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The Feminist Voice in Mainstream News Discourse

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THE FEMINIST VOICE IN MAINSTREAM NEWS DISCOURSE

by

Rachel Kinnard

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ABSTRACT

THE FEMINIST VOICE IN MAINSTREAM NEWS DISCOURSE

by

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Under the Supervision of Professor Elana Levine

This thesis analyzes the work of six self-identified feminist women who wrote opinion pieces for mainstream news and cultures sites in 2014. The internet and the widening public sphere has opened up new spaces for feminist writing that has allowed this writing to be published and read on a large and easily accessible platform. This group of women is an example of a broader generational development born out of third wave feminism, postfeminism, and the rise of online platforms for political commentary. By introducing traditionally private matters into the public sphere, their columns challenge dominant cultural discourse about political issues that are important to women. Further, their work highlights the problematic nature of the internet as a public sphere. Through the creation of columns that are a combination of feminist blogging and political commentary, their work represents a change in traditional mainstream news discourse.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

“The personal is political,” a rallying cry for feminists everywhere, is much more than a familiar catchphrase. Grounded in the student and feminist movements of the late 1960s, it characterizes the shift from the prioritization of legal rights, especially women’s suffrage, by first wave feminists to a broader range of concerns held by second wave feminists. The phrase has been interpreted a number of ways, but it is most often used when referring to the political importance of issues that directly relate to women. Political, in this case, refers to broad, unequal power dynamics, not just electoral politics. At one time, women were expected to keep their “problems” to themselves, to deal with issues on an individual level because they (falsely) had little relevance to the rest of the world. Second wave feminists sought to change this. Rather than face the marginalization of being a woman in isolation, “the personal is political” encourages women to get together, speak up, and organize for collective action. Issues such as abortion, sexual violence, access to healthcare, freedom of speech, and maternity benefits are not just individual issues, but the result of long-standing systemic inequalities that affect women in all aspects of life. Because of their deep entrenchment within cultural and institutional structures, systemic inequalities need to be dealt with on a societal level. They have a profound impact not only on women, but on the entire nation as well, because women’s issues *are* political issues.

As a population that has largely been shut out of the public sphere, women have had to find alternative ways to express their thoughts and concerns about their daily experiences. Research shows that male voices, particularly white male voices, have comprised the majority of

news and opinion pieces published in the American popular press over the last 30 years.¹ As a result, women interested in writing opinion pieces or commentary for the mainstream press often went through other outlets to share their work. Their methods of communication have changed over the decades, from writing in personal diaries, to sharing newsletters, writing for magazines targeted at women, creating zines, writing blogs, and so on. However, most of these methods of communication are forms of alternative media, ones that are often highly niche and do not reach the eyes of the masses. To put it simply, the opinion pages and columns written by men were (and sometimes still are) deemed to be important for public discourse, whereas female voices have been restricted to the private sphere, or did not find expression at all.

In this thesis, I look at the work of six self-identified feminist women who spent 2014 writing opinion pieces for mainstream news and cultures sites: Jessica Valenti, Jill Filipovic, Ann Friedman, Rebecca Traister, Michelle Goldberg, and Jessica Bennett. By placing them within the historical timeline of the feminist movement and digital culture, I will discuss how their unique status within the mainstream media is based off of a long history of feminist activism. I have named this group of women the Digital Discourse Feminists because they have an influential role in shaping news discourse online. They covered a range of topics such as abortion, sexual violence, and equality in the workplace. They were published on a variety of popular news and culture sites such as *The Guardian*, *The Nation*, *New Republic*, *New York Magazine*, and *Time*. I look at this group in particular because all six were either teenagers or young adults during the height of the third wave/postfeminist culture clash in the 1990s. They

¹ Sue Lafky, "The progress of women and people of color in the US journalistic workforce: A long, slow journey." *Women in mass communication*2 (1993): 89; American Society of Newsroom Editors, "Employment of Men and Women by Job Category," <http://asne.org/content.asp?pl=140&sl=144&contentid=144>.

also all come from similar class and racial backgrounds, though this is hardly a coincidence. The stories and writing of these feminist columnists are especially interesting and important to look at because I see them as examples of a broader generational development; this phenomenon is a product of third wave feminism. What impact did the third wave have if it is still feminists with privilege who have the prominent voices in mainstream conversation? Who isn't getting heard? What issues are being left out or missed?

In today's digital news culture, women are featured much more prominently in the opinion pages of elite and mainstream news sites than were their predecessors. Of course, not all of these women align themselves with the contemporary feminist movement or write about issues related to women. However, many well-known, feminist women, such as Jessica Valenti, Rebecca Traister, and Michelle Goldberg, are now regularly published online by *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *The Nation*, and more. As their careers have grown, they have continued to bring both the personal and political aspects of being a woman to ever-larger audiences, writing about a range of topics from abortion, to rape culture, to bias in political coverage of female candidates. As opposed to most of their male counterparts, many of the women columnists who identify as feminist include personal anecdotes or autobiographical information in their writing. While men still far outnumber women in terms of mainstream opinion writing, a cultural shift has clearly taken place over the last 30 years or so, particularly since the advent of the internet.

A notable characteristic shared amongst many of the women who have been able to break through the columnist barrier is that the most regular writers since 2010 tend to come from the same generation and have had similar life/career trajectories. These women, now in their mid-30s/early 40s, grew up in a time when the influence of second wave of feminism was widely felt.

In theory, this was a time when individuals within the public sphere were becoming more welcoming towards women, or at least more willing to listen to what they had to say. The internet, which allows for an array of voices to be heard, also opened up space for feminists around the country to meet and discuss the things that mattered to them. Valenti, for example, began her writing career by founding the popular feminist news and discussion website Feministing.com in 2004. This widening of the public sphere, as well as the massive increase in news outlets and culture magazines online, meant that women and girls in the 1990s and early 2000s had access to forms of technology and platforms unavailable to the women before them.

These women also grew up in a time when feminism was facing a huge backlash. Beginning in the 1980s, cultural attitudes about feminism trended towards a sense that feminism was “over,” that feminism’s goals had been met and so the movement was no longer needed. This simultaneous acknowledgement and disavowal was termed “postfeminism,” a response to feminism that has continued to endure. Much of the writing by contemporary feminist writers is informed by their negotiation of the effects of the third wave and the postfeminist culture that surrounded them as they grew up. They have learned to articulate their own thoughts and beliefs on what feminism means to them, in the contradictory period of what has come to be known as the third wave of feminism. It is these ideas about the public sphere, postfeminism, and contemporary feminist culture that inform my analysis. Outside of investigating the reasons why so few women are political/news columnists, little research has examined female columnists and their writing in detail.² While it is indeed a problem that women do not yet have as much representation as men in mainstream opinion writing, the women who have made it into the field

² Anne Johnston et al., “Standpoint in Political Blogs: Voice, Authority, and Issues,” *Women’s Studies* 40, no. 3 (2011), 269–298.

thus far offer a great starting point for deeper analysis of a largely ignored group. This thesis explores what factors within the public sphere and news culture, along with those of contemporary feminism, have made these opinion pieces possible. To do so, I use historical and discourse analysis to take an in-depth look at the columns of six female writers who regularly wrote on political issues important to many women in 2014.

2014 was a major year for the feminist movement and its relationship with mainstream media. It was the year when the hashtag #YesAllWomen trended in response to a killing spree by a young man whose motives were suspected to be fueled at least in part by misogyny.³ Campus sexual assault ruled headlines when *Rolling Stone* published a hotly contested and flawed report about campus assault at the University of Virginia⁴ and Columbia University student Emma Sulkowicz carried around a mattress to protest the university's decision not to expel her assailant.⁵ Jill Abramson, the first female executive editor of the *New York Times*, was fired.⁶ A female Supreme Court Justice became an empowering internet meme.⁷ The hugely successful singer, Beyoncé, loudly and proudly proclaimed that she was a feminist during her MTV Video

³ Jennifer Medina, "Campus Killings Set Off Anguished Conversation About the Treatment of Women," *The New York Times*. May 26, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/27/us/campus-killings-set-off-anguished-conversation-about-the-treatment-of-women.html>

⁴ Sheila Coronel, Steve Coll, and Derek Kravitz, "Rolling Stone and UVA: The Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism Report," *Rolling Stone*, April 5, 2015. <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/a-rape-on-campus-what-went-wrong-20150405>

⁵ Vanessa Grigoriadis, "Meet the College Women Who Are Starting a Revolution Against Campus Sexual Assault," *The Cut*, September 21, 2014. <http://nymag.com/thecut/2014/09/emma-sulkowicz-campus-sexual-assault-activism.html>

⁶ David Carr and Ravi Somaiya, "Times Ousts Jill Abramson as Executive Editor, Elevating Dean Baquet," *The New York Times*, May 14, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/15/business/media/jill-abramson-being-replaced-as-top-editor-at-times.html>.

⁷ Irin Carmon and Shana Knizhnik, *Notorious RBG: The Life and times of Ruth Bader Ginsburg*, HarperCollins, 2015.

Music Award performance.⁸ This is only a sample of the many successes and setbacks women and feminists faced throughout the year. One writer for *Time* suggested that 2014 had possibly been “the best year for women since the dawn of time.”⁹ *The Guardian* called the year a “watershed” for feminism.¹⁰ With all of this attention to women and feminism, opinion writers had ample opportunities to explore the feminist movement.

By situating this project within the context of contemporary feminist thought, online news culture, and theories about the digital public sphere, I shed some much needed light on a group of women who have the potential to shape feminist discourse and thought on national platforms. This is an important topic to look at because not only do these women have an incredibly large platform, but they are able to write about highly debated issues from their own lived experiences; personal stories are often more powerful than abstract ones. Ultimately, I argue that by introducing traditionally private matters into the public sphere, the Digital Discourse Feminists’ writing is a combination of feminist blogging and political commentary that produces a novel form of contemporary activism.

Literature Review

This project is informed by four related areas of research. The rapid evolution of technology and the impact this has had on the way news is produced and consumed ties into

⁸ Alexis Nadeska, "Beyonce's 2014 VMA Performance: Fearless, Feminist, Flawless, Family Time," *MTV News*, August 25, 2014. <http://www.mtv.com/news/1910270/beyonce-2014-vma-performance/>

⁹ Charlotte Alter, "This May Have Been the Best Year for Women Since the Dawn of Time," *Time*, December 23, 2014. <http://time.com/3639944/feminism-2014-womens-rights-ray-rice-bill-cosby/>

¹⁰ Editorial Staff, "The Guardian View on a Year in Feminism: 2014 Was a Watershed," *The Guardian*, December 31, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/dec/31/guardian-view-year-feminism-2014-watershed>

which voices are given platforms to speak and how those voices inhabit online space. The internet has opened up the opportunity for more voices to be heard on a grander level, and has transformed the way in which many journalists write. Research on the public and private spheres helps explain gatekeeping in media writing, as well as the (in)visibility of women's voices and the ways in which media and society talk about "women's issues," or issues politically relevant to women. Next, research on contemporary feminism and postfeminism and the complex interaction between the two contextualizes both the topics feminist writers choose to write about and how they write about these topics. Finally, this project can be situated within a historical context by looking at the history of contemporary mainstream feminist writing.

Online News Culture

When considering the place news fills within contemporary culture – how it is produced and consumed, its format, the structure of the industry – it is difficult to ignore how much has changed since news became available online. As Bob Franklin points out, "it is the *pace* of change, as much as its *character*" that makes the present and future states of journalism both a significant and, at times, overwhelming site of inquiry.¹¹ Over the last decade, digital news use has continuously grown at a steady pace. As of 2013, about 50% of U.S. citizens consider online news to be their main news source.¹² With this rise in popularity, news culture has changed drastically. News has become more tailored to personal interests, more interactive, and many

¹¹ Bob Franklin, "The Future of Journalism: In an age of digital media and economic uncertainty," In *The Future of Journalism: In an Age of Digital Media and Economic Uncertainty*. Edited by Bob Franklin. Journalism Studies: Theory and Practice (2016): 2.

¹² Andrea Caumont, "12 Trends Shaping Digital News," Pew Research Center, October 16, 2013, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/10/16/12-trends-shaping-digital-news/>

sites now have their own blog-like spaces to make room for more commentary.¹³ Readers are no longer limited to discussing news amongst friends and family, or mailing in letters to the editor. They can now comment on the news and share it with people across the globe. All of this access to greater amounts of information and public debate might theoretically lead to a more informed and active society. However, many scholars debate as to whether this change actually creates more informed and politically active citizens.¹⁴ Extreme personalization of news gives readers the ability to shield themselves from news or ideas that they disagree with; others might opt out of reading about political news or current events altogether.¹⁵ The question of whether the internet leads to a more civically active society is far more nuanced and complex than a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer, and both sides of the debate make valid points.¹⁶ My research adds to this debate by arguing that feminists who write for mainstream publications expose readers to ideas they may not come by otherwise.

As newspapers continually shift to online platforms by going partially or completely digital, those working in the newsroom have been forced to adapt to changing roles and responsibilities.¹⁷ Print norms are vastly different than digital norms in terms of journalist access and speed of publishing, amongst other factors. Some journalists and news workers find this

¹³ Richard L. Fox & Jennifer M. Ramos, “Introduction: Politics in the New Media Era,” In *iPolitics: Citizens, Elections, and Governing in the New Media Era*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1-21.

¹⁴ Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2007.

¹⁵ Todd Gitlin, “Public Sphere or Public Sphericules?” In Tamar Liebes and James Curran (eds.), *Media, Ritual and Identity*, (London: Routledge, 1998), 175-202.

¹⁶ Peter Dahlgren, *Media and Political Engagement: Citizens, Communication, and Democracy*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

¹⁷ Sue Robinson, “Beaming up” Traditional Journalists: The Transition of an American Newspaper into Cyberspace,” In *Making Online News: The Ethnography of New Media Production (Second Edition)*, eds. David Domingo and Chris Patterson, (Peter Lang Publishing, 2011): 31-44.

transition difficult; they find digital methods to be “undermining the fundamentals of traditional journalism.”¹⁸ One such change has been a shift in the way news is reported. In her research on newspaper front pages from 2001-2004, Michele Weldon notes that, “news has become at once personal and universal...personal stories of ordinary citizens are vehicles to explain national and global news in a way that is immediate, accessible, and understandable.”¹⁹ Weldon attributes the shift to a more personal form of reporting to a number of causes. For my research, the most relevant ones are the rise of citizen journalism and blogging, as well as the major growth and popularity of narrative journalism over the last 50 years.²⁰ Though the writing I examine is not the strict reporting of “just the facts,” my research aims to show how opinion writing, and the personal stories included in this writing, can be as informative as reporting, albeit in a different way.

Because digital news sites are not constrained by space in the way print newspapers are, a larger range of voices can be published, especially when it comes to commentary. Columns have always been quite popular in newspapers, dating back to the 17th century.²¹ Much of a columnist’s popularity comes from the trust built between a writer and his or her readers, which comes in the form of perceived privileged access to knowledge and persuasive writing skills. The role of the contemporary column, according to McNair, is to “entertain as it analyses and interprets.”²² The internet facilitates this entertainment and analysis to a much greater level. Due

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Michele Weldon, *Everyman News: The Changing American Front Page*, Columbia, MO, USA: University of Missouri Press (2006): 16.

²⁰ Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson, Joan Didion, etc. are prominent figures of this form of journalism.

²¹ Brian McNair, “I, Columnist,” In *Pulling Newspapers Apart: Analysing Print Journalism*, edited by Bob Franklin, (London: Routledge, 2008): 106-114.

²² Ibid.

to the expansive nature of the internet, that of a “globalized public sphere,” discussion and debate have flourished online.²³

Not only is news culture changing because of technology, those inside the news world are changing the culture as well. Online columns and blogs²⁴ have begun to challenge the current definition of “journalism,” a profession once belonging solely to the realm of journalists. Though the two groups may do similar work, they work under different rules and tend to be highly critical of each other. Richard Davis explains how political bloggers and journalists have come to form a symbiotic relationship, where bloggers depend on media for information and journalists read blogs, sometimes using them as sources as well.²⁵ Of the six writers I examine, four of them identify as journalists on their personal websites and/or social media, which suggests that they approach their work as purveyors of news. However, the work they do would not fit the traditional role of a journalist, which again challenges the idea that opinion writing is not a site of civic action. As digital news culture continues to evolve, the relationships between bloggers, columnists, and journalists are bound to become more complex.

Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas, best known for his theories regarding the bourgeois public sphere, suggests that to have a thriving political culture and keep governmental authorities in check, private citizens must come together as a public to discuss and debate the issues that concern

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ ‘Blogger’ and ‘Columnist’ are often used interchangeably both in research and online to talk about the same people: those who write non-journalistic editorial pieces for news and culture sites.

²⁵ Richard Davis, “Interplay: Political Blogging and Journalism,” In *iPolitics: Citizens, Elections, and Governing in the New Media Era*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 76-99.

them.²⁶ The public sphere is essentially a social space where political issues are worked out, and where, ideally, everyone can be heard and discourse rules. A variety of communities and spaces make up the public sphere, one of those being the press. An important component of Habermas's public sphere model is the idea that the press serves as a site for mediated deliberation. "The mass media ought to understand themselves as the mandatary of an enlightened public whose willingness to learn and capacity for criticism the media simultaneously presuppose, demand and reinforce..."²⁷ Following this model, Jacobs and Townsley see columnists as media workers who provide the necessary context and commentary for the audience to participate in critical discussion. They see opinion writing as "an especially influential part of the elite political public sphere; that is, it is that part of the public communicative infrastructure in which the elites of our huge, complex societies debate serious matters of common concern."²⁸ The Digital Discourse Feminists, then, are in positions to influence those important to the political process and democracy.

What once consisted solely of newspapers, the media component of the public sphere now also includes television, radio, online news organizations, blogs, and much more. Many critics of this theory have pointed out that the bourgeois public sphere excluded most everyone besides wealthy white men and have pushed for a reconception of the theory, especially in light

²⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, First MIT Press paperback edition, (Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, 1991).

²⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, MIT Press (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1996): 378.

²⁸ Ronald N. Jacobs and Eleanor Townsley. *The Space of Opinion: Media Intellectuals and the Public Sphere*, (Oxford University Press, 2011), 13.

of the internet. As Nancy Fraser has pointed out in her critique of Habermas and “actually existing democracy,” the public sphere in fact was not open to all and it is still not to this day.²⁹

A 2015 study by the Women’s Media Center on female involvement in U.S. media found that women made up only 37.3% of news contributors (the number has hovered around here since 1999), and the ratio of male-to-female authored opinion pieces was 7:4.³⁰ This data shows that men’s voices are being heard a disproportionate amount in the mainstream U.S. media, which means that the press in its current form is not representative of a true public sphere. This could be due to a number of things, including the normalization and routinization of journalistic work, as well as the tendency for media companies to be hegemonic in structure. The lack of female voices in the media undoubtedly affects the content of a given site. Though everyone experiences the world differently, cultural expectations and standards differ between men and women, which means that there are some topics where perspective and experience differ. Beyond that, when these same female writers are routinely harassed and threatened, what little female representation we have in the media is in danger of becoming even more marginalized. Because the public sphere is the “arena for the making of hegemony and of cultural common sense,”³¹ without feminist voices, hegemonic discourse and cultural common sense will naturally trend towards a dominantly patriarchal conception. That is, without an “actually existing democracy” in the public sphere, not everyone will be equally represented and heard.

²⁹ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 56–80.

³⁰ Women's Media Center, “The Status Of Women In The U. S. Media 2015,” Report, 2015. http://wmc.3cdn.net/83bf6082a319460eb1_hsr680x2.pdf.

³¹ Nancy Fraser, “Politics, Culture, and the Public Sphere: Toward a Postmodern Conception,” In *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics*, eds. Linda Nicholson and Steve Seidman, (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

In the early 1990s, the internet was seen as the “wild frontier,” a utopia where everyone was welcome because there were no limits to possibility and very few rules governed the web. The potential for what the internet could be was limitless; it “belonged to everyone and no one.”³² Out of this rhetoric of freedom and possibility came the idea of the virtual public sphere. There has been a growing body of work into examining the internet as a public sphere and its potential for allowing marginalized voices to be heard on a larger platform. Thus far, many have concluded that the internet is merely a “public space” similar to the Habermasian bourgeois public sphere, but is not representative of a public sphere in the truest form as there are still limits on access and who gets to be heard.³³ As Zizi Papacharissi notes, the internet in its current form merely provides a space for “public deliberation,” but “as a public sphere, the internet could facilitate discussion. . . . A virtual space enhances discussion; a virtual sphere enhances democracy.”³⁴ What these mean is that for the internet to actually be a public sphere, or as close to a public sphere as we may get, the internet needs to be a place of rational discourse, which is difficult to come by when many users are inundated with harassment and abuse and certain voices (often white and male) are privileged over others. We do see this with some alternative news and culture sites such as Jezebel and Colorlines, which focus on stories pertaining to women’s and racial issues respectively. But, even so, these sites largely remain counterpublics, which Nancy Fraser describes as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated

³² Patrice Flichy, *The internet Imaginaire*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2007.

³³ Zizi Papacharissi, “The Virtual Sphere: The internet as a Public Sphere,” *New Media & Society* 4, no. 1 (February 1, 2002): 9–27.

³⁴ Ibid.

social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.”³⁵

For political commentary/opinion to be an actual space of democratic debate and critique, women need to be given the same amount of space as men to speak. To this day, many women who write opinion pieces for major news outlets tend to stick to neutral topics such as business or politics, with little or no mention of anything related to feminism, “women’s issues,” or personal stories.³⁶ However, I look at the Digital Discourse Feminists in order to illustrate the possibilities for democracy when a variety of voices are allowed to speak.

Contemporary Feminism/Postfeminism

Much scholarship on contemporary feminism centers on how to conceptualize the current feminist movement and how the postfeminist sensibility has impacted both the form the movement has taken, as well as how larger society interprets the feminist movement and feminist beliefs. Some scholars have argued for decades now that we are living in an age of postfeminism. Postfeminist ideology “takes feminism into account” and does away with the idea of an imbalance of power between men and women, stating that because of feminism’s many successes in the past, women have now reached the point where they are essentially equal with men.³⁷ Others have argued that the feminist movement is moving into its next iteration and that

³⁵ Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 67.

³⁶ Dustin Harp, Ingrid Bachmann, and Jaime Loke, “Where Are the Women? The Presence of Female Columnists in U.S. Opinion Pages,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 91 (2014): 289-307.

³⁷ Angela McRobbie, “Postfeminism and Popular Culture,” In *Interrogating Post-feminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, (2007): 28.

we should begin to conceptualize it as the “fourth-wave.”³⁸ While the feminist waves are not so easily defined, most feminist scholarship tends to place the contemporary feminist movement within the diverse and rapidly evolving third wave, while also acknowledging the effects postfeminism has had on contemporary discourse. I, too, situate contemporary feminism within the third wave. Elana Levine argues that rather than seeing postfeminism and third wave feminism as opposing forces, we should look at them as in tension with each other. She notes that, “self-proclaimed third wave feminists sympathize with a post-feminist stance that sees feminism and femininity as opposing pulls. At the same time, however, they seek to retain the feminist label and many of the principles it represents.”³⁹ Due to both the historical context within which they grew up and the contemporary culture, I see my writers embodying this tension throughout their work.

One significant difference between previous waves of feminism and the third wave is the form that feminist activism takes. Third wave feminists felt unable to relate to many older feminists who had been fighting for voting rights and equal pay, as well as those who seemed to view that fight as over, that their goals had been met. The focus of many feminists who grew up during the third wave tends to rest less on legislation (though there are always feminists working on those issues), and more on navigating a media-saturated world and organizing for cultural

³⁸ Ealasaid Munro, "Feminism: A Fourth Wave?" *Political Insight* 4, no. 2 (2013): 22-25. Kira Cochrane, *All the Rebel Women: The Rise of the Fourth Wave of Feminism*, London: Guardian Books, 2013.

³⁹ Elana Levine, “Buffy and the ‘New Girl Order’: Defining Feminism and Femininity,” *In Undead TV: Essays on Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Eds. Elana Levine and Lisa Parks, Durham, NC: Duke University Press (2007), 172.

change.⁴⁰ Anita Harris argues that third wave feminism is particularly complicated by the increased individualization of American culture, in which focusing energy on the personal level is more “compelling” than structural change.⁴¹ Harris has also pointed out that increased globalization and the contracting public sphere have led to a change in both the political environment and the citizen positions women may take in contemporary society.⁴²

Third wave feminism, to Astrid Henry, is focused much more on individual articulations of feminism than “unified political goals, nor [is there a] shar[ed] critical perspective of the world.”⁴³ Complicated further by neoliberal ideology, the collectivity of a movement such as feminism “runs counter” to the prioritizing of the independent self, which Christina Scharff suggests “robs them [young women who reject feminism] of the opportunity to produce, construct and present themselves” as the self-made women society expects them to be.⁴⁴ Because of this, we must pay closer attention to the ways in which women, especially young women, engage online in activist and participatory communities, as well as their “development of new kinds of public selves” through the lenses of both feminism and postfeminism.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Anita Harris, “Introduction: Youth Cultures and Feminist Politics,” *Next Wave Cultures: Feminism, Subcultures, Activism, Edited by Anita Harris*, Critical Youth Studies, New York: Routledge, 2008.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Anita Harris, “Young Women, Late Modern Politics, and the Participatory Possibilities of Online Cultures,” *Journal of Youth Studies* 11, no. 5 (2008): 481-95.

⁴³ Astrid Henry, “Solitary Sisterhood: Individualism Meets Collectivity in Feminism's Third Wave,” In *Different Wavelengths: Studies of the Contemporary Women's Movement*, edited by Jo Reger, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 82-83.

⁴⁴ Christina Scharff, *Repudiating Feminism: Young Women in a Neoliberal World*, (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2013), 11.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

One common disagreement between younger and older feminists revolves around issues of activist strategies and visibility.⁴⁶ Feminists today have access to a vast array of technologies they can use to participate in activism and advocacy, many of which did not exist during previous feminist waves. Because of this, what counts as “activism” is highly contested. In recent years, the popular press has discussed at length whether “slacktivism,” organizing and protesting through digital means, is actually useful.⁴⁷ As it pertains to feminist activism, Anita Harris explains that third wave feminists are modifying their strategies to align with their own cultural experiences and integrating these strategies into the digital world. To some, these methods “may be unrecognizable if interpreted through more traditional paradigms of activism.”⁴⁸ Though platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr might not seem as effective as a mass protest in the streets, digital platforms are much larger and have a greater reach than other forms of resistance. The results of a protest might be different from an online campaign, but digital activism can be a powerful tool for consciousness-raising activities and gives traditionally silenced communities more resources to connect with others who share the same beliefs and values.⁴⁹ In my research, I consider whether and how opinion writing can function as a large-scale form of consciousness-raising. Dahlgren asserts that the first step to political participation is engagement. To him, “Engagement refers to subjective states, that is, a

⁴⁶ Joanna Chiu, "Young Feminists 'Rankling The Old Guard' and the Future of Feminism: A Conversation with Katha Pollitt," *The Nation*, January 6, 2011. <https://www.thenation.com/article/young-feminists-rankling-old-guard-and-future-feminism-conversation-katha-pollitt/>

⁴⁷ For example: Noah Berlatsky, "Hashtag Activism Isn't a Cop-Out," *The Atlantic*, January 7, 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/01/not-just-hashtag-activism-why-social-media-matters-to-protestors/384215/>

⁴⁸ Anita Harris, "Introduction: Youth Cultures and Feminist Politics," 7.

⁴⁹ Peter Dahlgren, *Media and Political Engagement: Citizens, Communication, and Democracy*.

mobilized, focused attention on some object.”⁵⁰ I see opinion writing as a form of engagement mediated through the focus of reader attention on feminist principles and ideas.

While there is currently no agreed upon definition of ‘postfeminism,’ when discussing postfeminist media culture, it is helpful to look at postfeminism as a sensibility, rather than a movement, because of “its tendency to entangle feminist and antifeminist discourses. Feminist ideas are both articulated and repudiated, expressed and disavowed. Its constructions of contemporary gender relations are profoundly contradictory.”⁵¹ A prime example of this contradiction is the commonly uttered phrase, “I’m not a feminist but...” which is often followed by examples of feminist ideology, such as, “I’m not a feminist, but I believe women should earn as much as men.” Susan Douglas characterizes the speaker of this phrase as one who “acquiesces to *and* resists” popular ideas about women and feminism.⁵² At its core, postfeminist ideology holds that the work of feminism is over, that women can now “have it all” without much difficulty. While postfeminism acknowledges the past work of feminists, it dangerously ignores the struggles that many women, especially minority women, continue to face on a regular basis. Postfeminist ideology upholds a primarily white, sexist, and classist stance where the “post” in postfeminism applies to a privileged few.

In her work on girls’ self-branding on YouTube, Sarah Banet-Weiser finds that commenting practices are used to reinforce normative femininity in the girl creators’ self-brands.⁵³ Girls and young women become successful entrepreneurs by shaping the self into one

⁵⁰ Ibid., 80.

⁵¹ Rosalind Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10 (2007), 147-166, accessed at <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/2449/>.

⁵² Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, New York: Random House, 1994, 270.

⁵³ Sarah Banet-Weiser, "Branding the Post-feminist Self: Girls' Video Production and YouTube." In *Mediated Girlhoods: New Explorations of Girls' Media Culture* (2011): 277-294.

that easily fits hegemonically feminine norms. Neoliberal discourse about selling the self in the cultural marketplace entangles with postfeminist discourses of empowerment to create a subject that feels independent but is still restricted by cultural norms. Christina Scharff argues that because young women are positioned as “autonomous, responsible and choosing subjects,” collective activism is often seen as less appealing than more individual forms.⁵⁴

Tying these two ideas together may help illuminate columnists’ complicated subjectivity as women who are at once independent entrepreneurs and actors within a larger collective movement. In order to stand out in an industry that is full of writers hoping for their big break, one must have a recognizable personality or self-brand. To be successful, feminist opinion writers must, in a sense, “sell” themselves. Their career choice requires them to assert their individual voices as ones that have important views and deserve to be heard. And because they write for mainstream media outlets, there are limits as to what selves they can sell based on hegemonic standards. At the same time, these writers, whether purposefully or not, become mouthpieces for a movement due to their visibility. What interests me is how this complicated subjectivity plays out in their columns.

There may be no “name” for today’s group of feminists, but I argue that is because we do not yet have historical distance from this time period, and as Rory Dicker notes in her work on the history of feminism, movements are often named after the fact.⁵⁵ However, I am placing the women I am studying within the third wave, both because of their generational position and because many of the goals of the third wave are still in the process of being met. Ultimately, this period of time will be characterized by the resurgence in popularity of feminism, the cooptation

⁵⁴ Christina Scharff, *Repudiating Feminism: Young Women in a Neoliberal World*, 117.

⁵⁵ Rory Dicker, *A History of US Feminisms*, Seal Press, 2008, 125.

by popular culture and capitalist industries, and a struggle for widening inclusivity of multiple and varied feminisms working together to advance the freedom of all women.

A Brief History of Contemporary Feminist Writing

A review of the history of contemporary feminist writing is important to understanding the significance of the Digital Discourse Feminists. One of the most prominent and longest running mainstream feminist publications is *Ms. Magazine*. Founded by political activist Gloria Steinem and Patricia Carbine in 1971, its original mission was to provide women with news that was not often given attention within already existing mainstream media on the issues that mattered to them, such as education and global gender equality. As a publication that attempted to provide authentic feminist writing to the masses while working within the commercial media system, *Ms.* has always been a site of “extreme loyalty and seething resentment, and sometimes both.”⁵⁶ Because of the magazine’s size and popularity, *Ms.* was able to interact with populations that smaller, more radical feminist publications could not. Amy Erdman Farrell sees *Ms.*’s history as an example of “the possibilities and limitations of forging an oppositional politics within the context of commercial culture.”⁵⁷ Farrell conceptualizes *Ms.* as an attempt to create a “popular feminism,” a feminism that is both accepted in culture at large and “is both articulated and represented within popular culture.”⁵⁸ Riddled with “contradictions and complexities,” *Ms.* is reflective of the difficulty of bringing political issues into the world of mainstream media and mass consumption. On the one hand, mass media have immense amounts of power in making issues visible, but this runs the risk of movement cooptation and depoliticization as a result of

⁵⁶ Amy Erdman Farrell, *Yours in Sisterhood: Ms. Magazine and the Promise of Popular Feminism*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press (1998), 1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 2.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 196.

neoliberal practices. Depoliticization and/or cooptation of the movement is a current concern that many of the feminist writers I'm interested in have addressed. This phenomenon is titled "celebrity feminism," where celebrities are now praised by mainstream media for claiming the title of feminist whether or not these celebrities actually do anything for the movement. This "trend" has led to the mass production of products consumers can purchase to proudly display that they are feminists.

While *Ms.* was providing feminism to the masses, in the early '90s a new underground feminist movement began spreading across the United States. Third wave feminism was gaining steam, and young women were angry. To express this anger, teenagers and young adults formed bands and created DIY zines, embracing a punk/grunge attitude throughout their work. This punk rock, pro-women movement was termed 'Riot grrrl.' The zines created by those in the movement were expressly "anti-corporate" and "anti-professional," and are what Alison Piepmeier contends are "sites for the articulation of a vernacular third wave feminist theory."⁵⁹ Riot grrrl zines, which continue to be created today, come in a variety of formats, though most often they take the form of handmade, photocopied pamphlets. In her exploration of grrrl zines and zinesters, Piepmeier finds that within these documents, girls and women are able to address politics and culture in "playful, angry, and unruly ways." While some grrrl zinesters may not explicitly claim the title of Third Wave Feminist, Piepmeier sees the work they are doing as drawn from "second wave insights, the theoretical work of U.S. third world feminists, and the

⁵⁹ Alison Piepmeier, *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism*, New York: New York University Press (2009), 4.

specificities of this late-capitalist culture moment.”⁶⁰ As such, zines are representative of the complex and contradictory feminist culture of their time.

Born out of this time were two magazines, *Bust* (1993) and *Bitch* (1996), both of which are still in print today. The two magazines embraced zine culture and “combined radical feminist politics with a punk rock, do-it-yourself aesthetic.”⁶¹ However, different from grrrl zines is the magazines’ heavy focus on popular culture. While both magazines had Riot Grrrl origins, I see these two as taking on Farrell’s “popular feminism” identity. Perhaps they are *Ms.* for a younger, more progressive generation. Astrid Henry notes that, at this same time, feminist writing was becoming more and more popular. Often using the terms “third wave” or “next generation” to identify themselves, young women were filling anthologies with first-person essays, “which provided concrete examples of how young women (and some men) were living feminism in a supposedly “postfeminist” era.”⁶² This is true of the writers I look at, as well. As I explore in this thesis, personal stories show up throughout their columns. And though they are writing for large audiences, they are doing so in an environment that is still often hostile towards feminist ideas.

Another way in which contemporary feminism is being explored, reinvented, and articulated is through the internet. Many girls and young women now keep their own blogs and/or write for various news and culture websites as part of their feminist activism (though older women use these platforms as well). In her work on girls’ blogging, Jessalynn Keller explains how feminist blogging allows girls to define and articulate their public selves and engage with the world around them in different ways, both political and not. Through their

⁶⁰ Ibid, 198.

⁶¹ Astrid Henry, "From a Mindset to a Movement: Feminism Since 1990," In *Feminism Unfinished*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014, 173-174.

⁶² Ibid, 173.

blogging practices, they are “reframing” what feminist activism looks like, which in turn allows them to “embrace new understandings of community, activism, and even feminism itself.”⁶³ Keller also sees this as a way for girls and young women to assert their “right to public space and voice.”⁶⁴ By utilizing mainstream and commercial media to publicize their feminist politics, young women are engaging with the public sphere in new ways. I see the Digital Discourse Feminists as doing the same thing. They write for mainstream commercial sites, using their platforms as spaces for feminist discussion. Different from young bloggers, however, is the fact that my group of feminist columnists do not own the sites they write for and are providing content as part of their careers, which takes away some of the autonomy Keller’s bloggers experience.

In addition, women have also begun to write political commentary from a feminist perspective for traditional media outlets, such as *The Nation* and *The Guardian*. The ubiquity of the internet also means that a larger number of people are more likely to be exposed to feminist writing, even if they are not seeking it out. Though they are still in the minority, a number of feminists now write columns or blog posts for mainstream news and culture websites.⁶⁵ If the comments sections on these pieces are any measure of their visibility, many readers are being confronted with ideas they either disagree with or have not heard before.

Theory/Methods

Using the assembled literature as a foundation, this thesis seeks to understand the discursive practices feminist writers employ within their columns when discussing political

⁶³ Jessalynn Keller, “Virtual Feminisms: Girls’ Blogging communities, feminist activism, and participatory politics,” *Information, Communication & Society* 15, no. 3, (2012), 429-447.

⁶⁴ Jessalynn Keller, *Girls’ Feminist Blogging in a Postfeminist Age*, (Routledge, 2015), 155.

⁶⁵ Women’s Media Center, “SheSource,” <http://www.shesource.org/experts>.

issues. My analysis is informed by the theoretical models of feminist critical discourse analysis and ideas about the public/private spheres. Feminist critical discourse analysis (CDA), as explained by Michelle Lazar, aims to “show up the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities.”⁶⁶ Lazar argues that power is “discursively resisted and counter-resisted” when there is a struggle to secure and/or challenge those power relations.⁶⁷ Following this, I see the very presence of feminist columnists in the mainstream press as a sort of discursive resistance against a male-dominated field. However, as media workers, these women are not freely independent actors.

While CDA frequently focuses on language, a number of theorists argue that it is also important to be aware of the structures that actors are working within. Thompson summarizes Bourdieu’s position on this, warning that, “it would be superficial (at best) to analyze political discourses or ideologies by focusing on the utterances as such, without reference to the constitution of the political field and the relations between this field and the broader space of social positions and processes.”⁶⁸ The Digital Discourse Feminists are at once producing discourse as actors within the mainstream media and as a subordinate group of citizens who are shaped and constrained by hegemonic discourse.

⁶⁶ Michelle M. Lazar, “Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis: Articulating a Feminist Discourse Praxis,” *Critical Discourse Studies*, 4: 2 (2007): 142.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ John B. Thompson, “Editor’s Introduction,” *Language and Symbolic Power* by Pierre Bourdieu, Harvard University Press, 1991, 28-29.

There are many structures in place, both institutionally and culturally, that serve to protect hegemonic discourse. This can come in the form of access issues (i.e. one must buy a television or newspaper to access information) or through structural biases, such as favoring the voices of one group through exclusion of another. One area in which this plays out is through ideas about what constitutes ‘private’ and ‘public’ matters. Zizi Papacharissi explains that, “the public/private divide operates as part of an ideological apparatus that minimizes the significance of the domestic sphere, and serves to conceal or confine behaviors occurring within it.”⁶⁹ Public space is thus deemed masculine, whereas matters that take place inside the home are feminine. In this way, issues such as maternity leave, reproductive health, and sexual harassment become topics meant for private discussion, kept away from public life and thus depoliticized. Both the press and the internet have historically been male dominated spaces built on a hierarchy of patriarchal power. Any change to these structures is often seen as a systemic threat to the natural social order.⁷⁰ In this same way, I see the Digital Discourse Feminists as figures claiming power and asserting their citizenship through their writing – both in the topics they write about and how they write about them.

Papacharissi also argues that while the most pure democracies were enacted within the public sphere, “in contemporary democracies the citizen becomes politically emancipated via a private sphere of reflection, expression, and behavior.”⁷¹ In the 21st century, much of this expression and reflection occurs online, via the many different social media platforms available

⁶⁹ Zizi Papacharissi, *A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age*, Cambridge, UK: Polity, (2010), 34.

⁷⁰ Janet Rifkin, “Toward a Theory of Law and Patriarchy,” *Harvard Women’s Law Journal* 3, no. 1 (1980): 83

⁷¹ Papacharissi, *A Private Sphere*, 132.

to today's digital citizens. Online news and culture sites become vehicles through which citizens can interact with discussion and debate – the public-- from inside their homes –the private. The home is ideologically transformed from a private sphere dedicated to the feminine into one in which “networked citizens claim their power through autonomously exerted acts of expression and connection.”⁷² This ties in with Dahlgren's arguments about civic engagement online. Online feminist writing can serve as a site of engagement, where citizens become political actors from within their homes.

It is with these ideas in mind that I explore how feminist writers perform citizenship in public space as well as influence feminist and political discourse through their writing. To do so, I perform discourse analyses of the columns of Jessica Valenti (*The Guardian*), Ann Friedman (*NY Mag*), Rebecca Traister (*The New Republic*), Jill Filipovic (*The Guardian*), Jessica Bennett (*Time*), and Michelle Goldberg (*The Nation*) from 2014. Discourse analyses reveal what topics these writers chose to write about, but also how they wrote about them and the ways in which this shapes feminist discourse.

After going through Pew's list of around 50 of the most popular online news⁷³ and news magazine outlets⁷⁴ for early 2015, I selected women who fit both the age criteria (mid-30s/early 40s) and had written pieces weekly or biweekly to ensure that I have a substantial amount of work to analyze. After reading through the columns posted online at each columnist's respective

⁷² Ibid, 166.

⁷³ Pew Research Centers Journalism Project, "Digital: Top 50 Online News Entities (2015)," Report, April 28, 2015. <http://www.journalism.org/media-indicators/digital-top-50-online-news-entities-2015/>.

⁷⁴ Pew Research Centers Journalism Project, "News Magazines: Online Traffic for News Magazine Websites," Report, April 28, 2015. <http://www.journalism.org/media-indicators/news-magazines-online-traffic-for-news-magazine-websites/>.

outlet, I chose to look at a select number of topics that were discussed at length by all or most of the women during 2014. These topics are contemporary feminist movement/celebrity feminism, reproductive rights, and sexual assault on college campuses. These topics were written about most frequently and are representative of what was going on in American culture at the time.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter two discusses the backgrounds of the Digital Discourse feminists and their historical positioning within the feminist movement. I highlight the ways in which their present day writing is shaped by third wave feminist activism and postfeminist influences. I also explore how being from a certain generation and societal background has shaped the identities and careers of the Digital Discourse Feminists. I discuss the different variations of third wave feminism and use interviews and other published materials relating to the Digital Discourse Feminists to pinpoint where this groups fits into the broader movement. Lastly, I examine the ways in which these women represent both the successes and failures of the third wave feminist movement in its current form, which I argue is largely due to their positions as relatively privileged white women.

Chapter three consists of discourse analyses of the columns of the Digital Discourse Feminists. I look at the pieces that discuss the feminist movement, reproductive rights, and sexual violence against women and and unpack how the issues are discussed. Specifically, I analyze how they approach the issues both as individual citizens and as feminists writing for mainstream platforms. I argue that their columns function as activism through the publishing of private matters in the public sphere and encouraging audience engagement.

Chapter four discusses the implications the identities of the writers and their writing have within a larger societal context, as well as the limitations of the project and future areas of

exploration. What does the relative homogeneity of the Digital Discourse Feminists say about the state of feminism and mainstream news culture? How does this factor into their writing? In what ways are these women challenging dominant narratives on women's issues? And where can they improve?

At this moment in history, the Digital Discourse Feminists are our representatives for mainstream feminist opinion writing. This gives them a level of importance and influence that future women may not have when/if the field becomes more welcoming to women, especially women who identify as feminists. As such, examining their writing is necessary not only to understand the current atmosphere for feminist writers who publish online, but also to begin to build a foundation for future research into the voices and writing of contemporary female columnists.

CHAPTER 2

Digital Discourse Feminists in Context

As a result of the second wave of feminism of the '60s and '70s, the subsequent decades have seen major cultural shifts in terms of how women are treated and understood. Today's young women have greater freedom in making choices about education, reproductive health, and their respective careers than their foremothers. While the second wave was heavily focused on and quite successful in garnering equality through the legal system (sexual harassment laws, Title IX, Roe v. Wade, the Equal Pay Act, etc.), third wavers have set their sights on cultural change (though there continue to be activists working on legislation). Propelled by the successes of the second wave, while also trying to make up for its mistakes, third wave feminists have been able to successfully target cultural and social institutions as sites for needed change. Third wave feminism, along with the previous waves, has opened up new ways in which women can have

active roles in society. Throughout all of this, writing and publishing on public forums has been an important aspect of feminist activism and progress.

A variety of cultural and social factors have led to the ever-increasing visibility of feminists in online spaces in particular. The voices that get heard, how they are heard, and on what platforms is deeply embedded in the norms of digital news culture and the public sphere as they pertain to women's equality. The six women whose columns I analyze in this project came of age during the third wave of feminism, some time during the mid to late '90s. All six are white, young, and middle class. In addition, they have all received degrees at fairly prestigious colleges. As far as women's equality goes, this is the subject position that is most accepted in mainstream society. Moreover, as I will explore in Chapter 3, their positions on feminism are not *too* radical. Sometimes they write columns that are controversial, but feminism as controversial is not a new phenomenon. Even when they are writing about topics such as making menstrual products free, they do so from a fairly liberal, rather than radical, stance.⁷⁵

Whether they were directly involved in feminist activism during their youth or not is inconsequential to my point; the cultural atmosphere in which they grew up was in part shaped by the feminist movement, which means their lives were influenced by the movement in ways seen and unseen. To fully understand the implications of contemporary feminist opinion writers' identities and their work, it is helpful to examine the traits and goals of the third wave feminism within which these writers came of age and acquired their feminist consciousnesses. A substantial amount of work that has come out of the third wave is a result of the influence of the

⁷⁵ Jessica Valenti, "The Case for Free Tampons," *The Guardian*, August 11, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/aug/11/free-tampons-cost-feminine-hygiene-products>.

previous waves and their progress (or lack thereof) on matters of gender equality. Exploring third wave feminism and its influences in greater depth allows me to also contextualize the writers and their work within digital news culture and the public/digital sphere more broadly in order to understand the historical significance of the Digital Discourse Feminists within the feminist movement.

Feminist Influences

Much of the writing by Digital Discourse Feminists is informed by their negotiation of the effects of the third-wave culture and other feminist influences that surrounded them as they grew up. One of the primary objectives of third wave feminism is to place greater emphasis on the need for intersectionality – a recognition of the multiple and varied identities that shape the experiences of women -- within the movement. In their widely read book on third wave feminism published in 2000, activists Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards list a 13-point agenda for third wave feminists to follow.⁷⁶ This “manifesta” includes goals like fighting for reproductive rights, increasing visibility for bisexual and lesbian feminists, passing the Equal Rights Amendment, and so on. While much of this list focuses on changing existing laws and creating new legislation, a few points call for the recognition of multiple perspectives and different groups of feminists. Baumgardner and Richards say that it is important to, “acknowledge that, although feminists may have disparate values, we share the same goal of equality, and of supporting one another in our efforts to gain the power to make our own choices.”⁷⁷ This speaks partly to some of the feminist infighting and exclusion that has occurred between different

⁷⁶ Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 270.

groups within the movement over the years, while also stressing the need for solidarity. This was and would continue to be an important aspect of the third wave and is something Digital Discourse Feminists confront on a regular basis.

Third wave feminist writing of the 1990s, according to Su-Lin Yu, “mark[ed] a return to the personal, and seem[s] to continue feminism’s long-standing recognition of the political underpinnings of personal life.”⁷⁸ One way in which third wave women have expressed themselves is through the creation of anthologies. Notable anthologies from the early period of third wave feminism include *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*, *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*, and *Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Today’s Feminism*. These anthologies include a wide variety of perspectives and incorporate personal narrative to articulate what feminism means to the individual authors. As Yu explains in her work on narrative within the third wave, these anthologies “function[ed] as a literary representation of multiple subjectivities in a coalitional form.”⁷⁹ Rebecca Walker, who edited *To Be Real*, states in the introduction of the anthology that she wants to focus on highly personal stories “because they build empathy and compassion, are infinitely more accessible than more academic tracts, and because I believe our lives are the best basis for feminist theory.”⁸⁰

Using work that came out of the second wave on personal narrative and intersectionality, these anthologies represented the third wave’s emphasis on recognizing the multiple perspectives and experiences of those within the feminist movement, and whose influence can still be seen in

⁷⁸ Su-Lin Yu, "Reclaiming the Personal: Personal Narratives of Third-Wave Feminists," *Women's Studies* 40, no. 7 (October 2011): 857.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 877.

⁸⁰ Rebecca Walker, *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism / Edited and with an Introduction by Rebecca Walker*, First Anchor Books ed, 1995, xxxvii.

contemporary feminist work. Though the Digital Discourse Feminists were part of a more recent generation of third wave writing, the influence of personal narrative from the third wave women who came before them is visible in much of their work. Both Jessica Valenti and Jill Filipovic have essays included in feminist anthologies published in the 2000s (Filipovic's essay was in an anthology Valenti co-edited). One of the reasons why anthology/personal narrative became so important for the third wave was because of its use as a response to the lack of racial (and, at times, sexual identity) inclusion within second wave feminist thought.⁸¹ For feminism to truly be a collective movement, feminist theory and activism needed to make room for a variety of subjectivities in order to free *all* women, and not just those of a certain race or class. The influence of personal narrative as a style of writing, one foundational to third wave activism, can be seen throughout Digital Discourse Feminists' writing, which I will explore in Chapter 3.

Digital Discourse Feminists also grew up in a time when feminism was facing a tremendous amount of backlash. Beginning in the 1980s, media began to declare that feminism was "over," that feminism's goals had been met.⁸² This backlash was termed "postfeminism," a response to feminism that has continued to endure. When they were young/college-aged, women like those studied in this project had to negotiate the tension between the impact of the second wave and the postfeminist culture that surrounded them, while learning to articulate their own thoughts and beliefs about what feminism meant to them as both writers and women. For example, when Jill Filipovic entered college, she was not particularly comfortable identifying as a feminist due to a lack of understanding about the movement, as well as the cultural backlash

⁸¹ Su-Lin Yu, 2011.

⁸² Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, Broadway Books, 2009.

towards feminism that was going on at the time. She ended up in a women's studies class because all other classes were full and planned on dropping the class as soon as possible. On the first day, her professor had students fill out a questionnaire to get a feel for where the students were in their knowledge of women's studies. The first question was, "Are you a feminist?" Filipovic knew she was a believer in equal rights, but "the term [feminist] seemed aggressive, dated, intimidating."⁸³ Nevertheless, she stayed in the class, and by the end of the semester she identified as a feminist. This instance is a clear example of more recent antifeminist backlash, in which feminism is seen as "dated" and unrelatable to modern women. Filipovic managed to overcome her initial biases against the word and the idea of being a feminist because of her college course, but not everyone is able to have an experience similar to hers. Thus, exposure to the ideas and beliefs of feminism outside an academic setting, such as through the Digital Discourse Feminists' columns, is important for society at large to gain a greater understanding of the movement and its goals.

Feminist Continuum

One product of the third wave's recognition of the multiple spheres and identities women inhabit is what can be called a "continuum" of feminist perspectives. Throughout their writing and in interviews, the Digital Discourse Feminists express a variety of feminist perspectives on the topics they are concerned with. Some take a more personal and individual approach, while others come at it with a more global perspective. Because of this, contemporary feminists may appear fractured or disconnected from each other at times. Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake see feminist individualism not as distaste for collective action, but something that is born out of

⁸³ Jill Filipovic, "Why Don't More People Call Themselves Feminists?" *The Guardian*, July 9, 2014. <http://www.cosmopolitan.com/politics/news/a28510/misconceptions-about-feminism/>

the recognition of a multiplicity of feminisms, something that was largely lacking during the first and second waves. Though a number of feminist perspectives have always coexisted within the feminist movement, some groups, including lesbian feminists and women of color, have felt that they were excluded from the larger movement.⁸⁴ Through the incorporation of work from black feminist scholars such as bell hooks and Kimberlé Crenshaw, a prominent goal of the third wave has been to develop ways of thinking about “the multiple, constantly shifting bases of oppression in relation to the multiple, interpenetrating axes of identity, and the creation of a coalition of politics based on these understandings.”⁸⁵ This is not to say that third wave feminism is not political, but that political goals and strategies may vary depending on the communities one is acting within.

Contemporary feminists identify with a wide variety of beliefs and practices. Some groups and individuals tend to focus their work on legislative issues, others’ activism takes the form of “Lean In” feminism, which I will discuss in greater detail below. There are some who identify as “intersectional feminists,” and some whose main focus stems from a global feminist perspective; the list is lengthy. The perspective a feminist subscribes to creates a specific lens through which she approaches activism, her work within and for the movement, as well as feminism itself. However, because these perspectives don’t exist within their individual bubbles, many of their ideas are shared amongst different feminist groups. Some may be more focused on specific issues than others, but much of the same language and ideas show up repeatedly. While

⁸⁴ Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution*, Delta, 2000, 82.

⁸⁵ Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, “Introduction,” In *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 3.

Digital Discourse Feminists do not necessarily label themselves as specific “types” of feminists, they have all expressed support of or an awareness of the various feminist perspectives.

As educated white women, the Digital Discourse Feminists inhabit a space in which certain expressions of feminism that focus on the individual appear more relevant and useful for those who already have a certain amount of privilege, which consequentially excludes those who are most oppressed in society. Popularized in 2013 with the release of Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg’s best-selling book, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, “Lean In” feminism is one such feminist expression that has been both criticized and celebrated by feminists along the continuum. “Lean In” feminism, a descriptor for a form of neoliberal feminism in which the onus is on individual women to deal with inequality, stems. In the book and subsequent “movement,” Sandberg explains the many ways in which women hold themselves back in the workplace. She proposes that women have been socialized to be submissive and passive, which stops them from things like negotiating higher salaries, securing top leadership positions, and taking risks out of fear for personal failure. She suggests that women should “lean in” and embrace the uncomfortable by speaking up and engaging, asking for what one needs and wants. Thus, this type of feminism largely points to the individual as a site of change, rather than existing structures of power. Sandberg’s brand of feminism recognizes inequality to the extent that more women in higher corporate positions are needed, but does so without a full grasp on the depth and power of structural inequality. In Sandberg’s view, women need to stand up for themselves and make their voices heard, assuming they have not done so previously. Sandberg’s work has been criticized for ignoring the fact that a great deal of workplace inequality is due to structural and institutional problems, and not necessarily because women tend to be more

passive.⁸⁶ For example, scholar/activist bell hooks wrote that Sandberg's work is "faux feminism," nothing that "Mass media (along with Sandberg) is telling us that by sheer strength of will and staying power, any woman so inclined can work hard and climb the corporate ladder all the way to the top."⁸⁷ Of course, this is just not true when it comes to many women, especially those who are not white and middle-class. Some of these same critiques have been levelled at Digital Discourse Feminists as a result of their relatively privileged identities.

Despite its many criticisms, the ideas from "Lean In feminism"/neoliberal feminism are helpful for the women for whom it resonates. One of the Digital Discourse Feminists, Jessica Bennett, the executive editor for the Lean In organization's online community, describes the Lean In philosophy as one "anybody" can use in one way or another:

I think the idea of leaning in, of standing up for what you believe in, and of not being afraid, can apply to whatever your fears and challenges may be. Seriously, anybody can lean in. That's part of the reason why I like Sheryl's message so much, because you can literally apply it to anything. You can lean into work, your relationship, asking for a raise, raising your hand in class, overcoming your fears, going back to school, having confidence in yourself.⁸⁸

Bennett has a history of leaning into challenges she has faced throughout her career as a writer and feminist. As a young journalist at *Newsweek*, Bennett and two of her colleagues noticed

⁸⁶ Susan Faludi, "Facebook Feminism, Like It or Not," *The Baffler*, 2013. <http://thebaffler.com/articles/facebook-feminism-like-it-or-not>.

⁸⁷ bell hooks, "Dig Deep: Beyond Lean In," *The Feminist Wire*, October 28, 2013. <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2013/10/17973/>.

⁸⁸ Suzanna Bobadilla, "Meet Jessica Bennett, Feminist Powerhouse and Editor of Sheryl Sandberg's Lean In," *Mic.com*, June 28, 2013. <http://mic.com/articles/51723/meet-jessica-bennett-feminist-powerhouse-and-editor-of-sheryl-sandberg-s-lean-in#.yQYtgrxLC>.

something was off about the gender dynamics within the newsroom. Men seemed to be moving up the masthead much more quickly than women, most cover stories were written by men, etc. Then, a staff librarian shared a story with Bennett that “would transform the way [she] saw the world, the media landscape, *Newsweek* magazine – and [her] role within it.”⁸⁹ That story was about a 1970 lawsuit where 46 women at *Newsweek* sued their bosses for gender discrimination. Working with three other *Newsweek* colleagues, Bennett set out to report on the long forgotten lawsuit and the progress, or lack thereof, *Newsweek* (and society) had made over the years. Six months after the beginning of the project, “Young Women, *Newsweek*, and Feminism” debuted in a March 2010 issue of *Newsweek* magazine.⁹⁰

Bennett left *Newsweek* in 2012 to work for blogging site Tumblr on a new editorial project that was ultimately killed by Tumblr executives a year later, which led her to email Sheryl Sandburg about a job. “I’ve been writing on social issues and women for years, and Lean In resonated with me, so I thought, hey, what the hell, might as well lean the f--k in. She hadn’t planned on staffing an editor but I sold her on it,” said Bennett on her motivation to reach out to Sandburg.⁹¹ Bennett’s numerous successes with “leaning in” to uncomfortable or difficult workplace situations illustrate why this particular expression of feminism appeals to a large number of women. Bennett, Sandburg, and others like them have demonstrated that “Leaning In” in works, at least in some situations, which may suggest why this way of thinking is appealing for some women, particularly those already in positions of relative advantage.

⁸⁹ Jessica Bennett, <http://leanin.org/stories/jessica-bennett/>.

⁹⁰ Jessica Bennett and Jesse Ellison, “Young Women, *Newsweek*, and Feminism,” *Newsweek*, March 18, 2010. <http://www.newsweek.com/young-women-newsweek-and-sexism-69339>

⁹¹ Suzanna Bobadilla, “Meet Jessica Bennett”

Another part of feminism within which Digital Discourse Feminists matured, intersectional feminism, lies on the other end of the spectrum. Many black women found certain branches of second wave feminism, largely led by white, middle class women, unrelatable.⁹² Toni Cade Bambara, an activist working during the second wave, wrote in *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, “How relevant are the truths, the experiences, the findings of White women to Black women?”⁹³ This sentiment led to a push for what is now called intersectional feminism. Intersectional feminists recognize that subject positions based on class, race, sexuality, etc. differ among groups and that there is no “one size fits all” solution for the issues women face. They also focus on the intersectional aspects of identity – one’s identity cannot be broken down into various parts. Gender, race, class, and other markers of identity are always present, all of the time. Digital Discourse Feminists do have an awareness of the importance of diversity and occasionally discuss it in their work, but it is not always the prominent focus of their writing.

Despite a growing recognition for the need for a variety of voices, a lack of diversity continues to be a primary critique of the feminist movement, particularly when it comes to which feminists are visible online. Jessica Valenti describes this well:

I think there’s a feminist movement that’s totally already diverse and intersectional and happening but it’s not the feminist movement that we tend to see, it’s not the feminist movement that tends to be funded, it’s not the feminist movement that tends to get media attention. I think there’s a kind of institutional feminism that’s happening, like big organizations, big powerful names, and those are still majority

⁹² Ula Taylor, “The Historical Evolution of Black Feminist Theory and Praxis,” *Journal of Black Studies* 29 (1998): 243.

⁹³ Toni Cade Bambara, ed, *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, New York: New American Library, 1970: 9.

very straight, white, middle – upper middle class voices and organizations that play to that sort of demographic.⁹⁴

The newsroom is one such area in which the lack of diversity is prevalent. Though more women write for print and digital publications than have in the past, the number of women of color in newsrooms is still dismally low.⁹⁵ Jill Filipovic explains how this bias undoubtedly works in her favor (and that of others like her) by pointing out that, “Being young and white and having the money and ability to present oneself in a particular way is beneficial — you look “professional” and get taken more seriously... I’m definitely not under the impression that I have a platform solely based on my unique individual talents. My physical appearance, including my age and my race, certainly help quite a bit.”⁹⁶ Though it is undoubtedly good that the Digital Discourse Feminists recognize that they have privileges that many do not, it remains crucial that they go beyond recognition and use that privilege to highlight minority voices. While Digital Discourse Feminists are aware of the diversity issue, they are, at times, seen to be a part of the problem and have been criticized online as a result.⁹⁷

Online Writing

Over the past twenty years, the field of journalism — who gets to be a journalist, the career path one must follow to accomplish this — has gone through radical change. In the past, many journalists and news writers followed a fairly traditional route of going to journalism

⁹⁴ Julie Z, "An Interview with Jessica Valenti," *The FBomb*, November 21, 2011.
<http://thefbomb.org/2011/11/an-interview-with-jessica-valenti/>.

⁹⁵ Women’s Media Center, “The Status of Women in the U.S. Media 2015,” Report, 2015.
http://wmc.3cdn.net/83bf6082a319460eb1_hsr680x2.pdf.

⁹⁶ Jess McHugh, "Interview: Jill Filipovic of Feministe," *Broad Recognition*, October 8, 2011.
<http://broadrecognition.com/beats/sex-health/interview-jill-filipovic-of-feministe/>.

⁹⁷ For example, see:

http://www.salon.com/2013/08/15/feminism_cant_be_just_for_white_women/

school, starting their careers as fact checkers or reporters, and working their way up in the newsroom. However, the shift to publishing news online has greatly shaken up the way news is produced and consumed. Journalism as a profession has gone through rapid changes with the introduction of new technologies and the many ways in which readers consume news. As the previous literature has shown, who gets to call herself a journalist has been hotly contested within the industry. Traditionally, a journalist was someone who reported the news, with objectivity as one of the highest priorities. However, many writers, including some of the women I am focusing on in this project, consider themselves journalists. While most of these women have done pure reporting work, their columns are certainly much more than objective reports of the news. While some may hold onto past ideas about who “counts” as a journalist, it is likely that the title will continue to apply to an ever-larger range of work.

As news outlets have continued to shift online, either partially or fully, the financial aspect of journalism and writing has caused much worry and concern for the profession.⁹⁸ The internet as a news platform has reshaped the profession into one where “journalists and media workers are increasingly being employed in atypical and contingent employment relationships.”⁹⁹ Largely the result of cost-cutting measures in a financially precarious industry, freelancers and casual workers have come to replace staff writers.¹⁰⁰ By hiring fewer full-time employees, news outlets are able to save money by providing employee benefits to a smaller number of people. While freelancers have always been an important part of the news industry,

⁹⁸ Noah Davis, "I Was Paid \$12.50 An Hour To Write This Story," *The Awl*, June 20, 2013. <http://www.theawl.com/2013/06/dox-dox-dox>.

⁹⁹ Mark Deuze and Leopoldina Fortunati, "Atypical Newswork, Atypical Media Management," In *Managing Media Work*, Sage (2011), 111.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 112.

the rise of contract work and the ability to work anywhere due to technological changes has made it so that “freelancers have become central to the media production process.”¹⁰¹

Most of the Digital Discourse Feminists have experience in freelancing and the precarious nature of contract work, they exist as part of this new journalism economy. Before Ann Friedman began freelance work, she had years of editorial experience and connections she was able to use for pitching stories and publicity. She believes that anyone going into freelance should have a “plush financial cushion” first because of the financial difficulty most freelancers face, especially at the beginning of their career.¹⁰² Some writers online have expressed the lack of support for online work from publishers through essentially giving content away or not paying writers a proper amount. Rebecca Traister sees this as something that “degrades” the content because,

...there’s not an economic model for online journalism or for traditional journalism now that you have content online, and so it’s crashed the journalism job market. At the moment that feminism becomes something that journalists keep hearing about again, journalists are losing their jobs and aren’t getting paid. You’ve created a hunger for all kinds of feminist commentary, but lots of the places where that commentary are getting produced are not well funded, so you have many journalists writing about feminism for very little money, which has an impact on the quality of that writing.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Nicole S. Cohen, "From Pink Slips to Pink Slime: Transforming Media Labor in a Digital Age," *The Communication Review* 18, no. 2 (2015): 104.

¹⁰² Ann Friedman, "The Rules of the Freelance Game," *Columbia Journalism Review*, September 6, 2012. http://www.cjr.org/realtalk/the_rules_of_the_freelance_gam.php.

¹⁰³ Rebecca Traister, phone interview with author, December 10, 2015.

Not being properly paid for work is an issue in and of itself, but it becomes an even bigger problem when there's a hunger for more feminist writing, especially with mounting pressure to publish stories as quickly as possible in order to stay on top of the 24-hour news cycle.¹⁰⁴

Women already statistically make less than men do, and while men can certainly write feminist pieces, it is highly important that women are represented equally within this line of work.¹⁰⁵ If women (and men) are not being paid for opinion writing, then it is difficult to get exposure and experience at an established outlet as well as to create high-quality work. This creates a type of dead end, or a massive roadblock at the very least, to opening up the field to diverse perspectives.

Despite the turbulence within the journalism industry because of changing technology, some of today's most visible feminist writers have digital news culture to thank for their columns. Whether becoming well known and respected through freelance work or through blogging, these women had to hustle their way to being heard in mainstream spaces. When print newspapers were the sole spaces for mainstream journalism, space was limited to a select number of voices. The Internet has opened up an infinite amount of space for voices to be heard through blogging, YouTube videos, etc. The Internet has also allowed mainstream news sites to take on more writers due to the loss of print constraints. A 2014 Pew Research Center report found that among digitally native news sites, the growth rate of hiring has been "explosive,"

¹⁰⁴ Julia Carrie Wong, "Writing, Prestige and Other Things That Don't Pay the Rent," *The Nation*, April 07, 2014. <http://www.thenation.com/article/writing-prestige-and-other-things-dont-pay-rent/>.

¹⁰⁵ Pew Research Center, "On Equal Pay Day, Key Facts about the Gender Pay Gap," Report, April 14, 2015. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/14/on-equal-pay-day-everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-gender-pay-gap/>.

though these jobs have only made up for a “modest” amount of jobs lost in the print sector.¹⁰⁶ That doesn’t always mean that they publish diverse voices, but print constraints are no longer a valid reason as to why voices are missing. In addition, the 24-hour news cycle and the never-ending need for new content has meant that publishers are always looking for more writers and/or more story pitches.¹⁰⁷ As more feminists have congregated online, it follows that feminist content would be more in demand as well. So whether it was through working one’s way up in the newsroom, blogging, or freelancing, the Internet has opened many previously closed doors for women who want to write.

From Blogger to Journalist

In the late 1990s, popular blogging sites like LiveJournal and blogger.com were created. Blogging websites and online forums opened up spaces for feminists around the country to discuss the things that mattered to them, on a large and international scale, in real-time. They were no longer constrained to connecting with those in their local communities. Over the subsequent 20 years, this widening of the public sphere (or, perhaps, public space), as well as the massive increase in news outlets and culture magazines online, meant that women and girls in the 1990s and early 2000s had access to forms of technology and platforms unavailable to the women before them. This has become a key aspect of contemporary feminism.¹⁰⁸

During the mid-2000s, a few years after the founding of large blogging platforms like LiveJournal, young women began to create blogs to connect with like-minded people from all

¹⁰⁶ Pew Research Center, “State of the News Media 2014: The Growth in Digital Reporting: What It Means for Journalism and News Consumers.”

¹⁰⁷ Nicole Cohen, “From Pink Slips to Pink Slime,” 99.

¹⁰⁸ Astrid Henry, “From a Mindset to a Movement: Feminism Since 1990,” In *Feminism Unfinished*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014, 176.

over the world. The Digital Discourse Feminists created and wrote for a number of these blogs, including Feministing.com and Feministe.us. Jessica Valenti and her sister, Vanessa, founded the website Feministing.com in 2004 because they “felt like the mainstream women’s movement wasn’t really giving young women their due and [they were] feeling generally frustrated with media coverage with young women’s issues.”¹⁰⁹ The site became hugely popular with young women. Jessica Valenti stepped down from the site in 2011. In her farewell post, she explained that she was leaving because now that she was no longer “young” and had built a successful career, it was time to step back and allow the younger voices to continue the site’s mission. Feministing was initially created to help young women build platforms and launch their careers and Valenti wanted it to remain that way.¹¹⁰ The site fulfilled this goal for a number of feminist writers beginning their careers in the 2000s. Along with Valenti, another of the writers on whom I am focusing, Ann Friedman, wrote for Feministing for six years and credits it as “the first major platform [she] had for [her] writing.”¹¹¹

At around the same time that Feministing was founded in 2004, Jill Filipovic created her own feminist blog, then later joined Feministe.us. Feministe was founded by a teenaged single mother, Lauren Bruce, “as a way to meet other feminists – and as a way to talk about these ideas that she didn’t really get the chance to talk about in her day to day life... And it was right around the time when Feministing was also starting. So early on, to have hooked in with Jessica Valenti and her sister Vanessa, and the women that started that website... there were like four or five of

¹⁰⁹ Rachel Kramer Bussel, "Jessica Valenti, Executive Editor and Founder, Feministing.com," *Gothamist*, May 15, 2006. http://gothamist.com/2006/05/15/jessica_valenti_1.php.

¹¹⁰ Jessica Valenti, "Farewell, Feministing!" *Feministing*, February 2, 2011. <http://feministing.com/2011/02/02/farewell-feministing/>.

¹¹¹ Ann Friedman, "She Should Write," *Feministing*, March 16, 2011. <http://feministing.com/2011/03/16/she-should-write/>.

us – that all found each other in the early days.”¹¹² From there, hundreds of feminist blogs and news sites have popped up online. Some popular blogs still in existence today include *Feminist Current* (founded in 2012), *Role Reboot* (founded in 2010), *Everyday Feminism* (founded in 2012), and *Racialicious* (founded in 2006).

Rebecca Traister also became involved in online feminist writing during this period, though her circumstances were a bit different. She was initially hired by *Salon* to write about gender:

I got there, and of course all magazines were all populated by feminists, it’s just that there wasn’t any market for feminist journalism. My editors there were all feminists and I wrote a couple things from a feminist point of view and they got traffic, and so they let me continue to write things from a feminist point of view, and pretty soon I was developing a feminist beat....it happened at about the same time that Jessica Valenti was founding Feministing, and all of this stuff was happening at just the same time, and it sort of exploded together. This was about 2004. And so, suddenly there was a feminist blogosphere.¹¹³

Traister’s “feminist beat” points to a distinct historical moment in which the popularization of feminism and the proliferation of online writing collided to create a new niche of feminist commentary and reporting as a specific area of journalistic interest. At the beginning of their writing careers, Rebecca Traister, Jessica Valenti, Ann Friedman, and Jill Filipovic all either knew each other, knew *of* each other, or wrote in the same sphere of influence, and they now all

¹¹² Jess McHugh, "Interview: Jill Filipovic of Feministe," *Broad Recognition*., October 8, 2011. <http://broadrecognition.com/beats/sex-health/interview-jill-filipovic-of-feministe/>.

¹¹³ Rebecca Traister, phone interview with author, December 10, 2015.

have large platforms and followings online. One could attribute this to a happy coincidence, but it also speaks to a much larger cultural shift that occurred at this time. Activists and writers were incorporating the internet into their work more than ever before.

Before she wrote for *The Guardian*, Jessica Valenti was a communication associate for some activist organizations and an online political consultant for NARAL Pro-Choice, an organization whose goal is to expand reproductive freedom in the United States.¹¹⁴ After gaining popularity through her writing for *Feministing*, Valenti was given a column at *The Nation*, and then moved to *The Guardian* in 2014, where she currently has her own column. Jill Filipovic worked as a legal associate before she got involved in writing, and became an opinion writer for *The Guardian* after blogging for *Huffington Post* and working as a freelance journalist. Ann Friedman came to her column at *New York Magazine* through freelance work as well. Rebecca Traister was an assistant for an actor and originally interested in working in the film industry. Out of the six women I am using as examples, everyone but Rebecca Traister got her BA in journalism. So they do have training in writing, which undoubtedly gave them a leg up in the journalism world through experience and professional contacts, but not all came to have their own columns through conventional means.

However, being involved in the early period of online feminist writing, when the idea seemed far more revolutionary than it is today, has also led to instances in which Digital Discourse Feminists seem to be blind to the broad feminist history of which they are part. For example, Traister sees her start in feminist writing as something radically different from anything that came before her time:

¹¹⁴ <https://www.linkedin.com/in/jessicavalenti>

I got a job at *Salon* where I was hired to be staff writer in the women's section. And this was at a period when there wasn't...well, it's hard to describe.... you CANNOT imagine what it was like then. It was...to say that there was no feminist journalism...you can't imagine what the world was like. There was no *Jezebel*, there was no *Toast*, there was no feminist blogosphere whatsoever, it did not exist. Feminist journalists did not exist...¹¹⁵

Traister's response leaves out a long history of feminists doing journalistic work, and spreading feminist perspectives throughout the public sphere as a result. Well-known feminists such as Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan, Naomi Wolf, and others were established writers before the origination of online journalism. Of course, publishing feminist work online was revolutionary in its own way. Traister's statement is more reflective of the general nature of online journalism spaces when the medium was in its infancy than feminist journalism in general. Historically, the Internet was seen as a masculine space, especially for those involved in technology fields.¹¹⁶ In addition, blogs were largely focused on areas in which men are traditionally considered the "authority," such as electoral politics and war.¹¹⁷ The work Traister and other women who were writing about gender issues were doing online had certainly been done before, but now it was happening in a completely new space with the potential for a much larger audience.

One of the main differences between contemporary feminist writing and the work that was published in previous decades is that in the digital age there are far fewer barriers to

¹¹⁵ Rebecca Traister, phone interview with author, December 10, 2015.

¹¹⁶ Liesbet Van Zoonen, "Feminist Internet Studies," *Feminist Media Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001): 67.

¹¹⁷ Sharon Meraz, "The Blogosphere's Gender Gap: Differences in Visibility, Popularity, and Authority," In P. Poindexter, S. Meraz & A. Schmitz-Weiss (Eds), *Women, Men, and News: Divided and Disconnected in the News Media Landscape*, (New York: Routledge 2008): 146.

speaking, though are certainly still instances in which being accessible to many is not necessarily a positive experience. The Internet, and the ways in which feminists have come to use the Internet, has opened up a multitude of spaces for women to write, especially those that are accessible by a large amount of people. Up until the 21st century, one had little choice but to write for the women's page of traditional print publications, where topics such as fashion, food, and parenting were covered. There are still instances in which contemporary feminist writing ends up in a "soft" news section where it does not belong, such as Sarah Hepola's 2012 profile of feminist icon Gloria Steinem, which was placed in the Fashion & Style section of the *New York Times*.¹¹⁸ However, contemporary girls and women can create blogs and whole websites dedicated to feminism, where their work won't be relegated to the women's pages or in hard to find pamphlets/magazines.¹¹⁹ And although girls and women have always found ways to circulate their voices, the Internet offers many more opportunities, and on a larger platform, to do so. Traister describes this simply by saying, "...if you had an Internet connection, you could become a participant, whether that was a blogger, as a commenter, as a reader. You could be part of the exchange in conversation."¹²⁰ The ability to comment on posts and discuss articles on social media has also changed how feminist discourse happens, how issues are worked out within the movement. Before the internet, especially before social media, it was quite difficult to have any sort of synchronous discussion amongst large groups of women around the world. Now, lack of access, at least for those in the western world, is quickly becoming a thing of the past.

¹¹⁸ Sarah Hepola, "Gloria Steinem, a Woman Like No Other," *The New York Times*, March 16, 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/18/fashion/in-the-womans-movement-who-will-replace-gloria-steinem.html?_r=2.

¹¹⁹ Jessalynn Keller, *Girls' Feminist Blogging in a Postfeminist age*, 155.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

However, there are certainly still obstacles when it comes to feminist writing and discussion online.

As discussed in the literature review, women have long been forced to either subvert the mainstream press or negotiate their way through obstacles to be heard on mainstream platforms. In the world of digital feminist writing, a key obstacle can be online harassment. A 2014 Pew Research report found that, “women are significantly more likely than men to report being stalked or sexually harassed on the internet.”¹²¹ Research on online harassment is highly relevant to Digital Discourse Feminists because the nature of their careers as writers involves coming into contact with this kind of abuse on a regular basis. Social media is now an integral part of most online careers. Jessica Valenti says as much in a piece on harassment in comment sections of her work: “...the harassment doesn’t begin and end on the *Guardian* website – being on social media has become, for better or worse, part of being a writer online. And the things you publish for one site have a ripple effect across all of your various social media profiles. It’s a workplace harassment issue that doesn’t stop at the workplace.”¹²² Women of color are harassed online even more than white women, which may contribute, at least in part, to the lack of these voices online.¹²³

A 2015 piece by Michelle Goldberg published in *The Washington Post* chronicles the stories of a few women who make a living by writing online. Many prominent feminist writers in

¹²¹ Pew Research Center, “Online Harassment,” Report, October 2014.

<http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/10/22/online-harassment/>

¹²² Jessica Valenti, "Insults and Rape Threats. Writers Shouldn't Have to Deal with This," *The Guardian*, April 14, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/apr/14/insults-rape-threats-writers-online-harassment>.

¹²³ Danielle Keats Citron, *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 14.

the piece mention that dealing with harassment day in and day out does take a toll on their mental and emotional well being. Jill Filipovic, at this time a senior political writer at *Cosmopolitan*, describes her experience writing online as one of difficulty, saying, “I doubt myself a lot more. You read enough times that you’re a terrible person and an idiot, and it’s very hard not to start believing that maybe they see something that you don’t.”¹²⁴ On the abuse she gets online, Jessica Valenti says that, “You can’t get called a c--- day in, day out for 10 years and not have that make a really serious impact on your psyche” and that she does consider quitting from time to time because of it.¹²⁵ When female writers try to speak up and chronicle their experiences with online misogyny, they come up against a highly antifeminist side of the Internet that “paints harassment complaints as enforcers of ‘political correctness,’ authoritarian prudes interfering with men’s rights of free speech.”¹²⁶ The Goldberg article, which featured many prominent feminist writers discussing the difficulties of organized male harassment, was rife with comments such as, “They [feminists] basically want to neuter all men and turn them into emotionally wrecked little wimps who will never stand up to a woman ever,” and “institute a police state so that idiotic feminists can post their foolish drivel in peace.”¹²⁷ These comments

¹²⁴ Michelle Goldberg, 'Feminist Writers Are So Besieged By Online Abuse That Some Have Begun To Retire,' *Washington Post*, February 20, 2015.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/online-feminists-increasingly-ask-are-the-psychic-costs-too-much-to-bear/2015/02/19/3dc4ca6c-b7dd-11e4-a200-c008a01a6692_story.html.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Nancy Fraser, “Politics, Culture, and the Public Sphere...” 307.

¹²⁷ Christopher Kidwell, March 5, 2015 (6:16 PM), comment on Michelle Goldberg, 'Feminist Writers Are So Besieged By Online Abuse That Some Have Begun To Retire,' *Washington Post*, February 20, 2015. http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/online-feminists-increasingly-ask-are-the-psychic-costs-too-much-to-bear/2015/02/19/3dc4ca6c-b7dd-11e4-a200-c008a01a6692_story.html.

demonstrate a desire on the senders' parts to silence these women journalists or to force them to write elsewhere—though the location of “elsewhere” is yet to be determined.

Conclusion

A survey of studies on newsroom identities within a number of Western countries found that there is a “general homogeneity” among journalists and that they “have socioeconomic backgrounds firmly grounded in the dominant cultural and ethnic sectors of society,” which in turn leads to low minority representation. Though this research does not address causation, it illustrates an institutional phenomenon that goes beyond simple ignorance and racism in terms of the voices who get heard in the mainstream press. This homogeneity is likely why the feminist columnists chosen to write for mainstream publications all have similar identities. They are all part of the dominant socioeconomic class of contemporary American society. Michelle Goldberg called attention to this idea in an interview with *Bitch Magazine*. When asked about how she would like to see her field change in terms of covering topics like reproduction and power, Goldberg answered,

Of course, I also wish that the big magazines would give these subjects the attention they deserve, but as long as their mastheads remain overwhelmingly male, that's unlikely to happen. Not necessarily because the editors are sexist—more because this stuff doesn't even make it onto their radar, and if it does it doesn't capture their attention. That's irritating, obviously, but it also means that there's this huge, rich, overlooked territory for journalists like me to explore.”¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Anna Clark, "Interview: Michelle Goldberg on Sex, Power & The Future of the World," *Bitch Media*, March 25, 2009. <https://bitchmedia.org/post/interview-michelle-goldberg-on-sex-power-the-future-of-the-world>.

This begs the question: what does the “mainstream” nature of the spaces these women write in tell us about contemporary feminism? If one were to look at those who are writing for mainstream publications and what is being said in those publications, where theoretically the “mainstream” represents general public opinion, only a very small portion of the many different strains of feminism would be represented. Because of their platforms and positions in feminist discourse, Digital Discourse Feminists do face a great deal of pressure to be the “perfect” feminist, or to represent the feminist movement. While their popularity suggests that they give voice to the feelings of many others, they can only do so much. Criticism about their identities is better directed at the news organizations who participate in narrow hiring practices and the white supremacist patriarchal thinking that has led to the exclusion of all others. This does not excuse any exclusion of women of color on the behalf of media organizations, but points to the importance of publishers and news outlets needing to make a conscious effort to include a diverse group of women in their spaces.

Some visibility is certainly better than none, but as Goldberg points out, there is a whole wealth of topics that aren’t explored because of what voices are prioritized within mainstream news organizations. And beyond that, there are an infinite amount of perspectives that are left in the margins of Internet writing, meaning that most of the public is not exposed to these perspectives at all. Because of this, it’s important to pay attention to what *is* being published in the mainstream press, as this is the work that is reaching those who might not otherwise read about feminist issues. It also gives insight into what isn’t being said and where mainstream feminist writing can improve.

CHAPTER 3

Personal/Public: The Digital Discourse Feminists' Writing

In one of her last columns of 2014, titled "2014: The Year Everyone (Finally) Started Talking About Sexual Assault," Ann Friedman says, "It seems wrong to declare this the year of sexual and domestic abuse. After all, these crimes have been perpetrated for millennia. Yet there has been an undeniable shift in the amount of attention paid to what were previously deemed private matters."¹²⁹ Friedman's statement aptly captures the sentiment of 2014 and what separated that year from others. As she points out, sexual violence has existed for a very long time, but 2014 signaled a change in how this violence was talked about, and in what volume. Friedman's statement points to a breakdown of the boundaries between the public and private, which was largely facilitated by online media -- women had the freedom to publish their stories online and those stories were shared widely. By "decentralizing" the public sphere, online media opened the door for typically unspoken issues to become widely discussed political topics.¹³⁰ From sexual violence, to reproductive rights, to what contemporary feminism looks like to them, the Digital Discourse Feminists spent much of 2014 blurring the lines between public and private matters by writing about highly personal topics while advocating for political change on mainstream platforms.

In their study on gender differences within the top political blogs, Anne Johnston et al. found that in political blogging/commentary, women frequently wrote differently than their male

¹²⁹ Ann Friedman, "2014: The Year Everyone (Finally) Started Talking About Sexual Assault", *NY Mag*, December 14, 2014, <http://nymag.com/thecut/2014/12/2014-the-year-we-listened-to-abuse-survivors.html>.

¹³⁰ Zizi Papacharissi, *A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, (2010), 161.

counterparts. Women's writing tended to contain undertones of empowerment and audience action, whereas male writers encouraged "collective outrage."¹³¹ The same study also found that women were more likely to disclose personal information. As I will explore further in this chapter, the Digital Discourse Feminists do rely on some of the same strategies Johnston et al. attribute to female political bloggers, strategies that are also utilized within the third wave feminist activism that has been foundational to these writers' feminist consciousness. Many of the Digital Discourse Feminists' columns begin with personal anecdotes or stories, and they often propose strategies to empower the audience to act on whatever issue they are writing about in a given column.

This chapter analyzes the 2014 columns written by the Digital Discourse Feminists with a specific focus on the columns that discuss contemporary feminism, including celebrity feminism, columns on reproductive rights, and those about campus sexual assault. After reading through the entirety of the Digital Discourse Feminists' columns posted online during 2014, these topics stood out as the most commonly discussed among the six women and were significant both culturally and politically in the United States at the time. These pieces were published in *The Guardian* (Jessica Valenti), *NY Mag* (Ann Friedman), *The New Republic* (Rebecca Traister), *The Guardian* (Jill Filipovic), *Time* (Jessica Bennett), and *The Nation* (Michelle Goldberg). I argue that, at this moment in history, these women are our representatives for mainstream feminist opinion writing. As such, examining their writing is necessary in order to understand the discourse that is being created by mainstream feminist figures about issues important to many feminists. By analyzing their writing in-depth, I seek to uncover how the Digital Discourse

¹³¹ Anne Johnston et al., "Standpoint in Political Blogs: Voice, Authority, and Issues," *Women's Studies* 40, no. 3 (2011), 269–298.

Feminists approach the issues both as individual citizens and as feminists writing for mainstream platforms.

This is What a Feminist Looks Like

At the close of 2013, multiplatinum artist Beyoncé released her fifth studio album, *Beyoncé*, without any prerelease advertising or publicity. At the time of its release, the album was the fastest selling album in iTunes history and became major commercial success.¹³² One of the tracks, “Flawless,” sampled from author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s 2013 TEDx talk titled, “We should all be feminists.”¹³³ Beyoncé’s 2013 identification with feminism seemed to be a catalyst for other celebrities to do the same. Quickly, 2014 became the year of “celebrity feminism.” From Beyoncé to Emma Watson, Taylor Swift, and beyond, female celebrities were confronted with the question “Are you a feminist?” Their answers could elicit either massive amounts of praise or scorn.¹³⁴ This phenomenon was a significant moment for the feminist movement: feminism was being picked up by some of the most powerful cultural figures in the United States and it was being discussed on national media outlets. Thirty years after the 1980s feminist backlash, as well as the rise of postfeminism in the early 2000s, it appeared that feminism was making a comeback in a bold way.

In response to the celebrity feminism phenomenon, feminist opinion writers, bloggers, and academics, including the Digital Discourse Feminists, began exploring the topic, discussing

¹³² Apple, "Apple - Press Info - BEYONCÉ Shatters iTunes Store Records With 828,773 Albums Sold In Just Three Days," *Apple.com*, December 16, 2013. <https://www.apple.com/pr/library/2013/12/16BEYONC-Shatters-iTunes-Store-Records-With-Over-828-773-Albums-Sold-in-Just-Three-Days.html>.

¹³³ TEDx Talks, “We should all be feminists | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie | TEDxEuston,” 30:15, *YouTube* video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU_qWc

¹³⁴ Maria Meltzer, “Who is a feminist now?” *The New York Times*, May 21, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/22/fashion/who-is-a-feminist-now.html?_r=1

whether these celebrities were really feminists and what the significance of celebrities claiming the title ‘feminist’ would be for the movement. Through this, they also defined who feminists are and what feminist activism looks like in 2014. If anything, the celebrity feminism phenomenon has opened up a broader conversation about feminism in the 21st century and what, exactly, the Digital Discourse Feminists want the movement to look like. Because the phenomenon of Hollywood’s stars claiming the title of ‘feminist’ is fairly recent and new, it is impossible to gauge what, if any, lasting impact it will have on the movement and feminist discourse in the public sphere. There is no doubt, however, that the phenomenon has brought the movement a level of attention it has not received in quite a while.

Because of their positioning within the public sphere, I argue that what the Digital Discourse Feminists have to say about feminism holds an extra level of significance that must be paid attention to. They represent a subset of the feminist movement, and through their writing, create a picture of what a feminist is and what feminist activism should look like, at least in their opinions. However, the Digital Discourse Feminists are part of a movement that has slowly shifted toward a more decentralized and individual approach to feminist politics, where “the most defining feature of this generation of feminists is its inability to be defined by any single political goal, ideological perspective, or way of being feminist.”¹³⁵ The Digital Discourse Feminists’ writing exists in a complicated space where those who do not understand feminism or do not subscribe to feminist beliefs may take what they have to say as what *all* feminists believe. Readers have autonomy and can choose whether the Digital Discourse Feminists represent their

¹³⁵ Astrid Henry, "From a Mindset to a Movement: Feminism Since 1990." In *Feminism Unfinished*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014) 185.

views or not, but as workers in mainstream journalism, their writing does have a level of influence that most individuals do not have.

Some of the Digital Discourse Feminists have critiqued celebrity activism as being nothing more than a branding strategy for these celebrities' careers. Jessica Valenti argues that, "If celebrities want to cement their feminist bonafides, they should educate themselves on the work that's already been done and move forward with the intention of creating change, not just good PR."¹³⁶ However, Jessica Bennett points out that celebrity endorsements of feminism, such as Beyoncé's VMA performance, can also be powerful because "as far as feminist endorsements are concerned, this was the holy grail: A word with a complicated history reclaimed by the most powerful celebrity in the world."¹³⁷ Traister makes a similar point, arguing that Beyoncé and celebrities like her are "sending a signal, and the fact that that signal is coming from inside the house, the entertainment industry—hell, the fact that Beyoncé herself is arguably the most powerful person in that house—means something that we should all be paying attention to."¹³⁸ Though these celebrities may not be doing any "on the ground" work, their thoughts on feminism do travel throughout the internet, potentially educating or exposing ideas and discourse about feminism to those who have not encountered it before and engaging those who already consider

¹³⁶ Jessica Valenti, "Beyoncé's 'Flawless' Feminist Act At The VMAs Leads The Way For Other Women," *The Guardian*, August 25, 2014.

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/aug/25/beyonce-flawless-feminist-vmas>.

¹³⁷ Jessica Bennett, "How To Reclaim The F-Word? Just Call Beyoncé", *TIME.Com*, August 26, 2014, <http://time.com/3181644/beyonce-reclaim-feminism-pop-star/>.

¹³⁸ Rebecca Traister, "Beyonce's VMA Performance Was The Feminist Moment I've Been Waiting For", *New Republic*, August 25, 2014, <https://newrepublic.com/article/119211/beyonces-vm-performance-feminisms-most-powerful-pop-culture-moment>.

themselves feminists in conversation about feminism's goals. The internet is a prominent space wherein these goals are worked out.

Rebecca Traister argues that though online feminism is as rife with disagreements as previous conceptions of feminism have been, the opportunity even to have an online feminist movement is something to be celebrated because, "These days, as online feminism swells and roils with internal disagreements, it's easy to forget that not too long ago, there was no online feminism."¹³⁹ Jessalyn Keller explains that feminist blogging allows girls to define and articulate their public selves and engage with the world around them in different ways, both political and not. Through this, they are "reframing" what feminist activism looks like, which in turn allows them to "embrace new understandings of community, activism, and even feminism itself."¹⁴⁰ Of course, the Digital Discourse Feminists do not own the sites they write for and are being paid for their work, which takes away some of the freedom that independent bloggers possess.

Valenti, referencing fellow Digital Discourse Feminist Rebecca Traister, again stresses the importance of work over labels when she writes that, "Rebecca Traister...explained to me that determining who is and is not a feminist is nearly impossible. But maybe doing the work of feminism is more important than identifying as a feminist. After all, the word isn't just an identity - it's a movement. It's something that you do."¹⁴¹ This sentiment explains why much of the Digital Discourse Feminists' columns are focused on encouraging political action rather than merely sharing their opinions and ending it there. What is important about these ideas are the

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Jessalyn Keller, "Virtual Feminisms: Girls' Blogging communities, feminist activism, and participatory politics," *Information, Communication & Society* 15, no. 3, (2012), 429-447.

¹⁴¹ Jessica Valenti, "When Everyone Is A Feminist, Is Anyone?" *The Guardian*, November 26, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/nov/24/when-everyone-is-a-feminist>.

ways in which they materialize in the Digital Discourse Feminists' columns. Traister's thoughts on the celebrity feminist icons of 2014: "In feminism and liberalism, the wry lesson of *Some Like It Hot* pertains: Nobody's perfect. No individual can competently represent all the people who look to her (or him) to see their own experiences or perspectives reflected," are important to keep in mind not only in terms of celebrity feminism but also in thinking about feminist leaders such as the Digital Discourse Feminists.¹⁴² To the Digital Discourse Feminists, being a feminist is more than claiming a title. It involves work, and what exactly they mean by that can be seen in their writing on reproductive rights and campus sexual assault. When analyzing their writing, we must regularly ask who is not getting heard and what is being left out, as well as analyzing the ways their work advances feminist goals.

Reproductive Rights

According to the Guttmacher Institute, by the end of 2014, lawmakers had introduced 341 measures to restrict access to abortion and other reproductive health services. Twenty six of those were enacted in 15 states.¹⁴³ These included measures to extend waiting periods between a required initial counseling appointment and the actual abortion procedure, banning abortion after 18 weeks, limits on public funding for contraception, along with many others. Reproductive rights were also on trial in the US Supreme Court. The Supreme Court ruled that "closely held" corporations (corporations where 50% of stock is owned by less than 5 people) with religious objections are not required to pay for insurance coverage of contraception, which is otherwise

¹⁴² Rebecca Traister, "Beyonce's VMA Performance Was The Feminist Moment I've Been Waiting For."

¹⁴³ Elizabeth Nash, Rachel Benson Gold, Gwendolyn Rathbun, and Yana Vierboom, "In Just the Last Four Years, States Have Enacted 231 Abortion Restrictions," Guttmacher Institute, January 05, 2015. <https://www.guttmacher.org/article/2015/01/just-last-four-years-states-have-enacted-231-abortion-restrictions>.

mandated in the Affordable Care Act.¹⁴⁴ As a result, a majority of the writing on reproductive rights produced by the Digital Discourse Feminists focused on legislation and related pro-choice rhetoric.

Overall, the Digital Discourse Feminists largely agreed on who should be in charge of a woman's reproductive health: the woman, and when necessary, her doctor. The Digital Discourse Feminists advocate for "making birth control widely available, cheap, covered by insurance and free for those who don't have insurance."¹⁴⁵ They see abortion as a "fundamental, safe, and accessible medical option."¹⁴⁶ Some came down harder on certain laws/ideas than others, and they all offered differing strategies to secure privacy and individual choice for women's healthcare, but they reached a similar consensus towards reproductive health in general. Though they all wrote as individuals, their writing strategies often overlapped. Sometimes they relied on intensely personal stories throughout their columns. Other times they used their knowledge and experience gained from having other careers. They also often used outside research to back up their points, especially when they were writing about broader issues and not sharing personal stories. What is significant about these strategies is that they are all ways in which the Digital Discourse Feminists are able to claim legitimacy and authority within their work.

¹⁴⁴ *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.*, 134 S. Ct. 2751 (2014).

¹⁴⁵ Jessica Valenti, "There Is Absolutely No Reason to Restrict Women's Options for Abortion Access," *The Guardian*. May 06, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/06/reason-restrict-womens-options-abortion>.

¹⁴⁶ Rebecca Traister, "Let's Just Say It: Women Matter More Than Fetuses Do," *New Republic*, November 11, 2014. <https://newrepublic.com/article/120167/womens-abortion-rights-trump-fetuses-rights>.

The first strategy the Digital Discourse Feminists used to support their work is that of using fact based work to form and inform their opinions. They frequently linked to peer-reviewed research, included statements from professionals familiar with the topic, and were rarely self-referential in these research heavy pieces. Writing opinion pieces in this style can serve the purpose of taking the focus off of them as individuals and putting it more prominently on the issues at hand. This may benefit the Digital Discourse Feminists and the reception of their work in that multiple studies have shown that women who express anger are taken less seriously than their male counterparts and are also considered overly emotional.¹⁴⁷ The Digital Discourse Feminists all emanate some level of passion and, at at times, anger in their writing; whether it is a conscious decision or not; their reliance on research is one way in which the women attempt to be taken seriously in spite of the emotion underlying their work.

An example of relying on outside research can be seen in Michelle Goldberg's piece titled, "For Tennessee Lawmakers, Punishing Pregnant Women Is More Important Than Protecting Fetal Life." In it, Goldberg links to a statement released by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG). The ACOG statement uses numerous studies to explain the harms of laws that criminalize women who use drugs during pregnancy. In this column, which highlights a Tennessee law criminalizing pregnant women, Goldberg uses this medically-backed ACOG statement as evidence to support her claim that laws like the one in Tennessee are "bad for both pregnant women and babies."¹⁴⁸ In this way, Goldberg is able to

¹⁴⁷ Jessica M Salerno and Liana C. Peter-Hagene, "One angry woman: Anger expression increases influence for men, but decreases influence for women, during group deliberation," *Law and human behavior* 39, no. 6 (2015): 581.

¹⁴⁸ Michelle Goldberg, "For Tennessee Lawmakers, Punishing Pregnant Women Is More Important Than Protecting Fetal Life," *The Nation*, April 30, 2014.

point out that it is not just her who thinks criminalizing pregnant mothers is a bad idea. There are many in the medical profession, who would know more about the harms than almost anyone else, who agree with her. Linking to research and respected professional opinions for support, as Goldberg does in many of her columns, makes it much more difficult to dismiss her writing as one woman's emotional, uninformed opinion. It is easy to argue with one person's opinion, but it is far more difficult for a reasonable person to do so when that opinion is backed up by a medical association and years of research.

Jill Filipovic, who worked as an attorney before becoming a writer, uses her background in law to support her arguments. In a column titled, "Texas Will Soon Have 6 Abortion Clinics for 26m People. Courts Aren't Helping," Filipovic parses out the meaning of "undue burden," the US standard that prohibits states from passing abortion laws that place an "undue burden" on women who want an abortion.¹⁴⁹ In the column, she explains the Texas court case and questions how the court could rule that women are not unduly burdened when large sections of Texas will no longer have clinics within an easily reachable distance:

...the closest clinic is now in San Antonio, some 240 miles away. Getting there requires a car and a four-hour drive across deep Texas roads – if your immigration status even permits you to travel that far, which is not the case for many Valley women. A full day's drive to the clinic also means taking a day off of work, which is a significant difficulty for a low-wage worker in the Valley, which has one of the largest agricultural workforces in the United States. It also necessitates

<http://www.thenation.com/article/tennessee-lawmakers-punishing-pregnant-women-more-important-protecting-fetal-life/>.

¹⁴⁹ Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey, 505 U.S. 833, 846 (1992).

arranging childcare – the majority of women who terminate pregnancies already have at least one child – and scrapping together enough money not only for the procedure itself, but also for transportation there and back and for wages lost.¹⁵⁰

The column is still an opinion, albeit written by someone who has the training and professional experience to adeptly interpret legal issues. Some people are going to disagree with her argument, especially because abortion and other reproductive health services are highly contentious topics in the United States. Others will dismiss her thoughts for additional reasons, such as the commenter who believes Filipovic “should mind her own business” because she is a “Typical New York attorney, why don't you worry about New York.”¹⁵¹ However, using outside sources and credible, fact-based research to support their arguments creates a sort of buffer from accusations of creating “propaganda” and similar complaints that are often directed towards feminist writers.¹⁵² Relying on outside sources to back up arguments may not prevent accusations from those who are close-minded and/or ideologically opposed to the Digital Discourse Feminists’ ideas, but it does add a bit of objectivity to work that is categorized as opinion. Though these are just two instances in which outside research is referenced, this phenomenon was a theme throughout much of the Digital Discourse Feminists’ work.

¹⁵⁰ Jill Filipovic, “Texas Will Soon Have 6 Abortion Clinics for 26m People. Courts Aren't Helping,” *The Guardian*, March 28, 2014.

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/28/texas-abortion-clinics-courts-helping>.

¹⁵¹ ID7861768, March 28, 2014 (12:34pm), Comment on Jill Filipovic, “Texas Will Soon Have 6 Abortion Clinics for 26m People. Courts Aren't Helping,” *The Guardian*, March 28, 2014.

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/28/texas-abortion-clinics-courts-helping>.

¹⁵² Eddiel988, March 28, 2014 (12:50pm), Comment on Jill Filipovic, “Texas Will Soon Have 6 Abortion Clinics for 26m People. Courts Aren't Helping,” *The Guardian*, March 28, 2014.

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/28/texas-abortion-clinics-courts-helping>.

Most of the Digital Discourse Feminists also used personal narrative in their columns on reproductive rights. Before delving into a column on legal battles or healthcare policy, the women often started out with stories from their own lives. More than explicitly expressing their personal feelings on the topic, their stories provided an intimate glimpse into their own experiences as women. Some shared their own abortion stories, or their experiences with pregnancy, or why reproductive rights are important to them. In any case, a large majority of the Digital Discourse Feminists' writing on reproductive issues included some sort of personal disclosure. Given that the Digital Discourse Feminists are all women, it makes sense that they would have individual experiences with reproductive health services. By sharing these stories with their readers, they are able to claim authority over the issues and demonstrate how the politics of reproductive rights are inherently personal. As Heather Savigny and Helen Warner argue, "the construction of women in media and cultural discourse is an intensely political act."¹⁵³ Through the inclusion of personal narrative, the Digital Discourse Feminists are not only creating discourse on political topics, they are also doing the political work of constructing what it means to be a woman in the 21st century. As public figures, and as women, they are conferred with the authority to speak about what women want and need, which can show "how profoundly things can change when women raise their voices in realms where they were once urged to remain silent."¹⁵⁴ Using themselves as examples is one way to do so.

¹⁵³ Heather Savigny and Helen Warner, *The Politics of Being a Woman: Feminism, Media and 21st Century Popular Culture*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015): 9.

¹⁵⁴ Rebecca Traister, "How to Reveal You Had an Abortion," *New Republic*, September 23, 2014. <https://newrepublic.com/article/119547/how-wendy-davis-female-politicians-should-reveal-having-had-abortions>

In the Fall of 2014, Texas Senator and gubernatorial candidate Wendy Davis released a memoir. In it, Davis, who is a staunch supporter of women’s reproductive choice, provides a detailed account of her decision to have an abortion after learning her baby had a brain abnormality and likely would not survive to term.¹⁵⁵ Traister argues that sharing abortion stories, as a number of female politicians including Davis have done, can be incredibly powerful within political discourse. She points out that many of those who want to restrict abortion access are men, who “have no context for understanding what it might be like for a woman to physically feel a compromised fetus spasm inside of her.”¹⁵⁶ By explaining, in depth, the complexities behind any reproductive decision, women like Davis help add much needed nuance and context to a policy argument. Echoing the third wave perspective on personal narrative, Traister believes that “charging into a political debate armed simply with your own experiences can make a noticeable impact.”¹⁵⁷ A few weeks later, Traister shared her own experience with abortion. While she has not had the procedure herself, many of her family and friends have. However, had anything gone wrong during her two pregnancies, she would have wanted the option. She argues that “my rights, my health, my consciousness, and my obligations to others—including to my toddler daughter—outweigh the rights of the unborn human inside me.”¹⁵⁸ She uses this statement to push back on what she sees as right-wing rhetoric that puts the rights of fetuses before the rights of women. In this case, personal narrative serves as a way to show that women

¹⁵⁵ Wendy Davis, *Forgetting to Be Afraid*, Blue Rider Press (2014).

¹⁵⁶ Rebecca Traister, “How to Reveal You Had an Abortion.”

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Rebecca Traister, “Let’s Just Say It: Women Matter More Than Fetuses Do,” *New Republic*, November 11, 2014. <https://newrepublic.com/article/120167/womens-abortion-rights-trump-fetuses-rights>.

who have children can be and are pro-choice, as well as to argue for women's agency in making personal and important healthcare decisions.

Valenti takes a similar position to Traister, though she tends to be a bit contradictory at times. When writing about Wendy Davis's abortion story, she argues that women should not have to tell their stories to be seen as real people. She recognizes that Davis is brave for opening up, but asks, "why must women splay their most intimate moments out into the world in order for people to understand how basic and necessary abortion rights really are?"¹⁵⁹ A month later, in a column on sharing the abortion stories that are mundane and a normal part of many women's lives, Valenti writes, "I don't owe anyone an explanation over why I had my abortions, but, as the conservative movement continues to strip women of their rights and humanity, I believe that those of us who can speak, should."¹⁶⁰ Valenti herself has written about the two abortions she has had in an effort to combat stigma, knowing that doing so would not jeopardize her career or hurt personal relationships, as it might for others.¹⁶¹ Between these two columns she is essentially arguing that while women should not *have* to tell their stories to explain why reproductive healthcare is necessary, the unfortunate reality right now is that these stories can help humanize women who want or need abortions. Her contradictory position is illustrative of the Digital Discourse Feminists' belief that decisions regarding abortion, birth control, and sexual health

¹⁵⁹ Jessica Valenti, "Good for Wendy Davis, but Women's Abortions Are None of Your Damn Business," *The Guardian*, September 08, 2014.

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/08/wendy-davis-abortion-reveal-pregnancies-ended>.

¹⁶⁰ Jessica Valenti, "It's OK to Tell Your Abortion Story. Some Women Just Don't Want to Be Pregnant," *The Guardian*, November 20, 2014.

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/nov/20/abortion-story-women-dont-want-be-pregnant>.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

should be left to women and their partners. While telling her story can help erase stigma and educate those who are ignorant on the matter, ultimately, what a woman chooses to do with her body is her own personal choice and should not be subject to outside scrutiny unless she chooses to publicize it.

Since the sexual revolution of the '60s, the normalization of abortion, sex, and other reproductive rights in public discourse has been a crucial area for feminist activism, hence why Valenti and Traister argue for the importance of talking about abortion. To further emphasize this point, Jessica Bennett and Ann Friedman also included personal stories in their columns on reproductive rights. Bennett discusses the taboo of talking about freezing one's eggs and describes her experience of going to a fertility clinic:

The women in the room had presumably come for the same reason as I had – we were single, in our 30s and 40s, and wanted to know our options – and yet we might as well have been entering a brothel. We didn't make eye contact. We looked straight ahead. It was as if each of us now knew the other's big secret: the fertility elephant in the room.¹⁶²

She goes on to explain that, though freezing eggs may be something not regularly discussed in the public sphere, pregnancy, or lack thereof, has a major impact on women, especially those in the workplace. This is another indicator of the Digital Discourse Feminists' generational status. As women in their mid to late 30s, the topic of fertility is particularly resonant. This is also a result of their choices to attend higher education and focus on their careers before having children, which are typical choices for women of their class status who came of age in the

¹⁶² Jessica Bennett, "Company-Paid Egg Freezing Will Be the Great Equalizer," *Time*, October 15, 2014. <http://time.com/3509930/company-paid-egg-freezing-will-be-the-great-equalizer/>.

postfeminist/third wave era. By beginning the column with her own experience, Bennett challenges stigma and invites readers to discuss the topic with her. Similarly, Friedman considers birth control, “medical care that is critical to my ability to live and work — and, yeah, have consequence-free sex...”¹⁶³ This is not exactly a story, but it is a direct acknowledgement of why reproductive healthcare matters to her on a personal level. Their disclosure of personal information also normalizes the topic. Neither Friedman nor Bennett are discussing reproductive healthcare as some sort of dramatic, lifesaving necessity (though it often is); they are approaching fertility and contraception as things they want because it helps their careers or because they like having sex and do not want children at the moment. Valenti has written an entire column on how women enjoy sex and because of that, contraception should be easily accessible, noting that “It's also OK – wonderful, even! – that women use birth control to have sex and not get pregnant... We're allowed to use it. And not just for our periods – but to have hot, sweaty, fantastic, fun, non-procreative sex. That doesn't make us "sluts"; it makes us human.”¹⁶⁴ By breaking taboos through the third wave strategy of personal narrative, the Digital Discourse Feminists create public spaces for discourse about reproductive rights, inviting healthy debate as well as greater awareness and advocacy.

Sexual Assault on Campus

¹⁶³ Ann Friedman, “What a Woman's Choice Means to the Supreme Court and Social Conservatives,” *The Cut – NYMag*, July 01, 2014. <http://nymag.com/thecut/2014/07/what-a-womans-choice-means-to-the-supreme-court.html>.

¹⁶⁴ Jessica Valenti, “Women like Sex. Stop Making 'health' Excuses for Why We Use Birth Control,” *The Guardian*. July 08, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jul/08/women-sex-health-excuses-birth-control>.

In addition to contemporary feminism and reproductive rights, stories related to sexual violence against women filled headlines in 2014. Among the many issues the Digital Discourse Feminists discussed regarding sexual violence, the most prominent was that of sexual assault on college campuses, largely due to the considerable number of high profile stories/cases that made headlines during 2014. At the beginning of the year, the White House Task Force to Protect Students From Sexual Assault was formed to address high rates of sexual assault on American college campuses.¹⁶⁵ Columbia University student Emma Sulkowitz carried a mattress with her everywhere on campus to protest the university's decision not to expel her assailant. Later that year, California legislators enacted the "Yes Means Yes" law, which applies to college campuses receiving federal funds, in order to more clearly define the agreement between individuals to have sex. The law requires participating parties to give affirmative consent and states that someone asleep or "incapacitated" by drugs or alcohol is unable to provide consent.¹⁶⁶ Shortly after, *Rolling Stone* published a long, supposedly investigative piece about an alleged gang rape at the University of Virginia.¹⁶⁷

In their examination of this topic, the Digital Discourse Feminists included a variety of directives, suggestions, and questions to encourage their readers and the subjects of their columns to engage with the ideas and possibly mobilize for change. They stressed the need to believe victims, argued for change in how campus administrations deal with sexual assault cases, and lobbied for a new kind of campus culture. A notable difference between Digital Discourse

¹⁶⁵ Barack Obama, "Memorandum: Establishing White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault", *WhiteHouse.gov*, Washington, DC: The White House, January 22, 2014.

¹⁶⁶ Cal. Education Code § 67386

¹⁶⁷ Sheila Coronel, Steve Coll, and Derek Kravitz, "Rolling Stone and UVA: The Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism Report," *Rolling Stone*, April 5, 2015.

Feminists' writing on reproductive rights and campus sexual assault is the lack of a cohesive agreement about how to "fix" campus sexual assault. On reproductive rights, they all agreed – stop regulating women's bodies. The solutions suggested on how to end sexual violence against women, however, were far less clear cut. They all agreed that it was a very serious issue, but from there their approaches diverged.

Additionally, unlike their writing on reproductive rights, the Digital Discourse Feminists' writing on campus sexual assault contained very few personal anecdotes. These columns did not contain stories about the writers' lives and were rarely self-referential. Instead, when writing about campus sexual assault they provided various suggestions for institutional and societal change informed by academic research and expert analysis, and relied on the testimonies of others when they did include lived experiences. Though their columns may not give off the same sense of "personal" authority as the columns on reproductive rights, by relying heavily on researchers for facts and information about the topic, the Digital Discourse Feminists were able to focus their writing on strong appeals for action.

One idea that the Digital Discourse Feminists stressed repeatedly was that of listening to and believing victims of sexual assault. During the fall of 2014, *Rolling Stone* published a widely read story on an alleged gang rape at the University of Virginia. Shortly after the story was published, many raised questions about inconsistencies in the story, as well as the reporting process used by the story's author. Though the story later turned out to be fabricated, this was not known when the Digital Discourse Feminists wrote their 2014 columns on the case.¹⁶⁸ The

¹⁶⁸ It was later discovered that much of the story was fabricated: Margaret Hartmann, "Everything We Know About The UVA Rape Case [Updated]", *NY Mag*, 2015, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2014/12/everything-we-know-uva-rape-case.html>.

details of the story are irrelevant here; what is significant is how the Digital Discourse Feminists framed the issue of believing or questioning alleged victims of sexual assault. Jessica Valenti approaches the issue from a stance of believing victims until proven wrong:

I choose to believe Jackie [the alleged UVA victim]. I lose nothing by doing so, even if I'm later proven wrong - but at least I will still be able to sleep at night for having stood by a young woman who may have been through an awful trauma...No matter how the media story ends, or what we come to know, there is a reason that people believed and continue to believe Jackie: There are so many people - too many people - who report similar attacks.¹⁶⁹

Her argument is consistent with that of many third wave feminists. Due to a history of victim blaming and shaming,¹⁷⁰ feminists have created a number of campaigns focused on listening to and believing victims when they report sexual assaults because there are very few false rape accusations and not believing victims often allows alleged rapists to continue committing crimes.¹⁷¹ Rebecca Traister makes a similar argument:

What we will all be allowed to happily forget is that there are plenty of real stories of rape: of violent rape, frat house rape, gang rape, date rape; that most rape accusers do not lie and that in fact it's quite likely, statistically, that Jackie herself did not lie. But the

¹⁶⁹ Jessica Valenti, "Who Is Jackie? Rolling Stone's Rape Story Is About A Person – And I Believe Her | Jessica Valenti", *The Guardian*, December 8, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/dec/08/who-is-jackie-rolling-stone-rape-story>.

¹⁷⁰ J. Du Mont, K.L. Miller, and T.L. Myhr, "The Role of 'Real Rape' and 'Real Victim' Stereotypes in the Police Reporting Practices of Sexually Assaulted Women," *Violence Against Women* 9(4) (April 2003): 466.

¹⁷¹ For example, the "Start By Believing" campaign created by End Violence Against Women International: <http://www.startbybelieving.org/>

most serious thing that we'll be allowed to forget is the very point of Erdely's story, whatever its strengths or flaws may be determined to be: The system does not work.¹⁷² However, as Ann Friedman points out, believing victims at all costs does come with its own set of consequences because "even those of us who are inclined to believe survivors can end up undermining their stories by amplifying them. [Rolling Stone made] a judgment not to fully investigate the survivor's story, which left her open to a barrage of criticism after discrepancies in her narrative were pointed out."¹⁷³ Despite this, Valenti, Traister, and the rest of the Digital Discourse Feminists say that stories like the *Rolling Stone* piece are so exceedingly common that in addition to believing victims even when there are questions, college campuses, law enforcement, and others need to step up and ensure that campus sexual assault is not common and that perpetrators are properly punished.

An example of the Digital Discourse Feminists directly arguing for change is found in a piece on sexual assault on Ivy League campuses by Jill Filipovic. She writes, "But the most famously elite university in America [Harvard] should also be instituting transparent processes for dealing with sexual assault accusations, training administrators and judicial boards on how to handle sexual assault cases, and making sure students have a clear understanding of affirmative consent to sex."¹⁷⁴ Here, she is stating what, in her view, needs to be done to solve the problem.

¹⁷² Rebecca Traister, "Rolling Stone's UVA Rape Story Has Problems, But Don't Let Them Obscure The Appalling Truth", *New Republic*, December 2, 2014, <https://newrepublic.com/article/120465/uva-gang-rape-story-what-make-rolling-stones-mistakes>.

¹⁷³ Ann Friedman, "2014: The Year Everyone (Finally) Started Talking About Sexual Assault", *NY Mag*, December 14, 2014, <http://nymag.com/thecut/2014/12/2014-the-year-we-listened-to-abuse-survivors.html>.

¹⁷⁴ Jill Filipovic, "If Ivy League Men Feel Entitled To Sex, Why Is Harvard Stuck On 'No Means No'?", *The Guardian*, April 3, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/03/ivy-league-harvard-anonymous-sexual-assault-victim>.

She does not say, “I think this should be done...;” she writes it as an imperative statement, which adds more weight to her words. Ann Friedman similarly states that colleges must have a greater understanding about the issue amongst administrators, improved policies for handling sexual assault cases, and most of all, “an attitude shift.”¹⁷⁵ Michelle Goldberg sees it differently, questioning, “Can the college disciplinary processes tasked with protecting students from rapists be saved? And should they be?”¹⁷⁶ Goldberg does not answer these questions herself, but provides arguments from others on both sides, ultimately concluding with a quote from a Title IX scholar about the need for campus reform with a future goal of handling the cases in a properly trained criminal justice system. The Digital Discourse Feminists also disagreed on California’s “Yes Means Yes” affirmative consent law, which affects California’s college campuses. One argument is that, “The new law makes life easier for both [young men] and the women they sleep with, because it creates a compelling reason for both parties to speak up and talk about what they like.”¹⁷⁷ On the other hand, the law may be “so vague that, technically, it might turn most [college students] into rapists, victims or both.”¹⁷⁸ Situations like this show how complex political issues can be and highlight the importance of varied voices in the public sphere/mainstream media. A consensus does have to be met for the Digital Discourse Feminists’ writing to be successful as advocacy, but that consensus should always be reached through rational debate.

¹⁷⁵ Ann Friedman, "Colleges Need A New Attitude To Stop Sexual Assault On Campus", *NY Mag*, May 6, 2014, <http://nymag.com/thecut/2014/05/colleges-need-a-new-attitude-to-stop-rape.html>.

¹⁷⁶ Michelle Goldberg, "Why The Campus Rape Crisis Confounds Colleges," *The Nation*, June 5, 2014. <http://www.thenation.com/article/why-campus-rape-crisis-confounds-colleges/>.

¹⁷⁷ Ann Friedman, "Oh Yes Means Yes: The Joy Of Affirmative Consent", *NY Mag*, October 2, 2014, <http://nymag.com/thecut/2014/10/oh-yes-means-yes-the-joy-of-affirmative-consent.html>.

¹⁷⁸ Michelle Goldberg, “Why The Campus Rape Crisis Confounds Colleges.”

Another way in which the Digital Discourse Feminists sought to encourage audience action was through positioning themselves as part of the audience. More often than not, rather using ‘I,’ the Digital Discourse Feminists chose to use ‘we’. For example, in a column against sympathy for rapists, Jessica Valenti writes, “Until we shame attackers with the same contempt that so many people reserve for women who come forward – until we shift the disdain from victim to perpetrator – rape, sexual assault and harassment will continue to run rampant and predators will continue to attack.”¹⁷⁹ By using ‘we’ instead of something more general such as ‘society’, Valenti places herself on the same level as her audience. She is not merely saying what others should do and condemning those who are not her, but including herself in the equation as well. While she is critical of society, her use of ‘we’ transforms this critique into a passionate call for action.

A similar version of this strategy is seen in one of Ann Friedman’s columns on domestic violence: “Collectively, we do a terrible job of letting survivors know we care about them, no matter what they decide... We don’t talk about the fact that nobody wants to feel like a victim.”¹⁸⁰ Her use of ‘we’ works in the same way as the Valenti example. By using the phrase ‘Collectively, we...’, she sends a clear indication that she sees herself as part of this group; she acknowledges her own mistakes along with everyone else’s. While these are just two examples, this kind of language shows up again and again throughout the Digital Discourse Feminists’ writing, displaying the inherently feminist act of investing in collective action. What makes this

¹⁷⁹ Jessica Valenti, "Why Does Everyone Feel So Sorry For Men Accused Of Being Predators?", *The Guardian*, July 14, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jul/14/men-accused-predators-young-women-shamed>.

¹⁸⁰ Ann Friedman, "The NFL’S Disgusting Message To Abused Women", *The Cut*, September 9, 2014, <http://nymag.com/thecut/2014/09/nfls-disgusting-message-to-abused-women.html>.

strategy particularly effective is that it turns any reader into part of the group. Outside of occasionally pointing to ‘society’, the writers never define who ‘we’ is, thus creating a collective group out of the writer and their audience. As a result, any sort of call or demand for action appears far more encouraging than it might otherwise. I argue that this strategy exemplifies Peter Dahlgren’s assertion that the first step to political participation is engagement, which he sees as “a mobilized, focused attention on some object.”¹⁸¹ By putting the onus on their audience (and themselves) to create political change, the Digital Discourse Feminists are also demonstrating a push back against the individualist discourses of postfeminism and neoliberalism.

Jessalynn Keller believes that “online activism...must be analyzed as part of changing cultural conditions that require multiple modes of resistance, avenues of communication, and strategies of knowledge production.”¹⁸² The Digital Discourse Feminists are not traditional pundits who regularly appear on political news programs, but they do hold their own online columns, which are, in a sense, the Internet version of televised political commentary.

Nevertheless, I see the Digital Discourse Feminists reframing activism in their own way. Jill Filipovic illustrates this when she writes, “I’m a writer first, albeit one who is informed by feminist theory and social justice activism. I want to share information, interrogate ideas, disseminate good work, question social and cultural structures, build communities of smart progressive people and generally make the world a better place.”¹⁸³ The Digital Discourse Feminists write for mainstream commercial sites using their platforms as spaces for feminist

¹⁸¹ Ibid.,

¹⁸² Jessalynn Keller, *Girls’ Feminist Blogging in a Postfeminist Age*, Routledge, 2015: 60.

¹⁸³ Jill Filipovic, "I've Received More Rape Threats Than I Can Count. This Is A Call For Kinder Online Debate", *The Guardian*, January 9, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/09/twitter-call-for-kinder-more-humble-online-debate>.

discussion. They may not be consciously participating in activism as part of their work as columnists (though some are), but I see them contributing to feminist activism anyway. They write about political issues from a feminist perspective and suggest ways in which the audience can participate in activist work, as seen in their writing on campus sexual assault. Thus, I argue that the work the Digital Discourse Feminists publish is a blend of feminist blogging and political commentary that produces a unique form of contemporary activism through the blurring of the public and private spheres.

Conclusion

Jessica Valenti writes, “If you kill a person, you're a murderer. If you steal, no one would hesitate to call you a thief. But in America, when you force yourself on someone sexually, some people will jump through flaming hoops not to call you a rapist.”¹⁸⁴ Valenti’s statement points to the primary difference between talking about reproductive rights and campus sexual assault and why the Digital Discourse Feminists tackled these issues differently. On the topic of reproductive rights, their pieces focus on the problems with the increasing number of legal restrictions of rights. With campus sexual assault, they approach the topic from the opposite viewpoint: sexual assault is an epidemic on campuses, but people *are not* taking action. At least, they are not taking action in the ways the Digital Discourse Feminists would like, though even that is not always agreed upon between the women. Reproductive rights are highly contested in American culture and much of the disagreement is wrapped up in different religious beliefs; personal stories served to combat stigma and humanize the writers and women in general. Conversely, sexual violence is

¹⁸⁴ Jessica Valenti, "When You Call A Rape Anything But Rape, You Are Just Making Excuses For Rapists", *The Guardian*, April 24, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/24/rape-game-of-thrones>.

highly underreported, in great part due to a culture of victim-blaming; in this case, the Digital Discourse Feminists tried to elicit anger and inspire action from their readers.¹⁸⁵ However, these discussions and the different approaches to writing, whether through personal narrative, relating with the audience, or relying on outside sources, all add to the discussion on feminist political issues and are examples of feminist goals being worked out in online spaces. Perhaps the fact that these issues are being worked out on popular online spaces is the most significant part of the Digital Discourse Feminists' writing. These discussions are happening in spaces that a majority of the American public can access. Sexual assault, abortion, and feminism are all taboo, or at least unpopular, topics for everyday discourse. And yet, the Digital Discourse Feminists are unashamedly talking about them in the metaphorical public square, and demanding that society does so as well.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a majority of the Digital Discourse Feminists' columns on contemporary feminism, reproductive healthcare, and campus sexual assault were lacking in intersectional perspectives. The most intersectional aspect of the contemporary feminism columns was about the power of Beyoncé being a black woman. While this is significant, when writing about what feminism in 2014 should look like, they fail to address that different groups of women experience the world differently and the ways in which these experiences shape how these groups participate in activism. A few of the women discussed how abortion restrictions in Texas would specifically affect Latina women, many of whom are low-income.¹⁸⁶ Rebecca

¹⁸⁵ J. Du Mont, K.L. Miller, and T.L. Myhr, "The Role of 'Real Rape' and 'Real Victim' Stereotypes in the Police Reporting Practices of Sexually Assaulted Women," *Violence Against Women* 9(4) (April 2003): 466.

¹⁸⁶ Jill Filipovic, "Texas Will Soon Have 6 Abortion Clinics for 26m People. Courts Aren't Helping."

Traister mentions the Hyde Amendment occasionally, which disproportionately affects women of color.¹⁸⁷ Jill Filipovic discusses reproductive rights in the context of poverty.¹⁸⁸ In the campus sexual assault columns, women of color were only mentioned in passing. Additionally, the Digital Discourse Feminists' choice to focus so heavily on campus sexual assault in particular is a product of their privileged backgrounds as highly educated women with prestigious college degrees. Sexual assault happens to women from all walks of life, not just on college campuses. While they do acknowledge this from time to time, ultimately, the Digital Discourse Feminists' writing on sexual assault largely focuses on one realm, one in which a majority of women have little access.

Of course, these few instances are not representative of the diversity of the American public. Reproductive rights, sexual assault, and even feminism affect women differently. The Digital Discourse Feminists are likely not excluding perspectives that are not their own, but the fact that it does happen points to the necessity of diversity in the opinion sections of mainstream news sites.

CHAPTER 4 Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to analyze and understand the work of six self-identified feminist women who spent 2014 writing opinion pieces for mainstream news and cultures sites.

¹⁸⁷ Center for Reproductive Rights, "Whose Choice? How the Hyde Amendment Hurts Poor Women," Electronic Report, 2010, http://www.reproductiverights.org/sites/crr.civicaactions.net/files/documents/Hyde_Report_FINAL_nospreads.pdf.

¹⁸⁸ Jill Filipovic, "Nice Try Republicans, but Marriage Isn't the Solution to Poverty," *The Guardian*, January 30, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/30/marriage-is-not-the-solution-to-poverty>.

This group, which I have named the Digital Discourse Feminists because of their positioning within mainstream news online, covered a range of topics such as celebrity feminism, reproductive health, and sexual violence on college campuses. I situate the Digital Discourse Feminists within the context of the public/private spheres, digital news culture, and contemporary feminism and explore a variety of cultural and social factors that have led to the ever-increasing visibility of feminists in online spaces. Throughout the project, I have argued that they are examples of a broader generational development born out of third wave feminism, postfeminism, and the rise of online platforms for political commentary. I argue that the work the Digital Discourse Feminists publish is a blend of feminist blogging and political commentary that produces a unique form of contemporary activism through the blurring of the public and private spheres and encourages readers to participate in activism.

In chapter one, I introduced my project and situated it within contemporary understandings of feminism and feminist visibility online. This chapter also provided a review of literature relevant to this project, which includes work on digital news culture, the public sphere, contemporary feminism, and contemporary feminist writing. In addition, I explained the theories and methods I used to understand the Digital Discourse Feminists and their writing, namely, public sphere theory and discourse analysis.

Chapter two discusses the backgrounds of the six writers as representatives of a larger phenomenon within third wave feminism, postfeminist culture, and the rise of digital journalism. I explored how their generational and societal backgrounds have shaped the identities and careers of these women, as well as their approaches to feminism and writing. Through an analysis of interviews and other published materials, I highlighted the ways in which their present day writing is shaped by the historical context within which they grew up, influences

from second wave feminism, and their positions as relatively privileged white women working in a space that has not progressed much in terms of diversity. Additionally, I examined how the internet and the widening public sphere opened up new spaces for feminist writing that has allowed this writing to be disseminated and read on a grander scale than ever before.

Chapter three contains analyses of a selection of the columns of the Digital Discourse Feminists from 2014. I looked at the writing strategies used in their pieces on celebrity feminism and contemporary feminism, reproductive rights, and sexual assault on college campuses. I explored how the Digital Discourse Feminists utilized third wave feminist activist strategies in their writing despite their positioning as mainstream media writers. I argue that through the use of personal narrative, proposals for action, and identification with their readers, the Digital Discourse Feminists push back against the individualist discourses of postfeminism and neoliberalism. I also argue that although the Digital Discourse Feminists only represent one strain of feminism, their work represents a radical change in traditional mainstream news discourse.

Limitations and Future Research

As a historical analysis, my research does have a few limitations. Because of the methods used, it is impossible to know how closely my interpretations of the Digital Discourse Feminists' writing resemble the thoughts and intentions they had when writing their columns, though the fact that these women have emerged as a cohesive group is quite telling. Further research could interview such writers in order to gain clearer insight into their thought processes. Due to the large amount of content written by the Digital Discourse Feminists and the limited nature of this project, many columns and writing for other sites had to be left out. Future research could expand on this project by examining work published on less popular sites and/or incorporate how

these women use social media to shape feminist discourse. As I have noted, the Digital Discourse Feminists represent only one type of feminism online. Future research could look at the many other feminist women of diverse identities writing online, including women who write for both large and small platforms. This thesis studies one form of feminism in the public sphere, but there are a variety of acts of feminism being performed online daily. Because of this, future research should consider other innovative ways feminists are using digital technology in their activist work and how they challenge dominant narratives assigned to those technologies.

Another limitation comes from the varying levels of the Digital Discourse Feminists' popularity within mainstream media and the number of columns their respective outlets published. Just as media "magnified [Gloria] Steinem's role as a feminist leader" during the second wave feminist movement, so too have media focused on specific third wave women, one of whom is Jessica Valenti.¹⁸⁹ Valenti is often called a feminist leader in the mainstream media and has even been named one of *The Guardian's* 'Top 100 Women.' She was included on the list, which was created a few years before she began writing for the site, because "if feminism is enjoying a revival among young women, much of the credit should go to women such as Jessica Valenti."¹⁹⁰ When it comes to writing, she is also a leader amongst the Digital Discourse Feminists. Whereas the other Digital Discourse Feminists had pieces published weekly or biweekly during 2014, Valenti's work was published about three times a week. While I tried to provide a balance of writing between all women, Valenti clearly had a disproportionate amount of influence on mainstream feminist discourse. I suspect that had Valenti not published a

¹⁸⁹ Amanda Izzo, "Outrageous and Everyday: The Papers of Gloria Steinem," *Journal of Women's History* 14, no. 2 (2002): 151.

¹⁹⁰ Homa Khaleeli, "Jessica Valenti | Top 100 Women", *The Guardian*, March 7, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/mar/08/jessica-valenti-100-women>.

majority of the Digital Discourse Feminists' columns, different patterns may have emerged from the writing both regarding which topics were covered the most as well as the ways they were written about. In addition, because of her publishing schedule, Valenti was in a position to explore issues far more in-depth than the other women, adding nuance and context that may have been left out in others' columns. On the other hand, the volume of writing also means that her perspective dominated mainstream feminist news writing. As I explored in previous chapters, the Digital Discourse Feminists did not always agree on the issues; in this case, Valenti's arguments may have had an outsized influence on the public's perception of what "mainstream" feminists believe.

Because these writers are using a newer writing platform in a highly unstable and continuously changing medium, analyses of such work and of those who engage in it remains sparse. Future research should continue to explore news content on both mainstream and the newer digital native sites, and how issues of race, gender, and sexuality are covered, both by journalists and opinion writers. Scholarship should also consider who is doing the writing and how these writers' identities shape their work. Though much progress has been made within the digital news industry and American culture as a whole, there continues to be room for improvement.

Implications

Though blogs and news sites have been and remain important spaces for feminist discourse, social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook have become crucial for the circulation, expansion, and critique of this discourse. Differences and disagreements between feminist groups are commonly discussed and worked through in online spaces, likely due to the public square nature of social media. In late 2013, the hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen

trended on Twitter in reaction to what feminist writer Mikki Kendall describes as “problematic behavior from mainstream white feminists” in the feminist blogging community.¹⁹¹ This daylong, highly contentious discussion, which included criticisms directed toward both Jessica Valenti and Jill Filipovic, would spark a number of pieces written by feminist women of color explaining their frustrations and calling for more awareness amongst white feminists online, including those in high profile and influential positions like the Digital Discourse Feminists.¹⁹²

In reaction, Jill Filipovic participated in a roundtable discussion with National Public Radio on the hashtag and the issues it raised. She acknowledged the critiques sent her way, and took the acknowledgement a step further when she suggested that white women (and men) need to start "...refusing to sit on all-white panels, recommending writers of color for writing and speaking gigs, ceding their own platforms to new voices, actively mentoring women who don't share their same background, the many men who believe in gender equality and social justice doing the same."¹⁹³ Michelle Goldberg wrote about this incident and the ensuing hostility within and between feminist circles online, titling the piece “Feminism’s Toxic Twitter Wars.” She points out that, “Clearly, there’s some truth here: privileged white people dominate feminism, just as they do most other sectors of American life... That doesn’t mean, though, that social media’s climate of perpetual outrage and hair-trigger offense is constructive.”¹⁹⁴ What is highly

¹⁹¹ Mikki Kendall, “#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen: Women of Color's Issue With Digital Feminism,” *The Guardian*, August 14, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/14/solidarityisforwhitewomen-hashtag-feminism>

¹⁹² For example, see:

http://www.salon.com/2013/08/15/feminism_cant_be_just_for_white_women/

¹⁹³ Jill Filipovic, "Twitter, Feminism and Race: A Roundtable," *NPR*, August 26, 2013.

<http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/08/26/215804045/twitter-feminism-and-race-a-roundtable>.

¹⁹⁴ Michelle Goldberg, “Feminism’s Toxic Twitter Wars,” *The Nation*, January 29, 2014.

ironic about this situation is that the Digital Discourse Feminists participated in the creation of discourse about a situation in which they were identified as part of the problem. This situation suggests that some of the same issues black feminists had with white, middle-class women dominating second wave feminism have continued into the present day. In its own way, this event calls attention to an even larger problem within online writing. Though there are many feminist writers online, in 2014, six of the most visible feminist opinion writers in mainstream spaces were white women. Because the public sphere is the “arena for the making of hegemony and of cultural common sense,”¹⁹⁵ without a variety of voices and perspectives, hegemonic discourse and cultural common sense will naturally trend towards a dominant conception. That is, without an “actually existing democracy” in the public sphere, not everyone will be equally represented and heard.

As noted in Chapter 3, relatively little of the Digital Discourse Feminists’ writing on contemporary feminism, reproductive rights, and sexual assault on campus in 2014 included diverse racial and economic perspectives. They wrote on many more topics throughout the year, so there is a possibility that these three topics were covered differently than others. However, the three topics I analyzed in this project were three of the most talked about issues of the year, which makes the lack of different perspectives in these columns particularly problematic. As of mid-2016, there continue to be few non-white, non-middle class women writing regular columns

<http://www.thenation.com/article/feminisms-toxic-twitter-wars/>

As a point of information, the columns I analyze in the next chapter were written in the year following this event.

¹⁹⁵ Nancy Fraser, “Politics, Culture, and the Public Sphere: Toward a Postmodern Conception,” In *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics*, eds. Linda Nicholson and Steve Seidman, (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

for traditional mainstream media sites with the same level of notoriety as the Digital Discourse Feminists. While it is certainly okay for privileged white women to write about these topics, when they are the only ones doing so in mainstream spaces, they become part of a historical system of exclusion. As I have pointed out throughout this thesis, there were many instances in which the Digital Discourse Feminists' writing was shaped by their privilege. A low-income woman likely would have written about sexual assault on campuses much differently (if at all), much as a black woman might have experienced Beyoncé's embrace of feminism in a different context than a white person.

Given that women of color have vocally mobilized online in response to "mainstream white feminists," it is clear that these women feel underrepresented and want to be heard. Some have climbed the ladder, such as author and *New York Times* columnist Roxane Gay and Syreeta McFadden at *The Guardian*, but for the most part women of color continue to work outside of the mainstream. This points to one of the primary issues with the homogeneity of the Digital Discourse Feminists. If third wave feminist advocacy is focused on individual identities and experiences, then it follows that any sort of public feminist space should be populated by women representing all walks of life. Though intersectional issues are brought up by the Digital Discourse Feminists occasionally, these columns certainly do not have the power of personal narrative that some of their other columns do. Political issues like those explored in this thesis affect women differently depending on their backgrounds. Although the Digital Discourse Feminists are not identical in their arguments and all bring their own experiences to their work, they are all quite similar in terms of the larger sociocultural landscape.

The internet makes it fairly easy to seek out whatever one is searching for and anyone with an internet connection can publish writing online, which means that those who are looking

for writing by women of color or LGBT individuals will be able to find it. However, what makes the Digital Discourse Feminists' writing so significant is the size of the platforms they write for and the reach these platforms have. When certain perspectives are left in the margins of internet writing, many are not exposed to these perspectives at all. Because of this, it's important to pay attention to what *is* being published in the mainstream press, as this is the work that is reaching those who might not otherwise read about feminist issues. Mainstream writers should also write more about matters that are not their personal experiences. Though third wave feminism prioritizes personal narrative, it is also a response to the 'whiteness' of second wave feminism. Prominent writers with large platforms like the Digital Discourse Feminists have a responsibility to write about stories that affect those who do not have the privilege to be heard.

Despite the lack of diversity in mainstream outlets, digital news culture has undergone a rapid transformation over the last couple of years. Native digital media companies, funded by wealthy venture capitalists, have become some of legacy media's top competitors, both in readership and finances.¹⁹⁶ Sites such as BuzzFeed, Vox, Vice, and Mic are becoming increasingly popular, especially with those between the ages of 18 and 34 (also known by the generational title 'Millennials').¹⁹⁷ These sites, along with many others that are largely targeted towards a younger and highly diverse demographic, employ writers that are far more representative of the larger public than do traditional outlets. Many of these writers are vocal feminists and focus on issues relating to race and gender. These sites also have dedicated

¹⁹⁶ Rick Edmonds, "Capital is Flowing Like Water to Media Companies (of a Certain Kind)," *Poynter*, December 10, 2014. <http://www.poynter.org/2014/capital-is-flowing-like-water-to-media-companies-of-a-certain-kind/304659/>

¹⁹⁷ John McDermott, "Turns Out Traditional Publishers Do Just Fine With Millennials", *Digiday*, August 27, 2014, <http://digiday.com/publishers/traditional-publishers-millennials/>.

sections for race and gender issues, which suggests a recognition of their audiences' desires for more intersectional content. If these companies continue to grow and challenge traditional mainstream outlets, so does the chance that their writers will hold the same cultural capital as the Digital Discourse Feminists, bringing issues to light that are often left on the margins. Because these companies are still in their infancy, it is difficult to predict their long term impact on the news industry; however, they do indicate a shift in digital news culture and a widening of the public sphere. Digital culture has also opened up an endless amount of space for user-generated content that challenges dominant discourses about feminism. Anyone with an internet connection can get involved, and with the power and reach of social media, these voices can be elevated in such a way that one does not have to be a journalist to shape discussions in the public sphere.

Though there are problematic aspects to the Digital Discourse Feminists' writing and digital news culture in general, the significance of the Digital Discourse Feminists within the broader scope of feminist visibility in the public sphere can not be ignored. As I have explored throughout this thesis, feminist writing and female journalists have always existed, though not always together and on such a large scale. Due to the perfect mixture of changing cultural norms and the growing popularity of the internet as a space for news and writing, the Digital Discourse Feminists have been able to help shape the web into a more welcoming place for women. The Digital Discourse Feminists' discussions are happening in spaces that a majority of the American public can access. Sexual assault, abortion, and feminism are all taboo, or at least unpopular, topics for everyday discourse. And yet, the Digital Discourse Feminists' are unashamedly talking about them in the metaphorical public square, and demanding that society do so as well.

Seeing feminist writing such as that of the Digital Discourse Feminists on high-profile outlets has the potential to be liberating for young women who are able to see themselves in

these writers. This might be the first time a reader has found someone who is able to articulate their own thoughts and feelings, which can be incredibly powerful. In addition, being able to see women who are able to speak their mind on the issues they find important, on large news sites no less, can open up imaginative possibilities for girls and young women who aspire to have similar careers and provide them with the courage and inspiration to speak up about their own lives.

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