsuperscript{31} In fact, the switch to Movable Type was intended largely as an attempt to create a community of feminist activists rather than a single, albeit group-authored, feminist blog, which Jessica Valenti explained in her blog post on December 4, 2007:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{30} Movable Type, comparable to WordPress, is a publishing platform for building and maintaining blogs that includes a content management system, various tools meant to enhance interactivity within a site, and spam protection. In its early days, spam was a major problem on Feministing.

\textsuperscript{31} Main aesthetic changes seemed targeted at making the site look more organized and less busy through 1) expanding the width of the center column where the main blog posts were published, 2) condensing what had become a very long list of links and including the full list of links to users if they navigated to the newly added “links” page, 3) reinserting borders to distinguish different sections in the left and right columns, and 4) returning the text in the right and left columns to left-aligned rather than center-aligned. These changes seem aimed at keeping in line with changing trends in the larger blogosphere away from boxy, obvious-blog-looking designs.
\end{quote}
We're doing a redesign—hopefully to be completed by the new year—that will change Feministing from a blog to a **community site where readers and commenters can create their own profiles, blogs, and more**. It's going to [be] bad ass. Here's just a sampling of stuff that Feministing readers will be able to do when the upgrade is complete:

*Create personalized profile pages with (if you'd like) personal info like a photo, interests, your location; a list of all of your comments; a list of posts, forums, and comments that you recommend;*

*Create your own blog housed on Feministing (if you're unfamiliar with diaries, check out sites like DailyKos and MyDD) that other readers and commenters will have access to;*

*Rate posts and comments that you like, and see Feministing posts and diaries that are highly recommended by other users.*

And so much more. [link to the Movable Type website]

We're really excited about this, because it means that we'll be community-building, not just blogging. (emphasis and italics in original)

Of particular importance is Valenti’s insistence that the site become focused on community building in addition to blogging. As evidenced by the features she mentions, the editors were committed to increasing readers’ interactivity within and feelings of ownership over the site. This begins to indicate a belief that while blogging can be an important rhetorical tool of feminist activists, it must be accompanied by other tools such as community building, which as I will discuss more in chapters four and five, exists in both online and offline spaces and, in fact, can mediate the two. And it makes sense that the beginnings of Feministing would be more focused
on blogging and on the original four bloggers of the editorial team because when launching the site, there was no guarantee those women would have any, let alone active, readers. The earliest days of Feministing were a time to build the ethos of the site and its editorial team in order to also grow a base of readers (who eventually became “registered users” and more integral members of the Feministing community). Once it became clear people were reading the site and did want to have an active role in/on it, the Feministing editors responded by implementing architectural and design changes to enhance those activities. The editors’ desire to increase interactivity and community with the second redesign ultimately manifested in the following physical changes:

- addition of a “Community” blog where anyone could register and publish a blog post (in addition to the main page where the editors published posts),
- ability to see “recommended community posts” and “recent comments” on the main page (appeared as links in the right column),
- the ability to see “related posts” and “related Feministing posts” when on the Community blog (appeared as links in the right column), and
- the Feministing editors often referred to Community posts in their posts on the main page.

Other main content changes were included, which also continued to move further away from boxy, obviously-blog designs and relied more on various social media sites in addition to the core Feministing site:

- removing the “Feministing kudos” section from the left column,
- organizing the several large lists of links in the left column into a section titled “links” with subtitles like “news” and “work,”
• removing the Feministing interviews section from the right column,
• adding a “Feministing as you like it” section to the right column, including links to YouTube, Flickr, Meetup, Myspace, and Facebook, and
• changing the text in the footer from “by and for young feminists” to “powered by MT.”

Figure 3.8: Before and after screenshots of Feministing’s second major redesign (Wayback Machine).

Another noteworthy aspect of the second redesign is that the editors solicited donations to pay for what they anticipated would be a five thousand dollar upgrade after paying for software and technical support. They originally requested donations in the December 4th blog post from Jessica Valenti excerpted above, and then the editors kept readers updated with six blog posts over the next week detailing how much money they had raised, ending with a post on December 10th including a video where they thanked readers for donating $7,231. The editors posted monthly updates between the redesign announcement on December 4, 2007 and the eventual accomplishment of the redesign on June 30, 2008 to keep readers informed about the setbacks.
and progress they faced. And in fact, the before image in Figure 3.8 shows the editors actually asked readers to test out a beta version of their redesign before they officially implemented it in hopes of receiving additional feedback while they sorted out final problems and processes. Between the second and third redesigns, these additional smaller changes occurred, many of which also focused on increased interactivity and community building:

- October 31, 2008: new comment format with the ability to thread and rate comments and report abusive comments
- December 11, 2008: added FAQs to address questions such as “What’s with the logo?” “How did Feministing start?” and “How can I write for Feministing?” which appeared in the header and footer as an “FAQ” link in place of the “Advertise” link
- January 12, 2009: added an events calendar for users to view and add events
- September 14, 2009: added the ability to tweet posts by clicking on a button at the bottom of a post
- June 2009: Began to distinguish between “editors” and “columnists” so the “Meet the Editors” section in the right column became “Meet Feministing”
- Text in the footer changed from “Powered by MT” to “Design and Coding by Matthew Cordell”

In a reflective post on August 12, 2009, Jessica Valenti informed readers that editors had published 9,400 posts since the launch of Feministing and that there had been 200,000 comments on entries. (And with her typical humor, she noted that “upskirt” and “ball bustin’” were two of the top search terms that led people to their site). She ended that post by noting how much Feministing had changed its look since its launch and included links to screenshots of older
designs. Then, at Feministing’s six-year mark, (April 12, 2010)—just before its third redesign—Valenti published a post where she noted the site had been visited by over 6 million people in the past year, and she again referred to past designs of Feministing, this time referring to the original design as “scary.”

The third redesign of the site was implemented on July 21, 2010 (before and after screenshots in Figure 3.9). As these screenshots indicate, this redesign focused on both aesthetics and functionality. Like the second redesign, this one had been announced well in advance in a blog post on June 3, 2009, where Jessica Valenti wrote, “Feministing will be undergoing a redesign in next six months, something I’m incredibly excited about. We're hoping that the redesign will not only give us a new spiffy look, but that it will also fix any of the tech glitches people experience when using the site as well as highlight and improve the community functions” (emphasis in original). At that time, the editors had posted a link to polls about how people use the site, and they indicated their plan to use feedback from those polls to shape their redesign decisions. Then, on July 5, 2010, Valenti posted an update about the redesign and explained:

Not only is Feministing in desperate need of an aesthetic makeover, but our technology (registration issues, ability to comment, etc.) has also been…well, just awful. We know. But the redesign is not just about updating tech and putting a fancier veneer on the site—we also worked hard to think about the future of feminist blogging, community and participation online. We’re super pleased with how it turned out and are excited to announce that the new and improved Feministing will be launching mid-month!
Feministing will have a load of new tools, including social networking features and a blog for campus activists. We’ll give you more info in the coming days and will answer all of your questions once we launch the new site, but we couldn’t help but give you a sneak peak (after the jump)…hope you like it! (ellipses in original)

Figure 3.9: Before and after screenshots of Feministing’s third major redesign (Wayback Machine).

On July 21, the redesign was implemented, and as promised, there were several posts and videos the following day to explain the new features of the site, including this comprehensive list from Jessica Valenti:

**Feministing:** Our main blog that you know and love will remain pretty much the same. The biggest change is that our usual “quick hits” won’t be in post format – but instead will be listed in our sidebar. This way, we can bring you as much breaking news as possible! You can also find out more about your favorite bloggers through our schmancy new sidebar masthead.
**Community:** Feministing’s Community blog will also continue to function in the same way – the blog will remain an open forum for feminist and pro-feminist discourse. Please familiarize yourself with our community standards – even if you’re a regular Community blogger, a little refresher couldn’t hurt!

**Video:** The Video blog will be a combination of cross-posted pieces from our other sites (Feministing, Community, etc) that contain videos, as well as original Feministing videos. Consider it your one-stop-shop for feminist TV!

**Campus:** We are incredibly excited about the launch of our new Campus blog! The brainchild of our fabulous contributor Lori, Feministing Campus will be a space for college activists to write about their work, connect with feminists on other campuses, and develop support for their local initiatives. We’ll also cross-post related pieces about campus activism to this blog from Feministing and Community. While we get Campus off the ground, the blog will not be open to the public – but if you or your campus groups is interested in joining, you can email us and let us know.

**Events:** Want to promote a feminist event? Well, this is the space to do it! You can find out about local talks, actions and events here, as well as add your own. Feministing staff will approve events before they’re published, to ensure that nothing spammy or anti-feminist gets through.

**My Feministing:** And now for something completely different! My Feministing is pretty fabulous – and will be explained at length in a separate post and video. But here’s the short version: It’s your own Feministing profile, where you can add friends, post updates (kinda like on Facebook or Twitter), follow your
favorite bloggers from any of the Feministing sites, and send messages to other users. It’s pretty bad ass.

The new site retained a three-column layout, but now the main posts were in the left column, which was the largest. The right column included ads, and the center column now included a featured video, introductions to the editors and contributors, a list of “quick hit” news (instead of including this content in blog posts), an option to subscribe to Feministing, and—completely new—a list of links under the heading “Take Action,” which led to things like petitions and form letters. This was also when the site made “Feministing / Young Feminists Blogging, Organizing, Kicking Ass” their meta title (see Figure 3.10).

Figure 3.10: Screenshot of Feministing’s meta title (seen at the very top of the image and in the Internet browser tab).

Again, the editors were upfront about their intentions for the redesign to foster a more interactive, community-driven digital space, furthering the extent to which they could better design the form/architecture of the site to foster the developing functions they were discovering a feminist blog—and really now much more than just a blog—could have for the larger sphere of feminist and social justice work. In fact, as the editorial team revised the design of the site over time to create a space that was more about community building and less about blogging, they also began to modify the function of the site a bit. With the addition of things like the “Take Action” links and the emphasis on action in the meta title, it was becoming clear Feministing
was beginning to see a more active and critical role for feminist blogs and bloggers within the larger realm of feminist activism. As all three members of the editorial team I interviewed made clear, the editors soon began to realize just how many readers they could reach and how quickly, too, which they saw as a distinct advantage of the type of work they did for Feministing as compared to work done in more traditional media venues or even in non-profit organizations. Although there was (and still is) certainly still more to learn about how to use these differences to the best advantage, these redesigns show the editorial teams’ active desire to do so.

This third redesign was undoubtedly the most comprehensive. Even with all the additional features, though, the site had a clean, uncluttered appearance due to the clearly demarcated columns and sections of the blog and the enhanced navigational menu atop the page. At the same time the site added so many new features, it also removed the list of links that had appeared in one of the side columns and had been continually growing ever since the blog began. One logical explanation for the removal of the lengthy list of links is that doing so allowed for a cleaner, more streamlined appearance—one that again moved away from a boxy, obvious blog-looking design. However, it is also likely due to the fact that between 2004 and 2010, people’s expectations about the Internet and blogs had changed, as had the feminist blogosphere. In 2010, people relied much more heavily on Google and other search engines to find what they were looking for, and those search engines had become far more robust than they were in the past. Additionally, people no longer expected all blogs—“the blogosphere”—to be explicitly connected, yet there was also more of an understanding that the links that were present in blogs could lead someone to countless other digital spaces. Moreover, the feminist blogosphere was
vaster than it had been in 2004; there were far greater numbers of feminist and social justice blogs and bloggers, and some of them were widely well known.32

This third redesign was also funded by money the editors raised, this time through selling tickets for their 5th Anniversary Bash/Fundraiser. Tickets ranged from $20 to $50 depending on what someone could afford, and the editors encouraged people who wanted to support Feministing but couldn’t attend the event to buy a ticket they could raffle off on the blog for those who couldn’t afford one themselves. Additionally, the editors more publicly acknowledged the web design team they collaborated with for this redesign, as seen in Jessica Valenti’s post on July 23, 2010 and in the text in the footer that read “Website by COMMAND C design, LLC” and also included a link to CommandC’s website.

One of the most recent changes to the functionality of the site occurred December 13, 2011, when the site became part of a launch of the Google app Currents, which allows people to easily access the site’s content from a smartphone or tablet, yet another effort to increase the ability for people to use social media and mobile technologies to connect with the site. On the whole, though, Feministing’s website today (see Figure 3.11) looks very similar to how it looked after this third redesign, except there are now just two columns again and there are more ads, as seen in Figure 3.11 just under the header and, not pictured in Figure 3.11, just beneath the first post on every page in addition to the ads featured in the right column. Additionally, the “Most Shared” and “Most Commented” sections have moved from the gray bar below the header into the right column while the “Top Stories” section has expanded to span the width of the gray bar and now includes images. Additionally, the “Support Us” tab has moved to the far left side of the page. That Feministing’s website has not changed much aesthetically in the past two years may

32 For example, Technorati listed Jezebel as the 34th top-ranked blog overall for 2010, up 70 positions from its previous ranking as 104th in 2009 (“State of the Blogosphere 2010”).
be troubling to some. As Jos conveyed to me during our interview, she feels the site is, “in terms of the aesthetics of the blog . . . like ten years behind,” and she expressed feeling the site’s current look was “a little old school.” As an alternative point, however, I would argue there was more rapid change in blog design—both at Feministing and in the larger blogosphere—in their earlier years (late twentieth and very early twenty-first centuries) when the blog genre was even less “stabilized for now” (Schryer). In fact, looking back at the development of blogging genres, one finds that although blogs were once seen primarily as solo-authored online journals, people quickly realized the variety of focuses and purposes blogs could serve (e.g., political commentary, technological troubleshooting, parenting advice) and the more collaborative functions they could serve (for more on the development of blog genres, see Devitt; Herring et al.; and Miller and Shepherd). Therefore, it makes sense Feministing would undergo more redesigning in its earliest years. Of course, that does not mean the genre of blog, or even of political or feminist activist blog, is set in stone at this point. As Catherine Schryer argues, “Genres, because they exist before their users, shape their operators; yet their users and their discourse communities constantly remake and reshape them” (208–09). I do expect, then, that as the blogosphere, the culture, and Feministing’s members and their needs change, so too will the look of the site change again.

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33 It’s worth a reminder, though, that Jos is currently pursuing an MFA in printmaking and has gone to school for arts and design for many years, which certainly flavors her perception of the site’s aesthetic.
The Times, They Are A-Changing: Feministing as Digital Literacy Sponsor

A look back over the changes occurring during the past eight years for Feministing makes it apparent the site has become more technologically sophisticated and visually appealing. And of course, these changes mirror changes that happened in the larger blogosphere as people began to realize the potential reach and increasing significance of blogs. However, this technological development has not always happened easily or quickly for Feministing because when it comes to technology, Feministing’s editorial team has consistently been balancing concerns of aesthetics, functionality, and accessibility with their own and their readers’ varying levels of technological comfort and expertise. When the four original editors launched Feministing, they obviously had no idea what the site would become—which widely read and discussed it would eventually be. Therefore, just as the increased attention to community building occurred as the editorial team learned more about the potentials of a shared digital feminist space, the increased
attention over the past eight years to the technological and visual aspects of the site are logical: as the site became more heavily trafficked and discussed, as more people visited the site and attempted to interact with it, the site required a more robust technological frame. Since the beginning, though, technological limitations have consistently been a focal point for the editors and other users of the site as glitches such as the inability for people to comment or the site crashing frequently occurred. Yet it is significant that the editors have always been very open about these problems, have never tried to hide the technological issues or their struggles in dealing with them. Looking back through the archives, one will find numerous posts like the “Morning Tech Note” post, which explained certain aspects of the site that were not functioning, or the “Tech Problems Fixed” post, which let readers know when things were fully functioning again and included a humorous picture (Figure 3.12). By calling attention to their own struggles with technology, and by even poking fun at themselves, the editors have consistently set an example for other Feministing members. While the editors can, on the one hand, confidently write a thoughtful, biting, yet humorous critique of a recent political event, they may not, on the other hand, be able to publish that critique because of technological problems they are unable to address individually and/or quickly.

Figure 3.12: Screenshot from “Tech Problems: Fixed!” post (Feministing.com).
Here, one can see the exact concerns Herbst expressed about women not being code literate when she argued that “gender imbalances in programming translate into gender imbalances in the use of the Internet” (138) and lead to men’s greater sense of ownership in digital spaces, giving them the ability to “claim the spaces they invented as well as the nature of discourse within” (138). Indeed, as explained above, both the architecture and design of the site, including the software, created certain possibilities as well as certain restrictions. As Amy Devitt points out, “As a technology, like HTML more generally, blogging software not surprisingly sets limits on forms. To make different formal choices requires knowing HTML, being able to write programming that will create the desired forms” (45), which echoes Herbst’s concerns. Devitt also explicates how blogging software both helps and hinders users’ actions:

When bloggers choose one instance of the blogging software genre—most commonly the blogging freeware called Blogger—they choose an entire set of forms and, with them, a set of potential actions. These forms both enable and limit. Without Blogger, novice bloggers would be very restricted in the forms and resulting actions they could choose. With Blogger, they can add links, archives, badges, time stamps, and more. With Blogger, they cannot easily allow comments. Actions they might have chosen, like interacting with their readers, becomes more difficult. (45)

It is almost uncanny how well Devitt’s description describes the story I have laid out of Feministing’s redesigns, particularly in the recognition of how blog software can restrict bloggers’ ability to interact with readers. As the Feministing editorial team recognized these limitations, they also recognized they did not always have the technological capabilities to overcome those limitations, and often they knew what changes they wanted to make but weren’t...

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34 For more on the negatives of templates, see Arola.
able to implement them exactly as desired. Nevertheless, the editors did not let technological problems stop them, and they consistently disclosed their own digital learning curves, in pointing out how much the site has changed over time (even calling old versions “scary”) and openly acknowledging their collaborations with others, which eventually included people within and outside of the editorial team who they considered more expert at coding and design.

It is also significant that throughout their upgrades, redesigns, and otherwise handling of the technological functionality of the site, the editors have consistently taken readers’ feedback and preferences into consideration. For instance, before the second redesign launched, they encouraged people to test out a beta version, and before the third launch, they asked people to answer various polls to indicate how they used the site and what their preferences were. Additionally, by announcing redesigns and changes to the site in advance of when those changes went into effect, the editorial team encouraged Feministing members to share concerns or suggestions, both a pragmatic move in enacting user-testing to ensure the people using the site would respond well to the changes as well as yet another move that acted to build the sense of community within the site. Take, for instance, Jessica Valenti’s December 4, 2007 post announcing the second major redesign that was mentioned previously. After she published that post, people immediately began responding with enthusiasm, yet Valenti included the comment, “Thanks, folks! And remember, if you have any questions…I’m here” (ellipsis in original). Shortly thereafter, people did start responding with questions and concerns about the redesign, such as nerdalert’s comment, “I admit, I have little bit of old-lady-technology-anxiety upon hearing about all of the new features, but I’m sure I’ll be able to adjust,” and SarahMC’s comment, “Congrats to everyone! I admit that I’m sort of anxious about these new developments. I tend to fear change. Will the main feature still be posts from you all? I hope the
site isn’t going to be too complicated because I love it’s [sic] simplicity right now (just scrolling down for different threads)” (parentheses in original). In each case, Valenti responded to reassure readers the redesign would be primarily beneficial and not too difficult. At the same time, Valenti’s post also prompted some people to share their technological expertise, as in daryl’s comment, “Why not use a free solution like Drupal [linked] to save yourself some cash? I can’t help thinking it must be much more extensible and flexible than MT, though I haven’t evaluated MT in a while and have never looked at their community solution. I’d be happy to swap some email with you about pros and cons if you’d like to investigate this other option,” and geeky_girl’s comment, “Very cool! I suggest if you are computery enough to implement an ad-free site for big donators (more than X$) you do so. Just as a little reward . . . It might be more work than its worth for you though . . .” (ellipsis in original). Again, Valenti was quick to respond to these types of comments, too, either to express why they had decided not to use Drupal or to admit they had not considered the option of implementing an ad-free site for large donors but felt it was a great idea and would look into it.

Overall, then, by openly admitting technological struggles and learning curves as well as acknowledging and encouraging collaborations, Feministing’s editors have created a space intended to make people feel comfortable coming together to discuss issues of feminism and social justice, but they have also created a space where people openly discuss technology. Having this type of comfort is very important in a time when computers and other networked digital technology are becoming key tools for feminist activism. In fact, this is one way to address issues of access. Certainly, issues of access are multifaceted and complicated because they exist within complex cultural ecologies of literacy (see Pandey; Selfe and Hawisher). And
while socioeconomic issues\textsuperscript{35} are undoubtedly one reason many people lack access to computers and networked digital technology and technological literacies, others can feel the technology itself is a barrier, as expressed in nerdalert’s previous comment. Therefore, it is crucial for contemporary feminists to have digital literacy sponsors like Feministing. As Deborah Brandt explains the term “sponsors of literacy,” these are “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (25). Further, as Brandt points out, literacy today seems to move very quickly: “It is as if the history of literacy is in fast forward. Where once the same sponsoring arrangements could maintain value across a generation or more, forms of literacy and their sponsors can now rise and recede many times within a single life span . . . This phenomenon is what makes today’s literacy feel so advanced and, at the same time, so destabilized” (39–40). Although I learned through my surveys and archival reading that some of Feministing’s members do have a variety of literacy sponsors, especially schools, much of that sponsorship seemed most tied to traditional alphabetic, print-based literacies, which could certainly be used to compose the content of blog posts, but not to the emerging literacies needed to understand how to read and write with digital tools in digital spaces. That realization combined with Brandt’s acknowledgement of how quickly literacy moves today—which can certainly feel overwhelming—is why it is so important that feminists have digital literacy sponsors. Again, as Brandt explains, “literate ability has become more and more defined as the ability to position and reposition oneself amidst literacy’s recessive and emergent forms” (89), and she argues that because we currently exist in a state of a literacy “surplus,” to be literate must mean to be able to “negotiate that burgeoning surplus” (89). And that negotiation, I would

\textsuperscript{35} See, for example, Chinn and Fairlie and the series of “Falling through the Net” publications from the U.S. Department of Commerce.
argue, is exactly what Feministing’s editorial team models so well for members. As demonstrated by the examples given in the chapter thus far, the editorial team sponsors others’ digital literacy in modeling that those literacies can/should be collaborative and require ongoing learning and negotiation.

Of course, the “advantage” gained by a literacy sponsor is also a key part of Brandt’s definition. The advantage gained by Feministing as sponsor is at least twofold: on the one hand, by acting as digital literacy sponsors, Feministing’s editorial team gains advantage through advancing a common feminist goal: the burgeoning movement of young feminists, especially online, which contributes to renewed vigor for the larger feminist movement. In other words, through sponsoring others’ digital literacies by providing the space and various resources, the Feministing editors increase the visibility of the feminist movement, particularly of young feminists’ role within that movement, which was of course their initial goal for the site. And, in fact, the editors even serve as digital literacy sponsors for one another as they encourage each other to constantly engage in on-the-job or just-in-time learning in order to further advance the feminist movement. For instance, both Jos and Pamela shared with me that a lot of their technological literacy acquisition and development happened on the job because they wanted to do something they felt would be beneficial but had no idea how to do, so they pushed themselves to figure it out. Additionally, in a collective post the Feministing editors wrote to Jessica Valenti when Samhita Mukhopadhyay took over as executive editor in March 2010, they acknowledge, “Unlike so many who end up under the bright, exclusive media spotlight, Jessica has consistently tried to widen the circle—pointing producers towards other feminist writers and activists, mentoring younger women about blogging and book proposals, and securing media

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36 However, both of them also acknowledged receiving previous job or external training, and Jos mentioned having grown up using computers and having built a website in middle school.
training for the entire editorial team of Feministing.” At its heart, then, Feministing’s actions as digital literacy sponsor benefit the larger feminist movement by encouraging more people to take advantage of the reach and visibility of digital tools in the daily lives and in living their feminism.

However, I also feel it necessary to acknowledge a second type of advantage gained when Feministing’s editors serve as digital literacy sponsors, which is their personal gain. In the time Jessica Valenti, Martin, and Mukhopadhyay served as editors for Feministing, they published four, five, and one book respectively. Likewise, editors Vanessa Valenti and Courtney Martin formed a media consultancy, and several of the editors had work appear in nationally recognized publications or appeared on well-known television and radio shows. Certainly they may have accomplished these same feats had they not been associated with Feministing, but the increasing readership and recognition of Feministing undoubtedly enhanced their successes, which Jessica Valenti acknowledges in the post she wrote to announce she would be leaving the editorial team at Feministing:

I started Feministing almost seven years ago (wow) to provide a space for younger feminists who didn’t have a platform. I was a 25 year-old who found it profoundly unfair that an elite few in the feminist movement had their voices listened to, and that the work of so many younger women went misrepresented or ignored altogether. Today, almost 5,000 posts later, I’m a 32 year-old feminist with a voice that is listened to. Largely because of the work I’ve done with Feministing, I have a successful platform for my work—I’ve published books, written articles, and built a career as a speaker…. (“Farewell”)
Nevertheless, the success of *Feministing*’s editors serves as yet another way to invigorate the feminist movement and feed back into a loop of sponsoring both feminist consciousness and digital literacies. For example, I learned from several people who responded to my surveys as well as from Anna in our interview that reading one of Jessica Valenti’s books was what made them decide to claim the label feminist and get involved with the *Feministing* community. True to feminist ideals of practice, then, this is a collaborative effort at digital literacy acquisition and development because it is seen as furthering goals of the larger feminist movement.

**Complications in Feminist Digital Community Building**

Yet building and redesigning this digital feminist space has not been problem free. In fact, the design and features of this digital space have introduced some challenges to traditional conceptions of feminist space as non-hierarchical and uncensored, which has happened particularly through the presence of the comments section and the negotiations over the comments policy. When *Feministing* launched in 2004, there was no comment policy; anyone could comment, there were no guidelines to shape their responses, and there was no systematic filtering or blocking of comments. This openness was initially problematic because a lot of spam was posted, as was typical of many blogs at that time that were just learning to deal with the automated promotions of Viagra and diet pills that often appeared in comment sections. However, eventually there were some non-feminist and even anti-feminist comments posted, which upset some of *Feministing*’s regular guests and led to Jessica Valenti’s post on January 27, 2005:
The gals over at Feministing are pleased as punch that we’ve been getting so many comments lately—the whole purpose of starting this site was to foster an open dialogue among young women.

Unfortunately, the increase in traffic we’ve had recently has also brought out some folks who are less than polite about their opposition to the content of Feministing. As I’ve said before, I’m not into censoring. If people disagree and want to argue in the comments section, I’m all for it.

But I’m not going to tolerate threats or verbal abuse. And as much as I’d like to respond to every comment we receive—even the insulting ones—I just don’t have enough time in the day. So from now on, if certain people are here just to be assholes, I’m going to erase their comments.

Now let me be clear—this doesn’t apply to those who come to respectfully disagree with us. This doesn’t apply to those who come to sarcastically disagree. This policy is only for those whose comments are outright threatening or abusive.

Now back to the real work… (emphasis and ellipsis in original)

As this post indicates, the initial stance on commenting at Feministing was one very opposed to censorship,\(^{37}\) and Valenti suggests unease on the part of the editors over who is in control of the dialogue that appears on the blog. However, just a month later, Fraas published a

\(^{37}\) Debates over censorship have a long history in feminism. For some discussion of anti-censorship feminist thinking, see Ellen Willis’ *No More Nice Girls* and “Freedom, Power, and Speech” in *Don’t Think Smile*. Of particular note is Willis’ argument that censorship frequently did more harm than good to women. She argued, “No pornographer has ever been punished for being a woman hater, but not too long ago information about female sexuality, contraception, and abortion was assumed to be obscene. In a male supremacist society the only obscenity law that will not be used against women is no law at all” (Jacobsen 42).
post titled “Toward a Safe Space” to announce the first modification to the commenting structure—requiring people to register in order to comment on the site:

   We started Feministing to provide a forum to critically analyze and discuss issues that young women and feminists care about. Yet, as our web traffic has grown, we’ve had less critical discussion on the site. Whether it’s the never-ending stream of comment spam *or* the assholes that think that it’s okay to appropriate feminist space for their own agendas . . . we are tired of losing great feminist voices.

   **Because young feminists have so few spaces to *openly* analyze the world, we are re-committing ourselves to trying to provide a safe space for our readers.** (While we know that we will never be able to provide a truly safe space, that doesn’t mean we won’t try).

   **Starting tomorrow, you will have [to] register to comment.** It’s a one time registration process that will require you to provide a *real* email address. This new policy will have little impact on most of our readers. But it will have a significant impact on the two or three readers that write harassing & hateful comments under a barrage of names.

   **Our policy is not about censorship, it’s about fostering a space for the voices of young feminists and progressives.**

   We are sorry if you disagree with this policy. And we’re sorry that you have to take the time to register. But we think that this is an important step for Feministing to take.
We hope all of our regular readers know how much your thoughts / criticisms / voices mean to us, so *please* let us know what you think. (emphases, ellipsis, and parentheses in original)

Again, echoes of the historical feminist concerns about hierarchy and censorship come through in this post where Fraas tries to explain to people the need to balance openness and encouragement of all voices with a concern for creating a safe space for feminists. That is, when blatantly abusive non- or anti-feminist language begins to dominate Feministing, it ceases to serve as the type of space the editors always intended for it to be—a space for feminists to develop their voices and to move the feminist movement forward (more on this in chapter four in discussion of trolling and shared community rules at Feministing). Unfortunately, the site continued to be overrun at times by people clearly unwilling to engage in critical debate who were only commenting in order to take over the space and/or upset people, so some time between July 1, 2007 and August 6, 2007, Feministing posted an official comment policy, which read:

We view Feministing as a platform for not only discussion among feminists and allies, but for reaching (rational, not hateful) people who may not agree with every word we write. However, we require that discussion in comments should be respectful and be directed toward the ideas and argument, not the person. All comments with hate speech, personal attacks, or offensive language will be deleted. If we have to delete a total of three comments by any one commenter, that person will be banned.

The individual bloggers who write for this site are responsible for moderating comments on their own posts. If you feel the need to alert one of us to the presence of offensive comments on a thread, please send an email to the author of
This change, of course, signaled the move from simply requiring people to register for the site to an official policy for deleting inappropriate comments, enforcing censorship and reinforcing a hierarchy that put more power in the editorial team’s hands for what content did and did not appear on the site. Then, on October 31, 2008, the editors publicized yet another change to the site’s commenting structure by announcing people would be able to thread comments, rate others’ comments (a “like” or “dislike” function), and report abusive comments. Obviously this change in procedure was a way to try to subvert hierarchy and shift some control back to the members and away from the editors.

On July 6, 2009, Miriam Pérez, who was then an editor, published a post to announce the editors had updated the comment policy again to clarify the types of comments that were not allowed, to encourage people to use the “report abuse” button and particularly in the Community blog because editors were unable to moderate there as heavily, and to explain that comments would be heavily moderated the first day after they were posted and less so over the next seven days at which point the comment thread would close. Some people initially expressed concern over technical issues and over what constituted an inappropriate comment, which Pérez clarified in the comments section of that post. Of course, as evidenced by the comment shown in Figure 3.13, some people responded to this post about offensive language by posting something offensive, which gave the editors a chance to demonstrate the new policy. Pérez also explained the behind-the-scenes work that occurred if an editor were ever unsure whether a comment was appropriate: “If one of the editors is unsure if a comment is worth deleting, we check in with one
another via email. We developed this policy together and feel confident we are on the same page.”

Figure 3.13: Screenshot of deleted comment (Feministing.com).

A final round of changes to the commenting structure began on November 24, 2009 when Pérez published a post to announce Feministing was looking to add someone to their editorial team who would focus on comments and community moderation. After Anna Sterling joined the team as community moderator, she created a revised policy (the one the site continues to use today), which Jessica Valenti announced in a post on July 23, 2010. This policy much more explicitly defined the type of content that would be deleted.

Figure 3.14: Changes to Feministing’s comments policy.
Throughout the rounds of changes to the comment policy (overview in Figure 3.14), several people voiced various concerns about censorship on the site. It appears some people did choose to leave the site or stop commenting once these policies were put into place, either because the types of comments they would have posted would no longer be accepted or because they disagreed with the new commenting structure. As shown by the multiple previous posts that address the comment policy and request users’ feedback, the editorial team always worked to be transparent about their decisions and to be flexible about how to ensure a productive yet safe space for feminist dialogue, including dissent and debate. Additionally, as Anna explained to me during our interview, since she became community moderator, she has worked closely with registered users to address any concerns people have about the policy (i.e., she often corresponds with concerned users through email), and she goes into the comments sections herself to help steer the conversation. However, this is not apparent to all community members. For instance, one person who responded to my survey notes one thing she wishes she could change about *Feministing* would be to make the review process of community posts more transparent. She specifies that “some guidelines re: review process for community blog posts should be added (i.e. who does this reviewing, how long do ‘pending review’ stages take, what recourse do folks have when posts aren't approved)” (parentheses in original, R1). Later, this same respondent reiterates the frustration she felt with the moderation process in noting she felt a lack of response to her community blog post was due, in part, to the “lack of moderation or engagement on the part of *Feministing*” (R1). Exposing her frustration over the perceived ambiguity of *Feministing*’s moderation, she writes, “I understand it is a community-based blog, but given how much time passed while the post was ‘pending approval,’ I had hoped a bit more involvement in

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38 Although survey respondents provided demographic information (e.g., age, gender, nationality), most did not provide their name, so I am using the letter “R” followed by a unique number (e.g., R1) to identify which survey respondent quoted material belongs to.
fostering discussion and pushing back on folks to encourage further analysis might have been offered by the site’s mysterious ‘moderators’” (R1).

Nevertheless, some people remain upset about the idea that someone needs to steer the conversation at all or about how the moderation process affects dialogue. For instance, one survey respondent expressed his wish that “the comment-moderation system did not take about half a day to process each comment” because he believes that “completely kills any possibility of discussion and has reduced the median number of comments per post by a full factor of 10” (R8). Another person noted in her survey response that although the comments section is less “tense” than it used to be, it also seems “there’s not much of a community there” anymore (R7). While I have also noticed the shift toward moderation has reduced the overall number of comments on the main page of Feministing, I have to respect the editorial team’s decision to impose a comments policy and moderation process, in particular because looking back through the archives shows how unproductive and hostile conversations in the comments section can quickly become. In addition to intentionally offensive comments, one particularly unproductive aspect is that commenters often derail a conversation to discuss a topic unrelated to the main post. While this is not inherently an unproductive behavior, within the space of Feministing’s comments, it has often perpetuated the privileging of traditionally privileged voices (men, non-feminists, white people, straight people, cis-gendered people) talking about traditionally privileged topics, which is certainly problematic on a feminist website. While the editors have attempted to model feminist ideals (e.g., engaging in critical thinking and dialogue across/through differences, constantly challenging oneself on issues of privilege) they have learned lived experience does not always mesh with these ideals. Ultimately, then, they had to decide to privilege creating a safe space over creating a space where everyone’s ideas could be expressed. And in survey
responses and discussions in the archived comments sections, it is clear Feministing community members also value Feministing as a safe space. For instance, one survey respondent specifically notes turning to Feministing as a publishing venue because she considers it a “safe space”: “This year, one of [my] (former) students and I wrote a response to a newspaper column and when seeking a forum to publish it more widely (and in a safe space), opted to post the blog on the Feministing community site” (parentheses in original, R1).

This example of negotiating the comments section and policy provides yet another example of how the Feministing editorial team could not anticipate the ways the blog would develop. Likely in taking up traditional feminist ideals, the original editors sought to leave the comments section completely open for all—not to censor it—and to reproduce traditional feminist goals of creating spaces that are non-hierarchical and collaborative. They soon realized, however, the new digital spaces they were venturing into did not operate exactly as offline spaces do. Nevertheless, they sought compromise with other Feministing members and gradually introduced additional features of the site to subvert aspects of hierarchy and censorship they and members were uncomfortable with to varying degrees. For instance, to subvert hierarchy, the editorial team continued to add more editors and contributors to the team, and as stated before, members of the editorial team decided to leave when they felt they no longer fit the intended purpose for the site (i.e., when they became too old or too well known). Additionally, the editorial team added the Community and Campus blogs, continued to feature posts from the Community and Campus blogs on the main Feministing page and to link to various other feminists’ websites and blogs, and retained the main goal of the site as disruption to the hierarchy in feminism that privileged older and well established feminists. And in order to retain non-censorship, the editorial team members continued to all write their own posts without
worrying whether the members of the team all agreed about an issue and made it so members’ posts and comments would be posted more quickly once they had established themselves as good community members.

As demonstrated throughout this chapter, Feministing changed substantially in its look and even its functionality from 2004–2012. The move away from the boxy, obvious-looking blog design was more than just an attempt to look good and keep up with the times, though. Instead, these changes capture Feministing’s members’ processes of learning to design and perform within digital spaces that would foster literate activities that advanced the feminist movement. The Feministing editorial team’s choices in redesigning the site in response to the changes and learning happening within the larger blogosphere demonstrate both the crafty rhetorical work Wilding argues is necessary if feminists are to use digital spaces to their own advantages as well as the type of negotiation between existing and emerging literacies that Brandt has argued is essential to remain literate in an age of “surplus.”

Of course, as Feministing was experiencing changes in form and function, so too were more feminists entering, claiming, and sharing digital spaces. Collectively, they were learning how to perform digital feminism as they went, and at the same time, their actions were working to establish the role of digital literacies within the larger feminist movement. However, establishing these digital feminist communities has not always been easy work, and I turn now to considering some more specific conflicts that erupted in Feministing, many spilling over into the larger feminist and social justice blogosphere, during this time.
CHAPTER 4: NAVIGATING RHETORICAL ECOLOGIES AND SOCIAL CIRCULATIONS OF FEMINISTING

“The fundamental promise of rhetorical genealogy as a methodology for transnational feminist activism and scholarship is that it reconceptualizes and makes visible the multiple interactions between electronic texts and the material realities from which they emerge and through which they circulate to produce alternative fields for encountering each other in the moment of rhetorical action.”
-- Mary Queen (“Transnational” 476)

This chapter continues to address my research questions about the range of and impetuses for literate activities within the Feministing community as well as how various aspects foster and delimit these activities. Any list of these literate activities will undoubtedly always be partial, at the very least because activities change as technologies change. To contribute to this list, chapter three focused on how site design and redesign generated a portion of the literate activities within the Feministing community, including things like writing code or collaborating with someone who does, talking (e.g., with other members of the Feministing community about the changes), and composing blog posts or comments (e.g., to explain or ask questions about the changes). I focus now on more external rhetorical ecologies of the Feministing community and digital space, including the circulation of Feministing’s texts, images, and ideas, and how these generate another portion of this list of activities.

Of course, attempting to provide a list of impetuses/exigencies leads to a similar inability to account for all possibilities. Part of the reason for this is because, as Jenny Edbauer argues, “exigence is more like a complex of various audience/speaker perceptions and institutional material constraints” that are “everywhere shot through with perceptions,” so, as a result, “there can be no pure exigence that does not involve various mixes of felt interests” (8). In other words,
exigencies are complex, complicated, and hard to untangle, especially so when attempting to account for multiple rhetors who all bring their own previous experiences, interests, and biases to bear on any given rhetorical situation or action and especially because of the accelerated pace of change in technology. Like Edbauer, then, I argue that we can’t easily locate exigence in any one discrete element of a rhetorical situation but, rather:

[W]hat we dub exigence is more like a shorthand way of describing a series of events. The rhetorical situation is part of what we might call, borrowing from Phelps, an ongoing social flux. Situation bleeds into the concatenation of public interaction. Public interactions bleed into wider social processes. The elements of rhetorical situation simply bleed. (8–9, italics in original)

Recognizing exigence as a type of shorthand and recognizing that elements of the rhetorical situation bleed into one another muddies attempts to clearly write about the impetuses for literate practices. The messiness caused by the bleeding elements is not a bad thing, however. In fact, writing studies scholars have recently demanded that our scholarship more fully recognize and address complexity (e.g., Cooper; Hawk; Prior et al.; Syverson).

Although there is no simple way to manage and account for all the complexity, this chapter continues to highlight and make sense of this complexity by adding Jenny Edbauer’s emphases on rhetorical ecologies to Collins’ and Queen’s methodological frames discussed in chapter three. To begin, I more concretely describe this chapter’s analytic framework, drawing especially on Edbauer’s and Queen’s emphases on the movement and circulations of, as well as the transformations caused by, intersecting and overlapping rhetorical ecologies. I build on findings from chapter three in order to better understand the literate activities and rhetorical strategies in/of Feministing and continue to build the argument that in order to understand these
activities and strategies, we must also scope out and consider the larger blogosphere and histories of feminisms. Through the discussion provided in this chapter, I demonstrate that community members are carrying conventions of and conversations from these broader spaces and histories with them into Feministing even if un/subconsciously. While it is not possible to fully consider all influences on each rhetorical agent within Feministing, widening my scope to consider adjacently circulating rhetorical actions and spaces provides a fuller understanding of how these actions/spaces affect (and sometimes cause) the negotiations that take place among Feministing community members. When considering the larger ecologies and circulations of Feministing, I emphasize community members as part of other communities, too—communities that have their own rules and expectations—and emphasize their actions as always in relation to movements and histories. I illustrate the importance of scoping out and considering wider, even more complex rhetorical ecologies by focusing on three examples: 1) the negotiations that occur as Feministing members decide whether/how to engage unintended audiences, 2) the ways Feministing members employ and complicate invitational rhetoric, and 3) the complicated histories and movements involved in Feministing members’ engagement with other feminists during major debates within the feminist blogosphere.

**Tracing Connections and Tensions in Situated, Adjacent Fields**

“In my very enjoyable interactions with this blog and its community, I forget that my own sense of continuity, which is necessarily based on my personal contributions and not the sum total of all postings, is not shared by others and would then make some references seem quite out of place.”

-- Charity (a comment posted Feb. 22, 2007 at 8:48 pm in response to the post “I Heart Pro-Choice Graffiti”)\(^{39}\)

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\(^{39}\) I leave Charity’s quote, and all others in this chapter that I take from the Internet, as they originally appeared, unedited.
“5. Be aware that our words are very often part of conversations we’re having within our communities, and that we may be participating in overlapping conversations within multiple communities, e.g., our trans communities, our scholarly communities (both interdisciplinary ones and those that are disciplinarily bounded), feminist communities, queer communities, communities of color. Be aware of these conversations, our places within them, and our places within community and power structures. Otherwise, you won’t understand our words.”

-- Jacob Hale (from “Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans____.”)

Undoubtedly, when communicating in digital spaces, some people fail to acknowledge their own positionality or write in a very self-directed way; like many writers, they tend to write in ways symptomatic of what Linda Flower has referred to as writer-based prose. To define writer-based prose, Flower juxtaposes it with reader-based prose: “In function, Writer-Based prose is verbal expression written by a writer to himself and for himself . . . In contrast, Reader-Based prose is a deliberate attempt to communicate something to a reader. To do that it creates a shared language and shared context between writer and reader” (19–20, italics in original). In the first quote that begins this section, Charity’s comment highlights hir\(^{40}\) shift from more writer-based to more reader-based prose. Even though ze doesn’t actively work to provide the missing shared context between writer and reader, this shift is demonstrated by hir realization of hir own situatedness and the resultant inability to understand or experience exactly what another Feministing member does, or more specifically in this case, the inability for another Feministing member to understand why Charity referenced something that ze did earlier in the comment thread. A simple interpretation of this exchange is that this serves as a lesson for Charity and others to better explain their references in the future. However, this exchange also exemplifies

\(^{40}\) I employ gender-neutral pronouns (ze, hir, hirs, hirself) for both practical and political reasons. Practically, I use gender-neutral pronouns rather than clunky phrases like he/she or his/her when I don’t know the gender of someone I quote. Politically, I follow people like Kate Bornstein in using gender-neutral pronouns to acknowledge the English language needs pronouns that represent queer and non-gendered identities, and I seek to address Linda Alcoff’s concern of not speaking for others by not imposing a gendered identity that someone else might not choose for hirself. However, I do use gendered pronouns if the person I’m referring to has explicitly identified as male or female.
the benefits of a rhetorical ecologies approach in that it illustrates how considering discrete elements of a rhetorical situation (here, the rhetor, Charity, and the text and audience within this comment thread) is not sufficient for understanding the actions and significance of public rhetoric/rhetoric’s publicness (Edbauer 9). As Edbauer explains:

A given rhetoric is not contained by the elements that comprise its rhetorical situation (exigence, rhetor, audience, constraints). Rather, a rhetoric emerges already infected by the viral intensities that are circulating in the social field. Moreover, this same rhetoric will go on to evolve in a parallel ways: between two “species” that have absolutely nothing to do with each other. What is shared between them is not the situation, but certain contagions and energy. (14, italics and parentheses in original)

Applying Edbauer’s claims to Charity’s case emphasizes how Charity’s entire conversation and the previous one ze assumed hir readers would have been familiar with both existed within larger (and differing) fields of rhetorical action, each already inf(l)ected with unique “amalgamation[s] and mixture[s]of many different events and happenings that are not properly segmented into audience, text, or rhetorician” (Edbauer 20)—that is, inf(l)ected with the contagions and energies that circulate between different rhetorical exchanges and their attendant ecologies.

Edbauer’s productive complicating of a more traditional understanding of “rhetorical situation” is similar to Sheridan-Rabideau’s contention that literacy researchers must retune their attention to account for “an expanded cultural-historical mapping of rhetorical activity, a mapping that can better address how multiple networks shift relations among production and distribution and call upon resources striated across time and space” (“Kairos”). Sheridan-Rabideau’s call for literacy researchers to expand their view builds on the larger argument she
and her co-authors make in “Remediating the Canon”—that the wider view offered by a cultural-historical activity theory approach productively complicates the rhetorical canon. In fact, Sheridan-Rabideau’s call to literacy researchers acknowledges something similar to what Charity and Edbauer highlight but extends this awareness beyond individual persons and explicitly emphasizes also considering non-human actors within rhetorical ecologies. As Sheridan-Rabideau and her co-authors argue, a cultural-historical activity theory “argues that activity is situated in concrete interactions that are simultaneously improvised locally and mediated by historically provided tools and practices” (Prior et al.). Sheridan-Rabideau and her co-authors’ goals run parallel to the concerns of Edbauer and Queen. They extend Edbauer’s wish to “add the dimensions of history and movement (back) into our visions/versions of rhetoric’s public situations, reclaiming rhetoric from artificially elementary frameworks” (9, italics in original). They provide a precursor of sorts to Queen’s concern that “identifying and tracing associative paths across links opens up a new area of rhetorical analysis, one that explores how meaning and knowledge are made, changed, and transformed in the movement, rather than the stasis, of texts” (“Transnational” 475). In order to get at the situatedness; the mediation of local improvisation and historical tools and practices; the movements, transformations and circulations of texts; as well as the relationships and tensions between different rhetorical ecologies, my analysis of the Feministing community must look not only at the specific texts and internal workings of Feministing (as I did in chapter three) but also at how Feministing members and their texts contribute to and are affected by adjacent rhetorical ecologies. Emphasizing again Queen’s summation of a goal of rhetorical genealogy, I must “[make] visible the multiple interactions between electronic texts and the material realities from which they emerge and through which
they circulate to produce alternative fields for encountering each other in the moment of rhetorical action” (“Transnational” 476).

Symbiotically holding all of these approaches and their goals, my analysis in this chapter focuses less on the transformations of texts as rhetorical accretions over time (as in chapter three) and more on the relationships and tensions between rhetorical agents, processes, and products circulating in adjacent fields. This approach reveals the negotiations of community standards and community members’ behaviors as responses to complex, related actions of multiple rhetorical ecologies. I seek, as Jacob Hale cautions we must, to “be aware” of members’ conversations in various communities and as influenced by overlapping communities and power structures.

Engaging (or Not) Unintended Audiences: Negotiating Netiquette, Digital Feminist Community Expectations, and Feministing’s Goals and Histories

One exigency for the literate activity in Feministing is the presence of unintended audiences. As described previously, Feministing was created to be a space where young adult feminists could develop their own voices and ideas and could focus on issues they deemed important but had previously been overlooked by older feminists. However, there certainly are registered users who interact within Feministing’s digital space (not to mention people who do not have to register but can interact with the community in spaces like Facebook and YouTube) who are not a part of the intended audience. This includes feminists who are not young, people of undisclosed ages who are not feminist, and presumably some people who are neither young nor feminist.41 Not surprisingly, the people who provide the most pressing exigency for

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41 And these unintended audiences come to Feministing for a variety of reasons. For instance, as Pamela pointed out in our interview, journalists come to Feministing to get an idea of how feminists are responding to a particular event, topic, person, etc. As discussed later in this chapter, others come simply to “troll.”
Feministing members are those who fall into the category of non- or anti-feminist, regardless of age.

Feministing members report sometimes posting on Feministing’s website due to non- or anti-feminist activity that occurs offline, which was the case for one survey respondent who indicated her reason for creating a Feministing account and writing her first post was that she was “mad about getting harassed” (R17). At other times, the exigency comes from non- or anti-feminist people engaging with Feministing community members in their digital space. For instance, another survey respondent mentions that the Feministing editors used to publicize some of the “hate mail” they received by posting it to the blog. As the respondent explains, seeing that mail caused her to start “thinking about who/when we can engage with people who are anti-feminist” (R6). She commented about that on the blog post, which led to a larger discussion about when feminists should engage anti-feminists and how.

To this day, there are no clear guidelines about whether and how to engage with these unintended, and sometimes undesired, audiences. On the whole, however, it is clear Feministing members do not feel responsible for adapting their literate activities and rhetorical strategies to accommodate unintended audiences; they continue to focus primarily on providing space for young feminists and furthering the feminist movement. For instance, when clearly non- or anti-feminist people show up in the comment section and repeatedly critique Feministing or its members within comment threads, Jessica Valenti has no problem responding to tell those people to move to a different digital space: “Well since I’m such a liar and over-reactor [words the other person used to describe Valenti], I’m sure you won’t mind spending your time on another site” (Oct. 7, 2009 at 5:02 pm). At times members’ language is much more offensive and divisive, as in this comment from Marc:
So pray tell—who the fuck are you and why the hell are you on *our* website? It’s not that *we’re* not looking at the positive. The question is: why aren’t *you* looking at the negatives and thinking about the thousands of women being sexually assaulted? Better yet, what is *your* dumbass doing to stop sexual assaults, other than whining about how radical and liberal *we* are on this site? Go get an education, and then come back and talk to me, kid. (emphasis added, Oct. 8, 2009 at 4:18 am)

While some attempts are obviously more civil than others, both types of responses indicate *Feministing* community members’ position that although disagreement and dissent are beneficial and have a place within the *Feministing* blogs as well as the larger feminist movement, it is not beneficial to constantly engage with anti-feminists who are not willing to listen to the perspectives presented in/by the *Feministing* community. This sentiment—which is not new for feminists—is expressed in the “Finally, A Feminism 101 Blog” that *Feministing* links to in its FAQ page, particularly in this explanation from that blog:

**The first reason FF101 exists** is to help ensure that discussions between feminists don’t get continually derailed by challenges from newbies and/or antagonists to explain and justify our terminology and conclusions to them, right now! Substantive challenges can be valuable, but constantly having to explain basic theory over and over, when an interesting discussion was underway, gets really frustrating. There’s a time and a place for discussing the basics, and disrupting a discussion on other feminist topics is not that time and place. (“Introduction,” emphasis in original)
This echoes a long-held concern that feminists will not be able to move their conversations or the larger movement forward if the expectation is that feminists are responsible for educating people unfamiliar with feminism as opposed to those people taking responsibility themselves to read and learn before asking questions they could have easily found answers to. As Audre Lorde writes:

> Whenever the need for some pretense of communication arises, those who profit from our oppression call upon us to share our knowledge with them. In other words, it is the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressors their mistakes . . . The oppressors maintain their position and evade responsibility for their own actions. There is a constant drain of energy which might be better used in redefining ourselves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future. ("Age" 114–15)

**Don’t Feed the Trolls**

One particular way this draining of energy plays out in/on *Feministing* is through an act commonly known as trolling. As Susan Herring, Kirk Job-Sluder, Rebecca Scheckler, and Sasha Barab explain, “Trolling entails luring others into pointless and time-consuming discussions” (372). They differentiate this from the digital rhetorical act of flaming by explaining a flame is a message meant to insult someone while trollers usually initiate conversation by posting something that is “deceptive, but not blatantly so, in order to attract the maximum number of responses,” especially in attempts to draw in “particularly naïve or vulnerable readers” (Herring et al. 372). As Herring et al. explain, drawing on Andrew, an Internet user with a website devoted to trolling, “The object of recreational trolling is to sit back and laugh at all those
gullible idiots that will believe *anything*” (372). In the case of a feminist community like *Feministing*, then, a trolling incident might begin with a troller posting a slightly inaccurate but seemingly innocent comment about feminists or feminism in order to draw others into what they hope will eventually be a very long conversation that never really goes anywhere; even though the troller will likely continue to engage in the conversation, ze would be doing so only to rile others up and prolong the conversation rather than in an attempt to learn anything or to advance feminist conversations or goals. *Feministing’s* comments sections have attracted trollers, and as a result, an acronym often used in various digital spaces quickly became one of the most invoked community standards of *Feministing*: DFTT—Don’t Feed The Trolls. This shared understanding that it is not good *Feministing* community practice to engage trollers can be seen in a comment VT Idealist posted in response to Mukhopadhyay’s post “Judge Blocks Missouri Abortion Law.” VT Idealist begins hir post by prefacing, “Yes, I know I shouldn’t feed the trolls, but Oenophile has caught me on a bad day” (August 29, 2007 at 2:40 pm) before offering a response to Oenophile’s presumed trolling message.

In her post “Troll-B-Gone,” editor emerita Ann Friedman uses humor to deflate the effects of trolling but also provides concrete advice about how to respond to the rhetorical strategy of trolling (see Figure 4.1). Friedman points out the characteristics of trolls unique to *Feministing* to help others identify trolls and instructs *Feministing* members not to engage with trolls but to report trolling activity to the editorial team so they can “delete the offending comments and ban the trolls.” This advice fits with Herring et al.’s claim that trollers are often looking to draw in new, inexperienced members who may not even realize trolls exist or that they are being trolled. Similarly to Friedman, Herring et al. conclude their article with advice intended to “help to forestall individuals and groups from being trolled” (381).
Figure 4.1. Screenshot of a Feministing blog post on trolling (Feministing.com).
Despite the seemingly simple advice—mainly the rule DFTT—in reading through the Feministing archives, I see it remains difficult for members to heed this advice of not engaging. In addition to Herring et al.’s claim that people engage trolls because of naïveté, I would add that people who have experienced trolling behavior before and who know, perhaps even use, the DFTT mantra sometimes also decide to engage for a variety of reasons. To begin, it can be difficult to draw the line between intentional trolling and more reckless attempts at learning. Herring et al.’s caution that people who are new to Internet conversation are naïve of the practice of trolling can go both ways: yes, it might mean a newcomer is more likely to be baited by the troller, but it can also mean a newcomer who is unaware of trolling might phrase things in certain ways that come across as trolling but are not actually intended that way. Feministing member katemoore acknowledges this discernment difficulty in her response to Friedman’s post:

“Hooray, an accurate definition of trolls! I’d like to add, as I’ve added before, that calling a troll a troll is never helpful. If somebody’s trolling, you better believe they know it. If someone *isn’t* trolling, you’ve just killed any chance of getting through to them” (Oct. 1, 2008 at 1:52 am). Although there are general definitions of trolling, there are no specific guidelines as to what constitutes trolling behavior, as this could undoubtedly vary according to aspects of context such as who is speaking, about what, to whom, and why.

A second reason even an experienced member might be drawn into engaging a troll stems from the same concerns of censorship and hierarchy discussed in chapter three. That is, as Herring et al. explain, a feminist community can contain conflicting ideological views on trolling where, one the one hand, “[l]iberal and libertarian views advocate letting everyone participate, and combating problematic speech through debate,” and on the other hand, “[c]ommunitarian views focus on maintaining safe space” (379) and combine with more radical views focused on
creating separatist environments, which inherently necessitates the removal of trolls. The more liberal- and libertarian-minded members, then, would likely find it suspect that the editorial team wants to ban all trollers outright, particularly if the troller is not engaging in something that everyone can agree is explicitly anti-feminist, insulting, or threatening. Although Herring et al. note the practices of trolling and flaming do often merge because “in both cases there is intent to disrupt the ongoing conversation, and both can lead to extended aggravated argument” (372), that is not always the case. At the same time, the more communitarian and radical members would likely feel frustrated that what they felt should be safe space no longer feels so safe. These conflicting views are certainly present in the Feministing community as they were in the community Herring et al. researched.

Yet another reason experienced members might decide to engage a troll is a desire to disprove the negative stereotype of feminists as intolerant of or unwilling to engage in debate with people who do not already share their views. As much as the DFTT mantra is logical in its goal to enable feminists to move conversations forward instead of spending all their time and energy responding to people who cannot be persuaded, it can be hard to resist a chance to disprove the well-worn critique of feminists as intolerant of debate.\footnote{Of course, this claim could be seen as a type of trolling itself, or perhaps worse, it may function to silence feminists because it perpetuates the oppressive act of someone besides feminists getting to decide what counts as “critique” or “debate.”} This seems to be a case of damned if you do, damned if you don’t: both engaging and ignoring trolling can be read as ineffective rhetorical moves for Feministing community members. Herring et al. present an example of how the act of refusing to engage a troller can work against a feminist digital community. When their troll, Kent, enters a comment thread on a feminist publication’s website, he identifies himself as a middle-aged professional male who was previously banned from other digital feminist communities because of his views. Immediately, it is unclear if this comment is
meant to invoke anger, confrontation, dismissal, or pity. Even if people do recognize Kent’s words as troll-ish behavior, though, it becomes hard to resist engaging once he claims “women are ‘refusing to debate’ with him because they fear the threat he poses to feminism” (Herring et al. 377). Namely, it is hard to ignore the feeling that maybe, just maybe, if people could respond in a very calm, logical way, they might be able to explain how not engaging a troll is different than not engaging any debate and, therefore, convince Kent to finally change his mind about feminism and feminists. In fact, I have seen cases on Feministing where someone who initially seemed to be trolling did eventually change hir mind and even apologized to the community for hir behavior. For others who have seen this happen, desiring that potential accomplishment can serve as yet another reason it is hard to simply follow the DFTT mantra.

The DFTT mantra that circulates in the larger blogosphere, and even specifically in feminist blogospheres, does not tell the entire story, though, because it suggests only a negative relationship between feminists and trolling. To simply say that trolling always works against feminism or to claim no one should ever call someone else a troll is to deny the ways digital feminist communities might use the rhetorical strategy of trolling or of calling someone out as a troll to their benefit. For example, in a blog post titled “Feminists are Savagely Trolling this ‘Masculism’ Hashtag on Twitter” Lindy West, a self-identified feminist and writer for the online women’s interests blog Jezebel, wrote:

After some Reddit/4chan MRA babies [link to a page run by men’s-rights-activists (MRA) on the website Reddit] tried to make #INeedMasculismBecause happen on Twitter today (co-opting the popular feminist meme [link to the “Who Needs Feminism” Tumblr page], because EYEROLL), it blew up in their faces bigtime. The hashtag was gleefully hijacked by the normal, thinking humans of
Twitter, who are currently churning out hundreds of tweets lampooning Men's Rights talking points. I had to scroll down for years to find one sincere #INeedMasculismBecause tweet from an MRA. (And when you do find them, they read [link to specific tweet] like parody [link to specific tweet] anyway.) It's pretty awesome. (parentheses in original)

By trolling this hashtag on Twitter, feminists were able to interrupt a sexist conversation and use sarcasm to emphasize feminist points and to challenge popular misconceptions about feminism/feminists. Similarly, although katemoore cautions against calling out trolls claiming it is useless or alienating to do so, sometimes Feministing members do explicitly call out trolls in humorous ways that help to build their own ethos within the site and build a sense of camaraderie in the fight against trolls or implicitly suggest that someone is a troll to signal to others, perhaps newer members, that a troll is present and invoke the DFTT mantra.

Decisions about whether and how to engage unintended audiences—especially trolls and anti-feminists—are not easy decisions for Feministing members to make. As these examples demonstrate, Feministing members must negotiate expectations or rules for behavior coming from various sources, including the overlapping communities of 1) the larger blogosphere more broadly and the common Internet behavior rules known as netiquette promoted there, 2) the

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43 As seen in Amanda Hugankiss (@a_girl_irl)’s troll-tweet: “#INeedMasculismBecause i have never had a person who is literally 2.5 times my weight and a foot taller laugh about raping me.”

44 As seen in Daniel I. Pineda (@danielpineda)’s troll-tweet: #INeedMasculismBecause the word ‘feminism’ doesn’t have ‘equal’ in it & I’m too lazy to pick up a history book, so I KNOW they hate all men.”

45 As seen in Vervain’s response to long comments thread about reproductive rights that included quite a bit of debate and even some name calling: “Hank Dagny: Except for rape, doesn’t a woman make her ‘choice’ when she opens her knees? [here, italics represent material quoted from Hank Dagny] Hey, that’s right! Let’s follow your argument to its logical conclusion, shall we? Obviously women should only have sex when they specifically want to become pregnant and are certain that they will. You guys’d LOVE that, wouldn’t you? Calluses are super-cool! *checks bag* Damn…almost out of Troll Munchies. (Feb. 23, 2007 at 12:51 pm, italics and ellipses in original)

46 As in Desiree’s simple response to a very long and antagonistic previous post: “I think Brandi’s looking for a reaction 🙄”
feminist blogosphere more narrowly and their varying standards for good behavior, and 3) the Feministing community in particular and the goals and cultural memory of shared experiences that influence standards for good behavior there. Even though Feministing now has a more robust comments policy and a designated comment moderator, as their website becomes more well known and draws more visitors—some feminists who will become members, some not—members will need to continue to consider the very questions my survey respondent asked about “who/when we can engage with people who are anti-feminist.”

A Move toward More Explicative Posts

Although Feministing’s editorial team remains primarily focused on providing safe space for young feminists and furthering the feminist movement rather than adapting their literate activities and rhetorical strategies to accommodate unintended audiences, they have made some changes to their writing style and approach. For one, posts have become more explicative. Early on, the editors often wrote short, unexplained posts. Take, for example, the post “Here She Comes . . . There She Goes,” which Jessica Valenti posted on April 12, 2006:

The newly crowned Miss Iraq decided to step down [link to an article about the story] just four days after she won the pageant due to death threats.

During her acceptance speech, 23 year-old Tamar Goregian said, “Maybe beauty is the final step to end violence and preach world peace after all.” Huh.

The pageant director said of Goregian stepping down, “I respect her decision. The country is undergoing rough times, and we understand her desire to protect herself and her family.”

I’m freaked out by this on so many levels.
There is, of course, the obvious concern over a seemingly cavalier response to a woman receiving death threats, but Valenti mentions being freaked out on “so many levels” yet doesn’t offer any further explanation of what those various levels are or how they relate to feminism. A similar thing happened after Samhita Mukhopadhyay published a post on July 9, 2008 titled “Getting Marriage Advice from a Priest”:

Dowd has stooped to a new low. Paraphrasing a priest on advice on what to look for in a husband. I guess I can see on some level, since marriage is frequently a religious thing, but in general, this gets a no. And by the way, apparently we should be looking for man-robots that have never experienced any trauma or disruption in their life.

*Father Pat Connor, a 79-year-old Catholic priest born in Australia and based in Bordentown, N.J., has spent his celibate life—including nine years as a missionary in India—mulling connubial bliss. His decades of marriage counseling led him to distill some “mostly common sense” advice about how to dodge mates who would maul your happiness.*

*Keep reading.* [link to article in the New York Times] Oh my, even I can’t comment.

Several members responded in the comments thread asking for more explanation (see Figure 4.2), such as Mariella who wrote, “Since none of us really see what you were getting at, any chance you want to elaborate” (July 10, 2008 at 1:17 am) and darling121 who wrote, “I enjoyed the advice, and thought most of it was pretty reasonable. There was no talk about compromising yourself or your values which I might expect from a priest. I think the criticism is not deserved without a further explanation for your disagreement with the advice” (July 9, 2008 at 11:00 pm).
Additionally, when there was explanation or analysis included in earlier posts, it was sometimes buried in a link. For example, Jessica Valenti published another post on April 12, 2006 titled “Zen and the Art of Anti-Feminism,” which pointed readers to a Salon article that reviewed and critiqued an anti-feminist book. She writes:

Joan Walsh at Salon [link to Salon article] has a great piece on famed anti-feminist Caitlin Flanagan and her latest book, To Hell With All That: Loving and Loathing Our Inner Housewife. Walsh takes her to task for most of her feminists-ruined-everything arguments, but it’s Flanagan’s faux stay-at-home mom status that gets most of the article’s attention. And for good reason.

Caitlin Flanagan isn’t a stay-at-home mother, she’s an accomplished writer who plays a stay-at-home mom in magazines and on TV.
Anti-feminists touting the virtues of “traditional” motherhood and femininity while actually being one of those “career gals” that they seem to hate so much isn’t exactly new. Remember Beverly LaHaye? [link to an article in the journal *Genders*] (Go to #23 on the page) But Flanagan certainly has seemed to make her lie of stay-at-home motherhood as artful as her anti-feminism. Check out the whole piece, you’ll see what I mean. (emphasis and italics in original)

The *Genders* article she links to provides very detailed explanation and analysis of the problem Valenti is suggesting, but unfortunately, there is no guarantee people will follow links. This is evidenced by David Thompson’s seemingly snarky response, “What, she’s not allowed to write at home?” (April 12, 2006 at 4:56 pm).

Over time, members of the editorial team began writing posts that contained more analysis and explanation of their viewpoints. Consider, for instance, a post Jos Truitt wrote on November 30, 2009 titled “The Advocate ENDA poll FAIL” (see Figure 4.3). There, rather than just linking to an article and vaguely indicating disgust or critique, Truitt includes several paragraphs of analysis to explain why she takes issue with the poll. Of course, I cannot know all the factors that influenced this shift in rhetorical approach—perhaps it was due to changing expectations of political blogs over time, perhaps due to changes in the editorial members, perhaps due to changing expectations specifically of how blogging fits into a larger feminist activist agenda. Nevertheless, these longer, more explanatory posts do help to prevent confusion and operate against an assumption that people will easily understand or agree with an editorial member’s views. This could certainly be beneficial in communicating with audiences the site did not originally intend to draw. Yet, at the same time, writing longer posts and explanations does not necessarily compromise any of the editorial team’s goals for the site to be a safe place for
young feminists to develop their voices and ideas and to bring attention to issues they care about. The shift toward more explicative posts demonstrates the editorial team’s attention to clear communication and their willingness to make changes when it seems necessary to do so in order to better communicate feminist analyses. In fact, writing more explicative posts not only makes it harder for people to respond with comments like “you feminists overreact” or “your critiques make no sense” but also serves as a modeling of how to work through the often complex process of untangling complicated political and social issues with attention to intersectional, gendered oppression.

These longer, more explicative posts as well as the previous discussion of trolling demonstrate how, when deciding whether and how to engage with unintended audiences, Feministing members must negotiate the rules and norms for behavior of many different communities and spaces, including netiquette as well as specific expectations within the feminist blogosphere and, more specifically, specific expectations based on Feministing’s goals and histories. Both examples work to widen the field of activity Sheridan-Rabideau advocates literacy researchers consider. Likewise, the conversations that are layered and spread across time and digital space (not to mention the non-digital space I do not have access to), address Prior et al.’s contention that literate activities are both improvised locally and shaped by historical tools and practices.
The Advocate ENDA poll FAIL

Just in time for Thanksgiving, The Advocate gave transgender and gender non-conforming folks a reminder of how we’ve been screwed over by the mainstream gay community. No, I’m not grateful.

The Advocate posted a poll on their website asking, "Would you support the Employment Non-Discrimination Act if gender identity protections were again taken out of the bill?" Here’s what the results of this (I’m assuming very unscientific) poll look like as of this morning:

I suppose it’s nice to see the overwhelming answer of "No." But the big problem here is that the question was asked at all. It’s my understanding that supporting a version of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act that excludes protections for trans folks is not even a consideration. Barney Frank has said we are “beyond” the removal of gender identity and expression from the ENDA. HRC was the only mainstream LGBT organization to support a trans-exclusionary bill last time around, and they came under a lot of fire not just from the trans community but the broader LGBT community. A non-inclusive ENDA seems like a terrible political idea at this point given the amount of opposition among advocates.

So why would The Advocate even ask this question? Simply publishing this poll legitimizes the consideration of throwing trans folks under the bus again. It’s genuinely scary to see the question raised, to see any credence given to the idea that ENDA without protections for trans folks could be politically viable and worth supporting.

The Advocate has demonstrated multiple times that they are a publication for those gay folks with the most power and privilege through, for example, their problematic track record on issues of gender identity and race. This poll cements the fact that this publication is not for me and does not represent me or my community.

As of this writing the poll is still up on The Advocate’s website and is still accepting written responses. More contact information can be found here. Let The Advocate know how you feel about them raising this divisive question and even suggesting that ENDA without gender identity and expression is worth considering.

h/t to Kellan Baker.

Posted by Jos - November 30, 2009, at 01:07PM | in Queer issues, Transgender Issues

Figure 4.3. Screenshot of more explicative Feministing blog post (Feministing.com).
Some Differences between Non-/Anti-Feminist and Feminist Audiences: Negotiating and Complicating Theories of Invitational Rhetoric

In taking varying approaches to whether/how to engage non-intended audiences and balancing the energy-saving strategy of not continually answering the same questions repeatedly, Feministing community members sometimes do and sometimes do not fit Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin’s feminist rhetorical theory of “invitational rhetoric.” Foss and Griffin define invitational rhetoric in opposition to an antagonistic rhetoric based on Aristotelian claims that position persuasion as the ultimate goal of rhetoric. Instead invitational rhetoric:

constitutes an invitation to the audience to enter the rhetor’s world and to see it as the rhetor does. In presenting a particular perspective, the invitational rhetor does not judge or denigrate others’ perspectives but is open to and tries to appreciate and validate those perspectives, even if they differ dramatically from the rhetor’s own . . . rhetor and audience alike contribute to the thinking about an issue so that everyone involved gains a greater understanding of the issue in its subtlety, richness, and complexity. Ultimately, though, the result of invitational rhetoric is not just an understanding of an issue. Because of the nonhierarchical, nonjudgmental, nonadversarial framework established for the interaction, an understanding of the participants themselves occurs, and understanding that engenders appreciation, value, and a sense of equality. (Foss and Griffin, “Beyond,” 365–66)

Anyone familiar with Internet discussion boards would likely balk at this idyllic description. Indeed, as shown in chapter three, the comments sections of Feministing show how un-inviting and downright nasty Internet conversations can be. To be fair, Foss and Griffin did not seem to
have Internet conversations in mind as they wrote about invitational rhetoric in 1995. Nevertheless, I would like to consider how invitational rhetoric does and does not occur within the *Feministing* community, for there are, in fact, some pretty explicit uses of invitational rhetoric within *Feministing*.

Take, for example, this exchange from a conversation in a comment thread that stemmed from a post Mukhopadhyay published titled “On Racism and the First Lady” to explore how Michelle Obama fits and challenges societal conceptions of femininity and to address the complexities race adds to these conversations. In response to Mukhopadhyay’s post, a few users asked for more clarification, and they did so without antagonizing Mukhopadhyay and in attempts of better understanding the issue she writes about. Jane writes, “just one thing: how do formal dress norms uphold white beauty standards? I just want a little more info, please” (November 30, 2009 at 1:50 pm), and earwicga writes, quoting from Mukhopadhyay’s post “‘A first lady is symbolic of family, motherhood, togetherness and beauty’ Samhita, where does the beauty part of this sentence come from? I wasn’t aware it was part of the gig (further than the normal beauty rubbish pushed onto all women and increasingly men)” (November 30, 2009 at 12:25 pm, parentheses in original). When Mukhopadhyay doesn’t respond, a few others step in to attempt to offer clarification of the connection between the First Lady and gendered familial and beauty standards. Eventually earwicga responds to express gratitude that others responded to hir question and to acknowledge that ze better understands the point: “Ok, thanks. It ties them to all women in the public eye having to be beautiful/perfect” (Nov. 30, 2009 at 3:24 pm). Another example of invitiational rhetoric can be seen in this exchange between Matthew T. Jameson and Critter in response to Zerlina Maxwell’s post “First Lady Michelle Obama Funds Initiative to Bring Fresh Food to Low-Income Communities”: 
Critter: I love the idea of getting local food to low-income people, but Michelle Obama’s anti-obesity programs have been rife with really nasty fat-shaming. I’m also concerned with the involvement of Wall Street banks…but that’s the breaks of capitalism, I suppose. (July 20, 2011 at 9:33 pm, ellipsis in original)

Matthew T. Jameson: I’m curious, and I don’t mean to ask this in a combative way, but what exactly in Mrs. Obama’s anti-obesity effort is fat-shaming? Part of the reason I ask this is that I sometimes feel like merely acknowledging the health risks and societal costs of obesity warrant the label, at least within the Feministing community and others like it. Is it possible to “address the issue of childhood obesity” without fat-shaming? Or is merely framing obesity as an “issue” tantamount to fat-shaming? Again, not accusing you of anything, but I’m curious as to what in her campaign warrants the label. (July 21, 2011 at 2:42 pm)

Critter: Fear-mongering about obesity is fat-shaming. There’s nothing wrong with being obese and the “health risks” have been overstated by a health establishment that is extremely fat-phobic. Lots of socially sanctioned behavior has costs to society (playing contact sports like football, running marathons) have huge health risks and a large toll on society, but somehow “obesity” has become the enemy. That’s straight-up fat-phobia. (July 22, 2011 at 11:07 pm)

Matthew T. Jameson: Sorry I didn’t see this earlier. So, it sounds like, for you, saying that being obese is bad for your health and has societal costs is fat-shaming. Is that right? (July 25, 2011 at 12:39 pm)

Matthew T. Jameson’s use of qualifiers like “I don’t mean to ask this in a combative way” and his strategy of rephrasing Critter’s point of view and asking if ze was understanding demonstrate
the type of non-antagonistic search for understanding Foss and Griffin describe as a goal of invitational rhetoric.

In defending the importance of a theory of invitational rhetoric, Jennifer Emerling Bone, Cindy Griffin, and T. M. Linda Scholz emphasize the agency in invitational rhetoric is concerned with environment creation. As they explain, in invitational rhetoric, “[A]gency lies in the means by which safety, value, and freedom are created not in the effort to change”; “[A]gency is the means used to create the environment that leads to relationships of reciprocity, self-determination, and increased understanding”; and “[A]gency occurs when invitational rhetors work to create an environment suitable for [relationships of safety, value, and freedom] in situations where they may not already exist” (Bone, Griffin, and Scholz 446). As described in chapter three, Feministing’s editorial team certainly emphasizes their role in creating these types of environments. Therefore, although invitational rhetoric is not the only or best rhetorical approach for Feministing community members, the editorial team’s emphasis on creating an environment where members feel safe, valued, and free is another example of how invitational rhetoric is used within Feministing.

Importantly, though, one cannot conflate feminist rhetorical strategy with invitational rhetoric or presume that all feminists do/should/always adopt an invitational approach. For one, because invitational rhetoric is not based on changing an audience’s mind, it inherently does not seem a useful strategy for Feministing community members to use when engaging with non- or anti-feminist audiences. Although advancing feminist goals of making human life more equitable for women does not necessitate that feminists convince all people to claim the label feminist, it does presume the necessity of changing an audience’s mind if that audience does not believe

47 In their scholarship on invitational rhetoric, Foss and Griffin explain they do not intend to suggest invitational rhetoric is an ideal or is useful in all situations.
women deserve the same rights as men. And while feminists could certainly have different views about what rhetorical strategies are best—indeed, they may invite people who hold these views into conversations rather than behaving antagonistically—it is ultimately their aim to eradicate misogynistic views. In other words, invitational rhetoric is not well suited for engaging with non- or anti-feminist audiences because it is premised on compliance or cooperation. As Foss and Griffin explain, “In invitational rhetoric, in contrast [to antagonistic approaches], resistance is not anticipated, and rhetors do not adapt their communication to expected resistance in the audience” (“Beyond” 366). When communicating in the public and accessible space of Feministing’s website, Feministing members likely do anticipate resistance and, again, aim to work through that resistance, to change minds, and to encourage others to also see equality for women as a worthwhile goal. When engaging with non- and anti-feminist audiences, most feminists would likely not want to adopt a rhetorical strategy where “the audience’s lack of acceptance of or adherence to the perspective articulated by the rhetor truly makes no difference to the rhetor” (Foss and Griffin, “Beyond,” 373).

Even though invitational rhetoric doesn’t seem the most likely option for engaging with anti-feminist audiences, there are times when Feministing members do employ a more invitational approach that seems intended to promote a greater understanding of issues and of others. Take, for example, the following exchange where Mukhopadhyay responds to a seemingly anti-feminist comment posted in response to her post “Women in Work Force Not So Much, Po Mommies on the Rise”:

Photophlex: Oh Cripes. First it was women saying “hey! we can work, too! And we deserve the chance to work for equal pay!” Now it’s “women are pushed into the work force”, and there aren’t enough jobs, and too many women are
underemployed and poor. As the feminist wring their hands… “well, that didn’t work out so good, what now girls?” (March 2, 2006 at 4:47 pm)

**Samhita:** No, that is not the point. The point is that women should and are allowed into the work force and should/should demand equal compensation. The catch is that working women are still expected to continue their role in the house as primary care giver, so it is not that they have been alleviated of the full-time job of taking care of a family. So it is almost a joke on behalf of patriarchy, like, “you’ll see, you wanna work, now look where that got you, you will be back in the kitchen barefoot and pregnant in no time.” Feel me? (March 3, 2006 at 1:41 am)

Mukhopadhyay’s tone is not hostile or combative, she speaks in rather simple and conversational language to attempt to better explain her original point, and then she uses the question “Feel me?” at the end of her post to indicate an invitation into continuing the conversation in attempts to understand one another better.

Yet at other times, the editorial team puts less (or no) emphasis on being inviting and compassionate toward alternative points of view. For instance, on October 19, 2007, Jessica Valenti published a post titled “Nothing Like a Gang Rape Threat to Keep Bitches in Their Place” about a few male journalists from the New York Post’s Page Six who published a comment that read as a rape threat against a female journalist from New York Magazine. Valenti’s post elicited a large thread of comments (70), including an early comment from Kimmy, who wrote, “I’m just waiting for the parade of comments from people who claim not to see anything wrong or threatening in what was said” (Oct. 19, 2007 at 11:21 am). Three and a half hours later, noname wrote: “Kimmy—I’ll be the first. Sex, or something sexual at least, is
implied, but a lack of consent is not. I took it to mean that their masculinity is so powerful she
would inevitably [sic] consent to whatever they had in mind. Asshole comment: Definitely.
Rape threat: Maybe, maybe not” (Oct. 19, 2007 at 3:05 pm). Valenti quickly responded,
“Noname, you’re just wrong. So fucking wrong it hurts” (Oct. 19, 2007 at 3:11 pm). While
Valenti’s main point is still in favor of the feminist movement and therefore to establish
relationships of equality (similar to a goal of invitational rhetoric), the rhetorical strategy in this
particular interaction is not something Foss and Griffin would label as invitational. The approach
Valenti took here was, however, criticized by jeangenie, who writes, quoting from both Valenti’s
post and language from the editors about the type of content that would be deleted from the site:
[I]t’s disturbing that once again on this website, respectful dissent is met with
something like this, which is from either another poster or the editor of the site:
“Noname, you’re just wrong. So fucking wrong it hurts.” (All comments with
hate speech, personal attacks, or offensive language will be deleted)?? (Oct. 19,
2007 at 7:19 pm, parentheses in original)
Although Valenti doesn’t respond to this critique, several others continue to engage with
noname. After a mixture of antagonistic and invitational responses, noname finally agrees to
retract his original point and the hostility he used throughout the thread, which is concisely
captured in this exchange between RMislander and noname:

**RMislander:** Noname, I think the point you’re making is valid but irrelevant. Is it
possible that it wasn’t a rape threat? Yes. Is that likely? No. It’s also dangerous. Is
it possible that every woman who speaks about being raped is lying about the
particulars, or about consent, or about the incident in general? Yes. Is that likely?
No. Arguing for such unlikely scenarios helps perpetuate turning exceptions into
the rule, and helps foster a culture where women have to defend themselves and prove themselves twice as much because an exceptional viewpoint has become the common one. (October 25, 2007 at 9:19 am)

Noname: “Noname, I think the point you’re making is valid but irrelevant. Is it possible that it wasn’t a rape threat? Yes. Is that likely? No.” RMislander I agree, and apologize again. (October 25, 2007 at 9:44 am)

This exchange may be a bit unsettling for some because it suggests there isn’t a clear set of rules to use when deciding whether and how to use an invitational approach—and perhaps whether and how an invitational approach might be used in coordination with a more antagonistic or persuasive-based one. As Nina Lozano-Reich and Dana Cloud ask, “By what standard, then, are we to decide when and under what conditions invitational rhetoric would be productive?” (221). Although I’m skeptical we’ll ever have “criteria by which we might judge one situation as invitational and another more appropriately antagonistic” (Lozano-Reich and Cloud 222), I’m also not sure that would be beneficial. What’s more important is that having an invitational theory of rhetoric allows us to see more than persuasion within given rhetorical interactions and to contemplate when and how a give-and-take between antagonistic and invitational approaches can be beneficial.

However, in acknowledging the lack of a clear-cut set of criteria for invitational rhetoric, it is also important to acknowledge how invitational rhetoric might actually disadvantage Feministing rhetors. As Lozano-Reich and Cloud argue, invitational rhetoric will likely not happen in situations of unequal power: “the suitability of the invitational paradigm is not universal; it presupposes conditions of economic, political, and social equality between and among interlocutors,” and they acknowledge this equality is “rare in political controversy and
interpersonal relations” (221). Moreover, when a rhetor with greater power does “invite” less powerful people into conversation, “we must examine on whose terms and under what conditions that invitation takes place” (Lozano-Reich and Cloud 222) because, as Lozano-Reich and Cloud assert, in situations of power differentials, invitational rhetoric is a particularly unlikely approach if the more powerful party enjoys material benefit from the oppression. But most importantly, we must be careful that calls for invitational rhetoric do not become another way for dominant groups to “effectively silence and punish marginalized groups,” which Lozano-Reich and Cloud point out has historically happened, like in the 19th century when “antifeminists frequently appealed to masculine norms of ‘civilization’ to ‘depict women as less civilized than men, less able to contribute to the advancement of the race’” or as “women of color have been silenced through civilizing strategies that deem legitimately angry speech to be ‘uppity’ or illiterate” (223). As Lozano-Reich and Cloud reiterate, “Unfortunately, invitation and civility are as likely to be bludgeons of the oppressor as resources for the oppressed” (225).

Engaging Feminist Audiences: Negotiating Histories, Movement, Circulations

In this section, I continue my efforts to address Edbauer’s desire to add histories and movement back into our “visions/versions of rhetoric’s public situations” (9) and demonstrate how the literate activities and rhetorical strategies happening in/across the Feministing community are necessarily affected by the ways histories messily combine with present people, contexts, needs, and tools. Except now, I shift away from considering how Feministing members engage (or not) non- and anti-feminist audiences to focus specifically on how larger rhetorical ecologies (especially conversations and feelings bound up in histories of feminism and the movements of text, images, and conversations across multiple online and offline spaces) affect
the ways *Feministing* members engage other feminists. To further demonstrate how historical inflections shape literate activities and exigency on *Feministing*, I move now to an example where histories, movements, circulations, and transformations are even more complicated and complex. Representing this situation in an abbreviated and linear fashion will not do its complexity justice. It’s impossible to even account for all the major actors and actions within this “explosion” (a term many of the participants used when referring to this incident); the map I have created (Figure 4.4) only begins to represent the complexities.

![Diagram of race debates stemming from *Feministing* in 2006 and 2007.](image)

Figure 4.4. Mapping of race debates stemming from *Feministing* in 2006 and 2007.
When Jessica Valenti’s book *Full Frontal Feminism (FFF)* was published in April 2007, it immediately drew heavy critique from other feminist bloggers, which prompted debates within *Feministing*’s online space as well as across many other online and offline feminist spaces. Debates over the book actually began at least six months before the book was published. A primary concern was the book’s cover image (see Figure 4.5). Many took issue with the image because they felt it objectified women and/or reinforced an erasure of women of color from feminism. The first debates erupted on *Feministing*’s website in October 2006 after Valenti published a blog post that included a photo of the cover of her book. Arguments broke out in the comments section, which ended up with 139 posted comments. Nubian—who many in the *Feministing* community recognized as a black, queer, feminist blogger who ran the blog *Blac(k)ademic*—posted the thirty-fourth comment in this thread to express hir critique of the image: “why didn’t you just call it, a young WHITE womans guide to WHITE feminism. this is wack. i’m sorry. the naked torso of a woman is offensive AND the naked WHITE torso of the young woman pisses me off” (Oct. 19, 2006 at 11:17 am). Nubian then posted a longer explanation of hir critique of the image on *Blac(k)ademic* on October 19, 2006 (retrieved through Wayback Machine), which also drew heavy commentary (83 comments). Even after much heated debate within the *Feministing* comment thread, the participants did not reach a consensus. Valenti participated in the conversation somewhat, particularly toward the beginning of the thread, but ultimately said she stood by her choices and had to withdraw from the conversation in order to finish editing her book.

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48 And likely there were more than this at one point, but the editorial team has retroactively removed comments that violated their later comment policy because of the attention this debate received.

49 When this conversation occurred, Nubian identified as a queer female, so I use gender-neutral pronouns to refer to what ze wrote at that time. Now, the name used at *Blac(k)ademic* is Dr. Kortney Ryan Ziegler, and Dr. Ziegler identifies as a trans man. As always, in using language to refer to people, I must necessarily label them, which is uncomfortable.
When *FFF* was published in April 2007, intense conversation ignited again. Some continued to critique the cover image while others critiqued the content or Valenti herself. For instance, infinitethought argued that *FFF* was too much of a “puff” piece that was “stripped of any internationalist and political quality” and, as a result, became “about as radical as a diamante phone cover,” and others referred to Valenti as “a whore to the patriarchy” or “a feminist version of Ann Coulter” (qtd. in Filipovic “Full Frontal”). On May 16, 2007, well-known feminist blogger Jill Filipovic of the blog *Feministe* (another well-known, collaboratively authored feminist blog) published a post to defend *FFF* and Valenti and to rebut some of the more unfounded and less constructive critiques she had seen made about the book and/or Valenti. This post elicited 215 comments in response, many of them heated, and several from some of the same people who had commented on the topic before on *Feministing* and *Blac(k)ademic* (not to mention the numerous other blogs and bloggers involved in the initial arguments in October 2006). This conversation again spread quickly throughout the feminist blogosphere, particularly into blogs written by women of color who felt their voices were being shut out of conversations in spaces like *Feministing* and *Feministe*.

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50 A second edition of the book will be released in 2013, and interestingly, the cover is not set to contain any images this time, only text.
Within three days of writing to defend FFF and Valenti, Filipovic published a follow-up post on Feministe titled “Full Frontal Feminism Update.” In it, she acknowledged the vast spread of passionate conversations, some written in response to Filipovic’s own seemingly flippant dismissal of critiques of FFF. In part of the rather long post, she writes:

I’m glad that so many people have shown up in the comments and on their own blogs and called me out. Various aspects of my first post were unfair and fucked up. I was trying to only focus on the nasty criticisms, but I ended up conflating the more substantive criticisms with the personal ones as I read and wrote. I unintentionally lumped a lot of the critics together—someone who calls Jessica a feminist Ann Coulter is not the same as someone who says that yet again, issues of women of color are being ignored. So I guess I just want to point out that I’m hearing your criticisms, and I’m grateful that you’re generous enough to take the time to write them all out. I’m genuinely sorry that my post has started a huge mess, and I’ll shoulder the blame for that, because I should have been much more careful with my words, my issues and my structure.

Filipovic went on to talk about the process of learning in public and promised to continue working to be a better ally for feminists of color. That post also garnered heavy commentary—155 comments in response—including comment from Valenti, who began to engage some of the criticism from feminist women of color, and Mukhopadhyay, who wrote to defend Valenti as well as Feministing’s role in these debates. Mukhopadhyay then also published a post on Feministing to defend Valenti and FFF and explain Feministing’s comment moderation policies in the post “A Word on Intersectionality, Comment Moderation, and Our Love for Jessica” on May 20, 2007. The post began, “I write this entry with a broken heart. The cumulative effect of
hatred spewed via the internet inevitably bogs you down.” Mukhopadhyay then questioned why Valenti was being portrayed as the face of Feministing to the exclusion of other women who wrote for the site, including herself—a woman of color. A large portion of Mukhopadhyay’s post also acknowledged the frustration many in “the explosion” had expressed about Feministing’s comment moderation style, a concern Mukhopadhyay said the editorial team shared. People continued this larger conversation further in the comments section of this post, some new to the conversation, others spilling over conversations from other spaces by linking to blogs and comments sections.

This “explosion” was not only about FFF, though. There was further controversy in 2006 concerning Nubian and Feministing in addition to the FFF cover image debates. In April 2006, Nubian had written a blog post for Alas, A Blog, which ze also published on Blac(k)ademic, that discussed hir problems with the phrase “gender trumps race,” particularly stemming from then-current debates about racist allegations concerning a rape case at Duke University. Mukhopadhyay linked to and supported Nubian’s post in her own post, “Intersectionality and the Politics of White Feminism,” on Feministing on April 27, 2006 (about six months before the October 2006 blowout over the FFF cover image). Mukhopadhyay notes:

[F]eminists of color are often (and continually, usually subversively) asked to put their race (among other) *issues* to the side to call for some kind of fictional universal sisterhood fighting toward a type of equality we may not even agree with . . . Ultimately, I have to wonder, what is the mainstream face of feminism? All the work we (women of color) have done, has it trickled to the mainstream? Or are people still under the belief that patriarchy functions in a vacuum and is the sole root of oppression? (parentheses and emphases in original)
Mukhopadhyay also references a conversation she and Jessica Valenti had had recently to raise a concern that the posts on *Feministing* that typically received the most responses were “the ones about dating, or differences between men and women, or body images.” And while she admits those are important, often humorous conversations, she wonders if they can “*really* be had without rigorous analysis and incorporation of class, race, sexuality, etc.” and if it’s “still that difficult to engage in discussion about/with/around women of color” rather than “strategically and instinctually” leaving them “out of the dialogue of mainstream feminism (Mukhopadhyay “Intersectionality”).

Sadly, the sixth comment (out of an eventual ninety-eight) in response to Mukhopadhyay’s post exemplified the type of dismissive, racist commentary that Nubian and Mukhopadhyay were calling feminists’ attention to. SarahS writes, “I think I would take the criticism more seriously if it wasn’t coming from the most whiney petulant blogger I’ve ever had the misfortune of reading. I think that nubians [sic] acceptance and promotion in the feminist blogsphere [sic] is pure tokenism, because it sure has nothing to do with the quality of her work” (April 27, 2006 at 9:21 am). Later, in the only other comment SarahS makes in this thread, ze labels Nubian as defensive, non-intellectual, not calm enough, and a poor writer:

I do however wish that you [Nubian] would be less defensive and more likely to engage in debate with individuals on intellectual terms (I’m thinking of both Alas and your own blog). In addition, I think you could benefit from some writing classes that would make your work more readable and teach you how to incorporate evidence (including evidence of your own experiance [sic]) into your writing . . . I also think you need to find a way to calm down and engage in debate
without calling stupid for not sharing your views while simultaneously [sic] not explaining said views well. (April 27, 2006 at 1:12 pm, parentheses in original)

Nubian later responds to these posts from SarahS himself (see Figure 4.6), but others posting in this comment section were not quick to defend Nubian. For a while, the only acknowledgement of SarahS’s comments are KillerB’s comment that “blac(k)ademic doesn’t dumb down her work” (April 27, 2006 at 10:39 am) and then Jessica Valenti’s brief and noncommittal claim: “PS: SarahS, I just went through the comments at Alas and I’m afraid I don’t see what you’re saying” (April 27, 2006 at 11:28 am). The conversation then gets off track as comments 14–19 focus on the discrepancies between first and third world feminists and the work of the United Nations. Puck and Mukhopadhyay finally come to Nubian’s defense in their comments (see Figure 4.7 for Puck’s full comment). Mukhopadhyay emphasizes how SarahS’s comments perpetuate the racist dismissal and erasure of feminists of color she and Nubian had been trying to call attention to in the first place:

Yeah, I am super busy at work but I just have to add in here, SarahS your tone is really nasty. I clearly do think nubian is an awesome writer or I wouldn’t have linked her blog here. It is not good to you because you probably are so blinded by your inability to understand the content. **Either way, if you can’t see why just calling a black feminist queer blogger “whiny and petulant” and a *token* as tragically inappropriate and racist then I don’t think you are ready to enter this discussion.** I am writing this really quick as my students are out to recess, but I will add more later. (April 27, 2006 at 2:28 pm, emphasis added)
Comments 79–87 again stray from the topic of intersectionality and white feminists’ treatment of feminists of color in the form of a back-and-forth conversation primarily between tragula and Ismone who argue the benefits (or not) of stereotyping and eventually discuss housework. Noting this derailing of the conversation, nonwhiteperson responds, “The last ten posts or so have been about making yourselves (white women) again. I thought this thread is about intersectionality” (April 30, 2006 at 7:32 am, parentheses in original), and nubian writes, “and yet another blog conversation that privileges the experiences of woc [women of color], overpowered by white
feminist narratives . . . sometimes I think, why do we even bother?” (May 3, 2006 at 3:56 pm, ellipsis in original). Although some of the ninety-eight comments in this thread were written to thank Mukhopadhyay for starting this conversation on Feministing or to ask questions about how white feminists might be better allies for feminist of color, the thread ultimately serves as an example of the types of racist, dismissive commentary that not only exist but often go unchecked in feminist spaces as well as an example of how conversations drift from tough discussions of intersectionality and instead toward topics that continue to shut out feminists of color’s voices.
Figure 4.7. Screenshot of Puck’s comment in response to Mukhopadhyay’s “Intersectionality and the Politics of White Feminism” (Wayback Machine).
About three months after this exchange, Celina de Leon, then a *Feministing* editor, published a post titled “Blogging While Black,” which was an interview with Nubian about the increased scrutiny and hateful commentary bloggers of color face in comment sections. Again, this post received many hateful comments, further proving Nubian’s point. However, because Nubian was so upset by the comments and felt the editorial team was not moderating them fairly,\(^{51}\) ze requested that *Feministing* remove the post from their page altogether. This request, however, counteracted part of de Leon’s intentions in interviewing Nubian in the first place. As de Leon explains, “I decided to interview Nubian because I read on her blog that she was considering quitting her blog because of the numerous racist comments she received. I was a fan of her blog and wanted to help bring her more support” (de Leon). To remove the interview would be to silence Nubian’s voice and the legitimate concerns of a feminist blogger of color. Nevertheless, de Leon did eventually acquiesce and remove the post.

As mentioned previously, these debates are not easy to document linearly. Part of the reason is that the conversations spread across so many online and offline spaces.\(^{52}\) As Nanette wrote in a comment responding to Filipovic’s “Full Frontal Feminism Update,” conversations spread far throughout not only the feminist blogosphere but also to blogs not explicitly identified as feminist:

> I think probably you really are unaware of how far reaching the ripples were from the nubian interview thread, and the later book cover thread. I like to wander around online sometimes, just following random links, and I’ve been surprised myself to come across mention of feministing and the nubian thread(s) (not in a

\(^{51}\) They did not have a comments policy or moderator at that time.

\(^{52}\) I know these conversations happened in offline spaces, too, because of references made in online conversations, such as de Leon’s confession that she talked to Nubian about the interview on the phone. Unfortunately, these offline conversations are not documented in the way the online conversations are, and I’m therefore unable to represent them.
good way) on woc and other sites that are far outside my usual reading pattern. And whose own blogrolls sometimes have a link to nubian but not to any other site that is familiar to me. (May 20, 2007 at 10:51 am, parentheses in original)

And although it may be tempting to identify Feministing’s handling of comments or the publication of FFF as the origin of the debate, that would ignore how these conversations represent the combination of a few ongoing debates within feminist blogging: debates over attacks within comments sections and comment moderation, the privileging of mainstream (white, middle class, cis-gender female, heterosexual) voices/blogs, and, once again, attention to intersectionality within feminist blogs. Further, it would ignore how these debates are actually part of much longer-running conversations about race, intersectionality, silencing, and unchallenged privilege that have been a part of feminist rhetorical ecologies for decades (with notable prominence in conflicts during the Civil Rights and Women’s movements).

These explosions reinforce writing studies scholarship that debunks early claims the Internet would lead to the democratization of communication. As Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe point out, early rhetoric about technology often overemphasized its positive aspects or entirely excluded its negatives. As Selfe argues elsewhere, there was a palpable “Un-Gendered Utopia” narrative running through popular and academic discourse that suggested “computer-supported environments [would] help us create a utopic world in which gender is not a predictor of success or a constraint for interaction with the world” (305–06). This utopic vision did not only apply to gender, though; early claims promised computers would somehow provide a utopic space in which all identity markers like race, class, gender, ability, and sexuality would no longer be used to replicate mainstream society’s marginalization practices. Although recognizing the naïveté of these claims didn’t happen quickly (e.g., in the foreword to Blair and Takayoshi’s
edited collection, Patricia Sullivan admits to working with computers for a decade before realizing she was gendered in cyberspace), several writing studies scholars have since revealed where lived realities do not mesh with these utopic forecasts (e.g., Alexander, McCoy and Velez; Banks; Blair, Gajjala, and Tulley; Blair and Takayoshi—especially Addison and Hilligoss; Hawisher, LeBlanc, Moran, and Selfe; Hawisher and Sullivan; Kynard; Selfe; Selfe and Selfe).

Most of this scholarship underscores ways traditionally marginalized communities continue to experience marginalization in digital spaces. However, instead of recounting the ways women of color have continued to be harassed or otherwise oppressed in digital spaces, Carmen Kynard’s article “From Candy Girls to Cyber Sista-Cipher: Narrating Black Females’ Color-Consciousness and Counterstories in and out of School” recounts how a group of black college students and she formed an empowering digital community—a cyber sista-cipher—that provided space for them to challenge “the racialized policing of language and being in schools” (35). An important part of Kynard’s reason for writing this article was to make visible these young black women’s use of digital community. While Kynard and the group did not have explicitly feminist aims, their work was challenging and not always smooth, similar to the experiences of those who were part of the “explosions” and conversations about race and feminism in blogging. Kynard points out, speaking of Haraway’s theory of cyborg agency:

Haraway’s theory is a reminder that we can define feminist identity and sista kinship in ways that are not overly idealized and romantic but, instead, realized through deliberate negotiations, polyvocal play with language, transgression of existing boundaries, and a conscious stance where machines and technologies are dynamically connected to the consciousness of its users. (41).
The explosions demonstrate just how un-idealized and un-romantic feminist identity and kinship can be in practice, particularly when it is impossible to know whether and to what extent participants were engaging in deliberate negotiation, polyvocal language play, transgression of boundaries, and the maintenance of a conscious stance about the connections of technologies and users.

Perhaps more importantly, though, like the digital group Kynard writes about, the explosions prove that silencing and visibility must remain important concerns in digital feminist space. Just as Kynard argues the digital literate practices of the black women she writes with/about were ignored or silenced, so too were feminist bloggers of color within the feminist blogosphere. Nubian, for instance, decided to leave discussions on Feministing and even to take a blogging hiatus (though ze has explained that break was caused by school work, not the explosions). My own reading of the archives suggests that others left Feministing at this time, too. Additionally, yet another explosion centered on race occurred in the feminist blogosphere in 2008 because many felt that well-known white feminist blogger Amanda Marcotte had plagiarized lesser-known blogger brownfemipower (commonly referred to as BFP in the feminist blogosphere), which caused BFP to quit blogging altogether. Again, these debates led to the very thing de Leon admitted to trying to avoid by posting the interview with Nubian: the removal of the voices of women of color from larger conversations about feminism, and in this case about race and privilege in digital feminism. As Feministe blogger Holly\textsuperscript{53} points out, blogging about race requires a lot of emotional and psychological stamina, pain many would rather avoid. “I understand BFP closing down,” Holly writes; “Shit, there is a reason I only rarely muster up the courage to write about racism . . . I would have quit the blogosphere months ago if I tackled race issues at a tenth of the rate the BRP did, because it is a painful, fraught, easily misunderstood

\textsuperscript{53} Holly never provided a last name.
subject to write about as a woman of color.” Within the feminist blogosphere, there is an understanding that part of the reason community building is so important is because its members can provide some support to one another in attempts of alleviating some of the stresses of writing publicly about controversial issues and effectively making oneself a target for hateful commenters.

In addition to challenging early claims the Internet would be a more democratic place and reinforcing the importance of concerns about silencing and visibility, all of the explosions mentioned in this section demonstrate how feminist blogging often entails a process of learning in public. In particular, these explosions illustrate public learning about how issues of privilege—especially race in this case—carry over into the blogosphere and can manifest in covert and sometimes unintended ways. They also illustrate public learning about rhetorical strategies that are at once unique to digital feminism while also building on older feminist practices and concerns, as was the case with concerns about censorship and hierarchy pointed out previously. These explosions specifically demonstrate public learning that comment moderation/policy (again) and linking must be of particular concern for digital feminist rhetorical practice.

Concerns about comment moderation/policy are most explicit in the 2006 and 2007 explosions centered on *FFF* and Nubian. At the time Nubian critiqued *FFF* and again when de Leon posted her interview with Nubian, *Feministing* did not have a comment policy, and many women of color expressed disappointment with *Feministing*’s lack of comment moderation (i.e., not removing what they perceived as hateful comments aimed at Nubian). Even though *Feministing* editors have argued that they did not intend to hurt Nubian or other feminist bloggers of color, the fact that some were hurt and that some left the space or didn’t feel
welcome there to begin with is significant and cannot be ignored. And in fact, with time, 
Feministing’s editorial team did acknowledge this significance in at least two ways: 1) they did 
establish a comment policy and expressed their regrets for not having done so sooner, and 2) the 
editors individually and collectively published response posts to reflect on these events and what 
they learned from them. The conversation between ampersand—an author at Alas, A Blog—

and Mukhopadhyay following Mukhopadhyay’s May 20, 2007 post (“A Word on 
Intersectionality, Comment Moderation, and Our Love for Jessica”) illustrates, though, that there

are no simple, easy answers in intersectional feminism nor are there simple, easy solutions to 
comment moderation/policy:

   Ampersand: I’m sorry you’re feeling hurt. It sucks. I don’t want to tell anyone 
not to criticize, or to be nice; but sometimes being in the blogosphere is so 
bruising. Some of it is necessary, but not all of it. “We do not want to silence 
diverse opinions, but it is hard to find a balance between a dialectical dialog 
versus things we happen to disagree with (that make us and many of our 
supportive readers, upset).” [quote from Mukhopadhyay’s original post] I share 
your frustration on this; finding the right way to moderate comments is a constant 
headache. What really drives me mad, though, is when people act like there’s One 
True Style of Politically Acceptable Comment Moderation, and if “Alas” doesn’t 
adhere to that style that must mean I’m insincere in my politics. In the end, I 
really think moderation style is something that people of good faith can disagree 
about without being traitors to the cause. It’s a big blogosphere; there’s room for 
multiple styles of moderation. (May 21, 2007 at 6:42 am, emphasis in original)

54 See, for instance, “Some Feminist Self-Reflection” published by Jessica Valenti on April 29, 2008 and “On 
feminist Blogging, Community, and Privilege” posted by the editorial team on April 14, 2008.
**Samhita:** Thank you Ampersand. Sometimes I think it is about the mood you are in too. Like how much can you take, what is constructive debate etc. And sometimes, something I learned from my co-panelist Lynne D Johnson at SXSW, it is amusing to leave them there to let folks know exactly how fucked up some people are. But yes, clearly, since this has been a steep learning curve at Feministing, we have lost many cool points for not doing it effectively enough in our earlier days. (May 21, 2007 at 6:54 am)

Concerns about linking, then, are most explicit in the 2008 explosion centered on Amanda Marcotte and brownfemipower. The debates caused by Marcotte’s perceived misappropriation of BFP’s ideas led to public learning about how linking serves as a form of not just citing a source but also giving visibility to that source, which is an especially important tactic in feminist blogging for bringing attention to smaller, less privileged, and less well-known blogs/bloggers. The concern for many bloggers regarding Marcotte and BFP was that the bloggers felt Marcotte had obviously repeated ideas about immigration being a feminist issue that BFP had continually been writing about but did so without ever mentioning BFP, let alone linking to her blog. As with the previous explosions, there were more blog posts written about this than any one person could follow. One particularly powerful post was Sylvia/M.’s (Sylvia also actively participated in the 2006 and 2007 explosions mentioned previously). Sylvia/M. reproduced the article Marcotte wrote and published on online news source, *AlterNet*, which was the article in which many were claiming Marcotte stole BFP’s ideas. But Sylvia/M. didn’t just copy the article exactly as it had been published on *AlterNet*. To make her point, she turned different sections of the article into forty-two different links to indicate where she felt Marcotte was borrowing ideas but not acknowledging doing so. Thirty-seven of the links lead to different
posts within BFP’s blog.\textsuperscript{55} By using so many links, Sylvia/M. makes the point that linking is not only easy within blogs but is expected and often desired. Just as the question “where are the women” effectively served to erase the presence of women blogging in the early days of blogs (as mentioned in chapter three), many felt Marcotte was effectively erasing BFP’s voice from the conversation—as well as erasing the voices of many other feminists of color with personal experience who’d been writing on this topic. As Sylvia/M. explains of her multi-linked post:

My post, which I was careful to compose, does not link point for point where Amanda “stole” things word-for-word from BFP. Rather, it makes BFP’s work—who is just one of the bloggers who have been tying feminism with immigration before the article Amanda quoted hit the “zeitgeist”—visible. And it questions why Amanda took upon her shoulders the claim of authenticity on critical issues on immigration and feminism, immigration and dehumanizing language, and immigration and sexual abuse without giving some indication of the longstanding body of work from multiple people of color who have identified more heinous crimes, who have pointed out more causal links, and whose work undoubtedly could lead to honest and critical engagement with the situation and possible broader activism in coalition with people who don’t want to touch the situation.

Because without that reference, it invisibilizes people who do have that authenticity and experience, who live those experiences, because they cannot impose a lens of detached whiteness that they did not have into their narratives. They cannot pretend that they’re horrified witnesses without a dog in the fight who have sympathetic and probing viewpoints in the matter. And as a result of

\textsuperscript{55} Although BFP’s blog is no longer public so I cannot read her posts myself, I can tell Sylvia/M.’s links each lead to a different post on BFP’s blog because by clicking on the links, I can see the original URLs, all of which lead to uniquely numbered posts.
not being able to claim that detachment, you get . . . a continuing dependence on people carrying the white lens to ferret ideas from people of color for publicizing and spreading awareness. The peddling of brown people without last names who get mundane yet detailed narratives of their every move because it’s so different. Who get their horrific moments sensationalized and their tragic and common moments ignored.

Sylvia/M.’s concerns are similar to Jacqueline Jones Royster’s attention to how African American women’s literacy practices have been erased from view/history. Like Sylvia/M., Royster argues that African American women have “been persistently subjected to measures of value and achievement that have been set and monitored by others, who have not had their interests or potential in mind and who have been free historically to discount, ignore, and disempower them” (4). This is the same concern and frustration Sylvia/M. raises when she argues:

THAT’S the sinister nature of appropriation. And in this instance, by not linking to anyone that inspired her viewpoint—forget BFP, even—Amanda tapped into this narrative that has been tapped into by countless folks online and offline. And each leaking into this scheme hurts and makes the victims of invisibility less than charitable once someone white sees us [people of color] and says, “Hey, what’s wrong? Please write us a book report with cross checks and proper cites, perfect spelling and grammar, and completely objective—that means don’t interpose your oversensitivity into it—yes, please write us a great screed telling us everything very clearly about what’s wrong. One ‘t’ uncrossed, and you lose your argument.
And please, make sure you note everyone involved; if you fail to do so, that’s intellectually dishonest and we’ll refuse to engage with you!”

Royster argues that being judged according to someone else’s standards—and significantly, a someone who is able to discount, ignore, and disempower people of color—creates barriers that serve as “filters” that hide women of color from view altogether. This, she explains, creates a system that not only makes it impossible for women of color to receive appropriate credit for their achievements but also creates a system that places the achievements of women of color that do “seep into view” as out of the ordinary, as “exceptional rather than as part and parcel of a pattern” (Royster 4), serving to reinforce a belief that women of color are less capable or worthy.

It makes sense then that as some feminist blogs, including Feministing, became better known, some feminists began to worry that smaller, less-known blogs—particularly those led by women of color, like BFP—were too easily overlooked, or hidden from view. While blogrolls initially served as one common linking practice to lead people to a variety of other blogs, as time went on, it became less common for people to include these long lists of links on their blogs (as shown in chapter three, this did happen at Feministing). Instead, it became more common to include several links within the text of a blog post to lead to others writing about the same or a similar topic. Feministing has always included several links in almost every blog post published, many of which led to related stories within Feministing’s webpage, but also many that led to a variety of external sites. Nevertheless, when the Marcotte/BFP explosion occurred, they pledged themselves to efforts at even more equitable linking practices:

We are all aware of the privilege we enjoy because of our large base of readers, and we’re aware of ways in which we could be better bloggers. Being part of a feminist online (and offline) community is a big part of our mission, and we don’t
want to neglect the huge number of smaller feminist sites that make up that community. We’ve heard from some bloggers (particularly those who write a lot about race) that sometimes the traffic they get from our site fundamentally changes their commenting community, so they’d rather if we didn’t link. We’re cool with that. But if you run a smaller blog—particularly if you’re a woman of color—and you think we do a shitty job at link-loving sites like yours, please let us know [link to their email]. We are making a concerted effort to be better about this. (parentheses in original)

Jos directly addressed this concern in our interview when she admitted the approach Feministing’s editorial team takes is “not what you do when you’re trying to build a business . . . because we’re trying to expand the number of people who have their voices recognized. That’s why we do the ‘What We Missed’ post and the weekly feminist reader, [posts that are basically just collections of links] which are, you know, actively saying, ‘Go away from Feministing.’” In addition to their linking practices within individual posts, Feministing also added the Community blog, which provided a space for anyone to publish a post on any issue relevant to feminism (but not in violation of the comment policy), especially intended to include people who were not well known in the feminist blogosphere. And in the summer of 2012, the editorial team hosted a contest they dubbed “So You Think You Can Blog”—a nod to the title of a popular reality dance show—which was created to allow Feministing members to vote for one community blogger who should be the newest addition to the editorial team (and in fact, they ended up choosing three new members based on this contest).

It is significant, then, that both Feministing’s linking policies and their comment policies are different today than they were in 2006, 2007, or 2008, when these different but related
explosions took place. Additionally, Feministing’s editorial board includes more diversity, in terms of race as well as other identity markers. Over time, the editorial team has admitted that each of these changes was at least partially in response to the discussions of race in relation to feminist blogging that these explosions caused.

It’s easy to presume feminists are prompted to write by non- and anti-feminists, patriarchy, and misogyny—things external to feminism. However, as these examples show, sometimes the most aggressive and silencing forces exist within feminism. Additionally, these examples show how the “community” of Feministing cannot really be separated from larger communities of feminist bloggers. I’ve argued previously that it’s important to consider Feministing within the larger blogosphere because, as with the example of Feministing’s website originally looking similar to LiberalOasis’ and in support of Wilding’s argument that when studying feminist cyberspaces, we have to remember work exists within physical and digital spaces as well as ideological frameworks not intended for feminism/feminist work. The discussion of these explosions further demonstrates how the literate activities of/in Feministing literally cannot be divorced from the larger blogosphere, particularly the feminist and social justice blogosphere as they are often debating the same things and/or debating one another (sometimes with explicit links, sometimes not).

**Feminist Rhetorical Analysis: Negotiating These Circuits**

In their recent study of feminist rhetorical practices in writing studies, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch argue that attention to “social circulation” is one of four major themes

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56 For instance, Feministing has continually worked to include women of color (currently nine editorial members are women of color), to be more international (e.g., Chloe is Australian), and after later “explosions” around gender, stemming from a post by community member Josh T, to be more inclusive of trans* identities/concerns (current editor Jos previously wrote under the name “Josh T”).
running throughout feminist rhetorical scholarship. “With the concept of social circulation,” they explain, “our move is also to disrupt the public-private divide by suggesting a more fully textured sense of what it means to place these women in social space, rather than private space or public space” (Royster and Kirsch 24). My discussion of the Feministing community more specifically and the feminist and not-so-feminist blogosphere more generally purposefully enacts this disruption of public and private by emphasizing complexly textured rhetorical agents, processes, and products as they circulate through adjacent rhetorical ecologies. Parts of these ecologies remain hidden from view, either because of my own limitations based on personal positioning and biases or due to my inability to access fully the social circles—“the contours of both women’s public lives and their private challenges” (especially the more “behind the scenes” activities like phone calls, emails, and otherwise mediated conversations not taking place in the public space of the blog); nevertheless, I do allow us to “see, hear, and understand more ecologically” (Royster and Kirsch 24). Rather than depict a tidy picture or storyline, this approach enacts the inherently paradoxical tensions Joy Ritchie argues are advantageous to feminism. In Ritchie’s words, “The strength of feminism is its ability to hold in tension an array of theoretical and practical perspectives and, thus, to arrive at a clearer understanding of the varied nature of women’s positions” (85). This chapter’s emphasis on polyvocality and tension further demonstrates how feminist writing studies scholars might simultaneously hold various feelings and consequences of many symbiotic yet sometimes competing rhetorical actors and actions spread across space and time, digitally and not, to execute a more ecological analytic approach. As a result of looking across and between different communities and conversations, we can see the inflections and haunting presence of previous, simultaneous, and anticipated literate activities and their histories and movements.
In the next and final chapter, I further consider the public-private divide Royster and Kirsch argue social circulation disrupts or, perhaps more accurately, complicates. In bringing together the conversations from chapter three and chapter four, I identify three key themes that emerge and, as with these past two chapters, emphasize the messiness and complexities of those themes by focusing not only on isolated people, texts, or events but also on the larger rhetorical ecologies and histories of literate activities in which they circulate. Additionally, I show how the explosions of 2006, 2007, and 2008 from this chapter extend to present-day discussions in the feminist blogosphere, some of which feature some of the same people/voices I present in this chapter.
CHAPTER 5: OVERARCHING AND EMERGENT THEMES, OR CONCLUDING TO BEGIN AGAIN

“As decade-long activists, we have lived and understand the power of boots on the ground. The feminist movement will continue to make strides through lobbying, on-the-ground organizing, and creating meaningful discourse through academia, but online feminism now offers a new entry point for feminist activism”
-- Courtney Martin and Vanessa Valenti (9)

This dissertation presents a selected version of the story of Feministing, but as always, it also necessarily implicates the stories of countless things and people connected to the many literate activities Feministing community members produce and consume and within the many rhetorical ecologies in which Feministing circulates. As indicated, this project is primarily descriptive—in its thick descriptions and analyses—rather than prescriptive, based in part on my positioning. For one, I am not an editor for a large feminist blog, so I will not pretend to know what is best for them nor prescribe it. I am, however, an academic, and in this position, I feel it is important to call attention to spaces like Feministing and people like their members to highlight the changing nature of feminist rhetorical and activist work in the early twenty-first century. In part this is a reaction to the important recovery work feminist rhetorical scholars have done in that I am writing these feminists and their stories into our scholarship proactively now rather than waiting for someone to retroactively do so later. However, it is also a continuation of the contestation of either/or stories like those carried out by scholars like Gerrard, Selfe and Hawisher, and Wajcman in that my aim is to present rich, detailed stories that highlight the co-mingling of negatives, positives, presences, absences, paradoxes, and inconsistencies.

57 And, of course, Feministing is just one space, and I mean to portray it as just that: as a space, not as a typical or (more) important space. Neither do I wish to speak for the people I write about. They all write themselves (and I mean that in the sense that they are writers and also that they write themselves into being).
Of course, throughout my description, I have also interwoven analysis and uncovered several key findings. Taking a more internal focus, chapter three highlighted the importance code literacy and design have for current performances and discussions of feminist literate activity, the continued importance of feminists having literacy sponsors to model digital literacies because those literacies are still uncomfortable and/or unfamiliar for some, and the challenges digital spaces can pose to conceptions of feminist space as non-hierarchical and uncensored. Chapter four took a more external focus to address questions of what fosters and delimits Feministing members’ literate activity and drew attention to the types of audiences Feministing members encounter (and then decide to engage or not) in their webspaces (i.e., the numerous digital spaces they have inhabited or do inhabit such as Feministing.com, their Facebook page, their Twitter account). As such, the chapter discussed how the public nature and accessibility of Feministing’s webspaces leads to increased possibilities for interaction with uninvited/unintended audiences and, as a result, considered how trolling functions as rhetorical strategy as well as how Feministing complicates theories of invitational rhetoric. Additionally, chapter four demonstrated how long-running debates among feminists about race and intersectionality carry over into digital space and, as a result, both affect Feministing members’ literate activity as well as various literate activities dispersed across adjacent rhetorical ecologies within the feminist blogosphere, which in turn also shape the literate activity within/of Feministing.

In this final chapter, then, I emphasize three large themes that cut across this dissertation: visibility, amplification, and continua of literate activity. An additional theme that is interwoven with these three themes is the importance of learning in public. Within my discussion of these themes, I draw attention to some themes just beginning to emerge that will serve to steer future research and scholarship that grows out of this project: the complicated relationship of
Finally, I return to one of my initial research questions—where does the literate activity of Feministing seem self-sponsored, and where does it seem community-sponsored (underlying question, can the two be differentiated)?—in order to challenge my initial desire to delineate the two within writing studies scholarship and to, instead, critique overly positive and vague references to community/community-building when discussing online feminism.

Visibility

“I think the greatest impact of Feministing has been to throw out into the atmosphere, so to speak, that young feminists are active, that feminism is not a historic footnote but is a live and vibrant movement, and that our voices and our activism might manifest differently than the second wave or the first wave but that it’s definitely a present thing.”

-- Pamela Merritt, aka Shark-Fu, personal interview

“Millions of people read the content [of Feministing], and so if we are admired or are read, then we have a—you know, with great privilege comes great responsibility, so we have a responsibility to get it right, and I think that’s the day-to-day challenge of writing about feminism. It’s that, you know, if we get something wrong, or if we, more importantly, if we don’t say what we meant to say right, then we get eaten alive, and it becomes something used to harm the movement.”

-- Pamela Merritt, aka Shark-Fu, personal interview

The theme of visibility is complexly represented within/by Feministing because for each seemingly beneficial aspect, one can identify coexistent complications. For instance, one aspect of visibility with both positive and negative qualities relates to chapter three’s discussion of the importance of sponsorship. Because feminists have been performing their activism in digital spaces for nearly two decades, there is a traceable record of some of the products of these actions (e.g., blog posts, videos). On the one hand, those traceable records can be scary and potentially harmful to those who have created them (e.g., they may have previously said or written something they now regret). On the other hand, however, these records also exemplify the
necessary learning and growing processes feminists go through, which can reassure others that messing up and learning from your mistakes are valuable, though uncomfortable, parts of being a feminist. For example, Emily Nussbaum relays the story of Shelby Knox, who became a well-known feminist as a teenager. Knox admits:

I almost got offline when I heard that a professor was using my posts as examples of young feminism. They extend back to when I was 17. But I realized we’re the reality-TV culture. We live publicly. And if someone like Snooki can show us her discovery of her own alcoholism and her attraction to abusive men, why not show the formation of a young feminist? (qtd. in Nussbaum 3)

Another aspect of visibility with both positive and negative qualities is that Feministing helps to draw attention to—to make more visible—the newer types of spaces feminists are using to build and advance the feminist movement. This visibility is beneficial as a response to mainstream media that repeatedly question whether feminism is still alive/necessary (see Figure 5.1) and even as a response to some established feminists who have questioned younger feminists’ activism (e.g., Susan Faludi’s 2010 Harper’s Magazine article). As expressed in the first quote atop this section, Pamela, during our interview, noted the importance of Feministing’s ability to demonstrate “that young feminists are active, that feminism is not a historic footnote but is a live and vibrant movement, and that our voices and our activism might manifest differently than the second wave or the first wave but that it’s definitely a present thing” (Merritt; see Figure 5.2 for handouts from a recent talk about online feminism that express the exasperation some young feminists feel about this same point). Additionally, Pamela told me members of the editorial team are aware members of the mainstream media often visit

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58 For a brief article about the question “Is Feminism Dead” as repetitive trope, see Laura Ruttum’s “Is Feminism Dead?”
*Feministing* in order to “see what is the feminist critique” of various things (she offered the example of Super Bowl commercials) before reporting on them (Merritt). This visibility can be seen as beneficial because it brings a feminist component to stories in the media that may not have been there had a site like *Feministing* not made those opinions easily visible. Similarly, the visibility of spaces like *Feministing* also serves as an empowered response to the “where are the women bloggers” questions Nussbaum noted were often asked in the earlier days of blogging, as discussed in chapter three.

Fig 5.1. Screenshot of June 29, 1998 cover of *Time* magazine ([www.time.com](http://www.time.com)).
At the same time, however, as Pamela noted in her interview and as expressed in the second quote that begins this section, accompanying problems arise when people begin to view Feministing as a representative for the entire feminist movement. For instance, as Pamela explained, the Feministing editorial team feels a heavy responsibility to “get it right” when they write. For Pamela, “get it right” means to write about and link to content that is factually accurate as well as “to apply feminist principles accurately” (Merritt) to whatever topic they are writing about. This responsibility of being viewed as a feminist authority places a lot of undue pressure on the editorial team members who struggle to represent feminism as best they can, knowing their work may be the only feminist work someone accesses/reads. Of course, this happens at the same time feminists are constantly reminding others there is no typical woman or typical feminist. As Latoya Peterson argues, “the idea that any one of us can represent the many is inherently flawed. It doesn’t matter who we’re talking about—no one can fully represent the whole of who we are and our varied thoughts and feelings. The trouble is that our current system requires exactly that.” The “system” Latoya refers to is the same system Pamela infers when she acknowledges that people look to the Feministing website in order to find a spokesperson to represent feminism, despite the fact the ideas represented on Feministing are always just one of
many feminist responses to a particular person or event. Additionally, being viewed as a feminist authority also means *Feministing* sometimes actually eclipses smaller online webspaces owned/operated by more marginalized and less well-known feminists. As illustrated by the “explosion” discussions in chapter four, this eclipsing is sometimes the fault of *Feministing*’s editorial team, as when they do not do enough to draw attention to or provide the appropriate links to less well-known spaces and bloggers. This eclipsing has often resulted in a silencing or erasure of the voices of feminists of color and/or queer and trans* feminists within the larger feminist and social justice blogosphere/movements. This eclipsing phenomenon can also be seen as a continuation of ongoing struggles that have occurred within the feminist movement as, repeatedly, white women viewed as more mainstream feminists have caused feminists of color, feminists with disabilities, trans* feminists, and feminists working outside of the United States to feel further marginalized within the movement. In her dispute with Mary Daly, Audre Lorde referred to this as an instance of “the knowledge, crone-ology and work of women of Color being ghettoized by a white woman dealing only out of a patriarchal western european [sic] frame of reference” (“Open” 68). As evidenced by conversations surrounding the “explosions” discussed in chapter four as well as many other conversations online, many people within the feminist blogosphere continue to feel this type of marginalization or co-optation despite the Internet’s celebrated ability to provide space, and presumably visibility, to everyone.

59 I follow Sam Killermann’s use of the term “trans*” to indicate “all of the identities within the gender spectrum…the asterisk makes special note in an effort to include all non-cisgender gender identities, including transgender, transsexual, transvestite, genderqueer, genderfluid, non-binary, genderfuck, genderless, agender, non-gendered, third gender, two-spirit, bigender, and trans man and trans woman.”

60 Also see arguments made in/by texts like “The Combahee River Collective Statement,” *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color; All the Women are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies; This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation; “On Being Feminism’s ‘Ms. Nigga’”; and “Dear White Feminists, Quit Goddamn Fucking Up.”

61 In particular, see conversations on Twitter using the hashtag #femfuture for very recent conversations about privilege and silencing within current feminism.
One more fraught aspect of visibility is that spaces like *Feministing* and my work with them helps to make visible the wide range of individual and collective (community-sponsored) literate activities that are integral parts of feminist activism in the early twenty-first century. From my research, and especially from conversation with Jos, Anna, and Pamela, I’ve learned more about several individual instances (e.g., reading, writing, thinking, offline activist efforts) as well as collective instances (e.g., numerous phone calls, in-person retreats, nearly incessant conversations held over and across email chains and instant messaging) of *Feministing* members’ literate activities. In revealing and calling attention to this work, I seek to challenge notions of what Jos, in our interview, referred to as the “women’s work of the feminist movement,” which she explains as, “you know, like it’s necessary, it’s hard, important, real work, but it’s invisible, and it’s not valued,” which she further characterized as “very stereotypical gendered behavior” (Truitt). My work joins large-scale efforts like Courtney Martin and Vanessa Valenti’s recently published report, “#FemFuture: Online Revolution,” on the funding and sustainability of online feminism in order to not only bring attention to all of the behind-the-scenes work that is a necessary part of the literate activity of online feminist activism but also to construct this as valuable work that should not be overlooked or discounted.62

In discussions of the work and leadership in social movements, what is seen—often what is documented and adheres to conventional standards—is typically what has been privileged. For instance, in her scholarship on social movement theory, Belinda Robnett argues against and works to expand traditional “narrowly defined conceptions of leadership,” which she argues, “have included only the most visible actors within a singular hierarchical model of organizational leadership” (18). In particular, Robnett argues these narrow definitions of what

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62 Jaclyn Friedman also documents some of the fascinating behind-the-scenes work that went into online feminist activist work such as the Twitter campaigns coordinated with the hashtags #mooreandme and #dearjohn (around 14:00 and 25:44 in the video respectively).
counts for leadership have served to exclude black women’s contributions to the civil rights movement, have served to position that work as less visible/invisible, undervalued/unvalued “women’s work.” A similar invisible-izing and dis-privileging happens when older feminists question where today’s feminists are or what they are doing if what those questioners really mean is why aren’t current feminists adhering to previous models of feminist activists. And to further compound the problem, not only are feminists who are doing work in online spaces not seen by other feminists, they are also overlooked by people who, like those Robnett draws attention to, do not “see” women’s work and/or do not consider it to be as important because it does not adhere to traditional theories of leadership or work.

A related concern is careless use of the terms “slacktivist” or “slacktivism,” which are frequently applied to or contested within communities of activists who use the Internet to further their cause (e.g., Christensen; Phan). While I agree with Friedman there are some actions that purport to be online activism but do little or nothing to advance their cause, I also worry that people apply the labels slacktivism or slacktivist offhand because they are trying to measure online activist work by standards that predate the Internet and/or by standards that position online activist work as “women’s work.” Careless application of this label is especially problematic because it can serve to further trivialize (and invisible-ize) the meaningful work Feministing members and other online activists do. Because many people do not yet recognize the work of Feministing members and similar work as meaningful activism, this work is typically unfunded, which makes it hard to sustain. This is, in fact, the reason Feministing editors emeriti, Courtney Martin and Vanessa Valenti released their report about online feminism; they

63 One example Friedman offers is the breast cancer awareness campaign that circulated on Facebook where people were told to post the color of their bra as their Facebook status. However, the directions also indicated that a person was only to post the color, not to do anything else to advance the cause of breast cancer awareness or research (such as providing a link to a site where donations could be made). Jurgenson provides a thoughtful critique of dismissing this strategy offhand, though (“Facebook”).
are working to develop a variety of ways to fund the work of online feminists like *Feministing*’s editorial team (this report is discussed in even more detail below). My work has not yet focused on the complicated relationship of economics and feminism, but this is an emergent theme I look forward to interrogating more in future work. In part, this is an important topic to study because it is an issue I know *Feministing* editors feel is important, as evidenced by the #FemFuture report as well as comments Jos, Anna, and Pamela shared during their interviews. Additionally, though, the relationships among feminists, capitalism, and consumerism are contentious points for some feminist scholars—in particular, third wave feminists have been criticized for being too comfortable with capitalism. Looking at the various iterations of *Feministing* as depicted in chapter three shows the website has at times relied more heavily on advertising—sometimes of their own merchandise, sometimes advertisements for others. These changes, as well as the choices behind them and what they reveal about *Feministing*’s relationships with capitalism and consumerism, are some of the economic issues I look forward to studying more and discussing in future conversations with *Feministing* members.

**Amplification**

Like visibility, amplification is also complexly represented within/by *Feministing*. Amplification is a concept scholars like Anne McKay and Jaclyn Friedman have discussed in relation to feminism and technology. McKay discusses amplification in what is perhaps a more traditional understanding of the term as a way of adding volume to an individual speaking voice. She notes, “Techniques for voice amplification are surely as old as public speaking itself” (193) and are accomplished through various acts, such as “manipulation of physical and acoustic space” (McKay 193), or tools, such as the trumpet, megaphone, microphone, telephone, and
Friedman discusses amplification more closely to the way I mean it here: as an act that draws attention to voices, yes, but also to the ideas expressed by voices, and as an act that is accomplished through increased access and volume. In her re:publica talk, “How Feminist Digital Activism is Like the Clitoris,” Friedman uses the phrase “signal amplification” around the thirteen-minute mark in the video, but she does not spend much time discussing it. She later (around the 42:57 mark) refers to the kind of “collective impact” and “collective intensity” that occurs when multiple feminists tell their stories in online space and use strategies like a Twitter hashtag to coalesce their stories and voices, increasing the impact of their individual action. This type of strategic amplification is also exercised by Feministing’s members across their webspaces (e.g., use of Twitter hashtags, use of hyperlinks to connect blog posts to similar stories, spaces, and people), which is often beneficial, such as when they are able to connect with other feminists and social justice activists to rally around a particular cause (e.g., the amplification of their voices successfully got a racist billboard removed from a New York City neighborhood and a sexist clothing item removed from Walmart’s shelves) or even just to lend or find support in knowing that there are others experiencing the same struggles they are facing. Amplification is especially important in an attention economy, when we live in an age of information overload with more texts available than anyone could ever read and where each text is battling the others for attention (Iskold). Courtney Martin provides the example of how RH Reality Check “was able to get their coverage of the murder of Dr. George Tiller to the top of Google Search, knocking off the anti-choice analysis by LifeSiteNews which initially enjoyed top ranking.” Similarly, as both Jos and Anna told me, a benefit of having an online space like Feministing is the ability to reach a wide audience quickly, which is the “speed and reach”

64 McKay discusses amplification to ultimately challenge Walter Ong’s claim that voice amplification technologies significantly advanced women’s participation in public speaking.
capacity Laura Gurak and John Logie highlight as a benefit the Internet offers to Web-based protests (45). Jos emphasized how important this speed and reach capacity is, using it as a measure to claim greater effects for the work she does for Feministing as opposed to the work she did previously for more traditional publications in non-profit and offline spaces.

However, amplification is also complex, as demonstrated in the recent Twitter conversations surrounding the release of Martin and Valenti’s #FemFuture report. In this report, Martin and Valenti make several claims about the history and successes of various online feminist actions and offer suggestions for how to better fund and sustain future online feminist work. Upon release of the report, many people began tweeting using the #femfuture hashtag that had been promoted for this report (which was accompanied by a formal presentation at Barnard College on April 8, 2013), and in addition to much praise for the report came much valid criticism. Among the various critiques were claims that the report was not inclusive enough of voices and histories of feminists of color (and especially their previous online work and strategic planning), that the information was inaccessible (both in its offline and online delivery), and that the information addressed only a very specific (i.e., white, U.S.-centric, educated, able-bodied) portion of the concerns of current and future feminists. Much like the “explosions” discussed in chapter four, the feminist blogosphere was abuzz with conversations about this report and criticisms of it, and these conversations spread across several online spaces (e.g., Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook).

The amplification of these particular concerns, especially of the continued conversations about race and privilege—of who is visible and who is once again eclipsed—is complex. Ultimately, the amplification of voices drawing attention to this report and the critiques of it could be viewed as beneficial because it draws attention to an important and ongoing
conversation within feminism and because its “collective intensity” encourages discussion and, ideally, redress. In fact, Martin and Valenti have already addressed some concerns by releasing the report in additional and more accessible formats, releasing an FAQ on their own website Valenti Martin Media to further explain their report and its methodology, and revising parts of the original report such as the claim that early online feminist work was “accidental.” However, the work this amplification encourages has negative impacts as well. For one, it is yet another instance of in-fighting within feminism that those outside of the movement can use as reason to avoid or discredit feminism/feminists. Additionally, for those involved, the work the amplification encourages is painful, asking many to question their own privileges or their complicity within interlocking systems of privilege, while it asks others to take on the emotional work of yet again raising their voices, so to speak, to attempt to interrupt longer conversations and larger systems of power.

It is not news, of course, that feminism requires this type of tough, emotional work. As previously stated, Joy Ritchie argues that a primary strength of feminism is “its ability to hold in tension an array of theoretical and practical perspectives and, thus, to arrive at a clearer understanding of the varied nature of women’s positions” (85). The way Ritchie speaks of the ability to juggle multiple perspectives and draw clear conclusions, though, suggests this is an easy task. It is not. As Blackamazon expressed in a response to Martin and Valenti’s report and to the critiques of it (see Fig 5.3), feminism “make[s] your head hurt,” but it can also make you sing, if you are willing to do the tough work it requires. As not only Blackamazon’s tweet but also the larger #femfuture discussion reveals, emotional work is an inherent part of the literate activities feminists have been performing for hundreds of years.
This theme of emotions and the embodied aspects of feminist literate activity has not thus far been a primary focus in this dissertation; I have not yet discussed the essential emotional work that is also a necessary part of the behind-the-scenes, less-documented work of performing feminist activism in the early twenty-first century. Especially because of access and anonymity, feminists who are online often receive disparaging, abusive, and even threatening comments. Friedman acknowledges she is not aware of any threats that have actually been acted on but importantly admits, “but none of us wants to be the first time, and you really can’t know.” Friedman also argues that those abusive and threatening comments take an emotional toll on feminists and can have a “chilling effect” because if people cannot find a way to endure that type of abuse, they withdraw from or drop out of online space/the movement, which results in fewer feminists left to raise their voices and to challenge and lend support to one another. The emotions involved are not all negative, though. In the aftermath of Martin and Valenti’s report, I have been particularly moved by a related set of impassioned calls for (online) feminists to learn about—as well as some explanations of how they already do—“love each other harder” (e.g., Blackamazon; Johnson; Ortiz). The embodied and emotional aspect of online feminist work, then, is something I look forward to focusing on more in future research and scholarship. Embodiment is a topic that certainly comes up in relation to feminist technology (e.g., Haraway; several chapters in Domain Errors; Paasonen), and further study of this topic would undoubtedly lead to scholarship.
on affect. Although the scope of this dissertation did not include this scholarship and these topics, I look forward to reading more and to discussing this with Feministing members and potentially other future research participants.

**Continua of Literate Activity**

A third large theme I have identified at the end of this project is that the literate activities I have studied with/in Feministing are part of larger continua of literate activity. And in fact, the larger realm of online feminism is part of larger continua of feminist work: it both builds on the important work of many feminists who came before and carries on debates from previous people, time, and spaces. One way of recognizing how literate activities of/within Feministing develop out of continua of literate activities is to acknowledge how these literate activities are similar to and grow out of previous feminists’ work creating zines, or what Michelle Comstock refers to as “grrrl zines.” These do-it-yourself publications have roots in the 1950s and 60s in small press and fan magazine communities (Comstock 384) and continue to exist today but are typically most associated with the third wave of feminism or feminist literate activity in the 1990s. Alison Piepmeier’s explanation of the significance of zines could just as easily be about Feministing: “Zines created by girls and women . . . are sites where girls and women construct identities, communities, and explanatory narrative from the materials that comprise their cultural moment: discourses, media representations, ideologies, stereotypes, and even physical detritus” (2). In her discussion of zines, Piepmeier draws on Janice Radway’s discussion of “insubordinate creativity,” or how girls creatively make use of materials at hand to read and write and (re)construct narratives about themselves and society. Piepmeier summarizes this activity as an ability to “bring these [ready-to-hand] materials together in surprising ways, leveraging them
against one another to release meanings that challenge, contradict, and go beyond the cultural material themselves,” as activity that is “unruly, insurgent energy that calls into question dominant cultural norms and that, in some cases, may be so disruptive that it is invisible or unintelligible from mainstream vantage points, misread as comical, trivial, or insignificant” (11). Again, Radway’s and Piepmeier’s explanations of zines could just as easily be explanations of Feministing editorial team members’ uses of blogs (and increasingly other digital spaces such as social media like Twitter and Facebook).

Likewise, zine creators of the 1990s share similar concerns of visibility and validation with today’s feminist bloggers and website builders. Piepmeier quotes Lisa Jervis, co-founder of the zine Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture, who protests:

I am so sick of being told that young women aren’t active enough or aren’t active in the right ways or active around the right issues. You know, if you want us to be engage in feminism, let us be engaged in feminism in ways that engage us, and appreciate that, and I mean “appreciate it” not in the sense of “be grateful” but almost in the medical sense of feel it, see that it exists. (Jervis qtd. in Piepmeier 161)

Similarly, Piepmeier includes a quote from zinester China Martens who asserts, “women’s unofficial writing to each other has always created social change, and we don’t see these undercurrents, and I think that’s what women’s zines can change—how we talk to each other, we need personal, informal spaces but it comes out into influencing society” (162). As discussed in the previous sections, concerns like Jervis’ and Martens’ are similar to online feminists’ concerns that people don’t “appreciate” the type of work Feministing does.
However, I also see *Feministing* and online feminist texts/communities as part of larger continua of creative, participatory feminist activity that have existed at least since the first wave. My visioning is supported by Piepmeier’s scholarship, which traces histories of first wave feminists’ scrapbooking, second wave feminists’ mimeographing, and third wave feminists’ zines to depict a continuum of feminist participatory media activities. Like the zines that Piepmeier discusses, I see *Feministing* as yet another enactment of feminists’ creative, participatory media production that emerges from much longer, larger trajectories of similar, previous literate activities. In arguing that it is important to recognize how the literate activities of spaces like *Feministing* exist within longer trajectories of activities and in understanding online feminist work (whether one labels it cyberfeminist or technofeminist) as part of larger historical trajectories, I acknowledge arguments of previous scholars like Verta Taylor and Belinda Robnett who argue for viewing the women’s movement and the civil rights movements, respectively, as developing on a continuum. As Robnett summarizes:

> The civil rights movement, just as scholar Verta Taylor has characterized the women’s movement, developed on a continuum. It did not begin in 1954 with the Montgomery bus boycott, but rather emerged from a period of abeyance. Activity prior to the Montgomery bus boycott included the efforts of women who later influenced the ideology and strategies of the civil rights movement in important ways. Moreover, this legacy of activism affected the ways in which women participated and viewed their participation in the civil rights movement. (8)

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65 Piepmeier defines participatory media simply as “media made by individuals rather than by the consumer culture industries” (29).

66 However, I do not wish to deny differences that exist across the continua of literate activity of people, processes, and products. As Piepmeier notes, distinctive rhetorics, aesthetics, and ideologies exist.
To view *Feministing* as part of larger trajectories of activities and histories means conversations from previous feminists are ongoing (e.g., about race, intersectionality, and waves of feminism/intergenerational feminism); therefore, it also means feminists have much to learn from previous feminists’ literate activities and rhetorical strategies. Recognizing this adds weight to Faith Wilding’s argument that “[i]f cyberfeminists wish to avoid making the mistakes of past feminists, it behooves them to know and analyze feminist histories very carefully.” This argument is repeated in critical responses to Martin and Valenti’s report, particularly on Twitter. Several respondents tweeted about the “selective” or “convenient” amnesia (e.g., see Fig 5.4) they felt was being exercised by not only Martin and Valenti but also by others who contributed to the creation of the report. In part, this amnesia refers to forgetting, or at least not noticeably learning from, the “explosions” I discussed in chapter four. The sting of those “explosions” is acknowledged in various subsequent conversations online (e.g., see Fig 5.5).

Figure 5.4. Screenshot of #femfuture tweet about history and amnesia (Twitter).

Figure 5.5. Screenshot of @leonineleft’s untagged response to #femfuture, invoking histories and attendant pain of online feminist history (Twitter).

As discussed in chapter four, because of the “explosions,” *Feministing* underwent public learning about the importance of not only having clear comment policies and moderation strategies but also of the timeliness and manner of responding to other feminists’ critiques.
Despite critiques about the ways Martin and Valenti created and distributed their #Femfuture report, their responses to these critiques enact lessons they learned about acknowledging critique and responding to it in a timely, measured manner. Whereas Jessica Valenti was largely absent from critiques and conversations in response to the cover of her book *Full Frontal Feminism*, Martin and Vanessa Valenti were both noticeably active in conversations using the #femfuture hashtag in the time immediately following the release of their report and presentation about it (see Figure 5.6). And just as Martin and Valenti demonstrated their public learning based in past literate activities and feminist histories, Twitter users like Blackamazon illustrate how feminists of color have learned the negative outcomes that can result when they remain silent about their own concerns in the guise of feminist solidarity (see Fig 5.7). Each of these examples is an illustration of not only how contemporary literate activities like tweeting can be used to call attention to public learning and the need to remember lessons learned from previous literate activities/feminist histories but also of just how embedded these literate activities always are within larger continua of activities and histories.
Figure 5.6. Screenshots to illustrate Valenti and Martin’s participation in conversations critiquing their #Femfuture report (Twitter).

Fig 5.7. Screenshot demonstrating public learning about/from feminist histories (Twitter).

Feminist writing scholars can join Martin and Valenti in responding to and learning from this “amnesia.” For one, I reiterate the need to recognize that literate activities within/of certain communities or people exists within larger continua of literate activity. Recognizing this in our scholarship is one possible strategy. Additionally, we can contribute this awareness to our conversations with other feminists. I join Wilding in calling for the benefits of coalitions of feminists:

The political work of building a movement is a technology which must be learned by study and practice and needs the help of experienced practitioners. The struggle to keep practices and histories of resistance alive today is harder in the
face of a commodity culture which thrives on novelty, speed, obsolescence, evanescence, virtuality, simulation, and utopian promises of technology . . . And if [cyberfeminists] are to expand their territory on the Net and negotiate issues of difference across generational, economic, educational, racial, national, and experiential boundaries, they must seek out coalitions and alliances with diverse groups of women involved in the integrated circuit of global technologies.

Feminist writing studies scholars must lend, among other skills and knowledges, this awareness of the importance of writing not only as a tool for activist work but also as a crucial component of continua of literate activities that help to build feminist histories and which must be remembered and learned from.

At the same time, we must also recognize these continua stretch across online and offline spaces. On the one hand, the word “online” in the phrase “online feminism” is important because it calls attention to a new dimension of feminist activism and particularly, as discussed previously, to a dimension that is often overlooked. Yet at the same time, the phrase also suggests discontinuity between this new (which is sometimes seen/portrayed as hip or cool\textsuperscript{67}) type of feminism and the larger movement, or it creates a false binary between online feminism and offline feminism (see Fig. 5.8). Like Nathan Jurgenson, I disagree with the notion that what happens in online spaces is separate and less real than what happens in offline spaces; I agree with his argument that “the digital and physical are increasingly meshed” and that “our reality is both technological and organic, both digital and physical, all at once” (“Digital”). Gail Hawisher argues that Kristine Blair, Radhika Gajjala, and Christine Tulley’s book *Webbing Cyberfeminist Practice* emphasizes this very notion by repeatedly illustrating how “online and offline worlds

\textsuperscript{67} For example, Martin and Valenti write, “Decades of stigmatization have resulted in a toxic perception of what a feminist is. But that stigma is beginning to dissipate among young people as they see feminism in action online. \textit{Here, feminism is cool again}” (12, emphasis added).
are inseparable” and “inextricably intertwined” (xi). One critical reason it’s important to recognize this mutuality, what Jurgenson calls “augmented reality” (as opposed to “digital duality”), is because, as pointed out in chapter four, online spaces do not function all that differently than offline spaces despite early predictions online spaces would be more democratic. This recognition fits with Royster and Kirsch’s call for feminist rhetorical scholars to “critique not only [multimodal texts’] contexts, products, and processes but also the impacts and consequences of technologies on the scope, nature, and contours of rhetorical enterprises” (150, emphasis in original). Tara Conley also makes the argument that it’s important to recognize that online and offline feminist work are not separate entities:

It’s no secret that the word “feminism” conjures up divisive feelings. Even on social networks like myspace and Twitter, people still equate feminism with terms like “man-hating” and being a “white woman’s ideology.” The reality is that our belief systems online tend to mimic our beliefs offline and no amount of technology alone can necessarily change commonly accepted notions about what feminism is, and what it isn’t. So while new media [her term for social + new] can be a great way for educators and activists to produce and disseminate ideas, it is still a space of contention that self-identified feminists must navigate consciously and lovingly, always remembering the greater purpose of our advocacy.
However, although I feel it is important to speak in terms of augmented reality rather than digital duality, I would also argue that one important part of offline feminist conversation has not yet been easily accomplished or understood in digital spaces: rhetorical listening. While Krista Ratcliffe’s book provides rich discussion of rhetorical listening, it does not indicate how this practice might carry over into digital spaces or what differences and difficulties might occur. I am curious, then, how we can better encourage and practice rhetorical listening in digital spaces like YouTube, where it seems the more hateful the comment the better, and in spaces like Facebook and Twitter, where just keeping up with the posts in one’s feed can be difficult. Of course, my work thus far has not addressed rhetorical listening in digital spaces; therefore, this is a third emergent theme I look forward to studying and discussing with research participants more in the future.

**Complicating Conceptions of Community**

At the end of my project, I want to return to one of my research questions in order to further complicate it. I asked, *Where does the literate activity of Feministing seem self-sponsored, and where does it seem community-sponsored (underlying question, can the two be*
differentiated)? The original impetus for this question stemmed from always encountering the term “self-sponsored” in scholarship about the extracurriculum. The emphasis on “self,” it seemed to me, left much collective and collaborative work unrecognized or unprivileged. However, I’m now less interested whether that was authors’ intent and more interested in the ways the term “community” functions like a God term (Weaver) and as something that has been blackboxed (Latour). John Murphy explains Richard Weaver’s concept, God terms, as “those things to which everyone pledges allegiance: terms like ‘progress’ [and] ‘patriotism’” (qtd. in Warren). These are large, vaguely defined terms that have been imbued with positivity; they are terms that become valued and validating within certain realms. I borrow the term blackboxing from Bruno Latour, who explains it as:

> An expression from the sociology of science that refers to the way scientific and technical work is made invisible by its own success. When a machine runs efficiently, when a matter of fact is settled, one need focus only on its inputs and outputs and **not on its internal complexity**. Thus, paradoxically, the more science and technology succeed, the more opaque and obscure they become. (304, emphasis added)

Both the term “community” itself and conceptions of the use of digital spaces to help foster community building have been blackboxed. I would argue this happens precisely because community has come to function as a God term (so it is seen as a settled matter of fact), especially in the realm of higher education where I am often located, and because of constant

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68 In fact, it seems to me it is not their intent, though I do still think it’s worth recognizing that the term “self-sponsored” is somewhat misleading as much of the writing and writing instruction happening outside of schools involves more than just a self. Additionally, a desire to differentiate the two seems a bit impractical and risks reinforcing systems that devalue collaborative authorship.
focus on how easily people can create communities of like-minded people through digital spaces and tools (so it is seen to run efficiently). This diverts attention from internal complexities.

Many, many texts have been written about community, and it is not my intention here to review or critique them all or to offer a new and improved definition of the term. Instead, I wish to call attention to a tendency, caused by “community” being a blackboxed God term, to gloss over the internal complexities of “community” and “community building.” For instance, I return to Sharon Crowley’s claim that was mentioned in chapter one: “Once one becomes a member of a desired community, the community itself offers little internal impetus for change . . .

Rhetorically speaking, insiders engage chiefly in epideictic discourse . . . Deliberative rhetors, on the other hand, risk becoming outsiders” (195–96). Likewise, when scholarship does address dissent or discomfort within online communities, the emphasis is typically on interactions between community members and non-community members, not on internal complexity (e.g., discussions of trolling such as Herring et al., or discussion of how men still dominate online spaces as in Haas). Yet as my research has shown, the conversation within the Feministing website is often very critical (deliberative rather than merely epideictic), and perhaps because feminism itself typically strives for constant reflection and contemplation of change, I would not say the community offers little internal impetus for change. To discuss the ease with which digital spaces and tools can foster community building and/or to point out how non-community members interrupt that community without also acknowledging the difficulties and tensions that exist within that community is to leave out an important part of the story of community building in online spaces. To be clear, I do not wish to completely disregard the positive aspects of digital tools and spaces for bringing people together across vast geographic divides and helping them to feel less isolated (which can be especially important for feminists living in smaller, more rural
towns). However, I believe it is very important to also interrogate the less-positive and difficult aspects of what communities are and how they function, particularly because when studying online feminist communities, we must acknowledge there are always already several communities of feminists implicated.

Of course, I am guilty of using the term “community” uncritically, too. At times it is just easy to refer to a collective group as a community without putting in the necessary interrogative work to focus on what all being a community actually entails. And in part, I use the word “community” somewhat uncritically at times because this is a term Feministing applies to themselves, so it does seem an appropriate term to use. Yet I have also worked to use theories of rhetorical ecology and invitational rhetoric to challenge overly positive aspects of community and to challenge the idea that conflict within communities exists only when outsiders enter. In the future, I would like to make stronger connections between my work and the scholarly work of social movement theory to further explore this issue of complicating conceptions of community. In particular, I look forward to investigating how it might be beneficial to consider the word “coalition” alongside “community” because to talk about coalitions stresses power and negotiation—a necessary jolt when thinking about a blackboxed God term, perhaps.

**To Produce Different Knowledge and to Produce Knowledge Differently**

Throughout this dissertation, I have sought to do my work in such a way that enables me to produce different knowledge and to produce knowledge differently, much the way that Elizabeth St. Pierre argues that educational researchers have a responsibility “to keep educational research in play, increasingly unintelligible to itself, in order to produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently as we work for social justice in the human sciences” (27). One
way I have sought to accomplish that goal is through simultaneously juggling and combining various theories (of literate activity, technofeminism, invitational rhetoric, and rhetorical ecology) and methodologies (grounded theory/situational analysis, postcritical digital, feminist, rhetorical genealogy, material rhetoric) I have not seen other scholars combine in quite the same way. Additionally, I have worked to interrupt common narratives about gender and technology (e.g., online space as democratic, feminist space as nonhierarchical and uncensored, discussions of community) and, as Sheridan-Rabideau does, to disrupt notions of “typical cases” of online feminism (8).

As always, the findings I located and the knowledge I produced as a result are based on the particular approach I took and the particular lens through which I look. Someone else could just as easily study Feministing and present different conclusions and themes. This is not a weakness, just a reality that should be acknowledged. I found grounded theory, particularly Clarke’s development of a situational analysis approach to grounded theory, to fit well with feminist research methodologies, though this combination certainly made things very messy and left me with more data than I have been able to discuss in these past five chapters. Additionally, I found rhetorical ecology and rhetorical genealogy as important theoretical frames particularly because of my desire to trouble the either/or binaries often used to portray women, particularly in relation to technology (i.e., as either passive victims or active agents). Although I have tried to carefully note all along the shortcomings of either/or presentations, when presenting an example or a discussion, it is very hard to present all of the complexities that exist within it. However, I feel theories of rhetorical ecologies and rhetorical genealogy help to address that difficulty. Additionally, theories of literate activity (especially as discussed by Prior and Sheridan-Rabideau) have encouraged me to see and to make visible the complexity—the layering of
various people, tools, and modalities across time and space—inherent in the “writing” 
*Feministing* members do. This approach has helped me to focus on the presence and importance 
of the various overlapping and messy tasks of talking, instant messaging, photographing, 
browsing videos and GIFs as well as other blogs and websites, phone calls, emails, drawing, 
creating and removing design elements within a webtext, scripting and recording videos, and so 
many other literate activities of/within the *Feministing* community. Additionally, invoking 
“literacy” within the phrase “literate activity” draws attention to the cultural and ideological 
dimensions new literacy studies scholars have argued must be acknowledged as integral to 
understanding literacy—and really, literacies (e.g., Brandt; Selber; Selfe and Hawisher; Street). 
Rhetorical theories about movement and ecologies (especially as discussed by Edbauer; Queen; 
and Royster and Kirsch) have revealed additional layers of complexity in focusing my attention 
on how the literate activities of/within *Feministing* also circulate across other spaces and time 
and, in the process, both retain their initial substance and significance and are also altered (e.g., 
revised, inflected with additional or alternate meanings).

These theoretical frames were news ways of looking and doing for me, and they led me 
to tools I had not used for research before, too (such as the Wayback Machine). However, 
because I agree with Royster and Kirsch that *social circulation* is a critical term of engagement 
for feminist scholarship in writing studies, because I used a grounded theory approach, and 
because I inhabit a world where feminisms are inherently digital and global, I believe it would 
have been my peril to ignore the social circulations of *Feministing* through adjacent rhetorical 
ecologies. Likewise, because of the affordances of the Internet and because I agree with Vicki 
Tolar Collins that it is important to study the material conditions and accretions that affect 
women’s (but for me, feminists’) texts, I believe it would have been my peril to ignore rhetorical
genealogy. Throughout my work, I have also returned regularly to the questions Kristine Blair identifies as important for technofeminist researchers: “(1) how and why women access technology in their daily lives, (2) what larger material constraints impact that access, and (3) what methods best enable opportunities for women to make their lived experiences with technology more visible” (“Complicated” 65). Ultimately, the answers to these questions must come from many people and places and must continue to be studied across diverse spaces and in various times, and this dissertation is a contribution to what I hope will be much larger investigations and conversations.
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APPENDIX A: HUMAN SUBJECT REVIEW BOARD DOCUMENTS

DATE: March 1, 2013
TO: Kerri Hauman
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board
PROJECT TITLE: [287020-3] Community-Sponsored Literate Activity and Technofeminism: Ethnographic Inquiry of Feministing
SUBMISSION TYPE: Continuing Review/Progress Report
ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: March 5, 2013
EXPIRATION DATE: March 4, 2014
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Continuing Review/Progress Report materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on March 4, 2014. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.
DATE: March 19, 2012

TO: Kerri Hauman

FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [287020-2] Community-Sponsored Literate Activity and Technofeminism: Ethnographic Inquiry of Feministing

SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: March 16, 2012

EXPIRATION DATE: March 4, 2013

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please add the text equivalent of the HSRB IRBNet approval/expiration date stamp to the "footer" area of the electronic consent documents.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 53 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on March 4, 2013. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.
Appendix A: Informed Consent for Feministing Editors

Greetings,

My name is Kerri Hauman, and I am a Ph.D. student in Rhetoric and Writing at Bowling Green State University, where I am currently beginning work on my dissertation. I am completing this work under the guidance of my co-chairs, Dr. Kristine Blair and Dr. Lee Nickoson. In my dissertation, I am excited to explore the literacy practices of the Feministing community, a community I have been an avid reader in for about four years. In particular, I’m eager to see how an online community creates opportunities for written communication that benefit and, if applicable, hinder the activist work inherent in feminism. In order to create a research project that accounts for more than just my own voice and opinions, which I feel is vital to creating a more meaningful project, I am requesting your input on this topic via your agreement to participate in a phone or electronic interview.

Purpose and Benefits
In this research project, I am looking forward to more careful consideration of the influential role that Feministing plays in young feminists’ lives. As a feminist and a PhD student in a Rhetoric and Writing program, I am especially interested in Feministing as a rhetorical space, and I’m interested to explore particular rhetorical practices happening in that space, looking at ways these practices both grow out of and modify previous feminist rhetorical strategies with an eye toward activism and social change. Within my field (most graduates go on to teach college writing, rhetoric, or other English courses), feminist research, rhetoric, and pedagogy are very important focuses, and I believe this project would have a lot to offer the field, but I am also interested in finding ways it might be beneficial to Feministing, if you think there might be any interest in that.

As a teacher of college writing, I believe a study of the types of writing that go on outside of college classrooms will be extremely beneficial to me and to others who study and teach writing and feminism. Of course, I also anticipate that this research will be of interest to any writer and/or feminist. I especially hope this research will be of interest to those who are part of the Feministing community, and I am happy to share my work in progress as well as my completed dissertation. However, there are no monetary awards offered for your participation in this project.

Procedure and Nature of the Project
Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary, and your decision to participate or not will not affect your relationship with Bowling Green State University. You may decide to skip questions or discontinue participation at any time. There are no anticipated risks associated with this project.

If you choose to participate, I will ask you to complete an interview over the phone or electronically, whichever you prefer. The interview should take approximately an hour. If you consent, I may contact you for follow-up clarification. Likewise, I am happy to provide you with transcripts of our interview as well as to give you access to my research blog where we can correspond about my work in progress. I am the only person who will have access to your answers, and I will save these files in a password-protected digital folder. While I will obviously know your identity, you may choose a pseudonym by which you wish to be identified, and I will take all measures to ensure that any reference to your answers in any subsequent presentations or publications would not be traceable to you unless you give me explicit permission to
reveal your identity. Because there is a possibility that you will complete an electronic interview, I want to remind you: (1) you may want to complete your survey on a personal computer as some employers may use tracking software; (2) you should not leave the survey open if using a public computer or a computer others may have access to; and (3) you should clear your browser cache and page history after completing the survey.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me (khauman@falcon.bgsu.edu or 419-348-9505). As well, you are welcome to contact the faculty members supervising this research project: Lee Nickson (leenick@bgsu.edu or 419-372-7556) or Kristine Blair (kblair@bgsu.edu or 419-372-7543). You may also contact the Chair of the Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu, if you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research.

I’d like to thank you in advance for considering my research and hope that you share my interest in examining how the writing practices in digital communities affect feminist activism.

Sincerely,
Kerri Hauman

I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in this research.

(electronic signature)

Please indicate how you would prefer to be interviewed:

☐ Phone interview
☐ Skype interview
  ☐ If via Skype, please provide your Skype user name: ______________________
☐ Electronic interview (via email)
  ☐ If via email, please provide your email address: ______________________

Please indicate how you would like to be identified in any resulting publications/presentations:

☐ By name:
☐ By the following pseudonym: ______________________
☐ I would not like to be identified by any name
☐ Other: (specify)

Please indicate how you would like me to use your words in any resulting publications/presentations:

☐ Feel free to quote my responses
☐ Feel free to refer to my ideas generally but do not quote me directly
☐ Other: (specify)
Bowling Green State University
Department of English

Greetings,

My name is Kerri Hauman, and I am a Ph.D. student in Rhetoric and Writing at Bowling Green State University, where I am currently beginning work on my dissertation. I am completing this work under the guidance of my co-chairs, Dr. Kristine Blair and Dr. Lee Nickson. In my dissertation, I am excited to explore the literacy practices of the Feministing community, a community I have been an avid reader in for about four years. In particular, I'm eager to see how an online community creates opportunities for written communication that benefit and, if applicable, hinder the activist work inherent in feminism. In order to create a research project that accounts for more than just my own voice and opinions, which I feel is vital to creating a more meaningful project, I am requesting your input on this topic via responses to a short electronic survey.

Purpose and Benefits As a teacher of college writing, I believe a study of the types of writing that go on outside of college classrooms will be extremely beneficial to me and to others who study and teach writing and feminism. Of course, I also anticipate that this research will be of interest to any writer and/or feminist. I especially hope this research will be of interest to those who are part of the Feministing community, and I am happy to share my work in progress as well as my completed dissertation. However, there are no monetary awards offered for your participation in this project.

Procedure and Nature of the Project Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary, and your decision to participate or not will not affect your relationship with Bowling Green State University. You may decide to skip questions or discontinue participation at any time. Additionally, the editors of Feministing are aware of this project and that I am asking you to participate. There are no anticipated risks associated with this project.

If you choose to participate, I am the only person who will have access to your answers, and I will save these files in a password-protected digital folder. You will not need to identify yourself by name, though you may choose to do so, or you may choose a pseudonym by which you wish to be identified. Therefore, depending on how you choose to identify yourself (or not), you may remain anonymous, and I will take all measures to ensure that any reference to your answers in any subsequent presentations or publications would not be traceable to you unless you give me explicit permission to reveal your identity. Because I am asking you to complete an electronic survey, I want to remind you: (1) you may want to complete your survey on a personal computer as some employers may use tracking software; (2) you should not leave the survey open if using a public computer or a computer others may have access to; and (3) you should clear your browser cache and page history after completing the survey.
It is my hope that you will take approximately 30 minutes to complete the following survey. Your completion of the survey also indicates that you consent to my use of your data in my dissertation and any subsequent publications.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me (khauman@falcon.bgsu.edu or 419-348-9505). As well, you are welcome to contact the faculty members supervising this research project: Lee Nickson (leenick@bgsu.edu or 419-372-7556) or Kristine Blair (kblair@bgsu.edu or 419-372-7543). You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Review Board at 419-372-7716 or hrsb@bgsu.edu, if you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research.

I'd like to thank you in advance for considering my research and hope that you share my interest in examining how the writing practices in digital communities affect feminist activism.

Sincerely,

Kerri Hauman
APPENDIX B: FEMINISTING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (FOR EDITORS)

Background/Demographic Information
1. For most of the editors, I can get much demographic information from the web, but depending on who agrees to participate and what I can find online, I will also begin with any unknown following demographic questions:
   o Age:
   o Gender:
   o Nationality:
   o Are you currently a student: y/n
   o Occupation:
   o Do you identify as a feminist: y/n (with room to explain why)
   o Other parts of your identity you would like to identify:
2. How long have you been an editor for Feministing?
3. Were you a part of the Feministing community before becoming an editor?
4. As a Feministing editor, what are your responsibilities? Have these responsibilities always been the same, or have they changed over time?
5. How much time do you typically dedicate to Feministing each week?
6. Do you hold other jobs, and if so, what is it/are they?
7. What made you decide to take part in Feministing?
8. What parts, if any, of your job as a Feministing editor make you uncomfortable?
9. What parts of your job as a Feministing editor do you find most difficult?
10. What is your favorite part of your job as a Feministing editor?
11. If not addressed previously, what is the most rewarding part of your job as a Feministing editor?

Has Feministing always used Wordpress? Who made this decision? Do you know why Feministing blocks access to being tracked through the Way Back Machine?

Effects of Feministing
12. How would you describe the goals of Feministing?
13. In your opinion, what effects do you believe the Feministing community has had (on young people, on feminism, on society, etc.)?
14. What do you feel are the best aspects or parts of Feministing, and why?
15. What do you wish you could change about Feministing, and why?
16. In your experience, what is the largest critique others have of Feministing?
17. What does Feministing do that other feminist approaches have not been able to do?
18. What is Feministing unable to do that other feminist approaches have been able to do?
Social and Technological Forces and Feminism/Activism

19. In your life outside of Feministing, how do you typically use technology?
20. What other technological spaces do you use/have you used for feminism and/or activism, and how have you used them?
21. What non-tech spaces or approaches do you use/have you used for feminism and/or activism?
22. How did you use technology before joining the editing team at Feministing?
23. What outside forces affect your work for Feministing in helpful/beneficial ways?
24. What outside forces affect your work for Feministing in hurtful/restrictive ways?

Writing

25. When writing for Feministing, are you free to write about anything you’d like, or are you assigned topics? (Potential follow-up: If you are free to write about anything, how do you decide what to write about?)
26. How do you decide the approach to take in your writing (e.g., hostile, humorous), or do you not spend much time considering this?
27. How do you decide what type of content goes into the post (e.g., video, text, links)?
28. What are your goals for your writing – that is, what do you want your writing to do; how do you want it to affect readers?
29. What types of responses have you gotten to your writing at Feministing? And how have you felt about these responses? (How) have you responded in turn?
30. What are your feelings about the “comments” section?
31. How active are you in the “comments” section?
32. How would you describe your participation in areas beside the main page at Feministing.com – e.g., Community page, Campus page, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube?

Please indicate how you would like to be identified in any resulting publications/presentations:
- By name:
- By the following pseudonym: ____________________
- I would not like to be identified by any name
- Other: (specify)

Please indicate how you would like me to use your words in any resulting publications/presentations:
- Feel free to quote my responses
- Feel free to refer to my ideas generally but do not quote me directly
- Other (please specify): ____________________
APPENDIX C: FEMINISTING SURVEY (FOR NON-EDITORS)

Demographic information
- Age:
- Gender:
- Nationality:
- Are you currently a student: y/n
- Occupation:
- Do you identify as a feminist: y/n (with room to explain why)
- Other parts of your identity you would like to identify:

Participation in Feministing
1. How long have you participated (writing and/or reading) in the Feministing community (select one):
   - Less than one year
   - 1-2 years
   - 3-4 years
   - 5-6 years
   - More than 6 years
   - Other (with room to explain)
33. What made you decide to take part in Feministing? (short answer)
34. For each of the following, select one option that you feel best describes your writing participation on Feministing.com:
   - Writing comments on blog posts on the home page:
     - Frequently (1 or more times per day)
     - Occasionally (approximately 1 time per week)
     - Rarely (approximately 1 time per month)
     - Very rarely (less than 1 time per month)
     - Never
     - Other (with room to explain)
   - Writing blog posts on the Community page:
     - Frequently (1 or more times per day)
     - Occasionally (approximately 1 time per week)
     - Rarely (approximately 1 time per month)
     - Very rarely (less than 1 time per month)
     - Never
     - Other (with room to explain)
   - Writing comments on posts on the Community page:
     - Frequently (1 or more times per day)
     - Occasionally (approximately 1 time per week)
     - Rarely (approximately 1 time per month)
- Very rarely (less than 1 time per month)
- Never
- Other (with room to explain)

○ Writing blog posts on the Campus page
  - Frequently (1 or more times per day)
  - Occasionally (approximately 1 time per week)
  - Rarely (approximately 1 time per month)
  - Very rarely (less than 1 time per month)
  - Never
  - Other (with room to explain)

○ Writing comments on posts on the Campus page
  - Frequently (1 or more times per day)
  - Occasionally (approximately 1 time per week)
  - Rarely (approximately 1 time per month)
  - Very rarely (less than 1 time per month)
  - Never
  - Other (with room to explain)

35. For each of the following, select one option that you feel best describes your reading/visiting participation on Feministing.com:

○ Reading/visiting the Community page
  - Frequently (1 or more times per day)
  - Occasionally (approximately 1 time per week)
  - Rarely (approximately 1 time per month)
  - Very rarely (less than 1 time per month)
  - Never
  - Other (with room to explain)

○ Reading/visiting the Campus page
  - Frequently (1 or more times per day)
  - Occasionally (approximately 1 time per week)
  - Rarely (approximately 1 time per month)
  - Very rarely (less than 1 time per month)
  - Never
  - Other (with room to explain)

○ Reading/visiting the Facebook page
  - Frequently (1 or more times per day)
  - Occasionally (approximately 1 time per week)
  - Rarely (approximately 1 time per month)
  - Very rarely (less than 1 time per month)
  - Never
  - Other (with room to explain)
o Reading/visiting the Twitter page
  ▪ Frequently (1 or more times per day)
  ▪ Occasionally (approximately 1 time per week)
  ▪ Rarely (approximately 1 time per month)
  ▪ Very rarely (less than 1 time per month)
  ▪ Never
  ▪ Other (with room to explain)

o Reading/visiting the YouTube page
  ▪ Frequently (1 or more times per day)
  ▪ Occasionally (approximately 1 time per week)
  ▪ Rarely (approximately 1 time per month)
  ▪ Very rarely (less than 1 time per month)
  ▪ Never
  ▪ Other (with room to explain)

**Effects of Feministing**
36. How would you describe the goals of Feministing?
37. What effect(s) has Feministing had on you?
38. In your opinion, what effects has the Feministing community had more broadly (on young people, on feminism, on society, etc.)?
39. What do you feel are the best aspects/parts of Feministing, and why?
40. What do you wish you could change about Feministing, and why?

**Writing**
41. How important is writing to feminism?
   o Extremely important
   o Somewhat important
   o Not important
   o Unsure
   o Other (room to explain for all options)
42. How would you describe the relationship between writing and feminist activism?

If you have never written anything for Feministing, you may skip the rest of this section and go directly to question 21.

43. In the past, what has prompted you to write something for Feministing?
44. How long do you typically spend writing a blog post for Feministing?
45. How long do you typically spend writing a comment for Feministing?
46. How do you decide the approach to take in your writing (e.g., hostile, humorous), or do you not spend much time considering this?
47. How do you decide what type of content goes into what you write (e.g., video, text, links)?
48. What are your goals for your writing – that is, what do you want your writing to do; how do you want it to affect readers?
49. What types of responses have you gotten to your writing at Feministing? How have you felt about these responses? (How) have you responded in turn?

**Technology and Feminism/Activism**

50. In your life outside of Feministing, how do you typically use technology?
51. What other technological spaces do you use/have you used for feminism and/or activism, and how have you used them?
52. What non-tech spaces or approaches do you use/have you used for feminism and/or activism?

**Identification Preferences**

53. How would you like to be identified in my writeup:
   - By name: (type name here)
   - By pseudonym: (type that here)
   - I would not like to be identified by any name
   - Other: (specify)

54. Please indicate how you would like me to use your words in my writeup:
   - Feel free to quote my responses
   - Feel free to refer to my ideas generally but do not quote me directly
   - Other: (specify)
APPENDIX D: RECRUITMENT POST

Hey, fellow Feministing community members!

In the spirit of feminist collaboration, I’d like to invite you all to participate in a research project I am undertaking as part of my dissertation for my doctoral degree in Rhetoric and Writing at Bowling Green State University (BGSU). In my dissertation, I am excited to explore the digital writing practices of the Feministing community, a community I have been an avid reader in for about four years now. In particular, I’m eager to find out more about how being online changes (or not) feminist activism and, generally, to learn more from all of you about how you view feminist activism in this digital age.

In order to create a research project that accounts for more than just my own voice and opinions, I am requesting your input on this topic via responses to a short electronic survey, which should take approximately 30 minutes to complete. Your participation would be completely voluntary, and you could decide to skip questions or quit at any time. You will not need to identify yourself by name, though you may choose to do so, or you may choose a pseudonym by which you wish to be identified.

As a teacher of college writing, I believe a study of the types of writing that go on outside of college classrooms will be extremely beneficial to me and to others who study and teach writing. Of course, I also anticipate that this research will be of interest to any writers and feminists. I especially hope this research will be of interest to those who are part of the Feministing community, and I am happy to share my work in progress as well as my completed dissertation with anyone who is interested to read it and, if you’d like, to respond to it. However, I cannot offer any monetary awards for your participation. I do have approval for my project from my university’s IRB board.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me via e-mail at kerri.hauman@gmail.com, and I will happily answer any questions and then send you the link to my 21-question electronic survey.

Thank you in advance for your time and assistance. I greatly look forward to hearing from you!

Kerri Hauman
APPENDIX E: LIST OF RANDOMIZED DATES FOR ARCHIVAL CODING

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