

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: DIGITAL ROOMS OF THEIR OWN:
WOMEN'S VOICES ONLINE ABOUT THE
POLITICS OF WOMEN, FAMILY AND
MATERNITY IN FOUR WESTERN
DEMOCRACIES

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This dissertation examined the experiences of 109 women with varying backgrounds who blog or write online about the politics of women, family and maternity in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland.

This dissertation argues that a broader definition of what counts as political needs to be applied to the voices of women online to capture their political expressions in Western democracies. An analysis of in-depth interviews found that 84 percent of interviewees considered their blogging to be political. A statistically significant relationship was found to exist between women bloggers/writers online who identified as feminist and who considered their blogging to be political. Rather than categorizing the personal styles of women who blog/write online (in and outside my sample) as “just” “personal journaling,” the fluidity of topics they address needs

to be recognized as a feature of fluid public clusters online, which are tied to their lives offline.

This dissertation argues that it is necessary to amend the theories of public spheres to capture the political expressions and experiences of women who use social media to write about their concerns publicly. This dissertation suggests a new theory of fluid public clusters. This new theory expands on the idea of a multitude of publics rather than the often-criticized singularity of the original Habermasian public sphere. It emphasizes that publics are messy, overlapping and changing over time. It also highlights that offline social hierarchies of power and identities migrate online.

This dissertation concludes that national contexts shape the expressions of women bloggers/writers online and that these were particularly apparent in the fluid public clusters that were salient in each country. One key finding was that Switzerland differed significantly from the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany. In the latter three countries women – across a wide variety of backgrounds – have (or at least are not denied) ample opportunities to make their voices heard. In Switzerland, women’s voices online have been constrained in number and range of perspectives to center around traditional understandings of motherhood while feminist/progressive views remain rare.

While 73 percent of interviewees said they had negative experiences due to blogging/writing online, all 109 interviewees said they had at least one positive experience due to blogging/writing online. These included personal, professional and, in some cases, also commercial benefits. Interviewees cherished having a digital room of their own to write what they want in a space for which they set the rules.

Interviewees dealt with negative experiences mostly on a personal level, as police, state and lawmakers have been slow in recognizing and prosecuting online discrimination and abuse leveled against women. Positive experiences are nearly guaranteed but negative interactions remain and are more likely to happen to women who identify as feminists and/or say that their writing is political.

This dissertation offers insights into the discourse among women about the democratization of democracies via social media. Seventy-two percent of interviewees remained skeptical about the democratic potential of social media. Most interviewees had concerns about internet access, internet literacy, online harassment and which voices get heard or amplified. Yet, interviewees also shared examples of starting or contributing to (national) public debates over issues of their concern. The democratic potential of social remains haphazard.

Finally, this dissertation argues that women, who have been under-represented and misrepresented in (news) media content and production, need to keep blogging, tweeting and writing online. By doing so, women will tap into the haphazard democratic potential of social media. This will make Western democracies more democratic. To encourage women to blog, this dissertation offers recommendations to women on managing blogs/sites (safely).

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AND MATERNITY IN FOUR WESTERN DEMOCRACIES

By

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Dedication

For all people who identify as women and who blog or write online

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Many people helped and supported me in completing this dissertation. It is difficult to know where to start.

It would have been impossible without the help of 109 women bloggers and online writers in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland. They generously gave their time and thoughts in long interviews, recommended other bloggers and encouraged my project. Many felt that this research project is important in getting the voices of women recognized in society.

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Sometimes it feels like I have become a "magnet" for texts on anything that touches on women, gender, media and journalism. My fellow students kept tweeting and e-mailing me articles, websites and projects that they thought might be helpful. I want to thank them for their thoughtfulness, especially Micha and Joanna. I also thank Sally Ann and Candi for their mentoring on how to navigate academia.

I also thank my friends for encouraging my work with their many kind words and for giving me places to stay and food to eat while on research or conference trips. I especially thank Dunja who never fails to keep me grounded as to what really matters in life. I thank Nina for her relentless support of and advice for my (academic) journey. I thank Julia for reminding me how precious time is and to never forget thinking about how we want to spend it. I thank Dori and Sharon for showing me that with tenacity in goals but flexibility in tactics we can adapt to what life can throw at us.

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Albeit both, my own grandpa – “mein Opa“ – and my husband’s grandpa Hoyt, have passed before they could witness the completion of my dissertation; they also deserve much thanks. “Mein Opa“ was the first person who encouraged me to pursue a doctoral degree when I was a teenager. He was also the one who put me on track for studying in the United States. Little did he know that eventually I would complete a doctoral degree at a U.S. university. Hoyt was among my first supporters when I applied to doctoral programs. Throughout my studies he encouraged me. He always asked helpful questions, discussed current news media coverage and sent me links, books and magazines on U.S. journalism. They are both dearly missed, especially at this moment.

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My interviewees reminded me how important it is to show solidarity. This dissertation lists one author but indeed it has many collaborators who helped bring it to fruition.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

But, you may say, we agreed that you write about women and blogging – what has that got to do with a digital space of her own? You surely recognize that this dissertation begins by adapting the first sentence of Virginia Woolf’s (1929) famous essay *A room of one’s own*. It is for a good reason.

I talked with 109 women with varying backgrounds in four Western democracies who blog, tweet or otherwise write online on their own site. One of the benefits that many women described is having a digital space where they rule, rant, and express themselves in the way they choose. As for instance a 48-year old white U.S. mother, who works as a screenwriter from home, said: “My blog is the room of my own. That’s my room and there I can do what I want to do without having to please anyone else but myself.” They can change what they write about, how they write it, where to take their writing and if to write at all. They do so to direct their voices to a wider public. The majority of women said that they want to be part of societal discussions; that their writing is political; and that they are contributing to discourse about important issues in democracy. From the digital space of their own they have addressed the public and forged powerful connections: with people who recognize their work, who offer concrete help or who express gratitude for advice they read; with communities that support them; with activists with whom they start campaigns; and with people who they met online and who have become “real (life)” friends.

As a 49-year old white German veteran woman blogger said, politics is about negotiating how we want to live together. Many of the different women I talked with,

across the four Western democracies, have done exactly that, participating in negotiations of how to make living together better regarding women's, family and maternal politics. Yet, current established (news) media and researchers continue to use old analog-based benchmarks to measure participation in discourse and its impact. These include narrow definition of politics, rankings or numbers of clicks and links. Some researchers have recognized and pointed to the limitations of these benchmarks, yet, (news) media and researchers still fall short to move beyond them, and to develop new ideas to recognize (women's) voices online. Women bloggers and online writers have nevertheless poked holes into the fabric of these old benchmarks as they understand and exercise the new logic of blogging and social media. They see that the reward lays in sometimes having one qualitatively worthy connection, not necessarily in having "the numbers." They have also launched publicly directed campaigns grounded in personal experience, which they make transparent. This way, they have harnessed blog networks and hashtags on Twitter to draw attention to the still persisting but more slippery discriminations of women such as everyday sexism on the street; sexual harassment on public transportation, at work or at school; commercialization of maternity wards; sexualization of girls; rape culture and victim blaming; the presentation of women in established (news) media and in the public. Several such campaigns have changed specific situations. At the least they have sparked (national) public discourses. Women bloggers have helped elucidate the continuation of complex power hierarchies in which gender, race, class and other dimensions of identity intersect with each other.

This dissertation also argues that national and cultural contexts are important frameworks to understand why women’s blogging/online writing on political issues of their concern has been more variegated and vibrant in terms of voices, perspectives and topics in the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany than in Switzerland. This means also that despite sharing the context of being established Western democracies, national and cultural contexts can bring out different fluid public clusters in these democracies. One key finding was that Switzerland differed significantly from the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany. In the latter three countries women – across a wide variety of backgrounds – are having (or at least are not denied) ample opportunities to make their voices heard. In Switzerland women’s voices have been constrained in number and range of perspectives to center around traditional understandings of motherhood. While notions of traditional motherhood have been challenged, feminist/progressive views and perspectives outside the hetero-normative (white) couple remained rare.

A majority of 72 percent of interviewees argued that the internet¹ and social media are a double-edged sword regarding their potential to enable people, and especially women, to participate in public discourse. Access, literacy, offline identities, powerful private companies who own and set the rules for using social media, the imbalances of which voices get heard online and why, online harassment – these were some of the issues interviewees addressed. In sum, the “magic of the open web,” which Tim Berners-Lee (2014) conjured up in his recent statement on the

¹ Following Markham and Baym (2009) I do not capitalize the term “internet” as it is not grammatically warranted because the word neither signifies a person nor a place. With capitalization it would granted an agency that is more correctly attributed to the humans who design and use it.

occasion of the 25th anniversary of the “World Wide Web” in March 2014, has been rubbing off in the countries that have had the privilege to test it. It is important to remember that this privilege has never existed for a majority of 60 percent of people on the planet (Internet World Stats, 2014). In democracies with high internet distribution and use among their populations – such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland – social hierarchies offline have migrated online; social identities offline determine online presence. A white 27-year old German woman blogger, who suffers from a dissociative identity disorder, and who described herself as poor and only having a high school diploma because of the sexual violence she experienced in the past, said:

You have to be somebody to be somebody on the internet, to pose as somebody. It is for someone like me who is at the very, very, very, very bottom, it is all very far from everything.

Her words stand in stark contrast with those of web inventor Tim Berners-Lee’s statement. Yet, his words serve as the most recent reminder that the internet and its accessible surface, the “World Wide Web,” still spark the public imagination, as previous technologies did when they were new (Das et al., 2011):

Now, about 40 percent of users are connected and creating online. The web has generated trillions of dollars of economic value, transform education and healthcare and activated many new movements for democracy around the world. And we’re just getting started. ... How can we make sure that the web supports all languages and cultures, not just the dominant ones? ... will we protect the magic of the open web and the power it gives us to say, discover, and create anything? (Berners-Lee, 2014)

But after a quarter century of use of the World Wide Web, and of research about its use, it is time to look at the realities rather than the magic.

Since the advent in the 1990s of web 2.0 spaces, which have allowed easier interaction between internet users and content production than pre-internet media and earlier internet technologies, research of humans interacting with the internet has mushroomed (Herring, 2004). One string of research has studied how dimensions of identity such as gender, race, class, sexual orientation and others play out in who participates to which extent in the production of content on and use of web 2.0 spaces. The fact that different demographics might be relatively hidden in online interaction does not mean that demographic differences “go away” (Murthy, 2008). Indeed, technologies can exacerbate social divisions (Gitlin, 1998). Internet access is connected to offline identity – economic and educational gaps still determine the possibility of access, the kind of access, and the use an individual can get out of the internet (Palczewski, 2001; Downey & Fenton, 2003; Poor, 2005; Oxley, 2012). Rather than dividing between “real world” and “online world,” researchers need to view online and offline data as “complementing records of events unfolding in the same social world and not as specimens from two different planets” (Bakardjieva, 2009).

This dissertation examined how women bloggers/writers online in four Western democracies have used online spaces such as blogs, own websites and Twitter, to address issues of women’s, family and maternal politics to bring their own perspectives into a broader public. This dissertation argues that many people, technologies and (social) media spaces, that is, many publics are needed for deliberation. In turn, deliberation has been deemed crucial for sustaining a democracy (Oxley, 2012; Gitlin, 1998). I am taking up Gitlin’s (1998) idea of “public

sphericules” (p. 173); Norval’s (2012) concept of critical feedback; and Macgilchrist and Böhmig’s (2012) demonstration of “minimal politics“ based on Marchart (2011).

This dissertation expands on the idea of a multitude of publics rather than the often-criticized singularity of the original Habermasian public sphere. I argue that it is more appropriate, especially in regard to web 2.0 media usage, to speak of fluid public clusters. My theory and model of fluid public clusters emphasizes that publics are messy, overlapping, and changing over time. This fluidity is better reflected in a new language of fluid public clusters rather than continuing the terminology of “spheres.“ My model of fluid public clusters also highlights that offline hierarchies and identities migrate online and that national contexts set the framework for them (hierarchies, identities and hence also clusters).

Chapter 2 summarizes Habermas’ original concept of the public sphere and its limitations; new, related concepts to public sphere theory; and my theory of fluid public clusters.

Chapter 3 summarizes studies on social media spaces for people to blog/write about politics and current affairs in different national contexts and women’s participation in this kind of blogging. Third is a brief excursus into the history women and women’s rights in each of the four examined countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland).

Chapter 4 details the use of in-depth interviews and textual analysis as appropriate methods as well as the reasoning for using feminist and comparative approaches for this dissertation.

Chapter 5 further details my theory of fluid public clusters. I apply it to my sample of women bloggers/writers online across all four countries. I also describe particularly salient fluid public clusters in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland.

Chapter 6 describes the positive and negative experiences of interviewees due to blogging/writing online. This includes an analysis of the responses and strategies interviewees have developed to deal with negative experiences.

Chapter 7 provides a description and analysis of interviewees responses to the two questions: if their blogging is political, or not, and if they consider social media to be democratic, or not (in the sense of enabling people to participate in public debate). Last are conclusions and avenues for future research.

The appendix offers recommendations and links for women to safely – and with fun – start or continue blogging/online writing.

I now turn to the theory underlying my research project. Before detailing my own theoretical model of fluid public clusters, I summarize core concepts and critiques of the theory of the public sphere.

Chapter 2: Public spheres theory, its critiques and a new approach

The idea and ideal of the public sphere has been intriguing scholars in communication and related studies since its inception (Haas, 2004). Its core concepts continue to be discussed, especially in regard to the advent of the internet and its web 2.0 spaces (see several critical essays published in December 2012 in *Political Theory* 40(6) and in January 2013 in *Media, Culture & Society* 35(1). In *Media, Culture & Society* alone, 346 articles have referred to the public sphere since the magazine's inception in 1979 (Lunt & Livingstone, 2013). Of those, over two third have been published over the past decade, which Lunt and Livingstone dub "the rise and rise" of public sphere theory in media studies. German philosopher Jürgen Habermas pioneered the theory of the public sphere in his postdoctoral work in the 1960s, which was translated into English in the 1980s. After outlining Habermas' original concept, I turn to critiques and new concepts: counterpublics, sphericules, non-binaries and minimal politics. Last, I detail my theoretical advancement of the concept of the public sphere, the model of fluid public clusters.

2.1 The Habermasian public sphere and its limitations

Habermas (1989) described the public sphere as a space for citizens to discuss thoughts based on rational deliberation, information, and news input from print news media:

By the 'public sphere' we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every

conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body (Habermas, 1984: p. 49).

He described the peak of the public sphere as occurring in Europe in the 18th century when citizens met in coffee houses, literary salons, and other public spaces to strive for consensus, trading arguments about society and politics of the day. A crucial aspect was the distance from the state and also from the home – the public sphere was a space outside government control, the family and the economy. He originally described it as open to everyone, so that out of such deliberations a public opinion would emerge (Habermas, 1989). But with the rise of mass media, Habermas (2006) described the collapse of the 18th century public sphere as increasing commercialization and entertainment within mass media corrupted the process to produce public consensus. In this process, mass media, evolving from literary notices to political party tools with competing social and economic interests, have lost their potential to be an instrument of the public, which resulted in a weakening of the public sphere in contemporary society. In his view, mass media have become a space for entertainment, advertisement, and special interests rather than serving rational-critical debate.

Habermas has written little about the significance of the internet regarding the public sphere. In two publications (2006, 2008) he briefly notes a weakening of the authoritative voices of pre-internet mass media and public intellectuals, a fragmentation of society, and the internet's democratizing potential in authoritarian regimes. Other scholars argued that the internet is a virtual public sphere that has

potential to diversify voices but that the influence of the internet on political communication and social practices remains unclear (Boeder, 2005).

Several scholars highlighted the rational, deliberative character of the public sphere as valuable elements of Habermas' (1989) theory (Poor, 2005; Steiner, 2005; El Nawawy & Khamis, 2009, 2011). They simultaneously argued that the Habermasian public sphere must be treated as an ideal that most likely never existed and is difficult to achieve.

Among the most common criticisms of Habermas' notion of the public sphere is the question of access (Gitlin, 1998). Given its setting in 18th century Europe, several groups in society then, before, and after did not enjoy access to the public sphere. Nancy Fraser (1990) led the way in pointing out that women (of any color) were excluded from this public sphere, based on historical research by Joan Landes (1988) and Mary P. Ryan (1990); others who criticized Habermas for this inattention to women's absence include Felski (1989), Squires (2002), Steiner (2005), El Nawawy and Khamis (2009), Elsadda (2010) and Allen (2013). The other groups excluded from the public sphere were non-white, working and poor people (Squires, 2002; Steiner, 2005; El Nawawy & Khamis, 2009). El Nawawy and Khamis (2009, 2011) further point to Habermas' focus on Europe; Chouliaraki (2013) and Allen (2013) to the narrow space of (Western) nation-states.

A second line of criticism has addressed the problematic notion of a single public sphere, prompting several scholars to develop a notion of multiple public spheres such as "sphericules" (Gitlin, 1998), "micro-publics" (Goode & McKee, 2013) or weaker and stronger publics and counterpublics (Fraser, 1990; Squires,

2002). This does not mean, however, that other scholars do not maintain the idea of the singularity of one public sphere, to emphasize its “essential role” in deliberative democracies, as instruments of formal politics and to contest the idea of completely isolated public spheres in a constant flow of communication (Rasmussen, 2013).

Most scholars also keep the term “sphere,” which Gitlin (1998) writes comes with the problematic association of “fullness, ripeness” (p. 168). While it is more important to acknowledge the relevant idea of a multiplicity of publics, including their power hierarchies, I will return to this terminological criticism later.

Another line of criticism has questioned Habermas’ limitation of the public sphere to rational debate without accounting for passions and other expressions that also feed into publicly discussed matters of general concern (Gitlin, 1989; Bernstein, 2012; Goode & McKee, 2013). This connects to another debate among scholars about the normative character of the public sphere versus more realistic notions of what is possible and indeed happening (Bernstein, 2012; Cooke, 2012). Lunt and Livingstone (2013) further add to the list of criticism. They are skeptical of Habermas’ accounts of history and that his political model has been based on a level of direct democracy that does not exist.

While Habermas (1992, 2006) addressed some of the criticism, especially the problematic notion of a single public sphere rather than multitudes, he has also maintained that elites will always find separate spaces to discuss, meaning they can abandon the public sphere if it no longer serves their purposes. He also changed his definition of the public sphere as a geographical space to include certain kinds of communication no matter in which time or space they occur and extended its

application beyond the nation-state. He also recognized that diverse identities and institutions play an important role in public deliberation. Consequently, he also moved away from a bourgeois ideal of communication and formulated that truth, sincerity and comprehensibility form a minimal ethics of mutual understanding. Media scholars have viewed the public sphere critically but still recognize it as a starting point to launch their own ideas and frameworks (Lunt & Livingstone, 2013). This has also found expression in a discussion of multiple public spheres and the notion of “counterpublics,” which I will detail in the next section.

2.2 Counterpublics, sphericules and minimal politics

Especially Nancy Fraser (1990) discussed the theory of counterpublics, which she defined as emergent “subaltern publics” in “parallel discursive arenas” (p. 67), which develop because certain groups are not accepted in a dominant public sphere. She questioned how a status-free space, such as the public sphere originally envisioned by Habermas, can exist in societies characterized by deep socio-economic differences. Even if all would have access to the public sphere, she wrote, that this does not necessarily mean that social hierarchies vanish in favor of an even-leveled debate. This also means that if the internet is a virtual public sphere (Boeder, 2005), here also dimensions of identity also shape who participates in content production on and use of web 2.0 spaces, even if identities might be more hidden in online interaction (Murthy, 2008).

According to Fraser (1990), groups who lack representation and identification in the dominant public sphere seek relief in separate spaces where they can feel

comfortable about their identity, discuss and rebrand it to be positive, and build a community. A second characteristic of counterpublics, as Fraser writes, is the creation and distribution of counternarratives that oppose and challenge the dominant discourse. Counterpublics are thus internally and externally focused for intra- as well as interpublic sphere debates, striving towards being included in the dominant public sphere. Fraser added that several public spheres exist that can partially overlap and influence each other.

In the decades since Fraser's powerful critique, many scholars have developed thinking around counterpublics and have applied them to specific domains. Squires (2002) analyzed the history of Black public spheres in the United States and argued in favor of multiple public spheres. She divided oppositional public spheres into enclaves (groups forced into hiding using secret speech scripts to survive), counterpublics (speaking out as oppression diminishes, challenging the dominant public sphere as Fraser defined them), and satellite publics (groups remaining distant from a dominant public sphere voluntarily to preserve group coherence and identity). She also argued that the Black public spheres have become fragmented i.e. that there are many such spheres (due to a rise in conservative thought, state politics, election rather than protest politics and internal division.)

In regard to the internet, Gitlin (1998) pointed out that democracies require deliberation and need to provide equal access to the "terms of deliberation" (p. 169). He asked if democracies need one public sphere or many "public sphericules" (p. 168) and which conditions are necessary for "sphericules" to work. Downey and Fenton (2003) argued that social crisis combined with growing online counterpublic

spheres feed a cycle of opening “the mass-media public sphere” (p. 189) toward radical opinions which in turn would spark increased counterpublic sphere actions. In this way counterpublics can move from the margins to the center. They define counterpublics as a modern reaction and parallel occurrence to dominant capitalist communication structures. These partially overlapping counterpublics then allow for discourse among many publics on the background of constant cultural and economic powers. Goode and McKee (2013) took up the theme describing a “kaleidoscopic array of unofficial and informal micro-publics” (p. 113).

Norval (2012) suggested eliminating the two-tier assumption of a critical public versus the masses (or in Gitlin’s words the information poor versus the information rich). She argued for a cautiously optimistic view especially regarding social media as they can circumvent established (news) media and challenge previously attached virtues to a liberal public sphere. She suggested considering a broader range of what is critical feedback, who can participate in public deliberations and what it means to democratize, i.e. what it means to be and become a democracy:

The fostering of virtues associated with democracy – giving voice to senses of wrong and injustice, protesting, occupying, listening to others, critically debating opinions, giving and receiving reasons, coming to see things in a different way through critical engagement with others, proposing alternatives, aspiring to higher selves and better societies, to name but a few – come about in and through construction of and participation in critical, oppositional activities (p. 807).

She argued to take into account all possibilities for all people to express themselves and to contribute to alternative narratives and digital storytelling. Her argument dovetails with Macgilchrist and Böhmig’s (2012) application of a concept of minimal politics. Rather than defining politics as only state actions, they used the

concepts of agonistic democracy and hegemony. They understand minimal politics as the smallest, daily, radical and democratic practices that destabilize hegemonic formations. Daily rips are actions that challenge what is at present considered impossible. This already qualifies as success of groups that aim at long-term change, are politically organized and contest dominant discourse. That is, political is not only what is possible but also what aims at the impossible and transforms the impossible into what can be considered possible in the future. They base their notion on Marchart's (2011) concept of minimal politics, which he defined as:

We can meaningfully speak about politics *whenever* the minimal conditions of collectivity, strategy, conflictuality, and organization are met – no matter how big the collective, how effective the strategy, how intense the conflict, and how good (or bad) the organization. A renewed reflection on politics will have to rehabilitate the smallest political acts and the most modest achievements that are, provided the conditions are met, as *political* as the greatest revolution (p. 972, italics in text)

For example, Macgilchrist and Böhmig (2012) demonstrate how minimal politics worked in a case in Germany. Usually the success of blogs is judged by a blog being acknowledged by established (news) media or political actors and its number of readers. But they describe how bloggers used strategies of rebutting, reflecting and re-articulating racist statements to contest a racist book written by a politician who alleged that Muslim immigrants and their genetic dispositions will lead to the demise of Germany.

2.3 The theory of fluid public clusters

Following the scholars who have analyzed the public sphere, I agree that no one public sphere exists but many public “spheres,” with different leverage to reach other

groups. New groups are forming and are able to voice their concerns via web 2.0 spaces and a new understanding develops on what counts as a successful political act.

I am picking up the questions Gitlin (1998) posed about the existence of what he calls “public sphericules” in contrast to a single public sphere. He wrote of many “globules like mercury” (p. 173) without attaching a value to them beyond recognizing people who are information poor and information rich. He outlined two preconditions for “segments constitut[ing] their own deliberative assemblies” (p. 173): the existence of equivalent resources and the absence of disagreements between groups that keep them from communicating with each other altogether. The latter precondition presupposed the echo chamber argument that became prominent when Sunstein (2007) coined it as such. In his analysis of partisan websites, Sunstein found that participants in online debate only linked to oppositional websites to point out their false accounts. He argued that the internet allows people to stay within their own comfort zone of like-minded people so that their views would not be seriously challenged. In turn, this would lead to more extreme viewpoints that would reinforce each other and eventually fragment society into increasingly smaller groups (fragmentation of society was also addressed by Habermas). Sunstein saw a remedy to this trend in creating public spaces that connect niches (Sunstein, 2007).

The emergence of web 2.0 spaces in Western democracies could be considered to work toward fulfilling Gitlin’s (1998) first condition of equivalent access. In the United States 78 percent of its population are using the internet and 53 percent of its population are using Facebook; in Germany these are 83 percent and 31

percent respectively; in the United Kingdom 84 percent and 52 percent, and in Switzerland 82 percent and 39 percent (Internet World Stats, 2012).

Regarding Gitlin's second condition, Fraser (1990), Squires (2002) and others have shown that most non-dominant public "spheres" are aimed towards other groups and/or the dominant public "spheres" rather than towards isolation. Among the optimists, Benkler (2006) has argued that clusters of like-minded people can help with problem solving rather than turning into echo chambers. Meanwhile, Hindman (2009), more pessimistically, described the internet as reflecting politics as usual rather than heightened isolation in his vast analysis of more than three million websites and their links.

In terms of concrete counterpublics, for instance, Eckert and Chadha (2013) demonstrated in a study of bloggers in Germany who identify as Muslim, how these bloggers emerged as a counterpublic. These bloggers reached out to society to contest and correct the unbalanced, predominantly negative, representation of Muslims in German news media. Due to their blogging, several bloggers were invited to occasionally or even regularly contribute their standpoints in established news media. Other examples of such studies include Downey and Fenton's (2003) analysis of the anti-globalization movement as a counterpublic and McDorman's (2001) examination of "right to die advocates" online. Elsadda (2010) argued that several Egyptian literary blogs by women represented a counterpublic sphere to the mainstream literary public sphere. Via their blogging, these authors became major "offline," popular booksellers. Breindl and Houghton (2010) analyzed citizen responses to governmental efforts to enforce copyright legislation. They theorized the

technological infrastructure of the internet as a new battleground, i.e. offering spaces of interaction rather than isolation between established power hierarchies and emerging counterpublic spheres. Similarly, Milioni (2009) identified the practices of IndyMedia Athens as an online counterpublic sphere and part of a global network of other independent media producers.

I suggest adding to existing public spheres theory especially when applied to social media in Western democracies by highlighting the fluidity of social media spaces. Rather than continuing the terminology of public sphere(s) and counterpublic(s) I suggest a new model and language: the model of fluid public clusters. I do not use the term “sphere” as I agree with Gitlin’s (1998) critique that a sphere suggests too much perfection and symmetry. My model attempts to include new insights that have accumulated regarding the original public sphere concept. Most, however, do not use a new language.

While this might not be a completely perfect metaphor, the idea of a lava lamp illustrates some of the main aspects of the model of fluid public clusters. Imagine a lava lamp. Watch how the transparent liquid inside heats up slowly. Soon emerging clusters of molten wax of different, amorphous shapes rise in the fluid that surrounds them. Imagine how the clusters move through the heated liquid, at different speeds, into different directions, how they near each other or separate into smaller clusters. But also imagine how the clusters can grow or shrink on their own as the temperature changes, how they bump into each other, partially overlapping or completely merging. That is, imagine a fluid environment comprised of many different clusters of people and their concerns, which can stay stable to a certain extent but can also

overlap, fall apart, separate, re-form, or merge. It is a space where once you have access to that space you can create a new cluster or promote and change existing clusters. Clusters then compete for their growth, prominence and voice among the other clusters, fed by the attention, actions and reactions other clusters. The cluster represents a certain group of people but also their concerns. As people have multiple dimensions to their identity they (can) participate in different clusters at the same time.

This is not to say that all clusters are equally resilient or sustained over time with the same amount of resources. Some clusters might be more persistent. Others will challenge persistent clusters but might not be successful to do so. Different clusters have different amounts and kinds of resources to push other clusters aside, obscure or replace them. Longer established clusters might have more resources and resilience, acknowledging Goode's (2013) continuities of "old mediascapes" (p. 114). Thus, not all clusters are equal but they reflect varying and overlapping degrees on a sliding scale of persistence and power. Rather than Gitlin's (1998) binary of information poor and information rich or Habermas' distinction between a mass and a critical public, I incorporate Norval's (2012) broader range of critical feedback that can come from anyone. This also reflects Marchart's (2011) concept of minimal politics:

We can meaningfully speak about politics *whenever* the minimal conditions of collectivity, strategy, conflictuality, and organization are met – no matter how big the collective, how effective the strategy, how intense the conflict, and how good (or bad) the organization. A renewed reflection on politics will have to rehabilitate the smallest political acts and the most modest achievements that are, provided the conditions are met, as *political* as the greatest revolution (p. 972, emphasis in original).

This concept means that the “smallest political act” and “most modest achievement” by people in a cluster counts toward political public debate. That means fluid public clusters can challenge or oust other more persistent and powerful clusters. They can shift notions of what was previously thought impossible to redefine what can be considered possible in the future.

The lava lamp metaphor applies to a national level or across national boundaries in Western democracies. Above all it is meant to reflect the fluidity of public clusters forming and re-forming online, but which also remain tied to offline identities. The fluid in the lava lamp, in which the public clusters float, illustrates the continuing social practices that co-exist and struggle with emerging ones. The fluid represents a space for manifold actions and interactions between fluid public clusters rather than two poles. The lava lamp metaphor, with its uncountable number of clusters, also reflects the increasing challenge for us as participants in public clusters to keep track of all other ongoing concerns and conversations on as they float in and out of our attention over time. The molten wax clusters, which are moving in the hot fluid, remind us of the malleability of our times and spaces, the uncertainty of which dents and stretches can and will occur. The clusters in the fluid illustrate that we have to recognize that the human remains “an animal suspended in the webs of significance he himself has spun” (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). But humans also strive toward “genuine debate and mutual participation” as a “real concrete and urgent possibility” and a “task before us” (Bernstein, 2012, p. 777). My model of fluid public clusters attempts to capture this struggle.

Social media which are geared toward producing and distributing information and news as well as community building can help to create and grow public clusters in a certain space, at a certain time, for a certain duration and surrounding certain issues/topics connected to certain people. Because of the speed that social media offer for voicing and sharing public expressions, in my theory I want to highlight the fluidity of clusters and issues. They can emerge in short time, can connect to ongoing related issues or highlight new ones. Keeping access issues in mind, social media do allow more individuals and hence clusters to use produce content and distribute it to others. Social media provide tools in democracies, which previously were restricted to fewer individuals and clusters.

Public spheres theories have especially addressed the democratic tradition in political theory (Gitlin, 1998), which rests on the assumption that “decisions are made by and for the people” (p. 167). The model of fluid public clusters is mostly concerned with advancing public spheres theory in Western democracies. That is, at this point, it is not interested in the emergent democratic processes in countries of the Middle East toward which many other scholars have turned their attention.

Contrary to Habermas – I argue that fluid public clusters online can further democratize democracies. Democracy has been formed and changed over time in regard to whom to include and to which extent. Democracy, I think, is “not done yet;” every society needs to include more representatives of different groups of people to become even more democratic. I argue that in certain cases that can happen with the aid of social media. In sum, my larger research project centers around the following question:

What does it exactly mean to “democratize” a democratic society via web 2.0 media spaces?

I argue that to democratize means giving individuals who have had little political and attention power in the past voice, listen to and seriously consider and discuss what they have to say in a broader debate among many fluid public clusters. Thus, success of democratizing means having the chance of a meaningful participation in a debate that reaches many public clusters, including also more dominant or more persistent ones. In other words I mean: “genuine deliberative encounters” in which “users gain some new knowledge or understanding through exposure to the ideas, perspectives and identities of others, and where users perceive their practices to have some social or cultural impact” (Goode, 2013, p. 114). Thus more specifically my research question is:

To which extent and in what ways have individuals harnessed web 2.0 spaces in Western democracies to become successful in promoting their issues to be more widely and meaningfully discussed, that is to “democratize”?

To operationalize and test my theory, I explored this broad research questions in regard to women, who historically have been disadvantaged in access to (news) media production and in representations in (news) media. Women continue to struggle with access to established (news) media production, especially the more editorial power a position offers and in regard to ownership/executive power.

Little worldwide research on women in news media production and ownership has been done since a 1995 UNESCO study which estimated that women producers in news and other media ranged “around 30 percent down to the single digits” around

the world, except for a few Nordic countries where women worked in equal numbers as men (International Women's Media Foundation, 2012). More recent numbers collected between 2008 and 2010 showed a similar overall number with women representing only a third of full-time journalists in 522 companies surveyed in 59 nations (Byerly, 2011). But Byerly also found an increase in top management positions at media companies from 12 percent in the 1995 to 27 percent in 2011. Especially in Eastern and Northern Europe women made up 43 and 37 percent of top management respectively. In some other countries, such as South Africa, women exceeded men in such positions with 80 percent. "Glass ceilings" for women existed in 20 of the 59 countries, mostly in middle and top management; only half of all analyzed companies had gender equity policies (Byerly, 2011). Another recent global inquiry across 108 countries and 1,281 newspapers, radio, and television stations found that women made up 24 percent to 48 percent among reporters (Who Makes the News, 2010). Both studies provide a wealth of specific national and regional data, which cannot be detailed at this point. They demonstrate that national and regional contexts shape the numbers and positions of women in established news media and to a smaller extent in online news production.

Before the advent of the internet, women (and minorities) have used other media and technologies to debate among themselves, to create counternarratives and to bring their concerns into a wider public.

Feminists in the United States, especially in the 1970s and 1980s (often referred to as the second wave of feminism), published own newsletters and journals. They also used mainstream media to raise the public consciousness, mobilize women and

introduced phrases and terms into the wider public to describe women's experiences, for instance regarding gendered violence (Byerly, 2013). "Their collective agency created a contemporary feminist public sphere through mainstream and alternative media over some forty years" (p. 214). Zarnow (2010) detailed how *Ms.*, *Sassy*, *Bust* and *Bitch* magazines have contributed to creating a feminist space in the United States. While *Ms.* magazine is rooted in the second wave of the 1970s; third wavers founded *Bust* and *Bitch* in the 1990s (*Sassy* existed from 1988 to 1994). Zarnow concluded their popular feminism has struggled to balance feminist values and commercial success. Steiner (2005) provided a detailed example of how (second wave feminist) women of the National Organization for Women (NOW) have used public access television to broadcast their own newscast. She concluded the channel empowered the individual producers and countered mainstream hegemony.

Zobl, Reitsamer and Grünangerl (2012) summarized how feminists in Europe have been producing alternative media offline and online. They found 425 media projects (printed magazines, e-zines and blogs) led by women or feminists in 19 European countries: 56 in Germany, 51 in the United Kingdom and 12 in Switzerland.² Two thirds of the 425 media did not use social media. They are mostly produced by independent (women's) organizations. Their do-it-yourself culture stems from the avantgarde arts movement in the 1950s. They include publications that were founded in the 1970s as well as more recently created publications. But only a third of has used social media to continue to challenge power structures and to produce alternative content.

² The book provides a list of all contemporary feminist media in all 19 countries (Zobl, Reitsamer & Grünangerl, 2012).

Since the advent of the internet, the question remains how women have used social media to create critical and politically relevant content outside established news media. Thus, more concretely this dissertation asks:

To which extent and in what ways have women in different democratic countries used web 2.0 spaces (including blogs, own websites Facebook, Twitter but possibly also other sites) to address and promote issues and needs of women, that is, to “democratize” a debate across larger parts of society?

How do women define and measure their success of speaking out in web 2.0 spaces such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and forums?

How do women define and measure, if they do, “democratization”?

Which roles do national and regional context play in how women use web 2.0 spaces to address their concerns to a wider public?

I investigated these research questions by interviewing women bloggers in four Western democracies, the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland. I detail my methodological approaches in Chapter 4 after surveying relevant literature on political web 2.0 content production (by women) in different national contexts in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Literature review

Relevant for my study are two areas of scholarship touching on online public clusters: political content production in social media in different national contexts and the intersections of gender or women and political content production in social media in different national contexts. Last, for a wider context, is a brief excursus on the history of women's rights in the four countries of interest to this study: the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland. Excluded are studies which focus on teenage bloggers, for two reasons: they constitute a separate field of study and are not the focus of this dissertation in which I interviewed adult bloggers/online writers 18 years or older.

3.1 Political content production in social media in different national contexts

That national and cultural context shape online public sphere activity, including political blogging, has been demonstrated in studies set in Germany (Albrecht, Lübcke & Hartig-Perschke, 2007; Eckert, Chadha & Koliska, 2014), France (Echchaibi, 2009), Romania (Barbovski, 2008), Israel (Vaisman, 2009), Egypt (El Nawawy & Khamis, 2011), Morocco (Douai, 2009), Iran (Khiabany & Sreberny, 2007), Saudi Arabia (Tschirhart, 2014), Singapore (Ibrahim, 2009) and Australia (Bruns & Adams, 2009).

Several of these studies used a broader notion of what can count as political expressions in blogging. For instance, Elsadda's (2010) study of literary blogs of three women in Egypt argued that these blogs blur the personal and the political as they put individual stories into a broader social context. She argued that women

bloggers who posted their short stories and essays online contested the social practice of gender separation in public. They pointed out that this practice has been at odds with another strong social expectation of finding a (heterosexual) partner to marry. Elsadda demonstrated that these literary blogs reached into political discussions of the role of women in Egyptian society. Similarly, Khiabany and Sreberny (2007) wrote that Iranian bloggers from a wide range of backgrounds have merged the personal with the political, including defiant acts of escaping the political reality by using entertainment. The authors concluded that entertaining content can be political as well. Goode and McKee (2013) showed how a distinction between “pre-political creative expression and criticism” (p. 115), as envisioned in Habermas’ literary public sphere, and political deliberation only makes sense when seen as a continuum. They argued for a “co-existence of the deliberative and the expressive” (p. 115) and that changing someone’s way of thinking also counts as “political outcome” (p. 115), linking back to the feminist insight that the personal is political (Hanisch, 1969).

Further, comparative scholarship in communication and media studies has highlighted that contrasting different contexts works to reveal national particularities but also commonalities (Horton, 2011; Goroshko & Zhigalina, 2011), raises awareness of other systems and alternatives (Cantrell & Bachmann, 2008), and adds nuance to analysis (Russell & Echchaibi, 2009; see also Hanitzsch, 2009).

For instance, Hyun (2012) argued that “national particularities” (p. 408) in the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany remain relevant to understand why political blogging is more vibrant in the United States and the United Kingdom than in Germany. Hayward (2008) delineated how national and supranational legal

contexts have burdened political bloggers in the United States, Germany and the European Union in different ways. Goroshko and Zhigalina (2011) studied the intersections of political blogging and gender in the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, the Ukraine and Belarus. They concluded that culture and technology advancement have had a greater impact on political blogging than the gender of blog owners. While these studies are good examples for comparative research about the adoption and use of political blogging, they often are centered on a U.S. context: several scholars have been criticizing the dominance of U.S. focused research (Goel, 2009; Goroshko & Zhigalina, 2011).

The rapid rise of social media, and particularly blog use, in countries such as France (Russell & Echchaibi, 2009), Iran (Khiabany & Sreberny, 2007), Egypt (El Nawawy & Khamis, 2011), the United States and the United Kingdom (Hyun, 2012) stands in contrast to more dampened political blogging activity in countries such as Germany, Switzerland, Austria (Gasser & Gerlach, 2012; Hyun, 2012; Albrecht, Lübcke & Hartig-Perschke, 2005; Lardinois, 2009; Eckert, Chadha & Koliska, 2014) and Australia (Russell & Echchaibi, 2009). In these countries political blogs thus far have only reached niche audiences, do not have much power to contest established news media, and have had little effect on political debates. Scholars pointed toward a range of reasons: culture and bureaucracy that have limited innovative online start-ups, especially in Germany (Lardinois, 2009; Gasser & Gerlach, 2012; Eckert, Chadha & Koliska, 2014); smaller population size that need fewer (news) media channels to get messages across (Gasser & Gerlach, 2012); the strong position of established news media as authorities (Albrecht, Lübcke & Hartig-Perschke, 2005;

Neuberger & Nürnbergk, 2010; Russell & Echchaibi, 2009; Gasser & Gerlach, 2012; Eckert, Chadha & Koliska, 2014); and legal threats to bloggers (Eckert, Chadha & Koliska, 2014; Hayward, 2008).

These examples stand in contrast to the often-cited U.S. examples of political blogs and their effects on national debates and the notion of journalism. Blogs have acted as watchdogs over established news media, have reminded journalists that they are humans with a personal voice, and have highlighted the need for more transparency in journalism. U.S. journalism in turn has influenced political blogs to become more professionalized in content production, to add editing layers and multiple authors, and to pay more attention to credibility (Davis, 2012). On a much lesser level, German editors-in-chief of newspapers reported that they were using blogs also as inspiration for sources, story ideas and arguments (Neuberger & Nürnbergk, 2010). German political blogs have not managed to set own focal points; their choice of salient stories followed those on five German evening news shows (Buhl, 2013). While both countries see a process of competition/conflict, complementation and supplementation (Davis, 2012; Neuberger & Nürnbergk, 2010) in their respective social media-journalism relationships, the U.S. context has demonstrated a much higher level of co-dependency between them in shaping political discourse. While blogs have had agenda-setting effects in the United States, nevertheless, established U.S. (news) media remain the main agenda-setters (Meraz, 2009).

As the examples above demonstrate it is valuable to examine national contexts, to compare and contrast how social media, and especially blogs, have been

adopted and used for political expression. In turn, using blogs as points of inquiry can yield insights into national contexts and current political situations. With online spaces having become a new playground for public spheres, indeed, for fluid public clusters as I argue, it is of great interest to examine whose voices get heard this way in public debates.

3.2 Women and political content production in social media

Several studies have examined the intersections of gender or women and (political) blogging within the four Western democracies that are of particular interest for this dissertation but also beyond. I first summarize studies set in countries other than the four countries that are the focus of this dissertation (United States, United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland). Then I turn to each of the four examined countries.

As detailed above Elsadda (2010), but also El Nawawy & Khamis (2011), have emphasized that Egyptian blogs and Muslim discussion forums have become sites of self-expression especially for women, who before have been more restricted in speaking out in public. Both studies argued that blogging in Egypt has blurred the realms of private and public, thus allowing women to bring their personal stories into the public, political realm. Khamis (2010) pointed to more examples of successful blogs authored by women in Gaza and in Iraq, which

offered unique opportunities for these newly emerging alternative female voices to make themselves heard within contemporary cyberspace discourses, as representatives of a new Islamic feminist agenda that manifests social and political resistances in different forms and on many levels (p. 251).

Similarly, but yet distinctly different, women's rights advocates in Saudi Arabia have

used blogs to renegotiate interpretations of Islamic texts in favor of more fairness for women (Tschirhart, 2014). In a discourse analysis of eight blog posts and their 889 comments of one of the most influential English-language blogs in Saudi Arabia, Tschirhart described how Saudiwomen.me has contributed to an emerging public sphere online for women. He argued that Saudi women's standpoints are "unique" as they largely rejected Western feminism. Instead, Saudi women's "feminism" (a term associated with Western countries) focused on re-interpreting Islam to challenge the government's monopoly on interpretations of their religion. The blog author, Eman Al Nafjan (a woman), and commentators on her blog discussed the status of women and cited Islamic texts to restore "egalitarian modes of Islam." That is, other than more secular oriented women's movement in Egypt and Malaysia, Saudi women's rights advocates recognized the separation between and different roles of genders and worked within this framework to seek political influence. They envisioned a Saudi Islamic state that encourages women to participate in the public sphere. Tschirhart concluded that scholars who study how deliberations in the public sphere can be increased "must address socioeconomic, cultural, and political factors that influence the development of public and counter public sphere" (last paragraph).

Goroshko and Zhigalina (2011) contrasted gender between 10 political blogs in the United Kingdom and the United States (five each) and 10 blogs in Russia, Belarus, and the Ukraine. Women authored five blogs each in the English-language and the Russian-language sample. Using a definition by Barbovschi (2008, p. 2), they defined a political blog as a platform that presents "unmediated voices of political actors, specialist/conventional journalists (connected to traditional media), opinion

leaders, politicians, politically informed non-journalists and popular bloggers.”

Despite this wide-ranging definition of political blogs, the authors concluded that in none of the five countries women were dominant in the political blogging scenes.

They also found that women authors of Russian-language blogs had more comments, addressed more issues, were less open to the public and did not reveal party affiliations compared to women authors of English-language blogs.

Two blog posts pointed to conflicting assessments and numbers of women bloggers in the “Euroblogosphere,” that is blogs about the European Union (EU) and its politics. Frisch (2010) briefly introduced “20 women who run the EU (blogosphere)” as contributors to group blogs but also as individual bloggers. They were politicians within EU institutions (for instance commissioners), journalists, PR consultants, lobbyists, and scholars. They came from many, if not all, EU member states. In contrast, political scientist Ronny Patz (2012) assessed that women maintained only 10 percent to 15 percent of active blogs on EU politics. Similar to Frisch (2010), he wrote these were EU commissioners, members and staff of the EU parliament, scholars, journalists, and activists who contributed to group blogs or wrote on their own site. Patz added one statistic showed that men also dominated tweeting about EU politics. He assesses that more women tweeted than blogged about EU politics. He concluded that “in a political environment where male politicians, male journalists and male bloggers still have the majority, attention to male blogging and male bloggers is also still higher than attention to female bloggers.” Yet, as a policy paper by the European Union on gender, new media and increased political participation, concluded: “Women *are* online, engaged and willing to advocate for

their own rights and issues. Larger organisations, including political parties should learn to listen” (emphasis in original).

Turning to the four countries of interest to this study, below I summarize women’s (political) blogging in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland.

In the United States, women and men blog in even numbers but mostly men (political) bloggers have captured the attention of a wider public, link mostly to each other, and consider topics that women blog about as not political, following a rather narrow definition of what political means (Harp & Tremayne, 2006). This appears to be the case especially for women bloggers who are left-leaning and/or feminist (Rantliff, 2003). In a study that examined the links from the top ten “most important weblogs” on the website Blogstreet (all maintained by men), outgoing links to other men’s blogs greatly outnumbered outgoing links to women’s blogs. Among the minority of women blogs that got linked to, the majority was politically conservative (Rantliff, 2003). (I elaborate on the low visibility of women bloggers in Chapter 4 on method below).

Widening one’s scope of what counts as political, leads to results in other studies that show participation of women bloggers in public debate. For instance, in a survey of 307 women bloggers on all topics (albeit unclear if all were located in the United States), 62 percent said they used their blog to express their opinions (Bane, Cornish, Erspamer & Kampman, 2010). Stavrositu and Sundar (2012) found in a survey of 340 women bloggers on the BlogHer network that diary-style blogs empowered women by establishing a “strong sense of community” (p. 369) and

topical blogs (filter blogs) by “enhancing their sense of agency” (p. 369).

Hendrickson (2008) examined the newsgathering of the feminist and entertainment multi-author blog Jezebel. She argued the site exemplified a new hybrid form of online media in which the women contributors mix personal with political posts. They also worked together via a virtual newsroom and mostly computer-mediated communication. Another field regarding women bloggers in the United States have been studies of blogs by mothers about parenting. For instance, Lopez’ (2009) analysis of the 2005 BlogHer network conference for women bloggers argued that while the terminology of “mommy blogs” is demeaning, these blogs built community and “challenged dominant representations of motherhood” (p. 729). Husbands (2008) demonstrated that women have used the blog *The Shape of a Mother* (Bonnie, 2014) to increase the visibility of narratives about their pregnant and postpartum bodies, which in “popular media” are “objectified, ignored or represented only in a particular and narrow way ... a privileged body ... increasingly associated with wealth whiteness, slimness and youth” (p. 69). Morrison (2010) argued “personal mommy blogging” creates “intimate public,” which equally value personal self-expression and community development.

In the United Kingdom, women and men enjoy similar levels of access to the internet, yet political blogging is dominated by men: 85 percent of political media blogs were written by men; 85 percent of individuals blogs in the “Total Political Blog Award 2010” were written by men; and 79 percent of the posts and 90 percent of the comments on the blog *Liberal Democratic Voice* were written by men (Fallon, Williamson & Pack, 2011). Regarding politicians using Twitter, women and men

members of the British parliament appeared to be active in similar numbers. Depending on party, 41 percent (Conservative), 43 percent (Liberal Democrat) and 49 percent (Labour) of women tweeted. In contrast, 30 percent, 56 percent and 45 percent of men members of the respective parties tweeted. The authors concluded this gender imbalance resulted from “wider political exclusion, not digital exclusion and, where women are active in politics, they are equally as likely as their male counterparts to be digitally active” (Fallon, Williamson & Pack, 2011, last paragraph). The authors added that women discuss politics in spaces that have traditionally been viewed as non-political such as the parenting and blog network Mumsnet.

The woman-dominated Mumsnet has become a “major player in governmental policy campaigns and [is] considered a key stakeholder on children and sexualization issues” (Pedersen & Smithson, 2013, p. 99). Particularly during the 2010 election, Mumsnet and its users drew attention to the network. They held web chats with then incumbent prime minister Gordon Brown, and candidates David Cameron and Nick Clegg. Many British news media and several U.S. news media subsequently dubbed this the “Mumsnet election” (Mumsnet, 2010). Mumsnet has continued to host debates on political issues such as public sector pensions, the National Health Service, the European Union, and Margaret Thatcher’s rejection to meet with U.S. vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin (Fallow, Williamson & Pack, 2011). Mumsnet continues to organize political campaigns regarding the portrayal, sexualization and exploitation of girls and women (Mumsnet, 2014).

Generally, however, more women than men write blogs in the United Kingdom (Nowson, 2006) and women provided more context in their writing than men, except for blogs geared toward academic writing. Pedersen and Macafee (2007) studied the attitudes and practices of 48 women and 48 men British bloggers. Both genders also regarded blogging as a leisure activity and received the same levels of satisfaction from it. But more women than men were using blogs as a creative outlet. Women bloggers focused more on personal content, the social aspects of blogging, and more often preferred to remain anonymous than men who emphasized information.

In Germany, Schmidt (2008) found women were underrepresented in the [now defunct ranking site] Deutsche Blogcharts. The Blogcharts listed blogs on political and other topics: men wrote 78.6 percent of individual blogs and 60 percent of group blogs; 23.4 percent of group blogs were maintained by women and men, and only 13.3 percent by women only. In contrast, in a content analysis of a random sample from the blog aggregator site Blogstats, Harders and Hesse (2006) found that women authored 67.4 percent of 464 German-language blogs; and the majority of women were teenagers. Thus it remained unclear how many women and men blog in Germany but it has become apparent that where and how you count matters for who you find.

A study on the factors for the slower growth of the political and current affairs blog scenes in Germany (compared to the United States and other European countries such as the United Kingdom, France and Poland) only included three women among 28 interviewees (Eckert, Chadha & Koliska, 2014). The authors did not further

explore gender. In contrast, an interview series with 28 Muslim bloggers in Germany, who have emerged as a counter public online, included 15 women and 13 men (Eckert & Chadha, 2013). Apart from Islam, these bloggers also wrote about political topics ones such as immigration and integration; women bloggers were very vocal. In fact, the most famous blogger in Germany who identifies as Muslim is a young Turkish-German woman, Kübra Gümüşay. She blogs about political issues such as integration, discrimination, media critique and Islam (among other issues) and has challenged the image of the “silent Muslima” in the public sphere. She has become a speaker at conferences, universities and events in Germany and the United States; she has been interviewed repeatedly in German and British news media; and she became the first columnist in German news media to wear a headscarf (Winkler, 2013).

While studies specifically on women political bloggers were lacking, several blog posts focused on them. For instance, Korbik (2010) reported on several women bloggers in Germany such as Anne Roth, Vera Bunse and Antje Schrupp, and in France, who echoed the sentiment that they do not receive the same level of recognition as men bloggers on politics.³

Carstensen (2009) argued that within the German feminist network the internet was hardly used for discussion and political action at the beginning of the 2000s. But over the past fifteen years feminist politics has become more dynamic because of social media. But social media would remain a complex space that is neither a “men’s realm” nor a “room for women” nor a “space beyond two genders”

³ For a list of links to articles (mostly in German) published between 2008 and 2010 about the lower recognition of women bloggers in Germany, see Mädchenmannschaft (2010).

(Carstensen, 2012, p. 30). Hansen (2013) detailed the development of the group blog Mädchenmannschaft [Girls' Team]. Since its creation in 2007, it has become the biggest feminist blog in Germany. She argued Mädchenmannschaft has contributed to building a feminist community online and has awakened the broader society to recognize the presence of feminist women bloggers. Meanwhile, the feminist group blog kleinerdrei (2014) was established in 2013. It gained popularity when its founders started the #aufschrei [#outcry] hashtag on Twitter that led to a national debate on everyday sexism in January 2013 (Eckert & Puschmann, 2013; Maireder & Schlögl, 2014). Another study, still in progress, analyzes how feminist blogs in Germany envision concepts of manliness (personal communication, March 4, 2014).⁴ Thus feminists have established sites and blogs to make their voices increasingly heard. Moreover, Ganz (2013) outlined how feminist perspectives can be injected into the discourse on internet politics. She suggested adding a debate on communication cultures based on the (also negative) experiences of feminist bloggers. Carstensen (2012) argued similarly that social media remain spaces in which debates about inclusion, marginalization and opportunities play out. Thus they remain important spaces of inquiry for research on gender and feminist politics.

In Switzerland, more men than women use social networks (60 and 55 percent respectively), blogs (46 and 34 percent), and Twitter (20 and 16 percent) (Künzler, 2013). But studies that focus on (women) and/or political blogging in Switzerland could not be found (to the best of the author's knowledge). Several articles, online platforms and blogs indicated that women blog about political issues. For instance,

⁴ The authors would not send me proofs to read the study before its publication.

the discussion platform Politnetz offers an online space for politicians to interact with their constituents and gives “Swiss citizens an audible voice any time” (SRF, 2013). With more than 21,000 registered users it is the biggest political discussion forum in Switzerland. For its efforts to increase political transparency and participation, the site won the prestigious Online Grimme Award in 2013. Politnetz (2014) offers a gendered overview over all national, cantonal and local politicians who are registered with the site: 883 women compared to 2,562 men politicians were listed as of April 2014.

Another blog hosting site, Frauen Blog (2014) addresses the topics “women in life, women in politics, women at work, women and men.” But it also emphasized, that men are also welcome as the blog is intended to serve as a platform to enhance the exchange of opinions between men and women. It listed 343 users (no gender provided), 1645 articles, and 2,531 comments as of April 2013.

In an interview with the German feminist group blog Mädchenmannschaft (n.d.), two Swiss women bloggers said that there would be too few feminist blogs in Switzerland, compared to Germany and Austria. In their own blog, Total Quality Women, they wanted to blog about current affairs, politics and the portrayal of women but also Swiss specific topics such as racism, islamophobia and the backlash against feminism in the country.

Perhaps the most well-known blog on political issues operated by women in Switzerland has been the Mamablog (2014). It is part of the website of the daily Swiss newspaper *Tagesanzeiger* and has covered politics concerning family, children and relationships since its inception in 2009. For their work, the two women blog

authors won the award of journalist of year in 2010, the first time the prize was given to online journalism (Tagesanzeiger, 2010).

3.2 Excursus: women's history in Europe and in the United States

This section provides a brief summary of the historical context for the four examined countries – the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland. Rather than describing a complete chronology, I focus on specific markers in their women's histories.

One of the main markers of achievement for women has been suffrage, that is women's rights to vote, especially on a federal level. Women obtained suffrage on a federal level in the United Kingdom and in Germany in 1918, as did most countries in Europe. Switzerland was a special case: as one of the last countries in Europe it established the right to vote federally for women only in 1971 (Towns, 2010). Moreover, it took until 1990 until women could vote on all political levels in Switzerland (Furter, 2003). Similar to most European countries, in the United States white women obtained the right to vote on a federal level in 1920 (Towns, 2010). But it took until the 1960s and 1970s until African-American women and Spanish-speaking Filipina and Puerto Rican women could vote, too (Hewitt, 2010).

In most of Europe, demands for voting rights for women began at least in the 1840s. Women in the United Kingdom and in Germany were actively collaborating with other suffragettes in the United States and other European countries respectively (Towns, 2010). Again Switzerland was an outlier: similar efforts there did not start until the end of the 1890s (Furter, 2003). More parallel with efforts in the United Kingdom, in the United States demands for voting rights reached back to at least the

1820s. They were intertwined with anti-slavery activism; white *and* Black women were part of the early women's rights movements (Hewitt, 2010).

Because Switzerland is an outlier, I will briefly sketch its longer struggle to achieve women's suffrage. During the 1920s when most of European countries and the United States had already established women's voting rights, suffragettes in Switzerland submitted a petition with a record number of signatures for the same rights, but "[men] politicians remained unimpressed" (Furter, 2003, p. 16).

Remarkably, until the 1950s, Swiss women citizens, but not Swiss men citizens, lost their citizenship if they married a foreigner becoming foreigners themselves in their home country. In contrast, foreign women who married a Swiss man gained immediate Swiss citizenship (Wirz, 2000). It was also in the 1950s when a protest by women's organizations regarding a change in the law of civil security revived demands for voting rights. In 1959, however, a first national vote rejected giving voting rights to women. But starting in 1959 voting rights became established on the local and cantonal level moving from the community to the national level. In the late 1960s Switzerland came under pressure, as the lack of women's suffrage became a problem when the country wanted to sign the European Human Rights Convention. This situation and a massive march by suffragettes in 1971 triggered a second national vote; now a majority voted in favor of women's voting rights on a national level. In 1990 the Federal Court of Switzerland forced the last canton (of Appenzell Innerrhoden) to introduce women's voting rights, completing the suffrage process.⁵

⁵ For a more detailed history of the process to achieve suffrage in Switzerland see Eidgenössische Kommission für Frauenfragen [Federal Commission for Women] (n.d.).

Beyond the demand to obtain the right to vote, the history of the women's rights movements in the United States reaches back into the late 18th century. For instance, Mary Wollstonecraft published *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792, in which she recognized the construction of gender and the dichotomized spheres for women and men, with women being objects of women (Schneir, 1994). In Europe, in the 16th to 18th centuries a model of "one sex" was pervasive. It was based on interpreting ancient Greek ideas that humans are of one sex. Thus, difference between sexes was not emphasized; women of a certain class were rulers, owned property and had other rights. Only in the 19th century society started to view women as a distinct sex, opposite to men. The state came to be understood as the realm of men; women became excluded from formal activity in state affairs. This led to struggles over defining these differences between women and men and what they implied, especially for women. Consequently, movements for rights for women in European countries emerged in the late 18th century and grew stronger in the 19th and early 20th century (Towns, 2010).

In the process of fighting for women's rights and political representation, national women's policy bureaus were founded to bring women's issues into formalized policies and into a state's structure (Towns, 2010). For instance, within the context of the United Nations (UN), temporary and more permanent government offices dedicated to the status of women were promoted. Most Western European countries established advisory commission or committees for the advancement of

women in the 1960s: the United States in 1961, (West) Germany in 1964,⁶ and the United Kingdom in 1969 (Towns, 2010). The United States and the United Kingdom became UN members in 1945; West Germany in 1973, joined by East Germany in 1990. Switzerland did not join the UN until 2002 (UN, 2014). It founded a Federal Office for Gender Equality in 1988. In 1997 it ratified the most important international treaty to protect women's rights and to support gender equity, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (Schweizerische Konferenz der Gleichstellungsbeauftragten, n.d.). In contrast, the German Democratic Republic (former East Germany) ratified CEDAW in 1980, the Federal Republic of Germany (former West Germany) in 1985 and the United Kingdom in 1986. The United States⁷ signed the treaty in 1980 but has not ratified it (UN Treaty Collection, 2014).

Last is a brief look at the current political representation of women on the national level. The United Kingdom has had one woman, Margaret Thatcher, as prime minister between 1979 and 1990 (who also has been the longest serving prime minister in the country). In Germany, Angela Merkel became the first woman chancellor in 2005 and has remained in office since (there is no limit to reelect chancellors in Germany). In Switzerland, a seven-person federal council fulfills the functions of the head of government. Established in 1848, it took until 1984 until a woman became one of the seven councilors for the first time. Between 2010 and 2012

⁶ East Germany is not listed. This is perhaps based on Towns' (2010) explanation that the UN assessed that in socialist states women had reached higher educational levels, were more engaged in public life and paid labor, were legally better protected and better provided for by health care systems.

⁷ For more details on continued attempts to have the United States ratify the treaty, see CEDAW Task Force (2014).

the council briefly had a majority of four women federal councilors for the first time but otherwise has been men-dominated (de Graffenried, 2010; Swiss Confederation, 2014). In the United States several Black and white women candidates ran for the presidency in the past but have failed to win the office thus far. Potential women candidates for the 2016 U.S. presidential election, who frequently have been mentioned in the U.S. news media, are former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren. In parliament, in 2012, in Germany, women held 33 percent of seats in the lower chamber and 28 percent in the upper chamber. In Switzerland, these were 29 percent and 20 percent respectively; in the United Kingdom 22 percent in each chamber; and in the United States 17 percent in each chamber (Sedghi, 2012).

Chapter 4: Method

Qualitative research is best suited for providing “rich, detailed descriptions of human experience, dialogic encounters between self and other, and the inductive development of theory from intimate knowledge of situated practice” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 28). Qualitative research is also highly effective at refining concepts, testing theories and generating new theoretical ideas (Munck, 2004). Consequently, I adopted a qualitative method to analyze the experiences and perceptions of successful women bloggers/online writers in four Western democracies. I combined this with a comparative and feminist approach, conducting in-depth interviews with women and textual analysis of their texts online. I interviewed 109 women in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland about their experiences, perceptions and the process that has enabled them to promote issues regarding women, family and maternity they are concerned about. In this chapter, I detail first the values of a feminist research approach. Then I elaborate on my rationale for a transnational comparison and the selection of countries. Last, I detail my interview framework and sampling method.

4.1 Research approach

Feminist scholars have emphasized four principles for research (Fonow & Cook, 1991): critically reflecting on the research process and the researcher’s position; being action-oriented; considering the consequences of the research process, and using situations at hand for research inquiries.

The first principle is critically reflecting the research process and the researcher's position as insider or outsider in relation to her/his research participants and her/his authority to decide which data are selected to create truth claims or knowledge. In the United States and Germany I have been perceived as an insider/outsider simultaneously. In Germany, I am legally treated as a "guest in the home country" while I remain a German citizen; occasionally friends or family members dub me "the American." In the United States, I am a "non-resident alien" and identifiable as a non-U.S. native speaker by my accent. Yet, after seven years of living in several U.S. states I am very familiar with American culture and able to blend in. In Switzerland and the United Kingdom I have an outsider status as I have neither conducted research about these countries nor have lived there before. To be an "outsider within," (Collins, 1986) that is, someone who is not completely inside but neither completely outside, has the advantage of potentially asking better research questions.⁸

I also kept in mind the imbalance of authority that remains in research: my participants voluntarily told me their stories but ultimately I, as the researcher, selected the quotes and combined them with prior scientifically generated knowledge (Radway, 1986). In this regard, Abha Sur (2008) reminded us that academic knowledge is constructed:

[s]cientific knowledge is dependent upon prior earlier knowledges as well as upon the social conditions in which it is produced. One cannot simply disembodify scientific knowledges from the institutions, communities, and societies that produce it (p. 78).

⁸ I will return to standpoint epistemology in the last paragraph of this section on research approaches.

Recognizing the imbalance between researcher and participant and the constructed character of academic knowledge has encouraged the idea to strive for a certain level of collaboration with participants. For instance, this could mean giving them the chance to look over interview transcripts to clarify what they said or writing collaboratively (for instance see Sangtin Writers Collective, 2006). I did not offer to send my 109 participants their transcripts from the in-depth interviews and none of my participants asked to read them.⁹ Several women asked about the background of my work and I explained my intentions in detail.

Second, feminist researchers have developed an action-oriented approach to emphasize the goal to strive for gender equity. Action-orientation refers to three approaches: first, some scholars argue that feminist research itself is a form of political action. Second, some scholars use the histories and unfolding stories of feminist action as subjects of inquiry. Third, some scholars advocate conducting research whose findings should be usable for public policy (Fonow & Cook, 1991) or contribute to the improvement of women's situations by producing knowledge that women can use (Acker, Barry & Esseveld, 1991). I believe my study is action-oriented in that second sense, as it was my conscious decision to highlight women bloggers' voices and to give women a voice by using direct quotes from in-depth interviews with them. Partly, this study also inquires into current feminist action that utilizes social media for its campaigns. Finally, it is also feminist in the third sense,

⁹ In the case that someone would have asked, I would have sent it to her.

since the appendix of this dissertation includes recommendations for women to be heard via social media safely and successfully.

I chose to study women¹⁰ as they have remained understudied compared to men in regard to communication, media, and technology. In the history of social science research, including communication research, women's ideas were mostly ignored until the 1970s (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). In regard to blogging, men have been perceived as more visible and thus findable compared to women who blog.

Evidence in the U.S. context has accumulated that by the mid-2000s, women and men produced blogs in equal numbers (Meraz, 2008; Harp & Tremayne, 2006; Pew Internet Research, 2010) or even that more women than men blog (Herring, Kouper, Scheidt & Wright, 2004). Yet, men have yet achieved higher visibility as bloggers. This, Meraz, as well as Harp and Tremayne, who examined political blogs specifically, argued this is due to a mixture of factors: an early adoption advantages; a narrow definition of politics; a de-politicization of issues that women write about; a linking culture among men bloggers excluding women, except for references to sexual-related content (Blogging Feminism, 2007); and the attribution of greater credibility to men bloggers (Armstrong & McAdams, 2009). Lopez (2009) also argued that "mommy blogs" have been demeaned since what women, and mothers, blog about is seen as inherently less political and less important than what men blog

¹⁰ I am aware that by pre-choosing women, I am implicitly accepting a binary gender system while trying to deconstruct gender. This reification problem in gender studies is well known and difficult to break (Lünenborg & Maier, 2013). The authors suggest that completely eliminating socially constructed categories, however, is not helpful to illuminate what still exists in society. As gender still remains tied to social injustice and inequality, it remains an important and central category for the analysis of societal structures (Allmendinger, 2011).

about. Similarly Chen (2013) argued using the term “mommy blog” limits mothers to one version of motherhood and keeps them captive to the notion of an ideal mother. Husbands (2008) demonstrated that women have used the blog *The Shape of a Mother* (Bonnie, 2014) to increase the visibility of narratives about their pregnant and postpartum bodies, which in “popular media” are “objectified, ignored or represented only in a particular and narrow way ... a privileged body ... increasingly associated with wealth whiteness, slimness and youth” (p. 69). She concluded the blog has successfully contested hegemonic representations, allowing participants who have used the blog to send in their stories and image to “work toward their own peace” and to contribute to a “more inclusive, positive and realistic understanding of the maternal body” (p. 77). Yet, such studies are rare and further demonstrate the invisibility and/or misrepresentation of women’s voices and bodies in established media. On the other hand, while not focusing on the terminology, Morrison (2010, 2011) and Friedman (2010) continue using the language of “mommy blogging” in their studies on blogs by mothers on motherhood and family.

This condition of invisibility or a lower profile in news media and society of women bloggers is similar in the United Kingdom: Pederson and Macafee (2007) compared the motivations, topics, and technical skills of 24 British men and women bloggers each. They found women focused more on personal posts and the social aspects of blogging, reported lesser technical sophistication, and a greater preference for anonymity compared to men. While women and their blogs are studied, the women’s blogger focus on personal matters is often used to marginalize them and to frame them as less important or political. While women and men have similar levels

of internet access in the United Kingdom, writing political blog posts or commenting of blogs is dominated by men: 85 percent of political media blogs were written by men, 85 percent of individuals blogs in the “Total Political Blog Award 2010” were written by men, and 79 percent of the posts and 90 percent of the comments on the blog Liberal Democratic Voice were written by men compared the online political participation of women and men in the United Kingdom (Fallon, Williamson & Pack, 2011). The authors concluded this gender imbalance “is the result of wider political exclusion, not digital exclusion and, where women are active in politics, they are equally as likely as their male counterparts to be digitally active” (last paragraph).

In Germany, at least two studies compared women and men bloggers. Schmidt (2008) used data from the ranking site Deutsche Blogcharts [German blog charts, now defunct (Schröder, 2012)]. They presented the top hundred German blogs with the highest number of incoming links from other blogs. He found women were underrepresented in these charts: men authored 78.6 percent of individual blogs and 60 of multi-author blogs; only 23.4 percent of multi-author blogs were written by women and men, and 13.3 percent by women only. But in contrast, in a content analysis of a random sample of the blog aggregator Blogstats, Harders and Hesse (2006) found that women authored 67.4 percent of 464 German-language blogs; the majority of women were teenagers. Schmidt (2008) and Hesse (2008) both argued that the reasons for women’s lesser visibility is connected to linking patterns among blogs and women bloggers’ more frequent use of diary-style entries, which are perceived as less valuable than “filter blogs” which focus on one topic. Hesse (2008) concluded: “The attribution of relevance is owed to societal power relations. What is

considered as part of the public, is the result of processes of negotiations by actors with powerful resources” (p. 9). Hansen (2013) writes another reason for the invisibility of women bloggers in the broader public is their young age; younger women would not be perceived as competent in society. For instance, a 2010 video interview series of opinion makers among German bloggers across topics introduced 15 men and four women (dctp.tv, 2010). Similarly, a podcast by German national public radio introduced 26 men and five women in a portrait series on bloggers between August 2010 and January 2014 on a range of topics such as cars, law, military politics, fashion, urban development, money, games, security politics, unemployment, being a teacher, being a taxi driver, software, science, and food (DRadio Wissen, 2014).¹¹ This imbalance has also been an issue at re:publica, Germany’s biggest national conference on blogging and digital society. The conference increased its percentage of women among all presenters from 19 percent in 2009 to about 30 percent in 2011 and 2012 (Hansen, 2013; Sauerbrey, 2012). But even with this minority in 2011 and only two of 180 presentations addressing feminism, attendees complained about “too many women topics and feminism topics” (Hansen, 2013; Windt, 2013).¹² Frequently, blogs have taken up the topic of lower visibility of woman as political bloggers and have linked this situation to blog rankings. For instance, Korbik (2010) reported on several women bloggers in Germany such as Anne Roth, Vera Bunse and Antje Schrupp, who echoed the

¹¹ Numbers for dctp.tv (2014) and DRadio Wissen (2014) are my own.

¹² No one had counted the number of women versus men speakers in 2013 but the conference included a rule for panels that “at least half of the team should be female” (personal communication, February 28, 2013).

sentiment that they do not receive the same level of recognition as men bloggers on politics

No academic studies comparing men and women bloggers, or focusing on women bloggers in Switzerland were found. But Schmidt (2008) and Hesse (2008) both drew samples from German-language blogs, which could have included blogs from the German-speaking majority in Switzerland, thus indicating similar trends as in Germany.¹³ For instance, a marketing company listed its top ten Swiss “women blogs” (Xeit, 2010), ranking them by visitor numbers, links, regularity of posting, Google rank, when the blog was started and other unnamed criteria. Xeit described the blogs as writing about design, fashion, dating, men, feelings, experiences, motherhood, photography, television, children’s parties and scientific studies. Notably, in the comment section one of the listed bloggers remarked that only 113 of her articles were tagged as “men” while almost 200 were about veterinarian medicine. Yet, Xeit would characterize her blog as being about “men.” Another example is the Swiss blog network Blog-Net Schweiz (2014). Among its nine categories for blogs it lists “Politics” and “Personal.” The site describes “Politics” as blogs by representatives, political parties and groups, and activists. It describes “Personal” as blogs writing about “politics, music, family, parenting, traveling, health, vacation, religion, books, photography, and whatever” (Blog-Net Schweiz, 2014).

¹³ Both studies do not detail where the German-language blogs were based and/or if this was detailed in the blog ranking and aggregator sites they used for their samples.

Thus, regarding the definition of politics, researchers¹⁴ often draw from sites that pre-define politics narrowly. For instance, in a network analysis, Hyun (2012) compared political blogs in the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany. He used lists of “political blogs” on blog ranking websites such as Wikio (now defunct), which ranked blogs by the number of incoming links. By doing this, he validated both: Wikio’s definition of what constitutes a political blog and the idea that linking is a valid way to rank which blogs count as political. Hyun did not list the names of all the blogs he investigated and did not mention gender. But, among the thirteen most linked to political blogs Hyun named for the United States, United Kingdom and Germany, only one was founded by and is prominently associated with a woman. Thus, blogs, which are not included in such ranking sites, are potentially less visible to the public and researchers. Other studies rank political blogs by their number of readers. For example, Tanni Haas (2011) wrote portraits of “20 of the world’s top political bloggers” (p. 14). He defined political bloggers as mostly “ordinary people with a passion for politics, who use their blogs to report original news for events they’ve personally witnessed, analyze and comment on the reporting by mainstream news media and champion their own political causes” (p. 9). This broad definition is helpful to potentially include women but still only four women made it into his list based on readership and influence among political blogs and in politics (so-called A-bloggers). His ranking did not include bloggers outside United States or anyone who

¹⁴ And this includes a study I conducted (Eckert, Chadha & Koliska, 2014). We also used the German ranking site Deutsche Blogcharts to identify blogs writing about political or current affairs topics. This led to an imbalanced sample of 25 men and three women. This study was part of the reason for me to examine women bloggers more closely.

did not blog in English. Two studies in Germany on political and current affairs blogging used the German blog charts to draw a sample of political blogs: Buhl's (2013) sample ten blogs were all authored by men; Eckert, Chadha and Koliska's (2014) of 28 blogs included three women.

Given this imbalance in the visibility of women bloggers and the issues they are concerned with, I chose to not compare women to men but to focus on women. As demonstrated above other studies have focused on comparing men to women bloggers.¹⁵

In the United States they include studies on political blogs (Harp & Tremayne, 2006); on language style (Schler, Koppel, Argamon & Pennebaker, 2005; Herring & Paolillo, 2006); on credibility (Armstrong & McAdams, 2009); on content or filter blogs vs. personal blogs (Herring, Kouper, Scheidt & Wright, 2004; Schler, Koppel, Argamon & Pennebaker, 2005; Wei, 2009); on knowledge sharing (Chai, Das & Rao, 2011); on political blogs (Johnston, Friedman & Peach, 2011); on health blog features Miller, Pole & Bateman, 2011). In the United Kingdom they include studies on political bloggers (Pederson & Macafee, 2007; Fallon, Williamson & Pack, 2011); on identifiability and self-presentation (Fullwood, Melrose, Morris & Floyd, 2013). In Germany they include studies on blog type, motivation, linking and demographics (Hesse, 2008; Schmidt, 2008). Several studies in each country, except Switzerland, focused on women bloggers only, for instance, in the United States Stavrisotu and Sundar (2012) on psychological empowerment; Hendrickson (2008) on the feminist

¹⁵ I am only including studies which focused on adult bloggers as my study focuses on adults. Adolescent bloggers below the age of 18 are subject of another field of study (for instance see the works of danah boyd).

and entertainment group blog Jezebel; Davis (2014, forthcoming) on blogging her academic self and several studies on blogs about motherhood (Husbands, 2008; Lopez, 2009; Friedman, 2010; Morrison, 2010; Crosby, 2011; Morrison, 2011; Chen, 2012; McDaniel, Coyne & Holmes, 2012; Chen, 2013; Friedman, 2013). In the United Kingdom, Pederson and Smithson (2013) examined the women-dominated parenting site Mumsnet. In Germany, Winkler (2013) studied the blog of a prominent Muslima and Seidel and Gerdes (forthcoming) the conceptualization of masculinity in feminist blogs. Most studies have been based on surveys, content analysis or textual analysis, case studies, interviews and auto-ethnography.

I wanted to provide space and time for women to speak out. I did not want to take away time, writing space, and energy from the women given the limited resources I have had available to conduct in-depth interviews and textual analysis of blogs in four countries. In hindsight, this also turned out to be in line with an idea that many participants expressed as a defining feature of their blog/site: providing a “safe space,” a digital room of their own in which their voices do not have to deal with the more visible voices of men which they have to counter elsewhere online and offline. In hindsight also, many women reported that among their best experiences have been instances in which others have recognized their work and ideas. This included their many, variegated political efforts to bring their concerns about women, family and maternal politics into a broader public, to have an impact on readers, acquaintances, friends, established media, politicians, and the wider societal discourse. Several women expressed gratitude toward me for interviewing them and for dedicating my research to women bloggers. Being recognized also included to be recognized not as a

lumped together category of “the women” but as complex individuals who turn their insights into action for long-term change in the societies they live in. For all these reasons, I decided to focus on women.

I focused on women who express their views on blogs, own sites, Twitter, Facebook and other social media regarding women’s, family and maternal politics. For a definition of politics, I applied Macgilchrist and Böhmig’s (2012) and understanding of Marchart’s (2011) concept of minimal politics. Rather than defining politics as only state actions, Macgilchrist and Böhmig used the concepts of agonistic democracy and hegemony. They understand minimal politics as the smallest, daily, radical, and democratic practices that destabilize hegemonic formations. They applied this definition to blogs, whose success is most often judged by the blogs’ acknowledgement in established news media or among political actors and their number of readers. Macgilchrist and Böhmig suggested, however, that daily rips in the hegemony and questioning what is at present considered possible also qualify as success of politically organized groups that contest dominant discourse and aim at long-term change. That is, political and democratizing is not only what is possible but also what aims at the impossible and transforms it into what can be considered possible in the future. They base their notion on Marchart’s (2011) concept of minimal politics:

We can meaningfully speak about politics *whenever* the minimal conditions of collectivity, strategy, conflictuality, and organization are met – no matter how big the collective, how effective the strategy, how intense the conflict, and how good (or bad) the organization. A renewed reflection on politics will have to rehabilitate the smallest political acts and the most modest achievements that are, provided the conditions are met, as *political* as the greatest revolution (p. 972, emphasis in original).

This connects also to Harders and Hesse's (2006) call to develop a new concept of participation that reflects how people participate online. They argued only with a new concept of participation the opportunities and the empowerment of women will be able to be taken into account.

Third, feminist scholars have paid attention to the consequences of their research for their participants. Thus far no negative consequences have been reported back to me from my participants, nor have I noticed any. On the contrary, many participants expressed their gratitude toward me for focusing my research on women bloggers and for including them in my project. At least two women reported on their blogs about their interview with me. Two participants asked to interview me for their blog about my dissertation after it is finished. I informed all participants that I set up two e-mail lists (one in English, one in German; in both cases the e-mail addresses of participants were in the blind copy field) to update them on the progress of my work such as conference presentations and publications. I e-mailed my participants a first update after a conference presentation in February 2014 and offered to send a summary to those who are interested. Several women asked me to e-mail them a summary; several more thanked me for the update.

Finally, feminists have used situations at hand for their point of inquiry or research material to foreground everyday practices that are taken for granted and neglected or ignored in research. I am a native German speaker with full fluency in English, so I am able to examine two German-speaking and two English-speaking countries. Based on my insider status in Germany and the United States, I chose these two countries. I chose Switzerland and the United Kingdom because I am an outsider

to both countries so that their context provided fresh perspectives to better test my theory of fluid public clusters (which I partially developed through my prior research on social media in Germany and the United States.)

This dissertation also reflects feminist standpoint epistemology in that it advocates starting with the perspectives of those who are less powerful to provide more “illuminating questions that do not arise in thought that begin with dominant groups” (Steiner, 2012, p. 262). Feminist standpoint epistemology can thus provide “less false accounts” and a richer theory (Steiner, 2012, p. 262). This can include women who have had less political power; and who have developed a “bifurcated consciousness” (Smith, 1974, p. 10) that reflects upon their participation and exclusion in a structure at the same time. To lend women a voice, in-depth interviews are an especially appropriate method, and allow for a deeper understanding of how women construct the reality of the world around them (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). In-depth interviews further acknowledge and emphasize the role of participants in research, researching *with* not only *on* people (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002), again following principles of feminist research.

4.2 Comparative approach

Comparative research, which has been prevalent since at least the 1960s, has become especially prominent as part of what Hanitzsch (2009) called the global-comparative turn in journalism studies since the 1990s. Comparative research in journalism has been conducted between the United States and the “rest” of the world (1950s-1960s), Northern and Southern countries (1970s), different Western countries (1980-1990),

and the West and the “rest” (since the 1990s) (Hanitzsch, 2009). This research has mostly been focused on differences between nation-states, as national boundaries remain the most clear-cut and feasible boundaries (Hanitzsch, 2009). This roughly 50-year old track record of international, comparative studies demonstrates that cultural, political and historical contexts shape journalism (Hanitzsch, 2009). But he criticizes that this approach has neglected a more fine-grained analysis that focuses on socio-economic features such as gender, race and class. He also argued for more discussion on theories, concepts, design and methods. Comparative research provides a “deeper understanding of the commonalities and differences between two systems” (Engesser & Franzetti, 2011, p. 274) on the macro level of media and political structures but has mostly been limited to content analyses or surveys for large data analyses. The authors lamented the unpopularity of interdisciplinary approaches in international comparative media research. Meanwhile, Atton (2009) pointed to a lack of international, comparative research into alternative and citizen journalism.

This dissertation takes these criticisms into account. It uses less often employed qualitative methods, which contribute to a discussion about which methods are useful to arrive at which findings and how to best develop and test theories in international, comparative media studies. Qualitative methods are highly efficient in describing human experiences, recognizing relevant themes that emerge and developing theory inductively (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Munck, 2004). To lend content producers a voice, in-depth interviews are an especially appropriate method. They allow for a deeper understanding of how individuals, who produce content online, make sense of the world around them (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Further, by

testing my model of fluid public spheres in four countries – the United States, United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland – I contribute to the needed discussion of explanatory theories in this field. Finally, this dissertation represents an interdisciplinary approach between media and women’s studies. This way it aids to fill a gap regarding a more fine-grained focus on gender in regard to citizen-generated journalistic projects.

4.2.1 Selection of countries

It is crucial to present a rationale for the chosen mix of countries in comparative analysis (Chang et al., 2001). I chose four Western democracies: the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland. These countries are appropriate to test my theory of fluid public clusters in democratic countries to challenge the Habermasian (2006, 2008) skepticism that social media only contain a democratizing dimension in authoritarian countries. Habermas contended that within democracies social media would only fragment and weaken elite voices. In contrast to a single public sphere as originally theorized by Habermas, Gitlin (1998) spoke of many such spheres or “public sphericules.” He defined them as “segments constitut[ing] their own deliberative assemblies” (p. 173). Gitlin pointed out that such sphericules require two conditions in democracies: deliberation and equal access to the “terms of deliberation” (p. 169). The four countries I chose satisfy Gitlin’s (1998) conditions necessary for the existence of “public sphericules” in democracies. They provide similar levels of internet access and have seen vigorous deliberations online and offline surrounding the situation and rights of women and mothers.

My selection of countries also followed the most “similar systems design” within comparative studies. In this design countries are selected that are very similar to each other to tease out what they share regarding the research questions while keeping extraneous factors as stable as possible. For instance, Hyun (2012) compared the political blogospheres in three Western democracies – in the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany – and found that political cultures in the United States and the United Kingdom “provide more fertile ground for political blogging than in Germany” (p. 408). He concluded that “national particularities” (p. 408) in these three countries continue to be relevant to understand their differing political blog scenes. In a content analysis, De Keyser and Sehl (2011) compared features for participatory journalism and interaction with the audience for eight newspapers in two Western democracies each. They found Dutch newspaper websites were ahead of German ones for accepting, producing and presenting citizen journalists’ content. Hayward (2008) compared laws that affect political blogging in two Western countries and one Western supranational entity. She found that in the United States campaign finance restrictions and attempts to limit the liability for copyright infringing of Internet Service Providers burden political blogging. In Germany, strict laws prohibiting content, such as Nazi language and symbols, defining defamation and requesting an imprint identifying the author of a website, burden political blogging. The European Union provided a middle ground between the two countries because of its more lenient content restrictions and campaign activity. But its occasional bowing to domestic laws made it an unpredictable player and added uncertainty to the legal situation of bloggers (Hayward, 2008).

As the examples above demonstrate, and as Hanitzsch (2009) described as being most common among comparative journalism, media researchers often use samples of two or three countries. Medium-sized and larger samples exist but usually a team of researchers usually handles them. For instance, Örnebring (2010, 2013), and his team of four assistants and professional translators asked 2,200 journalists in a survey and 63 journalists in interviews about their skills. He compared the European democracies of the United Kingdom, Sweden, Estonia, Poland, Germany and Italy and found that all journalists noted story telling as a core skill but that they valued networking skills differently in each country. Örnebring (2013) concluded professional journalists across the countries defined their work as collective, based on expertise and a sense of duty, to demarcate themselves from citizen journalists.

Another example is the eight-person-research team of Vujnovic et al. (2010) who compared newspaper websites in ten Western democracies. Vujnovic et al. content analyzed participatory features on the sites and interviewed 65 journalists about audience participation. Similarly, Shoemaker and Cohen's (2006) book *News Around the World: Content Practitioners and the Public* presented research comparing what is considered news in ten countries. Together with a host of other researchers they used content analysis and focus group interviews in Australia, Chile, China, Germany, India, Israel, Jordan, Russia, South Africa, and the United States. They concluded "that what people – even journalists – think is newsworthy is not necessarily what becomes news" (p. 337). Instead news emerged after a long gate-keeping process with many factors, partly shaped by national conditions.

Among the largest studies is for instance *The Global Journalist*, edited by Weaver and Willnat (2012). Together with a host of researchers, they offered new and updated findings regarding journalists' education, demographics, professional attitudes, working conditions, skills and competencies in 33 nations around the world.

Perhaps most famously within international comparative media studies, Hallin and Mancini (2004) used a most similar systems design to study the media and political systems in 18 Western democracies. They compared newspaper industries, links between actors in media and politics, professionalization and the role of the state in media systems. They divided the countries into three models: the Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Model, the North/Central European or Democratic Corporatist, and the North Atlantic or Liberal Model. More recently, they published an edited book in which they and other scholars studied countries' media systems beyond the Western world: Israel, Poland, Brazil, Russia, China, and Baltic, pan-Arabic and Asian media (Hallin & Mancini, 2011). In their conclusion they addressed criticism leveled against the Polarized Pluralist Model and their thesis of a convergence toward a Liberal model. They also discussed new variables for comparison that arose in the discussion of non-Western countries.

A higher number of countries, however, does not necessarily bring greater advantages for generalization (Kohn, 1989). I chose a medium-sized sample of four countries as it gives me a range of democratic Western countries in terms of media systems, internet use in the population, and the gender gap in internet use. As Hallin and Mancini (2004) did in their original study, I chose a most similar systems design because it reduces the number and complexity of variables to handle. This approach is

based on the idea that “systems as similar as possible with respect to as many features as possible constitute the optimal samples for comparative inquiry” (Przekowski & Teune, 1970, p. 32). This approach focuses on inter-systemic similarities and differences in which shared systemic characteristics are seen as being “controlled for” and inter-systemic differences as “explanatory differences” (p. 33). While this design helps to rule out some factors it is also important to keep in mind that the selected countries are still purposive. This could lead to overly emphasizing the findings at hand but cannot rule out other plausible explanations in a larger set (Przekowski & Teune, 1970).

I used several criteria to select different countries: recent debates relating to the situation and rights of women and mothers in social media and news media; the different media systems as described by Hallin and Mancini (2004); the limitation of my language fluency to English and German; the limited time and resources as a single researcher to conduct interviews; and the countries rank on measurements for democracy by the Global Democracy Ranking (2013). This ranking combined data from a range of indices. It only tracked countries that are categorized as “free” by Freedom House (2013). The ranking used data from Freedom House for political rights and civil liberties and press freedom; from the World Economic Forum for gender equality; and from Transparency International for corruption. Its overall ranking took the following dimensions into account: politics (political rights, civil liberties), economy (GDP, debt, inflation, unemployment), health (life expectancy, healthy expenditure, number of physicians, mortality rate), knowledge (school enrollment, student-teacher ratio, internet use, research expenditure, scientific journal

articles) and environment (CO² emission, electricity consumption). For its gender equality ranking it weighed the percentage of women in the labor force, unemployment among women in the labor force, the number of girls and women in school enrollment at all levels and life expectancy at birth. Politics weighed into the overall index with 50 percent, the other five dimensions with ten percent each. The United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland were all ranked as free democracies by Freedom House (2013).

In the following four sections I detail for each country its recent debates about the situation and rights of women and mothers; its population, political system and ranking in the Global Democracy Index; its placement in Hallin and Mancini's media models; and internet usage by gender.

4.2.2 The United States

Over at least the past five years several debates emerged in news media, politics and society regarding women's rights such as abortion and birth control and issues such as women's roles as housewives, mothers and/or professionals, often referred to as the "war on women" (ACLU, 2014). The ACLU defines this "war on women" as "legislative and rhetorical attacks on women and women's rights taking place across the nation." Examples of this "war on women," (including as actual or potential mothers), are conservative radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh insulting Georgetown University law student Sandra Fluke as a "slut" and "prostitute" when she testified that insurers should provide no-cost birth control (Stelter, 2012); the Susan G. Komen organization cutting funding for health services provider Planned Parenthood, which already faced congressional scrutiny for receiving governmental

funding for providing contraceptives (Kliff, 2012); Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney's quip of "binders full of women" (Hicks, 2012), the debate about presidential candidate Romney's wife Ann Romney's credentials of understanding what it means to be a working mother (Pollitt, 2012); the trend of closing and threatening abortion clinics (Sheppard, 2013); a pregnant Marissa Meyer becoming CEO of Yahoo (Forbes, 2012) and terminating telecommuting (Forbes, 2013); and the releases of two books. Hanna Rosin's (2012) published *The end of men*, in which she argues that gender dynamics have shifted toward the advantage of women. Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's (2013) published *Lean in*, in which she charges women to work harder in their job and career and show more will to lead while at the same time demanding men to be more involved with child care and housework. Similarly, heated debates about work-life balance were prompted by Anne Marie Slaughter's (2012) essay in the *Atlantic*. It was the most often read article in the U.S. monthly magazine until then, titled "Why women still can't have it all." *Time* magazine also published five cover stories on women and mothers and gender issues over the past two years, such as "The truth about tiger moms" (Paul, 2011), "The richer sex" (Mundy, 2012), "Chore wars" (Konigsberg, 2011) and "Are you mom enough" (Pickert, 2012). These publications were covered widely in U.S. news media and illustrate the prominence of debates over women's status and rights in American society.

Politically, the United States is a federal republic with a population of 314 million people. The Global Democracy Ranking (2013) ranked it 15th, the lowest-ranked in my sample of countries. For gender equality it has a score of 84.5, close to

the score of the United Kingdom and Germany. In their comparison of media systems across Western democracies, Hallin and Mancini (2004) place the United States into the North Atlantic or Liberal Model. The American media system features a medium level of newspaper circulation, an early development of a mass-circulated commercial press, a formal autonomy from politics, an information-oriented journalism, internal pluralism, strong professionalization and market domination. At the same time, commercial pressures limit journalistic independence. The American is also almost exclusively privately owned, in contrast to the mixed private and public service media models in the other three countries. Regarding its political system, the United States has been shaped by an early democratization, moderate pluralism, a predominantly majoritarian government, individualized representation and a weaker welfare state (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

The United States remains a pioneer regarding internet access: 86 percent of the U.S. adult population use the internet; with 85 percent of women and 86 men going online. Further, 78 percent of women online and 69 percent of men online use social media (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2012; Table 1 below). In detail, Pew found that 76 percent of women online and 66 of men online use Facebook. Similarly, more women than men online use Twitter (18 and 16 percent respectively), Instagram (20 and 17 percent) and Pinterest (33 and 8 percent). LinkedIn was the only exception: more men online than women online used the site (24 and 19 percent respectively). The same number of adult women and men have been writing blogs,

both rising from around 11 percent in 2005 to 14 percent in 2009¹⁶ (Pew Internet Research, 2010).

State	Pop. Million	Form of Government	Democracy Rank	Gender Score	Media System	Internet Use Pop.	Internet Use Women	Internet Use Men
CH	8	Confederation	4	83.7	North European	82%	74%	85%
GER	82	Federal republic	7	85.7	North European	77%	71%	84%
UK	63	Constitutional monarchy	14	84.5	North Atlantic	78%	78%	79%
US	314	Federal republic	15	84.5	North Atlantic	86%	85%	86%

Table 1 Overview over the population (in million), form of government, democracy rank (the lower the better, Global Democracy Ranking, 2013), gender score (the higher the better, Global Democracy Ranking, 2013), media system (using Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and internet use in the total population and by gender in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland as of 2013

4.2.3 The United Kingdom

Vigorous debates about the situation of women and mothers in British society have emerged in news media and politics during the past five years. For instance, in the book *The equality illusion: the truth about women and men today*, British activist Kat Banyard (2012) assessed to which extent women in the United Kingdom have achieved equality. She concluded feminism is not done yet citing statistics on unequal pay; women being fired from their jobs because of pregnancy; and a minority of women as directors in companies, in parliament and the legal profession. In *Living dolls: the return of sexism* British writer Natasha Walter (2010) argued that a currently hyper-sexualized world embraces biological determinism and defines

¹⁶ Before, slightly more men wrote blogs, with 8 percent in 2002 rising to 11 percent in 2005. Of women, about 5 percent wrote blogs in 2002, rising to 11 percent in 2005 (Pew Internet Research, 2010).

women only via their sexuality. The display of sexuality then is coined as empowering and a sign of feminism. Initiatives such as Reclaim the Night and End Victim Blaming have sprung up to demand justice for women who have experienced harassment, rape and other violence. Kat Banyard, who also founded the non-profit organization U.K. Feminista to train activists, estimates over 100 activist groups which work for women's rights have been founded between 2010 and 2012 in the United Kingdom (Gentleman, 2012). This "new wave" of feminist activists as it has been called in the *New York Times* (Gentleman, 2012) and the British *Guardian* (McVeigh, 2013; Cochrane, 2013), prompted the *Guardian* to repeatedly portray women and their initiatives. For instance, this included Laura Bates and the Everyday Sexism Project (2014) to collect stories of street harassment and sexism in the work place. Further, the BBC reported on a survey that mothers feel discriminated at work, sparking a vigorous discussion on their website (Sellgren, 2013). In 2010, the national elections were dubbed a "Mumsnet election" by British news media. British politicians debated child tax credits during their election campaigns for which they also used web chats on the women-dominated parenting network Mumsnet (Davies, 2010). These examples demonstrate the wide-ranging debates about women and mother's situation in the United Kingdom.

Politically, the United Kingdom is a constitutional monarchy. Its population is 63 million and it ranks 14th in the Global Democracy Index. Its gender score of 84.5 is close to Germany and the United States. Hallin and Mancini (2004) placed the United Kingdom into the North Atlantic or Liberal Model, albeit to a lesser extent than the United States. The U.K. media system features a medium level of newspaper

circulation, an early development of mass-circulated commercial press, a formally autonomous system from politics and external pluralism. Media are also dominated by the market but provide a mixture of privately owned and public service media. Notable is the strong position of the British Broadcasting Company (BBC), which is supported by a fee paid by the population. The political system of the United Kingdom is similar to the United States, except for its stronger welfare state and less individualized representation system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

In 2013, 78 percent of the British adult population used the internet; including 79 percent of British men and 78 percent of British women (Dutton & Blank, 2013). Of those online, 64 percent set up a profile on social media (Ofcom, 2013); 52.3 percent of the British population had a Facebook account (Internet World Stats, 2012), with 51 percent of women and 49 percent of men (Visual.ly, 2013).

4.2.4 Germany

Similar to the recent debates in the United Kingdom and the United States, in Germany in January 2013 two articles (in a news magazine and a blog) about everyday sexism caused an explosion of tweets (short messages on the social network Twitter). Using the hashtag (a way to mark keywords on Twitter) #aufschrei [#outcry], women and men shared episodes of experiencing sexism, prompting rebuttals, comments and reaction on social media, in established news media and society for several weeks. In a network and content analysis of the first 24 hours of the tweets, Maireder and Schlögl (2014) argued that the #aufschrei phenomenon was an “ad hoc public – a communication sphere evolving around a shared topic within the spaces of the networked public sphere” (first paragraph). Further, the country has

been debating quotas for women on executive boards and other high-level positions in private business (Barber, 2013). This has included debates on a quota for women journalists in leading positions in the news media industry. Of 360 daily and weekly newspapers only two percent have women as editor-in-chief; only three women of 12 regional public broadcasters are directors (Pro Quote, 2013).

Several books have contributed to the debate about the situation of women and mothers. For instance, Basha Mika (2011), former editor-in-chief of the national left-leaning daily *Tageszeitung*, published *Die Feigheit der Frauen* [*The cowardice of women*]. Similarly, but more strongly than Sheryl Sandberg, she demanded that women should develop a stronger will to lead. Also critically, but from a different perspective, the feminist activists Meredith Haaf, Susanne Klinger and Barbara Streidl (2009) published the feminist manifesto titled *Wir Alphamädchen* [*We alpha girls*]. They addressed the dilemma of “choice” between children or career and a search for new role models for young women. They encouraged women to fight for their rights and argued that feminism is not done yet. To keep up the conversation, they founded the group blog Mädchenmannschaft [Girls’ Team] in 2007. A similar book was *Neue Deutsche Mädchen* [*New German Girls*] by Jana Hensel and Elisabeth Raether (2008). The authors argued that a new feminism is under way [in the U.S. context often called third wave feminism, a term that is not used as much in the European context, see Zobl, Reitsamer & Grünangerl (2012)]. This new feminism stands in contrast to the domination of feminism especially in former West Germany by feminist icon Alice Schwarzer and her publication *Emma* (see also Hansen, 2013). Besides detailing their experiences with career, lovers and parents; they addressed the

challenge of mothers to allow the so-called “new” fathers to play a greater part in the child’s life and to not fall back into a traditional mother role.

Germany features the biggest population in Europe (excluding Russia) with 82 million. It ranked 7th in the Global Democracy Ranking (2013) and had a score of 85.7 in gender equality, close to the United Kingdom and the United States.

Politically, Germany is a federal republic with strong federalism. Hallin and Mancini (2004) placed Germany in the North/Central European or Democratic/Corporatist Model. Its media system is characterized by a high newspaper circulation, an early development of mass-circulated press, with more opinion-oriented but also information-oriented media, with strong political party and commercial newspapers, strong professionalization, institutional self-regulation, and strong formal and state institutions providing press subsidies but also protection for press freedom. Germany’s media system was modeled after the BBC, with a strong public-service branch but also a privately owned branch that has been growing since the mid-1980s. Germany’s political system includes predominantly consensus-oriented government, a history of segmented pluralism and a strong welfare state with state involvement in the economy (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

In Germany 77.2 percent of adults use the internet; 71.1 percent of all German women go online compared to 83.5 percent of men. Women and men online use blogs equally, with 16 percent each. In contrast, only 6 percent of women online and 8 percent of men online use Twitter. Almost half of all women online and men online use private online communities, with 46 percent each (ARD-ZDF Onlinestudie, 2013).

4.2.5 Switzerland

In Switzerland a debate about the situation of (working) mothers accompanied a recent vote for a proposed amendment to the Swiss constitution to improve the situation for parents to combine work and family (dubbed “family amendment”). Supporters of the amendment argued the amendment was especially necessary for women since a lack of adequate childcare opportunities makes it difficult for them to keep working. Opponents pointed out the financial costs and the interference of the state in local and family affairs; they argued for a family model with stay-at-home mothers. While 55 percent of the public voted to pass the amendment, the majority of cantons voted against it, resulting in a failure to pass the amendment (Birrer, 2013). Debates surrounding the situation of working women and mothers have also found expression in at least three widely read books. Journalist Michèle Roten published *Wie Frau sein* [How to be a woman] (2011) and *Wie Mutter sein* [How to be a mother] (2013). She questioned the complicated expectations and roles women and mothers are supposed to fulfill. Similarly, the journalists Nicole Althaus and Michèle Binswanger (2012) wrote a manifesto for working mothers titled *Machomamas*. They argued, in the vein of Sheryl Sandberg (2013) in the United States and Basha Mika (2011) in Germany, that mothers need to lean it at work but also that (men) partners and companies need to adjust to allow mothers to pursue a career. In 2009, Althaus initiated the widely read Mamablog on the website of national leading daily newspaper *Tagesanzeiger*. Binswanger contributed to the blog, in which they wrote about societal and political issues regarding family and children. Both journalists won a prize for best journalism for the blog in 2010 (Tagesanzeiger, 2010). These cases

highlight the current debates surrounding women and especially mothers in Swiss society.

Switzerland has population of about 8 million. It ranks 4th in the Global Democracy Ranking (2013) – the highest rank in my four-country sample – and received a score of 83.7 for gender equality, the lowest score in my sample. Switzerland is constituted as a direct democracy with strong federalism. This gives citizens the right to participate in popular votes to propose amendments to the constitution and to vote in nationwide referenda to challenge bills approved by the government. On average, Swiss citizens decide on political issues via popular vote three to four times annually (Federal Department of Foreign Affairs Switzerland, 2010). According to Hallin and Mancini (2004), Switzerland falls into the North/Central European or Democratic/Corporatist Model, sharing the same features as the media system in Germany. The different linguistic regions are featured intensely on Swiss public broadcasting, which has a strong role in the broadcasting landscape. Within the political system, Hallin and Mancini (2004) point out that Switzerland also enjoyed early democratization and moderate pluralism, unlike Germany, but similar to the United Kingdom and the United States.

In Switzerland, 82 percent of its population uses the internet: 74 percent of all women and 85 percent of all men go online (Bundesamt für Statistik, 2013a). More men than women use social networks (60 and 55 percent), blogs (46 and 34 percent), and Twitter (20 and 16 percent) (Künzler, 2013). I focused on German-language online spaces. German is one of the four national languages spoken in Switzerland.

With 65 percent of the Swiss population speaking German, it is by far the most frequently spoken language in Switzerland.

4.3. Interview framework

Core principles of interview research are based on the underlying assumption that reality is also constructed: a researcher and an interviewee construct reality together in a conversation. The term conversation goes back to the mid-14th century meaning of “living together, having dealings with others.” It is based on the Latin word “conversationem.” It means “act of living with, keep company with” (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2014). Similarly, Merriam-Webster (2014) described its Latin roots as meaning, “to associate with.” In a conversation the interviewer follows the interviewee to understand the interviewees’ thoughts, ideas, experiences, memories and meaning making of social phenomena and the world around her/him. Interviews are a qualitative method that allows for a deeper understanding of how individuals make sense of the world (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Consequently, the best method to analyze the experiences and perceptions of women bloggers/online writers was to conduct in-depth interviews with them.

4.3.1 Selection of participants

The women I interviewed self-identified as women in terms of gender and were vocal online on blogs and/or websites, Facebook, Twitter and other social media about a range of political issues regarding women’s, family and maternal politics.

In my definition, women’s, maternal and family politics include but are not limited to issues relating to work-life balance for mothers and other women. This also

includes issues regarding women who are in a family with their partner “only” (who are childless); adoption, including for lesbian couples; birth control and abortion; child care and maternity leave; opportunities for mothers but also women without children to enjoy equality in the work space and career opportunities compared to fathers and men without children; working mothers; “helicopter” mothers and other popular culture notions of mothers; as well as the sexist foregrounding of women only as mothers.

I approached women starting from the most visible blogs in each country. These were blogs that were mentioned in established news media, in research journals, referenced by students in classes on gender and/or communication and which appeared when searching online for “women” and “blog” for each country.

In the United States these were group blogs such as Jezebel, BlogHer, Feministing and feministe but also contacts and links provided by bloggers in the United Kingdom and Germany. Starting points to find bloggers in the United Kingdom were group sites and blogs such as Mumsnet, Netmums, UK Feminista and The F-Word as well as other contacts and links provided by bloggers in interviews. In Germany I started my inquiry via the country’s biggest national conference on blogs, social media and digital society, called re:publica, and group blogs such as Mädchenmannschaft, Featurette and kleinerdrei. In Switzerland, I turned to the popular Mamablog, hosted by the Swiss daily newspaper *Tagesanzeiger*. Additionally, I approached bloggers who have been vocal in posts and on Twitter about the so-called “family amendment” such as Michelle Beyeler, Deana Gariup, Margrit Stamm and Nathalie Sassine-Hauptmann. Further, contacts and blogs pointed

to by women bloggers in Germany helped to generate interviews with women in Switzerland.

After each interview, I asked participants for contacts to other bloggers who write about women’s, family and/or maternal issues and who are located in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany or Switzerland. Often women referred me to their blog roll (a list of blogs to which a blogger links to endorse other bloggers). I also used these blog rolls to find women bloggers. That is, my method was primarily purposive snowball sampling. This purpose sampling was appropriate, given my interest in the active selection of “people” rather than a “population” (Gubrium & Gubrium, 2002). I also wanted to avoid blog rankings as they have rendered women bloggers less visible compared to men bloggers.

I contacted 242 bloggers, of whom 109 granted me interviews. The percentage of successful interviews ranged from 35.2 percent in the United Kingdom and 43.5 percent in the United States to 48.7 percent in Switzerland and 53.1 percent in Germany. The mean across all four countries was 45 percent (see Table 2).

Interviews	US	UK	GER	CH	Total
Number of Interviews	37	19	34	19	109
Number of women approached	85	54	64	39	242
Interviews in % of all approached in country	43.5%	35.2%	53.1%	48.7%	45.0%

Table 2 Number of approached bloggers and response rate of interviewees in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland

English-language bloggers, among them women writing for very successful multi-author blogs, appeared to be “busier” because of their success. This might partly

account for the lower response rate in the United Kingdom, where one woman said she does not have time for the interview because of her time-consuming work for her blog and project. In the United States two women also responded that they had no time for an interview. In contrast, in Germany and Switzerland response rates were higher. Both countries mostly featured single women bloggers or smaller group blogs, operated by volunteers in addition to work, activist, and/or family obligations.

This is in line with research, news media and blogger's reports. They indicate that financial gains via blogging remain an exception in Germany. For instance, Berendt, Schlegel and Koch's (2008) comparison of the 100 top German-language blogs with top U.S. blogs demonstrated that in Germany popular blogs tend to be operated by "leisure time and semi-professional bloggers" (p. 72). The authors argued blogs still need to gain "societal significance" in Germany (p. 95). In an interview series with bloggers on politics and current affairs in Germany, which I conducted, almost all interviewees also indicated that making money from blogging remains a rarity (Eckert, Chadha & Koliska, 2014). For instance, a nationally recognized blogger, who is often quoted on the topic in German news media, said:

I think from advertisement there are only up to five blogs, gadget blogs, who earn enough money from advertisement. The normal business model is like mine. I have a strong reputation doing speeches, doing workshops, writing articles and earn my money from such things, which have not really much to do with my blog. But I derive my reputation from my blog. But I couldn't live from advertisements or micro-donations [on the blog] [Personal conversation, January 6, 2011].

A report by German public broadcaster NDR also indicated that bloggers in Germany still barely make money from blogging (Heinzle, 2013). Blog marketing company rankseller (2013) found in a survey of 2,344 German

bloggers,¹⁷ that only 13 percent reported to earn more than €1,000 (\$1,380) per month. The majority of 63.5 percent earned nothing to €300 (\$415) per month. Only some blogs make their income transparent. A survey of thirteen such blogs in Germany for January 2014 showed that only four blogs made over \$300. The highest earning blog, which posted about how to earn money via blogging, had an income of \$1,009;¹⁸ the lowest income was \$4.75 for a blog on Latin America (Wandiger, 2014). Similarly, in Switzerland, a blog aggregator writes that only “a few bloggers are becoming rich via blogging. Most bloggers can earn a little pocket money or enough to pay for hosting their blog” (Blogverzeichnis.ch, 2014).

In contrast, in the United States and the United Kingdom, commercial blogging has become a source of income for bloggers. Yet, only a few bloggers can live just from their blog’s income. Rather, bloggers diversify where they post, look for book deals and have additional income sources (Williams, G., 2013). A non-dated list of 30 top earning bloggers, listed the group blog *Huffington Post* first with more than \$2.3 million in monthly earnings. Others high earning sites were group and star blogs such as Mashable (\$560.000), Perez Hilton (\$450.000), Techcrunch (\$400.000) and Talking Points Memo (\$45.000). The only other woman listed – apart from Arianna Huffington – was lifestyle blogger Heather B. Armstrong on Dooce.com with \$50.000 (Dunlop, n.d.). She was referenced as a role model by a few

¹⁷ Initially, rankseller (2013) had asked 48,000 bloggers to participate. Thus their response rate was 4.8 percent. Of the 2,344 participants, 67.2 percent were men; 32.8 percent were women.

¹⁸ Currency conversions from Euro into Dollar are as of spring 2014.

interviewees in the United States who also tried to pursue income via blogging.¹⁹ In the United Kingdom, Pederson and Macafee (2007) indicated in their survey of British bloggers, that of the 24 women participants, six said their blog was a source of income, of 24 men participants, two said so.

This is in line with what my participants reported. In the United Kingdom and in the United States, mothers who wrote reviews of commercial products and services for their blogs reported to earn money from their blogging. Usually they also said that they have a working partner or other sources of income. This phenomenon did appear to be mostly limited to bloggers who focus on family and motherhood and whose main activities are to be a mother and housewife. A few bloggers in all four countries said they had published books or intended to write a book drawing from texts on their blogs. Thompson (2007) called “mommy blogs” with commercial content, advertising and income “mompreneurs” and described them as an upcoming trend to target mothers as consumers. For instance, Procter & Gamble recruited at least 15 “mommy bloggers” as new influencers in online marketing (Neff, 2008). In 2011, Danielle Wiley founded a talent agency to guide and represent “mommy bloggers” (Bruell, 2011). But numbers beyond individual examples are hard to come by. The top ten percent of women bloggers are said to “make six figures” (Paw, 2012); 70 percent make “a modicum of profit” and 20 percent nothing. The majority of women bloggers would receive “at least \$250 in free products per month” (Paw, 2012). Lopez (2009) found that 12 of 23 bloggers in her sample from the BlogHer network

¹⁹ A similar list of top 50 earning bloggers on another site also lists the Huffington Post first, followed by Mashable, TechCrunch and Engadget. Among the owners of the fifty blogs, four were women (Smith, n.d.).

used advertising on their blogs. She also pointed to discussions about women and “mommy” bloggers’ earning; critics said payments would compromise editorial content and lead to over-commodification. Morrison (2010, 2011) and Friedman (2010) also mentioned the commercial opportunities especially for “mommy bloggers.” Some “mommy bloggers,” however, limit participation in such monetizing in favor of controlling the size of their audience (Morrison, 2011).

One of my interviewees in the United Kingdom, a 35-year white mother who includes commercial content on her blog, said she conducted a survey of 100 other mothers who blog commercially. She found that over half of them used a practice called “paid follow links.” She explained this means these bloggers get paid to include key words with links to certain products into their posts to drive up Google’s page ranking for these products. Yet, when Google finds out about these SEO [search engine optimization] tactics, she said, it strips such bloggers of their page ranks on Google. She cited the example of Interflora, a flower delivery company, which “disappeared completely from Google for like two or three weeks” because of paying local and regional press online and bloggers to plant paid follow links on their pages.²⁰ She said recently it has become more of a trend that mothers who blog commercially fall into two groups:

[T]here are the bloggers who still want to make money and be commercial but also want to have that image of having integrity and that sort of thing. And then there are bloggers who are perhaps not quite as high profile and not much

²⁰ *Wired* (Warr, 2013) reported the UK version of the Interflora website was removed because of “manipulating links to improve its ranking on [Google]” but a representative of Google declined to comment on the case. The website Search Engine Land (McGee, 2013) wrote that Interflora got its Google ranking back after eleven days.

of a reputation to risk who still take paid follow links. And that is definitely a recent trend.

My interviewees were women bloggers/online writers who have been blogging regularly for at least half a year or have been active for a long time with their most recent post being four to six months old. I e-mailed them, used the contact space provided on their blog/site or sent direct messages on Twitter (which are hidden from the public). I contacted each blogger again after two to four weeks if the first message did not elicit a response.

For the interview, I used a semi-structured interview guide. Questions focused on positive, negative and unexpected experiences regarding their blogging and expressing themselves online. They also included asking if the women considered their blogging to be political or not. Moreover, I asked how they assessed the democratic potential of social media. I conducted the interviews via phone or Skype between April 2013 and January 2014 either in English or German. Each interview lasted between 30 to 80 minutes.

I recorded all 104 oral interviews,²¹ took notes by hand during the interview, summarized the notes and transcribed relevant parts from the audio recording for analysis. I then used a qualitative textual analysis to discern patterns, idiosyncrasies, recurrences, repetitions and overlapping, contradictory statements (Berger, 1998) and the most likely (i.e., to most people) interpretations of a given text (McKee, 2006). This involved a “long, preliminary soak” (Hall, 1975), reading the interview notes and transcribed parts many times to reach a deep understanding of and familiarity

²¹ Five additional interviews were answered in writing: two women identified as deaf, three other women insisted on written answers to protect their privacy.

with them. This allowed me to extract larger themes from the answers and to compare the women's experiences in different national contexts. Additionally, I sorted interview answers and emerging themes into several excel tables to quantify them and to apply descriptive statistics to find significant patterns.

I also conducted a textual analysis of the most recent posts online by the interviewees to triangulate interview data. To keep the confidentiality agreement intact, which I promised to each participant, I will not be able to quote from blogs, Facebook pages or tweets directly as this would provide a search string leading back to each woman. Instead, I will describe the topics participants write about and paraphrase relevant text passages.

4.3.2 Participants

Of the 109 participants, 34 were located in Germany, 37 in the United States, 19 in the United Kingdom and 19 in Switzerland. Almost all women held citizenship in the country where they resided (some held dual citizenships); the overwhelming majority self-identified as white Caucasian. While in each country, except Switzerland, I had the chance to talk with women of color; they remained a small minority in my sample (Table 3 below). As I noticed the lack of women of color, I asked participants in each country if they could refer me to women of color who blog about women, family and maternal issues. This resulted in several valuable interviews. My sample reflected a majority of white Caucasian people in the United States (63 percent, U.S. Census, 2010) and the United Kingdom (79.1 percent, Office of National Statistics, 2011). In Germany, a census was conducted in 2011 but no information regarding race or ethnicity was collected. In contrast – and this does not provide information about race

or ethnicity – the German census queried if people have a “migration background.”

This refers to people who immigrated to Germany in 1955 or afterwards or who have at least one parent who did so. The report stated 19 percent of the German population indicated a “migration background” (Destatis, 2011). Similarly, in Switzerland the census does not collect data on race or ethnicity but also rather the percentage of migrants, which was 34.7 percent in 2012 (Bundesamt für Statistik, 2013b).

		US		UK		GER		CH		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Interviews		37	33.9%	19	17.4%	34	31.2%	19	17.4%	109	100.0%
Citizenship	U.S.	36	97.3%	1	5.0%					38	33.1%
	British	1	2.7%	16	80.0%					18	15.5%
	German					34	97.1%	2	9.5%	35	30.4%
	Swiss							16	76.2%	16	13.9%
	Other	1	2.7%	3	15.0%	1	2.9%	4	19.0%	8	7.0%
Highest Ed	High School/ A-Levels			2	10.5%	3	8.8%			5	4.9%
	Some college	3	8.1%	3	15.8%	3	8.8%			9	8.7%
	Apprentice ship					5	14.7%	4	21.1%	9	8.4%
	Bachelor	17	45.9%	3	15.8%	2	5.9%	4	21.1%	26	24.3%
	Master (Diplom/ Lizenziat)	12	32.4%	8	42.1%	15	44.1%	9	47.4%	42	39.3%
	Ph.D./J.D./ M.D.	5	13.5%	3	15.8%	5	14.7%	1	5.3%	13	12.6%
	Post-Doctoral					1	2.9%	1	5.3%	2	1.9%
Race/ Ethnicity	White Caucasian	25	67.6%	18	85.7%	32	82.1%	19	100.0%	92	79.3%
	White Hispanic	2	5.4%							2	1.8%
	Black	6	16.2%							6	5.3%
	Jewish	5	13.5%	1	4.8%	1	2.6%			7	6.2%
	Latina	1	2.7%								
	Other			2	9.5%	6	15.4%			9	7.8%
Mothers		27	73.0%	8	42.1%	16	47.1%	16	84.2%	67	62.6%
Family	Married to man	26	70.3%	6	31.6%	15	44.1%	11	57.9%	57	53.3%

	Married to woman	4	10.8%			1	2.9%	1	5.3%	6	5.6%
	Relationship/ engaged to man			7	36.8%	7	20.6%	3	15.8%	17	15.9%
	Relationship/ engaged to woman	3	8.1%	4	21.1%	4	11.8%			11	10.7%
	Single/divorced/separated	4	10.8%	2	10.5%	7	20.6%	3	15.8%	16	15.0%
Sexuality	Heterosexual	25	67.6%	13	68.4%	22	64.7%	15	78.9%	75	70.1%
	Lesbian	4	10.8%	3	15.8%	5	14.7%	1	5.3%	13	12.1%
	Bisexual	4	10.8%	2	10.5%	3	8.8%	1	5.3%	10	9.3%
	Queer/fluid/pan-sexual/undecided	3	8.1%	1	5.3%	4	11.8%	1	5.3%	9	8.4%
Age	Range	22-50		29-48		24-69		24-48		22-69	
	Median	40		37		35		38		38	
	Mode	39		38		34		36		39	

Table 3 Dimension of identity of participants (N=109)

More than half of the women stated that they were heterosexual and married to a man.

Age ranged from 22 to 69 years; the median age was 38 years and the mode for age was 43 years. Most women resided in or near urban areas. Almost two thirds held either a bachelor's or master's degree. All women were either employed, freelance workers, or self-employed/entrepreneurial; only a minority were "stay-at-home" parents with or without part-time work. Several women identified other aspects important to their identity such as parenting a child with special needs (for instance, a rare heart condition, cerebral palsy, autism) or being disabled themselves (deaf or not being able to walk). Two women (both in Germany) identified as transgender. The majority of bloggers set up their blog over the past five years. Each country, except

Switzerland, had several veteran bloggers who set up their blog between 2000 and 2007 (Table 4 below).

		US	UK	GER	CH	Total
Years blogging	Over 0.5 to 1 year (since 2013)	1	1	1	3	6
(as of Jan. 2014)	Over 1 to 2 (since 2012)	4	3	4	5	16
	Over 2 to 3 (since 2011)	7	2	5	1	15
	Over 3 to 4 (since 2010)	5	1	5	3	14
	Over 4 to 5 (since 2009)	3	5	3	3	14
	Over 5 to 6 (since 2008)	7	1	2	2	12
	Over 6 to 7 (since 2007)	4	1	1		6
	Over 7 to 8 (since 2006)			6	1	7
	Over 8 to 9 (since 2005)	3	2	2		7
	Over 9 to 10 (since 2004)	3	3			6
	Over 10 to 11 (since 2003)			1		1
	Over 11 to 12 (since 2002)			2		2
	Over 12 to 13 (since 2001)			2		2
	Over 13 (since 2000)				1	1
	Total	37	19	34	19	109

Table 4 Years of blogging of participants (N=109)

4.4 Limitations

This study does not claim to be representative of all women writing online, or in their respective countries, nor does it compare women with men writing online. With fluid public clusters²² it will remain near impossible to ever create representative samples, if so, only for a particular time and perhaps space, language or country. The fluidity of the public clusters renders them to be in flux, i.e. changing over time, shifting in

²² Fluid public clusters are defined in Chapters 2 and 5 and refer to my new theoretical concept of multiple public spheres that takes fluidity online into account.

and out of public focus. While I aimed for a range of women with varying backgrounds and did reach a high level of diversity across the four countries, I did not reach the same high level of diversity in each country. This happened partly because blogging and online writing is connected to certain backgrounds that provide resources to make blogging possible. Nevertheless, my study provides deep insights into the experiences of women with different backgrounds who blog/write online in English or German in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland.

Chapter 5: The theory of fluid public clusters

Blogging and writing online, as interviewees often stressed, is a learning process. Many interviewees said that they are grateful for this opportunity, as it has opened up new horizons, themes, and connections – including significant relationships and friendships in “real life” – for them over time. This was true for participants across all four countries. Yet, interviewees also explicitly or implicitly touched upon national contexts.

This chapter presents and applies evidence found in this study to support my theory of fluid public clusters. As described in Chapter 2, I suggest adding to public spheres theory in a Western democratic context by highlighting the fluidity of public spheres regarding the continuing adoption of web 2.0 media spaces for content production and public deliberation. Additionally, I suggest using a new terminology rather than continuing to use the phrases “public sphere(s)” and/or “counterpublic(s).”

The following four sections detail the three elements of the theory of fluid public clusters; then provide evidence for the fluidity from this study; and then apply the theory of fluid public clusters to the sample in this study. Last is an analysis of the national contexts that have shaped fluid public clusters in the countries in my sample, the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland.

5.1 Three elements of the theory of fluid public clusters

This section details the three elements of the theory of fluid public clusters. First, it turns to using the term “clusters” instead of “spheres,” followed by describing the meaning of the adjectives “public” and “fluid.”

A sphere is defined as a “solid that is bounded by a surface consisting of all points at a given distance from a point constituting its center” (Merriam-Webster, 2014). The term “the public sphere” works as a powerful metaphor, as Gitlin (1998) writes, and “the phrase has ballooned into the God-term of democratic discourse theory.”

The rounded sphere displays a perfect symmetry. The sphere looks the same from each point on its surface. It permits no privileged vantage point. No direction is superior to any other direction. On the surface of the sphere, each point is equal – equidistant from the center or, if one likes, equally marginal. Roundness, fullness, ripeness: the image of the public sphere conveys the sense of a planet, a fruit, something complete. The sphere in its perfection is, of course, an abstraction that nature only approximates; even the earth is flattened at its poles. Yet the sphere remains a Platonic form, easily identifiable and august (p. 168).

But the internet has enabled a “plurality of publics – for the development of distinct groups organized around affinity and interest” (p. 173). Despite his criticism of the metaphor of “the public sphere,” he continued to use similar terms: “Does it not look as though the public sphere, in falling, has shattered into a scatter of globules, like mercury?” (p. 173) He was skeptical if “separate public sphericules” (p. 173) can help to create “*a public* – an active encounter of citizens who reach across their social and ideological differences to establish a common agenda of concern and to debate rival approaches” (p. 173 italics in original). Gitlin remained torn between the idea and terminology of a single “sphere” or “*a public*” and multiple “sphericules.”

Before and after Gitlin’s (1998) article was published, scholars have contested the singularity of “the public sphere” and introduced new vocabulary. As a pioneer, Felski (1989) used the term “counterpublic” and argued to acknowledge a diversity of publics. Fraser (1990) took up the term “(subaltern) counterpublics,” but did not

address the term “sphere.” Contrary to Gitlin (1998), Fraser (1990) argued that a “multiplicity of competing publics” (p. 62) is preferable in stratified and egalitarian societies to a single public sphere. Similarly, Squires (2002) extended this vocabulary adding satellite publics and enclaves to counterpublics. She did not address Gitlin’s (1998) “sphericules.” In contrast to him, she emphasized the importance of a plurality of publics to recognize the political power struggle among different groups. Both, Fraser and Squires, do not cling to the term “sphere,” nor do they discuss it in detail. Yet, both their papers use the term “public sphere” in their title. In contrast, Morrison (2010) used the phrase “intimate public” in the title of her qualitative survey of “personal mommy blogging.” She theorized that such blogs operate as “intimate publics,” which equally value personal self-expression and community development and thus keep audience sizes limited.

Searching in the academic databases “Communication & Mass Media Complete” and “Academic Search Premier,” since 1998, when Gitlin published his article, at least 1,302 publications have used the term “public sphere” in their headline, 121 used the phrase “publics spheres” but only three articles have used the term “sphericules.” Similarly, 121 publications have used the term “counterpublic” or “counterpublics” in their headlines since 1989, when Rita Felski introduced the term. Thus, the terminological hold of the phrase “the public sphere” is strong, albeit other vocabulary has been suggested and used occasionally.

This study takes up Gitlin’s (1998) critique of the metaphor of “the public sphere” and suggests avoiding the term “sphere.” Instead, I suggest a theory and terminology of fluid public clusters.

A cluster is “a number of similar things that occur together” (Merriam-Webster, 2014) or “a number of persons, animals, or things gathered or situated close together; an assemblage, group, swarm, crowd” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2014). Clusters are thus a useful metaphor to describe a messier constellation of people with shared interests than the term “sphere.” This also follows insights from standpoint epistemology that our identity foregrounds certain observations, experiences and concerns over others (Harding, 2004). The plural form, “clusters,” is appropriate to take up critiques of a single public sphere (Fraser, 1990; Gitlin, 1998; Squires, 2002; and others). Recognizing this multiplicity is not to say that all clusters are created equal (Fraser, 1990; Gitlin, 1998; Squires, 2002; and others). Clusters have different amounts and kinds of resources available on a sliding scale of power connected to their offline identities. Longer established clusters might have more resources, continuing “old mediascapes” (Goode & McKee, 2013, p. 114). The terms “cluster” and/or “clustering” have been used in social network analysis of blogs and their readership to describe accumulation of blogs around certain features. Baumer, Sueyoshi and Tomlinson (2008) described that blogs are “rather grouped in numerous clusters of blogs with limited links between clusters” (paragraph 4). They clustered around certain topics, writing styles and interactions between bloggers. Benkler (2006) also wrote of “clusters of moderately read sites” (p. 242) that will enable a greater number of producers and speakers.

Using “public” as an adjective reflects the two conditions that Gitlin (1998) describes as necessary to enable deliberation: first, publicness requires having spaces with a similar degree of equivalent access; and second, publicness requires looking at

publics whose interactions are directed toward other publics and society, i.e. who are not working in or toward isolation. For instance, the satellite publics, which Squires (2002) describes, were voluntarily inward-focused. They did not want to engage with other clusters to maintain their group identity such as the Nation of Islam. “Public” thus means “of, relating to or affecting all or most of the people of a country, state, etc.” (Merriam-Webster, 2014). This also aligns with the idea that national contexts shape discourse.

Third, the adjective “fluid” refers to how the landscape of social media changes over time; their spaces and participants are not fixed but develop over time. Fluid means “something that can change easily or that changes often” and “particles that easily move and change their relative position without a separation of the mass and that easily yield to pressure” (Merriam-Webster, 2014, see also Oxford English Dictionary, 2014).

The metaphor of a lava lamp comes closest to describing how fluid public clusters work: multiple amorphous clusters of all sizes emerge, merge, separate, change, bump into each other, overlap or dissolve, always being in motion. The space in which these clusters float is the context of Western democracies, with high levels of internet penetration and literacy. People with internet can create new clusters or change existing ones to compete with others. The lava lamp metaphor is best applied to a national level or across nation-states in Western democracies, which share the two conditions that Gitlin (1998) set out for the existence of multiple publics: first, having spaces with a similar degree of equivalent access; and second, having publics whose interactions are directed toward other publics and society. This is not to say

that national contexts do not remain important aspects of the frameworks in which fluid public clusters unfold. Above all, the theory of fluid public clusters addresses the fluidity of public clusters, but the framework, which allows for this fluidity, should be kept in mind (more on national contexts below in section 5.4).

5.2 Aspects of fluidity of online public clusters

Fluidity emerged as a theme in all four countries in the sample of this study: interviewees were using different blogs and social media as they were moving through their lives as a blogger/online writer, single or partner in a relationship, worker, mother, organizer and/or activist. If a blog/site, Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr or other social media space no longer fulfilled a purpose for interviewees, they adjusted the content they posted or the frequency of using it; they took a break from it, abandoned it all together or started with a new account. Moving to a new city, starting or ending a relationship, finding or quitting a job, the birth of a baby, joining or quitting an activist group or receiving offers to publish elsewhere (perhaps also for money) among other changes in life prompted shifts in their blogging and social media activity. For instance, one 36-year old white blogger in Germany, who identified as feminist, started blogging when her child was born in 2012. She said the importance of her blog has shifted since then:

I have to admit, when I was on parental leave, mainly during the day, [the blog] was totally important for communication with the other blogs that I have read. And now that I am working again and also would like to spend time with my child, my husband and my friends, it has lost importance.

Other “new” mothers, also in the other three countries, described a similar pattern.

This reflected the findings of a U.S. based study that blogging improved the overall

well-being of new mothers as it made them feel connected to extended family, friends and the outside world (McDaniel, Coyne & Holmes, 2011). Another 39-year old white mother in the United States moved from blogging to write for magazines. She said she is now using her blog to cross-post articles she wrote for other media outlets, which pay her for writing articles. This echoed a growing trend among bloggers about motherhood whose content is sought-after by advertisers to target other mothers (Lopez, 2009; Friedman, 2010; Morrison, 2011; Paw, 2012). This trend, however, appears to exist more so in English-language than German-language blogs, also in the sample of this study.

Several aspects indicated the fluidity in blogging and social media activity in this study: changing or adding topics; coming to terms with feminism, moving blogs across hosting sites and revealing identity or not; changing writing styles and approaches; commercializing; and making new connections. In sum, these aspects provide evidence for the fluidity of public clusters online.

5.2.1 Topics

While all interviewees wrote, at least in part, about women's, family and maternal issues, almost all named several other topics they are writing about. It was rare for blogs to focus on one topic. Some studies distinguish between diary-style/personal blogs and so-called filter blogs, which focus on one topic. For instance, in Germany, Schmidt (2008) and Hesse (2008) and in the United States Herring, Kouper, Scheidt and Wright (2004) found that more men wrote filter blogs or a mixture of filter and personal-style blogs while women wrote overwhelmingly personal-style blogs. These studies also pointed out that blog rankings mostly focus on filter blogs than personal-

style blogs. This binary of “filter blogs” versus “personal-style blogs” rather obscures the existing fluidity of online public clusters in which people write about several topics but might also change them.

Many interviewees addressed how they write about several topics on their blog or across different social media. The following list is not exhaustive but it demonstrates the wide range of topics interviewees named: transitioning from identifying as a man to identifying as a woman; women who are biological men; a lesbian view of the world; sexuality; raising a rainbow family; feminist language critique; feminist deconstruction of motherhood; women’s history; daily violence; rape culture and sexual abuse; victim blaming; child pornography; political education; education; internet politics and feminism; gender differences in political debates; law and gender; critique of presentations of gender and women in established (news) media and advertising; social politics; contraception; intersections of race, motherhood and feminism; mothers’ rights; child care; care for children with disabilities and special needs; adoption; family politics; school policies; work life balance; experiences with children; parenting; aging; fashion; sewing; everyday life; current affairs; news; environmental politics; psychological disorders; popular culture; music; literature; television series; and interactions at work.

This list illustrates the wide range of topics interviewees wrote about and which connect to larger societal debates. Interviewees were not only public in the way they directed their writings to a broader public (for everyone to read on their blogs, sites, Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr and other social media accounts); they also addressed issues of concern to the community, to the people and the state.

Many interviewees said they have widened or altered the range of topics on their blog or site. For instance, in the United States, a 39-year old white mother, who identified as feminist and started blogging about adoption in 2009, said she since has added posts about (cyber)-bullying, social conflict and girl empowerment. Similarly, a 31-year old white blogger in Germany, who identified as feminist, said while certain topics have been present from the outset on her blog such as race, nonetheless, other topics have come and gone. She said her focus on family politics – about which she wrote in her master’s thesis – has lessened; meanwhile her posts on internet politics have become more frequent as she started researching this area in her academic career. A 36-year old white Swiss blogger, who identified as feminist, said she has been writing for over 20 years: “I am 36 now and I have different topics than ten years ago and I like to discuss them.”

5.2.2 Feminism

Often interviewees mentioned that they did not want to be categorized in terms of their blogging topics but enjoy that their blog is a “digital room of their own,” to write about what they like without being pre-defined or controlled by others (more on that also in Chapter 6). One 37-year old white mother in Germany, who identified as feminist, said she does not want to be pigeonholed as a “mommy” or “feminist” blogger:

I write what I like. I try not to go into a certain direction but at the same time I do represent a certain type of being a woman. I have children so I also write about my children. I also see myself as a feminist. I try to also address these topics but I don’t think because I am a feminist I have to have a certain opinion. If I see something critically I will write it that way. I try to continue to write about what I think, that is why I want to continue to write with a pseudonym, to keep on writing about things that I am interested in and not to have to limit myself in terms of topic.

She said she changed topics over time from writing about her single life and job search, to family anecdotes, to fewer personal stories and more posts about current events at present. In between, she said, she took breaks from blogging when she moved and when she gave birth. Lopez (2009) also demonstrated the rejection of the term “mommy blogger.” She analyzed a discussion around this term during a U.S. based blog conference hosted by BlogHer, a blog network for women. Lopez argued “mommy blogs” are demeaned because what women write about is perceived as inherently less important and valuable because they are women. Further, the term holds women captive in a “culturally ingrained performance of motherhood women learned since childhood” that might not fit their current needs (Chen, 2013, p. 510). Chen argued that the term “mommy” remains associated with notions of the ideal mother, reproducing hegemonic normative roles online and limiting women to “digital domesticity” (p. 510) while eradicating other aspects of identity for women and mothers.

The term “feminist” also remains contentious. Some interviewees said they are in favor of women’s rights but would not use the term on their blog. For instance, a 37-year old white activist in the United Kingdom, who has been highlighting victim blaming on her site, said:

We don’t use the word feminism on our website or anywhere in our campaign simply because we are available to meet the women where they are and sometimes there are not ‘at feminism,’ as survivors of sexual violence. But it is clear: we are a feminist campaign, especially as we are doing work with women’s organizations.

Similarly, a project in the United States called “Who needs feminism?” encourages people to define feminism for themselves. The project started in 2012 and quickly branched out to Germany where one of its organizers, a white 35-year old woman, who identified as feminist, explained that, at least in Germany

It is cool to be against racism and for animal rights but apparently as far as I can see from my perspective it is uncool to be in favor of women’s rights and for emancipation...lots of people don’t think [feminism] is about women’s rights and emancipation but they link it to something vague, radical, outdated, something you do not want to be associated with, something that we don’t need any more.

Yet, some individual bloggers said that through their writing they have come to identify as feminist. For instance, a 47-year old white single mother in Germany:

I’ve become more feminist, I believe. I was, in my heart, as a bisexual woman in Berlin, and also in Freiburg in my childhood, someone who with her attitude was a bit outside of society. But because of the #outcry hash tag thing [protests on Twitter against everyday sexism, see Eckert & Puschmann, 2013, and Maireder & Schlögl, 2014] and currents which I perceive in my network on Facebook and Twitter, I dare more to come out from underneath the cover to say what I don’t find to be okay socially and in regard to women’s rights. That is not my main topic but that is of course one topic that also plays a role for me as a single parent.

A 42-year old white single mother in the United Kingdom, who works full time to help run a parenting network, echoed this sentiment:

Quite often, women, people, or men, will come to [our site] not particularly identifying as feminist but will over time, and having participated in debates about feminism on the boards, will come to identify as feminist or sort of feel more self-confident about expressing feminist view points or speaking up when they see something happening that they don’t think is right. It sort of, it can act to bolster, particularly as a female-dominated space, I think, it can act to bolster women’s confidence in that.

In sum, some interviewees rejected or avoided easy labels, especially if these labels were perceived as being negatively associated in a broader public; others used and tried to reform their meaning and associations.

5.2.3 Hosting on different sites

Many interviewees had used other online spaces to express themselves before they started their current blog(s) or site(s). Several continue to use different social media to separate their topical and/or writing interests. For instance, one 36-year old white author in Switzerland operates nine different blogs to write about several topics she is interested in: in four blogs she writes about feminism, rheumatism, dementia and television. In four additional blogs she has been publishing stories she wrote or is the processes of writing. Her ninth blog contains a collection of crime fiction she wrote. Several other interviewees said they contribute to or cross-post on other (multi-author) blogs/sites.

Occasionally, interviewees said they moved their blogs or sites across different hosting sites or created their own domain. The most frequent hosting sites that interviewees mentioned were Wordpress, BlogSpot and self-hosted domains. They differ in terms of costs (Wordpress and BlogSpot can be used for free; renting a domain name costs a small yearly fee) and levels of control over viewer statistics, layout and formatting. A 37-year old white mother and housewife in the United Kingdom described how her blog hosting changed over time:

The sort of first time that I got into the Tots 100, there's a metrics down here called the Tots 100 Index, which now has about 5,000 blogs on it, but, you know, in the early days it didn't have that many. So the first time it was around I was sort of in the 70s, which was astonishing, and I sort of plummeted down, and then I went back up, then I switched, I self-hosted site, which affected my scores a lot.

A 33-year old white German woman, who blogs about parenting from the perspective of a same-sex married couple, said since she started blogging in 2006, she moved her blog from BlogSpot to Wordpress, then to her own domain, and again to Wordpress. She said she switched between the sites because of the difference in costs and control over viewer statistics. In the process, she said she changed from using her real name to using a pseudonym because: “I’m not this internet persona; it is a part of me, but a teeny tiny part of me.” She said she did not want people to think they know her as [real name] but to put a “wall” or “distance” between her internet persona and herself.

But interviewees also described reverse change. For instance, in the United States, a 39-year old Latina mother said between 2000 and 2007 she blogged under pseudonyms. Then she decided to start a blog to write more professionally, using her legal name. Similarly, several other interviewees who worked as journalists, writers or professors said they used their real names on their blogs and sites so that they can receive credit for their work. Several said that their blogs and sites served as part of their CV or as a calling card for their writing work. This way, they said, others can approach them for speaking engagements or to commission articles.

As these examples demonstrate, choosing different hosting sites and deciding to reveal real names, or not, are aspects of the fluidity of blogs as their users adapt to different life situations.

5.2.4 Writing styles and approaches

Several women indicated that over time either their writing style or the amounts of information they share have changed. For instance, a 38-year old white mother in the

United Kingdom, who identified as feminist, said she started to post more poems on her blog when readers told her that they admired her lyrical writing.

Several interviewees said that they have changed toward writing less about themselves and to limit the number of photos they post about themselves or their children. Almost all interviewees who wrote at least partly about their children addressed how their children growing up has prompted them to be more careful about which stories to share about them. They said, as their children grow older, they get more of a say in what is written about them and which photos of them can be displayed online. Some interviewees indicated they refocused on their own perspective and experiences. For instance, a 43-year old white mother in Germany, who has been writing about her children, her life and sewing since 2002, said she does not yet know if she will continue:

I'm also running out of topics. There is less that I can write about; to write private things about my grown children does not belong there. Well, what else is happening here is too private; I cannot put it on the internet anymore.

So I have to think about a new direction for the blog or if I will close down the blog. I have to think about it. But, I had given up on the blog a few times before but I could not keep that up either and reactivated the blog.

On the other hand, several women I interviewed stressed they have grown more confident through their blogging and are now writing more boldly and openly about their experiences and opinions. One 47-year old white working mother in Germany, who has been writing about the compatibility of family and career since 2009, said her writing has changed from being more generic to now being more personal and specific. She said her self-confidence and courage grew by reading other blogs and by being in touch with other bloggers. Similarly, a 42-year old single white

mother in the United Kingdom, who worked full time to help run a parenting network, which also hosts blogs, said:

There's something about the internet that can feel very male dominated and as though male viewpoints are the ones that really matter. And what's quite interesting about [our site] is because it is a female dominated space, the conversations that take place come, you know, come from a different perspective often and women can feel quite emboldened by that I think.

Another 47-year old white single mother in Germany, who has been seeking work, said she has become "more honest" in her posts:

In the beginning I still thought, yeah, I'll find work again and I'll be an optimistic mother who can pull off everything, something like that. But bit by bit – I've been looking for two years for a full-time job – I have developed a positively resigned attitude so that I think, oh well, it's like that now, I work as a free lancer, I receive housing support and am currently poor.

I'm writing much more radically and more open-heartedly about that than in the beginning. I think that's why the blog finds so many readers because not everyone says online how poor she is [laughs] and how difficult this all is sometimes.

No matter if women wrote blogs that were perceived as "personal-style" or "filter blogs," a U.S.-based survey of 340 women found that blogging psychologically empowers women (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012). The authors linked this to either a strong sense of community in the cases seen as "personal-style blogs" or to an enhanced sense of agency in the cases perceived as "filter blogs."

Other interviewees said they have become more selective regarding what they write about or changed the frequency of their blogging, especially if they have been writing for a long time. One 45-year old white working mother in the United States, who identified as feminist, said she noticed changes over the ten years of her blogging:

I think the biggest change, I think it is really age related as opposed to be blog related. I mean I am 45 now. I started blogging when I was 35 and I just don't have the energy to really get that worked up over stuff anymore. I mean I don't go on rants. I guess it is two things: one, I learned when something incenses me I often don't have all the information, so I find myself waiting until the full story is revealed before I get incensed.

And then also, I just am not willing...I can't work up that kind of steam anymore, you know, it's too draining, it doesn't have a lot of value, and other people are already doing it, it's been covered, I don't need to add my voice to the pile, and that's mostly about political stuff. I still feel the same fire politically about issues that I always have but I am less willing to invest my time writing about it. And so it could probably also be because I write full time, so I write lots of amounts of content every day.

One study found that regardless of gender, the writing style of bloggers changes with age to increasingly use pronouns, expressions of assent and links; in turn, negation becomes more seldom (Schler, Koppel, Argamon & Pennebaker, 2005). The authors also found that stylistic differences varied more than content differences between genders.

Women re-negotiate the information they blog about when their life changes or because of experiences online. They adjust their writing styles and approaches to fit their needs.

5.2.5 Commercial approaches

Several interviewees in the United States and in the United Kingdom said they tried to pursue a business-oriented approach for their blog, which has changed content. Some said they started off without the idea of making money via their blog and have become, at least partly, a commercial blog. As described in Chapter 4, income from blogs in all four countries varies greatly; only a small percentage of bloggers can live off their blogs (Blogverzeichnis.ch, 2014 for Switzerland; Paw, 2012 for the United

States; Pederson & Macafee, 2007 for the United Kingdom; Wandiger, 2014 for Germany). Several interviewees who earned money through their blog did not live just from this money but had other jobs (as writers, copy-editors, speakers among other occupations) or a working partner who brought income to their household. Nobody would quantify how much money they made from blogging. One 35-year old white mother in the United Kingdom, who hosts competitions, product reviews and advertorials on her blog about family and parenting, mentioned that £40 (\$67 as of April 24, 2014) for a blog post would be acceptable for her but perhaps not for others:

In the UK there are quite a few private Facebook groups that all the parent bloggers will go on. And they go on there to complain about the agencies they are working with. So you can read a message that is like: 'Oh, I have an e-mail from so and so and they wanted me to write about this but they only wanted to give me £20 [\$34], I mean, how ludicrous.' And like a lot of that kind of thing. And okay £25 [\$42] isn't much; I wouldn't probably do it for £25. But they might say more, it might be more money than that and you might read it and think, well actually, 40 quid is 40 quid [British pound]. And if it's going to take you maybe an hour to write a post that's an awful lot of money and that's fantastic that you're able to make that much money just from sitting at home doing something you enjoy and you should be a bit more grateful. Because there are plenty of people who don't make that during their whole day and they're doing a really crap job.

Another 37-year white mother and housewife in the United Kingdom, who is married to a man lawyer, described how she earned money through her blog by reviewing products and services:

I said when I started a blog that I know I would have made it when my blog got us a holiday and so the fact that I achieved this aim was massive. Even though it wasn't really a free holiday because I had to blog some posts, you know. I think we had to do a family challenge and I had to write about that, so, in fact, it was twelve blog posts, to break it down into the equivalent costs of a holiday, so practically it was just a strange exchange, so stuff like that I think, really, things I wouldn't necessarily pay for myself but that I sometimes get offered. ...

A 39-year old Latina working mother in the United States detailed how she makes “coffee money” from her blogging:

I have affiliate links for two different book sites, and occasionally I could buy a book from them; so I get credit there. And then I have two product affiliate site links, right now, the reading card, photo card shop, and then one with the healthy snacks, and really nothing is coming from that. ...

They’re just two products, I thought I liked the affiliate program, I like their products; it didn’t hurt to have that link on. If somebody clicks on there I might get a couple of dollars and it’ll go straight for coffee [laughs], you know.

I have a Zazzle²³ store so people can buy products with my blog logo on it, you know. Over the last year I have earned again coffee money from that.

She added that she made more money from speaking engagements as people find her blog. Similarly, a 34-year old Black queer blogger in the United States, who identified as feminist, said the blog has provided her with other writing opportunities:

That’s been my number one passion; I always wanted to be a writer. I’ve had opportunities to write for publications and they hear my voice and to get paid for it, that’s been probably the most positive outcome of being a blogger and tweeter.

One 26-year old Black writer in the United States, who identified as feminist and runs a multi-author site on queer issues, addressed how difficult it is to earn money from advertising in her case:

I think the most challenging part has been to make [the site] self-sustaining and make it profitable...And unfortunately, there is a lot of, the advertising that’s out there, I think a lot of gay men, men’s websites and publication, there’s a lot of money out there for them because of certain things, like HIV/Aids prevention. They get a lot of money from those campaigns. But for

²³ Zazzle (2014) is a company that allows individuals to design and offer customized products on the Zazzle site. People use Zazzle to offer paraphernalia related to their blogs, sites or projects and sometimes refer to the subpage they run on Zazzle as their “Zazzle store.”

women, especially women of color, because there isn't a lot of research out there on us, unfortunately convincing advertisers that we are a market for them to tap in, that's been an ongoing struggle and battle.

Some blogs lost their appeal for interviewees (mostly in the United States) if they did not promise financial gains in the future. It led them to either write elsewhere for money or to adjust their expectations for their own blog. For instance, a 45-year old white mother in the United States said:

I wanted to grow my following, become a famous blogger, get paid gazillions of dollars, make millions in ad revenue, you know, these all. I realized that there's no way that I could do that and maintain my true voice if I was going to keep my blog. So instead I have chosen professional writing as a way to pursue those goals. I get a lot of satisfaction out of writing for Babble [Disney owned parenting blog site]....[They don't pay] a lot, but they pay.

When commercial opportunities arise, in forms of advertising, linking, reviewing, paid writing or speaking engagements, women use them to earn money for themselves, their family or to advance their career. The money added to their income or affords them products and service they might not have gotten otherwise. But in most cases it did not afford them to live off their blogs. They also negotiated the conditions under which they are willing to earn money, to not compromise their voice or values. Commercial opportunities thus are another aspect of the fluidity of public clusters.

5.2.6 New connections

Many interviewees addressed how they became connected to other people with similar or different interests. Their blogging shifted either within or across public clusters, sometimes overlapping with "real life." For instance, a 39-year old white

mother of an adopted child in the United States said she got involved, online and offline, with clusters whose participants addressed adoptees, birth parents, movies her child likes, gender-progressive parenting and girl empowerment. She added she is also part of a local group of bloggers on other topics. Another 42-year old mother in the United States, who worked as a free lance writer and social media consultant, said she does not separate between her “real life community” and her “internet community” but considers herself as part of three different “bubbles:”

There’s the people I have only met online, whose face I’ve never seen, who I don’t know but I’ve had this 10-year relationship with them, and so I feel like they’re a valuable part of my life even though we will never sit across a table from each other.

Once I started travelling, when I really became a full-time blogger, when I started going to blogging conferences, I developed, you know, a group of face-to-face friends who are also online friends, people that I do sit across the table from and who have become a big part of my life even though we’re not super close friends; we’re good friends. We’re more than just acquaintances.

And then of course there’s the group of people who I met through travelling and through blogging who have become my absolutely closest friends ever. There’s a group who I call my sister wives group. They are about ten women and they live all across the country. We love each other passionately and we have Google hanging outs, we see each other’s faces and, you know, I mean, they are my closest girlfriends.

Similarly, a 29-year old white deaf blogger in the United Kingdom, who identified as feminist, wrote:

There are quite a few communities that I have been part of through blogging. For example, the fat activist/fashion community (body acceptance etc.), the deaf blogging and writing community, the feminist community and just bloggers in general – for example writers, people interested in psychology/sociology (which I’m interested in at the moment), cat owners! Blogging seems to cut across all kinds of things. It has taught me a lot about intersectionality, disability, activism and passion.

In the same vein, a 37-year old white working mother in Switzerland said counter to her expectation she made friends because of her blog:

A lot of people I got to know, and, in fact, I found friends because of [blogging], real friends, what I thought could not happen like that without having met in person before. Or there are people from the beginning of my blog, whom I haven't seen except for a more or less sharp picture but where I say they are friends.

Another 47-year single mother in Germany, who identified as feminist, said she considers herself part of many clusters:

I'm not just in the community of the 'grumbly mothers community,' but there are also blogging parents who are not mainly writing about children's topics but simply about other things. And I don't always look around just my topical areas but well, in my imagination there are like 20 overlapping bubbles in which I move...for instance, there's an Asperger autism woman blogger, then there's a woman blogger with a multiple personality and I like to read her blog, that's interesting, well, the psychologically defect, the emancipated, the happily married ones, cooking, crafting blogs. I also like to look into those sometimes.

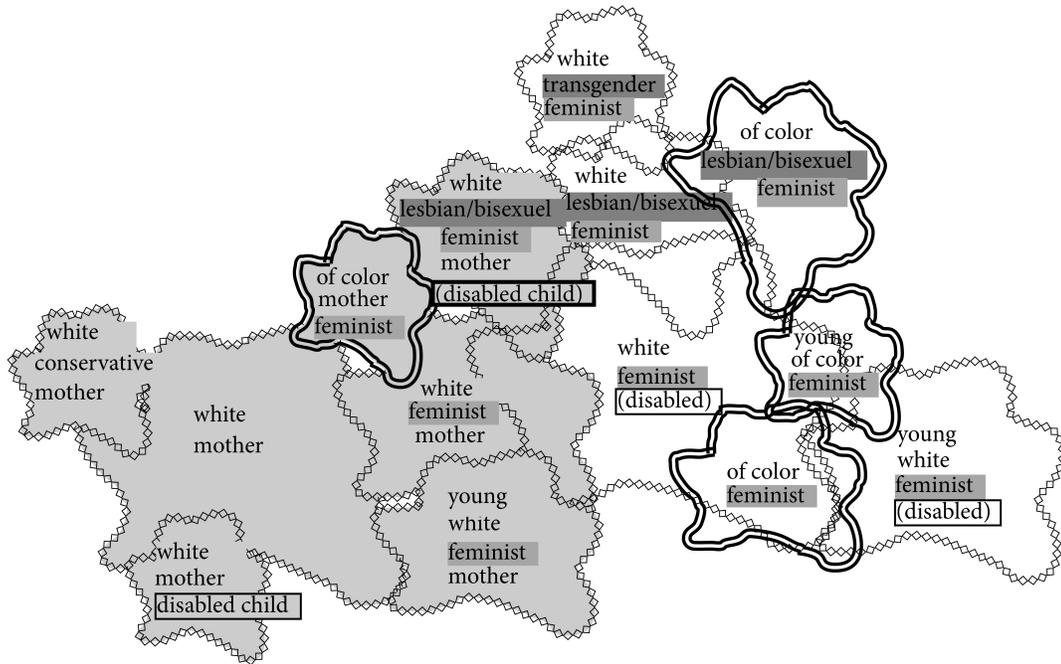
These friendships, professional relationships or just learning about other people's lives and issues, speak to another aspect of the fluidity of public clusters online. A 33-year old white German working mother, who has been blogging since 2006 about raising her children from the perspective of same-sex parents, perhaps put it best:

What has honestly amazed me is how much this [blogging] environment has changed. I would have never expected it to be like that, because there was a peak time. In the beginning there was nothing; I was all on my own. Then a few more came; then there were a bunch for a while, and then bit-by-bit it has died down again. And now there are really just a few who write, or write in a way that it is worth reading. ... It's a very, very lively environment.

In sum, blogs authored by women with a variety of backgrounds are good examples of fluid public clusters. The blogs and sites offer women digital rooms of their own that are linked to each other. They allow women bloggers/online writers to define new, empowering identities that are anchored in their experiences of working, child rearing and pursuing interests and activism. At the same time, the clusters they participated in are fluid enough to allow women to grow beyond their own identity and interests. The fluid public clusters which they built, refract stereotypes of women in society (more about the benefits of having a digital room of her own in Chapter 6.)

5.3 Applying the theory fluid public clusters online to women writers online

While my case studies are not representative and exhaustive for each country or across them, I identified a row of fluid public clusters online that illustrate my model of fluid public clusters. In this study the model of fluid public clusters online is applied to women bloggers/online writers on women's, family and maternal politics and issues. It indicates which of these fluid public clusters have become more prominent over recent years in Western democracies as well as which ones have come more into focus for this study (Figure 1)



young = 35 years or younger as of 2013
 mother = bloggers who often write about motherhood or their children
 of color = mostly Black women, but also white Hispanics, Latina, Asian, and mixed race

 lines with white circles = white women
 two line borders = women of color
 light grey background = mother
 medium grey label = feminist
 dark grey label = LBQ(T) background
 label with black border = disabled woman or child

Figure 1 The model of fluid public clusters online for women bloggers/writers on women, family and maternal issues in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland (N=109)

As Figure 1 illustrates, the fluid public clusters do not have well defined or smooth boundaries; they are porous and overlap as different dimensions of identity bring people and their concerns together in different clusters. They are also porous because participants direct their voices and concerns to other clusters and wider society to interact with other people. By definition being *fluid* public clusters, the visualization of my model can only capture a snapshot of a particular moment in time and of particular online and geographical spaces. While interviewees adjusted the social media they used, their topics and writing approaches, they, nevertheless were

rooted in the dimensions of their identities and related experiences. This is why I chose to visualize the dimensions of identity with which interviewees identified in terms of race, motherhood, age, sexuality, disability, and feminism. They did so partly on their blogs and in their interviews with me.

The most prominent fluid public clusters across all four countries in my sample were white heterosexual women who identified as feminist, white heterosexual mothers, white heterosexual young feminists and white heterosexual young feminist mothers who were married or in a relationship (young refers to women 35 years old or younger). Smaller clusters were white women with a lesbian, bisexual or transgender background, a traditional perspective or conservative political leaning, being disabled themselves or having a disabled or adopted child or a child of a different race.

Similarly, clusters with women of color were less prominent, especially women of color as mothers and in all countries but the United States. They also included women with a lesbian, bisexual or queer background in Germany. (No transgender women came to my attention in the other three countries though most likely they exist). Women of color mostly included Black women. Interviewees who identified as Jewish, White Hispanic, Latina, Asian or mixed race were less visible than white women's blogs.

As the application of the theory of fluid public clusters to my sample demonstrates, no one type of "woman" blogger exists. Their venues online, their topics, and writing approaches are fluid over time but they remain rooted in their identities, related experiences and the Western democracies in which they are located.

5.4 National contexts

Interviewees in each country explicitly or implicitly pointed to the national context that frames their writing. This provides compelling evidence that national frameworks do matter in the adoption of web 2.0 spaces.

In the following five sections I describe those fluid public clusters in each country, which were particularly salient in contrast to the other three countries. That is, I either did not or barely encountered them in the other three countries.

For the United States, the focus is on the clusters of women with disabled children and women of color, as they were not as salient in the other three countries. In the United Kingdom, clusters of feminist (mother) bloggers stood out who tackled current problems for mothers and women in successful campaigns. A brief summary sketches an emerging public cluster of teenage feminist activists. These were not as salient in the other three countries. For Germany, the focus is on clusters of young feminists and young feminist mothers, who are between 24 and 35 years old, and work to dismantle the notion of the ideal mother. They stood out in terms of their (younger) age compared to the other three countries. Also participants in Germany across all public clusters were predominantly located in the area of former West Germany. In Switzerland, a cluster of traditionally oriented mothers and housewives dominated the blog scene. In turn, clusters of working, feminist mothers and feminist women without children were minorities. Last is an analysis of the asymmetrical flow of information, mostly flowing from English-language countries to German-speaking countries but not as much if at all vice versa.

5.4.1 The United States

In the United States several clusters were more salient compared to the other three countries: white mothers with disabled or special needs children, including mothers with a lesbian, bisexual or queer background, and women of color, especially Black women.

A small cluster of six individual white working and stay-at-home mothers, including those in same-sex marriages, blogged about their children with physical or mental disabilities or other special needs (be in terms of adoption or having a child of color with a white mother). Each of them said that they are connected to other bloggers who face similar situation and write about health, ailments, treatments and resources. Several U.S. based studies analyzed blogging communities of (mostly) mothers, who write about their children with disabilities. For instance, Clark and Lang (2012) analyzed blogs in which mostly mothers discussed medication for their children with attention deficit disorder (ADD/ADHD). They concluded that these blog conversations represented an “individuated, rationally motivated intense parenting style” (p. 412):

Parental responsibility, when described, begins and ends with the mother (rarely, but sometimes, the father) being systematically and assiduously attentive to the child’s behavior, observing closely and counting the length of time the child has seemed to be symptomatic and then making an immediate appointment with an expert (p. 412).

Similarly, Swanke, Zeman and Doktor (2009) described mothers who blogged about their children with autism spectrum disorders. The authors wrote that mothers blogged about their discontent with schools, health and social institutions and criticized the stigmatization of their child. Swanke, Zeman and Doktor concluded that

the mothers used their blogs to advocate a better world for their children, “creating future possibilities for their children in which they are accepted as full members of the community” (p. 208).

Themes of intense mothering, documenting the frustrations to find resources for their child and advocating for their child to be recognized as a full member of society also shone through in the fluid public cluster of women with children with special needs in my sample. For instance, one 39-year old white working mother of a child born with a short limb said:

I never considered not talking about it. I also knew pretty quickly that there weren't any resources. There was one Yahoo health group online when she was born; there was nothing else. And so I was really just documenting what we were going through and trying to figure out, not knowing it could become a resource for others.

Another 46-year old white working mother of a child with a physical movement disability described the reasons for starting her blog:

I started this blog for several reasons, one of which was yes, I had things I wanted to air and talk about. But I was in a much better place by the time I started my blog. I had been going through a very hard time after [my child] was born. I was in a much better place and I wanted to help other moms, and dads even, who were going through a tough time. It was one of the two main reasons.

And the third would be for just community also. I'm definitely part of a thriving blogger community, which includes parents with kids with special needs and parents with kids who don't have special needs but it's an amazing community. I call many of these people my friends. I met some of them in real life, but most of them I only know online and you know. I find community on my blog when I raise a question and I get answers, or when I'm exchanging tweets with people, or when I'm on Facebook and I have a question to ask and I throw something out, or when I just want to share something wonderful.

Similarly, a 40-year old white stay-at-home mother who is married to the co-mother, echoed the sentiment:

Sometimes I just need to get it out there, you know. I'm the stay-at-home parent of a medically compromised and developmentally delayed child and I spend a lot of time by myself. So for me the writing is more therapeutic than anything and the secondary benefit is to get feedback. And I get messages from people that I know and people that I don't know that have been directed to the blog for whatever reason, to make contact. So for me it really is working against isolation of a stay-at-home parent in general and then of a stay-at-home parent of a child with special needs.

The United States also stood out for its diversity among interviewees regarding race/ethnicity. My sample of 37 women in the United States included one Latina mother, two White Hispanic activists, three Jewish bloggers, and six Black bloggers/online writers. This was determined by asking interviewees with which race or ethnicity they identified. Several interviewees also disclosed race/ethnicity on their blogs, especially Black and Latina interviewees. Blogs and sites by women of color were almost absent in all other three countries, despite efforts to locate such blogs.

In the United States sample, several Black interviewees contributed to multi-author blogs/sites, and said that many more women (of color) write for these blogs/sites. This speaks to the diversity of the U.S. population in terms of race/ethnicity. Among the four countries, which all feature a white majority in their population (see Chapter 4), the United States had the smallest majority of white people, with 63 percent. In turn, the United States features several big minorities with Latinas/os representing 16.9 percent, Black/African-American 13.1 percent, and Asians 5.1 percent of the population (U.S. Census, 2012). Notably, however, most often group blogs either included a majority of women of color or a majority of white women with little overlap and linking between each other. This provides evidence that the intersections of race and gender in media production and societal debate

offline have migrated online. Especially, in regard to Twitter, several Black women mentioned hashtags that addressed issues about race or race and gender such as #BlackTwitter and #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen.

Blogger Mikki Kendall, a woman of color, created the hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen in August 2013 after white feminist blogger Jill Filipovic had expressed sympathy for a college professor “who some have criticized as misogynist and racist” (Williams, V., 2013). Kendall said the hashtag addressed the imbalanced reporting in feminist online media which would pay more attention to the problems of white, middle and upper class, able-bodied and cisgender²⁴ women than to women of color and transgender, poor, undocumented and disabled women (Tolentino, 2013).

The second hashtag that Black women in my sample mentioned, and which is perhaps the most powerful and often used hashtag among Black Twitter users, was #BlackTwitter.²⁵ People who use #BlackTwitter continue a Black linguistic tradition of “signifyin’,” with wordplays, jokes, rules and indirect meanings (Florini, 2014). They are a “‘public group of specific Twitter users’ rather than a ‘Black online public’” (Brock, 2012, p. 545) but have been depicted as representing a Black monoculture rather than heterogeneity among Black people. This heterogeneity finds

²⁴ Cisgender refers to women whose gender matches with the sex they were assigned at birth in contrast to transgender women whose sex assigned at birth does not match with their own gender experience. Using the term cisgender works to name the unmarked normativity of humans whose gender and sex identification align. Both expressions have roots in Latin, with trans meaning “across, beyond, through, so as to change” and cis meaning “on this side” (Merriam-Webster, 2014).

²⁵ Similar hashtags such as #NotYourAsianSidekick and #NotYourMascot, which have been used on Twitter, express similar criticism and discontent regarding the experiences of Asian and Native American people.

expression in the multiple “Blacktags” that Sharma (2013) described, such as #atablackpersonfuneral, #ifsantawasblack or #onlyinthegetto. She argues that these hashtags work as an intervention to disrupt whiteness on Twitter.

Black interviewees echoed these themes when they talked about Black Twitter. One 40-year old Black feminist editor of a multi-author site said she does not participate “that much” in Black Twitter but that it was “very important” to her:

It’s like a movement, and again, it’s the voice of the people. I really detest when media give us leaders, who are not necessarily leaders, and then we go with it, right. So this is [Michael Eric] Dyson as a leader, he speaks for all Black people or Melissa Harris-Perry, you know, she speaks for all Black women or Cornell West, right. So they are the ones because they’re always on TV, they get to be the speakers, you know, they are great speakers but there are other voices.

So Black Twitter for me is important because it creates space for other voices that are typically marginal. It creates space for other voices that are extremely smart and witty and very funny, very radical in, you know, the things that they come up with. I look at Black Twitter and Black cultural production; it is a form of Black cultural production, you know. ...

They come up with some crazy stuff. That is absolutely wonderful, ingenious. ... That’s a part of Black Americans or Black culture. When I say Black culture, we’re definitely talking North American culture in terms of, you know, ex-slave Africans in the U.S., you know. We use wit and humor to create radical space, like giving space for themselves and community.

I see Twitter in that vein to using wit and humor to create radical space, that is, like giving to them and to outwit the opponent, that it is what Twitter is doing. That is fun Twitter is like a next level so people who are not familiar with that become upset. ‘Oh, you are so mean.’ No, no, it’s Black culture; you’ll get it in a minute.

The multi-author site for which she works as a volunteer editor also emphasized this heterogeneity of voices:

None of us profess to write for all of anyone. But we do represent, this is some nuancing there, we do represent certain kinds of perspectives. I definitely write from a Black feminist perspective; do I write for all Black feminists?

No. But, do a lot of my ideas align with the majority of a lot of Black feminists? Yes, depending on the age group especially.

She said contributors to the site write about everything: politics, arts, culture, fashion, sports, college feminism, religion and entertainment: “There’s nothing that is off limits, our work is intersectional, we are intersectional. ... We write about everything but from a feminist gaze.” Another 33-year old Black contributor to another multi-author blog, who identified as feminist, said they started writing

to give space to conversation and dialogue that’s not necessarily being talked about. ... if we don’t talk about these things, you know, that means, that there’s one less conversation happening about, you know, people feeling attacked by racism or sexism or. You know, not being seen in mainstream media or whatever. It is important to do this. ... If no one else is kind of illuminating or picks up our voices, we have to do it ourselves.

Another 42-year old Black individual blogger, who identified as feminist, said her goal is to have a “queer Black feminist voice out there.” Similarly, a 39-year old Latina mother said:

I have a perspective as a feminist, and as a Latina and as a mom...we don’t see that very often, definitely not in the mainstream press, but even in the “big feminist blogs” out there. That is, my viewpoint or of others like me is not heard so that’s where my goal is for my blog, to have this other perspective out there. The mainstream media likes to look and find and anoint, you know, a feminist blog at a time or you know, a blog of a “feminist leader,” no matter who that person is, that person is going to have only their perspective to talk from and for the most part that are pretty white, heterosexual, middle class viewpoints. And so, that is where I come in. Even my voice is not as inclusive as others so I try to help and support those other voices that are different. They’re not from New York or L.A. I’m not all those other glamorous feminists out there.

These statements speak to a continuing “black/white digital divide,” even if it is not consistent across different social media as a Pew Internet Research Project stated (Smith, 2014). The report noted that with 80 percent, still fewer African-

Americans use the internet than the 87 percent of white U.S. adults. Yet, as often mentioned in studies and news media reports, more Black people online use Twitter, with 22 percent, than white people online, with 16 percent²⁶ (Smith, 2014). Among all Twitter users, however, the overwhelming majority remains white, with 71 percent; only nine percent were Black (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie & Purcell, 2011).

My findings, as other studies do, point to insufficient intersectional analysis on race and gender online as women of color continue their struggle for recognition in society as well as in feminist and women's movements (Collins, 2008).

5.4.2 The United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom, white feminists and feminist mothers (in multi-author blogs, blogging networks or on their own) emerged as large, prominent clusters. In my sample of 19 women in the United Kingdom, fifteen women identified as feminist or a feminist mother. Most remarkably, among the four countries, feminist women appear to have produced a great number of (successful) campaigns to fight for women's, girls' and mothers' rights.

A second emerging, smaller cluster, which I observed on the fringes, were teenage feminists below the age of 18 who only use social media to organize their activism, voice their concerns and promise a "fun" feminist future.

Women who blog about motherhood and family, with or without earning money through their blogs, were often also members of large networks geared toward writing about parenting such as Mumsnet, Netmums, Britmums, Tots 100 or Babble (Disney-owned). With 63 percent more woman online in the United Kingdom than

²⁶ Especially Black internet users age 18 to 29 years use Twitter, with 40 percent, compared to white users of that age range, with 28 percent (Smith, 2014).

men online (57 percent) use social media (Oxford Internet Survey, 2011). Pederson and Macafee (2007) found that in their sample of 24 British women and men bloggers each, four women compared to one man participated in multi-author blogs. They noted, that the United Kingdom was the first country in Europe with widespread internet access at home. This early adoption advantage has perhaps helped to close the gender gap for internet access in the country: 78 percent of British women and 79 percent of British men go online (Dutton & Blank, 2013). This early adoption might also have aided in the emergence of the many multi-author blogs/sites and campaigns that use social media.

Especially the network and blog-hosting site Mumsnet has brought the concerns of mothers and women into a wider public since its creation in 2000. For instance, it lobbied on behalf of disabled children in the 2010 British election campaign and has been heard in British politics on issues such as rape, depression and divorce (Gardiner, 2012). Mumsnet has been active in launching campaigns inspired by the experiences of its users. For instance, as a 42-year old white single mother and editor for the site described, in 2012 Mumsnet started the Ban Bounty project. For this project it used the hashtag #BountyMutiny on Twitter. It refers to mothers who just gave birth in hospitals and protest that commercial photographers have access to the maternity ward to snap photos of the baby and mother to then sell the photos back to the family at steep prices. She also described the strategy and success of the networks' first campaign.

We kicked off with a campaign called Let Girls Be Girls, which was about the imposition of adult ideas and sexuality onto young girls, pre-teen girls, particularly in terms of clothing, by some shops. We went about by targeting the retailers mostly. All of our campaigns come from our members, it tends to

be that our members will get into a debate about something and ask us to do something about it. So that was an example of that and we did it by going to the retailers themselves and saying this is a code of conduct retailers that we think all responsible retailers should sign up to i.e. be prepared to put your name to this. And we got all, not quite all, of the big high street clothing retailers in the UK to sign up and to say that they agreed to the principles.

Which then when our members were going to these stores and seeing something appropriate, we had a pathway to say, well you signed up but our members found this puppet and sexy clothes in your stores, could you have your word with your buyers or the management of the store and explain to them that you're not supposed to be going down this road anymore. So this is how this worked.

It also got a lot of press coverage, and the prime minister, who was David Cameron, he had just come in at that time, signed up to it, and other politicians signed up to it. So it became a kind of press and politicians' thing, as well as a retailer thing but the focus was on the retailers.

Two other Mumsnet campaigns supported victims of rape and sexual assault (called We Believe You) and convinced the Outdoor Advertising Association to drop controversial posters. The site and community has become a “major player in governmental policy campaigns and [is] considered a key stakeholder on children and sexualization issues” (Pedersen & Smithson, 2013, p. 99). Pederson and Smithson argued that apart from providing advice, information, entertainment and support to its users, Mumsnet also fulfills a hedonistic need. They concluded that Mumsnet as a women-dominated space has allowed women to use behavior and language that previously have been described as preferred by men such as flaming and swear words. They argued the site has helped to shift gender norms online and has allowed its users to perform “new forms of femininity” (p. 105).

Other campaigns have focused on the representation of women in British media. For instance, the non-profit group UK Feminista started the campaign Lose

the Lads Mags to work against the easy availability of pornographic magazines in supermarkets and stores. One of the organizers, a 31-year old white feminist and author, said they have had some success with the big supermarket chain Tesco, which after intense e-mail lobbying agreed to meet them. The campaign achieved that the magazines would be displayed in a less prominent way and would only be available to people 18 years and older. Moreover, over 4,000 stores in the United Kingdom, she said, stopped selling the “lads mags” altogether. Specific wins like those, she said, show that activism has been working in the United Kingdom:

The only way things change is when people make it, demand it, and make it happen. And so the whole ethos of feminism is you can't leave change to a small number people of policy makers behind closed doors because the level of change that we need is just so wide-ranging and complex that it will take as many people as possible mobilizing on multiple fronts all at the same time in to bring about the change we need, which is fundamental transformation in relations between women and men.

The non-profit organization UK Feminista has started programs to train anyone who wants to start a campaign. My interviewee said over 500 people came to their last feminist training event. In a separate event, she said, hundreds of organizations lobbied parliamentarian on women's issues:

Feminism is very much back in the headlines and on the streets in the UK. What it does is power a positive feedback loop with increased media coverage, greater political attention, more funding for women's organization. And when it comes to feminism in the UK the genie is very much out of the bottle, the feminist movement is alive and here to stay.

Other interviewees in the United Kingdom talked similarly about their impressions of new vibrant feminist movements that are discussed in established news media and are taken up by politicians in the country. For instance, the London Feminist Network

and its campaign Reclaim the Night as well as the blog and campaign End Victim Blaming.

Reclaim the Night is an annual women-only march in different British cities to protest sexual assault and rape culture. One of the organizers, a 36-year old white feminist and researcher, echoed the sentiment that news media and politics take them seriously.

Yes, we've been approached by local [members of parliaments] in London, journalists in London, who contact us and say, you know, they're aware of our presence and would be like to comment on xyz and would we like to go along and be involved in a campaign that they're starting. It means that we don't get left out in the debate; it means that we don't get left out of any new initiative.

She added that for instance, the All Party Parliamentary Groups (APPG), in which members of the parliament work on a topic across party lines, have invited them to present information on domestic abuse. Established news media have "mostly been favorable," often copying press releases the group prepared, she said.

The blog and campaign of End Victim Blaming similarly fights against violence in relationships, the stigmatization of victims and the portrayal of victims in British news media. One of the site's organizers, a 36-year old white at-home mother, said the biggest success was over a trial in the United Kingdom during the summer of 2013. A barrister described a 13-year old girl as "predatory" in a sexual abuse trial, a term which the judge then also used, even though the abuser was a 41-year old man. She said the campaign got support from change.org to petition that the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) investigates the barrister, who then was removed from handling sexual abuse cases.

Perhaps the most famous, but also most attacked feminist campaign was Caroline Criado-Perez' successful petition to display another woman on the British paper currency other than the Queen of England. Her petition convinced the Bank of England to put an image of Jane Austen on the new ten-pound note starting in 2017 (Change.org, 2014). During her campaign, Caroline Criado Perez suffered from massive verbal attacks (Hattenstone, 2013; Hess, 2014), which became a topic in itself in British news media (more about negative experiences in the following Chapter 6) and which several interviewees in the United Kingdom referenced.

Another small public cluster that has emerged in the United Kingdom, and which was not salient in any of the other three countries, were teenage feminist activists.²⁷ While this age group fell out of the range of my study (and IRB approval), my research led me to young women in high schools and colleges, including some who are below 18 years of age, who identified as feminist activists. This trend was reflected in a recent post on the British multi-author blog *The F-Word*, in which Chelsea Birkby (2014) contrasted her time in school with a “whole new generation of angry teenagers”:

My youth was filled with apathy and ignorance and I wish it could have been injected with some riot-grrrrl passion via some cold hard, un-ignorable truth, albeit neatly packaged and delivered in 140 characters and a tinyurl link to something on the *New Statesman* [left-leaning blog]. When a lot of feminist discourse online is rightly about frustration, disappointment and rage, good news is overdue. So I'd like to take this opportunity to share the good news and say how pleased I am that the feminist movement is making itself heard and that people are listening, specifically younger people and those still in compulsory education. There may be a long, long way to go, but know this --

²⁷ Albeit feminist teenage activists did not become salient in the U.S. sample of my study, Keller (2012) studied two U.S.-based blogs authored by teenage girls who contested sexist culture and lobbied for women's rights.

an army is gathering ready to pick up their words and fight (but only after the school bell!)

For instance, the Twitter Youth Feminist Army (TYFA) has used Twitter, Facebook, a blog and a newsletter to organize feminist events, to network and to write about feminist issues. On their Facebook page, they welcome “young people who are passionate about feminism and equality ranging in age from 9 to 65” (Twitter Youth Feminist Army, 2014). One of its organizers, a 15-year old high school student, said the group has about 125 members (personal conversation, June 12, 2013). She said initially she only knew two other feminist girls under the age of 25 years on Twitter:

We were like, oh, we’re like an army of feminists, we’re on Twitter, and we’re young, we’re the Twitter Youth Feminist Army! And then we got a couple more members, because it was kind of a joke a first, we got a couple more members in the university. Then someone asked us to write an article for their blog. Because everyone was doing exams, or doing their degrees and I was the only one not doing major exams. So I was okay, I’ll organize it and everyone send their notes and I wrote it up and ever since I’ve been the organizer. So when it was accessed, everyone was like, that is so sweet, you are the Twitter Youth Feminist Army; that is so cute. And people wanted to join because it sounded so fun and is fun. Since then we’ve had a lot of press, we were mentioned in the *Guardian* and Radio 4 and every time we suddenly get 20 new members saying this is so cool, I want to join this. (Personal communication, June 12, 2013).

She also emphasized the great advantages of the internet for the younger members:

A lot of younger feminists would be kind of afraid and intimidated to go to women’s groups. They’re mostly organized by women in their 30s, 40s, 50s, who have their own children, who’ve been feminists for years, who have many years experience. So they might be intimidated or they might on late at night when we are not allowed to go out. Close to 7 is good for me or 8 but I have to be in by 9 o’clock, I can’t go to that. People with disabilities might find it intimidating, and have easier access online, less strain for them if they’re ill. ... We are all eternally broke, we don’t have any money for publicity so we have to do it on the internet (Personal communication, June 12, 2013).

Carter (2014) also observed the founding of student feminist societies and feminist activist campaigns in the United Kingdom, which also include men who also challenge “restrictive forms of femininity and masculinity” (p. 645). She concluded that feminist activists in the United Kingdom, but also in the United States, have “largely” used their “anger” about sexism in media, in everyday situations and the hijacking of feminist arguments for capitalist purposes for a “productive and positive end” (p. 652). She argued that only positive “political solidarity” (p. 652) can sustain media and gender activism in the future. The emphasis of the Twitter Youth Action Army on feminism being “fun” and “cool” might turn the tide to re-associate the word and notion of feminism as something positive.

5.4.3 Germany

Two clusters were salient in the German sample: feminist women without children and feminist mothers aged 35 years or younger, and, that the overwhelming number of all interviewees (regardless of age) was located in former West Germany.²⁸

Notably, the German sample featured a much lower percentage of mothers (47 percent) than the United States (73 percent) or Switzerland (84.2 percent). This corresponds with the Germany’s low birth rate of 8.34 children per 1,000 people

²⁸ Current language refers to former West Germany as *alte Bundesländer* [old federal states] and to former East Germany as *neue Bundesländer* [new federal states]. Since this might be confusing to readers who are less familiar this terminology, I will use the terms former West and East Germany. They are also still used among the German population.

(CIA World Factbook, 2014).²⁹ This is one of the lowest birth rates in the world and is projected to stagnate at a low level (Pötzsch, Weinmann & Haustein, 2012).

But two clusters that were salient included four feminist mothers³⁰ and nine feminists without children between the age of 24 and 35 years. Several of them said they started blogging in part because of the disturbing experience (to them) that suddenly they were only perceived as mothers by others, not as students, workers, activists, researchers or complex individuals otherwise. This experience, they said, made them feel isolated and alone, also in contrast to the advantages the children's father continued to enjoy. For instance, one 34-year old white mother and doctoral student, who identified as feminist, said:

I'm hoping a bit to produce a bit more space in gender studies and queer theory for the topic of reproduction and motherhood. I would like to give a substantial theoretical impulse. It would be too much to say that I try to change the entire [nation's] family politics. For that to happen, one would have to spread this topic more among feminist activists. At the moment, rights for transgender and intersex people...for them there's more activism among university students, at least that is my impression, than to get rid of the *Ehegattensplitting*.

The *Ehegattensplitting* has been a tax incentive in Germany since the 1950s that favors married couples in which one partner is having a high income and the other one a lower or no income. This tax incentive is one symptom of a German system that, in the interviewee's view and that of others, needs reform to provide equal opportunities for women and men, with and without children, in and outside of

²⁹ In comparison, the fertility rate for the United States is 13.42 children per 1,000 people, for the United Kingdom 12.22 children, and for Switzerland 10.48 children (CIA World Factbook, 2014).

³⁰ Because of their many duties as working/studying mothers and in some cases also activists, it was sometimes difficult to arrange interviews with mothers. In some cases, mothers were tending to their children in the background while talking with me. One mother nursed her baby while doing the interview.

marriage. Currently, the tax system encourages one of the two married partners – in most cases a wife and/or mother – to take up a lower paid job if the other partner – in most cases a husband and/or father – has a higher paid job. Critics of this law say that this is one way the state perpetuates outdated gender role models (Bothfeld & Fuchs, 2011). In this regard, a 29-year old white feminist activist said:

Still a lot needs to change in Germany, the family politics are terrible, the poverty of retired women, missing promotions, what Jutta Allmendinger [2013, 2014] has said, that the marriage market is still in fact more important for women than the job market is a catastrophe. At the moment blogs are an important vehicle to get that rolling, that Facebook makes an online network possible for those who don't dare to blog, who have safe groups there to exchange. The internet has made things possible, a new version of old movements. When we wouldn't have had blogs, it would have gone via other forms. So I see the internet not as a panacea but as means to an end.

A 28-year old white mother and undergraduate student said for a while she wrote about mobility as a mother and the baby stroller as a handicap. She added that her blog:

is about things which are not so apparent right away. ... It was a lot about being unhappy with my child, the division of labor, and going to college and having a child.

Another 34-year old mother said she had already read blogs by “feminist moms” before she became pregnant:

Because already during the pregnancy I started to experience overbearing and vitriolic things and was thinking “What the fuck, this can't be.” Meanwhile we've become very many [feminist mothers who blog].

Another 28-year old white mother and undergraduate student, who is a single parent, said she blogs

a lot about being a mother and being myself, then also about the conflict to be white, also in regard to being a mother of a Black child, and also connected to that what touches on school, education and race.

Through their blogs, and also on Twitter, they have formed support communities among peers. A 34-year old white feminist mother described the solidarity especially in Berlin:

It is incredibly beautiful, the solidarity, also exchanges and practical help among all bloggers who are here in Berlin, easy to reach. It is really ... something I find very beautiful because it has also grown over the past few weeks from virtual to real, into another reality. I cannot even say “real life” because online it is just as real, also real feelings, also real solidarity and exchanges about how we can support each other, how humans can support each other. I find this very inspiring, with all mothers which whom I’ve been in touch.

The online space these mothers have carved out for their protest and resistance play out on a backdrop of old laws and ideals that still favor a one-income family in terms of taxes and other monetary incentives; a vast lack of (affordable) child care facilities (especially in former West Germany where they have been viewed as inferior to the care of a mother); and myths of ideal motherhood, *Mutterglück* (happiness/joy of being a mother) and *neue Väter* [new fathers], who supposedly absorb substantially more house work and child care responsibilities. As a 34-year old white mother put it:

For the blog it is about the feminist deconstruction of the myth of the mother. At the moment I’m writing a post, which criticizes leftist-scene-daddies, who also like the so-called new fathers [*neue Väter*] are greatly celebrated. But for me, I really rant about it, because in our left queer scene people pretend even more so that we have already overcome gender issues, and that women are completely liberated.

A survey among Germans found that only four percent of fathers are working part-time (Spiegel, 2014). Even though fathers of newborns are entitled to take parental leave, only 38 percent said they did (Spiegel, 2014). Among this minority, 80 percent of fathers only took off the minimum requirement of two months to receive a

federal financial incentive to parents of newborns even though they could take up to 14 months. Forty-one percent of fathers said they feared that parental leave would negatively affect their career (Spiegel, 2014). In turn, mothers in Germany struggle to fight against an image of an ideal mother whose fulfillment they can never reach. Rather, they need to, as several interviewees in Germany did, recognize that this “failure” is not theirs but an effect produced by a social-historical construct of motherhood (Mauerer, 2002). Germany is the only country in Europe in which women are not seen as able to combine children and career; pressuring mothers to become full-time mothers, or, at the most, working part time (Vinken, 2011). Silke Bothfeld and Gesine Fuchs (2011) argued that Germany needs more consistent and transparent politics to provide equal opportunities for women and men, which can only be achieved with more debate in politics as well as in civil society.

In their blogs, young feminist mothers and young feminists debated and resisted the strong cultural norms of the German ideal full-time mother, especially as they enjoyed the gains of previous women’s generations for women’s emancipation. They have been at the forefront of change that Germany desperately needs. Old policies and ideals rub against urgent economic and social realities: a need for two-income parents to reach a desirable standard of living for all family members, the need for (educated) women and mothers as skilled labor is in short supply, and a need for more children in an aging population.

Regarding location, it was salient that interviewees in Germany did not include women who were located in former East Germany. Exceptions were eight

women in the German capital Berlin,³¹ which is a special case because of its historic and historical division into East and West Berlin. Several interviewees said they were located in or around Munich, Frankfurt/Main, Hannover and Hamburg. A few others said they live in smaller cities or in the countryside. Several women said³² that they were born in former East Germany and that this was important to their identity.

This parallels the geographical distribution of (mostly men) white politics and current affairs bloggers (Eckert, Chadha & Koliska, 2014) and (women and men) bloggers who identify as Muslim in Germany (Eckert & Chadha, 2013). In each study the overwhelming majority of bloggers were located in former West Germany.

These studies and the sample of interviewees in Germany in this study reflect the internal migration from East to West since in 1989 the Berlin Wall fell and Germany re-united. In this complex process, the economy in former East Germany collapsed, triggering unemployment, lower incomes and fewer opportunities for younger generations. Young people moved to the former West German states for work, career and income opportunities. Only in 2012 this East-to-West migration pattern stopped for the first time (Status of German Unity, 2013).

Among other aspects, a remaining difference between former East and West Germany is internet use. Except for the capital of Berlin (which is also a state), all other five former East German states have the lowest percentage of people going

³¹ I did not ask interviewees who said they are located in Berlin where exactly they were located in Berlin, in the former East or West.

³² I asked each woman about their name, citizenship, ethnicity/race, motherhood, occupation, sexual orientation, relationship status, highest level of formal education, age and location. At the end of this “standard” catalogue I asked each woman if there would be other aspects important to their identity. Some women mentioned disabilities, family backgrounds or regional identities.

online among all German states, ranging from 67.3 to 71.9 percent. In contrast, except for one former West German state,³³ between 74.8 to 80 percent of people go online in the former West German states (Initiative D21, 2013) Thus, the dearth of (women) bloggers in East Germany provides strong evidence that geopolitical realities within national boundaries are reflected and reproduced online. As part of national contexts, intra-national differences also need to be taken into account in studies regarding the adoption of technology and the intersections of social media use and gender.

5.4.4 Switzerland

In Switzerland, two clusters were salient, compared to the other three countries: a majority of mothers and housewives with a traditional view on family and a minority of women and mothers who identified as feminist.

Notably, with 84.2 percent, interviewees located in Switzerland featured the highest percentage of mothers across all four countries. White stay-at-home mothers and housewives who blogged appeared to be the biggest fluid public cluster in Switzerland; they made up ten cases in the Swiss sample in this study. In turn, bloggers who were white working mothers or women without children, who identified as feminist, were a minority; they made up nine cases in the Swiss sample in this study. Further, no bloggers of color could be found. This dynamic differed greatly from the other three countries in which either feminists were dominant clusters such as in Germany or in the United Kingdom or in which both clusters each were present in larger numbers such as in the United States.

³³ The exception is the smallest state in former West Germany, the Saarland at the border with France, in which only 70.3 percent of people went online in 2013 (Initiative D21, 2013).

Additionally, in Switzerland only one participant, a white 24-year old working woman who lived in a civil union with her wife, was writing about motherhood from a lesbian partnership perspective (albeit she was not a mother yet).³⁴ She indicated that she was not aware of any other similar blogs like hers in Switzerland. She said “it’s a pity,” as she knows from her statistics that many people in Switzerland visit her blog. Yet, in the comments only people from abroad would speak up. She suggested: “It’s the mentality, I think, they’re shy and they like to keep more to themselves. They’re not so interested in debate. I think it is the Swiss mentality.” In contrast, all other three countries’ blog scenes featured women and mothers with a lesbian, bisexual or queer identity and/or women and mothers of color.

Switzerland also posed the greatest challenge to find women bloggers writing about motherhood, family and other women’s issues. This might be linked to the small population of just eight million (the smallest population among the four countries I researched) and a gender gap in internet use: of all women in Switzerland 74 percent went online compared to 85 percent of all men (Bundesamt für Statistik, 2013a). It also featured the lowest gender equity score among the four countries in the Global Democracy Ranking (2013).

Mothers and women without children, who identified as feminist, said they were often seen as “bold” or “daring.” A 34-year old white journalist, who identified as feminist, said she offered to blog for the newspaper for which she works. She said when she approached her boss about it, he responded: “Of course, you want to make a mark for yourself [*profilieren*].’ It is something people don’t like here.” She added:

³⁴ She e-mailed that since our interview she and her partner have become mothers and are expecting their second child.

“Women are more cautious than men but everyone is cautious in general because it is a small country; everyone knows everybody. Everything is judged very seriously, no humor.” Another 36-year old white author echoed this sentiment:

My father would say that the Swiss speak very humbly about themselves, so one would always put their light a bit under the bushel. And of course that is how men and women grow up. People who present themselves as self-confident or loud are not taken seriously for sure or are seen as embarrassing. And then I think, with this attitude or this socialization you also present yourself differently as a woman.

This sentiment was shared no matter if bloggers identified as feminist or not. For instance, a conservative 48-year old mother and housewife, who has blogged since 2011 to promote her husband’s work, said that over the past 20 years the sense of what is acceptable to say has changed and people have become shyer to voice their opinion. She likened the atmosphere to the climate in the former German Democratic Republic and said some people might see what she does as brave, or as an exception.

Most bloggers located in Switzerland focused on a model of motherhood in which the mother stays at home, or works part-time, while a heterosexual (white) man as (a married) partner provides the economic base for the family. A 37-year old white mother who worked part-time said that most women’s blogs in Switzerland would evolve around “classical women’s topics” such as “sewing, knitting, cooking, decorating, homemaking, children.”

One 41-year old white mother and journalist said that anti-feminism is “very tangible” in Switzerland as divorce laws would favor women³⁵ casting men who see

³⁵ The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women concluded that women in Switzerland bear “heavy financial burdens” after a divorce (Human Rights.ch, 2009).

themselves as “divorce losers” and connect their situation with feminism.³⁶ Another 36-year old white working feminist indicated that the combination of cultural and historical conditions would make it especially difficult for feminist voices:

In Switzerland until 40 years ago, women were not allowed to vote. That is still a bit part of it. I think it is a different mentality of how to deal with each other...in Switzerland you are also very quickly sidelined and ridiculed. I know many people who find certain women stupid because these women are feminists.

The founding institutions of the Swiss nation-state were based on the exclusion of women and a policing of their bodies (Mottier, 2006). In the 1950s and 1960s a national myth of isolation and a mentality of defending the country against outsiders during the Cold War continued to block women’s emancipation (Furter, 2003). This was part of a long struggle for women’s rights to vote. They were not established on a national level until 1971, making the country one of the last in Europe to implement women’s voting rights on a national level (Towns, 2010). Only in 1990 the Federal Court of Switzerland forced the last canton to also implement voting rights for women (Furter, 2003).

Bloggers who worked and had children reported incidents in which their choice to work was questioned in their community. For instance, a 36-year old journalist recalled neighbors questioning her while walking on the street by herself: Why is her child not with her? Another 38-year old white working mother, who said she lives in a conservative area, said she has received negative comments in the neighborhood because she is working. She said once when she went to pick up her

³⁶ For more information on the history of antifeminism and its proponents in Switzerland, including also women, see Furter (2003).

child from kindergarten, a woman from her neighborhood had already picked it up, thinking that as a working mother she does not have time for her child.

Asking bloggers if a movement of young feminists as it has evolved in neighboring Germany or in the United Kingdom would also exist in Switzerland, one 39-year old white mother and author said she is “rather pessimistic:”

I notice that many Swiss women take it for granted that we have already achieved some things but then suddenly when they have children, they become aware ‘Oh, we haven’t achieved anything.’ And then it starts to hurt. A lot feel cozy and safe, ‘Oh, we’re doing well.’ But then suddenly they notice that they aren’t in demand anymore because they have had a child or until they are pitted against a men colleague and then they wake up.

In Switzerland child-less women make up the overwhelming majority of women who participate in paid labor (Losa & Origoni, 2005). The authors showed that, in contrast, married or widowed mothers have the lowest labor force participation, which “clearly reflects the traditional separation of male/female roles within the family, with the man in paid employment and the woman looking after family and domestic responsibilities” (pp. 478-479). The authors added that if married or widowed mothers work, they predominantly choose part-time jobs, concluding that dominant socio-cultural gender models are one of the factors responsible for these work patterns.

A 39-year old white mother and author emphasized that blogs have been an outlet for mothers to speak out, which has changed public debate on motherhood:

I think that blogging has given a voice to mothers; especially in Switzerland because I think here the separation is still very strong between women at work and women at home. I think that blogs have become a mouthpiece so that meanwhile to a certain extent mothers are taken more seriously. That is a development I did not expect. I have been asked more often by established news media what my standpoint is on topics; also topics have been picked up

over time. When we look what is written about in established news media, I think, you can read about what mothers are concerned about. New media have paid more attention to mothers and before these things were not recognized at all. Before it was happening more in meetings of mothers only, but now also magazines are taking up what mothers are concerned about.

Notably, women and mothers, who identified as feminists, often worked as journalists, thus having a background and routine in publishing texts. Some wrote for (multi-author) blogs connected to national newspapers or magazines, of which the Mamablog of the daily *Tagesanzeiger* has been the most popular. In this blog mothers addressed work-life balance issues as women strive to combine a career and children. Yet, individual bloggers were more common in Switzerland than multi-author blogs.

A 39-year old white mother and author described that currently the national-conservative Swiss People's Party [SVP, *Schweizerische Volkspartei*] is in power. She said that this party supports the dominant paradigm that family is a private issue, in which the state should not meddle. She said a lack of child care facilities in some areas and steep prices for them in other areas would force mothers to stay home even though most mothers would want to work at least part time. Currently, the SVP is the biggest party in the Swiss parliament with 38 percent of seats. The party features the smallest proportion of women among all parties in Swiss parliament with just 11 percent. Yet, the SVP has the third highest number of members in the country. The SVP emphasizes the family as a private realm and condones traditional gender roles in which mothers stay home or at the most work part time while fathers work as breadwinners. It rejects expanding the welfare state, including spending public money to support maternity leave and childcare in public institutions. Just recently, on April 28, 2014, SVP member and Swiss Secretary of Defense Ueli Maurer compared

women to household gadgets in a campaign to obtain new expensive fighter jets. He said: “How many things which are 30 years old do you still have at home? Here, there aren’t many of those around, except of course for women, who are running the household” (Focus, 2014). Another SVP party member defended the sexist and insulting comment and the Defense Ministry had not apologized at the time of coverage (Focus, 2014). This small example illustrates well the dominant conservative atmosphere. Even with increasing criticism, this atmosphere currently still makes it near impossible for women to reach positions of higher responsibility. In turn, it is perceived to be impossible for men to work part-time, and no legally demanded paternity leave exists. Most companies allow freshly minted fathers one day of paid leave to spend with their new family, some companies may grant one week, only a few companies give up to a month (Wohlgemuth, n.d.).

Traditional mothers’ concerns might be taken more seriously in established news media in Switzerland as women bloggers have brought mothers’ concerns into a wider public. Yet, the current conservative political atmosphere, the Swiss mentality, the history of the country regarding women’s rights and the gender gap regarding internet access have constrained women’s voices that venture beyond the notion of the stay-at-home mother (who at the most might work part-time) or a family beyond a heteronormative couple.

5.4.5 Asymmetrical flow of information

Last, bloggers in the United States, because of their early internet adoption advantage, have enjoyed an asymmetric advantage of access, literacy and language compared to bloggers elsewhere.

Several women in the United Kingdom, Germany, and also in some cases in Switzerland, said they were aware of and reading U.S. and British blogs such as *feministing*, *Jezebel*, *feministe*, *Who Needs Feminism*, *The F-Word*, *the Crunk Feminist Collective*, *The Feminist Wire*, *Shakesville*, *BlogHer* and *Babble* (owned by Disney). Similarly, feminist campaigns, which started in the United States and in the United Kingdom have been adopted by women in Germany such as *Who needs feminism* (US), *Pink Stinks* (UK) and *Everyday Sexism* (UK), and in Switzerland such as *16 Days Against Violence Against Women* (US).

In turn, and certainly due to a language barrier, interviewees in the United States never mentioned being aware of or reading German or Swiss blogs or sites. The biggest German social media phenomenon against everyday sexism with the hashtag *#outcry* [*#aufschrei*] on Twitter was acknowledged by some women in the United Kingdom and Switzerland but not in the United States. Similarly, women in the United States did not reference British campaigns such as the *Everyday Sexism Project*, *Pink Stink*, *Reclaim the Night* or others. Despite the shared language, only occasionally did interviewees in the United States point toward blogs/sites in the United Kingdom (for instance to *UK Feminista* or *The F-Word*).

These patterns indicate an asymmetry in the flow of information among women writers in the four countries in favor of acknowledging and/or reading U.S. and English-language blogs. Bloggers in the other three countries acknowledged a pioneering role of U.S. bloggers and some expressed admiration for them. This illustrates another aspect of how “real life” geo-political hierarchies migrate online: global information patterns are reinforced online rather than changed.

This trend also emerged in research and popular writings about blogging and/or gender and women: German, British, and Swiss articles frequently cited U.S.-based works on blogging and/or gender or women. In turn, while some U.S.-based studies drew on other English-language works, including British ones, they rarely, if ever, used studies or other writings from Germany or Switzerland. Several scholars have criticized the dominance of U.S. focused research regarding social media (Goel, 2009; Goroshko & Zhigalina, 2011). It appears that researchers and bloggers/online writers in the United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland keep an eye on (online) happenings in the United States, but not so much the other way around.

Chapter 6: Positive and negative experiences

According to a recently conducted survey to mark the 25th anniversary of the invention of the “World Wide Web” in March 2014, 56 percent of women online in the United States said that it would be hard to give up the internet; only 48 percent of men said this (Pew Research Center, 2014). The survey concluded that the internet has been “a plus for society and an especially good thing for individual users.” Indeed, all women I interviewed told me of positive experiences they had due to their blog, site, Twitter and/or Facebook use.

But while this Pew report (2014) presented its finding separately for women and men, it did not address the hostilities that women in particular may often endure when they actively participate online. In a survey of over 48,000 women in the 28 member states of the European Union, 11 percent of women reported having experienced sexual harassment online (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). According to the report, among the most serious cases of stalking, 19 percent involved emails, text messages or instant messages; another one percent involved the sharing of videos or photos via the internet. Other U.S. based studies and surveys have also shown the imbalance of online abuse leveled against women compared to men (Herring, Job-Schluder, Scheckler & Barab, 2002; Meyer & Cukier, 2006; Working to Halt Online Abuse, 2013). Just this January, in the United States, the journalist Amanda Hess (2014) described the cases of several women bloggers and online activists in the United States and the United Kingdom who became targets of repeated and continuing vicious verbal abuse online. She reported cases of

stalking, rape threats and death threats with little protection by police or the law. Her essay received wide attention in U.S. news media (Filipovic, 2014; Franks, 2014; Friedersdorf, 2014; Opam, 2014; Raja, 2014; Watson, 2014). In the United Kingdom, the case of feminist activist Caroline Criado-Perez received similar attention in British news media (Hattenstone, 2013; Best, 2014; Cockerell, 2014; London Evening Standard; Vidal, 2014) and U.S. media (Hess, 2014). Because Criado-Perez had started an online petition to put the image of a woman on the British paper currency other than the Queen the England, she had to suffer from repeated massive death threats and rape threats on Twitter. Eventually, two of her abusers were sentenced to prison time (Best, 2014).

This discourse indicates that after 25 years of using “the World Wide Web,” discriminations against women online is well and alive. Hess’s essay and the case of activist Caroline Criado-Perez continue a discussion about the situation for women writing online that dates back to least the 1980s, when U.S. researchers started to describe disruptions of online feminist spaces by trolls (Herring, Job-Schluder, Scheckler & Barab, 2002).

Of the 109 women I interviewed, 80 women (73.4 percent) said that have had negative experiences because of their blog, site, use of Twitter, Facebook or other social media (Figure 3 below). These experiences ranged from negative remarks by parents-in-law and abusive comments to threats of sexual violence, rape threats and death threats. Nine of the interviewees with negative experiences were provoked to seek help from the police. Yet, the majority of women who have had negative experiences also said that the positive feedback outweighed the unpleasant comments

and incidents. Moreover, all 109 interviewees reported at least one positive experience; the overwhelming majority named several personal, professional and/or commercial benefits it derived from her blog, site or social media use. These positive experiences ranged from being able to express her voice online to receiving appreciative comments to friendships and speaking engagements, travel and other commercial opportunities. Blogs, no matter if mostly offering personal perspectives or if focusing on specific topics, empower women by providing a sense of community or agency respectively (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012). They also increase the well being of new mothers by connecting them to the outside world, friends and extended family (McDaniel, Coyne & Holmes, 2012). For mothers, personal blogs create and nurture “intimate publics” (Morrison, 2014, p. 37) and a community around shared practices and labor of parenting.

In this chapter I detail the range of online and offline experiences interviewees had because of their blog, site or social media use. I begin with the positive experiences; then I describe the negative experiences the women reported, including their responses and strategies for dealing with them.

6.1 Positive and beneficial experiences

Two larger themes emerged in the responses of my participants when I asked them about positive experiences they had because of their blog, site, use of Twitter, Facebook or other social media. The first theme concerned having their own digital space to express themselves, that is, having a (relatively) *safe* space that *they control*. Other internal rewards they mentioned included learning social media skills, how to

write publicly or about specific issues. One in ten women said she had gained greater self-confidence because of her writing (Figure 2 below).

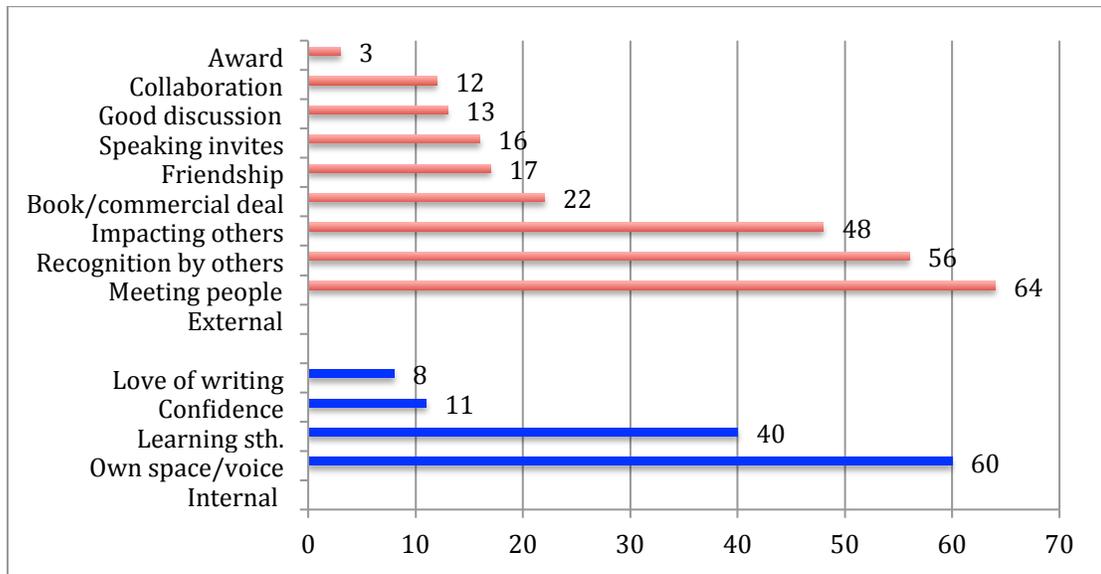


Figure 2 Numbers and kinds of mentions of positive experiences (N=109 with multiple mentions per person)

The second theme concerned pleasant encounters with others (external rewards) either online, offline or in combination, especially sense of not being alone. More than half of interviewees said they really enjoyed getting in touch with people because of posts they had written. These encounters happened in the form of online comments and exchanges, meetings in person, collaboration on projects, invitations to conferences or panels, interviews or coverage by alternative or established news media, “real life” friendships or a sense of community.

6.1.1 A room of one's own (internal positive experiences)

The blogs or sites that interviewees used to write online provided them a space and time that belongs to them. Partly, it is a digital version of what Radway (1991) described in *Reading the Romance*: women read romance novels to create a space for themselves to withdraw from family and household duties. Similarly, Müller (2010) described how women (in Germany) used the magazine *Brigitte* to establish a boundary between themselves and other family members and their needs. The difference, however, is that instead of consuming a cultural form and negotiating the meaning of its text, the women I interviewed have produced digital texts about women's, family, maternal and a host of other issues. Their texts articulate issues and perspectives, which in part they said, were not covered in established news media and dismissed in society. Many of their posts have found entrance into other blogs and online spaces, established news media coverage and/or public debate. This use of the digital space parallels Virginia Woolf's (1929) argument that women need a room of their own (and financial independence) to start writing and to develop a tradition of writing. Similar to Woolf's description, the blogs and sites provided digital rooms that are not connected to family, household or other duties or are subject to direct control by society. A few women explicitly referred to Virginia Woolf in describing their online writing. For instance, a white 48-year old at-home mother and writer in the United States said:

I realize that as a creative person, as someone who perceives herself to be a writer – I think of myself as a writer, not really a blogger, that's just the conduit for me – it is important for me to have a room of my own, you know, like that Virginia Woolf quote, and so my blog is the room of my own; that's my room; and there I can do what I want to do without having to please

anyone else but myself.

Another 39-year old white U.S. woman said she initially had named her blog after the fictitious sister of Shakespeare³⁷ in Woolf's essay; and a 69-year old white German feminist researcher referred to Woolf's description of a history of men-dominated universities and think tanks that allowed men to generate and voice their ideas.

Whether or not they referenced Woolf, 60 interviewees described the importance of having their own safe, controlled space online to present their perspectives and issues. Mothers especially said they appreciated their blog as a separate space. For instance, in the United States a 32-year old white mother and part-time freelance writer said: "It is nice to have something else beyond the children, something that is my thing, a mental escape." A 37-year old white at-home mother in the United Kingdom, who has also used her blog to promote products and services, similarly said that the blog "keeps her sane:"

It's been totally bonkers here and I thought that if I would not do the blog I would have so much more time. But the I think the thing is, I went to an event in London, and then I thought if I wouldn't have the blog I wouldn't be doing this. I literally would have nothing else.

But also for women who did not identify as mothers, blogs and sites were spaces for their own free expressions. A 27-year old white blogger in Germany said about her blog that "it is my living room ... to practice freedom with glitter on top" to emphasize the joy of being able to control her space. She also referred to her blog as a "dictatorship:"

³⁷ The name of her blog still pays tribute to this origin but the blog author was promised that her identity or that of her blog would not be disclosed in this study per IRB consent form.

That's where I rule and nobody else. This is also a role the blog plays, to show me, you got a space where you can rule; here are no weird user agreements or privacy settings as on Facebook where nevertheless strangers fill your [timeline] with half-decayed corpses of animals.

Several other interviewees described how their blog, site or Twitter account gives them a chance to have a voice that is recognized by a wider public. As a 45-year old white mother and writer in the United States said: "I just like telling my story." In the same vein, a 45-year old white free lance writer and mother in Germany said that it is great to "publicly state your opinion, to put a public opinion where otherwise there wouldn't be one. It would not be there." In the United Kingdom, a 30-year old blogger of Chinese-Latina-Spanish ethnicity said she sees the blog as a place for her to contribute thoughts and beliefs to political conversations. Similarly, another 36-year old white writer in Switzerland, who identified as feminist, said online writing is worthwhile because no other place exists for her to write this way.

Other interviewees emphasized that the blog is a space where they can add perspectives that have been neglected or are missing in established (news) media and societal debate. In my sample these were often, if not only, women who identified their race or ethnicity as mixed, Asian, Black/African-American or Latina. For instance, in Germany, a 28-year old Vietnamese-German who has been blogging for five years, said:

I try to make Asian people in Germany more visible. That is one thing. I try to enlighten, and to simply answer questions or to give an insight into other lives in Germany, and yes, to do this possibly in an entertaining and humorous way because in the circles of activists here I sometimes find them to be too snarky. I know it is also necessary to fight and to be loud or to be aggressive but that is not my way. On my blog I try to address the same topics and to fight for the same issues but with other means.

She added that a “feeling of necessity” has motivated her:

I have the feeling if I don't do it, who else is doing it? There are barely any people of Asian descent [in Germany] who address these topics as I do it. Over the years of blogging I just found one other woman blogger in the recent weeks who blogs in the same direction. It is a bit of a feeling of duty, if I don't stand there, nobody stands there or barely anyone. And the goal is to make Asian life more present, I have to stand there, also with the danger of getting attacked, that is part of it, but so far I've been lucky.

In Switzerland, a 24-year old white librarian, who is married to a woman and was working on conceiving a child, started a blog to add the perspective of “rainbow families,” that is, families with same-sex parents. She said she wanted to create visibility for such families to show how they live and think. More basic perhaps, a 39-year old white at-home mother and writer in Switzerland said that the recognition that mothers have a voice has itself been a benefit of blogs:

I do have the feeling that blogging has given a voice to mothers; especially in Switzerland because I think here the separation is still very strong between women at work and women at home. I think that blogs have become a mouthpiece so that over time, to a certain extent, they are taken more seriously.

In the United Kingdom and in the United States, several women said that their blog or site is a space where they can add perspectives as non-heterosexual and/or women of color, which otherwise were neglected or missing in established (news) media or societal debates. For instance, in the United Kingdom a 30-year old Ph.D. student of Chinese-Latina-Spanish ethnicity noted:

It's important to note that social hierarchies of race, class and gender that affect the wider world are reflected in online spaces as well, such that middle-class white feminist sources (e.g. Jezebel, Feministing, Laurie Penny, etc.) get the most attention in the mass media whereas WoC [women of color] bloggers, such as the ones I recommended to you, are the ones who are truly pushing the agenda forward on all fronts, but getting the least recognition or

attention, reflecting the marginalization of women of color even within feminist spaces, and underscoring the need to understand intersectionality and multiple experiences of oppression.

In the United States, a 39-year old Latina mother echoed this sentiment:

I have a perspective as a feminist, and as a Latina and as a mom. ... We don't see that very often, definitely not in the mainstream press, but not even in the 'big feminist blogs' out there. That is, my viewpoint, or of others like me, is not heard so that my goal for my blog is to have this other perspective out there.

And several interviewees in the United States who identified as Black described the importance of their blog space in the same vein. For instance, a 33-year old Black professor, who co-founded a group blog, said that one of the reasons for creating the blog was to give space to conversation and dialogue that is not necessarily being talked about:

We're being one of many spaces, I mean. We're not the only one, there's The Feminist Wire, Black Girl Dangerous or For Harriet [blogs/sites with mostly women writers of color], there's lots of other different places now. And so if we didn't talk about these things, you know, that means, that there's one less conversation happening about, you know, people feeling attacked by racism or sexism, you know, not being seen in mainstream media or whatever. It is important to do this. It is also important to do this kind of work. That is one of our motivations. We have a voice; we want to express ourselves. If no one else is kind of illuminating or picking up our voices, we have to do it ourselves.

Another 34-year old Black social worker described how her blog has provided her a space to contribute a perspective missing in Black and feminist circles:

I would say that I blog as a Black sex positive feminist and I think that I come from a perspective of Black women who feel underrepresented or ignored in feminist circles as well as within the sex positive movement³⁸ because there's a lot of sex positive feminists who really are pro sexuality, pro sex work and

³⁸ The sex-positive movement embraces and promotes open sexuality and all consensual sexual activities, sex education and safer sex. Sex positive refers to people who are comfortable with (their own) sexuality (Center for Sex Positive Culture, 2014).

things like that but that tends to be more white women. You know, I hear a lot of voices of color, particularly because within our own community we don't like to talk about sex too much. So I think I represent Black women who embrace their sexuality, are liberated, are, you know, liberated as feminist women and we kind of want to change the conversation.

Similarly, another 42-year old Black professor said her blog is committed to having a "queer black feminist voice out there." Highlighting yet another aspect of the intersections of being Black and a woman, one 26-year old activist said she blogs against the stigmatization of Black women living in the Deep South and the stereotype of Mississippi as a "backwater:"

I just want to provide, you know, a space where somebody is actually talking about them. I think, and there are a lot of Black women bloggers, I think sometimes, we as bloggers, we don't really talk about how region has an impact on lives of Black women in the United States.

In sum, interviewees said that they value the space of their blog, site or Twitter to share their own stories and opinions. They also used their blogs to highlight neglected or add missing perspectives, similar to the way counter publics create counter narratives (Fraser, 1990). The women I interviewed blog or write online in these spaces without others' controlling, editing or restricting what they can write about, or, in cases of multi-author blogs decided together what goes online. Many women addressed how important this sense of control was to them.

Interviewees who also worked as full-time journalists emphasized their blogs being free from editorial oversight. For instance, a 34-year old white journalist in Switzerland, who identified as feminist, said that compared to the time before she had her blog, she is more "personally satisfied" now: when her ideas "don't make it through the editor's news conference," she puts them on her blog. A 46-year old white journalist in Germany, who identified as feminist, said that blogging has been

an opportunity to publish without others' permission or edits; she can set her own agenda. Another 45-year old white journalist and mother in Switzerland described the sense of agency she derived from the blog she founded as part of a newspaper initiative:

The greatest was that with writing I created my own platform. I noticed that when something is interesting to me, that when I see an exciting topic, then I can implement that and then many others also find it to be exciting, which you notice in the dialogue. That was very nice, that I noticed, well, I am picking up on something and it is also relevant to others. We also won the first prize; it was the first blog ever in Switzerland that won a prize. That also was a great success, and then also later on we wrote a book. I really created a reputation for my name with the blog. People knew me before but much more so after the blog.

Other interviewees without a journalism background echoed the sentiment of enjoying control over the content on their blog such as a 57-year old white veteran blogger in Germany, who identified as feminist and an outspoken advocate on LGBTQ issues:

Sometimes I don't feel like approving comments; some of them annoy me. If it is critique I sometimes say, you can wait a bit. But if it's not an attack I'll approve it. That is my freedom. It is my blog, my rules, done, period.

Another 37-year old white mother and veteran blogger in Germany, who identified as feminist, agreed saying that while debate is welcome ultimately she can decide which content to keep:

I don't have a problem if people say something like 'Your text is stupid.' But when it gets to be about body stuff and it becomes insulting I chuck it out. I don't like that. It is my blog and whoever feels called upon to smear something on my blog, I'll get rid of it.

A 38-year old working mother in the United Kingdom, who identified as feminist, similarly said: "my blog is my space." Another 35-year old working mother in the

United States, who identified as feminist and has been blogging for seven years, established a pay wall on her blog when she felt the blog had become too unsafe for her and fellow commentators for fruitful discussions because of too many attacks online and offline. She said her blog is a “sacred space,” as it launched and has supported her career as a speaker. She said the subscriber model made the blog a “safer community” for everyone, with more respect, evolving from resembling “a bathroom wall to a dinner party.” Similarly, a 32-year old white deaf blogger in the United States stressed safety:

[My blog] has been a wonderful outlet for finding people who have similar social justice ideals as I; when you live in an area where you don't feel safe publically identifying as a feminist, having an online community is like a lifeline. ... For me, [the other feminist blog] is the first real ‘safe space’ I'd ever heard of or visited, where it wasn't considered mandatory to engage the trolls in order to ‘educate them’ or because they might just be ‘mistaken.’ It has been VASTLY crucial to my experience as a blogger to be ‘allowed’ to define boundaries and say ‘No, in MY home/space you will not debate my rights like a fun thought-experiment.’

As these descriptions demonstrate, the emphasis on control contains two aspects: to be able to express oneself freely about one’s own topics, and second, to create a safe space for oneself and for others to discuss these issues without being verbally attacked. So the sense of control is tied to offense, i.e. self expressions geared toward the public, but also defense, i.e. cutting out inappropriate content that is perceived as an attack on oneself and/or other commentators rather than addressing an issue. Interviewees embraced the opportunity to freely express themselves and to add underrepresented or missing perspectives but many of them also said that they need to make sure that they control the conditions of these online expressions. This tension between keeping an open space for debate and controlling this space to keep it

safe for all participants to discuss has been an issue for feminist or women-only online spaces since their beginning in the 1980s, replicating disruptions feminists also experience offline (Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler & Barab, 2002). Despite interviewees' efforts to rule over their space and to keep it safe, almost three quarters of interviewees reported negative experiences (more about that in the following section).

Forty women said one of their positive experiences has been to learn something new (including about themselves) because of their blog/site. And one in ten women reported that blogging increased their self-confidence to express themselves. For instance, in Germany three interviewees addressed this. A 28-year old blogger of Vietnamese descent said:

I grew up in a small town in Franconia [North Bavaria] and by any stretch of the imagination this it is not the most cosmopolitan area. I always felt extremely different. And well, over time you get used to it and don't notice it anymore so much but you still feel like a foreign object if nobody else shares your background. And the blog has already helped that I can say with more self-confidence I don't have a clearly defined background and that somehow inside I'm torn but that it is okay, that is who I am.

A 30-year old white writer said blogging has "strengthened her" and has taught her more about feminist initiatives. Another 27-year old white blogger said she has derived a lot of "self-value" from her blog. A 38-year old NGO worker in Switzerland said her blog and Twitter account, where she said she had created her "own bubble," have been "very empowering, very enriching" for her, to gain knowledge and tools to think more critically. Two white women in the United Kingdom said that they had gained self-confidence through their blog: one 48-year old veteran blogger said she is now more involved in activism and does more things

than before blogging. Another 37-year old mother, who also promoted products and services on her blog, said she now can assume a persona to “go out there” and represent her blog at events. In the United States, a 32-year old white mother echoed the sentiment that the blog has “boosted” her self-confidence.

All of the interviewed women’s expressions of having, defending and growing because of their blog, site or Twitter use, are in line with the findings in the U.S. context, that blogging empowers women: in blogs with mostly personal perspectives, empowerment came through a sense of community, in blogs focused on a particular topic, it came through a sense of agency (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012). Another U.S. based study found that blogging increases the well being of new mothers as it connects them with the outside world, friends and extended family (McDaniel, Coyne & Holmes, 2012). Another survey of mothers who blog found that through their blog they create “intimate publics” and a community around shared practices of parenting and associated emotional, physical and intellectual labor (Morrison, 2011). It is just the first step to have a safe space under one’s own control. The second leitmotif in the answers of my interviewees was the mention of external positive experiences they have had, that is connecting with other people.

6.1.1 Connecting with others (external positive experiences)

Interviewees spoke of a range of connections that they have made through their blog, site or use of Twitter and Facebook. The most frequent mention of such a positive experience was meeting people (64 women), receiving appreciative comments or gestures from others (56) and impacting others either individually or via starting or contributing to a public discussion (48). Another benefit was to minimize a sense of

isolation. This was especially pronounced among at-home mothers (who might work part-time as writers), women who identified as racial/ethnic minorities and/or women who lived in a remote area. A 40-year old white at-home mother in the United States with a disabled child perhaps described it best:

Sometimes I just need to get it out there, you know. I'm the stay-at-home parent of a medically compromised and developmentally delayed child and I spend a lot of time by myself. So for me the writing is more therapeutic than anything and the secondary benefit is to get feedback. And I get messages from people that I know and people that I don't know that have been directed to the blog for whatever reason, to make contact. So for me it really is working against isolation of a stay-at-home parent in general and then of a stay-at-home parent of a child with special needs. It's both of those things, it's an outlet for me to just share, even though it feels like sometimes it's sent to a void, and those times when we've gotten great feedback. It helps me a lot to know I'm not alone.

Another 42-year old white at-home mother in the United States described how she started to blog in order to not feel isolated anymore, especially as a feminist:

I started blogging to really talk about those experiences because at the time I was a mom to two small kids and I was also doing volunteer work for women for NOW. And it was hard for me to find feminist parents of young children. It was easy to find, you know, parents with kids on the playground but you know they don't really want to talk about politics a lot. ... I ended up meeting a lot of really young women, who were recent college graduates and a lot of quite older women who either did not have children or had already raised their children. So I was kind of right between the millennials and the second wavers. So I was hoping to connect with people who have similar interests. And I'd say that was the greatest benefit of blogging, finding those people, all across the country and really across the world. You don't feel as alone; you feel really you can still get connected in a job that can be kind of lonely.

Similarly, another 42-year old white at-home mother in the United States said that the blog has been her "virtual connection" to the world as she lives "in the middle of the woods." In Switzerland, a 37-year old white single mother said that among the best

experiences with the blog has been that she is not alone online and has met many nice people with useful opinions:

It is easy to exchange experiences; otherwise it is a time and distance problem, which doesn't exist online.

In Germany, a 49-year old white transgender woman said the internet has been an “important space “ for her

to find my own identity, to know that I am not alone, that I am not a freak or so, and I slowly also used [the internet] as the means back then, without Facebook, mostly with forums, to get in touch with others.

This eventually led her to write publicly about her transition to be out as a transgender woman and about LGBTQ issues on her own site, which includes a blog, video log, audio posts and a podcast.

Seventeen women emphasized that among their most pleasant experiences were friendships that developed through their blog. For instance, a 38-year old white mother in the United Kingdom, who identified as feminist, said she met “wonderful women online” and didn't expect to “make such good friends.” Similarly, a 42-year old white single mother and organizer for a large parenting network in the United Kingdom said that through the network and Twitter she made “good real-life friends.” In Switzerland, a 42-year old white mother and teacher said through her blog one “real-life” and two e-mail friendships have developed. In Germany, a 34-year old white mother of a young child said she has become friends with the author of the first blog about motherhood that she read. A 27-year old white German NGO worker and feminist described how she found a friend when she lived abroad:

Another German who also has lived in Paris wrote, ‘Hey I know your blog and I would like to meet with you’ and now we are friends. That was also great.

In the United States, a 42-year old white mother and housewife said she made two friends via her blog, one who lives farther away but with whom she is now vacationing and another one who lives in her city. Another 39-year white old mother of an adopted child in the United States described how she found a play date for her daughter after meeting another mother with an adopted child through her blog. Other than in a survey of 307 (mostly white) women bloggers, which found that women valued “real-life” over “online” friendships (Bane, Cornish, Erspamer & Kampman, 2010),³⁹ interviewees in this dissertation did not always distinguish between the two. They rather indicated that “real-life” and “online” friendships are both valuable and frequently overlap.

In two cases, bloggers also said they found family members due to their blog. In the United States, a 45-year old mother and freelance writer said she discovered that she had a half-sister after she blogged about her father. A 33-year old white German working mother, who conceived her child with the help of a sperm donor, said the blog has brought her in touch with half-siblings of her child.

Forty-eight women recalled instances in which their post has made a difference either for individual people and/or in terms of stirring up or contributing to a larger societal debate about an issue. They all emphasized how having an impact on others was among their most positive experiences. For instance, the Who Needs

³⁹ It remains unclear in which country they were situated as they were recruited via blog hosting platforms such as Typepad and Blogger and searching via Google.

Feminism project in the United States combined both aspects. The project allows people to submit photos in which they write on a poster or slip of paper why they think feminism is needed. On the website, the project has collected 290 web pages filled with such photo submissions. It has also been covered in several other online and offline news media (Who Needs Feminism, 2014). Its hashtag has been widely used and it has sparked a branch project in Germany. Yet, one of its organizers, a 22-year old white Hispanic woman, recalled one particular instance that for her made the project worthy. She told me that a friend confided in her that the campaign had helped her to realize that she had been a victim of sexual assault.

Several other women told me stories about how one particular instance has demonstrated to them that their work is recognized and has impacted at least one other person. In the United Kingdom, a 36-year old white researcher and activist, who has blogged against sexual violence, recalled how during an event for rape survivors in the British parliament, a father of a daughter got up from the audience and said that he did not know before that there is an organized movement against rape culture. A 35-year old white mother in the United States, who identified as a feminist and worked as a doula (a non-medical person assisting a woman and her family before, during and after childbirth), described the many appreciative comments she received for her posts:

You know, every time someone sends me their birth stories and says ‘Oh my gosh, I had this totally truly amazing birth, that I was empowered by whether it was through a C-section or my home water birth. You know, I did this because, you know, I was following all these things you were writing about. You gave me all this encouragement. I was empowered after watching what you did or doing what you said.’

I'm just hearing the pride in women's voices after they achieved this thing that they weren't totally sure they could do and then they did. ... That is the stuff I love, I get a lot of that. I get a lot of people writing to me ... So those are the things that make me really happy and these are the kind of e-mails that remind me why I put myself out there and make myself vulnerable.

Several interviewees said a blog post or hashtag on Twitter they created was shared many times and started a debate among a larger public. One 30-year old Ph.D. student in the United Kingdom said on an individual level her blog has helped women to deal with their unhappy relationships. But she also described how one post about men activists was shared on Facebook and Reddit, thus sparking a debate between men and women about sexism among activists. Similarly, in the United States, a 37-year old white working mother in a same-sex marriage described how her post went “viral:”

I wrote a blog post a couple of years ago about anti-gay policies and how it impacts us as a family with a kid that has medical issues. It went kind of viral, and that was really interesting to get to have a dialogue, to get to use the example of our family as a way to talk about policy stuff.

Similarly, a 32-year old white lawyer in the United Kingdom told me of a hashtag that she created which went viral:

There were a bunch of them on Twitter who were moaning about sexual harassment on the public transport system. And then somebody said they hadn't, they didn't even bother to report it. And then I used the hashtag #ididnotreport and mentioned an experience I've had which was someone just brushing my bottom on the Central Line. And it went completely viral.

And it ended up being mentioned on [other] blogs and also went all over the world and then people started using it in their languages and it spread absolutely everywhere. And then it turned into not just a thing about everyday harassment but in terms of all sorts of things, and all sorts of impacts on women, which was quite serious, and then we got into discussions about men not reporting things, and what happens to them for similar reasons. And it turned into a much, much bigger thing than I thought it would be.

Another similar hashtag that drove societal debate, and was being covered heavily in established news media in Germany, was *#Aufschrei* [#outcry]. The hashtag started in January 2013 and rapidly became the most often used German-language hashtag used on Twitter. It called attention to everyday sexism on the street, at work and in school (Eckert & Puschmann, 2013; Maireder & Schlögl, 2014). One of its initial posters, a 32-year old white blogger, who identified as feminist, said that *#Aufschrei* had been the best and happiest experience so far in connection with the multi-author blog she co-founded. She said she gave so many interviews about *#Aufschrei* to established news media that she could not count them anymore.

To be covered in established, alternative or online news media were also among the pleasant experiences many women reported. But any kind of recognition for their writing, if they came from individual readers, fellow bloggers or activists, family and friends, news media or political organizations, were perceived as beneficial and positive. A few women even received unusual opportunities. One 39-year old white working mother, who lived in the U.S. Midwest, received a sponsored trip for herself and her disabled child to Florida so that her child could play with dolphins. Another 48-year old white at-home mother in the United States said she got to go on a safari in Africa with her children “for a very reasonable rate” because she was blogging about it. She called it “an experience of a life time” and something that would not have happened if it would not have been for her blog. Similarly, a 35-year old at-home mother in the United Kingdom was invited to a trip to Ethiopia to meet other women and meant that she travelled outside Europe for the first time. Another British 37-year old at-home mother said she enjoyed a sponsored trip with her family

to one of the Center Parcs family resorts in England. In Germany, a 30-year old white feminist blogger was invited to a trip to Cairo by German national public radio to meet other young activists. Other unusual rewards included free gifts from readers for the child of a 45-year old white mother in the United States and a small monthly stipend for a 27-year old white blogger in Germany who identified as poor and said she was happy to see “three digits” on her bank account.

While all interviewees had at least one positive experience to share, almost three quarters (80 of 109 women) recalled at least one negative incident they experienced because of their blog or social media use. The following section contributes evidence that women are not always safe when they are writing online, even in their own space or with the support of their networks and communities. But this section also details the variegated responses and strategies interviewees developed to deal with these negative experiences and how they have grown resilient over time. Their responses unfolded on the backdrop that law, police and society continue to trivialize and dismiss online harassment and discrimination leveled against women.

6.2 Negative experiences and responses to deal with them

The overwhelming majority of the 109 interviewees said they have had negative experiences: 73.4 percent (80 women) recalled an unpleasant encounter (Figure 3 below). But the majority of the women with negative experiences also said that negative incidents happened far less often than positive ones. One 38-year old white mother and freelance journalist in Germany quantified her feedback as containing about 10 percent negative and 90 positive comments. While most women did not

quantify their positive and negative experiences, the 1:9 ratio appeared to be true for most of the 80 interviewees with negative incidents. Only a few women said they have had repeated and/or high numbers of abusive comments or other unpleasant experiences. Nevertheless, no matter if few or many negative incidents, no woman I interviewed dismissed such incidents as unimportant or insignificant. Each talked about how she had to deal with the situation.

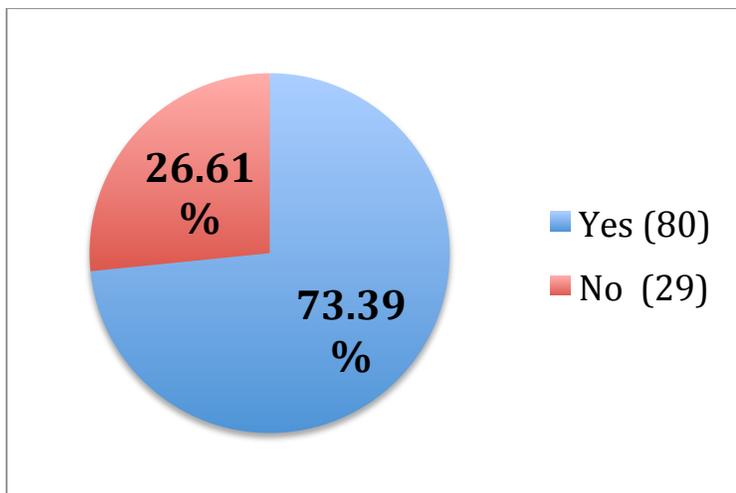


Figure 3 Numbers and percentages of interviewees who answered yes or no to the question if they have had negative experiences due to blogging/online writing (N=109)

6.2.1 Negative experiences

The most frequent kind of a negative experience my interviewees talked about were, by far, abusive or insulting comments: 69 of 80 women with negative experiences said they had received hate mail (this excluded rape threats and death threats), either via comments on their blog or site, as tweets or via e-mail (Figure 4 below). These attacks included remarks about the woman's appearance and sexuality. For instance,

women reported they were called “men-haters,” “men-hating bitch,” “Feminazis,” “bitch,” “ugly” and “stupid.” They received remarks such as “[being] chronically underfucked,” “she just needs to be fucked right,” “you just need to be raped,” “I know you are not going to publish this but I still want to tell you that you suck,” “we are standing in front of your house,” “Black and white don’t mix” and “let’s go bowling to kill babies.”

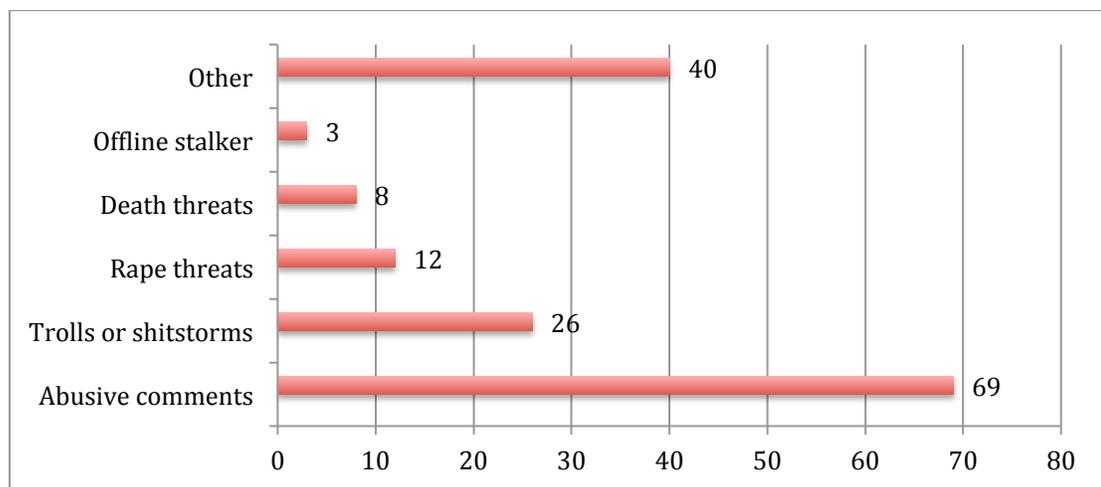


Figure 4 Numbers and kinds of mentions of negative experiences (N=109 with multiple mentions per person)

Twenty-six of 80 women with negative experiences said they had dealt with “trolls” and/or “shit storms.” “Trolls” are users who provoke others in order to distract from or disrupt a discussion and the purpose of the blog (Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler & Barub, 2002). “Shit storms” involve a large number of comments online that express outrage and/or insults toward one blogger/writer (Duden, 2014). One 57-year old white veteran blogger in Germany, who is also an advocate for LGBTQ issues, said she must deal with a troll who regularly posts around noon on Saturdays.

A 38-year old blogger in the United Kingdom, who identified as feminist, said she has to deal with a troll who has followed her from day one, sending “sinister comments” about her background that only deep research can reveal, for instance, an abortion she had and different business transactions.

Twelve of 80 women said they had received rape threats; eight of 80 said they had to deal with death threats. For instance, in the United States a 34-year old Black feminist, who identified as sex-positive, said she received comments saying a “bomb should land on my head” and that she “deserves to be raped.” Another 25-year old white advocate for women’s rights in the United States mentioned the same comment, that she “deserves to be raped,” as did another 22-year old white Hispanic feminist activist in the United States. Yet, another 39-year old white blogger, who identified as feminist, said she has received regular rape threats and death threats. When I asked if she has had experienced negative incidents, a 38-year old white blogger in the United Kingdom, who identified as feminist, said:

Oh my goodness, yeah. The hate is overwhelming. I don’t go a week without a death threat. When I started out I never expected that level of hate.

Another 36-year old white researcher in the United Kingdom, who identified as feminist, described her situation similarly:

I’ve also been abused on Twitter and via e-mail, my public e-mail address via the university. So I get sent links to pornography, get sent sexually explicit threats. I get tweeted threats of sexual violence. You know, I see that as a symptom of publicly engaging in feminist campaigns; it’s a bit of a double-edged sword. We have a right to use social media, to have a visible presence in social media and that is key for contacting people. You put yourself out there, you put your head above the parapet and it often gets shot off unfortunately. That is just a symptom at the moment of the kickback to visible feminist activism.

Several women in Germany and Switzerland reported other examples in this vein.

The large number of 40 out of 80 women who mentioned other kinds of negative experiences stemmed from a wide range of online as well as offline troubles. Several women in different countries reported that in-laws, parents or work colleagues were upset with their blogging; that their blog got hacked, their identity compromised, their content plagiarized; and that their site got linked to or visited by pedophiles, right-wing activists or people with fetishes.

For instance, one 39-year old white blogger in the United States, who identified as feminist, said people threw garbage on her lawn and published her identity, address, cell phone number and photos of her house on a dating website. Another 35-year old white mother in the United States, who identified as feminist, said people sent police and health department officers to her house to check on alleged wrong doing. In Germany, the logo of the site of a 35-year old white feminist campaign organizer was pasted onto a newly created Facebook page with the twisted motto “feminism is fascism.” In Switzerland, a 40-year old mother said a work colleague found out about her blog and tried to level this discovery against the blogger’s husband (which did not work out.) A 48-year old white blogger in the United Kingdom, who identified as feminist, said she had an instance that when people searched her via Google it would take them to a pornographic site, and that her blog was featured on a site designed to attack women bloggers.

In a couple of instances, interviewees posted about other people, which upset them and caused a stressful exchange. In other instances, women said that they had fallings out with co-bloggers and had to separate from them. A few interviewees said

that they regretted a certain text or were now ashamed of it; others mentioned the negative pressure of writing the next text or tweet to stay current.

	Without negative experience N=29		With negative experience N=80		Total N=109	
	N	% (of 29)	N	% (of 80)	N	% (of 109)
Mother (feminist or not)	19	65.52%	48	60.00%	67	61.47%
Feminist (incl. young fem.)	13	44.83%	59	73.75%	72	66.06%
Young Feminist (=>35 yrs.)	6	20.69%	30	37.50%	36	33.03%
Blog political	15	51.72%	56	70.00%	74	67.89%
Blog partly/indirectly political	10	34.48%	10	12.50%	17	15.60%
Unsure if blog is political	0	0.00%	4	5.00%	4	3.67%
Blog is not political	4	10.34%	10	12.50%	14	12.84%

Table 5 Motherhood, identification as feminist, identification of own blogging as political and negative experiences (N=109)

Comparing the cohorts of women *with* and *without* negative experiences yields the insight that women who identified as feminist and/or their blog as political make up a greater proportion in the cohort *with* negative experiences.

The number of participants who identified as mothers was almost equally distributed in the cohorts *with* and *without* negative experiences. But the cohort *with* negative incidents contained more women who identified as feminist: 73.8 percent of women *with* negative experience identified as feminist compared to only 44.9 percent of women *without* negative experiences. Similarly, if not quite as strong, in the cohort *with* negative incidents more participants said their blog is political: 70 percent of women *with* negative experience said their blog is political compared to only 51.7 percent of women *without* negative experiences. Among participants *without* negative

experiences almost four times as many women said that their blog is either indirectly or only partly political (Table 5 above).

While my sample is not representative, it indicates that an identification as feminist on a blog increases the likelihood for having negative experiences. Similarly, the more open women write about political issues they care about or define the issues they care about as political, the more likely it seems that they will experience negative incidents. The combination of women defining their writings and themselves as feminist – which often meant that they agree with the motto that the personal is political – makes them prone to attacks on their texts and themselves.

Several studies showed that just being a woman online carries a greater risk for (sexual) harassment online. Between 2000 and 2013, 70 percent of people who reported harassment online in the United States to a volunteer organization were women, 25 percent men⁴⁰ (Working to Halt Abuse Online, 2013). Chat room users with a name that indicates a woman were 25 times more likely to receive threatening and/or sexually explicit messages than names that indicated a men (Meyer & Cukier, 2006). The same U.S. based study also found that these attacks in chat rooms originated from human users who selected targets rather than from automated programs that attacked everyone. A study on the peer scoring and review behavior of 300,000 users on the online portal Newsground between 2000 and 2007 found that men acted aggressive toward women routinely (Warren, Stoerger & Kelley, 2012). The authors concluded that a “male bias” (p. 7) persisted online, as part of a complex hierarchy of gender and age. In a survey of over 48,000 women in the 28 member

⁴⁰ For the remaining five percent gender was unknown (Working to Halt Abuse Online, 2013).

states of the European Union, 11 percent of women reported having experienced sexual harassment online (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). The same report detailed that among the most serious cases of stalking, 19 percent of incidents involved emails, text messages or instant messages; another one percent involved the sharing of videos or photos via the internet.

At 73.4 percent (80 women), the number of women in my sample who reported negative experiences (overwhelmingly online experiences), was far higher than in the cited studies. Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler & Barab (2002) found that “feminist and nonmainstream forums are especially vulnerable, in that they must balance inclusive ideals against the need for protection and safety.” I also argue that this risk of negative experiences is significantly higher when women identify as feminist. I also suggest that especially individual women who create and use their own space online such as a site or blog, who regularly write “just” about traditional political issues and/or who redefine/challenge what counts as political by bringing in women’s, family and maternal issues face the risk of a higher probability and number of negative incidents.

Often abusive comments, linking, trolling and shit storms were connected and just one instance could be upsetting. For instance, one 27-year old white German NGO worker, who identified as feminist, said she had to deal with “surprisingly few” trolls, yet one instance of linking caused a lot of comments:

I once was linked to from the page of masculinists⁴¹ but this is not a good thing when this happens. Then the trolls come of course and then they appear

⁴¹ Masculinists are men who advocate male superiority or dominance (Merriam-Webster, 2014). For an overview over the history and organization of antifeminist

every so often. But I have configured my comment function so that they are filtered out, that if they try to comment again luckily they don't appear anymore. I can delete them right away. It is not a big problem for me because I expected that. It was not a deluge or that I couldn't get them under control. In part they contain stupid things but there wasn't really something where I would say I am scared or I feel intimidated. One once said I should hang myself if I feel so bad, that was the worst I've gotten. Also, as I said, it was back then when I was linked to and I know from which corner this comes and when you know who is behind it, then it isn't so dramatic. It didn't influence me to think, oh gosh, can I continue blogging or not.

Her response was typical in the sense that most of the 80 women with negative experiences had few major negative incidents. On one hand, this demonstrates the resilience women bloggers/writers online have developed in dealing with such incidents. On the other hand, I only reached out to bloggers who were still blogging. Thus, I cannot make claims about women bloggers or online writers who quit their posting because of negative incidents. Her answer was also typical in the mixture of responses and strategies that women said they employ to deal with negative comments online and trolls. As the following section describes, moderating or filtering comments before they go online and anticipating negative encounters were among the most frequent responses among the strategies adopted by interviewees to deal with negative incidents.

6.2.2 Responses and strategies to deal with negative experiences

Since the most frequently mentioned negative experience were abusive comments (69 women) and trolls (26), every interviewee had an answer to the question of whether she moderates her comments before or after they go online. Moderation of comments was by far the most common strategy to deal with negative instances that stemmed

masculinists and their connections to right-wing extremists in German-speaking countries see Kemper (2012) and Rosenbrock (2012).

from comments online on their blog: 71 women said they pre-approve comments before they go online, 32 women said they moderate comments after they appear on their blog or site.

	Without negative experience N=29		With negative experience N=80		Total N=109	
	N	% (of 29)	N	% (of 80)	N	% (of 109)
Pre-approved before online	16	55.17%	44	55.00%	60	55.05%
First time approval	2	6.90%	9	11.25%	11	10.09%
No pre-approval before online	10	34.48%	22	27.50%	32	29.36%
No comments on site	1	3.45%	5	6.25%	6	5.50%

Table 6 Commenting policy and negative experiences (N=109)

More than half of the women said they pre-approve comments before they appear on their blog or site, no matter whether they were in the cohort of women *with* negative experiences or not. Yet, with 11.3 percent, more women in the cohort *with* negative experience than *without* negative experiences (6.9 percent) also used the strategy to approve commentators for their first post only with all following posts going online automatically. In turn, with 35.5 percent, more women *without* negative experiences would let comments go online on their blog or site automatically without any pre-approval; this was only true for 27.5 percent of the women *with* negative incidents (Table 6 above). Thus, women who reported having had negative experiences were more likely to pre-approve comments before they go up online, sometimes also in combination with filters for certain words that indicate abusive intent. For instance, a 29-year old deaf white blogger in the United Kingdom, who identified as feminist, emphasized the need for moderation:

On the defunct feminist blog I used to get a lot of trolls or MRAs (male rights activists),⁴² arguing with me or being disrespectful. However, that is generally what comment moderation is for! I don't mind having a good debate about something so long as people are respectful and it doesn't degenerate into insults/derailing, but sadly a lot of the time, discussions often go this way when feminism or something people are passionate about are involved.

Pre-screening or banning disruptive users or comments have become common responses for women-centered groups online (Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler & Barab, 2002). Early moderation of comments helps to nip potential trolls in the bud (Korenman & Wyatt, 1996).

The majority of interviewees also said that commenting on posts has shifted from the blog/site toward Facebook and Twitter. Most women said they cross-posted their blog posts or articles also on a Facebook page or account and/or a Twitter account or other social media sites (less often mentioned were Instagram, tumblr, Pinterest, Google+ and LinkedIn). A few women only used Twitter and/or Facebook as their main outlets. Remarkably, only one 29-year old white German woman (in the cohort *with* negative experiences) said that she does not allow comments on her blog anymore due to repeated abusive comments and her unwillingness to police them.

Despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of women said they had negative incidents – mainly in the form of abusive comments online – virtually all of them allowed comments and were engaged with readers via social media. That is, they remained directed toward a larger public discourse, partly perhaps because only a few women experienced an especially high number and/or consistent and repeated

⁴² For studies on men's liberation and men's rights movements as well as fathers' rights group in the United States see Messner (1997, 1998) and Crowley (2008, 2009a, 2009b) respectively.

negative incidents. For most women, negative incidents had become “background noise,” as one 39-year old white activist in the United States, who identified as feminist, said: “someone could hurt me just being on the street, we’re not always safe.”

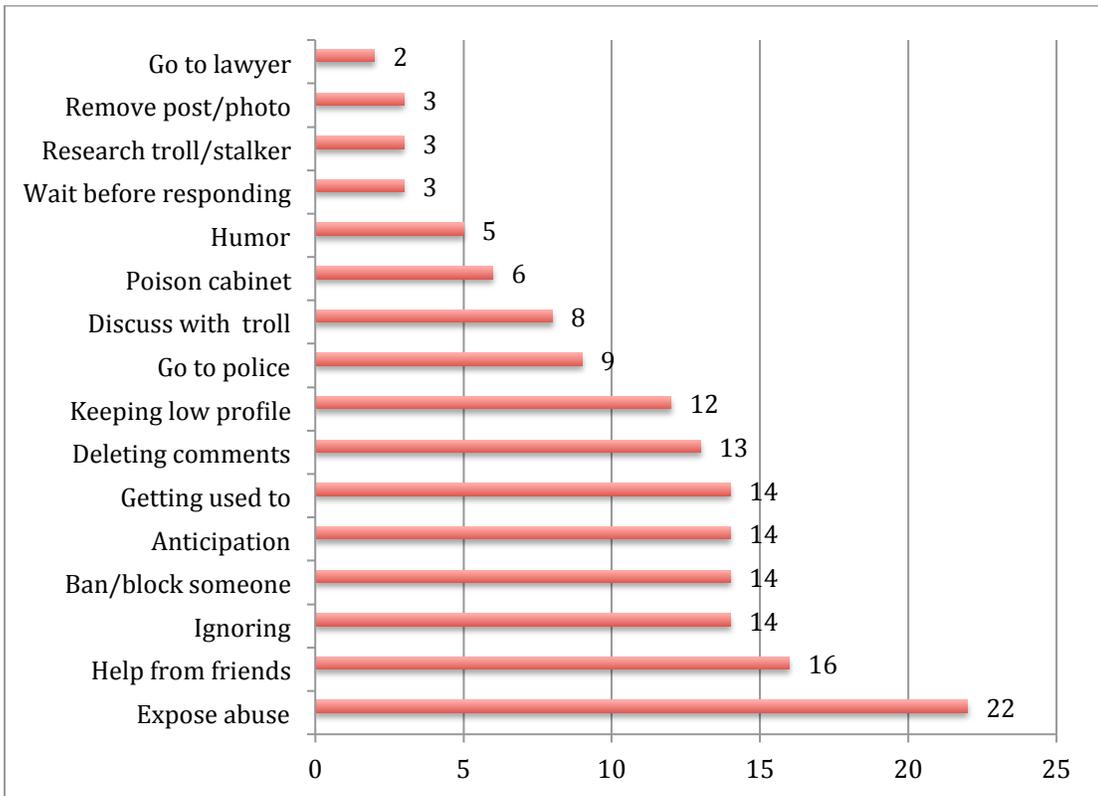


Figure 5 Numbers and kinds of mentions of how to deal with negative experiences (N=109 with multiple mentions per person)

This is not to say that unpleasant online and/or offline encounters did not affect the interviewees. To “get used to it” or to anticipate negative encounters online (less so offline, which prompted women to seek help from the police, more about this in a later section), were just two among 16 responses women described when dealing with negative incidents in addition to moderating comments. More than a quarter of women (22) said they exposed verbal abuse either to their blog/site readers or to the

wider public on Twitter or other websites (Figure 5 above). For instance, in Germany several women mentioned that they submitted abusive comments to the website [hatr.org](#) (2014). The website's aim is to collect abusive comments from trolls that were posted on blogs, which focus on societal critique, feminism, anti-sexism and anti-racism. In the United States, a 32-year old white feminist activist said she used the social medium Storify to publish abusive tweets directed at her. Most famously perhaps in the U.S. context, several women mentioned the blog [dooce.com](#), on which the author Heather Armstrong (2014) and her team post hate mail on a sub-page flanked with many advertisement banners to "monetize the hate."

In a similar way, one of my interviewees in the United States, a 35-year old white mother, who identified as feminist, installed a pay wall on her blog when attacks on her blog and on her did not stop:

When I first did this [the pay wall], I said I'm pioneering the 'paid stalk model.' I said at least now the people who really hate me, just to stalk me, at least now they are going to pay for the privilege and they have. There definitely have been people who sign up, just to follow what I say. They pay me money, five bucks a month or a yearly fee, to copy out what I say and put it on a message board. But I am being paid for it.

Exposing abusive comments to a wider public also tied in with the next most frequent response (16 women) that friends or fellow bloggers helped them deal with unpleasant situations. In some cases this involved a buddy system in which a person other than the "targeted blogger" moderated insulting comments. In other cases this meant sharing incidents with others to know that one is not alone. Both, talking with friends or fellow bloggers/writers, and the posts and sites that expose hate mail, have contributed to a growing level of anticipation of negative instances. Almost a fifth of the women with negative experiences expected negative incidents, especially if they

identified on their blog as feminist. Just as many women have become used to banning or blocking users (especially on Twitter), deleting and ignoring insults. Twelve women said because of their negative experiences they have been trying to keep a “low profile.” This meant they either did not post on a certain topic, backed up their writings with facts, toned down their language or did not promote their blog to a wider community. For instance, a 32-year old white deaf blogger in the United States, who identified as feminist, wrote about a shit storm she experienced:

I ended up having to go offline for several weeks because I was so distraught over it. It's seen as part-and-parcel with blogging, and I've known several bloggers to talk about how the more popular you become, the worse the negative attention gets. I worry about that a lot, actually, and that's one reason why I'm glad my community is still relatively small.

Nine out of 80 women with negative experiences (11.25 percent)⁴³ said that they sought help from the police because they felt threatened online or because a stalker had crossed into offline harassment via phone or personal encounters. These cases were distributed across all four countries: one occurred in Switzerland, two in the United Kingdom and the United States each, and four in Germany. Of these nine women, four said police action helped to stop three stalkers and took a case of child pornography seriously. But the other five women said the police did not help or even respond to their requests. One 39-year old white activist in the United States, who identified as feminist, described the limbo in which she was put with her call for help:

Well, you know it's funny. If I go to the FBI cybercrimes division they said if people are calling me or e-mailing me, I need to talk to the local police about that. But the people who are doing that aren't local. I have the phone numbers, I traced them, none of them are local for me, so the local police is not going to

⁴³ One woman in the United Kingdom who worked for a large parenting network said the network's policy is not to disclose whether they have been seeking police help in cases of negative incidents.

be able to do anything about it. But they said to go to the local police. I contacted the local police chief about it and he never responded. So... I don't know [laughs]. I think it is because the laws haven't quite caught up to the internet but I also think there's just, you know, it is not really true that the FBI cares about this thing or takes it serious.

Similarly, a 57-year old white writer and advocate for LGBTQ issues in Germany said she went to the police when she received threatening comments:

One comment was about a rat that is supposed to eat me up from the inside, also 'you will be killed,' into this direction. ... I have filed charges twice [with the police] but in Germany this does not accomplish anything, also in other countries. I got a letter from the prosecution that this would be 'tasteless prose' but not a threat to murder or for violence. So far I have never heard that filing charges has succeeded.

A 38-year old blogger in the United Kingdom, who identified as feminist, echoed this sense of futility regarding police help. She said the police "are just idiots" who advised her to simply change her e-mail address, blog and Facebook account and not to write about certain topics. Trivializing or ignoring threats and harm leveled against women has a long history in law; they have been dismissed as part of daily living, occurring only in a specific environment and/or have been blamed on the victims (Citron, 2009). These "arguments" have also been applied to online harassment, labeling it as harmless teasing that is unique to the internet and can be handled by women on their own (Citron, 2009). But as the cases above demonstrate, individual or multi-author blogs are another space in which women have to continue to fight for the naming, prosecuting and penalizing of discrimination based on gender and/or race. While police, law and society have been slow to catch up on recognizing such discriminations, women are forced to take care of their safety on their own (I offer several recommendations in this regard in the appendix.)

To sum up this chapter, positive experiences outweighed negative incidents by far. It is worth noting that the women I interviewed were all still blogging; I interviewed no women who stopped blogging because of negative experiences. Only two women mentioned they stayed away from the internet temporarily due to negative experiences. The benefits of having and being able to mostly control one's own safe digital space, to publish one's texts without editing by others, to receive recognition and gratitude from readers, friends and family, to make new friends, meet new people, to impact or help individuals, to start or contribute to public discussions, to collaborate and to receive offers for paid writing or speaking engagements were more dominant for all women than unpleasant occurrences. Women continue to claim their space and voice online and to enjoy benefits from this participation in public discourse. Yet, almost three quarters of interviewees recalled specific unpleasant incidents, which were mostly abusive comments, including rape threats and death threats. Such negative encounters were more likely when women identified as feminist or in the favor of women's rights, wrote about political issues or challenged the meaning of what counts as political in favor of including their concerns regarding women, family and motherhood.

Yet, women who write online appear to have grown very resilient in dealing with these mostly verbal attacks on their content and/or themselves with a variety of strategies. First and foremost, pre-approving comments from the start before they go online was a common strategy. Other frequent strategies included exposing abuse, support from friends or fellow bloggers, expecting negative encounters (especially from masculinists), deleting or ignoring hate mail and understanding blogging as a

learning process. This suggests that collectively women have a tool kit available to deal with ongoing negative encounters to continue to claim their (relatively) safe space online, to participate in public discourse and to challenge the definition of what counts as political. Nevertheless, law, police and society still need to fully acknowledge the seriousness and frequency with which women become targets of online harassment as a discrimination that needs to be rigorously prosecuted and penalized.

The following (and last) Chapter 7 dives deeper into the answers of interviewees regarding whether and why they consider their blogging to be political or not. Additionally, I discuss if and why interviewees assessed social media to be democratic, or not, in the sense that they allow, or do not allow, people to participate in public debate in a democracy.

Chapter 7: Redefining “political” and the democratic potential of social media

Instead of labeling blogs as political, or not, based on rankings or lists, I decided to ask my interviewees directly whether they regarded their blogging as political, or not, and why they made that characterization. Similarly, to assess what my interviewees regarded as the democratic potential of social media, and especially for women, I asked my interviewees directly: Do you think that social media are democratic, in the sense that they enable people to participate in public debate, or not, and why do you think so?

Of 109 interviewees, 66 percent said that their blogging is political; another 18 percent said their blogging is partly or indirectly political (Table 7 below).

Their answers made clear that we need a broader definition of what counts as “political” in regard to blogs and other social media participation if we want to capture political participation via social media. Concepts such as “minimal politics” (Marchart, 2011) are better able to capture what is happening in terms of political blogging than are rankings based on quantitative measures such as links, followers or clicks. Marchart defines his concept of “minimal politics” this way:

We can meaningfully speak about politics *whenever* the minimal conditions of collectivity, strategy, conflictuality, and organization are met – no matter how big the collective, how effective the strategy, how intense the conflict, and how good (or bad) the organization. A renewed reflection on politics will have to rehabilitate the smallest political acts and the most modest achievements that are, provided the conditions are met, as *political* as the greatest revolution (p. 972, italics in text)

He argued “little actions in large numbers” can support “political upheaval” (p. 972)

and so challenge public clusters located on the more powerful end of current political hierarchies by redefining what is considered possible in reality. In other words, he made the point to include “imperfect” attempts that are happening in reality “all around us all the time” (p. 972) rather than looking at what could be.

Of all interviewees, 58 percent described the democratic potential of social media as a mixed bag, offering opportunities but also containing constraints. Another 14 percent described social media as largely *not* democratic. Thus, enthusiasts made up less than a quarter of interviewees and only surfaced in the United States, Germany and Switzerland. In the United Kingdom, no women said she regarded social media as outright democratic. My interviewees’ answers demonstrate that neither celebratory laudations nor dystopic visions adequately describe the democratic potential of social media for people, and particularly women. Their answers illustrate that this is especially true for people who have been disadvantaged in established (news) media production.

Women, of color or white, are still minorities in U.S. newsrooms; “[U.S.] news-reporting is male-focused, and journalists are socialized to accept professional norms of news judgment that favor a masculine agenda” (Everbach, 2014, p. 19). For instance, in 2013, 64 percent of the bylines and on-camera appearances of the top 20 U.S. news media featured men (Women’s Media Center, 2014). In Germany, in 2013, among the 16 leading newspapers and news magazines, and all of the country’s public broadcasters, only one outlet had gender parity in leading positions;⁴⁴ in all

⁴⁴ The only case of parity of gender in leading positions is a left-leaning national newspaper, *Tageszeitung*. It is the only newspaper in Germany that has a woman as editor-in-chief (Pro Quote, 2014).

other outlets men held 60 percent to 91.3 percent of leading positions (Pro Quote, 2014). In the United Kingdom, in a typical month in 2011, men wrote 78 percent of articles and made up 84 percent of guests and reporters on Radio 4's Today Show (Cochrane, 2011). In Switzerland, in 2011, women made up only 22 percent of people mentioned in the news, and, depending on region and medium, 23 percent to 44 percent of journalists (Pfenniger, 2011). As in Germany (Pro Quote, 2014), news media organizations in Switzerland have started to discuss quotas to work toward gender parity in leading positions (Zaslowski, 2013).

“New” media and competition among all media are “obliterating any pretense that mass media successfully present the collective consciousness of a society” (Tuchman, 2013, p. xiii). Yet, U.S. media content continues to show “women in traditional gender roles” and that “women are considered anomalies within [U.S.] society in any portrayal outside the home” (Armstrong, 2013, p. 5; see also Everbach, 2014). Further, “Swiss media and journalists are still clinging to traditional, stereotypical gender roles that have been shaped by men’s perspective (Pfenniger, 2011, paragraph 1) from over 40 years ago when women in Switzerland did not have voting rights Similarly, daily newspapers in Germany and Switzerland have presented limited and stereotypical misrepresentations of women (Magin & Stark, 2010).

Hence, women’s expressions on blogs about a wide range of topics have mostly been labeled as “mommy blogs” or “personal journaling,” domesticating them despite their public writing. Chen (2013) called this “digital domesticity” (p. 510). She argued that the term “mommy blogger” remains associated with notions of the ideal mother. This in turn would reproduce hegemonic normative roles online and

limits women to “digital domesticity” while eradicating other aspects of identity for women and mothers. Similarly, Lopez (2009) found that members of a U.S. based conference of the blogging network BlogHer rejected the term “mommy blog” because it is used in a demeaning way. She argued this demeaning takes place because what women write about is perceived as inherently less important and valuable because they are women.

In contrast other scholars, who identified as a “mommy blogger” or reader of “mommyblogs,” have embraced the term. For instance, Morrison (2011) used the phrase “personal mommy blogging” to describe blogs that focused on motherhood, which equally valued personal self-expression and community, limited their audience size to about 100 readers and also limited the commercial use of their blog. She wrote that she came to study such blogs through her own “personal mommy blogging.” She defines them as

purposeful and deliberate social engagement, a creative as well as interpersonal practice that mitigates the assorted ills (physical isolation, role confusion, lack of realistic role models, etc.) and celebrates the particular joys of contemporary mothering, especial in the earliest years of parenting (Morrison, 2010, para. 1).

Morrison (2011) argued such blogs help women with their “identity work” to grow as “woman, mother, worker, wife, daughter, and friend” (p. 52). Friedman (2010), a self-identified mother, scholar and reader of “mommyblogs,” argued “mommyblogs” are “historical texts” for future study of “‘real’ motherhood today” (p. 198). She also referred to blogs by mothers about motherhood as “the mamasphere” (p. 200) and noted that they are mostly situated in Western countries. While both, Morrison (2010, 2011) and Friedman (2010), used the term “mommy blogger” throughout their

studies, they did not write if the women they researched embraced the term as much as they did. But similar to Morrison, Friedman also highlighted that “mommy blogs” did not fit “neatly into an identity” (p. 204): “mothers...write with the sum of their various irreconcilable parts, rather than splitting them so neatly into private and public worlds” (Friedman, 2010, p. 197).

This quote also illustrates that an old divide between public versus private, which traditionally has been coded as “men’s realm” vs. “women’s realm,” falls far short in describing participation in social media. Contemporary Western societies are shifting toward putting a greater value on self-expression, self-improvement and self-reflection (Papacharissi, 2010). Citizens are moving into a “mobile private sphere of thought, expression, and reaction, in search of ultimate autonomy and expression” (p. 136). One of these forms of self-expression is blogging. Papacharissi assessed them to display more narcissism than to contribute to deliberations or “reviving a public sphere” (p. 149). Yet, she pointed to their value to bring out the conflict between what is considered private and public. She concluded that in developed democracies today, citizens can use internet technologies to challenge what is defined as private and public, and ultimately what is part of public agendas. In other words:

Being at the same time private and public, individual and collective, Weblogs invoke the notion of a contradictory genre and activity with “you,” “me” and everyone in between being brought into a single, semiprivate and semipublic space and experience (Gurak & Antonijevic, 2008, p. 64).

Rettberg (2008) has predicted that blogs contribute to an eventual collapse of public and private. In sum, it is important to highlight that what is considered “public” and “private” is malleable. These terms are not “simply straightforward designations of

societal spheres; they are powerful terms that are frequently deployed to delegitimize some interests, views, and topics and to valorize others” (Fraser, 1990, p. 73).

In the following four sections, I first describe and analyze the answers from my interviewees regarding whether and why they understood their blog as political, or not. Next, I turn to the interviewees’ answers regarding the democratic potential of social media. Then, by way of making more general statements about the research, I draw conclusions from my study regarding my theory of fluid public clusters, the importance of national contexts, the benefits of blogging for women and the democratic potential of social media participation. Last, in an appendix, I offer recommendations for women how to deal with or even minimize negative experiences due to blogging and online writing. As cases in all four countries in my study showed, police, lawmakers, and ultimately society, still need to take abuse online more seriously. It currently is, alas, up to the individual to take care of herself online.

7.1 Is your blogging political, or not, and why?

Of all 109 women, 66 percent said that they consider their blogging to be political. Another 18.3 percent said that their blogging is partly or indirectly political. Taken together, this means the overwhelming majority of 84.4 percent considered its blogging to be political. Only 13.5 percent said that their blogging is not political, while another 1.8 percent was not sure what to answer (Table 7 below).

	GER N=34		CH N=19		US N=37		UK N=19		Total N=109	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	22	64.7%	9	47.4%	26	70.3%	15	78.9%	72	66.1%
Partly/indirectly	8	23.5%	6	31.6%	4	10.8%	2	10.5%	20	18.3%
Unsure	1	2.9%	1	5.3%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	1.8%
No	3	8.8%	3	15.8%	7	18.9%	2	10.5%	15	13.8%
Total	34	100%	19	100%	37	100%	19	100%	109	100%

Table 7 Answers to the question: Is your blogging political or not? (N=109)

Analyzing the answers, it was found that a significant relationship ($\chi^2(1) = 23.083, p < .005$, Table 8 below; Figure 6 below) between interviewees who identified as feminist and interviewees who said their blogging is, at least partly or indirectly, political. Identifying as a feminist, or not, had a large effect on considering that blogging is political, or not ($V = .46$). That is, interviewees who identified as feminist were more likely to say that their blogging is political.

Crosstab

			Blogging Political		Total
			no	yes	
Feminist or not	no	Count	13	20	33
		Expected Count	4.8	28.2	33.0
		% within Feminist or not	39.4%	60.6%	100.0%
yes	yes	Count	3	73	76
		Expected Count	11.2	64.8	76.0
		% within Feminist or not	3.9%	96.1%	100.0%
Total		Count	16	93	109
		Expected Count	16.0	93.0	109.0
		% within Feminist or not	14.7%	85.3%	100.0%

Table 8 Is your blogging political (yes includes partly/indirectly; no includes unsure) and identification as feminist

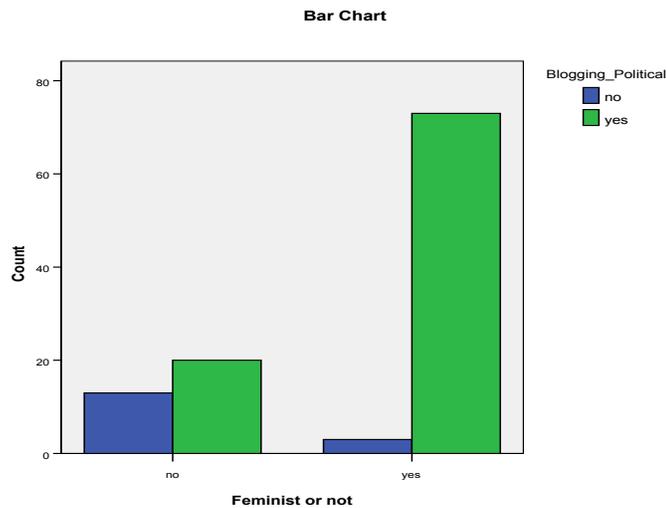


Figure 6 Is your blogging political (yes includes partly/indirectly; no includes unsure) and identification as feminist

In addition, it was found that a significant relationship ($\chi^2 (3) = 25.640, p < .005$, Table 9 below, Figure 7 below) existed between interviewees who considered their blogging to be political and if interviewees considered social media to be democratic (in the sense of enabling people to participate in public debate). Assessing that social media are democratic had a large effect on considering if interviewees considered their blogging to be political, ($V = .485$). Interviewees who assessed social media to contain democratic but also non-democratic aspects and those who said social media are largely *not* democratic were more likely to say that their blogging is political.

Crosstab

			Blogging Political		Total
			no	yes	
Social_Media _Democratic	mixed	Count	7	56	63
		Expected Count	9.2	53.8	63.0
		% within Social_Media_Democratic	11.1%	88.9%	100.0%
	no	Count	0	14	14
		Expected Count	2.1	11.9	14.0
		% within Social_Media_Democratic	.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	no_opinion	Count	5	1	6
		Expected Count	.9	5.1	6.0
		% within Social_Media_Democratic	83.3%	16.7%	100.0%
	yes	Count	4	22	26
		Expected Count	3.8	22.2	26.0
		% within Social_Media_Democratic	15.4%	84.6%	100.0%
Total	Count	16	93	109	
	Expected Count	16.0	93.0	109.0	
	% within Social_Media_Democratic	14.7%	85.3%	100.0%	
	Social_Media_Democratic			%	

Table 9 Is your blogging political (yes includes partly/indirectly; no includes unsure) and are social media democratic

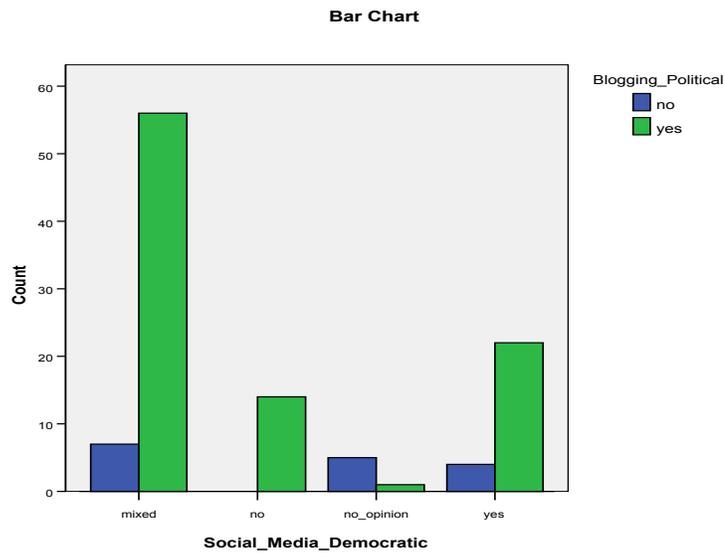


Figure 7 Is your blogging political (yes includes partly/indirectly; no includes unsure) and are social media democratic

No significant relationship existed between considering blogging to be political and age, race, motherhood, education, sexuality, country in which interviewees were located and years of blogging experience. This indicates that the assessment that blogging is political is spread among women with a variety of different backgrounds. Except for considering herself to a feminist and being skeptical of the democratic potential of social media, women with different backgrounds considered their blogging to be political.

In the following three parts of this section I detail the reasons women gave for saying that their blogging is political. Then I will turn to those who said their blog is partly or indirectly political. Last, I will describe the reasons of the interviewees who said their blogging is *not* political.

7.1.1 Blogging is political

Interviewees described several reasons why they considered their blogging to be political and sometimes reasons also overlapped: because they applied the idea that feminism is political and/or the feminist motto that “the personal is political” to their blogging; because they commented on news and current affairs; and/or because they considered the topics they write about to be political in the sense that political parties, parliaments and governments discuss and regulate them.

Of the 84.4 percent of interviewees (92 women) who said that their blogging is political, 20 women mentioned the motto “the personal is political.” Using this motto was especially the case in the United States (10 women) and in Germany (8 women); but only two women in the United Kingdom and no woman in Switzerland referred to “the personal is political.” Almost all women who cited this motto as their reason for their blogging being political or who agreed to this motto as applying to their blog, would connect this motto with feminism; some of them with a previous generation of “second-wave feminists.” Nobody mentioned U.S. activist Carol Hanisch (1969) whose essay was headlined “The personal is political.” Interviewees, who used this phrase, however, meant what the essay suggested: that “‘political’ was used here in the broad sense of the word as having to do with power relationships, not the narrower sense of electoral politics” (Hanisch, 2006). That is, that “personal problems are political problems,” and therefore do not allow for a personal solution (Hanisch, 1969). For instance, a 42-year old white mother and housewife in the United States, who identified as feminist, said:

My blogging? I think it is political. I do believe that the personal is political. Especially for women, the more we share our stories, the more we connect

with each other and we are including rather than excluding each other. One of the symptoms of the patriarchy obviously is keeping women divided from each other. I think the mommy wars is being part of it, where working moms feel they are competing with at-home moms, and where at-home moms might feel they are being charged.

But the truth is we want the same thing and when we work together we can make this country more family-friendly for moms and for dads and for children. But we're so...we get so caught up in these petty battles between each other that we lose sight of the big picture. And I think the more women talk about it...I'm an at-home mom and I don't judge women at work. We're all just trying to do the best for ourselves and our kids but we have a lot of barriers that we all have to work out.

Another 37-year old white working mother in Germany, who identified as feminist, echoed this sentiment:

I do have a clear political opinion, I am not in a party, but with feminism or that I – I don't know if I have written a [blog] text about it yet – that I am in favor of same-sex married couples having the same rights for adoption – I have a clear political opinion and when they play a role in the context of a text I will write them down. When something in politics pisses me off I will write about it. ... I don't want to have a jolly political carnival. I think it is difficult to relay politics. ... I try to apply it to a personal level because I can't relate to the more general and the empty phrases.

Thus, just using or asking for the term “political” is narrowing in a sense as many women understood their approach to writing is not perceived as “political” even though they understand it to be political for themselves. Rather than applying a “God trick,” as Donna Haraway (1988) described it, interviewees stressed their personal approach, revealing where they are coming from with their political opinion. That is, a gap exists between a widespread understanding of political as connected to covering politicians, political parties, elections, the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government on one hand, and on the other hand what women who blog or write online about women's, family and maternal issues understand as political. Some

researchers have fallen into this gap, using rankings and listings that pre-define “political” in the widespread sense of relating to government only. Thus, women’s voices have been shoehorned into a “private” realm, which is not sufficiently perceived as being political. Thus, some interviewees struggled to make the connection between their blogs being political in a broader sense of relating to government as it is, while they did understand their writing to be political for themselves.

Using feminism or the motto “the personal is the political” has helped women to articulate that their blogging or online writing is political, and that the prevalent notion of “political” as relating to government, parliament and party politics is too narrow. One 35-year old white mother in the United States, who worked part-time as a freelance writer and doula (a non-medical person assisting a woman and her family before, during and after childbirth), addressed this:

Some of [the posts] are certainly political. I even wrote a post called ‘I hate to break it to you but feminists are political.’ And most of them are personal stories, but some certainly are. I think any time I talk about feminism itself in any way, feminism is a political act. So that’s political.

I was named one of the top 25 political bloggers⁴⁵ on the internet but I would not say I spend a lot of time talking about politics. I don’t talk about political candidates; I don’t talk about, you know, elections. You know, those are the politics I don’t really bother with; people know where I stand and whom I’m more likely to vote for. I only talk about political issues if something, if there is some sort of bee in my bonnet about something in particular, a kind of thing that bothers me.

But I did feel, you know that post about feminists...I post some political stuff on Facebook page, during the election I share a lot of stuff, and people are always shocked there, why are you posting political stuff on your Facebook page and I’m like because I’m a feminist. Feminists are political people. By definition feminism is a political act.

⁴⁵ She is listed among the “Top 25 Political Mom Blogs” (Circle of Moms, 2011).

In fact, the way many women understood their blogging – as weaving personal experiences together with insights into political issues of public interest – is closer to what blogs are supposed to be: a personal voice, not another vessel of “objective” reporting. One 49-year old white journalist in Germany, who identified as feminist, put it best when she said:

A lot of what men write, it is still a very distanced way to blog, which is still very close to classical journalism: the author disappears behind the text, lots of propaganda is part of it, to spread one’s own political opinion etc. But the strength that to start with one’s own personal experience and not to arrive at a universal insight but to take one aspect, which you have, which is original because I have experienced it, to make this available in a form that might be interesting to others, that for me is the core of blogging. And I find that more frequently in blogs written by women than by men.

Several women highlighted that by just putting their voice and perspective online and out to the public, they are performing a political act. This also paralleled an argument in Hanisch’s (1969) essay: “It is at this point a political action to tell it like it is, to say what I really believe about my life instead of what I’ve been told to say.” For instance, one 34-year old Black social worker in the United States, who identified as feminist, said:

Yes, I do have a lot of political tweets. I think that just affirming myself as a Black woman, who loves herself and thinks herself as beautiful, that is a political statement in and of itself because that is not what society wants for Black women. So I think the fact that I wake up every morning and love myself is political in itself.

Another 26-year old Black writer in the United States echoed this sentiment saying about her blog posts:

I do think they're political. You know, I think anything that is unapologetically owning our identities and also challenging systems of patriarchy, heterosexism, sexism, I think, every time we walk fully in our identity, is a political act.

Several women said their blogging is political because they comment on government politics or because they reveal their political leanings in terms of being conservative or liberal. For instance, one 34-year old Black social worker in the United States, who identified as feminist, said:

I do a lot of political tweeting. I am very much a liberal. I am very, very, very blue [being a Democrat]. I am a huge supporter of liberal politics and beliefs. I'm very pro-choice, just you know, a little bit on the radical side of that, I do tweet about that, no problem.

Similarly, one 39-year old white British mother and writer in the United States said:

Political, yes, I would say mostly yes because I write about things in the news. I don't write about party politics that much, I wouldn't write about imaginations of what might happen, in Westminster [British parliament], the White House, but it is political.

Another 32-year old white disabled master student in the United States said:

I would say recently, like within the past year, it has been very [political]. And I think it's because just things have come to a head so much here, especially in Texas, people are just fed up. We haven't had a Democrat as governor since Ann Richards, which was 20 years or more ago. And it's just that people are fed up with the way the state is going. It's not easy but people are ready for it. So when you tweet or write about it, people are ready to listen.

Several women highlighted that while their blogging is political, it is not connected to party politics, but rather about specific issues or showing political attitude. For instance, in the United Kingdom, one 42-year old white single mother and digital consultant to a large parenting network, said:

Political with a small “p” we would say. We don’t ever align ourselves with any particular political party, obviously because we have so many members. We have members who are spread across the political spectrum so that is not something we could ever do or want to do. With a small “p.” But our campaigns quite often are about issues to do with power or distribution of resources, and things like that, then we are involved in politics with a small “p” quite a lot.

In Switzerland, one 34-year old white journalist, who identified as feminist, said her political attitude “automatically” flows into her blog posts. A 38-year old white journalist and mother in Switzerland said “as soon as you have children you become political because you deal with the schooling system.” She added that while her blog is also still quite personal, it speaks for a generation of mothers who are also something other than “just a mother.” Similarly, another 45-year old white mother and journalist in Switzerland created a blog about motherhood for a national daily newspaper, which became the most famous blog about motherhood in the country. She emphasized: “I never wanted to write a ‘diaper blog.’ It was always a concern for me to discuss socially and politically relevant questions.”

While 20 women applied the motto the “personal is political” to their blog, highlighting how issues regarding women’s, family and maternal rights are still not recognized as being political in established news media and society, several women also said they wished the topics they blog about would *not* be considered to be political. They said because topics such as reproductive rights are seen as political, it would make their blogging about such topics also political. For instance, a 32-year old white deaf software engineer in the United States, who identified as feminist, answered in writing:

Unfortunately, there's really no way for me to separate feminism from politics. I say 'unfortunately,' because I wish we lived in a world where social justice was the rule of thumb and politics were just different viewpoints on how to accomplish the same goals. But when stuff like reproductive freedom – which is integral to bodily autonomy – is so heavily politicized, then everything I write about reproductive freedom in, say, *The Hunger Games* is sort of political by association.

Her quote and the many quotes from interviewees who regarded their blogging as political because “the personal is political” show how malleable the “political” is: parental leave, child care and work-life balance issues are still coded as “mommy blogging” or “personal journaling,” yet the ruling over women’s bodies regarding reproductive rights and contraception is part of government politics, and qualified as political in established news media and society.

7.1.2 Blogging is partly or indirectly political

The primary reason that 19 women said their blog was only indirectly or partly political was that they would not call their blog a “political blog.” That is, they did not locate their blog within a narrow definition of “political blogs,” which, to them, were currently predominantly defined as reporting about government, parliament and party politics. They qualified either single posts or specific issues as political but not all of their posts. Or they said that they did not make it explicit when they write about their political attitude but rather weave it into all of their posts. In this regard, a 43-year old white mother, who worked as a lecturer in digital media at a university in Germany, said:

But [the political] resonates through the blog, for instance when I relay our model to handle childcare 50:50 [between her and her male partner and father of the children], which unfortunately still is not that usual. ... This is political,

I think, to make such things transparent. I did not make this explicit in a blog post yet but I would like to. It is in my 'About' section and I weave that into the blog from time to time via personal stories or when I am [writing about] searching for childcare. I'll write about it from a personal perspective and I'll give my two cents ... I don't like to objectify it but to rather say these are the experiences that I have made; it might not be like that everywhere but it is a structural problem. My approach is rather on a subjective level.

A 36-year old white mother and editor-in-chief of a small news media outlet in Switzerland also said in this regard that her blog is not political but that she has an opinion and frequently writes about political topics such as the difficulty of building a career as a mother. A 45-year old white mother and freelance writer in Germany echoed this sentiment. She said that her blog has a "political side:" "but is not 100 percent political...I really enjoy voicing my political opinion on a platform, so it is subliminally political." In the United States, a 39-year old white mother said: "my politics come out more in a subtle way:"

I try not to be too political, and some people are.... I have a very specific reason for that because I write about adoption and because a number of my followers are not only adoptive parents but also birth parents, there's a pretty wide range of political beliefs out there. For example, birth parents, by and large, are people who are going to be against abortion because they've chosen to go through this very painful process of having a baby and getting pregnant instead of adoption.

Knowing that, I'm a liberal, I'm Democrat, and I have, you know, liberal leanings, which, anyway, as an anti-bullying advocate I am pretty much a liberal leaning person. That's just the way the cookie crumbles. But I don't throw that down people's throats because I recognize that I probably have a wider array of political followers than other pages because of the fact that I have a lot of birth parents on my page. And so, you know, I do personally support abortion rights but I wouldn't write about that because I think it would create problems that I don't need.

My politics come out in more subtle ways, you know. I don't write about them directly though. And I've purposely chosen not to write about certain topics that are very charged politically. I don't write about guns. I don't write about birth control. I write about the things that matter in my life and that I also think are appropriate for my blog. It is not that gun control does not matter to

me but I don't want to open that can of worms on my blog. I don't have the time to deal with that.

A 49-year old white transgender woman in Germany said her blog is “partly” political because she writes openly about her transgender identity:

I try to show that I am a transgender woman; that I have a past relating to that. I try to create some awareness in this regard so that if people don't know anything about this topic and they happen to land on my blog, that they then notice something about the topic, and also that transgendered humans are very normal humans and that you don't have to be afraid of them, so that the prejudices and images about them, which are still widely spread, can be dismantled.

Several women pointed to posts or tweets regarding specific issues that made their blog/site or social media use partly political. For instance, in Germany a 34-year old Turkish-German mother said:

I don't know if [my tweets] have had an effect, if others also tweeted it like that. But regarding the NSU⁴⁶ trial for example, that I didn't find it good that Turkish media could not be represented, because the accreditation [of journalists] was planned so stupidly. I tweeted about that. And I also shared articles on Twitter which were in my opinion interesting in that regard, and in the end, yesterday, the decision was made that the accreditations will be redone. So in my opinion something like that would be politically effective.

Similarly, a 33-year old white German working mother in a same-sex marriage said her blog is only political when she writes about the tax bracket she falls into despite being married, the difficulty to adopt in same-sex relationships and her life as a “rainbow family.” Another 47-year old working mother in Germany said her blog is partly political because she writes about fashion for women who are 40 years or older and also about “big women.” In the United Kingdom, a 35-year old white mother said

⁴⁶ This trial has charged several members of the National Socialist Underground, a far-right terrorist group, with killing nine immigrants of mostly Turkish background and a policewoman in Germany (Deutsche Welle, 2014).

her blog is usually “light-hearted” but that occasionally she also “tackles difficult topics” in her posts such as pornography or when her daughter told her that she is lesbian.

Several women combined the two approaches, addressing issues they considered political and giving their political opinion on current affairs. For example, a 39-year old white stay-at-home mother and book author in Switzerland said:

I certainly have political approaches. I voice my political opinion when it is appropriate. That is quite important to me; it’s partially also an outlet for me.

On one hand, it is about family politics in Switzerland. In Switzerland, family is very strongly considered to be a private thing; the state is not supposed to be meddling with it; the parents are on their own. I want to voice my opinion that...I want to show that family is not just a private thing. I think also, we have lots of voting here, and I voice my frustrations about lost public referenda or about when we won but I rather seldom vote with the majority.

Often, I read something in-depth, especially in the Sunday press, and then I want to comment on that. That is what I do quite often, too. On one hand, when it is about family politics and school; on the other hand also when it is about the environment, nuclear power plants. We also have decided [in Switzerland] to get rid of nuclear energy and I also write about that. I am thinking about that a lot. I was raised to care about that topic. So environmental topics, social politics, asylum politics and xenophobic politics, that’s when I voice my opinion.

In sum, I argue to count these 19 women toward the group of women who say their blogging is political. The examples above provide ample evidence for why these interviewees’ blogging is political: either by infusing posts with their political attitude or by voicing their opinion on specific issues regarding women’s rights, family politics and/or motherhood as well as politics in the traditional sense connected to the government, parliament and political parties.

7.1.3 Blogging is not political

Of 109 women, only 11.9 percent (13) said that their blogging is *not* political. Of these 13 interviewees, six were located in the United States; making up the largest cohort among those who said their blogging is *not* political. The interviewees in this cohort in the United States most often said they have chosen to stay away from politics on purpose to avoid having to fight with people. One answer shows particularly well what these interviewees meant by trying to avoid “trouble.” A 46-year old white mother with a disabled child explained about her blogging:

It is not political; I don't go there. That is not the purpose of the blog. One time, once, I wrote about [former Republican vice presidential candidate] Sarah Palin... I can't even remember, I think it was something about how she said something to the effect how her son Trig would never grow up to be a hockey player. And, you know, I was mad at her for that. I thought she was talking negatively. People were mad at me for writing about that. And I remember this one therapist, who had been following me for years, sent me that outraged note about how dare I do that and she was never talking with me again. I don't regret it really but I have the policy to not go into politics.

Similarly, another 32-year old white writer said that when she once revealed her political leanings it was a “disaster,” as people responded they could not support her blog anymore. She added that she does not have the time to defend her point of view. Another 49-year old white mother-at-home and artist echoed this sentiment that she is trying to not go into politics and religion as she does not want to “fight off people.” Another 42-year old white housewife said she does not want to “offend” people and is not “well-educated in politics.” One 39-year old white journalist and mother of a disabled child said: “It's the journalist in me, I report what I see.”

These cases in the United States reflect the strong polarization between political parties, in Congress, but also within the public. A Pew Research Center

(2013) study that measured party affiliations and political views (as conservative, moderate or liberal) among the public found that over the past decade the number of people identifying as moderate has been waning. The answers of U.S. interviewees, who said they have chosen to stay away from defining their blogging as political, reflect this current polarized atmosphere in the United States, in which only two sides appear to exist. Yet, these interviewees also fulfilled a “bridging” function. While some said their political leanings come out subtly in their posts, they also put in great effort to maintain public discussion about matters that concern everyone across the political spectrum, such as adoption and child rearing. By nurturing and sustaining such public discussion, I would argue that they are in fact politically participating in democratic debate.

Interviewees in Germany, Switzerland and the United Kingdom who said their blogging is *not* political said so either because they did not consider their topics to be political or because they focused on personal stories.

In sum, a majority of 66 percent of interviewees considered its blogging to be political. Another 18.3 percent said their blogging is partly or indirectly political. They were distributed almost proportionally across all four countries. This means that with 84.4 percent, the overwhelming majority of interviewees understood their blogging, at least partly, to be political. Women who qualified their blogging to be political only partly said so because they infused their posts with their political attitude or because specific posts or topics they covered were touching on something they considered political. This was partly due to them having adopted a narrow understanding of politics as relating to government, parliament and party politics

only. When women based their understanding of what counts as political on the idea that feminism is political and/or that “the personal is political,” they were more likely to say that their blogging is political (and not “just” partly of indirectly). This relationship was also shown to be significant statistically. But women also qualified their blogging as political when they commented on government, parliament and party politics or when they perceived a topic to be political. Thus, especially multi-author blogs and campaigns that used blogs, sites and other social media, reflected what Marchart (2011) defined as “minimal politics” (p. 972):

acting politically means acting collectively, it means acting strategically, it means confronting a rather complicated formation of obstacles and inimical powers (rather than a dichotomous relation between the revolutionaries and “the State”), and it implies the necessity to organize (p. 971).

Interviewees who were part of a multi-author blog or campaign said their collective blogging and online writing aims at long-term change, often working together with others in their fluid public cluster or across clusters. Part of their strategy was to blog, tweet and write online to create awareness and visibility of their identities and issues, to work toward an idea of politics that is still considered impossible. They pointed toward and criticized conflicts they see that turn on women’s, family and/or maternal issues intersecting with race and other social justice issues. They did so purposefully, organizing their social media presence consciously to build networks and to enjoy meeting and collaborating with other people, which often overlapped with offline activism or advocacy.

Further, Marchart (2011) wrote that the new definition of “minimal politics” will “rehabilitate the smallest political acts and most modest achievements” because

“even the biggest political upheavals will be supported by little actions in large numbers” (p. 972). I argue that the hashtags on Twitter and the posts on sites and blogs that interviewees said were spread widely across social media and in some cases nationally represent such “most modest achievements.” They included, but are not limited to, #ididnotreport and #bountymutiny in the United Kingdom, #Aufschrei [#outcry] in Germany, #solidarityisforwhitewomen and #BlackTwitter in the United States, and #whoneedsfeminism across countries. In these tweets and related posts, women addressed everyday sexism, sexual harassment, the intersections of race and gender, the commercial exploitation of mothers and the situation of women’s rights.

Interviewees also told me of other achievements that combined online and offline activism. For instance, one activist in the United Kingdom said their campaign achieved that pornographic magazines would not be displayed openly anymore in supermarkets and stores. Another activist in the United Kingdom said that the first campaign of the site for which she works achieved that clothing stores have become committed to not selling over-sexualized girls’ clothes anymore. Most famously in the United Kingdom, several interviewees pointed to feminist activist Caroline Criado-Perez. Her petition convinced the Bank of England to put the image of Jane Austen on the British five-pound note as the only other woman besides the Queen England that appears on the country’s paper currency. One activist in the United States told me how her online activism contributed to a filibuster in Texas that prevented a stricter abortion bill. In Switzerland, two interviewees told me how their blog about the social and political implications of motherhood won a prize for best journalism of the year; an award that went to online journalists in the country for the

first time ever. These examples are among the “most modest achievements” (Marchart, 2011, p. 972) that constitute what it means to be political in a broader sense and are not limited to actions by the government, parliament or political party.

The interviewees’ understanding of their blogging as political also dovetails with Norval’s (2012) idea of what can be considered critical feedback and who is considered as participating in public deliberations in a democracy:

The fostering of virtues associated with democracy – giving voice to senses of wrong and injustice, protesting, occupying, listening to others, critically debating opinions, giving and receiving reasons, coming to see things in a different way through critical engagement with others, proposing alternatives, aspiring to higher selves and better societies, to name but a few – come about in and through construction of and participation in critical, oppositional activities (p. 807).

Her list of “virtues associated with democracy” describe very well the blogging, tweeting and online writing of the women I interviewed. They were keen to express views about issues they oppose and happenings they embrace, to state their opinion on topics they considered political but also topics that are part of what is currently *not* considered as political (yet). Interviewees repeatedly emphasized the learning process they are undergoing because of their blogging/online writing (Chapter 6).

Based on the strong evidence of my sample and existing *broader* concepts of what political participation in a democracy means, especially in regard to social media, I argue that women’s voices online need to be taken into account when we are studying “political blogging” or political participation online in democracies. Too often women’s blogging has been stigmatized as “mommy blogs” (Lopez, 2009) or “personal journaling,” rhetorically assigning them to a “digital domesticity” (Chen, 2013, p. 510) that limits other aspects of their identity as women and mothers.

Social media offer new spaces; women have used them to weave together personal stories, public issues and topics they are concerned about. Especially blogs, as a space online, are not meant to perpetuate the “objective” reporting tradition of journalism, rather they are meant to offer a voice that is personal and to whom others can relate. This space in form of blogs matches in format what women bloggers offer in content: commentary with examples from experience on a wide range of topics that are of public interest, with the author acknowledging that she has a perspective rather than hiding the biases of authorship.

This form of political blogging also reflects what Papacharissi (2010) describes as a new “private sphere:” individuals use media to scan what is happening around them in the world, and then use these same media to express themselves, starting from their private space to write into digital public space. But she also pointed to the technological (im)possibilities: “Net-based technologies are susceptible to the systemic limitations that influence the democratizing potential of all media and have little ability to revive democratic ideals that never really existed in the first place” (p. 20).

The political blogging of women with their different backgrounds and interests in this dissertation happens at the same time that women, of color and white, continue to be under- and/or misrepresented in news media coverage (for the United States Everbach, 2014; for the United Kingdom Cochrane, 2011; for Switzerland Pfenniger, 2011; for Germany Lünenborg & Maier, 2013). Structures of what established news media offline consider relevant are perpetuated online, including gender structures, reproducing binaries of what counts as private and what as public

(Lünenborg & Maier, 2013). That the forms of political blogging by the women I interviewed have been mostly not recognized as political demonstrates such a constraint for establishing an equal playground for voices online. This strongly reflects that offline hierarchies migrate online. A box called “women” is still handy to devalue and to not acknowledge the political writings of a wide range of bloggers, who identify as women, but also as mothers or not; as Black, white, white Hispanic, Latina, mixed and of other racial or ethnic backgrounds; as hetero-, bi-, pansexual, lesbian or queer; as full-time working, free-lancing, part-time working or at home; as disabled; as married, in a relationship or single; as holding high school diplomas, bachelor’s, master’s or doctoral degrees; as of different ages; as activists or volunteers; and as living in four different Western democracies.

The majority of interviewees addressed the constraints that social media entail: 72 percent rejected or responded skeptically to the idea that social media are democratic in the sense of enabling people to participate in public debate.

7.2 Are social media democratic, or not, and why?

The majority of interviewees said that social media are a double-edged sword regarding their democratic potential. While offering democratic elements such as low barriers to access and to publish, social media were also described as constrained in terms of access, literacy and who is being heard how loudly. I asked interviewees: Do you consider social media to be democratic, or not, in the sense of enabling people to participate in public debate?

Of 109 women, 57.8 percent said they understand social media to be democratic in some aspects but not in others. While in Switzerland (58 percent), in Germany (56 percent) and in the United States (52 percent) the majority of interviewees said this; with 74 percent comparatively more interviewees in the United Kingdom said so. In addition, 21 percent of interviewees in the United Kingdom said social media are largely *not* democratic. In contrast, the percentages of interviewees in the United States (16 percent), Germany (12 percent) and Switzerland (5 percent) who said so were smaller. Germany (30 percent), the United States (30 percent) and Switzerland (27 percent) also featured bigger minorities that said that social media *are* largely democratic. In contrast, in the United Kingdom no interviewee said social media *are* largely democratic (Table 10 below). Overall, this paints a picture of interviewees leaning toward skepticism: 71.6 percent of all 109 interviewees pointed out aspects why social media are either *not* or largely *not* democratic.

	GER N=34		CH N=19		US N=37		UK N=19		Total N=109	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	10	29.4%	5	26.3%	11	29.7%	0	0.0%	26	23.9%
No	4	11.8%	1	5.3%	6	16.2%	4	21.1%	15	13.8%
Yes and no	19	55.9%	11	57.9%	19	51.4%	14	73.7%	63	57.8%
No opinion/ don't know	1	2.9%	2	10.5%	1	2.7%	1	5.3%	5	4.6%
Total	34	100%	19	100%	37	100%	19	100%	109	100%

Table 10 Answers to the question: Do you consider social media to be democratic, or not, in the sense of enabling people to participate in public debate?

Analyzing the answers, it was found that a significant relationship ($\chi^2 (3) = 12.699, p < .005$ Table 11 below, Figure 8 below) between those who identified as feminist and those who said social media contain democratic *and* undemocratic aspects (“mixed”) existed. Identifying as a feminist had a large effect on assessing that social media contain democratic *and* undemocratic aspects at the same time (“mixed”) ($V = .341$).

			Social_Media_Democratic				Total
			mixed	no	no opinion	yes	
Feminist or not	no	Count	17	1	5	10	33
		Expected Count	19.1	4.2	1.8	7.9	33.0
		% within Feminist or not	51.5%	3.0%	15.2%	30.3%	100.0%
	yes	Count	46	13	1	16	76
		Expected Count	43.9	9.8	4.2	18.1	76.0
		% within Feminist or not	60.5%	17.1%	1.3%	21.1%	100.0%
Total		Count	63	14	6	26	109
		Expected Count	63.0	14.0	6.0	26.0	109.0
		% within Feminist or not	57.8%	12.8%	5.5%	23.9%	100.0%

Table 11 Are social media democratic and identification as feminist

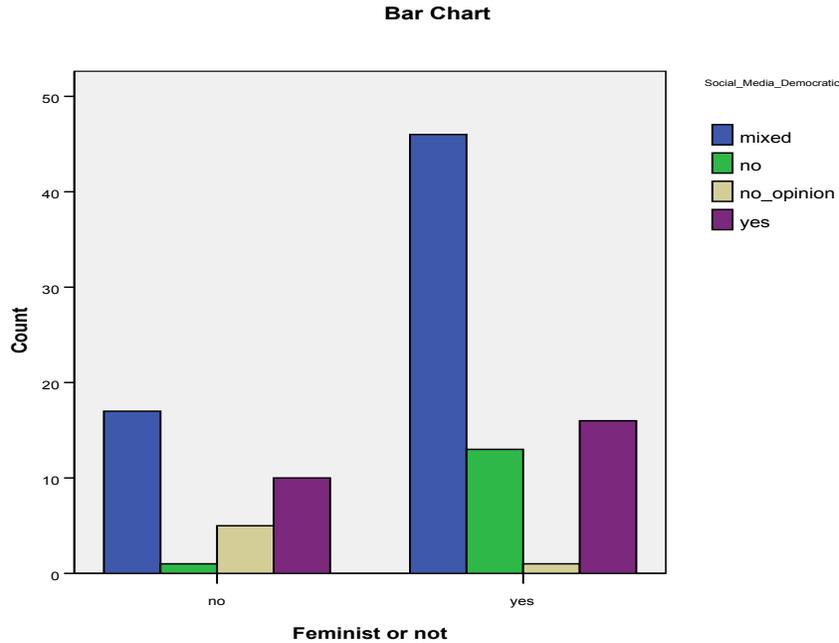


Figure 8 Are social media democratic and identification as feminist

As pointed out in the previous section on blogging to be considered to be political or not, also a significant relationship ($\chi^2(3) = 25.640, p < .005$ Table 9 p. 186, Figure 7 p. 187) existed between interviewees who considered their blogging to be political and interviewees who considered social media to be democratic or not. Assessing that their blog is political had a large effect on assessing social media to be democratic ($V = .485$). Interviewees who said their blogging is political were more likely to assess that social media contain democratic but also undemocratic aspects.

No significant relationship existed between assessing social media to be democratic, or not, and age, race, motherhood, education, sexuality, country in which they were located and years of blogging experience. In sum, women who considered their blogging/online writing as political and/or identified as feminist were more

skeptical about the democratic potential of social media than (the minority) of women who considered their blogging to be *not* political. Thus, I argue that interviewees who have performed “minimal politics” (Marchart, 2011, p. 972) and have participated in public debate with “critical feedback” (Norval, 2012, p. 807), that is, those who have tried out social media for deliberations in democracies, are seeing the limitations of social media for such participation. This also indicates that the intersections of gender and participation in fluid public clusters to discuss matters of interest to women mirror and continue the “offline” struggles of women to be heard and to redefine what counts as political. At the same time, interviewees acknowledged that participating in fluid public clusters online via social media has brought them a new quality of voicing their concerns and so contributing to democratic deliberations.

7.2.1 Social media are a mixed bag

The majority of interviewees, in each country, expressed a mixed opinion about the democratic potential of social media. Overall, 57.8 percent (63 of 109 interviewees) named aspects of social media that they considered democratic as well as aspects they described as limiting or constraining people in participating in public debate in a democracy (Figure 9 below).

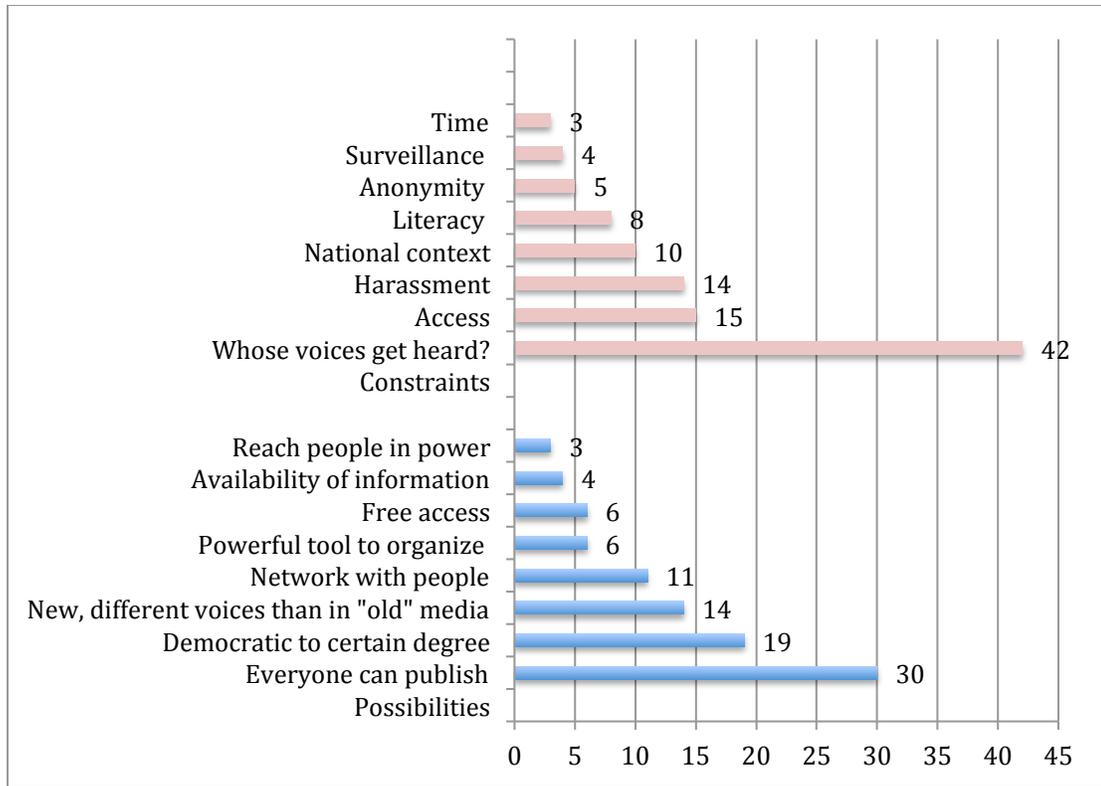


Figure 9 Number and kinds of mentions of possibilities and constrains of social media in mixed opinion cohort (N=63 multiple mentions per person)

The most often mentioned democratic aspect of social media was the idea that everyone can publish her opinion online and so can join a debate. At the same time, the most often mentioned limitation to this freedom was concern over whose voices get heard or even get amplified to reach wider publics. This also included concerns over manipulation of which voices are findable online via search engine optimization (SEO); the rules of different social media regarding privacy settings, advertisement, blocking and banning and the continued power of established news media to reach a great number of people. Interviewees also connected these aspects with existing inequalities and stratifications in society, in which men's voices are more dominant than women's voices, voices of white people are more dominant than voices of

people of color, and voices of people who are formally educated and well-off are more dominant than voices of poor people and people with little formal education.

For instance, a 29-year old white, deaf blogger in the United Kingdom, who identified as feminist, wrote:

I think that blogging and tweeting has become a way of on-the-ground reporting, discussion and can put pressure on public figures and news outlets. However, I think sometimes it depends on who is getting the attention – a lot of people I follow do activist work and don't get recognized for it, purely because they don't have the most followers. There is a problem with a hierarchy of blogging sometimes. Just because someone has the most followers or likes, doesn't always mean they are always the best people to comment on something.

Similarly, a 36-year old white mother and editor of a small media outlet in

Switzerland said:

[Social media] are the voice of the people; everyone can write; everyone can publish her/his opinion and shout it out into the world. In this regard, they are democratic, definitely. But, you also need an audience. And in the case of blogs this depends a lot on word by mouth marketing to spread word about them.

In Germany, a 31-year old white doctoral candidate, who identified as feminist put it this way:

[S]ocial media have generated digital publics, which differ qualitatively from the old media system in terms of democracy. They're also structured by social inequality and not every voice is worth the same there, and a lot of attention flows into areas where there's already a lot of attention. And also, if money plays a role, it also flows into areas where there's already a lot of money. But it's qualitatively different than in a media society that works more like a bottleneck, where if the editor in charge does not find something interesting right that moment, it cannot reach the public.

A 34-year old white journalist in Switzerland, who identified as feminist, described the dynamic in her country in detail:

It really is the case that in Switzerland in the media there are mostly men around 50 [years in age], which I have listed recently [on her blog]. I have nothing against them. But I believe that they have a certain perspective, a certain socialization, a certain understanding of what a story is. And when they cannot imagine a certain thing, and it does not fit into their understanding, it will not make it into the paper. And in this regard, I felt that a great world has opened up, to show them that something is a topic; it is interesting to many people; it is shared; it is liked. And then they cannot ignore that as easily anymore. So I think that social media are an important tool.

Also the Mamablog, I remember when we started it with the [national daily Swiss newspaper] *Tagesanzeiger*, as always, it was ridiculed: well, it's just for girls. And then they saw what a huge success it was. The numbers, they just went through the roof. It was a huge success. And now suddenly everyone is doing it, as if before nobody ever tried to bring these topics to them, but they would not listen. And in this regard, I think it's important that [social media] get to have more clout.

In the United States, a 39-year old Latina working mother, who identified as feminist, addressed the imbalance of voices regarding race:

To an extent, yes, people who have access to the internet and all of these amazing tools, definitely, there's a degree of democracy that happens. Although, you know, when we, when I first started blogging, we – that is people on the internet – thought it would be more democratic than it has turned out to be. The big-name bloggers are still being white men; big-name women bloggers are white. So it's not as democratic as we thought it is going to be but there's still a degree. If people have the ability to have good access, they can set up shop, and have their voice heard. How loud that is, is where we start to lose the democracy part.

Interviewees also connected the question of who gets heard by whom with levels of access and/or literacy, online harassments or threats, national contexts, and the commercial background of social media. For instance, a 48-year old white activist and writer in the United Kingdom, who identified as feminist, pointed to online harassment:

I like to think [social media] are [democratic]. But there is an access issue because there are still lots of male dominated spaces online and women's

voices are silenced. Also women give up blogging because they couldn't handle abuse.

Another a 36-year old white researcher and activist in the United Kingdom, who identified as feminist, similarly pointed to gender dynamics:

We know we live in an imperfect society. We live in aspirational democracies so I see the internet as the same; we can aspire to be democratic; we can try to engage with it on that level, but ultimately it does not exist in a vacuum and it's subject to patriarchal capitalism the same as everything else.

A 44-year old white doctoral student in the United States addressed the intersections of internet access, proprietary ownership and race:

I do believe that the change in control of what voices can be out there and findable, it's a sort of democratization of communication. So, we're not stuck in the one-to-many structure of communication and I believe that that is valuable [for democratic discourse].

I think there's still particularly a lot of class and access issues that don't necessarily actually translate as much as they theoretically might, and those are the things that concern me, issues such as net neutrality. If we look at who has access to the internet primarily through their cell phones, their smart phones, their wireless devices versus who has access to desktops or laptops that have more sophisticated fire power, low-income people, people of color are far more likely to have their primary internet access through their phones.

And I don't think people blog through their phones. I don't think people publish through their phones. Maybe occasionally they might throw up some Instagram picture. It's not nothing but it's not the same as the people with laptop access. And trying to figure out how to make those issues around access and the ability to publish in a way where your voice *is* findable and can be heard, it's a great theory. But I don't know, I don't feel like we have done a great job of successfully implementing that great theory.

Another 39 year-old white actress in the United States, who identified as feminist, pointed to the difference between social media platforms:

I think Twitter [is] probably more [democratic] than anything, just because Facebook increasingly over recent years has a lot of algorithms running that prefer frankly people who are paying Facebook to promote content. So

Facebook less so but I think Twitter is a really democratic venue for people to participate in the process and give feedback, second to that probably Tumblr.

A 24-year old white blogger in Switzerland, who writes about same-sex parenting, recalled the power of governments to shape public expressions. She had noticed a rise of traffic on her site after laws against homosexuals in Russia were implemented:

Democratic, well, it is difficult to say. It certainly is a possibility, well, to express one's opinion, as long as a country does not intervene suddenly, so to speak, to forbid certain expressions, to censor. It is democratic in a certain way but it depends on in which country you currently are.

Another 36-year old white NGO worker and activist in Switzerland, who identified as feminist, echoed the sentiment:

[I]n some countries it's highly dangerous to express yourself; so to use these platforms, they bear some risk. And it can also be a risk in Europe, I think, who knows? I would not be surprised at all if I would also already be on a list in Switzerland. This is no joke, because there has been a scandal about files that were started about people in Germany who are part of the left spectrum.

Yet, on the side of democratic aspects, interviewees most often mentioned the idea that everyone with access can publish their opinion and voice. They linked this aspect also to the benefit that they can find and read new and different voices, can network with people and can organize campaigns. For instance, a 39-year old white mother in the United States, who free-lances as a writer, said:

Blogging is incredibly democratizing ... anybody can do it; anybody can set up a Wordpress [blog hosting site] account and just start writing ideas. We're not confined to a single set of points. It's allowed new voices to emerge, which is great because the mainstream media, there was so little political comment at all. Each newspaper would have had maybe two or three op-eds – if you're lucky – a day and then the editorials, and they were written by a very small handful of people, who were from a certain class. And now, you know, anyone can do it.

And it's not as mixed up as we would like it to be perhaps. And I think, obviously it's still not, as I found, if you run an individual website and it

doesn't get as many clicks as the *New York Times*. But it does allow lots and lots of new voices than we had in the past.

A 32-year old white master student in the United States echoed this sentiment:

People who don't have internet access are automatically excluded, obviously there is that to consider. But for people who are on the internet, I think, it is a pretty democratic platform. You can choose who you want to follow; you don't have to follow people you don't want to; you can block someone who's annoying you. You can say whatever you want, if people think it's offensive, they can report you. I mean it's not perfect by any means ... but I think, broadly speaking, it is a pretty good platform.

In Germany, a 28-year old with Vietnamese background said:

I can conclude for myself that I find blogging very helpful and that I very much appreciate the possibilities of social media. Because, in the end, it is quite democratic; everyone can raise their voice if they want to. The technical possibilities are there and I think the more variegated and different the voices are, the better the image of reality will be or rather the sharper the image will be. I mean one cannot, and, well, never could before, rely on established big media because they heavily filter, depending on the background of the journalists or the media certain topics fall aside. So it is good when there's another public on social media to point to other aspects, so they are not so easily shoved aside when they reach a critical mass.

Regarding the use of social media for campaigns, a 35-year old white mother and commercial blogger in the United Kingdom pointed to the Everyday Sexism project:

Twitter, especially has been key, hasn't it, as a source of news and as a voice for people in difficult political situations. And it is a very kind of quick and easy way of sharing information and to get a lot of people on board. There's a campaign I follow on Twitter. I kind of followed from the beginning, called #EverydaySexism. I followed Laura Bates [the founder] from the beginning and Laura got in touch with me and she said, you know, can you tweet about it a bit? And I was like, I don't expect the idea to be popular and obviously it has been massively popular.

And that's a simple idea; that's something that obviously a lot of people can kind of relate to, and so you get that snowball effect that is so easy to get on Twitter if you get something with a hashtag. That kind of thing, I can't think how else you would get that sort of momentum using any other media on something like that, something where you can bring people's experiences and stories together. I can't think of how that would be possible otherwise.

In the United States, a 22 year old white Hispanic co-founder and organizer of a widespread campaign on feminism, also emphasized the crucial importance of social media for the campaign:

I think the fact that our campaign went viral proves that social media can be very democratic. Because now we kind of have this huge audience and we're just a bunch of college students. I think that's pretty amazing. But I also recognize the limitations of social media. Not everybody has a smart phone and 24/7 access to Twitter and Facebook.

So I think that when you are talking about democracy, so there are certainly limitations, economic limitations to that and also generational ones, which I think is really important to think about. Yeah, I think, the other thing that is democratic about social media, and more so about blogging, that participating in it can be developmental in and of itself. The people can use blogging and social media to find their own voice and become confident in using their voice in public spaces.

I think that when people go on our Facebook wall and have debates and challenge each other, first of all, they're honing their own beliefs and they're honing how to make concise arguments that resonate with people. And I believe these are important skills to have in a democracy, to function in a democracy. So I think there are two sides to it.

Especially in the United Kingdom, with 74 percent, the overwhelming majority of women said that social media contain democratic *and* undemocratic aspects. This was a higher majority than in the other three countries and might be related to the number of interviewees in the United Kingdom who said they had negative experiences due to their blogging/online writing or social media use. Compared to the other three countries, with 79 percent, in the United Kingdom, comparatively more women said they had negative experiences because of their blogging/online writing (Table 12 below).

	GER N=34		CH N=19		US N=37		UK N=19		Total N=109	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	25	73.5%	12	63.2%	28	75.7%	15	78.9%	80	73.4%
No	9	26.5%	7	36.8%	9	24.3%	4	21.1%	29	26.6%
Total	34	100%	19	100%	37	100%	19	100%	109	100%

Table 12 Answers to the question if interviewees had negative experiences due to blogging/online writing per country

Among interviewees in the United Kingdom *with* negative experiences due to blogging or social media use, at least seven women said they have received repeated and/or high numbers of abuse online or have experienced major incidents. For instance, a 48-year old white writer said she went through a time when people who searched her name online would be led to a pornographic website. She also described another blog that picked on women, which had also targeted her. At least five women in the United Kingdom, who had negative incidents, mentioned the example of the 29-year old feminist British activist Caroline Criado-Perez. She started the Women’s Room (2014), a campaign for fairer representation of women as sources in news media with a database for women experts. She also ran a successful campaign to bring the image of Jane Austen on the British bank notes as no other woman is featured on the paper currency except for the Queen of England (Change.org, 2014). Because of her activism she became the target of rape threats and death threats on Twitter (Hess, 2014). This led Criado-Perez to temporarily leave her house and stay elsewhere (Hattenstone, 2013). In January 2014, two trolls, who had sent her abusive messages, were sentenced to eight and twelve weeks in prison; the judge in the case said: “it was ‘hard to imagine more extreme threats’” (Best, 2014). The case of

Criado-Perez has received a lot of coverage in British media (Hattenstone, 2013; Best, 2014; Cockerell, 2014; London Evening Standard, 2014; Vidal, 2014).

Interviewees who mentioned Criado-Perez would often compare their own negative experiences to that of her. For instance, a 37-year old white activist, who identified as feminist, said regarding the campaign and blog she runs: “We don’t get that level of misogyny that was tweeted around [as in the case of Caroline Criado-Perez].”

Another 38-year old white woman, who identified as feminist, said:

I never had the experiences that, you know, Caroline Criado-Perez [had], the kind of rape threats and that kind of real pile-on; I’ve never had that at all with me. And I think if you get it at that level you can’t just ignore it.

Similarly to the widespread discussion in U.S. news media following the article by Amanda Hess (2014) on the abuse of women online, in the United Kingdom, feminist activist Laurie Penny has been speaking and publishing repeatedly about cyber sexism. Penny (2013) has been spreading awareness of the structures of gender, power and sexism online that work to silence the voices of women.

Thus, the higher level of negative incidents among women in the British sample and their awareness of online abuse toward other women who blog/write online might have contributed to their very skeptical to negative assessment of the democratic potential of social media.

In sum, the majority of interviewees regarded social media as a double-edged sword, with the power to carve out spaces and attention for their variegated voices, but also cutting off people from participating due to access, literacy, online harassment, national contexts and other constraints. Connecting democratic and

undemocratic aspects of social media participation was the question of whose voices get heard or even amplified online.

7.2.2 Social media are largely not democratic

Some interviewees who rejected the idea that social media are largely democratic also raised the question of whose voices get heard on social media. Of 109 women, 15 said social media are largely *not* democratic.

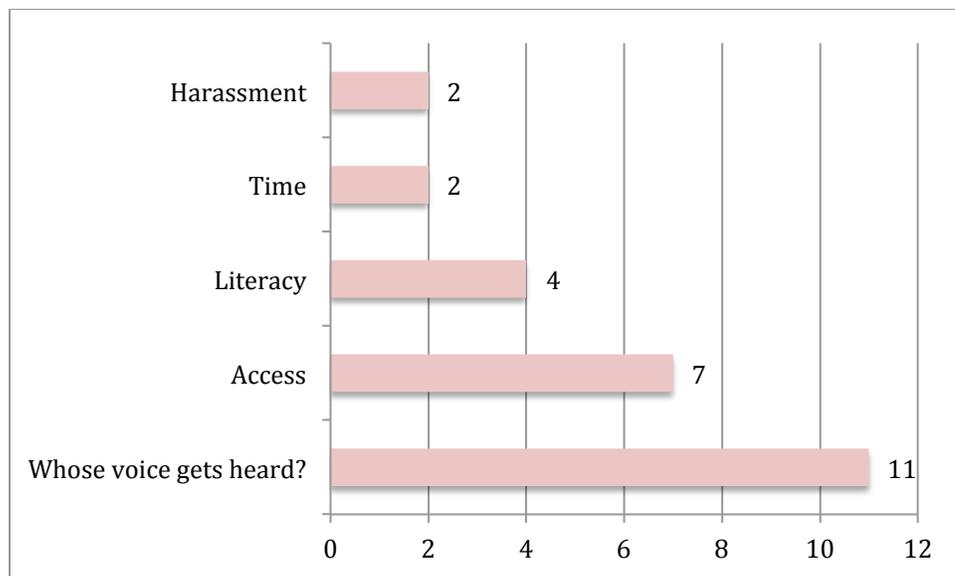


Figure 10 Number and kinds of mentions of constrains of social media in cohort which considered social media as largely not democratic (N=15 multiple mentions per person)

This perceived lack of democratic aspects was often linked to questions of access and literacy (Figure 10 above). It mirrored the objections of interviewees in the cohort with mixed opinions. To just cite a few examples, a 42-year old white mother and housewife in the United States, who identified as feminist, noted:

In practice the people who are on [social media] all the time, who are making the most noise and people who are making the most controversial statements get amplified. And that takes a lot of time, and a lot of energy. I don't think it is quite that democratic as people think it is. I think it's the people who have the time and the energy and not everyone has that.

A 35-year old white activist in the United Kingdom, who identified as feminist, addressed the same issues:

The more iPads and iPhones and gadgets you can afford and have time for, the more time you can use for blogs and Twitter. If you're time-poor and financially poor, then you don't have the same amount of access.

And a 27-year old white freelance consultant in Germany said: "I don't experience {the blog, social media] as democratic. My blog is definitely a dictatorship, that's where I rule and nobody else."

7.2.3 Social media are largely democratic

Of 109 interviewees, 23.9 percent across all countries except for the United Kingdom said social media are largely democratic. Mirroring again the democratic aspects mentioned by the cohort with the mixed opinion, they connected this to the idea that everyone can publish their voice and opinion. Second most often mentioned was again the idea to be able to read new, different voices, and, third most often mentioned to network with other people (Figure 11 below).

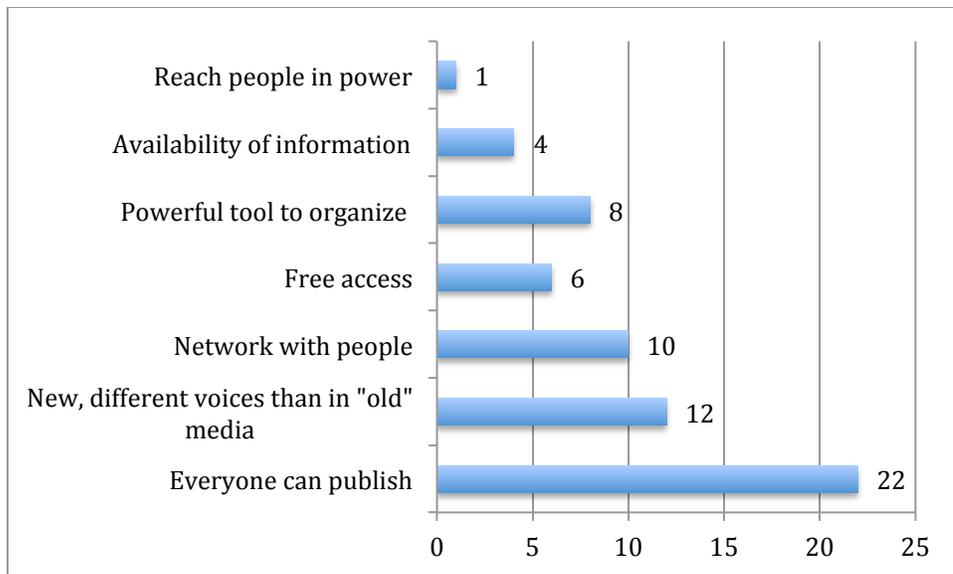


Figure 11 Number and kinds of mentions of possibilities of social media in cohort which said social media are largely democratic (N=26 multiple mentions per person)

In Switzerland, a 36-year old white blogger, who identified as feminist, said, not only can people write about everything but that blogs also make their authorship more transparent than newspapers. A 49-year old white transgender woman in Germany explained:

I find [social media] to be very, very democratic because they give access to a world which otherwise would not be possible, where it is much more likely that you can exchange your thoughts and your opinions, also where you can organize meetings as if it would be possible without [social media].

A 50-year old mother in the United States, who identified as feminist, recalled the power of social media to organize:

Yes, I would say [they are democratic]. I just think it's another way of bringing a lot of people together. And something like the filibuster, the Wendy Davis filibuster, I would just cite that as the most recent, that was incredible and the amount of energy that came via social media at that moment, it's just phenomenal. It was hard to go to sleep.

Several women highlighted the possibilities of social media especially for women, as this 37-year old working mother in Germany, who identified as feminist:

I think the internet helps as a medium, which is more democratically organized in the sense that basically everyone can join, even with wondering who has the final say via connections and with linking to A bloggers and the power does not matter, but the threshold is lower. . . . The internet allows it much more for women to have a public voice or as [British feminist speaker] Laurie Penny said to stand on the market place. And before, women haven't done that as much. That is cool, and I hope I can see that there's lots of potential.

Dominant themes have been the ability to publish one's voice or opinion if one has access, literacy and time to produce texts on social media. At the same time, interviewees questioned which of the new, different voices are being heard by whom and why. They pointed toward the migration of offline social hierarchies and inequalities to online spaces, including in terms of gender and race.

Based on the arguments and experiences of the women I interviewed, I argue that it will remain an effort to keep on collectively shouting – that is, posting, tweeting, rebutting and arguing with many, many variegated voices – into the ears of the four country's societies to make a dent to change the under- and/or misrepresentation of women in news media content and production and to further democratize these countries' democracies.

7.3 Conclusions

So what? Why does my study matter?

This dissertation matters in four ways.

First, it further amends and updates public spheres theory to consider the fluid and messy nature of publics. Moreover, in speaking of fluid public clusters, I suggest a new terminology to highlight the fluid and messy nature of online publics in democracies and how they are framed by national contexts.

Second, I conclude that national contexts shape the expressions of women bloggers/writers online and these were particularly apparent in the fluid public clusters that were salient in each country. One key finding was that Switzerland differed significantly from the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany. In the latter three countries women – across a wide variety of backgrounds – were having ample opportunities to make their voices heard while the number and perspectives of voices in Switzerland remained limited.

Third, this dissertation delivers plenty of concrete empirical evidence that women who blog or write online derive manifold personal, professional, and, in cases, even commercial, benefits from their blogs and sites. I offer recommendations in an appendix to encourage women to either start or keep on blogging/writing online despite potential negative encounters. Further, the great variety of topics, approaches, and identities among my interviewees debunks the idea that women’s online writing can be labeled easily as a “woman blog,” “mommy blog” or “feminist blog.”

Fourth, I return to the overarching research question of how to democratize democracies. This dissertation provides strong evidence that the online writing of my interviewees, which the overwhelming majority understood as political, is contributing to further democratize democracies. Yet, this democratic potential of social media remains a haphazard potential. The majority of interviewees addressed

this in presenting arguments that delineate social media participation as a double-edge sword.

7.3.1 Fluid public clusters in Western democracies

My theory of fluid public clusters consists of the three elements: fluidity, public orientation and clustering. Together, as elaborated on in Chapter 5, they highlight the shifting and messy nature of public clusters, which direct their online writing toward the outside world and others. I argue that the women I interviewed (who blog or write online partly about women's, family and maternal politics) are exemplifying such fluid public clusters. Further, I suggest that my theory of fluid public clusters could also be applied in other Western democracies or across several Western democracies. If it might also apply to online expressions outside this democratic framework would need testing and empirical research in other political contexts.

The literature on public sphere theory does not emphasize enough how online publics shift over time. Only in aspects, notions of change are addressed. For instance, Fraser (1990) touched on this by noting the constructed nature of and changes in what counts as public concerns. She argued no “naturally given, a priori boundaries” (p. 71) exist as to what can count as common concern; what counts is decided again and again anew in ongoing deliberations. She also noted that people negotiate aspects of their identity in different and overlapping publics. Squires (2002) traced how over time Black people participated in different types of counterpublics. She argued they moved from participating in involuntary isolated publics (enclaves) to counterpublics that can openly challenge other publics and to satellite publics that keep to themselves voluntarily to preserve group identity. Boeder (2005) also argued

that “the public sphere” is not static but will dramatically change because of new network structures via the internet. With such networks becoming more decentralized, “wider publics” (p. 9) could access them leading to denser public exchange. He noted that social identities play a role in who can participate online, that groups and individuals can be empowered by digital communication technology. But ultimately he returns to the concept of “the public sphere” as a singular entity. Rarely do studies trace how fluid public clusters online evolve, how participants change topics, writing styles or other features of their online expressions. For instance, Schler, Koppel, Argamon & Pennebaker (2005) found that the writing style of bloggers changed with age to increasingly use pronouns, expressions of assent and links while negative terms were used more seldom.

Interviewees adapted their level of participation in social media, the different social media sites used, the topics they write about, and their writing approaches according to their own (online) experience and/or according to life events that happened to them. This means they switched between blogs and/or social media sites; broadened or changed topics; switched between personal narratives, essays, commentary or even poems; and in cases took up commercial opportunities (mostly in the United Kingdom and the United States). Many women described different fluid public clusters they have become involved in by interacting with their readers, fellow bloggers/writers and interest groups, and how they changed or came to overlap over time. Sites, topics, writing styles, commercial opportunities, and participation in overlapping fluid public clusters are guided by personal experiences and interests, reflecting “real life” events. A link between their writing in online spaces and their

“real life” was apparent in the answers of most women; their (changing) status online was connected to their (changing) status offline.

This was also true for national contexts. In each country certain fluid public clusters online were more salient than others, shaped by the countries’ population, history and social and political atmospheres. Thus, fluidity is constrained by the national contexts of each country as laws, policies, economy and unspoken rules in society sketch out the mobility of offline lives for women. For instance, these constraints were evident in the discussions around the availability or lack of (affordable) childcare addressed by bloggers in Germany and Switzerland; tax laws favoring marriage and/or children in Germany; heated discussion about abortion rights in the United States; the discourse of gender and race in the United States; the political polarization in the United States, the persistence of conservative culture and gender roles in Switzerland, and the emerging positive re-coining of the term and movements of feminism in the United Kingdom. These constraints and contexts translated into time, energy and other resources that enabled, or not, women to participate online, and to which extent.

While one can discern attempts of bloggers to connect online across national boundaries, usually when projects jump borders, they are set up anew in the other country. Then locals who understand local circumstances, hot button issues, and, in case of a language barrier, are native speakers, run the campaigns. For instance, this happened in the cases of campaigns and group blogs such as Pinkstinks (from United Kingdom to Germany), Who needs feminism, Jezebel and Feministing (from United States to Germany), 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence (from the

United States to Switzerland and many other countries worldwide), Slut Walk (from Canada to the United States, United Kingdom, Germany and many other countries worldwide).

Pinkstinks (2014) was started in May 2008 in the United Kingdom by the sisters Abi and Emma Moore as they became “increasingly alarmed by overtly gender-segregated, sexist products aimed at young children.” Pinkstinks (2014)

confronts the damaging messages that bombard girls through toys, clothes and media. Girls’ products overwhelmingly focus on being pretty, passive and obsessed with shopping, fashion and make up – this promotes a dangerously narrow definition of what it means to be a girl. These ‘Girly’ products and concepts are marketed, for the most part, under the umbrella of pink. Pink has become the ubiquitous brand colour to represent modern girlhood.

To target products and companies, Pinkstinks has used social networking, blogging, writing and videos (Pinkstinks, 2014). Following the British examples, in March 2012, gender researcher Stevie Schmiedel set up Pinkstinks in Germany to battle the “limited gender roles assigned to girls” (Pinkstinks Germany, 2014). Among their first projects has been a successful campaign to limit the outdoor advertisement for the popular television show “Germany’s Next Top Model.” Using Twitter, blogging, street performances and online petitions, the campaign has tackled a wide range of products from clothing to candy. Currently, the campaign collects signatures for an online petition against the highly gendered packaging of a popular chocolate egg marketed by Ferrero for the upcoming world soccer cup in Brazil. Ferrero uses pink decorations and slogans such as “only for girls,” “[soccer] player’s wife” and “fashionista,” while marketing the very same egg to boys with labels such as “[man] world champion” [*Weltmeister*, in German the ending “-in” would signify a woman, as in *Weltmeisterin*] (Pinkstinks Germany, 2014).

The student project *Who needs feminism?* started at Duke University in the United States as part of a course on “Women and the public sphere” in April 2012. The sixteen students in the course used a poster campaign on campus to start a conversation about ideas of feminisms and to “decrease negative associations with the word that would keep anyone from identifying with the movement” (*Who needs feminism?*, 2014). The students set up a Facebook group page to share the photos of the posters. After a woman took a photo with her web cam and shared it online, many more such photos appeared. Since then, students have collected and shared on tumblr, a website, Facebook and Twitter photos in which people say why they need feminism. By April 2014, the campaign had collected more than 4,360 photos with statements, displayed on 291 web pages. *Who needs feminism?* sparked a smaller campaign at Oxford University in the United Kingdom for the month of February in 2013, collecting 474 photos with statements on a dedicated Facebook page (*Who needs feminism Oxford?*, 2013). In Germany, an ongoing branch project was created in October 2012 to “fill the term feminism with life... and start an image change for feminism” (*Wer braucht Feminismus?*, 2012). The German campaign uses a website (with a blog), Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, tumblr, Google+, street booths and statements from German politicians, authors and activists.

In terms of blogs, the U.S.-based multi-author blogs *Jezebel* and *feministing* inspired the creation of the multi-author blog *Kleinerdrei* in Germany in January 2013, as one of the blog’s founders said (personal conversation, July 5, 2013). She said that she was missing a feminist perspective online mixed with pop culture, societal and political relevant themes, which at the same time would not be too

academic. Feministing was founded in 2004 by four women who felt that the “mainstream feminist movement wasn’t really interested in hearing younger women’s voices” (Feministing, 2014). In 2007, Anna Holmes founded Jezebel, which combines feminism with news about pop entertainment, celebrities and politics. It operates via a virtual newsroom, relying on instant messaging and working from home, that is, without face-to-face communication (Hendrickson, 2008). Similarly, in Germany, the multi-author blog Kleinerdrei [meaning the symbol of a heart online <3] is run by team of nine people spread over the country that got to know each other online as one of its co-founders said. They have addressed topics from a critical perspective ranging from feminism, film and television, internet, consumerism, art, literature, media, movies, music, television to politics and society, sex, games, relationships and technology (Kleinerdrei, 2014). Most famously, their authors sparked week-long discussions in German society and established news media by drawing attention to everyday sexism with the hashtag *#Aufschrei* [#outcry] on Twitter, the most often used hash tag on German Twitter to date (Eckert & Puschmann, 2013; Maireder & Schlögl, 2014):

The campaign 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence was started at the Center for Women’s Global Leadership at Rutgers University in the United States in 1991 to raise awareness of violence against women. The 16 days mark the time between November 25, the International Day For the Elimination of Violence Against Women, and December 10, the International Human Rights Day. They are meant to “symbolically link violence against women and human rights and to emphasize that such violence is a violation of human rights” (Rutgers, 2014). In

Switzerland, the same campaign started for the first time in 2008, using a website, Facebook, YouTube videos press releases and street action, especially during the 16 days in November and December (Christlicher Friedensdienst, 2014).

The annual march and campaign SlutWalk started in January 2011 in Toronto, Canada, after police constable Michael Sanguinetti advised students in a talk on rape prevention to avoid “dressing like sluts” (Slut Walk Toronto, n.d.). Outraged by these remarks, Heather Jarvis and Sonya J. F. Bennett founded the first SlutWalk to protest “victim-blaming...slut-shaming and sexual profiling and policing” and to raise awareness that “sexual violence is ingrained in a system of inequality that marginalizes some over others” (Slut Walk Toronto, n.d.). Slut Walk understands itself as a movement, using social media messages, websites, interviews with established news media, annual marches, and, in the case of the Toronto police, a formal request to the police for change. Slut Walk marches and campaigns, organized via Facebook and Twitter, have since been happening all over Europe, Asia, Australia and in several cities in the United States such as Dallas, Boston, Asheville and Hartford (Stampler, 2011). For instance, in Washington D.C., Slut Walk marches have taken place since 2011, using a Facebook site and Twitter to organize the annual street protest and to send messages and news regarding sexual assault (personal conversation, October 11, 2013). The founder and organizer said, the first march in 2011 brought 3,000 to the White House; in 2012, 1,500 people came together; and in 2013 between 300 and 500 gathered in Malcolm X Park.

In sum, campaigns and activism spread across national borders. But they are then usually operated by locals and adjusted to hot button issues in the “new”

country. It is another indication that national contexts still matter to for how women can voice their concerns or not. As one interviewee said, the internet does not exist in a “vacuum,” that is, social hierarchies migrate online. Fluid public clusters online are intertwined with the identities and interests of their participants. While the dimensions of their identity anchor participants, their interests shift and their life circumstances change. Many interviewees spoke about the personal learning process they have undergone or a widening of their horizon because of their blogging/online writing. Many women referred to their blog or site being a digital room of their own in which they (relatively safely) can write what they want. That’s why public clusters are not static; their participants develop and change in which clusters they participate and how. This fluidity needs to be taken into account when we talk about public clusters online.

Acknowledging the fluidity of public clusters online will also help researchers to develop new methods to study such moving targets as social media. Many scholars (for instance Li & Walejko, 2008 on the difficulty of sampling; Husbands, 2008) have observed the difficulty of studying blogs in particular. At least one of the blogs in my study had already changed in a significant aspect during the period of research between April 2013 and April 2014: it was turned from a public to a private blog, now requiring an invitation/password from its owner to read posts. Using a new terminology to speak of fluid public clusters instead of public spheres will remind us that studying participation in online debates is messy. It will also remind us that we are studying what is happening at a particular moment in time and in a particular online space that is also shaped by national contexts.

7.3.2 National contexts

National contexts shape the expressions of women bloggers/writers online and these were particularly apparent in the fluid public clusters that were salient in each country.

One key finding was that Switzerland (referring to the German-speaking majority of Switzerland studied here) differed significantly from the other three countries.

Given their national and cultural contexts, the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany seem to have provided (or least have not denied) women – across a wide variety of backgrounds – ample opportunities to make their voices heard. In those three countries women can express themselves online on blogs/sites, Twitter, Facebook and social media. Despite also logging negative experiences, women have been able to address a range of issues of their concern regarding women's, family and maternal politics. They also have been able to use social media to start their own campaigns and discussions about issues they are concerned about and to bring them into a broader public. Moreover, in particular cases in each of the three countries, women's blogging/social media use has helped to bring real transformation to particular situations they were protesting.

Particularly in the United States women of color, especially Black women, have been able to use blogs and social media as a digital space of their own to speak about their concerns, including intersections of race and gender in U.S. society. While blogs/sites in the United Kingdom and Germany included discourses on the

intersections of race and gender as well as a few women of color as blog/site authors, both were not as plentiful or vocal as in the United States. I suggest that this difference is rooted in the greater population size, the greater diversity of race/ethnicity within the population (quantity and quality), the history and the existing social and political discourses on race (and gender) in the United States.

In Germany it was salient that women bloggers/writers online were either located in the states of former West Germany or in the German capital Berlin (a special case due to its historic and historical division into East and West until 1989). That is, voices and perspectives from women in former East Germany were largely missing. This reflected the internal migration, mainly for economic and life quality reasons, from former East Germany to former West Germany since Germany reunited in 1990. Only in 2012 this migration pattern stopped for the first time (Status of Germany Unity, 2013). It also reflected the overall lower internet use in former East German states compared to former West German states. The dearth of (women) bloggers in East Germany provides strong evidence that intra-national differences in terms of geography, history and internet access and literacy affect intersections of social media use and gender.

Further, blogging in English provided more commercial opportunities for women bloggers/writers online than blogging/writing in German. This translated into more opportunities for bloggers/online writers located in English-language countries, which predominantly wrote in English, than in German-language countries, where bloggers/online writers predominantly wrote in German. For instance, even with a much smaller population in the United Kingdom than in Germany, English as a

dominant language online provided women in the United Kingdom, especially mothers who write about family and parenting, with the possibility to use their blog/site to post content for which brands paid them. In Germany, the dearth of commercial blogging among women could be attributed to the overall slower development of blog scenes in the country compared to the United States and the United Kingdom. This slow growth has been attributed to the continuing strong hold of established news media, especially public broadcasting, as institutional authorities; hostility in established news media toward blogs; continuing suspicion toward and fear of internet technologies held by the wider public; and legal challenges that bloggers in Germany face (Eckert, Chadha & Koliska, 2014). In Switzerland, the lack of commercial opportunities for women bloggers could be attributed to the continuing lower numbers of women online compared to men; the shorter history of women using blogs/sites to express themselves; as well as the small size of and the language-barriers within the country as a four-language market with German, Italian, French and Romansch.

Switzerland remained an outlier compared to the other three countries. Blogs written by women in Switzerland are limited in number and also in their range of perspectives. Particularly feminist and/or progressive voices regarding gender equity remain a minority that has to fight antifeminist sentiments. In Switzerland, blogging by women remains filtered mostly through the lens of motherhood, and especially voices of mothers who raise their children at home and at the most work part time. While blogs/sites have worked toward having mothers' concerns to be taken more seriously in established news media and society, women's blogs/sites, voices and

concerns that venture beyond motherhood or a family beyond a hetero-normative couple remain rare online.

This is connected to the country's shorter history of women's rights where women obtained voting rights just in 1971, as one of the last countries in Europe (Towns, 2012). It is also connected to the current conservative political and social atmosphere in the country with the right-wing Swiss People's Party dominating the parliament and endorsing traditional gender roles and opposing public money going toward childcare outside the family. The Global Democracy Ranking (2013) computed a lower gender equity score for Switzerland compared to the other three countries. And according to a United Nations convention that monitors gender equity (CEDAW),⁴⁷ the country still features:

Poor representation of women in all social domains, widespread gender stereotypes, unfair taxes for married couples, heavy financial burden for women after a divorce, insufficient resources for battered women's shelters and problematic integration requirements in the new immigration law for female migrants – there are numerous and multifaceted areas where Switzerland can improve its elimination of discrimination against women (Humanrights.ch, 2009).

Part of the lower representation of women is a continuing gender gap in the regarding internet adoption with 74 percent of women in Switzerland online compared to 85 percent of men in the country (Bundesamt für Statistik, 2013a). Interviewees in Switzerland also said they started blogging/online writing more recently than women compared to the other three countries (Table 4, p. 86). This indicates that adoption processes are still ongoing, especially for women. Further,

⁴⁷ CEDAW is the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Discriminations against Women. It is the most important international agreement against violence and discriminations again women and in support of emancipation of women.

interviewees pointed to a Swiss mentality of keeping to oneself rather than speaking out publicly. This marks women who blog publicly as “bold” or “daring.” Thus, the continued discriminatory situation of women as outlined by CEDAW combined with social rules of “keeping your light under the bushel,” as one interviewee put it, has dampened the range and number of women’s voices online. Perhaps it is just a matter of time until the country will “catch up” to the range and number of women’s voices online in other Western democracies, just as the country was late to implement women’s voting rights, join the United Nations and establish institutions to support women’s rights. Additionally, researching blogs by women on women’s, family and maternal politics who write in the country’s minority languages French, Italian and Romansch might help to further clarify which perspectives and voices are online.

In sum, I argue that national and cultural contexts are important frameworks to understand why women’s blogging/online writing on political issues of their concern is more variegated and vibrant in terms of voices, perspectives and topics in the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany than it is in Switzerland. This means also that despite sharing the context of being established Western democracies, national and cultural contexts can bring out different fluid public clusters in these democracies.

Taking national contexts into account, even when not explicitly conducting comparative research between nation-states (or other entities), means that scholars should make the location of the social media sites and/or location and nationality of their users transparent. Scholars should disclose in their literature review not only the results of the studies relevant to their own research but also in which location/country

they were situated. Often results are followed by a string of names and publication dates in parentheses. That is, research citation standards require consistently marking the dimension of time but not the dimension of space i.e. in which location/nation-state research was conducted. Including country location consistently would aid to better contextualize research results. Further, authors could note if national contexts played a role in their study or if results might be applicable across national boundaries.

7.3.3 Benefits of online writing for women and new benchmarks

Based on the concrete empirical evidence of my study I strongly encourage women to blog, tweet and make their voices heard on social media and the internet if they have the time, energy and resources to do so. While almost two thirds of women reported negative experiences because of their blogging/online writing, most of them were limited to a few instances. This is not to diminish these few instances nor the repeated, high amounts and/or especially vicious negative experiences several women talked about. But all women reported at least one benefit from their blogging. That is, benefits are 100 percent guaranteed, while chances to have negative interactions exist, and are more likely to happen to women who identify as feminists and/or their writing as political. This is a structural problem as society, police and law still trivialize gender-specific discrimination and harassment of women who are participating online. While society and its structures need to change in this regard, transformation will most likely require a long process, as other gender-specific crimes directed at women have had a track history of not being recognized for a long time (Citron, 2009; Byerly, 2013).

I further suggest that instead of applying old definitions of what counts as “political” to blogging via rankings, lists and a focus on filter blogs (geared to one topic), we apply new benchmarks to truly capture the political expressions of bloggers from all walks of life. Clearly, established news media and also researchers continue to a certain extent the “symbolic annihilation” (Tuchman, 1978, p. 8) of women who blog or write online if they do not make an effort to present and study those who identify as women and who understand their writing to be political in terms of topics, writing styles and commentary. Rather than categorizing the personal styles of women who blog/write online (in and outside my sample) as “just” “personal journaling,” the fluidity in topics they address needs to be recognized as a feature of fluid public clusters online, which are tied to lives offline. Societal hierarchies migrate online. And society still emphasizes the “choices” women are supposed to make between “motherhood or career,” in contrast to the virtual non-existence of discussions around “fatherhood or career.” That is “society, then, still prefers women in traditional gendered roles, according to norms demonstrated in [U.S.] media content” (Armstrong, 2013, p. 5). The Global Media Monitoring Report for the United States showed that as subjects in news, women were more often shown in certain occupations than others: on the day of monitoring the news, of all depicted media professionals 83 percent were women; of all homemakers and parents 81 percent were women; of all NGO workers 67 percent were women; of all professors, teachers and child care workers 52 percent were women. In contrast, among all shown lawyers and experts only 7 percent were women; of all political officials only 25 percent were women; of all businesspersons 27 percent were women and of all

celebrities only 37 percent were women (GMMP USA, 2010). In Germany, Switzerland and Austria “traditional stereotypes, especially in assigning the public area to men, and the private area to women, are still playing a role in media” (Magin & Stark, 2010, p. 400). Further, “Swiss media and journalists are still clinging to traditional, stereotypical gender roles that have been shaped by men’s perspectives” (Pfenniger, 2011, paragraph 1) from over 40 years ago when women in Switzerland did not have voting rights. Globally, in 2010, 46 percent of stories reinforced gender stereotypes, eight times more stories than those that challenged gender stereotypes (GMMP, 2010). In sum, with such gendered binaries, “media produce perspectives of gender, which are disciplining and controlling, and to a much lesser degree resisting and subversive” (Dorer, 2002, p. 55).

But rather than clinging to binaries of “personal journaling” versus “filter blogs” (for instance in Germany on gendered blogging Hesse, 2008, and Schmidt, 2008; in the United States for gendered blogging Herring & Paolillo, 2006, and Wei, 2009, for women bloggers Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012), that again allocate women to a domesticity online, the concept of fluidity in combination with a new terminology of fluid public clusters brings us closer to understanding how a broad range of political expressions by a variety of people are happening online and are contributing to public discourse in democracies. “Facile” distinction between “men-filter” and “women-journal” blogs (Pederson & Macafee, 2007, p. 155) are not appropriate.

This feeds into understandings that a binary of private versus public sphere in regard to the content produced on social media is not sustainable. People write from the privacy of their homes and personalized internet access via mobile devices into

the public sphere, while at the same time public spaces and goods become more privatized (Papacharissi, 2010).

The overwhelming majority of 84 percent of my interviewees understood their blogging to be political; interviewees who identified as feminists were much more likely to consider their blogging to be political. Interviewees who assessed social media to contain democratic and undemocratic aspects were also much more likely to consider their blogging to be political. Interviewees who did *not* identify as feminist and/or assessed social media to be largely democratic were more likely to consider their blogging as *not* political. This provides strong evidence that a narrow definition of political is inadequate to describe participation in public debates via blogs, sites, Twitter, Facebook, tumblr and other social media. The answers of my interviewees demonstrate that we need to apply wider and more flexible definitions such as those of minimal politics by Marchart (2011), daily rips in the hegemonic system (Macgilchrist & Böhmig, 2012) or critical feedback and virtues of democracy by Norval (2012). These definitions capture blogging/online writing that combines personal tones with public issues. In this sense, many interviewees used blogging/online writing for a new form of expression instead of replication traditional writing styles of “objective” journalism. Social media offer new technical possibilities, and women’s use of blogs offers a new approach rather than putting old contents into new vessels. While men shaped traditions of journalism, women are pioneering political blogging.

It is high time for a new benchmark to measure such political expressions, to redefine what is political or apply existing wider definitions of what is considered

political participation in democracies. Blogs are a format that transports how personal experience, insights, and learning processes lead to political opinion. They make the reality visible that political opinions are tied to identity and to observations, and that social hierarchies migrate online. Women who blog or write online are true innovators: they acknowledge this connection on their blogs and sites. They thus supplement perspectives and content to a narrow (news) media landscape in existing democracies that continue to misrepresent or underrepresent women in content and production regarding their race, motherhood, sexuality and other dimensions of their identity. Women who blog/write online help to make women and minorities visible – this is crucial for further democratizing democracy. The importance of this visibility of minorities is perhaps best described by novelist and poet Adam Foulds (2013):

I experienced the thrill that many members of minorities feel when they first find their world fully reflected back at them – when the African-American woman read Toni Morrison or the lesbian reader discovers Radcliffe Hall’s ‘The Well of Loneliness’. It can be an elating moment, ratifying your experience, newly legitimizing your life. That sensation is, it seems to me, the essence of identity: unstable and complicated as it may otherwise be, that involuntary and often happy sense of recognition is the thing itself. It can be triggered by very small things (p. 19).

But online visibility of women and their varied backgrounds is tied to a haphazard potential for meaningful recognition and discussion of different voices across public clusters. In sum, it is important for women to start or keep on writing online, to create visibility for women and their different identities in the overall media landscape if they can find the time, energy and resources to do so. It is always beneficial for women to blog, even in the face of the possibilities of negative experiences, which can be managed. While this responsibility to manage discrimination should not be another burden women are bearing, currently it would be

foolish to rely on laws, police or state to quickly step in against online harassment and discriminations leveled at women. Thus, in an appendix, I offer recommendations how to handle blogs/sites to minimize negative experiences online. Only by writing online women can have the chance to realize the haphazard democratic potential social media that offer.

7.3.4 The haphazard potential of social media in democracies

Harking back to my larger research question, what it means to “democratize” a democracy via web 2.0 media spaces, my interviewees’ experiences and assessments demonstrate that a potential exists to include a variety of new and different voices into public debate. Yet, constraints such as existing power hierarchies in mass publishing, social hierarchies, and availability of resources clip the wings of this democratic potential. I argue the democratic potential of social media is and remains a haphazard potential, in which new voices can slip through and go viral, stir up a public debate across many clusters while a great number of new, different perspectives remain on the margins. As I argued in chapter 2, democracy is malleable and “not done yet.” As I define this, to democratize means to give groups and individuals who have had little political and attention power in past a voice but also that these voices need to be heard and be seriously considered in discussions across public clusters. Or as Goode and McKee (2013) said, this means: “genuine deliberative encounters,” in which “users gain some new knowledge or understanding through exposure to the ideas, perspectives and identities of others, and where users perceive their practices to have some social or cultural impact” (p. 114). These are exactly the experiences that interviewees have made and described as positive

experiences through their blogging and online writing. Almost all interviewees emphasized the learning process they have undergone because of their blogging/online writing. Many recounted their contributions to start or participate in a public debate or their impact on individuals among their positive experiences. That is, in their blogging they have had “genuine deliberative encounters.”

In my definition of democratizing this also involves, as Macgilchrist and Böhmig (2012) suggested, “the tearing of small rips in what is considered possible” (p. 89) in hegemonies. That is, political and democratizing are not only deliberations about what is possible but also expressions that aim at the impossible and transform the impossible into what can be considered possible in the future. For instance, this is the rebutting, reflecting and re-articulating that Macgilchrist and Böhmig observed in the writings, links and exchanges on German blogs. Such exchanged have produced “constant ripping” (p. 97). This ripping, they argued, ensures that democracy is practiced daily and that hegemonic formations require more work to be kept stable. I concur that to democratize is also to challenge what *is* for the benefit of what can *be*. For that to happen we need two things: many, diverse voices – because standpoint epistemology suggests that our identity foregrounds different observations and identities and that voices on the margins can offer “less false accounts” (Steiner, 2012). And we need for these many, diverse voices to keep up the effort to educate each other in the genuine knowledge-exchanging deliberations (Goode & McKee, 2013), to tear “small rips” into what is considered possible (Macgilchrist & Böhmig, 2012; Marchart, 2011) and to engage in critical feedback to aspire “to higher selves and better societies” (Norval, 2012, p. 807). In one – German – word we need

“Bildung,” in the best sense of its meanings. In English, it most often refers to “education,” but literally it means “building” in the sense of to build, form or found something. It refers to creation. What do you do with what you learn? How does it shape you? To democratize also means to use knowledge exchange and deliberations to be shaped by them, to use them to build something, and potentially something new and better regarding how we *all* want to live our lives together in society.

The texts produced on social media by women from a variety of backgrounds in different national contexts can contribute to democratizing their democracies. Yet, democratizing democracies remains an uphill battle for women as it has been in the past to receive equal rights, medial and societal recognition. Interviewees who identified as feminist and/or their blogging as political were much more likely to assess social media to be a “mixed bag,” containing democratic and undemocratic aspects, or to see social media as largely not democratic. That is those who tested social media thoroughly for their political blogging, also see the limitations of the democratic potential of social media. Yet, social media can increase the likelihood of new, different voices being heard. The message to women, and other disadvantaged groups, should be – when time, energy and resources allow it – to blog, tweet, write online, to organize and to use the haphazard democratic potential of social media to increase the likelihood of their voices going viral to scratch, poke, and trouble the dominant structures, and to point to new and better politics of tomorrow that might yet seem impossible.

It would be beneficial to further test, advance and confirm my theory of fluid public clusters. For this purpose a longitudinal element to my study would make

sense by speaking with the same bloggers/online writers again in another two years, and perhaps in another wave in another two or five years. This would aid my ability to even better track the fluidity of public clusters. Follow-up interviews or surveys would demonstrate how many of my interviewees are still actively blogging, tweeting or elsewhere writing online, or not, and why; which online spaces they still use or not; and which topics they address with which approaches.

Several other aspects worth studying further became salient during my study but fell out its current scope. For instance, this included the question of if, how, and why women who participate in fluid public clusters online disclose, or not, their real names and the names of their family members, especially in the case of mothers their children's identity and/or names. The question arises how anonymity or disclosure of names contributes to positive and/or negative experiences for the women and/or their family. How is anonymity or disclosure being handled (also in different national contexts)? I asked my interviewees about their disclosure practice but an analysis of their answers fell out of the scope of this dissertation. But their answers again suggested that for some of them their approaches shifted over time, especially for those who blogged about their children who have grown older over time. Disclosure approaches also changed for those who went through personal and professional experiences and adjusted goals for their blog/site. Further, national context influenced the disclosure of identities as for instance in Germany several interviewees addressed the legal duty to disclose personal data in a legal notice on their blog if it was registered under a German domain name. Several interviewees in the United States remarked that privacy online is almost impossible, suggesting that being fully

disclosed from the start makes the most sense. Commercial and professionally oriented bloggers emphasized the importance to receive credit for their writing.

This dissertation also illuminated the importance and prominence of discourses around motherhood especially in Germany and Switzerland. Yet no previous studies who focused on mothers who blog in the German or Swiss context were found (to the best of my knowledge). Virtually all studies on mothers who blog/write online were focused on the United Kingdom (Pederson & Smithson, 2013) or the United States (Husbands, 2008; Lopez, 2009; Friedman, 2010; Morrison, 2010; Morrison, 2011; McDaniel, Coyne & Holmes, 2012; Chen, 2013). The dearth of studies in German-language countries regarding mothers who blog points to another avenue for future research.

As my study included women from varying backgrounds who provided many examples of successful posts and hashtags, it would also be valuable to more closely study cases in which hashtags on Twitter or posts on blogs and sites went viral. Women whose hashtags or posts went viral said that they enjoyed the discussions that happened because of such wide reach. But what made these hashtags go viral? How viral were they? Which were the circumstances in which these hashtags and/or posts went viral? Many interviewees said that they could not predict if a post will be read and shared a lot. Several said that often carefully planned and written articles were not as widely distributed as spontaneously shared insights or rants. For instance, one white interviewee in the United Kingdom said she started the hash tag #ididnotreport to mark an instance of being sexually harassed on public transportation. To her surprise, she said, it was taken up by many others on Twitter to tweet about similar

instances. She said this also led to debates about sexual harassment of men. Similarly, a Latina blogger in the United States started a hash tag #365feministselfie at the beginning of 2014 to highlight the visibility of women (of color) who are underrepresented in U.S. media. She said she has received so many responses to it from others who use it that she cannot keep up with answering all. In Germany, the hashtag #Aufschrei [#outcry] became over night and to the great surprise of its creators the most often used hashtag on German Twitter to date (Eckert & Puschmann, 2013; Maireder & Schlögel, 2014). It was meant to collect instances of everyday sexism; but just a few days afterwards virtually all German news media reported about the hashtag and a broad societal discussion on sexism ensued. Some interviewees expressed surprise and frustration as to which topics would be taken up, or not. Case studies of successful posts or hashtags and how they spread might help to gain further insight into how a text can become viral.

Appendix

Recommendations

To support the continued expression of women's voices online, I offer recommendations on how to manage blogging/online writing and related (potential) negative experiences. These recommendations are based on the responses and strategies from the 109 women I interviewed and are not exhaustive. But I hope that they perhaps offer some new ideas to experienced bloggers and that they encourage women who consider blogging/writing online to start their blog/site today.

I will offer these recommendations in English and German also to give back to the 109 inspiring women I interviewed in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland for this dissertation project. But of course, these recommendations are meant for any woman who is interested in starting to blog/write online or to (further) learn about managing her blog/site. Before I detail my recommendations below, I outline how these recommendations could be distributed to interested women.

Distribution and feedback

These recommendations can be published online and offline to make them available to all interested women for free under a creative commons license.

Online, I can upload the recommendations to a site/blog, for instance, my personal website or a separate but connected blog/site on Wordpress. This has the advantage that it is free and accessible to all women, and other people, who are already minimally familiar with browsing the web. A Wordpress page would also

allow moderated online comments to collect thoughts and ideas from readers to amend/adapt these recommendations.

Offline, I could print single-page leaflets. But the amount depends on financial and printing resources available. Leaflets have the advantage that they might reach women who have limited or no access to the internet at the moment. Leaflets could be distributed at conferences, women's centers, libraries, schools, colleges, community centers and in other public places.

Offline and online distribution can be combined by uploading a PDF of the leaflet to the web page for everyone to print and distribute. Vice versa, a web page address and/or QR code can be printed on the leaflet to find the web page.

The web page link could be sent to all 109 bloggers to ask for their input to amend and distribute recommendations. I have remained in touch with interviewees via an e-mail list to keep them up to date on the progress of my research. Interested bloggers could then provide feedback how to further improve these recommendations. If interested, bloggers could also post about these recommendations on their site/blog and link to the web site. Several bloggers inquired if they could do an interview with me for their blog regarding the results of my dissertation. These could be further opportunities to spread the web page with recommendations.

How to blog/write online safely

The following recommendations are meant to encourage women to start and keep on blogging/online writing. In my study, in which I interviewed 109 women in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland, *all* experienced bloggers/online writers said they had positive experiences because of their blogging. But 73 percent also said they had negative experiences. While police, law and society are slow to catch up on recognizing and persecuting online discriminations and harassment leveled against women, women are forced to take care of their safety on their own. Here are some ideas how to create and manage your own safe space online.

The good news

- * Blog, tweet, and express yourself online publicly if you have access, time and energy to do so. All women in my study said they benefitted personally, professionally, and in some cases, directly or indirectly financially, from putting their voice online. It is worth it!
- * Be prepared for a range of experiences and start with an open mind.
- * Know that you are not alone but that fellow bloggers are out there who cherish solidarity and will support and help you.

Getting started

- * Use an extra e-mail address for your blog, not your private one. That way, you can better choose when to check blog-related e-mails. You can also better segment potentially disruptive and/or abusive comments to collect them in a

separate space. And obviously this helps to keep your identity more private if you choose to not fully disclose it on your blog/site. Just make sure to check your e-mail regularly to not miss out on the many more positive messages and opportunities your blog might bring. (This also helps researchers who study blogs/sites to better reach you without more “open” contacts on other social media.)

- * Think about if or how much of your real name or identity you want to expose on your blog/site. Women who derived professional benefits from their blog were more likely to say that using their real name makes sense. This way they can get credit for their work. Women without professional goals for their blog and who chose pseudonyms or only used part of their name said they enjoyed the freedom this anonymity gives them.
- * Consider posting commenting policies or rules on your blog/site. It is your space and you determine the rules. If you make them clear to others, it can help to show that you are prepared for potential disruptions. Studies show that trolls are mostly targeting new or inexperienced users. Showing that you have rules and are policing your site, shows who is the boss.

What can happen (but does not mean that it does happen)

- * While this is not the case for all women, negative experiences online can be part of the deal. Just knowing that this might happen, and often does happen to women, can help to not feel alone or singled out when something happens.

- * Know again that you are not alone no matter which kind of experience you might have. Many studies and articles have now documented that just by being a woman who publishes online the probability to be harassed online is higher than for men. Negative instance online mirror the issues of offline power hierarchies, debates and struggles surrounding gender, motherhood, race and sexuality. It is not your fault; it is part of societal structures.
- * Anticipation, but not fear, is a good strategy that several women used to be prepared. The subpage “Monetizing the hate” on dooce.com provide examples of abuse if you want to familiarize yourself with what has happened to some women bloggers.
- * Be aware that using the words “feminism” or “feminist” explicitly on your blog/site might make you more of a target for masculinists/men’s rights activists who might search for such terms. This is not to say that you should not or cannot use them, but several studies have shown, including this one, that negative incidents can be higher if you are using these terms. The good news is: at least in the United Kingdom feminism is becoming “cool” again among teenagers and young adults. Several projects in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany are working to re-associate feminism with a positive image. Choose what you’re comfortable with; just be aware and learn from others about the context it might bring.

Handling comments

- * Always organize your site in a way that requires you to pre-approve comments before they go online on your blog/site right from the beginning. Early moderation of comments before they go online helps to nip potential trolls in the bud as studies show. For Twitter or Facebook banning and blocking of abusive users and comments from the start can be similarly effective.
- * Report abusive comments to Facebook, Twitter and other social media sites. Rules and user agreements change often. Reporting threats and abuse can help to build and keep up the pressure to change the rules toward a more civil communication.
- * Many women are also using a model of approving the first comment of a new commentator. The following comments are then going online automatically. This has the advantage that you do not need to read and approve all comments.
- * Similarly, you can use filters that catch words and phrases that might signal bad intentions to then block such comments from going online. (This can also help against spam).
- * Consider posting commenting policies or rules on your blog/site. It is your space and you determine the rules. If you make them clear to others, it can help to show that you are prepared for potential disruptions. Studies show that trolls are mostly targeting new or inexperienced users. Showing that you have rules and are policing your site, shows who is the boss.

Collecting and documenting abuse

- * Collecting and documenting abusive comments and or other attacks on you and/or your blog/site in a “poison cabinet” can serve as proof of what happened. This “poison cabinet” can be a separate folder in your e-mail system. That way you can collect abusive comments without having to look at them completely if you don’t want to read them. Collections can help in two ways: First, they might be useful information for later: if something happens offline that might be related to previous online messages and if/when laws will eventually catch up to better prosecute such cases. Second, having such collections can also serve to expose online abusive on one’s own blog or by contributing to other websites or projects that document abuse.
- * Expose abuse if you feel comfortable with this. Sites such as Working to Halt Online Abuse in the United States collect abusive statements to measure online abuse. One blogger also used Storify to expose a row of questionable tweets. Exposing abuse helps to further document the imbalances of online harassment that exist along gender boundaries. It also helps other women bloggers to anticipate what can happen and to develop solidarity with bloggers who have been affected. It also aids researchers in studying patterns of abuse and what this means for women and society.
- * Know that you are not alone and seek support and help from fellow bloggers and writers when a tricky situation arises. Ask others how they have dealt with a specific situation. Be available to support other women who might have less experience in dealing with negative incidents. Mutual education about concrete

instances of abusive comments, trolling, shit storms and cyber stalking can help to recognize potentially disturbing comments and people early on. Then you can disapprove comments, ban and or block users right away – while also considering saving evidence of them.

- * Use a buddy system to let a friend or fellow blogger deal with comments that you might not want to handle. In turn, offer your help to deal with abusive comments if a fellow blogger/writers appears to be struggling.

The police

- * If a threat migrates offline, for instance as phone calls or physical appearance of stalkers, seek police help. Call your local police and/or the FBI; ask for the cyber crime or online crime unit. This helped to stop stalkers in several cases. In one instance in my study the police also helped when a woman forwarded several problematic e-mails.
- * This is not to say that you cannot or should not also report rape threats and death threats that you have received online. Several women in this study reported that police were either not responding or not taking their cases seriously. But in the United Kingdom, two trolls got send to prison for repeatedly tweeting vicious rape and death threats to feminist activist Caroline Criado-Perez. Laws are changing slowly but they can change. If you have the time and energy, it is worth it to continue to sensitize police toward these “new” kinds of abuse online. Obviously it should not be your burden to educate the police. But going to the police repeatedly might help build up public pressure for police forces to get

educated about online harassment of women especially and to take them seriously.

Just do it!

- * Remember, blogging/writing online offer great opportunities for you personally and professionally. For most women I interviewed they outweighed a far smaller number of negative incidents. And, collectively women have grown resilient to deal with them.
- * Many interviewees stressed the importance of solidarity. If you can, help other women who start blogging/writing online to know what experiences might await them, including potentially negative ones. But also share your positive stories. What have been your best experiences with your blog or social media use? What benefits have you derived from your blogging? Share the good news about joys and opportunities.
- * Create your own safe digital room and express yourself online; support potential new and fellow bloggers/writers online to do the same! It is worth it!

Other useful resources (in English):

Trigger warning: Some sites contain graphic examples of slurs, threats and abusive comments.

- * Armstrong, Heather. (2014). *Monetizing the hate*. Dooce.com Available at: <http://dooce.com/hate/> [US]

- Provides examples of abusive comments
- * BlogHer. (2014). *Tips and tricks for blogging and social media*. Available at:
<http://www.blogger.com/blogger-topics/bloggng-social-media/tips-tricks-tools>
 [US-based]
 - Blogging network for women that collects blog posts with tips and tricks for blogging and social media use
- * Britmums. (2014). “*How to*” on *blogging*. Available at:
<http://www.britmums.com/category/howtos/bloggng-howtos/> [UK]
 - Tips on how to get started for blogging
- * Captain Awkward. (2012). “*How do I get rid of my Facebook stalker without being mean about it?*” Available at:
<http://captainawkward.com/2012/06/26/280-how-do-i-get-rid-of-my-facebook-stalker-without-being-mean-about-it/>
 - Suggestions on how to deal with Facebook stalking
- * CyberAngels. (2014). *Cyberstalking/Harassment*. Available at:
<http://cyberangels.org/security/stalking.php> [US-based]
 - Concrete tips on how to act in cases of cyber stalking and cyber bullying
 - CyberAngels also provides concrete tips what to do in cases of identity theft
- * Doyle, Sadie (2011). *The Girl’s Guide to Staying Safe Online*. Available at:
http://inthesetimes.com/article/12311/the_girls_guide_to_staying_safe_online
 [US]
 - Provides examples of abusive comments in case of feminist blogging
 - Provides ideas how to deal with abuse online and what that might result in

- * Electronic Frontier Foundation. (2014). *Legal guide for bloggers*. Available at: <https://www.eff.org/bloggers/legal/additional> [US-based]
 - Extensive pages with tips on blogging anonymously, commercial blogging, general blogging, workplace blogging and legal advice for bloggers
- * Get safe online. (2014). *Blogging*. Available at: <https://www.getsafeonline.org/social-networking/blogging/> [UK-based]
 - Brief list of thoughts about safe blogging especially for beginners
- * Hess, Amanda (2014). Why women are not welcome on the internet. *Pacific Standard*. Available at: <http://www.psmag.com/navigation/health-andbehavior/women-arent-welcome-internet-72170/#.Usq9QZi5wZA.twitter> [US]
 - Essay detailing several cases of heavy and repeated abuse against women writing online in the United States and the United Kingdom
 - Details how police helped or not in several cases of online harassment of women bloggers
- * Hudson, Laura. (2014). Curbing online abuse isn't impossible. Here is where we start. *Wired*. Available at: <http://www.wired.com/2014/05/fighting-online-harassment/>
 - Article about abuse in gaming communities and research project by League of Legends team with concrete changes that curbed online abuse
- * Internet Crime Complaint Center. (2014). About us. Available at: <http://www.ic3.gov/about/default.aspx> [US]

- To file a complaint about an online crime with the FBI and the National White Collar Crime Center
- * Mumsnet. (2013). *How to start a blog*. Available at:
<http://www.mumsnet.com/bloggers/how-to-start-a-blog> [UK-based]
→ Concrete advice on how to get started with your blog on Blogger or Wordpress
 - * Stalking Resource Center. (2014). *The use of technology to stalk*. Available at:
<http://www.victimsofcrime.org/our-programs/stalking-resource-center/stalking-information/the-use-of-technology-to-stalk> [US-based]
→ Information and further links on how the internet and social media are used to stalk and what measures you can take against that
 - * Take back the Tech. (2014). *Mapping technology related violence against women*. Available at: <https://www.takebackthetech.net/mapit/page/index/3> [FOR ALL COUNTRIES]
→ Here you can report cases of violence against you or other women, which happened online or via cell phone
→ The site also uses a hashtag #takebackthetech with which you can tweet to them
 - * Working to Halt Abuse Online. (2012). *Don't become an online victim*. Available at: <http://www.haltabuse.org/onlinesafety.PDF> [US-based]
→ Free, downloadable and foldable two-page leaflet with tips on being safe online, internet addresses on cyber stalking, internet crime complaints and antivirus software

Examples of blogs by women with detailed comment policies:

- * Captain Awkward. (2013). *Site policies and FAQs*. Available at:
<http://captainawkward.com/site-policies-and-faqs/>
- * Jezebel. (2014). *Commenting on Jezebel: rules of the road*. Available at:
<http://jezebel.com/5621055/a-friendly-note-on-commenting> [US]
- * Flip Flopping Joy. (2014). *Commenting*. Available at:
<http://flipfloppingjoy.com/commenting/> [US]
- * Shakesville. (2014). *Comment policy*. Available at:
<http://www.shakesville.com/2010/01/commenting-policy.html> [US]

GERMAN VERSION:

Leitfaden fürs sichere Bloggen und Schreiben im Netz

Die folgenden Tipps sollen Frauen ermutigen mit dem Bloggen oder Schreiben im Netz anzufangen oder weiterzumachen. In meiner Studie, für die ich 109 Frauen in Deutschland, der Schweiz, den USA und Großbritannien interviewt habe, gaben **alle** Bloggerinnen und Online-Autorinnen an, dass sie mindestens ein positives Erlebnis durch ihren Blog oder ihre Webseite gehabt haben. Yeah!!

Allerdings sagten auch fast drei Viertel, dass sie mindestens ein negatives Erlebnis durch das Bloggen oder Schreiben im Netz gehabt haben. Da Polizei, Gesetz und Gesellschaft sich nur langsam damit beschäftigen, die Angriffe auf Frauen online anzuerkennen und auch rechtlich zu verfolgen, sind Frauen (und alle, die solche Angriffe erleben) leider gezwungen sich selbst um ihre Sicherheit im Netz zu

kümmern. Hier sind einige Ideen wie Frauen einen sicheren Raum für sich online schaffen und erhalten können.

Die gute Nachricht

- * Wenn Du die Zeit, Energie und die technischen Möglichkeiten hast, blogge, tweete, poste und schreibe online! Bring Deine Stimme ein!
- * Alle Bloggerinnen und Online-Autorinnen in meiner Studie hatten mindestens ein positives Erlebnis durch ihr Bloggen oder Schreiben im Netz, die meisten sehr viele – entweder privat, beruflich oder sogar auch direkt oder indirekt finanziell. Es lohnt sich!
- * Fast alle Bloggerinnen und Online-Autorinnen betonten die vielen tollen Begegnungen mit anderen Menschen, die durch ihren Blog oder ihre Webseite zustande gekommen sind. Viele Frauen sagten, diese Begegnungen wären ihnen sonst so nie passiert! Verpasse diese Gelegenheiten nicht!
- * Sei auf eine Reihe von Erlebnissen vorbereitet. Bleib offen.
- * Du bist nicht allein. Es gibt viele, viele Bloggerinnen, die solidarisch sind und bereit sind, Dich zu unterstützen und Dir zu helfen mit dem Bloggen oder Schreiben im Netz anzufangen oder als schon Erfahrene noch dazuzulernen.

Blog/Webseite einrichten

- * Wenn Du Deinen Blog oder Deine Seite einrichtest, benutze eine separate E-Mail-Adresse für Deinen Blog, nicht Deine Privatadresse. Dann kannst Du besser einteilen, wann Du Dich mit E-Mails zum Blog auseinandersetzen willst und

- wann nicht. So kannst Du auch schwierige Kommentare besser in einem separaten Ort sammeln und dokumentieren. Und klar, es hilft auch, um Deine Identität zu schützen, falls Du sie nicht komplett preisgeben möchtest. Aber denke auch daran, die E-Mails für den Blog regelmäßig zu checken, damit Du all die guten und interessanten Anfragen nicht verpasst. Nebenbei hilft dass auch ForscherInnen, die Dich erreichen wollen und dies nicht offen durch die Kommentarfunktion auf Deinem Blog oder Webseite o. Ä. machen möchten.
- * Denk genau darüber nach, wieviel von Deinem Namen und Deiner Identität Du preisgeben möchtest. Denk auch genau darüber nach, wieviel Du von der Identität Deiner Familie und Deinen Kinder auf Deinem Blog oder Deiner Webseite preisgeben möchtest. Bloggerinnen, die ihren Blog auch für berufliche Zwecke nutzen, fanden es hilfreicher ihren richtigen, vollen Namen zu nutzen, um auch als Autorinnen ihrer Texte anerkannt zu werden. Andere Bloggerinnen, die anonym oder mit Pseudonym bloggen, genossen es so frei schreiben zu können wie es ihnen unter die Tastatur kommt, ohne vom Umfeld, ArbeitgeberIn, VermieterIn etc. erkannt zu werden.
 - * In Deutschland und der EU müssen Webseiten mit der Top-Level-Domain, die in “.de” enden bei der Verwaltungs- und Betriebsgesellschaft der Domain, DENIC, registriert werden. Dort kann jeder Deinen richtigen Namen und Deine Adresse nachschauen.
 - * Überlege ob Du vielleicht andere kostenlose Seiten nutzen willst, die einfache Systeme bereit stellen, um einen Blog oder eine Webseite einzurichten, wie z.B.

Wordpress.com oder Blogger.com. Diese Seiten verlangen keine Registrierung mit richtigem Namen.

- * Überlege Dir, ob Du Kommentarregeln auf Deinen Blog oder Deine Webseite stellen möchtest. Es ist Dein digitaler Raum und Du bestimmst die Regeln. Wenn Du das Deinen LeserInnen in Kommentarregeln klar machst, dann wissen alle, dass Du auf eventuelle Störungen vorbereitet bist und inakzeptables Verhalten nicht auf Deinem Blog oder Deiner Webseite duldest. Studien zeigen, dass Trolle sich meist neue oder weniger erfahrene BloggerInnen aussuchen.
Kommentarregeln und rigoroses Moderieren zeigen Deinen LeserInnen, dass Du die hier die Chefin bist.

Was passieren kann (aber nicht passieren muss)

- * Es passiert nicht allen Frauen, aber negative Erlebnisse sind im Moment leider ein Teil der Welt online. Sei Dir dessen bewusst, und auch, dass es oft Frauen trifft. Sich das zu vergegenwärtigen hilft, sich nicht allein zu fühlen, falls etwas passiert.
- * Mehrere Studien haben gezeigt, dass es reicht online als Frau erkennbar zu sein, um die Wahrscheinlichkeit zu erhöhen, Zielscheibe von Beleidigungen und Ähnlichem zu werden. Diese negativen Vorfälle spiegeln die Machtverhältnisse außerhalb des Netzes in unserer Gesellschaft wider die mit Gender, Ethnie, Mutterschaft, Sexualität und anderen Dimensionen der Identität verwoben sind. Es ist nicht Deine Schuld, falls Dir etwas passiert; es liegt an den Strukturen der Gesellschaft.

- * Vorbereitung, aber nicht Angst, ist eine gute Strategie. Die Webseite hatr.org (Vorsicht, Triggerwarnung) bietet Beispiele welche Kommentare BloggerInnen erhalten haben, falls Du mehr darüber lesen möchtest, welche Art von Kommentaren kommen könnten.
- * Sei Dir bewusst, dass die Verwendung der Worte “Feminismus” oder “Feministin” auf Deinem Blog oder Deiner Webseite es wahrscheinlicher macht, dass Du zur Zielscheibe von MaskulinistInnen wirst, die nach solchen Begriffen suchen. Das heisst natürlich nicht, dass Du diese Worte nicht verwenden kannst oder sollst. Dein Blog ist Dein Blog; Du machst dort was DU möchtest. Das ist klar. Aber vergegenwärtige Dir den Kontext, den bestimmte Begriffe im Moment mit sich bringen. Mehrere Studien haben gezeigt, dass leider negative Vorfälle öfter passieren können, wenn feministische Begriffe verwendet werden. Manche Bloggerinnen haben sich deshalb entschieden zwar feministisch oder zu feministischen Themen zu schreiben, aber benutzen den Begriff Feminismus selbst nicht. Die gute Nachricht: besonders in Großbritannien ist eine Gruppe an Teenager-Aktivistinnen dabei, den Begriff des Feminismus als cool und “fun” zu etablieren. Und auch andere Projekte in Deutschland und den USA thematisieren was Feminismus bedeutet und welche Assoziationen damit verbunden sind. Also, mach wie Du denkst, aber wisse was es mit sich bringen kann.

Umgang mit Kommentaren

- * Überlege Dir, ob Du Kommentarregeln auf Deinen Blog oder Deine Webseite stellen willst. Es ist Dein digitaler Raum und Du bestimmst die Regeln. Wenn Du das Deinen LeserInnen in geposteten Kommentarregeln klar machst, dann wissen alle, dass Du auf eventuelle Störungen vorbereitet bist und inakzeptables Verhalten nicht auf Deinem Blog oder Deiner Webseite duldest. Studien zeigen, dass Trolle sich meist neue oder weniger erfahrene BloggerInnen als Zielscheibe aussuchen. Kommentarregeln und rigoroses Moderieren zeigen Deinen LeserInnen, dass Du die hier die Chefin bist.
- * Richte Deinen Blog oder Deine Webseite so ein, dass Du immer alle Kommentare von LeserInnen moderieren musst BEVOR sie online gehen. Moderiere die Kommentare gleich von Anfang an. Frühes Moderieren kann helfen potentielle Trolle und StörerInnen gleich im Keim zu ersticken; das zeigen auch Studien.
- * Viele Bloggerinnen nutzen auch das Modell, den ersten Kommentar einer neuen Leserin/eines neuen Lesers zu moderieren und dann alle weiteren Kommentare automatisch online gehen zu lassen. Das hat den Vorteil, dass Du nicht alle Kommentare moderieren musst, wenn Du diese LeserInnen kennst und ihnen vertraust.
- * Einige Frauen nutzen auch Filter, die auf Wörter und Ausdrücke reagieren, die auf problematische Kommentare hinweisen können. Diese Kommentare werden dann erst einmal blockiert, damit Du sie moderieren kannst. (Das hilft wohl auch gut gegen Spam.)

- * Nutze auch die “Ban” und “Block”-Funktionen auf Twitter und Facebook und anderen sozialen Netzwerken um beleidigende Kommentare und NutzerInnen im Keim zu ersticken.
- * Melde den sozialen Netzwerken beleidigende Kommentare. Die Nutzungsbedingungen ändern sich immer noch häufig. Vorfälle zu melden, kann helfen, diese Regeln weiter so zu gestalten, dass Beleidigungen und Drohungen nicht mehr toleriert werden.

Sammeln und dokumentieren

- * Wenn Du die Energie und Zeit dazu hast, dann sammle und dokumentiere negative Vorfälle online in einem “Giftschrank.” Das kann als Beweis dafür dienen, dass etwas passiert. Dieser Giftschrank kann ein separater Ordner in Deinem E-Mail-Provider sein oder auch ein Word-Dokument. So kannst Du beleidigende und bedrohliche Kommentare sammeln ohne sie komplett lesen zu müssen, wenn Du das nicht möchtest. Negative Kommentare zu sammeln, kann zweifach helfen: einmal um später zu zeigen, dass und was schon passiert ist, auch falls etwas wieder online oder auch offline geschieht. Zweitens, Du kannst auch überlegen, ob Du diese Kommentare später vielleicht online posten und anderen zeigen möchtest.
- * Wenn Du das möchtest, kannst Du schwierige Kommentare auch posten und kommentieren, um anderen zu zeigen, was passiert ist. Im deutschsprachigem Raum sammelt die Webseite hatr.org solche Kommentare. Bloggerinnen haben aber auch z.B. Storify genutzt um problematische Tweets zu sammeln und

auszustellen. Das Ausstellen hilft weiter um Belästigungen und Bedrohungen online öffentlich zu dokumentieren, damit andere Frauen sehen was passieren kann, um Solidarität zu entwickeln, und um weiter zu diesem Problem zu forschen.

- * Vergiss nicht, dass Du online nicht alleine bist. Suche Dir Hilfe und Unterstützung von anderen BloggerInnen und Online-Autorinnen wenn Du einer schwierigen Situation begegnest. Wie sind andere mit konkreten Vorfällen umgegangen? Welche Möglichkeiten gab es zu reagieren? Was hat wie und warum geholfen?
- * Sei bereit anderen BloggerInnen zu helfen, die vielleicht neu sind oder noch nicht so viele oder andere Erfahrungen gemacht haben als Du. Gegenseitiger Austausch über konkrete Vorfälle kann helfen gleich zu Beginn potentielle StörerInnen zu erkennen, sie zu blockieren und so im Keim zu ersticken. Denk trotzdem auch daran, weiter Beweise zu Vorfällen zu sammeln.
- * Ein gegenseitiges “Buddy-System” kann auch helfen mit beleidigenden Kommentaren umzugehen: lass eine andere befreundete Bloggerin Kommentare moderieren, die Dich betreffen und die Du selbst nicht händeln möchtest. Im Gegenzug, sei bereit und verfügbar, dasselbe für andere BloggerInnen zu tun, die Hilfe brauchen.

Die Polizei

- * Wenn eine Bedrohung oder Beleidigung online in Dein “offline”-Leben rutscht, z.B. als Telefonanrufe, als Auftauchen von Menschen in der Umgebung oder am Arbeitsplatz, als Sachbeschädigungen etc., geh zur Polizei! Erkundige Dich dort nach BeamtInnen, die sich mit Onlinekriminalität/Cyberkriminalität beschäftigen (falls es das bei der örtlichen Polizei gibt.) Melde den Vorfall, frage nach Hilfen. In einigen Fällen hat das geholfen Stalker zu stoppen, die online angefangen haben oder die vermehrt E-Mails geschickt hatten.
- * Natürlich kannst Du auch Bedrohungen, die online passieren, vor allem Vergewaltigungs- und Todesandrohungen, anzeigen. Aber mehrere Frauen in meiner Studie haben gesagt, dass die Polizei diese Bedrohungen nicht ernst genommen hat oder sich nicht zurück gemeldet hat. Aber in Großbritannien gab es den Fall der feministischen Aktivistin Caroline Criado-Perez über den in den britischen und US-amerikanischen Nachrichtenmedien viel berichtet wurde. Vielleicht hast Du davon gehört. Die vielen Drohungen, die sie per Twitter erhielt, brachten zwei dieser TäterInnen für mehrere Monate ins Gefängnis. Ein guter Anfang! Natürlich ist es nicht Deine Aufgabe die örtliche Polizei aufzuklären. Aber Vorfälle weiter zu melden, wenn Du dazu die Kraft und Zeit hast, kann helfen weiter öffentlichen Druck aufzubauen, damit die Polizei besser informiert ist und handelt, Gesetze sich ändern und die Gesellschaft Bedrohungen und Beleidigungen online auch als Problem anerkennt und verfolgt.

Mach einfach los!

- * Also, vergiss nicht, Bloggen und im Netz schreiben, kann Dir persönliche, berufliche und auch finanzielle Vorteile verschaffen. Für die meisten BloggerInnen, mit denen ich gesprochen habe, überwogen ganz klar die tollen Erlebnisse, die interessanten Menschen und Projekte die sich durch das Bloggen oder Schreiben im Netz ergeben haben! Und als Kollektiv gesehen, haben Frauen eine erstaunliche Widerstandskraft gegenüber negativen Erlebnissen entwickelt. Sie haben sich Strategien geschaffen, um sich ihren eigenen digitalen Raum zu schaffen und zu erhalten. Aus diesem relativ sicheren digitalen Raum heraus konnten und können sie in der Öffentlichkeit mitmischen!
- * Viele Bloggerinnen haben immer wieder betont, wie wichtig Solidarität ist. Wenn Du Zeit, Energie und Ressourcen hast, dann hilf anderen Frauen auch mit dem Bloggen anzufangen oder weiterzumachen. Erzähle von den vielen tollen Erfahrungen, die Du gemacht hast. Was waren Deine besten Erlebnisse durchs Bloggen oder Schreiben im Netz? Welche Möglichkeiten hast Du dadurch bekommen? Welche interessanten Menschen hast Du getroffen? Welche Projekte wurden dadurch angestoßen?
- * Schaffe Deinen eigenen digitalen Raum! Bring Deine Stimme ein! Unterstütze andere Bloggerinnen oder Frauen, die es werden wollen! Es lohnt sich!

Nützliche Seiten:

Triggerwarnung: Einige Seiten beinhalten explizite Beschreibung von Gewalt und Androhungen.

- * Afrikawissenschaft. (2012). *Öffentliche Antwort an einen der „nicht locker lässt.“*

<http://afrikawissenschaft.wordpress.com/2012/07/01/offentliche-antwort-an-einen-der-nicht-locker-lasst/>

→ Beispiel wie eine Bloggerin in einer öffentlichen Antwort auf einen Troll reagiert hat und die vom Troll erhaltenen Kommentare analysiert

- * Grünwald, Esme. (2014). *Geflogene Kommentare*. High on Clichés.

<http://highoncliches.wordpress.com/geflogene-kommentare/>

→ Hier sammelt Esme Grünwald „toxische Kommentare“ öffentlich

- * Grünwald, Esme. (2012). *Trollen, Mobbing, Stalking – feministisches Bloggen im Jahre 2012*. High on Clichés.

<http://highoncliches.wordpress.com/2012/07/29/trollen-mobbing-stalking-feministisches-bloggen-im-jahre-2012/>

→ Vorschläge dazu mit Stalking, Trollen und Beleidungen umzugehen

- * Hatr.org. Seite mit freigeschalteten Hass-Kommentaren. <http://hatr.org/>

→ Fortlaufende Sammlung mit konkreten Hass-Kommentaren (mit

Triggerwarnung)

- * Lantzsch, Nadine. (2012). *Wie wollen wir im Netz füreinander Verantwortung tragen?* Medienelite. <http://medienelite.de/wie-wollen-wir-im-netz-fureinander-verantwortung-tragen/>

- Blogpost zum Umgang mit sexualisierter und verbaler Gewalt im Netz
- * Stephanie. (2010). *Feuerspuckende Drachen*. Mädchenmannschaft.
<http://maedchenmannschaft.net/feuerspuckende-drachen/>
 → Stephanie berichtet wie sie mit einer Morddrohung an sie in einer E-mail umgegangen ist
 - * Tabler, Nele. (2012). *Keine Angst, ihr feministischen/lesbischen Bloggerinnen, das ist nur geschmacklose Prosa*. Karnele. <http://www.karnele.de/keine-angst-ihr-feministischenlesbischen-bloggerinnen-das-ist-nur-geschmacklose-prosa/>
 → Bericht einer erfahrenen Bloggerin zu Erlebnissen mit der Polizei nach Anzeige von Drohungen, die sie online erhalten hatte (und weitere relevante Posts dazu)
 - * Deus, Gudrun und Wesp, Dieter. (2011). *We've got you under your skin. Grenzen ziehen in einem auch unsozialen Netz*. Soziale Bewegungen und Social Media.
<http://manuals.sozialebewegungen.org/abgrenzen/>
 → Leitfaden zum Umgang mit anderen in sozialen Medien, mit Trollen und zum Selbstschutz

Nützliche Seiten (auf Englisch):

- * Doyle, Sadie (2011). *The Girl's Guide to Staying Safe Online*.
http://inthesetimes.com/article/12311/the_girls_guide_to_staying_safe_online
 [USA]
 → Gibt konkrete Beispiele für beleidigende Kommentare
 → Gibt Tipps damit umzugehen

- * Take back the Tech. *Mapping technology related violence against women.*
<https://www.takebackthetech.net/mapit/page/index/3> [FÜR ALLE LÄNDER]
 → Hier kannst Du Gewalt und Beleidigungen melden, die Dir oder anderen im Netz oder per Handy passiert sind
 → Der Hashtag auf Twitter für das Projekt ist #takebackthetech

Beispiele für Kommentarregeln auf Blogs von/mit Frauen/FeministInnen:

- * Schrupp, Antje. (2014). *Wo ist dein Kommentar?* <http://antjeschrupp.com/nicht-freigeschaltet/> [DEUTSCHLAND]
- * Femgeeks. (2014). *Netiquette.* <http://femgeeks.de/netiquette/> [DEUTSCHLAND]
- * Grünwald, Esme. (2014). *Kommentare.* High on Clichés
<http://highoncliches.wordpress.com/kommentare/>
- * kleinerdrei. (2014). *Die beißen nicht.* <http://kleinerdrei.org/2013/02/die-beissen-nicht/> [DEUTSCHLAND]
- * Mädchenblog. (2014). *Netiquette.* <http://maedchenblog.blogsport.de/netiquette/>
 [DEUTSCHLAND]
- * Mädchenmannschaft. (2014). *Netiquette.*
<http://maedchenmannschaft.net/netiquette/> [DEUTSCHLAND]

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