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Finding Their Sphere: Feminist Communication in the Internet Era

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Finding Their Sphere: Feminist Communication in the Internet Era

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the Prerequisite for Honors in American Studies
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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
Chapter 1: Introduction, Historical Review, and Central Debates	1
Chapter 2: History of Feminist Press	20
Chapter 3: Survey of Sites and Case Study	35
Chapter 4: Interviews with Site Principals	58
Conclusion	75
Bibliography	82

Acknowledgements

I found feminism during a free period in my high school library. Though I was raised by a feminist and had learned about the movement's history, the first time I realized the complexity of feminism, and comprehended that it was something I wanted to engage with, was when I picked up my school's copy of *Ms. Magazine*. My quiet time in the library soon gave way to a multitude of voices as I began to check out the variety of feminist thought on the blogosphere. I am so fortunate that during my time at Wellesley, I have been able to explore a subject that has long fascinated me, and that I was able to do so under the guidance of many inspiring and insightful professors.

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Chapter 1: Introduction, Historical Review, and Central Debates

Introduction: A Cacophony of Misconceptions

A visit to the tumblr “Women Against Feminism” is a disorienting and frustrating experience. On the site, women from all over the world submit pictures of themselves holding up signs explaining why they are not feminists, often exemplifying common misunderstandings, false interpretations, or just plain ignorance of the concept.¹ One woman proclaims, “I don’t need feminism because my boyfriend treats me right.” While others offer, “I don’t need feminism because I am heterosexual and so a world without men would suck,” and “I don’t need feminism because I like when men say compliments about my body!” Occasionally, the signs contradict the exact definition of feminism (“I don’t need feminism because equality is better than domination.”) or reflect gains due to feminism (“I don’t need feminism because my husband and I respect each other and I’m the breadwinner.”).²

This tumblr account attracted a great deal of media attention during the summer of 2014, and feminists across the web let out a collective groan.³ The misconceptions that plagued earlier

¹ Feminism is defined as, “advocacy of equality of the sexes and the establishment of the political, social, and economic rights of the female sex.” “Feminism,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, April 21, 2015, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/69192?redirectedFrom=feminism>.

² “Women Against Feminism,” July 27, 2014, [http://womenagainstfeminism.tumblr.com/post/92998411040/submit-your-own-pic-anonymous](http://womenagainstfeminism.tumblr.com/post/92998411040/submit-your-own-pic-anonymous;); “Women Against Feminism,” August 7, 2014, <http://womenagainstfeminism.tumblr.com/post/94079318345/http-womenagainstfeminism-tumblr-com-submit>; “Women Against Feminism,” July 16, 2014, <http://womenagainstfeminism.tumblr.com/post/92008879290/https-www-facebook-com-womenagainstfeminism>; “Women Against Feminism,” August 9, 2014, <http://womenagainstfeminism.tumblr.com/post/94300293655/http-womenagainstfeminism-tumblr-com-submit>; “Women Against Feminism,” July 30, 2014, <http://womenagainstfeminism.tumblr.com/post/93292482990/http-womenagainstfeminism-tumblr-com-submit>.

³ Emily Shire, “You Don’t Hate Feminism. You Just Don’t Understand It.,” *The Daily Beast*, July 24, 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/07/24/you-don-t-hate-feminism-you-just-don-t-understand-it.html>.

eras of the feminist movement still clearly haunt it in its present form. Throughout its history, feminism has been chronically misidentified and misunderstood. Feminists in the movement have long struggled to combat these misconstructions, but they have also labored to understand what feminism means within the movement itself. Thus, feminism confronts a dual struggle: trying to convey its message and goals to skeptics and opponents, while trying to define itself and its purpose within a diverse group of activists who have varied notions about what “feminist” means and how the movement for gender equality should progress.⁴

The historical roots of feminism and the feminist struggle to self-define take on new meaning in the digital era. With the powerful reach of the Internet, it seems as though feminism should have an effective way to spread its message. Indeed, in recent years, there has been a proliferation of feminist sites and blogs, which aim to make feminist ideals accessible and part of everyday conversations. The sites reflect the various groups of women and men invested in promoting feminist principles and often approach these feminist goals in varied ways. However, as the “Women Against Feminism” site demonstrates, the web itself is subject to competing ideologies.

This thesis will survey a variety of the sites and blogs that claim the feminist label.⁵ While these sites appeal to different audiences, and have different perspectives on feminism,

⁴ Throughout the paper, I will refer to feminism in the singular, although I recognize there is no singular feminist movement or experience. I have acknowledged the group tensions that exist within feminism’s history.

⁵ Although the term, “blog,” originally described individual websites where writers posted their personal opinions, the definition has since morphed to include sites that publish multiple pieces and have many contributors. I will be using the words “site” and “blog” interchangeably throughout the paper.

they all engage in a dialogue about what feminism means in twenty-first century America.⁶

Through their existence and facilitation of discussion, they shape how feminism is debated and recreated in the digital age. The conversations occurring on these sites raise important questions: Can feminism be popularized? and can that be accomplished without lessening its viability? Is feminism gaining ground, stagnating, or regressing? Is online feminism steering, advancing or changing the movement? Are feminist websites changing the dialogue and are their actions helpful or hurtful? And, how do all these sites reflect ongoing debates within feminism and between feminists?

Historical Review

To understand the current state of feminism, online feminism, and the debates within both, it is fruitful to see how they evolved through the history of the movement. The history of feminism is often told in terms of waves: first, second, and third, with the disruption of postfeminism and questions about the rise of a fourth wave.⁷ This section will provide a brief overview of the various waves, to enable discussion of the divisions and disputes.

The beginning of feminism in the United States is usually linked to the demands of women during the nineteenth century to win political rights denied to them in, and since, the founding of the nation. The framers of the Constitution not only expressly left women out of the document, denying them the right to vote, they continued to adhere to the English tradition of coverture, which dictated that marriage “transferred a woman’s civic identity to her

⁶ I will be focusing on blogs and websites published in the United States. An examination of international feminist sites would undoubtedly yield interesting discussion of transnational feminism but is not within the time and space limitations of this project.

⁷ Although there are differences of opinion regarding the wave model, it is the predominant way of structuring historical discussions of feminism and will be used in this overview. For critiques of the wave model, see Laughlin et al., “Is it Time to Jump Ship? Historians Rethink the Waves Metaphor.”

husband...giving him use and direction of her property.”⁸ They maintained that this subjugation was in married women’s best interest and chose, in this respect, to be reactionary rather than truly revolutionary by perpetuating the laws of England regarding women in the newly formed nation. This treatment as “femme-covert” resulted in husbands’ control over wives’ wages and possessions, their control over wives’ bodies for sexual and economic purposes, over wives’ inability to bring suits in court, and wives’ inability to make contracts without permission.⁹ Clearly these laws did not benefit women, they were rather a measure to benefit their husbands, ensure their control over wives, and reinforce the patriarchal structure. The omission of women’s equality in the Constitution would lead to the protracted, centuries long battle for women to gain political and social rights in the United States.

In the 1830s and 1840s, many women joined the abolition movement and campaigned state-by-state, circulating newsletters and petitions, and organizing conferences, in order to abolish slavery. The women active in these efforts saw a connection between racial and gender oppression and were inspired to address the injustices in their lives. As historians Rita Simon and Gloria Danzinger explain, “From the very beginning, women’s participation in the abolitionist movement was linked to ‘the woman question,’ that women—as well as slaves—were in bondage to white males.”¹⁰ The interest in expanding women’s rights led to the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 where Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Paulina Wright Davis, and other prototype feminists presented the Declaration of Sentiments. The Declaration called for granting women the rights reserved solely for men, and it decried women’s second place status in

⁸ Linda K. Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to Be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship*, 1st ed (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 11–12.

⁹ Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to Be Ladies*.

¹⁰ Rita J. Simon, *Women’s Movements in America: Their Successes, Disappointments, and Aspirations* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 9.

American society.¹¹ By replicating the structure of the Declaration of Independence, its authors cleverly exposed the suffering and harm great numbers of married women endured under the practice of coverture, which for generations denied women basic rights in order to support the patriarchal interests of the nation. The Convention spurred the creation of feminist organizations, such as the American Equal Rights Association in 1866 and the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) in 1869.¹² Throughout the union, there were successful state suffrage campaigns, but the activists' focus was ultimately on passing a federal amendment to ensure this right for all women in the United States. Beginning in 1878, an amendment for women's suffrage was introduced into every session of Congress.¹³ Decades of political activism and animated social dialogues finally resulted in the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.¹⁴ After securing suffrage, the former suffragettes continued to work to ensure women's economic independence and campaigned for the Equal Rights Amendment, which was originally proposed, though not passed, in 1923.¹⁵ The Amendment, which would again be taken up by the second wave of feminism, remains unadopted today.

The struggle for suffrage was led predominantly by white middle and upper class women, those with the resources that facilitated participation. These leaders often directed discussion and rhetoric to men and women within their same demographic.¹⁶ However, African Americans, such

¹¹ "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, Seneca Falls," Rutgers University, *The Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony Papers Projects*, (October 1, 2014), <http://ecssba.rutgers.edu/docs/seneca.html>.

¹² Simon, *Women's Movements in America*, 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁴ Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 62.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁶ Bonnie Dow, "The Revolution, 1868-1970: Expanding the Woman Suffrage Agenda," in *A Voice of Their Own: The Woman Suffrage Press, 1840-1910*, ed. Martha M. Solomon (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1991), 78.

as Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells and Mary Eliza Church Terrell, were active throughout the movement. Sojourner Truth, a former slave, campaigned both for the abolition of slavery and women's suffrage. In her impassioned 1851 women's rights convention speech, "Ain't I A Woman," Truth challenged the social construction of the idea of woman, "by using the contradictions between her life as an African-American woman and the qualities ascribed to women."¹⁷ Truth disrupted the assumed universality of women's experience by giving insight into her personal struggles. The abolitionist Frederick Douglass was one of a small number of men present at the Seneca Falls Convention. He remained dedicated to the cause of women's rights, and in 1888 offered a speech, "On Woman Suffrage," to the International Council of Women, in which he reflected on the movement. Importantly, he called on men to understand their place within the movement, questioning even the precious time allocated to his speech. He insisted,

I believe no man, however gifted with thought and speech, can voice the wrongs and present the demands of women with the skill and effect, with the power and authority of woman herself. The man struck is the man to cry out. Woman knows and feels her wrongs as man cannot know and feel them, and she also knows as well as he can know, what measures are needed to redress them. I grant all the claims at this point. She is her own best representative. We can neither speak for her, nor vote for her, nor act for her, nor be responsible for her.¹⁸

While the leadership of the suffrage movement was certainly divided along racial and class lines, black women and men organized suffrage associations, developed agendas, and spread awareness about the cause in an effort to secure support for the Nineteenth

¹⁷ Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I a Woman," December 1851, <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp>; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Rev. 10th anniversary ed (New York: Routledge, 2000), 14–15.

¹⁸ "(1888) Frederick Douglass On Woman Suffrage | The Black Past: Remembered and Reclaimed," accessed December 19, 2014, <http://www.blackpast.org/1888-frederick-douglass-woman-suffrage>.

Amendment.¹⁹ However, even after women won the right to vote in 1920, African American women overwhelmingly had this right denied to them due to white supremacist Jim Crow Laws in the Southern states.

It is worth noting that many of the women active in the first wave may not have embraced, or even been aware of, the label “feminist,” as the term was only widely adopted in the U.S. in the 1910s, towards the end of the campaign for voting rights. Historian Nancy Cott explains the power of the word, as a change from the previously used “the woman movement”:

“[as] an *ism* (an ideology) it presupposed a set of principles not necessarily belonging to every woman—nor limited to women.”²⁰ The term was at once inclusive of gender, but it also became the subject of much debate: early stereotypes, and ones that remain in effect, painted feminists as anti-men and primarily interested in a battle of the sexes.²¹

The history of the second wave is most often linked with the publication of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, in 1949, which examined the historic oppression of women, and Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, in 1963, which spoke largely to white middle-class women about their unhappiness within the patriarchal home structure. Friedan’s book had a wide readership among its intended audience and was instrumental in introducing feminism to many women. However, this traditional historical summation is, of course, incredibly limited. The second wave is also marked by a vast variety of women, aligned by race, class, sexuality, and levels of radicalism, who were looking to expand women’s social, political, economic rights, and challenge the roots of patriarchal oppression. It is difficult to simplify all of the concurrent actors

¹⁹ Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920*, Blacks in the Diaspora (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 1–12.

²⁰ Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 271.

and actions that defined this era, but there are certain categories that help break down the analysis, and which also served to foment divisions within the movement.

At the center of the second wave mainstream feminist movement was the National Organization for Women (NOW). Founded in 1966 by Betty Friedan, and other feminist activists, such as Aileen Hernandez, Pauli Murray and Shirley Chisholm, NOW served as a civil rights organization that worked to bring women and men into equal political and social standing. The group had a broad agenda in its Statement of Purpose ranging from preventing sexual discrimination against women to improving social welfare to emphasize women's domestic and work needs, to reimagining equal partnership within marriage.²² While its agenda was expansive, NOW's founding marked a shift to organized, concentrated action by women to push for governmental change. Historian Ruth Rosen explains that "NOW members did more than assert their independence from male-dominated liberal politics; they publicly acknowledged that liberal political culture was inadequate to address the reality of women's lives."²³ Since the National Organization for Women was an effort by mainstream feminists, one of its major, and expressed, goals was to appeal to women across the country and to gain widespread support outside of the usual liberal hotspots. Publicizing its work through protests and the national media, NOW pushed for reforms to discriminatory laws through legal battles. For example, NOW campaigned, although ultimately unsuccessfully, for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Within NOW, but more directly in contrast to the organization, there were divisions among feminists about what strategies to adopt, what issues to focus on, and how inclusive the movement should be. NOW's resistance to be encompassing of all women, for fear that the strategy would turn away more

²² Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000), 78–79.

²³ *Ibid.*, 75.

traditional women, led to negative reactions by groups who felt marginalized within the mainstream feminist movement—such as members of the LGBTQ community and women of color.

Some feminists felt that NOW's emphasis on legal methods and goals was not radical enough, and imagined the movement as more sweeping in its ambition and means. Attacking sexism at its root within the culture, instead of focusing on incremental political gains, these activists were influential in the rise of the women's liberation movement. In 1969, feminist Carol Hanisch coined the phrase "The Personal is Political," and this slogan brought to the fore the idea that individual actions and exercises in self-discovery could be an integral part of the movement. Writer Deborah Siegel explains, "Fighting the mechanisms of oppression in one's own life by dealing with one's personal 'hang ups' became an act of political engagement. It was this kind of thinking that transformed personal decisions into political statements."²⁴

Consciousness-raising was a practice in which women gathered to discuss their encounters with the everyday sexism and to radically critique cultural experiences. While Kathie Sarachild, a member of New York Radical Women, saw consciousness-raising as addressing the need "to study the situation of women, not just take random action," some mainstream feminists had profoundly negative reactions to this tool.²⁵ The idea was dismissed by NOW, which preferred to focus on legal change and social policy, and thought of consciousness-raising gatherings as ineffective "bitch sessions."²⁶ Discussion of sexual experimentation and analyses of power dynamics within sexual relationships was a frequent topic in consciousness-raising meetings.

²⁴ Deborah Siegel, *Sisterhood, Interrupted: From Radical Women to Grrls Gone Wild*, 1st ed (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 28.

²⁵ Kathie Sarachild, "Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon," in *Feminist Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1978), 144–150.

²⁶ Siegel, *Sisterhood, Interrupted*, 39.

While the mainstream feminist movement was dedicated to campaigning for reproductive rights and saw women's control over their sexuality as part of larger political goals of self-determination, older feminists worried that younger feminists put too much emphasis on discussing personal sexual experiences over more quantifiable legislative goals.²⁷

Queer and lesbian women found a feminism that was not entirely welcoming to them. The normative figure in feminism was seen not only as white and middle-class, but also heterosexual. Labeling lesbians the "lavender menace," Friedan was resistant to including lesbian issues in NOW's agenda for fear of alienating more conservative potential feminists. Lesbians, who felt their issues not recognized or addressed adequately in mainstream feminism, nor in the male-centric gay rights movement, worked to carve out a unique space for themselves in the women's liberation movement. In her 1980 essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," writer Adrienne Rich critiqued feminist discussion and theory for continuing the widespread erasure of the lesbian experiences by assuming heterosexuality in its narratives. She advocated for a wider understanding of what constituted the "lesbian continuum," including any "woman-identified experience."²⁸ Also referenced in Rich's piece is the notion that lesbianism as a conscious choice was an inherently feminist act, an idea which caused further tension and antagonism with mainstream feminists.²⁹ While the relationship between these groups was fraught, historian Ruth Rosen explains that the debates ended up contributing to the movement: "the rise of lesbian feminism infused the movement with new ideas and theories that

²⁷ Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 152.

²⁸ Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5, no. 4 (Summer 1980): 631–60.

²⁹ Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 167; Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence."

helped feminists—and later scholars—to consider the social and cultural construction of gender, as well as the biological nature of sex.”³⁰

Similarly, as had been the case with the first wave, women of color struggled to find room for themselves within mainstream feminism. Many of them encountered sexism and a lack of attention to women’s issues in the civil rights and black nationalist movements. Facing “double jeopardy” as both women and minorities, these women of color felt the need to begin dialogues that address their unique identities and experiences. The National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), founded in 1973, aimed to create such an exchange, but some members felt as though the organization was trapped in the shadow of mainstream white feminism and felt pressures of comparison.³¹ Unhappy with the direction the NBFO was taking, a group of black socialist lesbian women then founded the radical Combahee River Collective a year later. The Collective’s Statement declares, “it is apparent that no other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered our specific oppression a priority or worked seriously for the ending of that oppression.”³² The Collective simultaneously called on black men to oppose the marginalization and treatment of black women within their community, and called on white women to combat racism within the movement in order to create a more comprehensive feminism which would recognize the issues of all women and give them equal standing.³³

³⁰ Ibid., 174.

³¹ Ibid., 282-283.

³² The Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” in *Words of Fire: Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New Press, 1995), 234.

³³ See also the early Black feminist organization, the Third World Women’s Alliance (1968), the founding of Women of All Red Nations (WARN), in 1974, by Native American activists, the 1971 creation of early Asian American women’s group, Asian Sisters, the 1966 founding of the League of Mexican-American Women and the 1970s start of the Comisión Femenil Mexicana Nacional, both Chicana feminist activist groups. Nancy A. Hewitt, ed., *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

The theme of alienation from mainstream feminism was one that women of color would continue to explore throughout the second wave. In 1981, Chicano writers Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa published *This Bridge Called My Back*, an anthology in which women of color from multiple races and ethnicities detailed their personal experiences with the intersection of sexism and racism. In the introduction, Moraga wrote that the “deepest political tragedy” is that the “commitment to women in the feminist movement grew to be exclusive and reactionary. *I call my white sisters on this.*”³⁴ A common refrain throughout the anthology calls attention to how feminism, if it is to be true to its definition, must address all women. In a famous piece by writer Audre Lorde, she asserts that feminists ignore important differences, to their detriment: “Advocating the mere tolerance of difference between women is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives.”³⁵ Arguing against any policy of colorblindness or a feminist agenda that considers race as a second-tier issue, she instead sees recognition of difference as a force for radical change. While the second wave was marred by exclusionary tendencies, the women it excluded rededicated themselves to the notion of an inclusive feminism and used a range of strategies, such as collective activism and powerful writing, to advance that cause.

Despite its failings, the second wave of feminism amassed many political and social victories—far too many to list in this brief overview but including the Equal Pay Act of 1963, *Griswold v. Connecticut*, *Roe v. Wade*, Title IX, Title X, the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, and the criminalization of domestic abuse. Further, it set up the

³⁴ Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women Ofcolor*, 2nd ed (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983), xiv.

³⁵ Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *This Bridge Called My Back*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Watertown: Persephone Press, 1981), 99.

potential for future gains by giving women the language and tools to feel comfortable identifying and confronting sexism. However, the growth of feminism also generated a backlash from conservative Americans who felt threatened by the changes in social, cultural, and political dynamics, and sought to discredit feminists by casting them in negative stereotypes. More surprisingly, the second wave also faced rejection from women to whom the movement attempted to appeal. In the 1990s, some women began to argue that the need for feminism was over, and that it had achieved all that was necessary. They claimed that feminism was becoming detrimental to women in American society; for example, writer Katie Roiphe argued that continued reliance on feminism allowed women to act irresponsibly and blame the patriarchy for their poor actions.³⁶ Postfeminists posed a paradox for the movement: these women, who were empowered by the very actions of the second wave, were now arguing against the earlier feminists themselves. Siegel examines this tension between the generations: “For many old-school feminists, the women they were fighting for and those they were fighting against had become one and the same: their daughters—the so-called postfeminists.”³⁷

While postfeminists threatened to denigrate the continued existence of feminism, the transition to the third wave challenged the claim that feminism was unnecessary. Matrilineal language is often used to define the waves along grandmother-mother-daughter lines; and this fits in with the rise of the third wave especially well since some of the new feminists were literally the daughters of old school feminists, and were educated and raised in second wave households (such is the case with Rebecca and Alice Walker). The generational language is even more fitting because the third wave sought to rebel against the flaws of the second wave and create a new, distinctive path from the previous one. In defining their generation’s approach, the

³⁶ Siegel, *Sisterhood, Interrupted*, 97–98.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

“[t]hird wavers sought to be more classically feminist than the postfeminists and more accepting of difference—and contradiction—than the second wave.”³⁸ Just as second wavers accused postfeminists of not giving credit where it was due, they felt a similar tension with the third wavers and some feared they were losing control over a movement they had worked so long to influence.³⁹ While the third wave approach is similar to the radical discussions of the second wave, third wave feminists worked to make their main agenda far more expansive than the previous waves.⁴⁰ The new feminism was framed as a lens for young women to use to interpret their personal experiences in political ways.

Central Debates in Feminism

In any movement centered on identity politics, there is a tension between the collective and individual, and there is a paradox in the group’s political demands. While identifying themselves as different from the hegemony, these self-identified groups are simultaneously trying to reject notions of differences that result in mistreatment and calling attention to the differences that are causal to the mistreatment. Thus, “the very identity they aim to dispel must be invoked to make their case.”⁴¹ And, as the collective make gains, there becomes less of a common grounding for unity; the individual’s experience may change to a feeling of less connection and commitment to the collective. The communal gains may benefit select individuals who then lose interest in identifying with difference, and the movement becomes harder to propel forward. For example, in her analysis of first wave feminism, Cott points out an early example of this division: “The singular conceptualization of woman in the woman

³⁸ Ibid., 140.

³⁹ Ibid., 138-139.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 132-133.

⁴¹ “Identity Politics,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, February 7, 2012, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-politics/>.

movement came into crisis: the more women gained the rights and access it had pressed for, the less operable its premise of unity.”⁴²

Feminism as an exercise in identity politics also confronts this problem in that there is no one female identity and no single female experience. It is incredibly difficult to create a collective conception of feminism because individual women differ so greatly. As explored in the historical overview, feminism takes on multiple forms and meanings, but the movement has often prioritized certain identities over others. The first, second, and third waves, along with the present-day feminist movement all explored the idea of ownership of the movement, and feminists continue to ask the dual questions: Who does the movement speak for and who does it speak to?

In her keynote address at Boston University’s “A Revolutionary Moment: Women’s Liberation in the late 1960s and early 1970s,” Sara Evans, herself a participant in women’s liberation, and now a historian of the movement, examined the flawed understanding of women in the second wave:

women’s liberation was inspired very directly by the models of Black power and anti-colonial revolutions, models that often had different meanings, I would argue, for white women and women of color. Subsequent generations have rightly seen in the words of white feminists in the late 60s and early 70s, an untenably unified concept of ‘woman,’ that ‘we,’ which is so essential to movement building, but which can’t ultimately collapse the incredibly diverse experiences of half the population. So, many efforts to define what that was kept falling short.⁴³

In order to create a common subject for feminism, the movement occasionally falls prey to essentializing when defining itself and has often assumed middle-class, white women as the

⁴² Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 3.

⁴³ “Opening Plenary,” May 30, 2014, <http://www.bu.edu/wgs/2014/05/30/opening-plenary/>.

normative figures and perspective.⁴⁴ By designating a stereotypical figure, and describing certain actions as “feminist” and others as not, the movement has sometimes provoked the implicit, and sometimes more explicit, problem of regulating other women about their understanding and expression of feminism. For example, during the second wave, Ruth Rosen explains that some feminists “began to scrutinize women’s private lives, bedmates, and career choices. Some feminists felt threatened by women who did not act, look, or think like themselves.”⁴⁵ This tendency still presents itself today as women explore their ideas of feminism and how they live out and practice their ideology, sometimes within a distracting good/bad dichotomy. Some feminists still feel that they must split away from the larger movement because it seems to police or attempt to dictate their actions instead of acknowledging and honoring differences. As an alternative to the embattled feminist label, in 1983 Alice Walker introduced the term “womanist” to better emphasize solidarity with a greater humanist struggle, particularly to include discussion of race and class-based oppression.⁴⁶

With many different voices and experiences contributing to feminism, there are, of course, varied opinions on the degree of radicalness required within the movement. The debates between radical and mainstream feminists continue to address even the most basic questions such as what should the movement entail? What changes do feminists imagine and which should they prioritize? What strategies should they employ? As evidenced in all the waves, the mainstream feminists understand that making feminism accessible and popular aids its chances of success. Mainstream feminists focus on solving the problems in women’s lives through policy-making, and advocate for incremental changes within already existing institutions. Betty

⁴⁴ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 8.

⁴⁵ Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 228.

⁴⁶ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 46.

Friedan's quote, "'if you are serious about anything in America, to make it fashionable helps,'" makes clear the priority of making the ideology appealing, even if it, intentionally or unintentionally, meant slower and smaller changes, and marginalizing the concerns other women, such as women of color and queer women.⁴⁷ Conveying a simple facet of a complex movement, the quote does speak to the debate about the strategy to make feminism popular—how can feminists expect to make gains if there is such discomfort with, or hostility to, the concept of feminism?

For others, the ideas of "working within the system" or "fashionable feminism" are concepts with which they deeply disagree—at best, it is a misplaced use of time; at worst, it is an incredibly detrimental idea that pacifies the movement and distracts activists and supporters from greater goals. Radical feminists argue that the mainstream will never get at the sexism rooted deeply within American society. They offer instead a vision of deconstructing oppressive forces that goes beyond the critiquing of sexism to include attacking the racism and capitalist hierarchy inherent in patriarchy. Feminist writer Audre Lorde reimagines how to combat the structures set up to marginalize groups:

[Survival] is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. *For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.* They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support.⁴⁸

Lorde, and many other radical feminists, argue that change within a system meant to oppress women and others can never be truly revolutionary. They believe that policy-making is important

⁴⁷ Siegel, *Sisterhood, Interrupted*, 71.

⁴⁸ Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," 99.

for protecting women in a society that mistreats them, but they are also galvanized to restructure society instead of simply accepting patchwork policy changes to the larger institutional and cultural inequalities. This approach grew from radical feminists in their consciousness-raising groups and is influencing new avenues in academic theory, from queer and feminist perspectives on the sources of oppression and the intersectionality of marginalized identities. Radical feminists remain committed to recognizing differences, instead of sublimating them, in order to broaden the movement and create powerful change for women of all backgrounds and experiences.

While these key debates existed in the earlier waves of feminism, they remain entirely relevant to the movement today. The same questions are being asked and the same tensions, encountered in new iterations, are being widely addressed online, which is the focus of this paper. For example, the dispute about whether certain sites can claim the label “feminist” renews the debates about what the term means, how expansive it can or should be, and whether or not the term should be challenged or policed. At the heart of this conflict are the questions: Do activists prioritize making feminism an approachable topic at the expense of its deeper meanings? Can it realistically move forward on both fronts? The movement seems still at a point where women and men are uncomfortable with the term and misconceive its ideology. Moreover, many women simply do not understand the movement’s relevance to their lives, as is clear from a visit to “Women Against Feminism.” However, it is dangerously reductive, not to mention tiresome, to simply shrink feminism to its dictionary definition, as is the trend as of late.⁴⁹ Here, feminists are caught in another identity paradox: defining feminism can be

⁴⁹ Emily Thomas, “Taylor Swift Reveals She Has Been a Feminist All This Time,” Huffington Post, (August 24, 2014), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/24/taylor-swift-feminist-_n_5704691.html; Amanda Marcotte, “Aziz Ansari Is Better Than Most Celebrities at Talking

restricting, fracturing, and dispersive, and a source of great antagonism between feminists with differences. However, if there is no set agreement of purpose, is feminism at risk of losing its meaning and power for action? Arguing over feminism at its most simplistic interpretation fails to acknowledge how truly profound it would be if society genuinely took up the feminist cause and applied its philosophy of equality.

Key feminist debates are continuously being explored, albeit to different degrees, on various feminist blogs. These online sites are interesting subjects for examination; they further dialogue by publishing pieces, encouraging readers to respond, and engaging with the general feminist blogosphere. These actions can, in many ways, be seen as extensions of earlier feminist publications. The next chapter reviews a sampling of print publications in order to examine how feminists used print as a medium to communicate their messages and strengthen the movement. In Chapter 3, I introduce and provide background information about the five feminist websites and blogs included in my study. I present my methods, data, and analysis of the sites. Chapter 4 includes interviews conducted with at least one writer or editor from most of the websites, in order to understand how those involved view their sites and the others. I conclude with some thoughts and reflections about these sites, their missions and effects, their relation to the larger movement, and the importance of understanding the online feminist dialogue.

About Feminism,” *Slate*, October 7, 2014,
http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2014/10/07/aziz_ansari_embraces_feminism_on_the_late_show_with_david_letterman.html.

Chapter 2: History of Feminist Press

Feminists have long published periodicals as a way to spread their messages, raise consciousness, bolster activism, and recruit supporters. Serving as a parallel to the condensed history of feminism in Chapter 1, this chapter will explore how the social movement has used the press to help achieve its political, social, and cultural goals. Chapter 2 will focus specifically on the use of feminist newspapers during the suffragette movement, and the use of news journals and magazines during the second wave. The tensions raised in this chapter also present themselves in the history of later, modern debates that also continue to inform online feminism.

Early Feminist Press

During the struggle to secure the women's vote in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, suffragettes established publications in order to expand and further their activism. They used these journals to bridge the geographic distance between women's rights supporters, spread awareness about their conventions and organizing efforts, and establish a common identity around which women and male supporters of women's rights could unite.⁵⁰ Historian Martha Solomon explains the importance of the suffragettes' self-published periodicals: with these journals, she argues, "the movement could reach, educate, and inspire scores of women who could not be tapped by other means. Controlling the content themselves, supporters could give the fullest, fairest, and most sympathetic coverage."⁵¹ There were many journals in operation during the decades-long campaign for suffrage, with more than thirty-three published between 1870 and 1890, and they appealed to a variety of constituencies. For example, *The Lily*

⁵⁰ Dow, "The Revolution, 1868-1970: Expanding the Woman Suffrage Agenda."

⁵¹ Martha M. Solomon, "The Role of the Suffrage Press in the Women's Rights Movement," in *A Voice of Their Own: The Woman Suffrage Press, 1840-1910*, ed. Martha M. Solomon (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1991), 3.

(1849-1856) sought to link the Temperance Movement to women's rights, and *The Farmer's Wife* (1891-1894) tried to raise the "prairie consciousness" and connect with women typically left out of the suffrage struggle by their distance from urban centers of political thought and discussion.⁵² While many of the journals were specific and limited, there were two widely-read publications, *The Revolution* and *The Woman's Journal*. Though both were feminist and suffrage-oriented, they contrasted in their messages, founders, and approaches.

Founded in 1868 by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Revolution* offered a radical perspective on the acquisition of the vote and "reflected the uncompromising and often controversial ideas of its creators."⁵³ Linked to the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), an organization also started by Anthony and Stanton, the paper fiercely advocated for the NWSA's proposal to achieve suffrage through a federal amendment.⁵⁴ However, *The Revolution* did not limit its focus to the vote; it covered topics including abortion, prostitution, marriage, divorce, and prison reform, and included contributions from activists such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Pauline Wright Davis. The publication also tried to combat the class bias within the struggle for suffrage, recognizing that middle and upper class women primarily had the resources to participate in the movement. Anthony worked to "convince working women that the solution to their problems lay in the right to the ballot and, consequently, to expand the membership of the movement by appealing to them."⁵⁵ While the newspaper advocated for progressive reforms for women, its initial backing came, in large part,

⁵² E. Claire Jerry and Martha M. Solomon, "The Role of Newspapers in the Nineteenth-Century Woman's Movement," in *A Voice of Their Own: The Woman Suffrage Press, 1840-1910* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1991), 24.

⁵³ Dow, "The Revolution, 1868-1970: Expanding the Woman Suffrage Agenda," 73.

⁵⁴ Agnes Hooper Gottlieb, "The Revolution," in *Women's Periodicals in the United States: Social and Political Issues*, ed. Kathleen L. Endres and Therese L. Lueck (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 470.

⁵⁵ Dow, "The Revolution, 1868-1970: Expanding the Woman Suffrage Agenda," 79.

from George Francis Train, a Southern Democrat, whose views on slavery did not match those of Anthony and Stanton, although this did not prevent them from accepting his funding.⁵⁶ The later loss of Train's financial support, an inability to attract enough advertisers, and a shortage of readers led to the paper's end.⁵⁷ Although the paper only ran from 1868 to 1872, its tone was a distinct, defiant one and it served an important role in the history of the suffrage press.

In response to Anthony and Stanton's newspaper, Lucy Stone started *The Woman's Journal* in 1870 to offer a less radical alternative. Stone collaborated on the paper with her husband, Henry Blackwell, and they recruited well-known suffragettes and abolitionists to work on and contribute to the publication, including William Lloyd Garrison, Mary Ashton Livermore, and Julia Ward Howe.⁵⁸ *The Woman's Journal* was the mouthpiece of the American Women Suffrage Association (AWSA), an organization founded by Stone, Blackwell, and Howe. Countering *The Revolution* and the NWSA's proposed constitutional path to suffrage, both the AWSA and its corresponding paper supported a slower, state-by-state strategy for change.⁵⁹ The *Journal's* approach to business and management also contrasted that of *The Revolution*. Stone was horrified by Anthony and Stanton's arrangement with Train and heavily critiqued their source of funding. Yet, she, too, found it difficult to find backing to sustain a suffrage paper as the majority of the fundraising responsibilities, securing subscribers, stockholders, and advertisements fell to her.⁶⁰ However, Stone and Blackwell succeeded in commanding a far

⁵⁶ Hooper Gottlieb, "The Revolution," 340.

⁵⁷ Lynne Masel-Walters, "Their Rights and Nothing More: A History of the Revolution, 1868-1870," *Journalism Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (Summer 1976): 242-51.

⁵⁸ David R. Spencer, "The Woman's Journal," in *Women's Periodicals in the United States: Social and Political Issues*, ed. Kathleen L. Endres and Therese L. Lueck (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 470.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Andrea Moore Kerr, *Lucy Stone: Speaking out for Equality* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 129; Susan Schultz Huxman, "The Woman's Journal, 1870-1890: The

reach for the paper; they had subscribers in every state and in thirty-nine countries. To support their international readership, the *Journal* began reporting on women's rights abroad, including dispatches from meetings at international women's organizations and updates on global suffrage efforts and legislation.⁶¹ Stone also started a woman's column which was syndicated in 1,000 newspapers in the United States, which demonstrated her dedicated attempt to generate sympathetic coverage in the mainstream press, recruit supporters, and propel interest in the topic of suffrage.⁶² After Stone's death in 1893, Henry Blackwell and their daughter, Alice Blackwell, continued the publication until 1917. The paper later consolidated with other journals, became *Woman Citizen*, and remained in print until 1927.⁶³ Susan Schultz Huxman, a professor of rhetoric and communication, explains how the journal achieved such sustained success: "Despite its readers' immense demographic differences, lack of publicly shared experience, and poor self-images, the *Journal* empowered and unified women by using an intimate, participatory rhetorical style in addressing feminist issues."⁶⁴

While *The Revolution* floundered after its first few years, and *The Woman's Journal* was a publication feat of endurance, taken together the papers show early fissures within the movement, and demonstrate tensions that would continue to test feminist publications. For example, historian Agnes Hooper Gottlieb argues that *The Revolution* splintered the movement by being so radical, and that *The Woman's Journal*, too, symbolized the unwillingness to work together by starting after *The Revolution* was already being published.⁶⁵ The titles of the papers

Torchbearer for Suffrage," in *A Voice of Their Own: The Woman Suffrage Press, 1840-1910*, ed. Martha M. Solomon (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1991), 90–91.

⁶¹ Kerr, *Lucy Stone*, 194.

⁶² Spencer, "The Woman's Journal," 471.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 476–478.

⁶⁴ Schultz Huxman, "The Woman's Journal, 1870-1890: The Torchbearer for Suffrage," 108.

⁶⁵ Hooper Gottlieb, "The Revolution," 342.

themselves revealed the strikingly different approaches embraced by their founders; while *The Revolution* sounds nothing short of an inflammatory missive, *The Woman's Journal* reads as a tame or bland manual of the status-quo. At the top of its front page, *The Revolution* proclaimed, "The true republic—Men, their rights and nothing more; women, their rights and nothing less."⁶⁶ The paper's radical nature strove to "ignite a fire of indignation and reform in the hearts of its readers," and its name signaled a demand for profound political change.⁶⁷ In contrast to the fiery spirit of its rival, *The Woman's Journal's* revolutionary nature only seemed understated. Its heading forthrightly stated its purpose: "A weekly newspaper published every Saturday in Boston, devoted to the interest of woman—to her educational, industrial, legal and political equality, and especially to her right of suffrage."⁶⁸ In comparison to the limited subjects covered by other women-centric magazines of the era, the paper was actually as innovative and valuable as *The Revolution*.

There was some overlap between *The Revolution* and *The Woman's Journal*. Most notably, they both worked to create a community among readers. In order to bolster the collective identity, they broadcast women's achievements. *The Journal* ran a weekly feature, which was filled with female role models, emphasizing women who started public careers in order to inspire readers to consider starting their own. *The Revolution* also "trumpeted the accomplishments of females," and included portraits of historically important women.⁶⁹ Both the papers included testimonies from readers who had "converted" to suffrage, and *The Woman's*

⁶⁶ Hooper Gottlieb, "The Revolution."

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 339.

⁶⁸ Lucy Stone, *The Woman's Journal*, January 3, 1891.

⁶⁹ Masel-Walters, "Their Rights and Nothing More: A History of the Revolution, 1868-1870," 247.

Journal, though considered the less radical of the two publications, suggested the radical notion that those who were anti-suffrage were living under “intellectual tyranny.”⁷⁰

As referenced above, funding proved to be a hardship for both publications. Anthony and Stanton’s alliance with Train came out of an interesting historical tension that arose post-Civil War. During Reconstruction, many progressives, such as abolitionists Horace Greeley and Wendell Phillips, felt that the “negro’s hour” had come, and that the struggle for women’s suffrage needed to be put on hold. While Stone was committed to the slower paced state-by-state process, Anthony and Stanton refused to put aside or lessen their demands in order to focus on and advocate for the women-excluding Fifteenth Amendment. In the absence of financial support from progressive sources, and with these subsidies going instead to black suffrage publications, they defended their acceptance of their backer’s funding as a form of their dedication to the cause. Stanton argued, “it seems to me it would be right and wise to accept aid from the devil himself, provided that he did not tempt us to lower our standard.”⁷¹ This debate, over where attention, and corresponding funds, should be focused, revealed the racial tensions inherent in the first wave feminist movement. Since the suffragettes were mainly middle-class white women, their emphasis on gender over race ignored the unique position black women were in at this political moment. Historian Lynne Masel-Walters references an 1868 double referendum in Kansas, wherein voters had to decide to remove “white” or “male” from the voters’ qualifications.⁷² This ballot starkly reflects the ongoing dialogue, which pitted the rights of freed

⁷⁰ Schultz Huxman, “The Woman’s Journal, 1870-1890: The Torchbearer for Suffrage,” 104–105.

⁷¹ William Samuel Solomon and Robert Waterman McChesney, eds., *Ruthless Criticism: New Perspectives in U.S. Communication History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 80.

⁷² Masel-Walters, “Their Rights and Nothing More: A History of the Revolution, 1868-1870,” 243.

black men against the rights of white women, defined them as mutually exclusive, and overlooked freed female slaves with either outcome.

Though NWSA's *The Revolution* and AWSA's *The Woman's Journal* had divergent approaches, and very disparate lifespans, both of them were integral to the early feminist press and to propelling activist efforts through the medium. Historian David Spencer notes the vital link between the papers and their respective suffrage associations; through the combination of activism and press, "organizers became journalists, and journalists became organizers."⁷³ They conducted lively conversations, and recruited women and men to their cause. Their work to spread their messages, enact political change and to create an identity with which readers could connect was essential to helping people identify with suffrage. In all ways except that of calling for female enfranchisement, a general description of early feminist press is a description of the next wave of feminist press, when mid-century women saw clearly that earning the right to vote only granted women that one right, and that there were still many issues and injustices to take up ink against.

Second Wave Feminist Press

One of the key issues raised during the second wave was that of the relationship between women and the media. Many feminists critiqued how the media, especially magazines, narrowly portrayed, and shaped, women's interests. They wanted instead to create publications that understood and presented women as multi-dimensional beings. The popular women's magazines of the 1960s and 1970s offered very narrow or singular depictions of women. Mass circulation publications such as *Ladies' Home Journal* or *Family Circle* catered to white middle-class women specifically as wives and homemakers, which perpetuated sexist gender roles.

⁷³ Spencer, "The Woman's Journal," 468.

Cosmopolitan and *Vogue*, with readerships consisting largely of young single white women, targeted these women as consumers. They focused on promoting and selling a commercialized version of beauty and style, or emphasized discussion of their readers' dating and sex lives, which perpetuated gender roles as well.⁷⁴ The editorials and articles of these women's magazines "never promised to inform their readers to create an informed citizenship, as they did in general interest magazines like *Time* or *Life*."⁷⁵ This dissatisfaction with the options available, combined with the desire to speak to the otherwise-uncovered issues facing women and the recognition that the almost exclusively male control of the media had no intention of disrupting the status quo, moved many feminists to create newsletters, broadsheets, and books, and to found independent feminist presses. According to Professor Amy Erdman Farrell, there were over 500 such publications by 1970, "most of them with extremely small circulations and small, volunteer staffs."⁷⁶ But clearly, there was a growing demand for feminist communication.

One of the more well-known feminist journals to come out of this era was *off our backs*, a radical collective news journal, formed by Marilyn Webb, Heidi Steffens, Marlene Wicks, Colette Reid, and Norma Lesser, which was headquartered in Washington, D.C.⁷⁷ The editorial in the first volume, published in February 1970, explained the need for its type of publication: "*off our backs* appears now at a stage when the existing institutions and channels for

⁷⁴ Amy Erdman Farrell, *Yours in Sisterhood: Ms. Magazine and the Promise of Popular Feminism*, Gender & American Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Mary Thom, *Inside Ms.: 25 Years of the Magazine and the Feminist Movement*, 1st ed (New York: H. Holt, 1997).

⁷⁵ Farrell, *Yours in Sisterhood*, 22.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷⁷ Kathleen L. Endres, "Off Our Backs," in *Women's Periodicals in the United States: Social and Political Issues*, ed. Kathleen L. Endres and Therese L. Lueck (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 266.

communication have ceased to meet the growing needs of the women's struggle."⁷⁸ The staff themselves shared the struggles that women faced in both the mainstream press and in other male-centric radical periodicals. Women-run feminist publications arose in response to the issues facing the women's movement, but they also stood in acknowledgement that the prior role for women in print was not usually in a decision-making capability. Even the editors of the "Seven Sisters," the group of seven major women's magazines that included *Ladies' Home Journal*, *McCall's*, and *Good Housekeeping*, were predominantly male. In 1965, only three of the executive editors were women.⁷⁹ With "U.S. women's magazines...largely being run by men and advertisers" and the male-dominated media mostly channeling women writers, editors, and photographers into the domestic or social sections, this pattern, consciously or unconsciously embedded in the patriarchy of print, had the effect of marginalizing women's contributions.⁸⁰ While other radical movement publications might occasionally print articles about women's issues, coverage of many crucial problems went unheeded, and women writers' talent went underutilized or untapped. The opening editorial of *off our back* called out the "male-dominated media" as "insensitive to our needs, unaware of our oppression."⁸¹ Arising as it did from the Women's Liberation movement, *off our backs* was activist and community oriented. The editors encouraged women from all over the country to write in order to "report regularly on the activists of their groups and cover the news they consider relevant to themselves and their sisters."⁸² The

⁷⁸ "Editorial," *Off Our Backs* 1, no. 1 (February 27, 1970): 2.

⁷⁹ *Mass Media and the Shaping of American Feminism, 1963-1975* (Jackson, MS, USA: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 209, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/alltitles/docDetail.action?docID=10157899>.

⁸⁰ Courtney E. Martin and Valenti Vanessa, *#FemFuture: Online Revolution* (Barnard Center for Research on Women, 2012), 8.

⁸¹ "Editorial."

⁸² *Ibid.*

audience for feminist communication was growing along with the publication; by 1977, the journal recorded a circulation of 15,000.⁸³

However, such radical feminist publications catered only to a small audience and, more importantly, one that was already seeking out feminist content. Women interested in bringing feminist messages into the mainstream publishing world, and thus introducing them to women not yet involved in the movement, faced major barriers. Gloria Steinem, a central figure in the second wave and one of the founders of *Ms. Magazine*, was well aware of the sexist treatment of women writers in the mainstream media from her career as a journalist, wherein she found herself subjected to discrimination and relegated to certain topics and sections. Other founding editors, including Letty Cottin Pogrebin and Patricia Carbine, left their positions at traditional women's magazines (*McCall's*) and mainstream publications (*Look*) to "pursue the dream of a mass-distributed feminist magazine for women."⁸⁴ While they originally considered publishing a feminist newsletter, the founders decided on the medium of a magazine because "a women's movement magazine could offer a mass circulation voice for feminism and could push more mainstream women's magazines—and the industry surrounding them—to change."⁸⁵ The founding of *Ms.* represented a desire to create a women-directed alternative to the otherwise male-dominated mass media, and to attract sufficient readership and generate enough interest to spread feminist messages to women who might not seek them out. In essence, *Ms.* was attempting to inspire a popular feminism, one that could cut across demographics to reach a multitude of women and inspire more women to identify with the cause.

⁸³ Farrell, *Yours in Sisterhood*, 24.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 27–8.

Ms. Magazine

When the preview edition of *Ms. Magazine* came out in spring of 1972, the cover image featured a modern woman with multiple arms, designed to resemble a Hindu goddess, but one who needed her eight arms to handle all the roles and jobs she was expected to manage. The woman holds a mix of traditionally feminine, domestic, and work objects—a hand mirror, a feather duster, an iron, a skillet, a typewriter, a telephone, a steering wheel, and a clock. She is also pregnant. This image was highly emblematic to many women in the 1970s, as they were juggling a new mix of the demands of gender expectations, family life, and career. *Ms.*

Magazine, too, had a juggling act to perform as it attempted to communicate feminism to a mass readership. *Ms.* aimed to balance both the interests of divergent groups of feminists, who had different ideas about how to get their also differing messages across, and the necessity for the magazine to be an economically viable source of news and information for the women's movement.

With sleek and shiny covers, *Ms.* fit right in on the newsstands. But its content, or most of its content, set it far apart from the other magazines of the time. It offered a combination of personal pieces by contributors about living feminist lives along with frank political discussions. For example, one of the pieces in the preview edition was titled "We Have Had Abortions;" it included a listing of fifty-three women who volunteered their names. It also offered a mail-in cut-out so readers could contribute their names to the list.⁸⁶ Coming out the year before the *Roe v. Wade* decision, this article took an explicitly political stance by bringing many women's unspoken reality into the public discourse and trying to shed the stigma surrounding abortion. Even the name, *Ms.*, offered a political statement. Interested in promoting the use of an

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

alternative to the marriage-defining titles of Miss or Mrs., the editors explained their choice:

“The use of Ms. isn’t meant to protect either the married or the unmarried from social pressure—only to signify a female human being. It’s symbolic and important. There’s a lot in a name.”⁸⁷ The “Ms.” abbreviation was meant to match the simple, non-relationship defining title of “Mr.” It signaled that a woman could be seen as independent of a man, which remained a key priority for the feminists during the second wave. The “Ms.” title became a major success for the magazine and for the movement, as it has in fact become the default designation for a woman.

From its beginning, *Ms.* generated a great amount of contention. The more radical publications criticized it for working within a system they viewed as inherently corrupted by patriarchy and capitalism. The fact that the preview edition was published in conjunction with the mainstream *New York* magazine, where Steinem was a frequent contributor, signaled to many that the publication would remain in an establishment mode. Furthermore, as *Ms.* aspired to reach a nationwide market and compete with the other major woman-oriented magazines, it was dependent on advertising to make the publication sustainable. Farrell comments on the inconsistent interests at work in the founding of *Ms.*: “Both a ‘marketing opportunity’ for advertisers and a resource within the women’s movement, *Ms.* magazine was an inherently contradictory test. The first tension that characterized the history of *Ms.* emanated from the magazine’s precarious union of feminism and capitalism, as the political ideals of its founders often clashed with the demands of the advertisers.”⁸⁸ *Ms.* occasionally refused to publish what they deemed as offensive advertisements or they would try to adapt the ad for their purposes. For example, Virginia Slims, a cigarette targeted at young women, tried to purchase ad space for their campaign, “You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby.” This copy was a surreal mix in that it

⁸⁷ Ibid., 32.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 3.

recognized women as a growing economic and political force, commented on the progress of the women's movement, and yet, did so utilizing language that infantilized and patronized women. *Ms.* unsuccessfully tried to get the copy changed to reflect a more feminist and forward-motivated message ("You'll Go a Long Way"), but ultimately had to turn down the ad campaign.⁸⁹ In other instances, *Ms.*' reliance on major advertisers who could provide *Ms.* with much needed financial support occasionally resulted in the "strangely juxtaposed" ads for radical feminist journals and organizations alongside those for beauty care products.⁹⁰ Many advertisers simply continued to present their ads in the traditional consumerist mindset of women's magazines, although some did try to cast their commercialization of so-called self-improvement through a feminist lens. Ironically, one of *Ms.*' regular and defining features was a section, "No Comment," which highlighted—and still highlights—examples of the advertising industry's most overt mistreatment and objectification of women. "No Comment" also includes the contact information of the companies, so that *Ms.* readers can complain to them and try to influence change in the advertising companies' representation of women.

Another major critique raised by feminist observers was that *Ms.* ignored real differences in women's experiences. The women who were involved in the founding and operating of the magazine largely fit the same profile: white, middle-and upper-class, college-educated Northeasters.⁹¹ Despite the leadership's seemingly sincere commitment to diversity, some women felt uncomfortable about what they saw as the erasure of differences, such as class, race, and sexuality. For example, Alice Walker, a prominent black author and activist, served as an editor at *Ms.* for many years and published several essays in the magazine. However, she

⁸⁹ Ibid., 86; Gloria Steinem, "Sex, Lies & Advertising," *Ms. Magazine*, August 1990.

⁹⁰ Thom, *Inside Ms.*, 38.

⁹¹ Abigail Pogrebin, "How Do You Spell Ms.," *NYMag.com*, October 30, 2011, <http://nymag.com/news/features/ms-magazine-2011-11/>.

resigned from the magazine in the 1980s, citing the lack of diversity as a major issue. She wrote, “it was nice to be a *Ms.* cover myself once. But a people of color cover once or twice a year is not enough. In real life, people of color occur with much more frequency. I do not feel welcome in the world you are projecting.”⁹² Another early contributor, Ellen Willis, was so frustrated by what she saw as the magazine’s singular viewpoint that she resigned from *Ms.* after two years as a contributing editor. Willis published an explanation for her resignation in *off our backs* in 1975, citing her frustrations with the magazine: “*Ms.*’s politics [include] a mushy, sentimental idea of sisterhood designed to obscure political conflicts between women.”⁹³ While she had hoped *Ms.* would serve as a liberal forum for sharing feminist ideals, Willis felt that it was basically “an updated women’s magazine fantasy. Instead of the sexy chick or the perfect homemaker, we now have a new image to live up to: ‘the liberated woman.’”⁹⁴ While *Ms.* tried to accommodate a wide range of opinions and experiences, certain factions remained discontented with their coverage in the magazine or with their relationship to it.

Although plagued by disputes both internal and external, *Ms.* was, in many ways, quite successful. It managed to reach a large number of women, more than any of the smaller, radical publications, ultimately obtaining a circulation of 400,000-500,000 and a readership of three million.⁹⁵ *Ms.*, as it hoped to, generated discussion and dissension, and fostered a nationwide community. Mary Thom wrote of the relationship between the magazine’s staff and its readers: “[the editors] were determined to write for and edit a magazine that they would want to read. In its turn, the *Ms.* audience, in letters to the editor and contributions to reader forums, was so exceptionally responsive that the distance between the magazine’s editors and regular writers and

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ellen Willis, “Statement from Willis,” *Off Our Backs* 5, no. 8 (October 1975): 7.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Farrell, *Yours in Sisterhood*, 1.

its readers tended to all but disappear.”⁹⁶ *Ms.*, as an experimental marriage between mainstream media and feminism, inspired argument about what a women’s magazine could and should be. It tried to satisfy multiple factions in order to make its message popular and to remain economically viable. Still in publication, *Ms.* now operates as a quarterly magazine and as an online publication, and its blog will serve as one of the sites of this study.

This historical review makes clear that the same issues that arose in the suffrage press presented themselves when the second wave feminists began publishing. Clearly, the struggle to procure funding, ideally through sources that did not compromise their political message, is one that feminist publishers have continued to negotiate. Further, discussion of that political message raises questions of what brand or tactics of feminism the publications chose to promote. Specifically, the publications examined in this review show varied interest in making their message intersectional and representative of more women. The overarching question that remains is the value of mainstreaming. Some publications prioritize making themselves accessible to a variety of readers in an effort to appeal to those who might not already align with their politics. The benefit of this choice, attracting more to their cause, often comes at the expense of either having a less radical viewpoint, simplifying the narrative, and/or ignoring important differences in women’s experiences. These questions appear again in the most recent form of feminist publishing, in the online websites and in the blogs, and are evident in the site survey detailed in the following chapter.

⁹⁶ Thom, *Inside Ms.*, 72.

Chapter 3: Survey of Sites and Case Study

Feminism Online

In a 2010 TEDWomen talk, Courtney Martin, one of the former editors of the feminist website, *Feministing*, declared that “blogging is the new form of consciousness-raising.” She observed that the web offers a place where women can engage in digital dialogues in a way that echoes the previous consciousness-raising gatherings and magazine forums of the 1960s and 1970s.⁹⁷ While feminist blogs emerged in the 1990s and have been providing new forums since then, present day feminist sites provide a particularly interesting view into the contemporary movement. Furthermore, because these sites have gained significant traction over the past few years, more mainstream media sites have adopted feminist viewpoints, causing more and wider sections of young women to discover and engage with the movement online. The current feminist blogosphere offers a myriad of site options from which to choose.⁹⁸ I chose to study *Feministing*, *Ms. Blog*, *Crunk Feminist Collective*, *Slate’s XX Factor/Double X*, and *Jezebel*, because they fall at different places along the spectrum of feminist opinion. While some sites are well known, and some are more obscure, each site contributes an invaluable perspective. This section provides background information for each site and some insight into why the site is integral to the study.

One of the earliest and most prominent feminist websites is *Feministing*. Founded in 2004, the site, and one of its founders, Jessica Valenti, received widespread attention upon the launch of the site. Valenti, who co-founded *Feministing* with her sister, Vanessa, and two other

⁹⁷ *This Isn’t Her Mother’s Feminism*, accessed February 18, 2015, http://www.ted.com/talks/courtney_martin_reinventing_feminism?language=en.

⁹⁸ Other sites considered for this survey but left unexamined due to time and space constraints were *Rookie*, a site for teenage girls, *Autostraddle*, a site for queer readers, and *Racialious*, a blog covering the intersection of race and pop culture.

women, is a writer, speaker, and an active voice in the current feminist dialogue. She started the site at age 25 after working at NOW and feeling discouraged by a generational divide in the movement. A few years after *Feministing*'s founding, Valenti explained, "At the time I felt like the mainstream women's movement wasn't really giving young women their due and [I] was feeling generally frustrated with media coverage [of] young women's issues."⁹⁹ In the ten years since its founding, *Feministing* has undergone major managerial changes, although its original commitment to young women's voices remains part of its operation and it includes a significant number of regular columnists from a diverse variety of backgrounds. Neither of the Valenti sisters, nor the other two founders, is still actively involved in the site, though they support it by linking to new *Feministing* articles from their sites and by otherwise promoting its work. When the site first appeared, it garnered significant press coverage and was heralded as the most popular feminist website and as a game changer for feminism. *The Guardian* wrote that it "effectively shifted the movement online."¹⁰⁰ Although the site has lost some popularity in recent years as more and more feminist blogs proliferate, it is included because it was the first of its kind, is one of the oldest blogs, and still has a loyal following. The site continues to provide reliable progressive feminist perspectives but is no longer as exciting or trailblazing as it once was.

The *Ms. Blog* is the online offshoot of *Ms. Magazine*. Since its founding in 1972, *Ms. Magazine* has undergone a convoluted series of ownership changes. The most recent change, in 2001, saw the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF), a non-profit women's rights organization,

⁹⁹ "Jessica Valenti, Executive Editor and Founder, *Feministing.com*," *Gothamist*, accessed December 27, 2014, http://gothamist.com/2006/05/15/jessica_valenti_1.php.

¹⁰⁰ Homa Khaleeli, "Jessica Valenti | Top 100 Women," *The Guardian*, accessed December 28, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/mar/08/jessica-valenti-100-women>.

acquire *Ms.* and begin publishing the magazine.¹⁰¹ It now publishes a quarterly edition that has a circulation of 100,000.¹⁰² *Ms.* experimented with an early blog in the 1990s called “*Ms. Musings*,” but it was short lived, lasting less than a year. In March 8, 2010 (International Women’s Day), the *Magazine* launched its new and ongoing *Ms. Blog*, which has approximately 450,000 views per month.¹⁰³ Since the *Ms. Magazine* staff is rather small, many of the pieces on the site are written by outside contributors or the magazine’s interns. The blog serves as an interesting voice because it represents the first modern mainstream feminist publication, which has managed to survive for more than forty years, and which is still actively engaged in current dialogues.

The next blog, *Crunk Feminist Collective*, also launched in 2010, provides an alternative feminist perspective to the mainstream, or relatively mainstream, feminist sites included in this study. Self-described as a “feminist of color scholar-activist group,” the Collective aims to “create a space of support and camaraderie for hip hop generation feminists of color, queer and straight, in the academy and without, by building a rhetorical community.”¹⁰⁴ The site is run by eight women, many with academic backgrounds, and is updated far less frequently than the other sites included in the study. Rather than reporting news stories, or publishing immediate responses to breaking stories, their pieces are reflective on current events, or offer unique perspectives about race, pop culture, media, and politics. *Crunk Feminist Collective* has garnered significant attention from other publications, such as *The Root* and *Essence*, for its dedication to illuminating alternative views and providing a place for feminists of color to openly

¹⁰¹ “About Ms. Magazine,” accessed December 27, 2014, <http://msmagazine.com/blog/about/>.

¹⁰² Michele Kort, interview by Anna Diamond, December 18, 2014.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Brittney Cooper, “Next Generation Black Intellectual,” accessed February 24, 2015, <http://www.brittneycooper.com/>; “Mission Statement,” *The Crunk Feminist Collective*, accessed February 18, 2015, <http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/about/>.

communicate. The sites sees its writing as political work: “resisting mainstream white feminism, through commentary and reflection from the margins, is how the CFC does its activism.”¹⁰⁵

The fourth site in this study is *XX Factor/Double X*. Varying slightly from the format of the other sites, *XX Factor/Double X*, which features the tagline “What Women Really Think,” is not a stand-alone website, but is rather a blog on the online magazine, *Slate*. *Slate* previously experimented with a separate women-focused website in 2009, with Emily Bazelon, Meghan O’Rourke, and Hanna Rosin as editors. However, after a brief tryout of six months, the site returned to its original form as a featured blog on *Slate*’s website.¹⁰⁶ As a web magazine, *Slate* is known for offering “contrarian” points of view, and *XX Factor/Double X* follows this pattern, regularly providing alternative positions in ongoing feminist debates, and occasionally provoking discussion by publishing what some have considered anti-feminist articles. One of the founders, and still a contributing writer for the site, Hanna Rosin, terms this editorial stance “skeptical feminism.”¹⁰⁷ *XX Factor/Double X* is included for two reasons: first, it is a feminist blog on a larger, widely-read site, and second, it frequently provides a critical view of major feminist debates while maintaining an overall supportive attitude.

The last site, *Jezebel*, founded in 2007, is the most popular and the best known of the surveyed sites. Founding writer and editor, Anna Holmes, was hired by Gawker Media to create the “girly Gawker,” a profit-driven news, culture, and gossip site.¹⁰⁸ Having worked for a few

¹⁰⁵ Michelle Chen, “‘Crunk Feminism: Digital Activism for the Real World’ at CLPP | BCRW Blog,” accessed April 12, 2015, <http://bcrw.barnard.edu/blog/crunk-feminism-digital-activism-for-the-real-world-at-clpp/>.

¹⁰⁶ “Double X Is Folded Into Slate Magazine,” *Media Decoder Blog*, accessed December 27, 2014, <http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/11/16/double-x-is-folded-into-slate-magazine/>.

¹⁰⁷ Hanna Rosin, interview by Anna Diamond, Phone, January 29, 2015.

¹⁰⁸ Gawker Media is a blog conglomerate founded in 2002 by Nick Denton. It publishes a variety of sites, including *Jezebel*, *Gawker*, *Deadspin*, and *Gizmodo*. Across the eight brand platforms, it

different women's magazines, Holmes was interested in offering "an antidote to [the] superficiality and irrelevance of women's media properties."¹⁰⁹ What makes *Jezebel* an interesting site to study is its refusal to fit easily into any category. Of the selected sites, it operates the most like a traditional or regressive women's magazine, obsessed with pop culture, celebrity, and fashion, but it also routinely promotes feminism and feminist positions. Because of its success and influence, the site is contributing to how traditional women's magazines and sites are adapting their content to include more feminist viewpoints and positions.

As evidenced in the historical review of Chapter 1, attempts to define feminism can be fraught. The movement, not unlike other social movements, has a tendency to exclude and alienate members, whether intentionally or not. Some feminists have recently stressed the importance of considering what makes someone or something feminist, while also attempting to steer clear of creating strict boundaries. Jessica Valenti, for example, speaks of her excitement about the growing popularity of the word, "feminist," but worries about the lack of accountability for those who take on the label, and its possible co-optation: "people who would normally and understandably be seen as foes of feminism are calling themselves and being accepted as feminists."¹¹⁰ However, discussion about feminism must be open and honest if it is to propel the movement forward; it cannot bog down in unhelpful, warring definitions and the disruptive, ignoble desire to police another's actions or presume another's intentions. As Nigerian author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who gave the popular and Beyoncé inspiring

has 64,000,000 monthly readers. Ben McGrath, "Search and Destroy," *The New Yorker*, October 11, 2010, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/18/search-and-destroy-2>.

¹⁰⁹ Jennifer Mascia, "The Blog Jezebel Is Not Afraid to Pick a Fight," *The New York Times*, July 11, 2010, sec. Business / Media & Advertising, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/12/business/media/12jezebel.html>.

¹¹⁰ "When Everyone Is a Feminist, Is Anyone? | Jessica Valenti," *The Guardian*, accessed February 8, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/nov/24/when-everyone-is-a-feminist>.

TedTalk, “We should all be feminists,” insists, “whoever says they’re feminist is a bloody feminist.”¹¹¹ Most importantly, as we see from its long history, feminism must be mindful to be inclusive.

Instead of defining the sites as truly feminist or not, this project aims to set up a feminist roundtable around which can be heard and compared the different voices these sites contribute, how they interact, how they perceive themselves, and what specific feminist tensions they are navigating. Chapter 3, the first part of this survey, covers both quantitative and qualitative study of the sites. It will examine website traffic, common topics of discussion in the published articles and examine how each site contributed to the discussion of a recent major event. Chapter 4 offers a review of interviews conducted with the sites’ editors and/or writers to discover how they perceive their blogs and the wider online feminist discussion.

Methods, Data, and Analysis

In this section, I use a few different tools to analyze how the different sites operate. I begin with web traffic data to provide an overview of how well read the various sites are. From there, I offer a site survey I conducted to examine the quantitative and qualitative details of the stories the websites posted, and lastly, I focus on a case-study to compare how the sites responded to a particular story, their methods of coverage, and what perspectives they offered. Rather than rely on or adopt the real time experience of a blog/site reader who usually receives an impression of a site on a daily or hourly basis, this survey attempts to provide a sustained period of review as the best way to see what the sites are following, and presenting to their readers, alongside what issues, concerns, and interests bring readers to the sites.

¹¹¹ “Here Are Zadie Smith and Chimamanda Adichie in Conversation,” *The Cut*, accessed April 22, 2015, <http://thecutsocial.nymag.com/thecut/2014/03/heres-zadie-smith-chimamanda-adichie-talking.html>.

To understand the sites' web traffic, I accessed data provided by Alexa Internet, Inc., a service that tracks the number of unique visitors, and the number of page views, to online sites. Below, Table 1 provides the rankings, both within the United States and globally, for *Feministing*, *Ms. Magazine*, *Crunk Feminist Collective*, *Slate*, and *Jezebel*. Clear patterns are apparent in popularity between the sites. The nominally most popular, *Slate*, and host of the *XX Factor/Double X* blog, is the 150th most visited site in the United States, so the articles that *XX Factor/Double X* posts have a huge potential readership. *Jezebel* is the second most popular of the sites listed and its Alexa page shows that the site attracts a number of readers from the other Gawker Media offshoot blogs, such as *Deadspin*, *Gizmodo*, and *Jalopnik*, where articles are often cross-posted for cross-readership. However, *Jezebel* is the de facto most popular of the feminist sites because *Slate*'s higher ranking applies to *Slate* generally and not specifically to the *XX Factor/Double X*. Falling far below the first two sites in popularity in the U.S. rankings are *Feministing* and *Ms. Magazine*. *Crunk Feminist Collective*, a blog that offers a decided alternative to the more mainstream or universal web publications, sees a very limited readership. *CFC* is also a much more specifically American phenomenon; it experiences a steeper reader drop-off globally compared to the other sites.

	Crunk Fem. Collective	Feministing	Ms. Magazine*	Slate*	Jezebel
Site Rank in U.S.	86,093	11,158	24,523	150	245
Site Rank Globally	550,734	49,979	107,321	555	913

Table 1. Website's Popularity via Alexa Web Analytics

* Because the *Ms. Blog* is a webpage within the *Ms. Magazine* website, and because *XX Factor/Double X* is a subsection of *Slate*, Alexa is not able to separate out the visits to those specific pages. I have included *Ms.*' and *Slate*'s ranking to approximate the traffic going through those sites and to recognize a certain percentage likely continuing on to the blogs and/or the sites' feminist-oriented stories that are placed in the larger site. The *Ms. Blog* is featured prominently on the front page of *Ms. Magazine* website and *XX Factor/Double X* pieces are embedded throughout the front page of *Slate*.

In addition to noting how many people visit each site, it is useful to examine what they experience once they arrive there. To do this, I looked at every story each site posted during a two-week period. From December 1, 2014 to December 14, 2014, I accessed the sites daily to collect the stories they published. After reviewing the content and creating a list of all the articles, I then created corresponding categories and assigned each story to its appropriate group. The categories are Politics/Legislation, LGBTQ, Race/Racial Violence, Reproductive Rights/Health/Medicine, Sexual Harassment/Violence, Pop/Culture/Sports, Fashion/Dating/Life, and Click Bait/Celebrity Gossip. The data, both quantitative and qualitative, offer insight to a variety of questions, such as what is the output of each site? Are the sites focusing on explicitly feminist topics? If so, which ones are they interested in covering? Are the sites covering the same stories? And if so, what are the differences in their coverage?

In the two weeks that I surveyed the sites, there was a wide range of activity between them. *Crunk Feminist Collective* posted only one story, while *Jezebel* published a substantial 494. *XX Factor/Double X* published 22, the *Ms. Blog* posted 23, and *Feministing* posted 34. Seeing how many articles each site posted gives a sense of the different sites' scope of operation and their areas of concern or interest. With an average of 35 posts a day (494 spread over 14 days), *Jezebel* clearly hopes to attract visitors to their page multiple times a day. A large number of the posts are not full articles; many are simply meant to engage visitors with the site, and encourage them to keep refreshing the page. On the opposite end of the spectrum, *Crunk*, as a side project of a group of academics and activists, does not have the staff to, nor, likely, the interest in, having a site that is as active as a commercial enterprise. Rather, they select carefully what subjects they are interested in addressing and write thoughtful, longer responses. Both the

Ms. Blog and *Feministing* are dedicated to publishing daily, but are restricted in their volume of articles by limited staffing and limited finances as nonprofits.

	Crunk Fem. Collective	Feministing	Ms. Blog	XX Factor/ Double X	Jezebel
Politics/Legislation	0	3	3	3	18
LGBTQ	0	2	1	0	5
Race/Racial Violence	1	8	4	2	36
Repro. Rights/ Health/Medicine	0	2	3	3	14
Sexual Harassment/ Violence	0	8	7	10	51
Pop/Culture/Sports	0	10	6	4	123
Fashion/Dating/Life	0	0	0	0	20
Click Bait/ Celebrity Gossip	0	1	0	0	213

Table 2. Number of Articles Separated by Categories**

**A very small number of the surveyed entries did not fit within these categories, but did not merit the creation of an additional category or were of such limited values that they did not meet the definition of an “article.” For this reason, there is a small discrepancy between the total number of articles published and the ones featured in the chart.

Sorting the stories into these categories is illuminating. First of all, it allows us to see what the sites are most interested in covering, or what topics they prioritize. Table 2 shows us the largest categories for each site: for *Crunk Feminist Collective* it is Race/Racial Violence; *Feministing* leads with Pop/Culture/Sports; the *Ms. Blog* highlights Sexual Harassment/Violence; *XX Factor/Double X* also gives prominence to Sexual Harassment/Violence; and *Jezebel’s* largest block is Click Bait/Celebrity Gossip. That the *Ms. Blog* and *XX Factor/Double X’s* focus on Sexual Harassment/Violence is largely due to the UVA scandal in the news cycle is explored below. It is worth noting that even during the height of the *Rolling Stone/UVA* backlash, the Sexual Harassment/Violence category was only tied for second place on *Feministing* and was a distant third place category for *Jezebel*. In fact, *Jezebel’s* statistics show a clear example of how it straddles the line of being a feminist site or primarily a popular site; their articles concerning

Sexual Harassment/Violence, arguably one of the main feminist news stories during the period of this paper's survey, make up just 10.6% of their overall stories. For the other surveyed publications, aside from *CFC*, which didn't cover the issue due to their specific subject emphasis, *Feministing's* coverage of Sexual Harassment/Violence was 23.5% of their output, the *Ms. Blog* devoted 29.1% of their postings to the subject, and *Slate's XX Factor/Double X* stories about Sexual Harassment/Violence made up a significant 45.5% of their published articles.

Table 2 certainly puts *Jezebel's* copious 494 stories into better perspective when over 200 of the posts can be labeled as Click Bait/Celebrity Gossip. Considering that founder Anna Holmes' original plan was to modernize traditional women's magazines for the web, and infuse them with feminist elements, it is not surprising that *Jezebel* relies so heavily on stories that can easily be labeled as bait or gossip, and that it is the only site to offer articles that fall under the Fashion/Dating/Life category. This superficial material, such as the daily feature titled "Dirt Bag," which consists of a round-up of gossip, is one more likely to be found in a copy of, or on the websites of, publications like *Cosmopolitan* or *Seventeen*. However, one of *Jezebel's* regular features, the "Photoshop of Horrors" section, categorized under Fashion/Dating/Life, is a direct critique of the "women's magazine" industry. It posts over-worked photoshopped images of celebrities and models that are so obviously manipulated and inhumanly possible as to be laughable; for example, women missing entire limbs, or their limbs slimmed down to impossible measurements. *Jezebel's* posts of the pictures have occasionally gone viral, such as with a picture of Faith Hill on the cover of *Redbook* and Lena Dunham on the cover of *Vogue*. In some ways a throwback to *Ms. Magazine's* "No Comment" section, "Photoshop of Horrors" exposes readers to the magnitude of image manipulation in everyday media and welcomes critique of model/celebrity idealization. *Jezebel* relies heavily on celebrity culture to serve as click bait

to draw readers into the site where they might then find more explicitly feminist or political pieces, as well as articles offering precise and detailed analysis of that very celebrity culture. In fact, Table 2 shows that once the trivial, or deceptively trivial, postings are separated from the serious, *Jezebel* still has the highest raw number of stories covering all of the other categories.

Table 2 also points to what topics are absent from specific sites, or command less attention on them. For example, neither *Crunk Feminist Collective* nor *XX Factor/Double X* covered anything LGBTQ related. It must be noted that *Crunk*'s mission statement includes a focus on queer issues, so this lack of coverage does not reflect a disinterest in the topic, rather it is the result of the limited posting schedule during this paper's survey period. *Slate* has a separate blog devoted to LGBTQ issues, called *Outward*, which explains, in large part, the absence of LGBTQ from *XX Factor/Double X*. *Slate*'s proliferation of avidly-followed specialty blogs allows previously marginalized groups their own soapboxes, but it also raises the specter of the compartmentalizing of identities in such a way as to limit the possibility for intersectional analysis on such sectionalized mainstream websites. However, it is helpful that *Slate* promotes all its separate interest blogs on its main page so that they can be seen by the entire readership. *XX Factor/Double X* was also more muted on the Race/Racial Violence discussions surrounding the decisions about Michael Brown and Eric Garner that were prevalent at the beginning of December 2014. *Slate*, of course, offered coverage of the trials and decisions; but, whereas the other feminist-oriented sites offered enhanced perspectives about why the Eric Garner and Michael Brown decisions were indeed feminist issues, *XX Factor/Double X* remained more focused elsewhere. For example, *Jezebel* reported that the mothers of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice met to call attention to their joint struggle against racial violence. Similarly, *Feministing* posted about the distrust that people of color and women felt

towards the police and the justice system following the Eric Garner decision and the University of Virginia scandal.¹¹²

The piece published by *Crunk Feminist Collective* was not reportage, but a reflection about the incidents of racial violence perpetrated against black men. Following the Eric Garner decision in early December, Robin Boylorn posted “Waiting to Exhale,” which begins with a summary of recent events, and morphs into a poem: “Wait./This can’t keep happening./Wait./This keeps happening./I can’t breathe./I hold my breath./Inhale and hold yours./Now Wait./Innocence is never presumed for black bodies/Instead there is suspicion of wrongdoing/Perversion of humanity/Assumption of delinquency/Wait.”¹¹³ This piece and the others posted around this time were meant to create an online space for people who were feeling confusion, anger, disheartened, and unsafe elsewhere; a place where they could turn to seek community. One of the founders of *Crunk Feminist Collective*, Brittney Cooper, a professor of Women and Gender Studies and Africana Studies, and a frequent columnist on race and gender for *Salon.com*, has spoken publicly about the personal involvement and dedication that running this site requires. When the writers contribute to the site, she explains, ““You’re not just doing intellectual labor. You’re also doing emotional labor when you come out with these...vulnerable posts about...how we like the world to look. As women of color specifically, a lot of that gets internalized and it creates other kinds of issues.””¹¹⁴ Cooper’s notion of emotional labor and its taxing effects offers an alternative way to view *Crunk’s* selective output and a meaningful

¹¹² “Mothers of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice Unite,” *Jezebel*, accessed March 1, 2015, <http://jezebel.com/mothers-of-trayvon-martin-michael-brown-eric-garner-1670781693>; “How Can Anyone Push Survivors to Report to the Police This Week?,” *Feministing*, accessed March 1, 2015, <http://feministing.com/2014/12/05/how-can-you-push-campus-survivors-to-report-to-the-police-this-week/>.

¹¹³ “Waiting to Exhale,” *The Crunk Feminist Collective*, accessed March 1, 2015, <http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2014/12/11/waiting-to-exhale/>.

¹¹⁴ Martin and Vanessa, *#FemFuture: Online Revolution*, 22.

contrast to the other sites, which produce many more stories thought usually at a rapid pace and of a shorter length. Although *Crunk* released only a one piece during this study's two-week span, and only a slight number more during the weeks of the Eric Garner and Michael Brown decisions, it is productive in creating a space outside of the feminist mainstream that is meant to build movement solidarity and offer powerful support.

Case Study: The University of Virginia-*Rolling Stone* Article

In addition to the Eric Garner decision, the other major story that broke during the first week of December 2014, and that had comprehensive coverage across the majority of the sites, was the University of Virginia-*Rolling Stone* scandal, which will serve as the case study of this survey.¹¹⁵ On November 19, 2014, *Rolling Stone* published an article by Sabrina Rubin Erdely, titled "A Rape on Campus: A Brutal Assault and Struggle for Justice at UVA."¹¹⁶ The piece depicted a woman's violent gang rape at a fraternity and a lack of compassion and justice shown to her by fellow students and the University administration. The story garnered significant public attention and led to the creation of the social media hashtag, "#IStandWithJackie." It also caused an upswing of activism that called attention to the issue of campus sexual violence, and resulted in UVA's suspension of fraternity and sorority activities for the remainder of the year.¹¹⁷ At the

¹¹⁵ *Crunk Feminist Collective* did not cover the UVA-RS scandal. This is not surprising since the site is centered around covering racial issues, and this story did not have a racial aspect. However, since the other four sites provided such coverage of the news, and they also provided a roundtable of perspectives, unlike those regarding the Eric Garner decision, it will serve as the case-study for this project. It is also worth noting that in Table 2, the Sexual Harassment/Violence category shares 76 articles across the sites compared to a total of 51 stories in the Race/Racial Violence category.

¹¹⁶ "A Rape on Campus: A Brutal Assault and Struggle for Justice at UVA," *Rolling Stone*, accessed February 19, 2015, <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/a-rape-on-campus-20141119>.

¹¹⁷ Jennifer Steinhauer and Richard Pérez-Peña, "University of Virginia Officials Vow to Combat Campus Rape Problem," *The New York Times*, November 25, 2014,

beginning of December, various commentators started to question Erdely's journalistic methods, including the fact that she did not contact the men Jackie had accused of rape and did not fact-check some of Jackie's claims. In essence, Erdely's reporting provided only one side of the story, and an unsubstantiated one at that. On December 5th, *Rolling Stone's* managing editor, Will Dana, issued a statement apologizing for the flawed reporting, and blaming Jackie for the magazine's errors, a position he later retracted.¹¹⁸ Later in December, *Rolling Stone* enlisted the Columbia Journalism School to review its reporting.¹¹⁹ On April 5th 2015, Columbia's assessment was released with the characterization that "*Rolling Stone's* repudiation of the main narrative in 'A Rape on Campus' is a story of journalistic failure that was avoidable."¹²⁰

Even though the scandal reflected mostly on the importance of maintaining proper journalistic standards, it also raised concerns about how the story might affect feminist efforts to take action against with the ongoing problem of campus sexual assaults. According to the American Association of University Women's summary of the United States' Department of Justice 2007 Campus Sexual Assault Study, approximately "1 in 5 women are targets of attempted or completed sexual assault while they are college students" and "less than 5 percent of rapes and attempted rapes of college students are reported to campus authorities or law

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/26/us/university-of-virginia-officials-vow-to-combat-campus-rape-problem.html>.

¹¹⁸ "A Note to Our Readers," *Rolling Stone*, accessed February 21, 2015, <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/a-note-to-our-readers-20141205>.

¹¹⁹ Erik Wemple, "Rolling Stone Farms out Review of U-Va. Rape Story to Columbia Journalism School," *The Washington Post*, December 22, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/erik-wemple/wp/2014/12/22/rolling-stone-farms-out-review-of-u-va-rape-story-to-columbia-journalism-school/>.

¹²⁰ Sheila Coronel, Steve Coll, and Derek Kravitz, *Rolling Stone's Investigation: "A Failure That Was Avoidable,"* April 5, 2015, http://article1.cjr.org/investigation/rolling_stone_investigation.php.

enforcement.”¹²¹ From Columbia University student Emma Sulkowicz’s “Carry That Weight” mattress performance piece, which spurred similar mattress carrying demonstrations across the country, to the student survivor-led grassroots movement, “End Rape on Campus,” depicted in the documentary *The Hunting Ground*, to increased political attention from Washington D.C., via President Obama’s creation of a White House task force, and the sizable, bipartisan group of senators who introduced legislation mandating that colleges and universities address the issue, 2014 was a landmark year for bringing campus sexual assault to the center of public discussion.¹²² The *Rolling Stone* article was the latest piece of reporting in a long chain that called attention to the issue and, due to the extremely violent nature of the purported attack, it heralded the need for serious, expedient change. When it came to light that Jackie either fabricated or was mistaken about part of, most of, or all of her story, many activists were concerned that the resulting negative coverage would erase the progress made and give credence to the discredited myth that women often lie about sexual assaults.¹²³ The percentage of false rape reports is between 2% and 8%, which is about the same rate of false reporting for any other serious crime.¹²⁴ Four of the blogs, *Ms. Blog*, *Feministing*, *Jezebel*, and *Slate*, offered different

¹²¹ “Here’s Your Talking-Points Memo on Campus Sexual Assault,” *AAUW: Empowering Women Since 1881*, accessed April 15, 2015, <http://www.aauw.org/resource/campus-sexual-assault-talking-points/>.

¹²² “Meet the College Women Who Are Starting a Revolution Against Campus Sexual Assault,” *The Cut*, accessed February 21, 2015, <http://thecutsocial.nymag.com/thecut/2014/09/emma-sulkowicz-campus-sexual-assault-activism.html>; Kirby Dick, *The Hunting Ground*, Documentary (The Weinstein Company, 2015); Jennifer Steinhauer, “Senators Offer Bill to Curb Campus Sexual Assault,” *The New York Times*, July 30, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/31/us/college-sexual-assault-bill-in-senate.html>.

¹²³ Chloe Angyal, “Rape, Rolling Stone, and the Radical Notion That Women Are Trustworthy,” *Feministing*, accessed March 10, 2015, <http://feministing.com/2014/12/11/rape-rolling-stone-and-the-radical-notion-that-women-are-trustworthy/>; “The Selling of Katie Roiphe,” *The Baffler*, accessed March 12, 2015, <http://www.thebaffler.com/salvos/the-selling-of-katie-roiphe>.

¹²⁴ Dick, *The Hunting Ground*.

types of coverage and feminist perspectives following the retraction and the subsequent reactions to the story.

The *Ms. Blog* took an activist approach, with multiple posts advocating for changes in dialogue and policy. In two different articles, three university professors commented on the importance of, and their dedication to, fixing the problem of college sexual assault.¹²⁵ One of the most powerful pieces was by Emily Shugerman, a student activist from Occidental College, a school under investigation by the Department of Education for its mistreatment of sexual assault victims.¹²⁶ In “We Don’t Need to Prove Jackie’s Story,” Shugerman wrote about her personal connection with Jackie’s account and how it inspired her to tell her friends about her own rape. Warning about the pernicious habit of excessively scrutinizing survivors’ stories, she set aside the reported discrepancies to conclude: “This is what we should take from Jackie’s story, whether it’s fully accurate or not: Being a woman on a college campus today means feeling, at times, threatened, abandoned and scared. Talking heads can deconstruct her story all they want, but they won’t make those feelings any less real.” By having another student speak out about her experience with rape on a college campus, the *Ms. Blog*, and its activists, aimed to refocus the debate on the ongoing problem and the majority of truthful reports of assault.

At *Feministing*, senior columnist Chloe Angyal wrote a piece that places the UVA-*Rolling Stone* controversy in a larger context. Rather than accept responsibility for their obvious

¹²⁵ Amanda Crawford, “Reasonable Doubt? Rolling Stone’s Missteps Fuel Disbelief of Rape Victims,” December 8, 2014, <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2014/12/08/reasonable-doubt-rolling-stones-missteps-fuel-disbelief-of-rape-victims/>; Ellen Mayrock and Stacey Vargas, “Dear Governor of Virginia: Please Protect College Women,” *Ms. Blog*, December 11, 2014, <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2014/12/11/dear-governor-of-virginia-please-protect-college-women/>.

¹²⁶ Richard Pérez-Peña and Ian Lovett, “Swarthmore and Occidental Colleges Are Accused of Mishandling Sexual Assault Cases,” *The New York Times*, April 18, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/19/education/swarthmore-and-occidental-colleges-are-accused-of-mishandling-sexual-assault-cases.html>.

fault, managing editor Will Dana claimed on behalf of the magazine that “our trust in her [Jackie] was misplaced.”¹²⁷ Angyal argued that blame shifting taps into the larger patriarchal notion that women cannot be trusted. This belief, which contends both that women lie about rape and that they lie about their sexual desire (“No Means Yes”), makes authorities inclined to trust men over women. Angyal also linked the dismissal of Jackie’s story to other political issues, such as the anti-feminist men’s rights activists and recent regressive reproductive health legislation, which rely on the idea that women are not to be trusted. By bringing up other causes that its feminist readers can rally around, Angyal helped ensure that Jackie’s story would not detract from the larger struggle to let women “narrate their own lives.”¹²⁸

Maya Dusenbery, executive editor of *Feministing*, also tried to pull back from the now uncertain details of the Jackie story and focus instead on the complexities of journalism. She covered the tension between journalism’s tendency to run towards a “good story” and the need for fact-checking as a corrective, and she concluded, “I believe in journalism. I believe in it for the same reason I believe in feminism. Because, at their best, both aim to tell the truth about this terrible, beautiful, complex world. But journalism can lie, just as feminism can lie, because they are both created by the fallible humans who live in it.”¹²⁹ While placing the blame clearly on *Rolling Stone*’s inadequate fact checking, and criticizing their scapegoating of Jackie, Dusenbery also indicted the craft of journalism, its inherent biases, and its assumption that it can be rid of them. With her two pieces for *Feministing*, Dusenbery explained what went wrong with the

¹²⁷ Angyal, “Rape, Rolling Stone, and the Radical Notion That Women Are Trustworthy.”

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ “On Rolling Stone, Lessons from Fact-Checking, and the Limits of Journalism,” *Feministing*, accessed March 10, 2015, <http://feministing.com/2014/12/08/on-rolling-stone-lessons-from-fact-checking-and-the-limits-of-journalism/>.

UVA story, but more importantly, she offered nuanced understandings of the larger forces at play.

Jezebel employed a few different approaches to the story. One method unique to *Jezebel* is its monitoring of social media. The site looked at Yik Yak, an anonymous media messaging service that allows a user to view messages based on geography. From a source near UVA, *Jezebel* collected messages and the reactions to them (i.e. likes/dislikes). Reading through these messages, one sees a range of opinions. Some posts urged support for rape and assault survivors, others joked about wanting to get back to partying after the Greek system suspension. Using social media (specifically Yik Yak) is an interesting idea for *Jezebel*'s faceted coverage, especially when dealing with college students, because the crowdsourcing method allows a real-time peek into the psyche of the application's users, in this case, the student body. Monitoring social media also fits well with *Jezebel*'s image as a youth-focused site and with its young female audience; for example, its readers seem far more likely to use the Yik Yak application than the more general readership of *Ms.* However, *Jezebel* did not add any analysis to that content; the writers likely saw it as an easy post to boost their numbers rather than as a genuine way to investigate the meaning or relevance of the college students' attitudes.

About a week after *Rolling Stone* issued its retraction, *Jezebel* published an exclusive essay by Randi Weingarten, head of the American Federation Of Teachers (AFL-CIO). Her article, "Rape is Part of My Truth, and the Truth of Many Other Women," tried to reclaim the issue of sexual assault back from the *Rolling Stone* controversy.¹³⁰ Weingarten wrote of the inspiration she finds in young women organizing around stopping campus assaults. She said that

¹³⁰ Randi Weingarten, "Rape Is Part of My Truth, and the Truth of Many Other Women," *Jezebel*, accessed March 6, 2015, <http://jezebel.com/rape-is-part-of-my-truth-and-the-truth-of-many-other-w-1671167736>.

she decided to share her story to encourage women to do the same especially after the *Rolling Stone* retraction, and she voiced her wish to combat that “same culture” that kept her from speaking out decades ago and to prevent a return to the fear-based “curtain of silence.”¹³¹ By divulging her story, and doing so on a website clearly oriented towards younger women, Weingarten, 57, spoke across the generation gap to the audience she felt most needed to hear this support. She recognized the importance of countering the hostility and negativity of the backlash with a reminder that standing either with Jackie, or all around her, are real victims of assault.

Some of *Jezebel*'s pieces in response to the controversy were marked by a defensive tone. To many feminists, the early questions about the *Rolling Stone* article and the hasty probing of Jackie's story were linked to the misogynist idea that women are unreliable, and that accusations of rape stem from a deceitful place. At *Jezebel*, Anna Merlan wrote a piece that lashed out at a libertarian writer, Robby Soave, who had questioned Jackie's story from the beginning. In an article titled, “‘Is the UVA Rape Story a Gigantic Hoax?’ Asks Idiot,” she criticized his skepticism about Jackie's story, and his critique of Erdely's reporting.¹³² While he and others were right in pointing out the lapses in journalistic judgment, Soave also wrote that he thinks the severity of campus sexual assault has been blown out of proportion and he attempted to belittle it as an issue.¹³³ The fear that inaccuracies in one story and in one poorly executed piece could hurt the movement's progress explains Merlan's combative reaction. However, her immediate and adamant defense was punctured when, a few days later, *Rolling Stone* issued the partial retraction

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Anna Merlan, “‘Is the UVA Rape Story a Gigantic Hoax?’ Asks Idiot,” *Jezebel*, accessed March 6, 2015, <http://jezebel.com/is-the-uva-rape-story-a-gigantic-hoax-asks-idiot-1665233387>.

¹³³ Robby Soave|Dec 1 and 2014 9:10 Am, “Is the UVA Rape Story a Gigantic Hoax? - Hit & Run,” *Reason.com*, accessed March 10, 2015, <http://reason.com/blog/2014/12/01/is-the-uva-rape-story-a-gigantic-hoax>.

of its story, and her previous name-calling seemed reactionary and juvenile. To her credit, she soon admitted the error of her overreaction.

A few days before this study's trial period began, Anna Merlan also wrote a similar, stinging piece, "Richard Cohen, Worst Columnist Alive, Asks Where 'Real Men' of UVA Are."¹³⁴ While the hyperbolic title is certainly attention catching, Merlan goes on to point out serious flaws with Cohen's arguments about the need for men to police men. In his article, Cohen explores the idea that "Real Men" don't let other men rape women.¹³⁵ Merlan argued how framing advocacy efforts in this terminology can be unhelpful at best and, at worst, it can be damaging. For example, putting women's safety solely in men's hands leaves women both without agency but also under the assumed protectorate of men rather than holding equal rights to that liberty. Further, Jackie's account of the rape described the accused as spurring each other on in order to prove their masculinity. Merlan critiqued Cohen's reliance on his imaginary figure of the "real man" and emphasizes how reliance on this concept can actually be harmful to the prevention of sexual assault. However, Merlan's thoughtful response was once again somewhat diminished when she concluded that Cohen's head is "jammed so frequently and so far up his ass." A large portion of *Jezebel's* readers may enjoy these kinds of combative and ad hominem postings, but in the larger sense, the posts take something away from the sincerity of the message. While they do express *Jezebel's* fiery feminist outrage, they burn up some of their credibility with the same flames.

¹³⁴ Anna Merlan, "Richard Cohen, Worst Columnist Alive, Asks Where 'Real Men' of UVA Are," *Jezebel*, accessed March 8, 2015, <http://jezebel.com/richard-cohen-worst-columnist-alive-asks-where-real-m-1663155471>.

¹³⁵ Richard Cohen, "Richard Cohen: Alleged Rape at U-Va. Reveals a Lack of Real Men," *The Washington Post*, November 24, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/richard-cohen-alleged-rape-at-u-va-reveals-a-lack-of-real-men/2014/11/24/c6bfe486-740e-11e4-a589-1b102c2f81d0_story.html.

In a clear contrast to *Jezebel*'s hasty proclamations and its missteps, *Slate*'s posts offered a more measured and reasoned response. In late November, Hanna Rosin invited Erdely to the blog's *Gabfest* podcast because she was privately skeptical of the story.¹³⁶ During the conversation, Rosin did not explicitly state her doubt, but she questioned Erdely about how astonishing and unbelievable the story is as well as the possible reasons behind the University's apathetic response. Rosin also clarified repeatedly that Erdely did not speak to any of the men Jackie accused of rape.¹³⁷ Throughout the study period, *XX Factor/Double X* published posts that were critical of the article and of how *Rolling Stone* handled the story, and they tried to balance doubt about Jackie with blaming the magazine. A week after the retraction, *Slate* staff writer Amanda Hess published "Feminism Can Stand Without Jackie." Her piece, which offered a much-needed rational approach to the discussion, attempted to provide an alternative to the "#IStandwithJackie" orthodoxy, and also maintained that the movement has not lost, and will not lose, its recent successes because of the scandal. Hess warned against relying on Jackie's story and against the unequivocal support many feminists voiced in their fear of a backlash. Many of Jackie's defenders pointed to misremembering events as a common problem for trauma victims; however, if Jackie did fabricate it the entire story, Hess argued, it is better to make clear that she is not the norm. Hess also pushed back on some feminist writers, such as Jessica Valenti, who insist on complete, unquestioning trust of survivors. Hess concluded, "Big ideological narratives about sexism and rape culture don't need to fit neatly with every incident in order to remain compelling. In fact, they are strengthened when they are accepting of nuances and aware of their

¹³⁶ Amanda Hess, interview by Anna Diamond, January 21, 2015.

¹³⁷ Hanna Rosin, June Thomas, and Katy Waldman, "DoubleX Gabfest: The Butch Goddess Edition," *Slate*, November 27, 2014, http://www.slate.com/articles/podcasts/doublex_gabfest/2014/11/the_double_x_gabfest_on_uva_frats_and_rape_in_rolling_stone_husbands_hurting.html.

limitations.”¹³⁸ Unlike the commentators, such as Richard Cohen and Bobby Soave, who questioned the extent of the sexual assault problem within their critique of the *Rolling Stone* article, Hess did not doubt the severity of the issue while she urged thoughtful discussion among feminists to continue their resolute activism.

The University of Virginia-*Rolling Stone* scandal offers a unique view into a difficult moment for the movement, and it does so with the re-fracturing lens of the feminist cyber presence. Feminists found that Jackie, a symbolic figure around whom they could rally and call out even more urgently for change, may have fabricated parts of, or all of, her story. Suddenly, rape-deniers and skeptics of the college sexual assault issue pointed to Jackie as proof of a long held stereotype that women lie about rape and are not to be trusted. Faced with this uncomfortable shift in the probable facts and in the story’s coverage, the sites of this study provided a type of virtual roundtable, responding to the emerging news. The *Ms. Blog* turned to professors and students to regroup and rededicate themselves to the issue, *Feministing* contextualized the specifics in larger, long-term debates. *Jezebel* offered up a mix of hasty opinionated pieces, trivial, disposable reports, and genuine assault survivor solidarity. Lastly, *XX Factor/Double X*’s thoughtful, nuanced response provided perhaps the most reasoned path forward: the Jackie episode is not a be-all, end-all moment for the feminist movement. To view it as such, and to view Jackie’s story as an absolute, will only hurt the cause of eradicating sexual violence on campus. *XX Factor/Double X* sits at the table with its sister sites as a proponent of precise, honest communication because precise, honest communication allows online feminism

¹³⁸ Amanda Hess, “Feminism Can Stand Without Jackie,” *Slate*, December 11, 2014, http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2014/12/11/_istandwithjackie_and_the_feminist_response_to_the_unraveling_of_rolling.html.

to present and grapple with the issues as they arise, and it allows online feminists a way to acknowledge problems in order to learn from and readdress them.

Just as a close examination of the survey's sites affords insight into what subjects they prioritize and what perspectives they offer, comparing the sites also makes clear how restrictions, such as staffing or funding, affect their production, and emphasizes how the sites with greater resources, *Jezebel* and *Slate's XX Factor/Double X*, are more powerful in their reach and output. Looking systematically at the actual content published crystallizes the sites' voices and their objectives. The case study of University of Virginia-*Rolling Stone* scandal yields a complex example of Courtney Martin's argument that blogging is a renewed form of "consciousness-raising." The controversy required the sites to engage in critical dialogues, and to confront and respond to a challenging conversation in ways both definitive and compelling. The next chapter presents the opinions of the women who write for and edit the sites in order to better understand the personal perspectives and aims of those currently leading the feminist blogosphere.

Chapter 4: Interviews with Site Principals

The numbers, headlines, and categories covered in Chapter 3 tell only the public part of the story, what the readers and observers perceive or experience on the sites. From December 2014 to April 2015, I conducted phone, in-person, and email interviews with writers and editors from four of the websites to hear their perspectives about how their sites, and the feminist blogosphere in general, have evolved and are evolving.¹³⁹ I met with Michele Kort, senior editor of *Ms. Magazine* and the *Ms. Blog*, who has worked at the magazine for the past 13 years. I spoke with Jessica Valenti, who co-founded *Feministing* in 2004 and was actively involved with the site until 2011, and corresponded with Lori Adelman, who is currently the executive director of partnerships, and has blogged for the site since 2009. For *Slate's XX Factor/Double X*, I met with Amanda Hess, who has written for the blog since 2012, and spoke with Hanna Rosin, who co-founded site in 2009. Lastly, Madeleine Davies, staff writer, and Erin Gloria Ryan, managing editor, met with me to share their experiences of working at *Jezebel*.

What is a “Feminist Site”?

Although recent efforts to popularize feminism often include reducing it to its basic definition, the reality is, of course, that the movement includes so much more, and is more complex, than can be expressed by a simple dictionary definition, encompassing as it does multiple perspectives on gender, race, and class. Consequently, the parameters of a feminist website are not always clear-cut. The sites, to differing extents, grapple with how strongly they

¹³⁹ Since December 2014, I have contacted several members of the *Crunk Feminist Collective*, and had some communication with one key contributor. Unfortunately, however, I was ultimately unable to conduct an interview with any writers or representatives for the site.

identify with feminism, and what it means to them if it is part of their mission. I asked each of my interview subjects to comment on her site's relationship to the label "feminist."

One site that identifies whole-heartedly with feminism is the *Ms. Blog*. As discussed in Chapter 2, more radical feminist groups and publications originally criticized *Ms. Magazine* and raised doubts about its dedication to the movement. Decades later, however, its mark on the history of feminist press is secure. It is widely recognized, and accepted as a substantive feminist publication.¹⁴⁰ When I spoke with Michele Kort, the senior editor, she stressed that *Ms.* pushes back against rigid definitions of the feminist label and embraces a "big tent" approach.¹⁴¹ Instead of advocating for one specific notion of feminism, the *Ms.* staff envisions their site as a platform for debates within the community. They welcome pieces about difficult or controversial subjects, such as those in support of or against pornography and prostitution. Kort points out that while sex work articles prompt extremely polarized opinions within the community, the viewpoints are still "equally feminist" and deserve fair attention. While *Ms.* supports these debates, Kort emphasized that they would never publish what they deem anti-feminist, such as an anti-choice piece. She professed feeling most comfortable with bell hooks' definition of feminism as "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression."¹⁴² Thus for *Ms.*, controversies begin and end in the same place, with a woman's right to self-autonomy and to determine what happens to her body.

Ms. also uses its platform as a space where readers can learn about and engage with academic feminism. The blog often encourages those in the academy to write pieces that draw on or discuss feminist theories, and make them approachable for the readers. To combat the division

¹⁴⁰ Pogrebin, "How Do You Spell Ms."

¹⁴¹ Kort, interview.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*; bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000), 1.

between academic theory and women's everyday life, *Ms.* tries to have the two work in tandem. Kort explained that the magazine and blog offer pieces on pop culture, which can be used as focal points for feminist conversations and propel the discussions further.¹⁴³ While there might not be a clear identifying *Ms.* position, or a singular definition of feminism employed, Kort says that their mission is “to put a feminist lens on everything and to work for women not to be excluded and [to] be given the same opportunities.”¹⁴⁴ The magazine and the blog both follow *Ms.*' founding desire to make feminism accessible to as many people as possible.

As evidenced by its name, *Feministing*, too, shows a dedication to the feminist label. The title of the blog, which turns the movement into a verb, is a philosophical call to how feminism can be actively lived or embodied. One of the defining aspects of the site's feminism is its commitment to inclusivity; the founders were inspired to start it when they felt young feminists were being left out of important political discussions, and they strove to make it a space in which all young women are welcome to participate. The idea of a blog was integral to making the movement welcoming for younger women. The informal nature of blogging, combined with the active community platform that the site offers, made and continues to make it a lively space for feminists to interact with one another.¹⁴⁵ During our interview, Valenti explained, “we wanted it to be a place that was accessible and fun and funny, but we also wanted to have a diversity of voices and people disagreeing with each other and we did have that, which was great.”¹⁴⁶

Feministing's current masthead shows a continued dedication to including a variety of experiences, including a number of women of color, queer writers, and a transwoman. Lori

¹⁴³ Kort, interview.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Deborah Solomon, “Fourth-Wave Feminism,” *The New York Times*, November 15, 2009, sec. Magazine, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/15/magazine/15fob-q4-t.html>; Jessica Valenti, interview by Anna Diamond, February 10, 2015.

¹⁴⁶ Valenti, interview.

Adelman, one of the executive directors and a woman of color, shared how she thinks the site has evolved since its founding when it “used to represent a specific brand of feminism most epitomized by young, white women like [the Valenti Sisters]. We've become broader than that, and now represent a kind of multi-faceted, intersectional feminism.”¹⁴⁷

The co-founder of *Slate's XX Factor/Double X*, Hanna Rosin, calls the guiding idea of the blog “skeptical feminism.” Founded as a sort of “referendum on feminism,” it insists on asking the questions: What is feminism? What is feminist? Must we rely on a feminist orthodoxy?¹⁴⁸ That said, two of the main writers for the blog, Amanda Hess and Amanda Marcotte, write along what could be called relatively standard feminist lines; for example, they cover reproductive rights, equal pay, and women in politics. Their pieces could be found on any other of the blogs, while some of the other oppositional pieces the blog publishes couldn't be. When I interviewed Hess, she mentioned how she enjoys that the blog doesn't have a singular viewpoint, and she likes to be at odds with writers even on the same site.¹⁴⁹ However, when she discussed *Slate's* overall contrarian nature and what it means in the context of *XX Factor/Double X*, she offered: “when you apply that to a women's website, it gets into really messed up territory sometimes because, if you see feminism itself as counterintuitive in some way, or against the status quo, if you have the counterintuitive feminist take, sometimes that's just like anti-feminist.”¹⁵⁰ Indeed, the blog has published some writers who are largely viewed as such. Katie Roiphe, a well-known postfeminist, has written for the blog, and Emily Yoffe, a *Slate*

¹⁴⁷ Lori Adelman, interview by Anna Diamond, April 20, 2015.

¹⁴⁸ Hess, interview.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

contributor, occasionally writes pieces that are met with feminist ire.¹⁵¹ For example, when Yoffe published “College Women: Stop Getting Drunk” in 2013, many feminist authors, including writers at *Feministing* and *Jezebel*, critiqued her article for placing blame on the victims of sexual assault and they encouraged discussions about the topic take a more sensitive, nuanced approach.¹⁵² These are pieces the other sites would not think of posting, and one could question if the site is doing a disservice to the movement or effectively canceling out the site’s other feminist articles by giving space to these arguments. But the fact that the writers on the same site, such as Hess and Marcotte, also feel comfortable critiquing opposing viewpoints, means that *XX Factor/Double X* is making room for constructive feminist debates.

Jezebel, positioned as a hybrid of feminism and “women’s mag” culture, experiences the most explicit struggle with its feminist label. Because it is one of the most popular women’s sites, *Jezebel*’s posts are endlessly examined, interpreted, and assigned to feminist or anti-feminist categories by its observers and critics. Both of my interview subjects, Madeleine Davies and Erin Gloria Ryan, expressed their frustration about the expectations placed on *Jezebel*, and the impossibility of pleasing all of its readers. Some of those readers critique the site for its reliance on trivial, frivolous topics, such as celebrity gossip, and accuse it of being “feminism-

¹⁵¹ Ibid.; Emily Yoffe, “The Putative Epidemic of Campus Rape Is Pushing Colleges to Adopt Policies Unfair to Men,” *Slate Magazine*, December 7, 2014, http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2014/12/college_rape_campus_sexual_assault_is_a_serious_problem_but_the_efforts.html.

¹⁵² Emily Yoffe, “College Women: Stop Getting Drunk,” *Slate*, October 15, 2013, http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2013/10/sexual_assault_and_drinking_teach_women_the_connection.html; Alexandra Brodsky • @azbrodsky • 2 years ago, “Dear Prudence: How Should I Respond to Your Rape Denialism?,” *Feministing*, accessed March 27, 2015, <http://feministing.com/2013/01/07/dear-prudence-how-should-i-respond-to-your-rape-denialism/>; “How To Write About Rape Prevention Without Sounding Like An Asshole,” *Jezebel*, accessed March 27, 2015, <http://jezebel.com/how-to-write-about-rape-prevention-without-sounding-lik-1446529386>.

lite.”¹⁵³ Others applaud it for its accessible, pop culture-oriented viewpoint.¹⁵⁴ It is necessary to remember, when making judgment calls on *Jezebel* or any of the other blogs, that the sites are dynamic entities. Ryan emphasized that the site is often cited as a monolith of pop culture opinions, but she sees it as an environment that encourages a variety of opinions. When I asked if there were any experiences or instances at *Jezebel* that struck Davies as conflicting with feminist ideals, she rushed to discuss and clarify her discomfort with the handling of the Lena Dunham-*Vogue* scandal.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, *Jezebel* regularly features a series called “Photoshop of Horrors,” meant to call out the fashion industry on its unrealistic body image. When Lena Dunham was featured on the cover of *Vogue*, *Jezebel* offered \$10,000 for, and ultimately received, the photo shoot’s original unaltered images of her.¹⁵⁵ Dunham, and other feminist commentators, spoke out against *Jezebel*’s campaign either because Dunham is a beloved body-acceptance role model or they objected to the “gotcha” nature of the bounty that targeted the feminist Dunham. For example, writer Roxane Gay accused the site of concealing its desire for

¹⁵³ Valerie Frankel, “Why Jezebel Has The Wrong Approach To Feminism, Period.,” *Thought Catalog*, accessed March 27, 2015, <http://thoughtcatalog.com/kyria-abrahams/2014/01/why-jezebel-has-the-wrong-approach-to-feminism-period/>.

¹⁵⁴ “How Jezebel Smashes the Patriarchy, One Click at a Time,” *Mother Jones*, accessed December 28, 2014, <http://www.motherjones.com/media/2013/10/anna-holmes-book-jezebel-interview/>; N. P. R. Staff, “‘The Book of Jezebel’: An Honest Look At ‘Lady Things,’” *NPR.org*, accessed March 27, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/2013/10/19/237004361/the-book-of-jezebel-an-honest-look-at-lady-things>.

¹⁵⁵ “We’re Offering \$10,000 for Unretouched Images of Lena Dunham in Vogue,” *Jezebel*, accessed March 24, 2015, <http://jezebel.com/were-offering-10-000-for-unretouched-images-of-lena-d-1502000514/>; “Here Are the Unretouched Images From Lena Dunham’s Vogue Shoot,” *Jezebel*, accessed March 24, 2015, <http://jezebel.com/here-are-the-unretouched-images-from-lena-dunhams-vogu-1503336657/>; “Lena Dunham Responds to Unretouched Images From Her Vogue Shoot,” *Jezebel*, accessed March 24, 2015, <http://jezebel.com/lena-dunham-responds-to-unretouched-images-from-her-vog-1503703786/>.

web traffic in a “righteous” body-positivity attitude.¹⁵⁶ Instances such as this one emphasize the diverse and contentious range of feminist opinions that the staff hold and must constantly negotiate, and how some of its content may be interpreted along a spectrum of feminist to anti-feminist.

Whether positive or negative, *Jezebel* elicits many strong reactions among readers and observers about what it can do for feminism. In this way, discussions about the site echo the early era of *Ms. Magazine*, where questions of popularizing feminism, aligning capitalist forces, and the movement’s inclusivity all intersected. However, this comparison is complicated by the fact that *Jezebel*’s publishing goals are not as explicitly feminist as *Ms.*’ were at its founding. The site is extremely wary of the expectations and questions that accompany taking on the feminist label, and, instead of making feminism an essential part of the site, it is just presented as a part of the individual writers’ identities. Davies said of her work at *Jezebel*: “I think that we’re expressing feminist opinions in a very fun, engaging way and I think we’re just kind of a crew of bad bitches saying it how it is and hopefully people relate to that or relate to us.”¹⁵⁷ When I spoke with Ryan, she emphasized that she views *Jezebel* as a “gateway drug” for feminism. Her hope is to attract readers with the click bait, celebrity gossip, fashion tips, and dating advice, and then interweave feminist content. Or, as Ryan so wryly put it, “My hope is that someone who comes for the Bieber crotch might stick around and find an article about Joni Ernst and her state of the union rebuttal or they’ll stick around and see something about immigration, like a really well-researched piece about [how] immigration reform affects women, or [they] might stick

¹⁵⁶ Roxane Gay, “Jezebel’s Lena Dunham Mistake: Why Offering Money for Her Photo Is Disingenuous,” accessed March 24, 2015, http://www.salon.com/2014/01/17/jezebels_lena_dunham_mistake_why_offering_money_for_her_image_is_disingenuous/.

¹⁵⁷ Madeleine Davies, interview by Anna Diamond, January 22, 2015.

around and read some of the historical essays we've posted."¹⁵⁸ Ultimately, while feminism might not be the guiding principle for *Jezebel*, it is certainly in the forefront of every writer's and editor's mind.

Advocacy for a Social Movement

For many feminists, a large part of the acceptance of the feminist identity involves embracing the role of advocacy. Feminism is, after all, a social movement to bring about equality between the sexes, not merely a way of defining oneself. The sites' proclaimed connection to this political ideology raises a few questions: How important is social action to the sites? What does effective social action on the web look like? How does consciousness-raising fit into activism? Here, I will refer to social action both as that which tries to effect concrete political and social change as well as the action of consciousness-raising because an individual's transformation in social awareness or understanding can also lead to change in personal and political action.

In a move away from historical class-based definitions of social movements, political scientists and sociologists have expanded the notion of new social movements to include those during the twentieth century, and perhaps earlier, especially with an eye to marginalized groups. New social movements include an expanded understanding of activism which focuses on, among others concepts, "identity, autonomy, and self-realization...politicization of everyday life, self-exemplification (organizational forms and styles that mimic the ideology of the movement)."¹⁵⁹ As was explored in the preceding chapters, previous feminists and feminist publications fit quite precisely into the definition of a new social movement as they worked to cultivate a collective

¹⁵⁸ Erin Ryan, interview by Anna Diamond, January 22, 2015.

¹⁵⁹ Craig Calhoun, "New Social Movements of the Early Nineteenth Century.," in *Repertoires and Cycles of Collective Action*, ed. Mark Traugott (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 173–215, quoted in Michael P. Jeffries, *Thug Life : Race, Gender, and the Meaning of Hip-Hop* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 25–27.

identity, as well as to mobilize for political change. This section explores how the interviewees relate to the idea of raised-consciousness activism and/or more policy-based activism as being in their sphere of influence.

Founded at the height of the second wave, *Ms. Magazine* always considered social action key to their mission, and it remains essential four decades later. During our interview, Kort said, “a lot of what *Ms.* does is trying to change policy, both nationally and globally for the benefit of women and their families and so that there’s equity in the world.”¹⁶⁰ The magazine’s advocacy journalism has had real effects; for example, *Ms.* spearheaded efforts to change the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s antiquated definition of rape. The Spring 2011 cover story, subsequent blog posts, and reader support and mobilization contributed heavily to the desired change in the FBI’s policy.¹⁶¹ *Ms. Magazine*’s connection to the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF), a non-profit which promotes women’s rights through domestic public policy initiatives and international campaigns, reinforces *Ms.*’ dedication to advocacy. The FMF actively works to curb restrictions on abortion access, encourage young women to vote, and end violence against women, all topics *Ms.* is interested in covering. However, the *Ms.*/FMF alliance also limits the advocacy power of the magazine in some ways. Because of the FMF’s 501(c)(3) tax designation, it is not allowed to endorse political candidates. As a result, *Ms.* usually avoids covering political candidates in case the pieces are interpreted as the magazine’s endorsement of them. Nevertheless, *Ms.*’ work remains committed to supporting feminist causes and calling for changes in policy, both in the United States and worldwide.

¹⁶⁰ Kort, interview.

¹⁶¹ Stephanie Hallett, “Rape Is Rape: No More Excuses!,” *Ms. Magazine*, April 20, 2011, <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2011/04/20/rape-is-rape-no-more-excuses/>; “What The New Definition Of Rape Means For Women -- And Men,” *The Huffington Post*, accessed March 27, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stephanie-hallett/definition-of-rape_b_1190633.html.

Feministing firmly believes in the role of advocacy journalism. Valenti told me, and Adelman affirmed similarly, that “*Feministing* wasn’t and isn’t an objective news source... We’re coming from a place of advocacy, coming from a place wanting to promote gender justice and equality.”¹⁶² Many of the writers involved with *Feministing* have activist backgrounds, and have worked or work for non-profit advocacy organizations, such as NARAL and Planned Parenthood. Two of the newer staff members, editor Alexandra Brodsky and contributor Dana Bolger, are the founders of Know Your IX, a campaign they began as undergraduates to help end sexual violence on college campuses.¹⁶³ Activism is an essential part of many of the contributors’ backgrounds, and their journalism reflects this by calling attention to ongoing campaigns or to issues that aren’t getting enough coverage elsewhere. The site works to translate its online discussions into real world advocacy rather than official policy change, by leading various activist workshops about campus and grassroots activism.¹⁶⁴

For *XX Factor/Double X* and *Jezebel*, profit-focused enterprises, social justice journalism and effect are secondary. Both Rosin and Hess at *Slate* said it would be great if their pieces inspired change, but they do not write pieces specifically for that purpose, nor do they consider it the objective of their writing.¹⁶⁵ Hess commented specifically on how the fast-paced nature of blogging limits the amount of advocacy content, since many pieces are simply published reactively to ongoing conversations. This is not unique to feminist or female-centric sites; blogging requires writers to be comfortable quickly producing “value-added pieces,” ones that build off or counter other writers’ arguments. She also pointed out, “there’s a poisonous thing

¹⁶² Valenti, interview; Adelman, interview.

¹⁶³ “About Feministing,” *Feministing*, accessed March 28, 2015, <http://feministing.com/about/>.

¹⁶⁴ “Speaking Tour,” *Feministing*, accessed March 28, 2015, <http://feministing.com/speaking-tour/>.

¹⁶⁵ Rosin, interview; Hess, interview.

about blogging sometimes...where you have to write all the time so you don't have the resources to...make everything you like your own idea, but you have to add value in some way otherwise you're just plagiarizing someone and it's like, why even come to this website instead of the other website?"¹⁶⁶ However, she was hopeful about the possibility of generating more original journalism. Hess referenced one of her recent pieces about the treatment of transwomen in prison, and said she hoped it would inspire dialogue and change. Unlike those involved with *Feministing*, *Ms.*, and *Crunk Feminist Collective*, she maintained, "I'm not an activist and I don't want to pretend to be an activist. Like, I get paid to write stories."¹⁶⁷ Rosin, too, said she enjoys writing opinionated pieces, which home in on a controversial, topical issue and take on an advocacy role, but that advocacy itself is not the guiding mission of the site.¹⁶⁸

At *Jezebel*, Davies took a similar approach. She said, "our first goal is to present voices maybe you haven't heard before, perspectives you haven't heard before, or maybe things you have heard before [but] in a new different way that makes you think about [them] differently...then change is the added benefit."¹⁶⁹ However, Ryan seemed more interested in pursuing social justice journalism and activism than her counterparts at the for-profit sites. She spoke about the frustrating divide between pop coverage and political activism. *Jezebel* regularly writes about legislation and candidates, includes stories about women's issues abroad, and covers social media campaigns. However, Ryan expressed disappointment that there seems to be a division between the coverage and interest of the readers, and any resultant action.¹⁷⁰ She contrasted the online outrage about abortion restrictions and anti-feminist legislation with the

¹⁶⁶ Hess, interview.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Rosin, interview.

¹⁶⁹ Davies, interview.

¹⁷⁰ Ryan, interview.

lack of explicit political action to change the situation. For example, *Jezebel* consistently posts about anti-women legislation and, prior to the 2014 midterm election, they posted a few articles about getting out the vote. Following the results of the election, Ryan wrote a scathing piece, “Election 2014 Postmortem: We Fucking Did This to Ourselves,” about how young prospective voters are hurting themselves by failing to turn out to vote.¹⁷¹ Lamenting the limits of pop feminism, Ryan seemed to be pushing against the structure of *Jezebel* in some ways, and desiring to be in an environment that supports and initiates actual action.

All of the sites included in this study are certainly dedicated to raising awareness about feminist issues. But, apart from *Ms.*, which is bolstered by its original mission of social change and its connection to the activist FMF, the other sites largely do not progress to a point beyond raising consciousness. In the late 1990s, political scientist Bruce Bimber predicted that the Internet “is accelerating the process of issue group formation and action, leaving the structure of political power in the U.S. altered, but not revolutionized or qualitatively transformed into a new epoch or era of democracy.”¹⁷² This study of the sites shows that they are clearly participating in issue group formation, but the translation of that group awareness into social change can be difficult to measure.¹⁷³ Although unfortunately not within the scope of this project, the measurement by questionnaire or interview of a representative sampling of Internet-connected

¹⁷¹ Ibid.; “Election 2014 Postmortem: We Fucking Did This To Ourselves,” *Jezebel*, accessed March 28, 2015, <http://jezebel.com/election-2014-postmortem-we-fucking-did-this-to-oursel-1654948653>; “Republicans Now Control the Senate: Your 2014 Election Night Wrap Up,” *Gawker*, accessed March 28, 2015, <http://gawker.com/your-2014-election-night-wrap-up-1654707885>.

¹⁷² Bruce Bimber, “The Internet and Political Transformation: Populism, Community, and Accelerated Pluralism,” *Polity* 31, no. 1 (Autumn 1998): 136.

¹⁷³ Michael P. Jeffries, *Paint the White House Black: Barack Obama and the Meaning of Race in America* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013), 104–107.

feminists to inquire into the relationship between social media activity and feminist activism is a worthwhile topic of study.

Evolution and the Future

Many of the feminist or female-centric sites have changed since their founding, and it is worthwhile to hear from the participants about what they think the future of each site might be. The landscape of the feminist blogosphere is also changing and the interviewees commented on those changes as well.

As the creator of one of the earliest and most well known feminist blogs, and currently the feminism columnist for *The Guardian*, Valenti stands astride these two spheres. She is now part of the mainstreaming of feminist content in a major publication. While to some this may signal a widespread acceptance and a lesser need for feminist spaces, Valenti believes there will always be a need for feminist blogs to focus on women-specific issues. However, the benefit of her current position is that she can engage with a wider audience, and be heard outside of strictly feminist circles.¹⁷⁴ Commenting on the continuous renewal of *Feministing*, she explained that she stepped aside in 2011 to integrate new voices into the site. She envisions the future of online feminism as a strong blogosphere and as a growing contributory presence of feminism in mainstream publications. Adelman described the work that *Feministing* is doing to try to remain an alternative site that offers a variety of perspectives: “we're really focused right now on getting sustainable. Jos Truitt [another one of the executive directors] is leading those efforts. I see a trend towards corporatization of digital feminist spaces (see Bustle, Mic, etc.) but I think there's still a really strong and important role for independent feminist spaces.”¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ Valenti, interview.

¹⁷⁵ Adelman, interview.

Both Davies and Ryan at *Jezebel* were extremely optimistic about the future of their site. They spoke positively about the new editor-in-chief, Emma Carmichael, and the recent changes made since she became editor in the summer of 2014. One of Carmichael's priorities was the diversifying of the staff; her first three hires were women of color. Davies, who is white, is confident about how this will improve coverage of racial and ethnic news and stories, since these new hires will be able to provide readers with a wider range of experiences.¹⁷⁶ In addition, Ryan talked about how quickly the site is expanding by adding subsites, such as those devoted to health care and travel.

Continuing on the theme of advocacy journalism, Ryan also expressed her desire to make the site more politics-oriented. She pointed out that the site recently live-blogged the State of the Union Address and that she received favorable responses to that project from the *Jezebel* staff and readers.¹⁷⁷ The site already offers live-blogs for most major pop culture events, such as the Oscars and the Grammys, so it is a positive sign that they are expanding the feature to encourage political engagement. Ryan is also thinking about other similar avenues to explore. She explained, "I think a lot of women are interested in [politics] but they don't know where to enter the conversation and they don't feel confident enough to enter the conversation...our political site will be a place where women can feel like they can access facts but they can also get some interesting opinions about those facts as well." If true, the site's interest in providing a "hard news" outlet for women stands to make it less like the "women's mags" it sometimes imitates, and make it more like the advocacy-oriented feminist blogs.

¹⁷⁶ Davies, interview.

¹⁷⁷ "It's Jezebel's State of the Union Live Blog!," *Jezebel*, accessed March 28, 2015, <http://jezebel.com/its-jezebels-state-of-the-union-live-blog-1680784414>.

When I asked Rosin about her vision of *XX Factor/Double X*'s future, she openly questioned the need for her site and feminist blogs in general. Recalling that the site was started as a "referendum on feminism," it is not surprising that Rosin acknowledged, "'why do we need women sites?' is something that lingered in my head from the very beginning and continues to linger more." She raised the question, for which she admits she doesn't have a firm answer, as to whether having women's sites is marginalizing or if they are still a useful source of discussion. However, her perspective, advocating for integrating coverage of women's issues into the larger publication, seems at odds with *Slate*'s tendency toward categorical blogging, evidenced by the recent creation of the LGBTQ blog, *Outward*. Still, with the growing attention to feminist issues on mainstream sites, Rosin feels that is worth asking the question of the continued relevancy of these blogs.

Two signs that point to the necessary ongoing role of feminist blogs are the virtual and physical harassment of feminist bloggers and the fast-growing online anti-feminist community. Each of my interview subjects had stories to tell of commenters who were virulently anti-feminist. For example, in the summer of 2014, *Jezebel* experienced a problem wherein commenters posted violent porn gifs to the site's open discussion system. The staff found itself working non-stop to take the images down and, after repeatedly asking for assistance internally and not receiving any, the staff posted an open letter to their parent company, *Gawker*.¹⁷⁸ By reaching out to their readers, and the general blogging community, and being open about a problem they were experiencing, the *Jezebel* staff was able to pressure *Gawker* into handling the

¹⁷⁸ "We Have a Rape Gif Problem and Gawker Media Won't Do Anything About It," *Jezebel*, accessed March 17, 2015, <http://jezebel.com/we-have-a-rape-gif-problem-and-gawker-media-wont-do-any-1619384265>; Amanda Hess, "Jezebel Staff Goes After Gawker for Ignoring Sexist Comments and Rape GIFs," *Slate*, August 11, 2014, http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2014/08/11/jezebel_to_gawker_media_do_something_about_the_violent_rape_gifs_in_our.html.

issue quickly and efficiently. Additionally, a previous *Jezebel* staffer, Lindy West, was recently featured on an episode of the radio program *This American Life*, in which she spoke with a man who had attacked her for months online, and who went to extremes to do so, such as impersonating her dead father on twitter.¹⁷⁹ Hess, of *Slate*, has also written about her personal experiences with online harassment and surveyed the generally hostile environment that women face when participating in, leading discussions, or simply existing online.¹⁸⁰ Rosin questions if this extra attention is perversely a victory for women, because it means their arguments are so widespread. She seems to have little doubt that women can “skewer the responsible sexist,” but she does not address the more significant or criminal situations where the harassment might not be quelled so easily.¹⁸¹ This small sample of stories shows a disturbing trend wherein feminist writers are targets of explicitly sexual or sexually violent harassment and threats. However, the inspiring willingness to confront the threats, reach out to readers and parent companies, and, most importantly, call much needed attention to the problem, means the continued existence of these blogs demonstrates both a symbolic and real success. It also demonstrates the need to continue to spotlight and address this particular feminist issue.

Beyond the proliferation of usually anonymous online trolls that feminist writers and activists encounter in the blogosphere, there has also been a rise in anti-feminist activism on other blogs and websites. Mentioned briefly at the beginning of Chapter 1, “Women Against Feminism” is one Internet trend that demonstrates either a simple-minded misunderstanding of the feminist ideology and the movement or a deliberately deceptive manipulation of them.

¹⁷⁹ “If You Don’t Have Anything Nice to Say, SAY IT IN ALL CAPS,” *This American Life*, accessed March 17, 2015, <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/545/if-you-dont-have-anything-nice-to-say-say-it-in-all-caps>.

¹⁸⁰ “Why Women Aren’t Welcome on the Internet,” *Pacific Standard*, accessed March 17, 2015, <http://www.psmag.com/health-and-behavior/women-arent-welcome-internet-72170>.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

Similarly, Men's Rights Activists (MRAs) have an increasing presence on the web, and a menacing presence in that their language and threatened actions appear in real-life physical violence. The work of the MRA groups is an attempt to roll back the acceptance of feminism and the gains of feminist activism. This movement is not unlike the backlash feminists faced during the 1980s, following their successes in the 1970s.¹⁸² Tellingly, it also showcases the newest form of gendered assault: the online cyber-bullying that consists of sexually violent threats. Men and women who believe that feminism is not a movement for equal opportunity, but rather an attack on them and who, sensing or seeing a loss of tradition or previous privilege, respond negatively in an attempt to belittle women, frighten women away or silence them completely. Ironically, these attacks are evidence of the gains and forward momentum of the women's movement. Nevertheless, anti-feminist individuals and groups have many supporters and an increasing web-driven reach, and unfortunately their actions have very real and devastating ramifications. For example, Elliot Rodger, responsible for the Isla Vista shootings last May, left behind videos that conveyed messages of, and dedication to, misogyny and male entitlement, ideologies he learned about in online forums dedicated to men's rights.¹⁸³ The importance of feminist blogs and sites lies in their continuing to combat the misconceptions of feminism, and in continuing to promote feminism's call for equality and justice as a counter to the serious threats and effects of the anti-feminist sites and movement.

¹⁸² Emily Wilson, "A Quick Reminder: Backlash by Susan Faludi," *The Guardian*, accessed March 29, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/dec/13/classics.gender>; Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*, 1st ed (New York: Crown, 1991).

¹⁸³ "Elliot Rodger's California Shooting Spree: Further Proof That Misogyny Kills | Jessica Valenti," *The Guardian*, accessed March 24, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/24/elliott-rodgers-california-shooting-mental-health-misogyny>; Brittney Cooper, "White Guy Killer Syndrome: Elliot Rodger's Deadly, Privileged Rage," accessed March 24, 2015, http://www.salon.com/2014/05/27/white_guy_killer_syndrome_elliott_rodgers_deadly_privileged_rage/.

Conclusion

While doing research for this thesis, there were several moments when I felt as though historical feminists were speaking through time to offer the rueful summation that, “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” The fight for gender equality has spanned centuries, and though there has been much progress, much more remains to be accomplished—and the work still to be done faces an environment that sometimes seeks to roll back those years and the progress made. One particular time-spanning comment came to me from suffragette Lucy Stone, founder of *The Woman’s Journal*, who argued in an 1885 speech entitled, “Disappointment is the Lot of Women” that we must “leave women, then, to find their sphere.”¹⁸⁴ Stone spoke persuasively for women to be allowed to seek and achieve whatever drove them, but I also heard in her quote the echo of the cybersphere, the most recent sphere that women have found to assist them in their seeking and achieving and in their ongoing ambition for the equality insisted on by feminism.

Chapter 1 presented a brief review of the history of feminism in the United States since the formation of the first wave in the nineteenth century, extrapolated a few key debates from within the various waves of feminism, and connected them to the modern-day movement. The history serves as a reminder that feminism is constantly negotiating multiple tensions, and it rarely settles for long, if at all, on a united position or front. The historical review also makes clear how the movement has frequently failed to make itself fully intersectional and truly inclusive. Recognizing these struggles, and how they have been part of and shaped feminism’s long and imperfect history, is essential to understanding the role they continue to play in modern

¹⁸⁴ Lucy Stone, “Disappointment Is the Lot of Women,” *Women’s Rights Convention* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1855), <http://www.womenspeecharchive.org/women/profile/speech/index.cfm?ProfileID=100&SpeechID=2236>.

feminism and is equally essential in any attempt to correct for them. Feminism continues to define and redefine itself and its goals, while trying to gain greater support and combat the misperceptions and backlashes that have paralleled the progress made by the movement.

Chapter 2 provided a study of a few key publications to show how feminist leaders have used the press as a way to create a collective identity for movement members, to draw people to the cause, and to communicate with their feminist followers. Analysis of the nineteenth-century journals, *The Revolution* and *The Woman's Journal*, highlighted the differences between suffragettes' opinions on how to mobilize for the right to vote—a debate that reverberantly split the movement over the concurrent racial issue of African-American civil rights in the form of black male suffrage in the 1870s. During the 1970s, *off our backs* provided a radical viewpoint and emphasized that collective's desire to separate from the mainstream media and its oppressive tendencies. Meanwhile, *Ms. Magazine* saw an opportunity to alter the mainstream media and to make feminism more accessible by publishing a popular magazine. Questions of funding, audience, and viewpoint informed all of the journals' existence and prompted debate about their missions and perspectives. The perception that the women's movement focused on gender and those in the white middle class to the exclusion of women of color and those of lesser means resulted in the creation of contemporaneous organizations and publications. Continuing gender inequality required renewed activism with and within in each wave of feminism, and the corresponding feminist publications provided the necessary forums for feminists to develop and/or solidify a collective identity and to reach out to loyal and new supporters.

With the history, trials, and errors of the previous feminist publications in mind, Chapter 3 turned to the blogosphere as the newest iteration of feminist communication, and introduced a roundtable of five current sites: *Feministing*, *Ms. Blog*, *Crunk Feminist Collective*, *Slate's XX*

Factor/Double X, and *Jezebel*. This survey chronicled the articles published during a two-week period to offer insight into what visitors to the sites experience. Identifying stories by category illuminated the topics that were expressly feminist and those that overlapped with more traditional women's magazines. More importantly, examining the articles' categorization highlighted both the common areas of coverage between the five sites and to the separate sites' specific priorities. Using the University of Virginia-*Rolling Stone* controversy as the case study revealed how the sites reacted to the news and what perspectives they offered in response to the implications of a possible setback for the campaign to end campus sexual assault.

Following the analysis of the sites' articles, Chapter 4 comprises interviews with writers and editors from four of the five sites, and the roundtable of voices introduced in Chapter 3 became more pronounced during the discussion of the sites' internal philosophies and of the women's own thoughts on feminism and feminism online. Three main themes emerged from the interviews with each of the women: their sites' relationship to feminism, the sites' interest in feminist advocacy, and their impressions of the future of their sites. It is useful to understand how the sites' staff members view feminism as part of their mission, what tenets of feminism they highlight, as well as what prevents some of the sites from adopting a feminist position as readily as the others. The women involved with the sites also expressed different levels of commitment to encouraging political action and to establishing a collective identity through their written pieces and through the sense of the sites as communities. Most of the writers and editors also believe strongly in the future of the feminist blogosphere and are optimistic about how it will evolve.

While it might be tempting to rate and rank these sites and their commitment to progressive feminist ideology, it is ultimately counterproductive to do so; such an endeavor falls

under the negative tradition of policing feminist participation. Recognizing what these unique sites accomplish is valuable for understanding the scope and power of the feminist blogosphere. Each of the sites contributes a vital voice or aspect to the online movement. By presenting a flashy, feisty pop feminism that seems like more fun than struggle, *Jezebel* is able to pull in large numbers of readers and expose them to some degree of feminist thought. The *Ms. Blog* is an inspiring symbol of decades of feminist communication that continues to bring significant stories and contributors to the attention of its readers. *Feministing* is an alternative for the young feminist who can't or won't handle the cognitive dissonance of *Jezebel* and does not respond to the old school image of *Ms.* The *Crunk Feminist Collective* provides for women of color an important platform that prioritizes their voices. *Slate's XX Factor/Double X* is valuable because it represents both a steady, intelligent expression of feminism while having the expertise to dispute the inevitable Internet inaccuracies. *Jezebel* and *XX Factor/Double X* are both effective at bringing feminism to a wider audience, but in so doing remain wedded to the mainstream media. *Jezebel's* image of itself as more than just feminist and *Slate's* journalistic credentials allow both websites to remain at arm's length from adopting feminism as their central mission. This more reserved position is also understandable for *Jezebel* and *XX Factor/Double X* for they, among all the sites, were created and are run as profit-making enterprises rather than arising from ideological urgency. The other three sites remain indispensable as they 1) provide progressive spaces to encourage and further the feminist dialogue, 2) remain relatively free from corporate interests, 3) promote more radical concepts or offer more acceptance of feminist missions, and 4) push the movement to be inclusive.

While this thesis provides a comprehensive review of five major feminist sites, their role as part of the current version of feminist publications, and their participation within the

movement, it also recognizes many areas where further research is needed. A study of the emerging MRAs sites, the “manosphere,” including their logic, rhetoric, and tactics, such as infiltrating spaces to harass female bloggers, would provide a compelling comparison to feminist sites and activity on the web. Further research on the connection between blogs and Internet activism would also be a fruitful area of study. A call for just such a connection is made in the recently released report, “#FemFuture: Online Revolution,” published by The Barnard Center for Research on Women and written by Courtney E. Martin and Vanessa Valenti, formerly of *Feministing*. “FemFuture” includes interviews with prominent feminist writers in which they discuss the sustainability of the feminist blogosphere and imagine how the power of online communities could be harnessed to affect change. Martin and Valenti assert that “the Internet has become a laboratory for movement leadership [where] young people, poor people, women with disabilities, queer women of color, those who identify as transgender, and a wide variety of others often left out of mainstream media narratives have a chance to tell their own stories and link these stories to larger cultural and political realities online.”¹⁸⁵ Looking both at the disparate sites and the division between the virtual and concrete feminist worlds, they envision a radical transformation: “It is time to strengthen the connective tissue between those who are most savvy and connected online, and those pushing feminist agendas in our courtrooms, classrooms, boardrooms, and beyond. The results could be profound.”¹⁸⁶

The “FemFuture” report offers some specific examples of feminist activism that point to its possible impact. One successful action was the 2011 #NotFunnyFacebook campaign led by feminist blogs and online activists to have Facebook remove fan pages that condoned rape and domestic abuse on the basis that they violated violent language and hate speech. Even after a

¹⁸⁵ Martin and Vanessa, *#FemFuture: Online Revolution*, 22–23.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

Change.org petition received over 150,000 signatures and site sponsoring corporations asked for their ads to be removed from the pages, Facebook refused to delete the so-called “rape pages,” comparing them instead to a rude but tolerable joke. Feminist blogs wrote about and shared widely Facebook’s callous response, while prompting 50,000 more signatures and the creation of a successful and very popular hashtag, “#NotFunnyFacebook.” After three months of feminist campaigning, Facebook took down the pages.¹⁸⁷ Reviewing the feminist blogosphere reveals that there is immense potential for such activism on the web, because it allows for the delivery of more information, through more voices, to more readers, and at a much faster pace than previous communication systems. The next step is translating this online momentum into speeding up the changes required for equality.

The sites studied in this thesis serve multiple functions: they raise consciousness of gender inequality, propel forward the discussion of feminism, offer platforms to otherwise unheard women’s voices, and are sometimes simply a space where women can enjoy the company of like-minded or forward thinking progressives. The sites also have multiple goals: to make feminism accessible, to keep their readers connected to their feminist identities, to counter anti-feminism in the world or on the web, and to press for change and justice. In short order, this current, electronic wave of feminism and its multiplying publications will contribute significantly to the evolution in equality that they so vociferously examine and call for. Just as the review the history of the feminism and the parallel feminist press revealed, the movement is always moving forward. The links are forged, whether they are now virtual hyperlinks between, or facilitated by, the blogs, or the physical linked-arms connections between activists. The

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 16.

movement surges on, no longer in the orderly parades of the suffragettes or in the more free-form marches of the “women’s libbers,” but now in the vast, democratized avenue of cyberspace.

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