

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN  
PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY:  
A CASE STUDY OF THREE FACEBOOK  
GROUPS

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As far back as 1918, John Dewey cautioned that democracy should not be identified with “economic individualism as the essence of freedom of action” (Dewey, 1954). He saw freedom as grounded socially in the human experience of “communicative (not merely economic) exchange through which individuals orient themselves to the world” (Couldry, 2010, p. 133). These communicative exchanges are necessary for people to live an authentically human life. In the widely dispersed societies of the twenty-first century, journalism and mass communication are necessary for this communicative exchange. This dissertation argues that Facebook, through purposefully designed and organized groups, can facilitate such communicative exchanges for social classes that are given short shrift by the mainstream media.

I posit that due to their ability to select, control, and filter media content according to their specified needs and concerns, rather than have media fare dictated to

them by the dominant classes, social media users in general, and Facebook groups composed of subordinate classes in particular, have the capacity to cultivate and nurture discourses that challenge the views and opinions of the dominant publics in which these groups are located. Using counterpublic theory à la Nancy Fraser, Catherine Squires, and Michael Warner, this dissertation analyzes the media content that members of three Facebook groups shared on their groups' Facebook walls, and how this content helped them articulate oppositional voices and identities.

Based in Kenya, the first group, Freethinkers Initiative Kenya (FIKA), identifies with freethought and atheism in a society that is predominantly Christian. The second group, Pan-African Network (PAN) promotes the interests of Africans across the globe, campaigning for the advancement of a proud black identity in a world increasingly perceived as hostile to Blacks and people of African descent. The third group, Women Without Religion (WWR), espouses a feminist atheist identity that opposes "white male supremacy," and speaks against the perceived oppression of women occasioned by the patriarchal religions of the Judeo-Christian heritage.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY:  
A CASE STUDY OF THREE FACEBOOK GROUPS

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my mothers; to Nyawira Ngetha, for believing in me, and for teaching me how to believe in myself, against all odds, across distant lands and vast oceans, all the way back in my homeland of Kenya, and to my Doctor Mother, Linda Steiner, my supervisor, for teaching me how not to take my faith in myself too seriously, for guiding and directing me through the exacting demands of good writing.

## **Acknowledgements**

This dissertation would not have been possible without the constant presence of my supervisor, Professor Linda Steiner, which started when I took her course in qualitative research methods. I still recall how about four years ago she replied to my email that I sent at around 2:00 a.m.: “I see you also have insomnia....” Due to my nature as a reserved introvert, I have the tendency to withdraw into my own interior world. Whenever I seemed to go missing by being too quiet, Linda would invite me to her office to talk about my research. When I had to move out of Maryland and communication between me and the academic community at Philip Merrill College became even more tenuous, Linda would send me an email every so often to see what I was up to. And then, when I finally got into the proper writing rhythm, she responded to my constant barrage of emails seeking advice with an immediacy that I hope to transfer to my professional life once I get a teaching job. One more thing I hope has rubbed off from her is her effortless ability to cross every **T** and dot every **I** that I happened to overlook, as well as her knack to show me that my love affair with words does not have to translate into verbose rambling.

Kalyani Chadha, my theory advisor, was essential in the production of this work. She it was who encouraged me to study Facebook groups. I recall vividly her saying to me, “Why not study that group you are a member of for this class?” I looked at her in disbelief: “I can do that?” Back then, I did not know I could convert virtually anything into a research subject. I thank Kalyani for showing me that I did not have to go back all the way to Kenya to study the leading newspaper there in the name of making significant contributions to research in journalism studies.

Sarah Oates, my journalism specialty advisor, gave me the confidence to believe in the readability of my writing, with her constant, “James, you write so beautifully!” Of course, she too was prescient in the direction of my research trajectory back when I was only a first-year doctoral student. I recall her saying, “James does not know it yet, but he is going to write about social media.” I recall smiling to myself about this, cockily telling myself, “No! I will study *The Daily Nation*, Kenya’s leading newspaper.” Needless to say, her prediction proved superior to my own.

John McCauley, my cognate advisor, was also inspirational with his open admiration for my writing. He attributed it to my background and training in journalism. His research interests in Sub-Saharan Africa also aligned with my own, and so he was only the natural choice for the political science side of my research.

Charles Alford was kind enough to be my Dean’s Representative, first for my proposal defense, even while his wife was ailing, and second for the final dissertation defense, even after he had officially retired from teaching. I thank him for boosting my confidence with an email remark that I was a political theorist, at least in the making. His vast command of political theory was central in guiding my thinking about political communication and its role in democracy.

Of course, I would be remiss if I forgot to acknowledge and thank my research participants, the members of the Facebook groups studied in this dissertation. In particular, I thank Annie Chant, the founder and chief administrator of Women Without Religion (WWR), one of the best-organized groups I have ever been a member of. I also thank all those other participants who must remain anonymous for the purposes of

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## **List of Abbreviations**

The following abbreviations are used for the Facebook groups studied in this dissertation

AIK	Atheists in Kenya
FIKA	Freethinkers Initiative Kenya
PAN	Pan-African Network
WWR	Women Without Religion

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## *Introduction*

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of three Facebook groups as cases of the potential of social media to enhance participatory democracy. Conducted between July 2014 and March 2018, the study analyzed the content shared on the walls of three Facebook groups, the responses of some of the most active group members to in-depth semi-structured interviews, and the interactions between various members on the groups' walls. The three groups were as follows: Freethinkers Initiative Kenya (FIKA), Pan-African Network (PAN), and Women Without Religion (WWR). This chapter examines participatory democracy as the aim of the three Facebook groups. It also offers a brief description of each of the groups, then lays out the plan and content of the rest of the dissertation.

## *Participatory Democracy*

Democracy can be traced back to ancient Greece, with its city-states governed through the direct involvement of citizens in the day-to-day political administration of their society (Raaflaub, et al. 2007). It, however, became a primary concern of political theory during the Enlightenment, when individual moral autonomy and reason dethroned the heteronomy of the church and state, and the absolutism of the monarchy and tradition (Butch, 2007). One of the key components of democracy as conceived by thinkers of the Enlightenment is that the state is constituted for the general good of citizens as determined by self-same citizens acting as a public body, rather than as a tool in the service of the monarch (Habermas, 1989). The citizens act as a public body “when they confer in an unrestricted fashion,” wrote Habermas (1974, p. 49), meeting

in that “realm” he called the public sphere. Public opinion is formed in the public sphere through rational deliberation on the issues that matter to all the citizens in general, under the auspices of the freedoms of association and assembly.

The public sphere thus understood is a place where the citizens of a nation, country, city, or other territorially bound “political community”, come together to deliberate on issues that matter to them all. This could be in the form of a town-hall meeting, in which the town residents meet to deliberate on the vehicular speed limits to be imposed on the roads running through their town, or in the form of a national parliament, whose members meet to deliberate on the laws to be “imposed” on the nationals they represent. In both these instances, communication among the deliberators is of paramount importance. In the latter case, however, while the deliberations in the house may be inclusive and democratic, they cannot legitimately be called public unless they are publicized through some formal mechanism.

Journalism provides one formal mechanism for publicizing the law-making deliberations of national governments. Reporters who enjoy freedom of expression publish the deliberations carried out in the legislative organ of the state, thus making those deliberations accessible to all the citizens of the nation. Thomas Carlyle (1841) consequently called journalists in the reporters’ gallery of the British parliament the Fourth Estate of the realm, distinguishing them from the other three estates composed of the Lords Spiritual (members of the clergy), the Lords Temporal (the English nobility), and the Commoners. Likewise, Habermas “associated the public sphere with modern media that, in enabling communication across distance, could knit spatially dispersed interlocutors into a public” (Fraser, 2014, p. 12). In the U.S., and as currently

used around the world, the fourth estate refers to the “fourth branch of government”, as opposed to the other three of the executive, the judiciary, and the legislature. The fourth estate in this sense signifies the press keeping the other three branches in check, as traditionally understood in the principle of the “separation of powers”.

Journalism should therefore be at the heart of democracy and should be the means by which different and varying members of the citizenry gain access to the public sphere, to have their needs, views, voices, and aspirations heard and addressed by the state. More than merely publicizing what the state does and says, the media should also speak for all members of the public.

Critics of the contemporary media scene, however, especially with the increased concentration of ownership and conglomeration of various media outlets under the same or similar powerful dominant classes, see a depoliticized social milieu. In this environment, citizens, both locally and globally, have lost critical muscle to challenge what the state and government officials do, because the media have turned from calling out those in power, to “the re-feudalization of the public sphere, returning to its function as a place for public display rather than of public discourse and debate” (Habermas, 1974, p. 54). Robert McChesney (2015) argues that media content has become so closely linked to the desires and affairs of a few gigantic and powerful corporations, that the notion of the public has been almost completely obliterated, and replaced by a mass of consumers, whom the corporations target for profits at all costs. The result is a media system that “simply exists to provide light escapist entertainment”, especially in the developing world of the Global South, where “[countries are composed] of a modest, very fucked up class, which will never stop

being fucked. Television has the obligation to bring diversion to these people and remove them from their sad reality and difficult future” (p. 113, quoting Emilio Azcarraga Jean, the president and CEO of Mexico’s Grupo Televisa).

I posit that due to their ability to select, control, and filter media content according to their specified needs and concerns, rather than have media fare dictated to them by the dominant classes, social media users in general, and Facebook groups composed of subordinate classes in particular, have the potential to stem the tide of the above-described mind-numbing tendency, and to cultivate and nurture countervailing discourses. Recent scholarship suggests this to be the case.

George Ogola (2015) found for example that social media in Kenya, particularly Twitter, can create “a heteroglossic text and space” in a media landscape otherwise dominated by a “duopoly” of the country’s biggest media houses. He studied how citizens are using Twitter in Kenya to contest the norms of the establishment media and public sphere, and found that counter-discourses challenging the hegemony of the dominant classes are being effectively articulated by Kenya’s online community, with a focus on social and political justice rather than on “generic news values” (Ogola 2015, p. 78). The result, he suggested, was that as more and more Kenyans adopt various communication technologies, “Kenya’s public sphere will undoubtedly expand even further” (p. 79). Other scholars, both in Kenya and in other countries, have come to similar conclusions.

Otieno and Mukhongo, also found that in Kenya, where the “youth have been sidelined, making them gullible to the machinations of politicians,” young people who are “active on social media have more established interest in politics than those who



are not ...[and] Facebook has provided the youth with a platform where they can access political information in formats that are appealing to them...” (2013, p. 273).

Ekdale and Tully (2014), studying in particular how the Kenyan meme *Makmende* facilitated participatory democracy, found that the Kenyan urban youth used a fictional action hero to create a meme that embodied their hopes for reclaiming their country from the old guard, which for decades has plundered public resources for their own private gain, and ethnically polarized the nation. Ekdale and Tully conclude that through this meme YouTube empowered the youth who for a long time had been denied a public voice, and whose identity had been subsumed under the dominant deification of elderly and patriarchal businessmen and politicians. I posit that the three Facebook groups in this study have the potential to empower their members in similar fashion.

Farther afield, Ndirangu Wachanga found that Ushahidi—the crowd-sourcing platform that was founded by Kenyan political activist, blogger, and Harvard-educated lawyer Ory Okolloh—had become an indispensable tool across the world, most notably during the rescue efforts following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti:

I cannot overemphasize to you what the work of the Ushahidi-Haiti has provided. It is saving lives every day. I wish I had time to document to you every example, but there are too many and our operation is moving too fast. [...] I say with confidence that there are 100s of these kinds of [success] stories. The Marine Corps is using your project every second of the day to get aid and assistance to the people that need it most. [...] Keep up the good work! You are making the biggest difference of anything I have seen out there in the open source world. (Wachanga, 2012, p. 208, quoting knightfoundation.org)

On the other hand, Kruse, Norris, and Flinchum (2017) found that social media were unlikely to promote the kind of political discourse that can revitalize the Habermasian public sphere. Defining the public sphere as a platform with “unlimited access to

information, equal and protected participation, and the absence of institutional influence, particularly regarding the economy” (p. 63), they studied Millennials (people born between 1987 and 1996) and Generation Xers (people born between 1965 and 1976) to determine if they used social media for civil discourse. Based on a study sample of 29 participants drawn from the U.S., their findings suggested that due to “(1) fear of online harassment and workplace surveillance; (2) engagement only with politically similar others; and (3) characterization of social media as a place for ‘happy’ interactions” (p. 62), respondents were unlikely to engage in political discourse. While their conclusions were measured and nuanced, without making broad generalizations, they did assert that social media were unlikely to promote civil discourse.

Kruse et al.’s study was limited to in-depth semi-structured interviews, and sought to get a “detailed understanding of what *social media*, privacy, and surveillance mean to participants in the context of their use of social media sites” (p. 67, my italics). In other words, they studied social media in general, and their research participants spoke about their experience of a wide variety of platforms, i.e., “Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, and Tumblr,” among others (p. 66). To the contrary, as the findings in this dissertation will show, Facebook groups, as social media platforms constituted expressly and unequivocally for civil discourse, can and do enhance political debate. The difference between this study and that of Kruse et al., I posit, lies in the specificity of the groups I studied; the Facebook groups in this dissertation were specifically created to promote political discourse. Furthermore, by their nature, these groups attracted membership from people with a wide array of differing political

positions, unlike the participants in Kruse et al.'s study, who engaged "only with politically similar others."

### ***A Brief Description of the Facebook Groups***

#### **Freethinkers Initiative Kenya (FIKA)**

In 2011, a group of friends came together to challenge the claims of a self-styled prophet who was asking people to give their belongings to his church because the world was slated to end in July of that year. These friends felt the need to do so because they were incensed by a trend they had seen in their society (Kenya), in which con artists would don the mantle of "Man of God", then proceed to fleece their followers of their money in the name of getting blessings in heaven. Being young and tech-savvy, the four friends thought a good way to reach a wider audience would be by going online. They thus created a website as well as a Facebook page to disseminate their anti-religion views. They called this initiative Freethinkers Initiative Kenya, and adopted the acronym FIKA. In 2014, I conducted an ethnography of FIKA as the pilot study for this dissertation.

Based in Kenya, a society which according to a poll conducted in 2012 ranked number eight as the most religious population in the world and number two in Africa (WIN Gallup, 2012), the group was predominantly concerned with questioning the religious, and other taken-for-granted, claims of the dominant public. Such claims consisted mainly of issues revolving around politics, culture, and science. In a predominantly religious environment, atheists, agnostics, secular humanists, and non-religious people in general tend to occupy a subaltern position that reports experiences

of exclusion, discrimination, and even outright persecution from the mainstream (Oppenheimer, 2014).

According to the group's chair, Solomon Marshal, FIKA started as a spoof that sought to mock the claims of the self-declared doomsday prophet. The parody ran on one of the many Data Operating Systems (DOS) forums that acted as blogs and discussion boards. The four friends who started it—two of whom were classmates studying psychology at the University of Nairobi, and the other two who were somewhat significantly older and more experienced—used the spoof to make fun of the prophet. Surprisingly, the parody drew more followers than the founders had anticipated, and after D-day came and went, and the earth still remained, the four friends realized they had going something bigger than they had anticipated. They thus decided to make it more formal and more enduring.

They first met physically as a group in March 2012, with about 12 loosely held “members” calling themselves “atheists, agnostics and people who want to know more.” The group then grew to 18 members. At some point, decided to adopt the mantle of Freethinkers, hence coining the FIKA moniker. Chief among the reasons for making the group more organized were the connections the initial members felt they had made with like-minded folks. In a world that is deeply religious and intolerant of people who question the teachings of religion, the people who formed FIKA found it quite liberating to be in the company of people who were irreligious and not ashamed or afraid of being so. One of the more senior founders opined that he did not want to lose touch with such kindred spirits. In other words, they had developed really good friendships that needed to be nurtured around common intellectual interests. They

moved the online discussions onto Facebook, which proved ideal for the kinds of ideas they were sharing.

As the meetings became more regular and members started to show their commitment in fostering what the group could do in their society, they felt the need to devise a constitution and rules of engagement. To this day, the Facebook page has attached to it a number of documents that contain the constitution, rules, minutes of the first meetings, and other texts that give a sense of how seriously the early members took this project. A handful of the regular members, about 20 to 30 in total, meet every Friday evening at a restaurant in downtown Nairobi, where hot-button issues arising from the Facebook page are debated upon amid food, drinks and good old-fashioned bonding and camaraderie. These debates, according to the members, help shape their views on many issues happening in the broader public sphere. As an example, Marshal has been severally quoted by local newspapers advancing the view that the trend of public officials using their religion as part of their public identity, and in their delivery of public service, needs to be abandoned. He has also strongly advocated for churches to stop enjoying tax exemption because they are not non-profits but do clearly make profits like other businesses. Other members have been able to use the forum to form a more solid basis for coming out as gay, bisexual, or polyamorous. Without FIKA, they said, they would not have been as bold to make these identities public. At the end of January 2018, the group's Facebook wall showed it to be composed of 18,890 members.

## **Pan-African Network (PAN)**

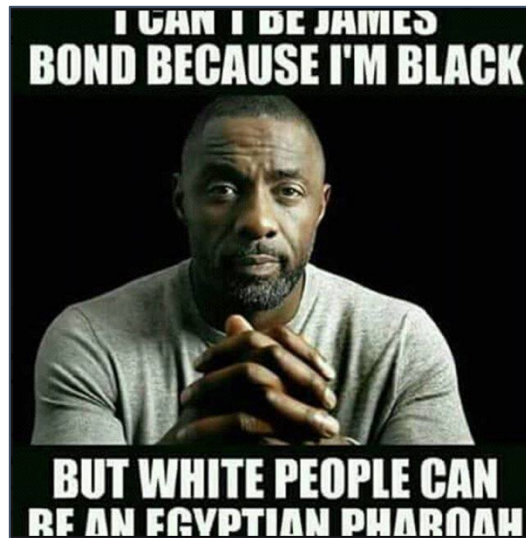
According to its Facebook wall, PAN “is a Worldwide Platform promoting the perpetual advancement of Global Africans (Africans/African descendant people/African Diaspora) and the African continent. ...dedicated to finding lasting solutions to situations affecting Global Africans, and ... tackle[s] every situation with this intent” (PAN, 2018). It, like FIKA, has a set of rules and guidelines, but these are not as detailed as those of FIKA. The group’s Facebook wall lists these rules as follows:

- 1) The PAN-AFRICAN NETWORK is a platform for knowledgeable, pragmatic think-tanks and concerned Global Africans (Africans and African descendant people) to engage in intellectual discussions on matters relevant to the progress of the Global African race (global black community).
- 2) The PAN-AFRICAN NETWORK expects every member to respect other members, including their rights to post and express their views in the context of the NETWORK’S purpose, rules and regulations.
- 3) The PAN-AFRICAN NETWORK is against use of abusive words; or posting of obscene or sexually explicit (nude, erotic, offensive etc.) images unless for educative/constructive discussions.
- 4) The PAN-AFRICAN NETWORK is NOT a platform for religion arguments. The platform is not a pulpit for preaching one’s religious doctrines. There are other platforms for religious arguments, and those who wish to engage in them are advised to join those platforms instead. We do not encourage that a member uses this platform to teach, preach or advertise their confessions or religious views, to engage in controversial discussions

or matters that are deemed derogatory. We know from experience that such discussions, advertisings, teachings and preachings among a gathering of multinationals of various spiritual, religious, cultural and social backgrounds most often tend to disunite rather than unite. We must guard against this. And we must avoid turning the platform into religions battleground.

- 5) The PANAFRICAN NETWORK is not an advertisement platform. DO NOT POST ANY UNRELATED ADVERTS ON THIS PLATFORM. LET US CONCENTRATE ON FINDING LASTING SOLUTIONS TO MATTERS THAT ARE COMMON TO US ALL AND TO ACHIEVING TANGIBLE FEATS

The majority of the content posted by members of the group highlights news and historical facts that are often neglected by the mainstream news media as well as by educational institutions such as schools, universities and museums. Figure 1 below offers a good example of the kind of posts that populate the group's wall. It illustrates the kind of counterpublic discourse the group engages in. The group members perceive the entire world where Black people are located as the mainstream dominant public; they post content that counters the opinions prevalent in that general public. At the end of January 2018, the group had a total of 17,617 members.



*Figure 1: A picture of African-British actor Idris Elba posted on PAN. The caption says: "I can't be James Bond because I am black but white people can be an Egyptian Pharaoh."*

### **Women Without Religion (WWR)**

On its Facebook wall, WWR describes itself as follows: "This group is for Women Without Religion or anyone who is interested in the lives and perspectives of Women Without Religion. We are an atheist feminist group and eschew all unsubstantiated supernatural claims, not just deities" (WWR, 2018). Annie Chant, the principal administrator of the group, told me she formed the group in 2012 because she found that all the other atheist groups she was a member of were dominated by men who often belittled women members or made explicitly misogynistic comments and jokes. Chant was of Australian nationality, as were the majority of the group's administrators. With a total of 6,924 members at the end of January 2018, WWR had 20 admins, drawn from Australia/Oceania, Papua New Guinea, Europe, and North America, which represented the majority of the locations from which members came.



WWR is a counterpublic that opposes the perceived oppression caused by the Judeo-Christian religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The members interviewed for this dissertation indicated that they found in the group a forum where they could articulate discourses that were counter to the opinions held in their home societies. The majority of those opinions, they said, were misogynistic, and the members believed the basis of this misogyny was a product of these three major world religions. An example of the mainstream public opinion against which WWR spoke included the subordination of women to men as demanded by the Bible's injunction that wives ought to obey their husbands, as the church obeys God. Another example was the shame prevalent in many societies with regard to women's sexuality; WWR posted content that celebrated women's sexual desire and expression in opposition to the view of the JudeoChristian religions that sex was a necessary evil to be engaged in solely for procreation.

### ***Research Questions and Methods***

This dissertation sought to address the question: "How can oppositional groups use social media to build and articulate identities that question the dominant public opinion about issues that have traditionally been controlled by hegemonic voices?" To tackle the question more effectively, I broke it down as follows:

#### **R1**

To what extent do these Facebook groups afford their members an affective form of community, in which they not only communicate their own ideas, needs, desires, strategies, hopes, and aspirations, independently of the

prevailing dominant society, but where they also find fellowship and sisterhood formed by their sharing common experiences, causes, and goals and objectives?

## **R2**

To what extent does belonging to and/or identifying with these groups equip members with an identity that is independent of the dominant public opinion of their society(s)?

## **R3**

In what ways does this in turn lend a voice, which can speak independently of the dominant society, to the group members? How do the community and identity furnished by these groups empower members to articulate themselves to a world they perceive wants to silence them?

I used the ethnographic methods of in-depth interviewing and participant-observation to answer these questions. I found that the majority of the group members perceived the particular group as a form of virtual community (Parks, 2012) that gave them the means to create online identities in the fashion described by Rob Cover, who argues that identity is performance of discourse (2016). I also found that the groups afforded the members a voice in the sense defined by Nick Couldry as the “skills which are necessary for anyone to give an account of themselves and others at a certain depth and with a certain freedom” (1996, p. 322). These three facilities, i.e., community, identity, and voice, in turn enabled the groups to better articulate counterpublic discourses, which helped them to expand the democratic spaces of their societies, where by democracy I mean participation of the members of a society in their own governance, or, as conceived by John Dewey, as “social cooperation” (1954).

The decision to use ethnography was informed by the method's strategic strengths in enabling the investigator to get behind the face of things, what Clifford Geertz (1973) calls the "ferret[ing] out [of] the unapparent import of things":

To generalize within cases is usually called, at least in medicine and depth psychology, clinical inference. Rather than beginning with a set of observations in attempting to subsume them under a governing law, such inference begins with a set of (presumptive) signifiers and attempts to place them within an intelligible frame. Measures are matched to theoretical peculiarities—that is, they are diagnosed. In the study of culture the signifiers are not symptoms or clusters of symptoms, but symbolic acts or clusters of symbolic acts, and the aim is not therapy but the analysis of social discourse. But the way in which theory is used—to ferret out the unapparent import of things—is the same." (Geertz, 1973, p. 25-26)

In addition, I chose to use case studies because of their ability to provide rich empirical data as instances of a phenomenon, principle, or precept. As Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) argue, case study is exceptionally good for building theory from data because it is "likely to produce theory that is accurate, interesting, and testable. Thus, it is a natural complement to mainstream deductive research" (p. 26). By comparing and contrasting three Facebook groups, I was able to trace the similarities and differences between them, and thence to reduce these similarities and differences into theoretical constructs that can be tested against other social media groups. This dissertation therefore illustrates the strengths of the qualitative methods of ethnography and case study.

### ***Plan of the Dissertation***

Chapter Two of this dissertation examines the theoretical underpinnings of the three major themes derived from the analysis of the data collected from the interviews, participant-observation of the interactions between the active members of each of the three groups, and the media content of the posts shared on the group walls. These three themes are community, identity, and voice.

Chapter Three reviews the literature on the public sphere, publics, and counterpublics, and develops the theoretical basis for how the groups serve their members as counterpublics. Chapter Four analyzes ethnography as a method as well as a methodology, examining the epistemological and ontological principles behind the technique. Chapter Five fleshes out the ways in which the groups functioned as virtual communities, Chapter Six analyzes how the group members performed individual and group identities based on the discourse generated by the content they posted, while Chapter Seven describes the forms that their voices took within the groups. Finally, Chapter Eight offers a summary and conclusion of the dissertation, arguing that all three groups functioned as affective counterpublics that allowed their members to express oppositional ideas and opinions. Chapter Eight also suggests the direction future research may take, proposing that the findings of this study can be tested against other social media groups to find out if and how community, identity, and voice become manifest in such groups.

## **CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW 1**

### **Community, Identity, and Voice**

#### ***Introduction***

This dissertation argues that journalism and political communication are essential to democracy. Taking the critical theory approach of such thinkers as Nancy Fraser and Craig Calhoun, I propose that the three Facebook groups investigated in this dissertation serve as communities that enable their members to construct identities and cultivate voices that can speak over and against the prevailing mainstream public opinion of their worlds. These three terms, community, identity, and voice, are co-equal in weight and depth. Each grows out of and simultaneously gives rise to the others.

I begin the chapter with a discussion of community, then move on to describe the concept of identity, and finish with the idea of voice.

#### ***Community***

“‘Community,’” wrote Robert Putnam, “means different things to different people. We speak of the community of nations, the community of Jamaica Plain, the gay community, the IBM community, the Catholic community, the Yale community, the African American community, the ‘virtual’ community of cyberspace, and so on” (Putnam, 2000, p. 273-274). “For many,” agrees Malcolm R. Parks “the community metaphor appears to be accepted uncritically and used without further elaboration..., and yet it is difficult to think of a social scientific concept in greater need of careful use and critical elaboration” (Parks, 2011, p. 106). Boellstorff et al. (2012) concur, noting

that in 1955, sociologist George Hillery found nearly 100 definitions of community, “and the situation has not improved” (p. 57). It is therefore imperative for researchers to clearly define what they mean by the term. This section aims to do that. I begin the section by stating my working definition of community and why I use this conception. I then review the major theorists of the concept, tracing its development over time and space.

### **Toward a Working Definition of Community**

Driskell and Lyon (2002) sought “to determine if virtual communities are indeed true communities” (p. 375) by first looking at definitions of community. Robert Park, they observed, provided the classic definition that a community requires at a bare minimum a population organized in a specific territory, essentially completely rooted in the soil it occupies, and its individual units living in mutual interdependence (p. 375). Noting that Hillery found more than 94 community definitions, they concluded that three core elements were essential: “(1) a specific place—a point crucial to the analysis of cyberspace, along with (2) common ties—perhaps the least analyzed of the three elements, and (3) social interaction—the *sine qua non* of community” (p. 375).

Driskell and Lyon point out that when sociologists speak of the loss of community, they mean that both of two things have been lost: the psychological meaning focusing on the social interaction dimension of the community, and the territorial meaning, more focused “on the specific area and the diminishing identification with place” (p. 376). Citing Tönnies’ claim that the “*Gemeinschaft*-like common ties may exist in social organizations or corporate bodies such as leagues,

fellowships, associations, or special interest groups” (p. 376), Driskell and Lyon declare that the internet offers more than ample opportunity for all manner of shared interests to lead to the formation of close-knit associations. However, like Calhoun, they remain leery of “the proposition that nonspatial virtual communities can *replace* the local place and shared space community as the primary basis for the psychological feelings of community” (p. 387, my emphasis). They conclude their analysis with the observation that at the time they were writing—the dawn of the 21st century—relationships found in Cyberspace “can *complement* the community found in the local place and in shared space, but they are poor replacements for the *Gemeinschaft*-type relationships found *in the place called The Community*” (p 387-388, first italics mine).

Seeking to provide “a renewed, but more cautious, appreciation of the concept of ‘virtual community,’” Malcolm R. Parks astutely observes that such social networking sites as MySpace and Facebook are “not communities in any singular sense, but rather function as social venues in which many different communities may form” (p. 105). Leaving the “conceptual turmoil” (p. 106) encountered by any survey of the literature on the concept of community behind, he proposes the following five recurring themes as criteria for evaluating the extent to which online groups function as virtual communities:

1. the ability to engage in collective action;
2. the sharing of information among group members in ritualized fashion and on a regular basis;
3. the larger patterns of interaction that grow out of this regularized information exchange;

4. the requirement that the group think of itself as a community;
5. and that group members identify with the community” (p. 108).

To operationalize these criteria for determining if a social networking site constitutes a virtual community, Parks used the concept of “social affordances” to determine if MySpace can function as a venue for the creation of such a community:

Wide utilization of the affordances of membership, personal expression, and connectivity would suggest that MySpace provides fertile grounds for the development of virtual communities, while limited utilization would suggest that MySpace is, whatever its other social and commercial functions, not living up to its billing as a site rich in virtual communities. (p. 111)

He admits that his findings are based on the “somewhat arbitrary” requirement that “to qualify as a member of a virtual community, an individual must have logged in within the past three months, have a personal picture, have at least two friends, and have received at least two comments from friends” (p. 116). Nonetheless, his findings suggest that “local, geographically shared connections may form a foundation for high levels of activity.” In addition, users “who have rich sets of offline connections that can be transported to MySpace are more likely to become active users and to have rich sets of online connections” (p. 117).

More importantly, for the purposes of my dissertation, Parks’ findings indicate that “the majority of people who create MySpace accounts clearly fail to visit them enough, interact enough, or make enough contacts to meet even the most minimal requirements of a ‘virtual community,’” (p. 119). Only “between 15%–25% of members were active enough, had established a sufficient identity, and had forged enough social ties to at least meet the minimal requirements for the formation of virtual communities” (p. 119). Most importantly, Parks found that the greatest difference



between highly active users of MySpace and those less engaged lay in the former's ability to gain the social affordances of community more extensively from pre-existing offline networks, especially local ones. This seems to confirm Calhoun's, and Driskell and Lyon's caution that rather than replacing geographic communities, virtual communities complement them. Indeed, Parks cites a 2009 study of Teen Second Life, which "suggests that adolescents tend to make friends with users who live in the same area offline than with users who do not" (p. 120). In addition, Parks' own findings imply that users of social networking sites (SNSs) who find more of their friends on those sites are more likely to engage more in community-oriented virtual activities than users who find fewer of their existing friends on the particular SNS.

These findings from Parks served as cautionary tale in my own analysis of the three Facebook groups in this dissertation. Parks, like other scholars before him, suggested that some measure of geographic propinquity was necessary to make virtual communities more strongly manifest the *Gemeinschaft* of community. I thus kept in mind that these Facebook groups would give their members a sense of community if they provided some way for them to interact physically. As the findings will show, the interviewees who said that they got a strong sense of community from the groups were more likely to have participated in offline group activities with other members. This is not, of course, to say that virtual community without any form of physical closeness is impossible. Rather, it is to note that such closeness gives more strength to the communal bonds between members of virtual communities.

I use the five criteria identified by Parks as my working definition of community in a general sense, and will determine in the findings chapters of this dissertation

whether the groups serve as communities for their members insofar as they display these five requirements, either from the self-perceptions of the members, or from the online interactions found on their Facebook group walls. The central thesis I posit is that these Facebook groups, acting as virtual communities, enable their members to forge and strengthen identities and voices which can speak to their status as marginalized and subaltern social groups. As noted by Aristotle in *The Politics* (1932), being human requires partnership in communication for the identification of human goods, which in turn requires participatory and deliberative democracy. Such democracy is not possible without a voice that can articulate the desires and longings, or the identities, of the individuals who belong to social groups.

### **A Brief History of “Community”**

Like the theory and practice of democracy, community can be traced back to Ancient Greece, especially to Aristotle and his idea that human beings are “political animals.” Before delving into Aristotle’s conception of what a community is, allow me to point out why I take him as my starting point: in her discussion of the theoretical underpinnings for her understanding of justice, to which I will return later in this chapter, Nancy Fraser observes that ever since Plato and Aristotle, political philosophers have wavered uneasily between the stance of the philosopher-king (Plato’s recommendation of the republic), or that of deliberative democracy (Aristotle’s recommendation) (Fraser and Honneth, 2003, p. 70-71). Like Fraser, I take the Aristotelian stance because it takes into account the historical and particular contexts of each situation, before attempting to draw general principles.

The individual was for Aristotle (1932) incomplete if deprived of *partnership* with others; in other words, humans actualize their potential only when they live together, beginning in the family, extending to the village, and culminating in the city-state, which is composed of neighboring villages. While no individual is self-sufficient, the city-state, by providing the conditions necessary for mutual association for mutual benefit, “has at last attained the limit of virtually complete self-sufficiency” (p. 9).

Aristotle used “self-sufficiency” to denote the actualization of all of man’s potentials. He based this on his ontology that everything occurs at the same time as both potency and act, for example an acorn being *actually* a *seed* and *potentially* an *oak*. Thus, a man is *actually* an *individual* who is *deficient*, and *potentially* a member of a *community* which is *self-sufficient*. The individual, in other words, is *actualized* in community.

Following in Aristotle’s tradition of describing things as act and potency, John Dewey held that the idea of democracy is “not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself...an ideal...namely, the tendency and movement of some thing which exists carried to its final limit, viewed as completed, perfected” (1954, p. 148). Humans therefore are perfected when they participate in the life of community. Dewey noted that “[f]rom the standpoint of the individual...the democratic idea in its generic social sense...consists in having a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs...” (p. 147). In other words, democracy is the condition upon which community is built, and community is the condition upon which humans depend for their lives to attain full fruition.

In his study of Dewey's idea of the Great Community, Philip Schuyler Bishop (2014) identifies six conditions as the prerequisites for a "cohesive and free community," viz. "the trust [that develops] from natural association, [the] mutual benefit [accrued by members as a consequence of belonging to the group], the possession and distribution of social knowledge, the active participation of the members in the directing of the community, the full integration of individuals, and communication through shared signs and symbols" (p. 121). Like Aristotle, Dewey maintained that freedom and individuality were made possible only in community. To be sure, rugged individualism can be a form of freedom, but it is only freedom in a negative sense, freedom *from* a heteronomous authority<sup>1</sup>; but positive freedom, the freedom *to* be what one *is*, or, in Aristotelian terms, to actualize one's potentials, is realized only in partnership with others. "No man and no mind," wrote Dewey, "was ever emancipated merely by being left alone" (1954, p. 168).

The mutual association identified by Aristotle as the foundation of community finds further ratification in Ferdinand Tönnies' concept of *Gemeinschaft*:

This direct mutual affirmation is found in its most intense form in three types of relationships: namely, (1) that between a mother and her child; (2) that between a man and a woman as a couple, as this term is understood in its natural or biological sense; and (3) that between those who recognize each other as brothers and sisters, i.e. offspring at least of the same mother. (Tönnies, 2001, p. 22)

Its counterpart, avers Tönnies, is the *Gesellschaft*, into which one goes "as one goes into a strange country" (p. 34). *Gesellschaft* is formed "mechanically" or transactionally for specifically given purposes while *Gemeinschaft* is organic and

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<sup>1</sup> Heteronomy is opposed to autonomy in that it consists of following an authority external to the individual acting as a moral agent.

natural, one being born into it, with which “one lives from birth on, bound to it in weal and woe” (p. 34). The relationships among the individuals who form these two are organized into two different forms of social composition. *Gemeinschaft* is organized into family life, rural village life, and town life. One partakes of family life with all of one’s sentiments, enters rural village life with all of one’s mind and heart, and participates in town life with one’s entire conscience (p. 231).

On the other hand, *Gesellschaft* is organized into city life, national life, and cosmopolitan life. City life is governed by convention, and it is determined by one’s intentions, as opposed to family life which is controlled by the people. National life is controlled by legislation, as opposed to rural village life with its folkways and mores; the real controlling agent, argues Tönnies, is the state for national life, while for rural village life, it is the commonwealth. National life is determined by “man’s calculations” (p. 231). The opposite of the town *Gemeinschaft*, is cosmopolitan life, and it is governed by public opinion, “evolved by man’s consciousness, and its real controlling agent is the republic of scholars” (p. 231).

In his revision of Tönnies’ *Gemeinschaft* theory, sociologist Steven Brint (2001) argues that the term *community*:

suggests many appealing features of human social relationships—a sense of familiarity and safety, mutual concern and support, continuous loyalties, possibility of being appreciated for one’s full personality and contribution to group life rather than for narrower aspects of rank and achievement. (p. 1-2)

Brint notes that due to the prevalence of the inequalities of social stratification, community studies in sociology were early on unable find genuine *Gemeinschaft* even in the “most *gemeinschaft*-like institutions—families, neighborhood and school play groups, and religious organizations” (p. 6). On the other hand, however, fears of urban

anonymity and disconnection found in some of the community studies, writes Brint, are “greatly overstated.” Thus, some of the literature has indeed found that “urbanism—mental freedom, variety of opportunities, diversity of contacts, change—[is] perfectly compatible with the virtues of community—personal relations, safety, support, and belonging” (p. 6). Therefore, he continues,

communities and communal relations continue to exist in neighborhoods and small towns; in bowling and soccer leagues; in singing and book clubs; in children's play groups; in groups of men and women who make a point of seeing each other on a regular basis; among the regulars at local taverns; in the interchanges of core members of usenet groups; among the active members of churches, synagogues, and mosques; among those who are fans of a particular television show, sports team, or philosophical movement and are in sympathetic contact with their fellow partisans. (p. 8)

Brint’s conception of community is thus closer to our day and age than that of Tönnies’, a day and age marked by transience and rootlessness. The groups studied in this dissertation are composed of people who come from all over the world, all walks of life, and quite possibly from every demographic imaginable. By and large, the majority of members participate in the groups through online interactions. To be sure, at least two of the three Facebook groups have members who engage in physical meetings and face-to-face encounters. Nonetheless, the bulk of the interpersonal interactions in the groups is virtual. Therefore, a more prudent approach to understand them would most likely be one that interrogates whether they are virtual communities.

### **Virtual Communities**

Perhaps the most famous account of what constitutes a virtual community is Howard Rheingold’s 1993 book *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. He said that he wanted to address “the potential importance of cyberspace to

political liberties and the ways virtual communities are likely to change our experience of the real world, as individuals and communities” (Rheingold, 1993, p. xviii). To illustrate the sense of community created by the WELL (“Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link—a computer conferencing system that enables people around the world to carry on public conversations and exchange private electronic mail” (p. xv), he cited the case of the sub-community of the Parenting conference, where a few of the WELLites found communion when a couple’s children were sick, and others wrote to support them:

Sitting in front of our computers with our hearts racing and tears in our eyes, in Tokyo and Sacramento and Austin, we read about Lillie’s croup, her tracheostomy... and now the vigil over Lillie’s breathing and the watchful attention to the mechanical apparatus that kept her alive. It went on for days. Weeks. Lillie recovered, and relieved our anxieties about her vocal capabilities after all that time with a hole in her throat by saying the most extraordinary things, duly reported online (p. 4).

Rheingold then adopted a scheme of what constitutes the three collective goods making the WELL a sort of community, as proposed by Marc Smith, then a graduate student in sociology at the University of California at Los Angeles: “social network capital, knowledge capital, and communion” (p. xviii). By social network capital he meant “what happened when I found a ready-made community in Tokyo, even though I had never been there in the flesh,” while knowledge capital was the information he received from members of the WELL when he asked questions that required “a highly varied accumulation of expertise” (p. xxviii).

As Rheingold explained, the “Parenting conference” was an inner core of a much smaller number of the WELLites. In the pilot study for this dissertation, I found that one of the Facebook groups (the Kenyan-based Freethinkers Initiative—FIKA) had members who were more tightly knit together than the general membership. Like the

WELLites living in the San Francisco Bay Area who started getting together physically for summer picnics and winter potlucks (p. 5), an offshoot of FIKA would occasionally meet for such bonding activities as mountain climbing and camping (Gachau, 2016). The point here is that despite the foundations of the community being laid in the virtual world, physical meetings seem to be necessary to strengthen and cement the communal bonds. Indeed, Rheingold offered the following cautionary caveat in his book:

The ways I've witnessed people in the virtual community I know best build value, help each other through hard times, solve (and fail to solve) vexing interpersonal problems together, offer a model—undoubtedly not an infallible one—of the kinds of social changes that virtual communities can make in real lives on a modestly local scale. Some knowledge of how people in a small virtual community behave will help prevent vertigo and give you tools for comparison when we zoom out to the larger metropolitan areas of cyberspace. Some aspects of life in a small community have to be abandoned when you move to an online metropolis; the fundamentals of human nature, however, always scale up. (p. xxxii)

Writing in 1998, Craig Calhoun, on the other hand, held that it was too early “to make conclusive arguments about a technology as rapidly developing as computer-mediated communications” (Calhoun, 1998, p. 381). While these new technologies offer a wide array of opportunities for adventure and transformation at the level of personal identity and social psychology, Calhoun argued that the Internet does not seem to foster sustained participatory democracy. Thus, although the web offers the possibility to change society dramatically, for Calhoun, it does only little in producing the kind of radical democracy it has been touted for. It does not do much to counteract trends toward urbanization, or to “empower the poor, weak, and dispersed against the rich, powerful, and well-positioned.” What it does a lot of is enhance extant power structures (p. 381).



Calhoun noted instances when the internet is used to enhance popular mobilization, for example by calling international attention to the resistance of the Zapatistas in Mexico against military and corporate incursions into Chiapas, rallying China's exiled democracy activists, and linking environmentalists on every continent. But he saw it as on the overwhelmingly negative side, used for "surveillance and data management by law enforcement agencies and state regulators, by giant corporations distributing production and avoiding unions, and by capitalist communications media which have grown more, not less, centralized" (p. 382). The web, Calhoun therefore cautioned, is most empowering when it facilitates local "offline" groups that are already active on the ground, rather than when it is fashioned as a substitute for the real thing. Calhoun maintained that like other technologies, the Internet chiefly makes it easier for people to do things they were already doing. Even more, and perhaps more importantly, it allows those with the resources, such as corporations and governments, to do what they already had planned to do to expand their power. While it provides capacity for grassroots organizations to communicate more widely with their supporters, it also affords corporations more globalized production and profiteering, thus enabling global capitalism, instead of uniting workers of the world in an effective manner.

Calhoun therefore found the label of "virtual community" to be misleading, and "in a sense an overstatement" (p. 383). Rheingold himself said that the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (The WELL) felt like an authentic community for him because it was based in his day-to-day physical world. WELLites who lived far from the home base of the San Francisco Bay Area could not effectively participate in the face-to-face interactions of the local networks. Calhoun cited his own "sociological community" as

being made possible largely by his ability to meet his network of sociologists throughout the US at conferences and conventions. Without such encounters, where he would physically meet friends and colleagues a great part of the sense of community between them would have been lost. The web here acted as a facilitator for people who were otherwise, like the WELLites, geographically dispersed to maintain communication in between physical meetings, through keeping in touch via email and listservs, and by exchanging data. “Most of everyone’s e-mail, for example,” explained Calhoun, “is not with strangers but with those whom they know directly in the context of their work, and secondarily with friends and family” (p. 383).

Consequently, rather than providing for the “community without propinquity” introduced by Melvin Webber in 1963, Calhoun said, computer mediated communication allows users to choose what the particular propinquity they want is. Calhoun gave the example of discussion groups which may transcend the geographic community specifically by linking people with similar interests, rather than by forging links among people who are sharply different. “Indeed,” he explained, “one of the distinctive—and in many ways attractive—features of Internet groups is participants’ capacities to control the presentation of their identities ... keeping [certain undesirable] aspects of themselves entirely backstage” (p. 385). In comparison, quite a number of the interview participants for this dissertation said that the anonymity offered by social media emboldened them to say things they would otherwise be shy to say in face-to-face interactions. In addition, members of such Internet groups are able to choose which “communities without propinquity” are more in tandem with their own cultural and aesthetic preferences.

Linda Steiner defines community as “a valued, social process directed at maintenance of culture over time” (Steiner 2010, p. 67). A community thus needs to be historical, because culture cannot be built except over an extended period of time, during which the members of the community build an identity of common practices, shared rituals, and, above all, a trust that addressing and communicating their differences and heterogeneity will forge a sense of responsibility for each other, rather than cause them to see one another as means for the achievement of their own individual ends. This resonates with Alasdair MacIntyre’s “communities of care,” in which “each of us achieves our good only if and insofar as others make our good their good by helping us...become ourselves the kind of human being...who makes the good of others her or his good” (MacIntyre, 1999, p. 108). Steiner does not appeal to the kind of radical dependency invoked by MacIntyre as necessary for us to recognize our need for others, but his theory is echoed in her call for the acknowledgement and deliberation on the “difference” and “otherness” of those who are not similar to *us* so that we can be in genuine *communion* with them. A community that glosses over difference cannot lay genuine claim to the term.

### ***Identity***

In this section, I will analyze the concept of human identity as it pertains to the ultimate goal of each individual to attain self-fulfillment by “having a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs” (Dewey, 1954). By identity therefore I do not mean the identity politics which campaigns for the elimination of discriminatory practices that refuse to recognize the full humanity of people based on their race, gender, sexual orientation, religion,

national origin, age, or any other “generalized social categories.” Rather, I mean the participation of group members in group activities that make them identify with the group. One therefore, for example, identifies as a WELLite insofar as she logs into the WELL, checks up on what other WELLites are doing, how they are, converses with them, participates in the activities they are engaged in, and feels she is a part of the group, and the group a part of her.

I use philosophical and communications literature on identity to arrive at an understanding of how the social groups studied in this dissertation provide their members with a sense of identity. Because people now more than ever before increasingly belong to and identify with a wide array of different groups, some sharply, and at times even completely contradictory, to others, I eschew the social-psychology approach of analyzing and understanding social identity as basically the positing of “out groups” against “in groups.” Instead, I depend on conceptualizations of identity from various authors and theorists across the globe, mainly from scholars of communications and the media, but also from such political theorists as Craig Calhoun, Nancy Fraser, and Kwame Anthony Appiah.

I begin with a review of Rob Cover’s conception of identity online as performative. Cover’s definition of identity as performance of discourse provides the tools I use to interrogate the ways the Facebook groups in this dissertation give their members an identity. I then examine some basic definitions of the concept of identity. Third, I review Fraser’s critique of identity politics to illustrate how a psychological conception of identity claims is limited and not effective enough to yield political understandings and outcomes. This leads me to an examination of feminist theory as it

pertains to identity, especially in the work of Sandra Harding and Nancy Hartsock. Finally, since two of the Facebook groups under study are on the main African, and since my background has its roots in Africa, I conclude with some African(ist) conceptions of identity.

### **Identity as Performativity**

Rob Cover conceives identity as performative: he says that subjectivity online is performed through the management of the user's profile, and through identification with others. Cover maintains:

[T]here is no core, essential self from which behaviors and actions—both offline and online—emerge, only a set of performances that retroactively produce an illusion of an inner identity core: the actor behind the acts is an effect of those performances. (Cover, 2012, p.180)

I argue, however, that belonging to clearly defined Facebook groups and identifying with the philosophies promulgated by these groups adds an extra layer of coherence to members' identities. Thus, I add the layer of identity borrowed from John Dewey, as "having a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs" (Dewey, 1954).

Following Cover, I posit that the members of these Facebook groups perform their identities through the following activities:

1. Management of one's own profile [as a member of the particular Facebook group], which includes:
  - a) choosing particular categories of common identity co-ordinates or demarcations, as well as providing and deciding on particular information that in the act of deciding is a performance of identity: age, gender, relationship status, indicators of sexual orientation/identity, and making biographical statements;

- b) citing and repeating discursively given norms, categories, stereotypes, labels and expressions leading to a performance of the self
- c) constituting the self in discourse, which can be reconstituted or reconfigured differently in the encounter with different, new, imaginative discursive arrangements; and
- d) performing identity within a narrative of coherence over time, motivated by a cultural demand or imperative that we are coherent, intelligible and recognizable to others in order to allow social participation and belonging.

2. Identifying in a relational sense with various members of the group as well as with networks affiliated with the groups (Cover, 2012, p. 179).

Cover's conception is based on Judith Butler's theory that gender is performative (Butler, 1993). By this, Butler means that gender identity is constituted by socially constructed roles, rather than by biologically fixed female or male natures. Identity is therefore a product of the performance of social roles: heteronormativity prescribes the ways that masculinity or femininity ought to be performed, and the bodies of men and women materialize these norms by enacting them. In other words, heterosexual norms of behavior are a form of "a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce—*demarcate, circulate, differentiate*—the bodies it controls" (Butler, 1993, p. 1, my italics). Central to this theory, therefore, is discourse, which is to say, the "demarcation, circulation, and differentiation" of the identities produced and controlled by social norms.

Butler demonstrates the power of social norms by invoking the "abject beings" who are produced by "the heterosexual imperative [which] enables certain sexed identifications and forecloses and/or disavows other identifications" (p. 3). These identities that are foreclosed and disavowed are abject because they are not yet subjects;

they are excluded from the norm and denied agency and autonomy by heterosexual hegemony, since they are the thing that the subject *must not be* so as to be. This recalls Warner's definition of counterpublic discourse as that which is regarded "with hostility or a sense of indecorousness" (Warner 2002, p. 119). Butler argues that the materialization of a particular sex demands a continual disavowal of that which it is *not*. But, ironically, this constant disavowal exposes the subject's norms as "phantasms" that can be contested, thus providing the foundations for a critical theory that can empower the abjected identities (Butler, 1993, p. 4).

In the next subsection I review some basic definitions of identity.

### **Basic Definitions of "Identity"**

"A crucial aspect of the project of subjectivity," wrote Craig Calhoun (1994), "is identity. Identity turns on the interrelated problems of self-recognition and recognition by others" (p. 20). He explained that one of the reasons why problems of recognition are integral to identity is because discourses sustained by society about who we *can* and *should* be "inevitably shape the way we look at and constitute ourselves" (p. 20). These problems "are expressed in and give rise to 'identity politics'" (p. 21). And they are "politics" because the separation of the private from the public, the personal from the social, has been shown to be false and a tool for power used by the dominant groups to marginalize the subordinate ones.

Identity politics seek recognition, where those asserting a certain identity call upon the response of "other people, groups and organizations (including states)" (p. 23). This clamor for identity and difference can often go too far, however, cautions Calhoun, resulting in what he calls "soft relativism." By rejecting categorical identities,

groups that engage in identity politics legitimately reject stereotypes and pigeonholes, and rather appeal to the multiplicity of identities we all possess. While the insistence on sameness can be repressive, it is sometimes necessary to find a common frame of reference for groups seeking to assert their difference from the rest. Thus, sometimes, it turns out to be better to bring disparate identities together under one common rubric for the sake of overthrowing repression. A good example of this is the LGBTQI movement, which started out with only gays and lesbians, who even by themselves could not and still cannot overcome the differences among themselves.

Identity is fraught with almost irreconcilable tensions between sameness and difference, Calhoun says, and that identity is always an ongoing project that is never complete. One can for example be a black feminist woman who will most likely be castigated for being feminist by male members of the black community in a racist society (hooks and West, 1991), just as the various parties that fought against Apartheid in South Africa were all black but identified differently as either the ANC, the Inkatha Freedom Party, or other. With all these tensions, concludes Calhoun, “acting on certain identities must frustrate others” (p. 28).

In agreement with this, Kwame Anthony Appiah writes:

One problem with ‘identity’: it can suggest that everyone of a certain identity is in some strong sense *idem*, i.e., the same, when, in fact, most groups are internally quite heterogeneous, partly because each of us has many identities. The right response to this problem is just to be aware of the risk. (Appiah, 2006, p. 15)

Appiah proposes a theory of identity to address this problem. He suggests that if a certain identity is labeled X, then it will have certain criteria of ascription which makes us *call certain people X* and others not X. This nominalist account of identity also



requires that people labeled X identify with the properties of an X, so that someone who is called an X *feels like an X*. The third requirement for a nominalist definition of identity is that people who are X and identify as X are *treated as X* because they are X.

Appiah argues that “everybody has—or, at least, should have—a great variety of decisions to make” and that these choices belong ultimately to the person whose life it is (p.18). But the claim that individuals should be able to determine the course of their own lives should not be confused with individualism, because “individuality isn’t produced in a vacuum; rather, the available social forms and, of course, our interactions with others help shape it” (p. 18)

[I]t is “through a social union...based on the individual wants and capacities of its members, that each is enabled to participate in the rich collective resources of the others.” Liberals realize that we need other people: respect for individuality is not an endorsement of individualism. (p. 18, quoting Wilhelm von Humboldt)

The recognition of identities demanded by such historically oppressed groups as blacks, women, gays, lesbians, and Jews is an effort to expand the “available social forms” that can be taken up by members of society so as to attain *Eudaimonia*<sup>2</sup>. But Appiah cautions against a pure “politics of recognition” because, as he noted in the beginning of his discussion, we all possess many different identities, and to reduce someone to only one of these has the potential to lead to more, instead of less, oppression. Appiah gives the example of women and blacks in the United States fighting for the franchise,

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<sup>2</sup> *Eudaimonia* is a term used by various philosophers to mean “happiness” or “well-being”; Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, however, argues that the term means “the best activities of which man is capable,” therefore implying that it is tied up with a person’s identity. Appiah uses the term in Aristotle’s sense, hence suggesting that a person is more likely to “flourish as a human being” when she has optimal “social forms” against which to construct an identity that more fully corresponds to the achievement of her *best* activities.

which would have been just even if divorced from their identities as blacks or women, and that of gays and lesbians fighting for the equal right to marry and serve in the military, which again is a social good regardless of the identity of the person seeking it. Thus:

Even though my ‘race’ or my sexuality may be elements of my individuality, someone who insists that I organize my life around these things is not an ally of individuality. Because identities are constituted in part by norms of identification and by treatment, there is no clear line between recognition and a new kind of oppression. (p. 21)

Todd Gitlin observes that the “cluster of recognitions” that constitutes identity politics “seems to answer the questions: Who am I? Who is like me? Whom can I trust? Where do I belong?” (1994, p. 153). Although Gitlin is not sympathetic to identity politics, as will become evident below, these questions, he explains, are vital to being human. They are more than mere sensibility or mind-set. They are a quest for belonging and meaning, for community and voice. Without an identity, one is silenced, lacks a voice, cannot be seen or heard. As the findings of this dissertation’s pilot study revealed, the members of one of the groups (FIKA) “are acutely aware of being on the margins by their espousal of contrarian views—a stance that entails more than merely taking a different tack from the mainstream, *but one that is actually born of an irrevocable state of being.*” (Gachau, 2016, p. 75).

Similarly, the sense of membership sought by identity politics has become a necessity because “other people seem to have chosen up sides, and worse, where they approach you—even disrespect you—as a type, it seems necessary to choose, or find, or invent, one’s strength among one’s own people” (Gitlin, 1994, p. 153). However, Gitlin is quick to note that these self-same memberships, which at first sought to

deconstruct a fixed definition of humanity, are now ossifying into social groups with essentialized identities. He cautions that what were once enclaves that offered their members a place where they could find their voices are becoming separatist self-enclosed worlds that no longer want to converse with the rest of the wider world.

### **Mutual Recognition: Identity vs Status**

Nancy Fraser identifies with what she calls the “feminism of the 99%,” by which she means the opposite of the current American feminism characterized by “a dangerous liaison with neoliberalism” (Fraser, 2017). She argues that feminism has become a corporate lean-in feminism that seeks to get “a small smattering of women into the corporate hierarchy” while the feminism she has always believed in seeks to abolish the corporate hierarchy altogether. This resonates with Walter Benn Michaels’ contention that identity politics is a zero-sum game (Michaels, 2010), and with Gitlin’s campaign for a return to the radical Marxism that puts the highest premium not on the politics of difference but on the politics of commonality.

Fraser observes that in the theorizing about social justice, the paradigm of redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor, from the Global North to the South, and from the owners of capital to workers is increasingly being challenged by the paradigm of recognition. The latter draws on “newer visions of a ‘difference-friendly’ society, [that] seek a world where assimilation to majority or dominant cultural norms is no longer the price of equal respect” (Fraser, 2001, p. 21). These two paradigms, she continues, have increasingly become so polarized that many scholars from each divide over that social justice must be tied to either one or the other but not to both. The result is a case where one must adopt either class politics or identity politics (p. 22).

Class politics is based on the view that justice is an issue of morality, which above-cited Appiah says “includes principles about how a person should treat other people” (Appiah, 2006, p. 17, quoting Dworkin, 2000). Fraser distinguishes questions of justice from questions of the good life (2001, p. 22). Justice, she explains, draws from the liberal tradition and is concerned with morality—translated as doing what is right—whose proponents say trumps the claims of ethics—translated as what different people and cultures define as the good. “Right,” in other words, is superior to “good,” because the former is concerned with universally binding principles that treat all human beings as of equal moral worth, while the latter is historical and specific to time and clime.

### **Feminist Standpoint Theory**

Now, I will consider identity through the lens of feminist standpoint theory (FST), mainly because a large part of the data collected for this dissertation is from and about women, but also because FST provides “less false accounts” of the world (Steiner, 2012). FST stands against the hierarchical dualism of the ostensibly “objectively neutral” epistemological viewpoint of the natural sciences (Hartsock, 1987), the same kind of hierarchy that Fraser earlier said she is opposed to. As Hartsock noted:

The construction of the self in opposition to another who threatens one’s very being reverberates throughout the construction of both *class society* and the masculinist world view and results in a deep going and *hierarchical dualism*. First, the male experience is characterized by the duality of concrete versus abstract. Material reality as experienced by the boy in the family provides no model and is unimportant in the attainment of masculinity. Nothing of value to the boy occurs with the family, and masculinity becomes an *abstract ideal* to be achieved over the opposition of daily life. Masculinity must be attained by means of opposition to the concrete world of daily life, by escaping from contact with the female world of the household into the masculine world of public life. This experience of two worlds, one valuable, if abstract and deeply unattainable, *the other useless and demeaning*, if concrete and necessary, lies

at the heart of a series of dualisms—abstract/concrete, mind/body, culture/nature, ideal/real, stasis/change. And these dualisms are overlaid by gender: only the first of each pair is associated with the male. (p. 169, my italics)

As Linda Steiner explains, Sandra Harding, one of the founders of FST, “goes beyond the usual challenges to value-free neutrality, to assert that scientists, and, for that matter, some philosophers, are blind to their own ethnocentrism and sexism” (Steiner, 2001, p. 262). She points out that everyone, including scientists, always and everywhere, operate from a value-laden standpoint, and that FST, unlike the androcentric European/Western science of the last two millennia, acknowledges this fact, but at the same time seeks to be inclusive and *consciously* intersects with race, national culture, sexual orientation, among other embodied experiences. More importantly, FST rejects the claims to universalism found in mainstream knowledge, and “insists on the significance and particularity of contexts” (p. 263).

The most distinctive point about identity that FST makes is not so much that what one can know is related to one’s identity (p. 263), but that the said identity comes with certain experiences that strongly influence people’s perceptions of the world. Thus, FST proposes to use the experiences of women as a vantage point for making knowledge claims about the world, which claims the identities of men would not easily have access to precisely because of the experiences attendant to those identities. This vantage point is not meant to imply women’s epistemic claims are more privileged or more real than those of men; rather, what it does is recognize that “[a]s a consequence of their subjugation, women, as compared to men, have less interest in ignorance” (p. 264).

“A standpoint is an achievement that a community struggles for” (p. 264). It is not *given*. It is not static. It is not automatic. It comes through a conscious wrestling with the powers that be to reveal what is claimed as reality by the dominant group as merely another position of interest among many. Thus, the oppositional Facebook groups examined in this dissertation can be considered to be looking for an epistemological standpoint that aims to show “the falsity or unjust political consequences of [the] material and conceptual practices” of the dominant groups (p. 264). These social media groups are defining their own identities in opposition to what their dominant societies say about them.

### **Africanist Perspectives on Identity**

As a black African studying three social groups, of which one is Kenyan, and another identifies as African, I am behooved to examine African and Africanist conceptions of identity. Thus, this subsection reviews some literature about identity written by Africans. Simon Gikandi (2002), Robert Schirmer Professor of English at Princeton University, notes:

One is as likely to come across Santeria worship in Miami as in Havana. One can watch and enjoy reruns of *Dallas* in Dallas and in the highlands of Kenya. In these circumstances, it doesn't seem to make sense to argue that there is a homological relationship between nations and cultures. (p. 638)

Gikandi's point is that as globalization spreads its tentacles to all four corners of the globe, it is well-nigh impossible to locate people's identity in their geographical locations, or even in their cultural or material circumstances. Postcolonial scholars laud “the articulation and enunciation of ‘a global or transnational imaginary and its cosmopolitan subjectivities’” (p. 629, citing Bhabha, 1996). But Gikandi points out

that people who are materially deprived, for instance Africans who live in perpetual poverty, are drawn to the same Eurocentrism that is seen as the cause of the selfsame privation. He gives the example of two Guinean boys whose dead bodies were found in the cargo hold of a plane in 1998: they had written a letter addressed to Europe as the only continent that could save them from the poverty and war by appealing to the ideals of the Enlightenment:

We call upon your graciousness and solidarity to help us in Africa. Our problems are many: war, sickness, hunger, lack of education. We beseech you to excuse us for daring to write this letter to you, important people whom we truly respect. It is to you, and to you only, that we can plead our case. (p. 630)

In like manner, a handful of the vocal members of the groups investigated in this dissertation see the universalism of a colonial Eurocentric view of “civilizing the native” as the solution to the material problems that plague the Global South. On the one hand, Africanist liberationists see the celebration of local cultures and identities as the antidote to hegemonic universalism, on the other, local members of materially deprived cultures see their own cultures as part of the problem.

## ***Voice***

This dissertation is about communication, dialogue, and voice. For people to have “a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which [they] belong” (Dewey, 1954) they must be able “to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right and the wrong” (Aristotle, 1932, p. 11 ), so as to form “an assembly in which all may hear and speak” (Depew and Peters, 2001). This requires voice. I posit that the Facebook groups studied here provide their members with a voice that can articulate their experiences, hopes, fears, desires,

needs, accomplishments, and vision. In this section, I review literature that addresses how communities develop a voice arising from their members, but more especially how marginalized and subaltern groups can speak to power and against the oppression they face from dominant groups. I begin with an explanation of what I understand “voice” to be.

### **What is Voice?**

I use this term to mean “the ability to speak on one’s own behalf,” as explicated by David Owen’s reading of Stephen Cavell in the following passage:

...Kant’s essay “Answering the Question: What Is Enlightenment?” begins by defining enlightenment as “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity,” where “immaturity” (*Unmündigkeit*) refers to the fact that the immature (*Unmündige*) are incapable of relying on their own understanding and, consequently, rely on a guardian (*Vormund*) to judge on their behalf.... “The common root [of *Vormund* and *Unmündig*]*—Mund* (mouth)—indicates that the underlying meaning of *unmündig* is being unable to speak on one’s own behalf. For that purpose, one has need of a *Vormund*, a legally sanctioned ‘mouthpiece’ to stand in front of (*vor*) him—or her—as official spokesman.” *Self-knowledge and self-government are inextricably interwoven with finding and exercising one’s own moral voice.* (Owen, 1999, p. 583, my emphasis)

This is why the three concepts of community, identity, and voice are treated as of equal weight and substance as each other throughout this dissertation.

The importance of speech in democracy is well captured in Stanley Cavell’s observation that

to speak for oneself politically is to speak for the others with whom you consent to association, and it is to consent to be spoken for by them—not as a parent speaks for you, i.e., instead of you but as someone in *mutuality* speaks for you, i.e., speaks your mind. (Cavell, 1979, p. 23, as quoted by Owen, 1999, p. 586, my italics)

This means that we enter into political community by mutual agreement with others as autonomous and mature individuals, seeking our own self-fulfillment



in the only place where we can find it. Thus, the social contract of government by consent of the governed means membership in a political partnership that recognizes others have consented to this government with me, and that because I am responsible for this government, I am answerable for it. Democracy thus demands that the members of a political community should speak for their government just as their government should speak for them.

This brings me back to the note by Steiner that political activity involves way more than political debate and voting (Steiner, 2010). It involves claiming a political voice with which one can speak for and on behalf of others. But, as Stephen Mulhall (1994, quoted by Owen, 1999) explains, claiming such a voice also demands that one allows others to speak for one. In other words, a political voice depends on mutual representation for mutual benefit.

Owen further argues that speaking for others does not always have to be in assent with them. “To dissent is still to exercise one’s political voice and, thereby, to speak for others,” (Owen, 1999, p. 587). This resonates with the point raised by Steiner in the “community” section earlier in this chapter, where she said that we must be willing to listen to those who are different from us, so that we may be in genuine community with them. Democracy is continually negotiated and renegotiated, and as such, then, it requires that its partners in interaction question whether the partnership is still mutually beneficial. If one party feels shortchanged, then she must speak up, she must raise her political voice, not only for herself but for the general good of the polis. Owen expounds on this point as follows:

In other words, it is through the exercise of one's political voice that one discovers (ongoingly) where one stands politically (the limits of that to which one can assent) and how one stands politically in relation to others (the depth and extent of one's agreement with others). (p. 587)

Thus, to have a voice is to be able to speak for oneself as a mature autonomous adult, and to have a political voice is to be able to speak with *and* for others with whom one is in community.

To operationalize this definition of voice for the purposes of examining how the Facebook groups in this dissertation give their members voices to speak for themselves, I take Nick Couldry's concept of voice as "the practice of giving an account of oneself, and the immediate conditions and qualities of that process" (Couldry, 2010, p. 3). By this, he means the telling of a story, a narrative, about one's life and one's experience of the world. Neoliberalism, however, imposes a politics that devalues voice and reduces everything to market principles. Couldry rejoins that neoliberalism is hegemonic for this precise reason of reducing everything to only one narrative, that of the market (2010). All our stories, in other words, are supposed to be reducible to the rationale of the free market economy, which renders us voiceless, because we cannot tell our own unique life stories except only if they toe the line of the market.

In opposition to this totalizing effect of the market hegemony, Couldry proposes that for voice to serve as the "skills which are necessary for anyone to give an account of themselves and others at a certain depth and with a certain freedom" (1996, p. 322), certain general principles are required:

1. *Voice is socially grounded*, in the sense conveyed by Alasdair MacIntyre when he wrote that "the narrative of anyone's life is part of an interlocking set of narratives" (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 218).

2. *Voice is a form of reflexive agency*, by which Couldry means the persons telling their life's stories do so in Dewey's conception of democracy as social cooperation; we need to recognize that the narratives we make of our lives are *our* own (agency), and at the same time a product of our interaction (reflexive) with *others*, over time.
3. *Voice is an embodied process*, which means that every voice is uniquely found in a concrete material life of the person telling the story of her life. Thus, while voice arises from social processes as stated in (1) above, it must be embodied in a particular individual life, with all its internal as well as external diversity, with all the contingencies peculiar to the individual's life history.
4. *Voice requires a material form which may be individual, collective, or distributed*. Couldry gives W.E.B. Dubois's example of the "double consciousness" of the "souls of black folks", who must see themselves through the eyes of white others, to illustrate how voice takes a collective material form. It can also take a distributed form when, for example, it occurs as a process generated across networks, especially such online networks as the Facebook groups in this study.
5. *Voice can be denied by voice-denying rationalities*, such as those of the market economy, or, in extreme cases, those of totalitarian regimes, brought into the worst form by Nazism, which organized "resources on the explicit basis that some individuals' voice and life had no value" (Couldry, 2010, p. 10).

In the findings section of this dissertation, I will use these five principles from Couldry to explore how FIKA, PAN, and WWR give their members tools to tell the stories of their lives as members of these Facebook groups.

## **CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW 2**

### **The Public Sphere, Publics, and Counterpublics**

#### ***Introduction***

This dissertation advances the thesis that social media groups, especially those formed and sustained through Facebook, offer their members sites in which to develop communities, through which they construct and articulate voices and identities. In particular, I study Facebook-based communities whose identities are explicitly counter to the dominant public opinion of their societies. These groups are particularly concerned with the promotion and enhancement of participatory democracy.

One of the key components of democracy as conceived by Enlightenment thinkers is that the state is constituted for the general good of citizens, as determined by self-same citizens acting as a public body, rather than as a tool in the service of a monarch (Habermas, 1989). The citizens act as a public body “when they confer in an unrestricted fashion,” wrote Habermas (1974, p. 49), meeting in that “realm” he called the public sphere, where public opinion is formed through deliberation on the issues that matter to all the citizens in general, under the auspices of the freedoms of association and assembly.

In this chapter’s three sections, I will review concepts and literature that address democratic theory via the lens of public deliberation. The first section analyzes the idea of the public sphere as understood and described by Jürgen Habermas; the second one reviews Michael Warner’s definition of publics and counterpublics; the third section appraises examples and incarnations of these concepts around the world. The overall

theme is converse to Habermas' conclusion that "the interweaving of the public and private realm [in social welfare democracy] ... leads to a kind of 'refeudalization' of the public sphere" (Habermas, Lennox, and Lennox, 1964, p. 54). Instead, I argue that participatory democracy requires multiple and competing publics if all adult members of society are to have a just and equal share of public goods. Therefore, what Habermas calls interest groups in "competitions which assume the form of violent conflict" (p. 54) turn out to be counterpublics that can speak to the hegemonic dominance of the mainstream public. My basic premise is that a dominant mainstream public *does* exist, both locally in each place where the Facebook groups are found, as well as globally.

This chapter, therefore, examines the concept of the public sphere, publics, and counterpublics.

### ***The Habermasian Public Sphere, and its Critics***

Habermas traced the history of the public sphere to the privatization of the princely court in Europe, and the advent of the market economy of capitalism. In feudalism, the state served the monarch, and power was exercised on the people for the sake of the prince. Everything existed for the maintenance and expansion of the monarch's power. The idea of a private realm separate from the general will of the prince was non-existent. Goods and wealth all belonged to the court. Only with the Protestant Reformation, followed by the Enlightenment, did individuals start to matter; only then did people begin to realize that they existed as individuals independent from the general society. And only then did they start to identify the work of their hands, and its product (wealth), with themselves, thus discovering the concept of private property. Indeed, scholars of oral society, such as Jack Goody (1996), and scholars who study the

implications of the development of writing and print, such as Elizabeth Eisenstein (1979), say that both capitalism and the very conception of the individual as separate from a community, family, or society, depended on writing and the printing press.

Once wealth became privatized, the people realized that the state ought to exist for the administration of public goods, i.e., the things and issues that were held in common between and among private citizens. These private citizens needed to agree on the administration of public goods and affairs. This they did by deliberating freely and communicating the results of the deliberations to the general society and as advice to the state, which in turn would enact the outcome of these deliberations as public policy. Habermas called the results of this deliberations public opinion, the process of deliberation public reason, and the sphere of deliberation the public sphere.

The public sphere thus understood is a place where the citizens of a nation, country, city, or other territorially bound “political community,” come together to deliberate on issues that matter to them all. It is neither the state nor the market, neither government nor the economic realm. It has to be free from the coercive force of the state, and from the buying and selling found in the market place. Ideally, it is a purely discursive arena where all citizens meet as equals to discuss issues that are common to them all. The public opinion generated through it is communicated via the mass media for the enactment of the policies proceeding from it so as to attain a general will that reflects the general consensus of the people. Journalism should therefore be at the heart of democracy, and should be the means by which different and varying members of the citizenry gain access to the public sphere, to have their needs, views, voices, and

aspirations heard and addressed by the state. More than merely publicizing what the state says, the media should also speak for all members of the public.

Nancy Fraser (1990) argued that contrary to the Habermasian conception of a single bourgeois public sphere as the best model for advancing democracy, in stratified societies, social compositions that allow “contestation among a plurality of competing publics” are better at furthering the principle of participatory democracy (p. 66). Habermas claimed that the proliferation of publics in late capitalism—what he termed “the social welfare state”—transformed the liberal public sphere from a rational discursive arena, with “the coherence created by bourgeois social institutions and a relatively high standard of education” (1974, p. 54), into a field of competition for conflicting interests among various social groups. Where he saw a deterioration of democracy due to this “incoherent” public sphere, Fraser saw the opportunity for subordinated groups to come together to form their own discourses away from the hegemonic influence of the dominant public.

Even more fundamentally, Fraser’s critique of Habermas emphasized that the bourgeois public sphere was not *the* public, as imagined by Habermas. In addition to the impracticality of bracketing out social inequalities, a single public made it impossible to include such subordinate social classes as women, peasants, workers, and other non-bourgeois masculine persons from that sphere. Fraser gave the example of faculty meetings where men would speak more and were heard more than women as a result of being part of a masculinist sexist culture, to illustrate the ways in which dominant groups override the desires, voices, objectives, and strategies of subordinate groups. A society with multiple public spheres is more conducive for democracy than

one where there is only one public sphere. Furthermore, Habermas was wrong to assume that these multiple publics came about with the transformation of liberal democracy into a “welfare state”. Fraser argued that alternative public arenas co-existed alongside the comprehensive bourgeois one, as shown by the revisionist historical works of Mary Ryan, Geoff Eley, and Rita Felski.

These histories critique Habermas’s idealization of liberal democracy, with its dominant white male bourgeois public, and show that subordinated groups formed their own counterpublics for the creation of discourses that were more suited to their needs, experiences, and desires. As Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge observed, the bourgeois public sphere derived “its entire substance from the existence of owners of private property” (1993, p. 10). By participating in this sphere, capitalists shored up their position of socioeconomic hegemony through summoning a “public” interest that advanced their individual concerns. They used and manipulated the bourgeois public sphere as a realm for enforcing a “dominant knowledge” in contradistinction to the “subjugated knowledges” of subalterns. The interests thus addressed in the bourgeois sphere were not generalizable to society as a whole, hence they could not legitimately be said to be for the good of the entire citizenry.

“Insofar as these counterpublics emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics, they help expand discursive space,” held Fraser (p. 67). This, she said, is a good thing for democracy in stratified societies, because issues that were suppressed must now be publicly addressed. Subaltern groups in this view could no longer be subsumed under the weight of the dominant public; they formed their own publics, which spoke out and challenged the views of the dominant public. In this kind



of social arrangement, there is a multiplicity of publics, not one comprehensive public sphere. The discursive arena in which these various publics interact Fraser called the “inter-public arena,” or “the public-at-large” (p. 68).

Subaltern counterpublics in such stratified societies serve a dual purpose: deliberation and contestation. They deliberate among themselves as members of the same public, and contest ideas with the dominant publics. When they deliberate among themselves, they enclave themselves and function as “training grounds” for debate; when they contest with the wider publics, they challenge the privileges and assumptions of the dominant groups, thus serving an emancipatory function, at least potentially.

The “contestatory” nature of subaltern counterpublics makes them crucial for the advancement of democracy. Fraser gave the example of feminist counterpublics in male-dominated societies, which enhanced democracy by making their concern with domestic violence matter to everyone, not just to “what was assumed to be a fairly small number of heterosexual couples (and perhaps the social and legal professionals who were supposed to deal with them)” (p. 71). They did this by their continual communication of dissent to the widely held view that what happened in a couple’s home was a private matter, not a public one. They made what was private public, which is to say, in Fraser’s words, “of concern to everyone” (p. 71).

Another critique Fraser levelled at the bourgeois public sphere was its exclusion of “private interests.” Habermas said that the public sphere was composed of private individuals meeting to deliberate public matters, that is, matters that surpassed and were not tied to the private interests of the participants. Fraser said this kind of exclusion is true of a masculinist epistemology that labels certain social issues a priori “privaten”

hence inadmissible to the public sphere. Such issues include domestic and familial matters, which masculinism presumes belong at home, rather than in the public square. Feminism rejects this categorization, and says nothing is a priori excluded from public deliberation. The reason for such rejection is that exclusion of these matters makes them remain shrouded in the cover of masculinist dominance, where women's concerns are left at home and in private, thus propagating the supremacy of the male over the female.

Another reason for Fraser's opposition to the exclusion of certain matters from the public sphere was that they foster the suppression of the voices of subordinate groups in the economic sphere, such as workers in the work environment. By privatizing such matters into "economic" problems instead of treating them as public political problems, the people who are affected by them remain voiceless, and objectified into cogs in the impersonal machine of the economic sphere.

This critique of the Habermasian conception of the public sphere bears on the discourses the Facebook groups in this dissertation engage in, to see how they relate within themselves and with "the public-at-large." Are the groups composed of subordinated and marginalized populations? Do they engage in contestation with the dominant publics? Do they act as enclaves that provide "training grounds" for their members to build and develop their own voices independent of the wider public? Does this enclaving lead to separatism, or does it engender a strong voice that can challenge the dominant public to face realities it would otherwise wish to sweep under the carpet, and listen to voices it would rather muzzle?

But counterpublics do not have to necessarily be “constituted by essentialist notions of different group identities,” Catherine Squires pointed out in her 2002 seminal essay. African Americans for example, she showed, do not have to belong to one homogenous Black counterpublic defined by their being an oppressed racial minority. They can be members of different groups at different times, or even at the same time. In addition, members of subaltern counterpublics can also simultaneously be members of the wider dominant public sphere (p. 453). In other words, belonging to one group does not exclude one from belonging to another, with sometimes differing, even conflicting, opinions and interests. Citing Asen (2000), Squires asked us to see the “counter” in counterpublics in how they “articulate unjust exclusions from wider publics” (p. 453). Belonging to the wider public allows one to be aware of how other groups are excluded from that wider sphere, and possibly makes one better at articulating the experience of that exclusion.

A key contribution of Squires’s essay to counterpublic theory was her proposal that “one way of exploring and comparing public spheres is to concentrate on how they respond to dominant social pressures, legal restrictions, and other challenges from dominant publics and the state” (p. 457). Enclaves are one such way subaltern publics can respond to the denial of a “public voice or entrance into public spaces by dominant groups” (p. 458). An example she gave for this were the “safe spaces” Black slaves created in their heavily-monitored and -constricted slave quarters. While they did not choose these enclaves, but were forced into them, they nevertheless used them to foster dissent and resistance.

When the enclave is able “to amass resources and create new institutions,” continued Squires (p. 462), or there is “a decrease in oppression” (p. 460), hidden discourses circulating and fomenting in the safe space find a way to migrate to the wider public through what she called counterpublics. She held that the term “counterpublic” as used both in extant scholarly and lay literature had lost its precise meaning, and she intended to make it more meaningful by delineating it from the other public spheres she described and analyzed. A counterpublic in this strict sense is one that becomes vocal about the discourses that had erstwhile remained suppressed and hidden from the dominant public. She gave the example of Black newspapers as a resource for changing the prevailing view of African Americans as inferior to Whites. The advent of the Black press made it possible for enclaved ideas to be adopted in efforts to challenge the dominant stereotypes about Blacks, and to reinvent the public image of Blacks.

Finally, Squires spoke about satellite publics. These ones “are formed by collectives that do not desire regular discourse or interdependency with other publics” (p. 463). She gave the examples of the Black satellite, the Nation of Islam, which sets itself apart from the rest of America, and wants to create a “nation within a nation,” and the radical White wing group that desires to live “off the grid” so as to maintain “racial purity” and limit the reach of the government (p. 463).

Asen and Brouwer’s book, *Counterpublics and the State*, is highly relevant to the present study because it expands the concept of the public sphere beyond the confines of such geographical boundaries as the nation: “If Dewey worried that ‘there are too many publics and too much of a public concern for our existing resources to

cope with', then new communication technologies (NCTs) threaten to exacerbate this problem" (2001, p. 2). In this book, McDorman's chapter explores how the Internet presents the likely revival of the public sphere by cultivating robust counterpublic disputes to state power, in a study of "right-to-die advocates" (p. 189). His study found that perhaps the most fruitful application of NCTs is through "an alternative model that integrates traditional and on-line efforts" (p. 202). Rather than substituting the "real thing" with a "virtual community," the groups he studied supplemented and fortified their existing infrastructures by using their websites to link like-minded people across the world.

In the same volume, Catherine Palczewski examines "cyber-movements as counterpublics", writing that scholars should pay attention to the way these new social movements work to not only generate "outward rhetoric", but perhaps more importantly "what happens within a movement in terms of identity creation" (p. 166). Thus, the ways in which these Facebook groups carry out their discourses, what they say, how they say it, what is allowed to be spoken about, by whom, to whom, can reveal their nature either as counterpublics, or as whatever other sort of social grouping they may be. Palczewski's cardinal point is that cyber-movements as counterpublics do not have to engage the outside world so as to be seen as effective. Scholars, she urges, should "be willing to envision a function for the Internet beyond the ability to access political institutions" (p. 181). They should also focus on the people, issues, and concerns that occur "within" the Net, rather than "between" it. In-group rhetoric, in other words, is just as important as outward rhetoric, if not more so.

Having briefly looked at what constitutes the public sphere as Habermas understood it, and how this conception was found to be limited by key public sphere theorists, I will now review what exactly is meant by the terms “public” and “counterpublic.”

### ***Publics and Counterpublics: Defining the Terms***

In this section I will first use Michael Warner’s work to define and describe what constitutes publics and counterpublics. Then, I will draw on the work of Zizi Papacharissi on “affective publics” as a way to understand virtual publics, which I hold the Facebook groups studied in this dissertation to be. Finally, I will review examples of counterpublics from across the world.

Warner says that the people around us are generally strangers, rather than kin or comrades. “How do we recognize them as members of our world? We are related to them (and I am to you) as transient participants in common publics, potentially addressable in impersonal forms” (2002, p. 7-8). However, he avers, publics exist only as a result of their imagining. “They are a kind of fiction that has taken on life, and very potent life at that” (p. 8).

The word has come to mean something that has multiple forms, and, therefore, we now speak less about *the public* and more about multiple publics. The “publics among which we steer, or surf, are potentially infinite in number” (p. 9). However, “the idea of a public does have some kind of systematicity that can be observed in widely differing contexts and from which important consequences follow” (p. 12). Despite the various forms it takes, it does have some consistency. “The social worlds constructed

by it are by no means uniform or uncontested, but they are nevertheless marked by the form in common ways” (p. 12).

To define what a public is one must recognize that the term takes for granted a contingent history, varying “from one context to another, from one set of institutions to another, from one rhetoric to another,” in almost imperceptible but significant ways. That notwithstanding, it does have at the same time “a functional intelligibility across a wide range of contexts” (p. 9). A public will therefore invariably be “one thing in London, quite another in Hong Kong,” despite the one being the erstwhile colony of the other. It needs to be rooted in the circumstances and self-perceptions of the people who participate in it if it is to work. Understanding the prerequisites that give a public an intelligible logic requires a historical approach.

Warner’s approach aligns with the theories discussed in the previous chapter: tension is a common underlying theme, and contestation is the order of the day. Taking the Anglo-American context to reflect a defining element of modernities, Warner continues:

Confronted by the local histories and contexts that make the form work, we might be tempted by the opposite approach, treating the idea of a public with nominalist skepticism: it just is whatever people in a particular context think it is. Its meaning depends on its “appropriation.” It is all local culture and contingent history. This rather desperate solution, which too often passes as historicism in literary studies, eschews the problem of translation altogether....I suggest below, in fact, that the idea of a public has a metacultural dimension; *it gives form to a tension* between general and particular that makes it difficult to analyze from either perspective alone (p. 11, my italics).

Examining a photograph of five drag queens posing in front of one another’s camera in a suburban, domestic scene, Warner argues that they “are doing *glamour*, which for them is both a public idiom and intimate feeling” (p. 13, italics in original). They

transform a private domain into a public performance by imagining that each camera allows their act to be witnessed by as many strangers as imaginable. At the same time, this performance in a private space protects them from a hostile mass public that would otherwise view them as “monsters of impudence” (p. 13). On the one hand, Warner explains, the cameras represent a mass media that is absent at this event, but on the other hand, they create a different kind of public viewing through the later circulation of the images captured therein. In other words, this act is a revision of what “public” means.

### **Warner’s Seven Characteristics of a Public**

Warner sees a public as defined by seven characteristics about how it functions. He underlines the dependence of the concept of “public” on discourse, describing it thus:

A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autotelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, Web sites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists by *virtue of being addressed*. (p. 67, italics in original)

Although he distinguishes *the* public from *a* public, the former being a totality that includes everyone, while the latter is bounded as a particular audience, he avers that the only way *the* public can function as “the people” in the public sphere is as *a* self-organizing public of discourse. Echoing Habermas’ observation that the public sphere is and needs to be independent of the state and the market for the people to be sovereign, he points to totalitarianism on the one hand and corporatism on the other. In totalitarian regimes, people’s commonality and participation in public life is prescribed and defined by institutions and laws. Such people have no sense of authenticity nor of power. Every one of them has their “position, function, and capacity for action” laid



down for them by the administration (p. 69). On the other hand, in modern capitalist societies, “we navigate a world of corporate agents that do not respond or act as people do” (p. 69). Rather, we have been reduced to almost nothing more than statistical data for the market to use for its production and distribution of goods. Without the self-organizing public, where we address each other as independent agents, “we would be nothing but the peasants of capital” (p. 69). Even such an activity as voting is grossly insufficient to make people experience the power of belonging to a public because it too is externally organized, rather than autotelic.

A public’s boundaries as well as its form are set by its own discourse instead of by an external framework; it can address only strangers because its addressees cannot be known beforehand, since they come into being only by participating in it. Therefore, argues Warner, a public is a relationship among strangers. Warner distinguishes the stranger of modern publics from the one of “an ancient, medieval, or early-modern town” (p. 75) in that today strangers must be treated as normally belonging to the social world while back then they were regarded as peculiar and disturbing. In former times, strangers needed to be explained and resolved; today, they are needed to make the social imaginary possible. Without the stranger, the continually being imagined and re-imagined public is not possible.

Warner further explains the necessity of publics to be made of strangers by noting the indefiniteness of public address. Any public address is aimed at anyone in general, and the addressees become part of the public only insofar as they recognize themselves as its addressees. Contrasted to this is Althusser’s interpellation, which Warner shows is specified towards a particular individual: “in singling us out, it [public

discourse] does so not on the basis of our concrete identity, but by virtue of our participation in the discourse alone, and therefore in common with strangers” (p. 77-78). On the contrary, when the policeman on the street says “Hey, you!” as in Althusser’s interpellation, he is addressing a particular person, thus not a generalized public. What makes speech public is that it is addressed toward “our partial *nonidentity* with the object of address” (p. 78). It is for this reason both personal and impersonal; intensely and intimately personal when we identify with it. At the same time, it is impersonal because we can just as easily step out of that personal realm as easily as we entered it, and because we constantly move in and out of these two realms.

Another example of the distinction between public discourse and other forms is that of gossip. While, as Warner notes, some scholars have appealed to gossip’s “potential for popular sociability and for the weak-group politics of women, peasants, and others” (p. 78), it does not address itself to strangers, but to particular people about other particular people. Gossip demands that those who participate in it are intensely personally identified with the group they belong to. They must also have earned the privilege to talk ill of whoever the subject of the gossip is, and they must have each other’s trust that the subject of said gossip does not get to hear it, at least not from them.

Thus far, Warner has identified three characteristics about what constitutes the historic form of a public: 1) it is self-organized, 2) it is a relation among strangers, and, 3) its address is both personal and impersonal. The fourth characteristic of a public he gives is that it “is constituted through mere attention” (p. 87). One can be a member of public convention in a hotel’s public hall while on the way to the bathroom by briefly stopping by to pay some attention to its address. One can be a member of a public ballet

performance merely by being there even though one falls asleep during the performance. And one can be a member of a TV show public while vacuuming the living room floor (p. 87). Attention by its members, in other words, is the sufficient condition for a public to be constituted as such. And this attention, which is given voluntarily by the members, is what gives a public its power. Not ascription, but voluntary attention to a public's discourse, is what gives it more agency than "that of contexts organized by kinship, hereditary status, local affiliation, mediated political access, parochial nativity, or ritual" (p. 89). Our attention, our "uptake" of the discourse generated by a public, gives us mastery over our social life. In other words, we *choose* which social world we want to belong to by paying attention to and taking up its discourse.

Discourse is thus Warner's fifth defining characteristic of a public. A public, he says, "is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse" (p. 90). It is reflexive because "the agonistic interlocutor is coupled with passive interlocutors; known enemies with indifferent strangers; parties present to a dialogue situation with parties whose textual location might be in other genres or scenes of circulation entirely" (p. 90). This means that it is open to various interpretations, and the originator of its address knows this much. The various interpretations of the discourse are only limited by circulation, and are thus potentially infinite, giving public discourse an "interactive relation" that goes way beyond the normal discourse of conversation or discussion. This characteristic I hold as central to the current work: the Facebook groups studied in this dissertation circulate public discourses in a virtually infinite space that allows as

much reading, “citation and characterization” (p. 91), and interpretation, as the numbers of participants who pay attention to it.

However, this circulation must be temporal and historical. “Publics have an ongoing life” (p. 97). They require the continuous and temporal circulation of their texts, which allows “further representations” (p. 97). This implies that all publics are “intertextual” because the circulation of texts requires an environment in which texts are cited and interpreted by and between other texts. Warner give the example of the *Spectator*, “which was designed to look like the newspapers of the day even though, as no. 262 declares, the paper ‘has not in it a single Word of News’” (p. 98). While the temporal circulation he describes in this sixth characteristic of publics is that of the news periodical—“In modernity, politics takes much of its character from the temporality of the headline, not the archive” (p. 97)—Warner argues that the *Spectator* was able to make the private matters of individuals public by subjecting them to periodical circulation. It called on its readers “to pass informed and reflective judgment on fashion, taste, manners, and gender relations” (p. 99), thus rendering private affairs public. By claiming to be general, the *Spectator* became the voice of civil society, by using the “feedback loops” of letters from readers to other readers, and the reference of its essays to previous essays. In so doing, it pointed the way to the now taken for granted fact “that public discourse must be circulated, not just emitted in one direction” (p. 100).

The seventh and final characteristic of what constitutes a public à la Warner is that it is performative, or poetic. Not only does public discourse bring into being its public, it also asks it to have a particular style, character, and *weltanschauung*.

Following this, it, the discourse, seeks to verify the existence of its public by citing, circulating, and bringing to realization the *weltanschauung* it articulates. “Run it up the flagpole, and see who salutes. Put on a show, and see who shows up” (p. 114). Here do we see its illusoriness and imaginary character *par excellence*. While its participants do not recognize themselves as virtual projections of public discourse, a public is constituted on “its subjunctive-creative project” (p. 114), on its performance of its own text. Public discourse is poetry and performance.

However, there *are* publics that do not presume to be “rational discussion writ large” (p. 117). By their “modes of address, style, and spaces of circulation” (p. 117) some publics can be thought of as “subpublics, or specialized publics, focused on particular interests, professions, or locales” (p. 117). Others actually, unmistakably, take on a different identity and discourse that goes against the general or dominant public. Quoting Fraser, Warner describes alternative publics that are comprised of “subordinated groups,” the ones Fraser refers to as “subaltern counterpublics” in the previous section.

### **Warner’s Counterpublics**

For Warner, what Fraser calls counterpublics are subpublics. Moreover, Warner regards her principal example of “the late-twentieth-century U.S. feminist subaltern counterpublic with its variegated array of journals, bookstores, publishing companies, film and video distribution networks, lecture series, research centers, academic programs, conferences, conventions, festivals, and local meeting places” (p. 118) as a public constituted as a “multicontextual space of circulation.” Perhaps, he argues, the only difference is that it defines itself by its reform program.

Warner would reserve the term counterpublic for publics that maintain an awareness of their subordinate status. Unlike the subpublic of the hunting and fishing males of *Field & Stream*, a counterpublic marks itself off from not merely “a general or wider public but a dominant one” (p. 119). Discourse that constitutes a counterpublic is more than merely different. It is one that would otherwise be regarded “with hostility or a sense of indecorousness” (p. 119).

Thus, while counterpublics also address themselves to indefinite strangers through a poesis that seeks to create a *weltanschauung*, the strangers addressed by counterpublic discourse are not just anybody. They are not the ordinary people who would not be marked as either, say, gay or black. A gay magazine, therefore, engages in public discourse that addresses indefinite strangers *who are also gay*, while a sermon for Blacks addresses indefinite strangers *who also identify as Black*. Thus, within a gay counterpublic, no one is closeted, because no one subscribes to the heteronormative requirements of ordinary straight society. And African-Americans may choose “to speak in a racially marked idiom” but only within the public discourse aimed at indefinite strangers who are exclusively African-American.

Dominant publics, explains Warner, are those that do not have the requirement to address a stranger with certain characteristics that are out of the mainstream assumptions of the general population. They can take the discourse they put out there, and their world-making (*weltanschauung*), for granted. They assume their address is universal and normal. Counterpublics, on the other hand, perform discourse pragmatics that seek to be transformative by making normal what has heretofore been regarded as abnormal, or subordinate. They are conscious of an identity and a discourse that is

*different* from that of the world out there. I posit that the Facebook groups in this study are counterpublics because they are aware that their discourse is not normal or universal, and that they seek to transform the perception that what the dominant public takes to be normal is necessarily so.

### **Affective Publics**

Papacharissi's book *Affective Publics* is centrally concerned with the ways in which "collaborative discourses organized by hashtags on Twitter...[and] virally circulated You-Tube videos or images rendered into memes as they are shared from person to person" (Papacharissi, 2014, p. 116) can bring people together through public feeling and affect. Such discourses are structured and organized, thus giving them the power to be systematically shared by differentiated groups of people. They are, however, at the same time filled with feeling and affect, thus enabling a reading that transcends class, gender, and/or race. People from all walks of life can find meaning in them, and further make *more* meaning out of them.

The discourses produced via Twitter, explains Papacharissi, should be understood as "soft structures of feeling" (p. 116), which foster "tropes of belonging that evolve beyond the conventional mode of rational thought and deliberation" (p. 117). As one may recall, the Habermasian public sphere appealed to rational deliberation. Papacharissi challenges the demand that political discourse ought to follow public reason, and suggests that online-generated and –performed publicness invites more inclusive participation that cuts across different forms of publics. The people who participated in the protests that led to the resignation of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, for instance, did not restrict their participation to deliberative logic. They

incorporated into their political performance “emotion, drama, opinion, and news” (p. 117). And they came from almost all over the world.

Affective publics, Papacharissi explains, are networks of public formations that are characterized by “expressions of sentiment” (p. 125). These sentiments mobilize and connect or disconnect said formations. Networked publics, on their part, are made possible by the technological affordances of “persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability” (p. 126). Through the iterations of the discourse carried out by networked publics, persistence affords a permanent record of the public’s performance. Replicability affords reproduction and remixing of the discourse circulating in the networked publics. Scalability gives the discourses in these networked publics the potential to go viral. And searchability, through tagging or algorithmic organization, makes otherwise loosely organized comments capable of being indexed.

Central to all these affordances, however, is shareability. The discourses emerging from and circulating within the networked publics become visible and acquire a material form when they are shared across the social media platforms. By sharing among users and beyond, what was initially hidden or limited to one locale gains traction in the wider world of the networked publics. Thus, the sharing of information “presences actors” (p. 126), lending them an active agency, and revealing networked publics as hinged upon the sharing of information. Consequently, affective publics turn out to be networked publics that share affect. Papacharissi found that the online engagement of the publics organized around Twitter hashtags permitted them to feel more intensely: “The affective intensity of the platform, expressed through



mobilized support, release of tension, and general opinion expression, amplified awareness of a particular event, issue, or conversation” (p. 127).

Papacharissi emphasizes that although she studied Twitter, “[a]ffective publics are not specific to Twitter” (p. 134). For example, in the 1970s, radio broadcasts were instrumental in keeping a “contagious structure of feeling during the Greek student uprisings against the military regime” alive (p. 134). Publics that bond around certain kinds of musical genres find their form and affective interconnection through songs and performances of the particular genres. A fan of John Mayer for instance gets affectively bonded to other John Mayer fans when she listens to a John Mayer song, or when she attends one of his concerts. An affective John Mayer public is thus born and sustained for the duration of the performance or the listening.

As structures of feeling, affective publics bring together emotion *and* reason, and open up discursive spaces where participants can tell their stories of what brings them together. Facebook groups such as PAN, therefore, are brought together by structures of feeling that are sustained by the experience of living in a world where people of African descent are treated as second-class citizens, or where they experience themselves as foreigners in the various diasporas where they find themselves. Their rallying around the “Black Lives Matter” campaign, for example, gives them an opportunity to tell their stories of how the worlds they live in subordinate, marginalize, and exclude Blacks. And because these experiences are laden with affect, they acquire an intensity that can help transform the wider mainstream public, or, if not that, at least, give material form to their experiences through networked sharing.

## ***Examples of (Counter)Public Discourse***

Below I consider examples of publics and counterpublics. Because this dissertation is about three Facebook groups, one feminist, one Pan-African, and one Kenyan, I review literature by authors who address corresponding public and counterpublic discourse. I begin with an ethnographic collection of feminist publics in Latin America, continue with Africanist and Pan-African considerations of public-sphere theory, and conclude with a number of reflections on Kenyan cases.

### **Contesting Publics in Brazil**

*Contesting Publics: Feminism, Activism, Ethnography* aims to bring into view new and emergent publics, to illustrate the critical import of publics in equality projects “that may contribute to the development of alternative feminist visions” (Cole, et. al, 2013, p. 2). Cole and Phillips do not assume that counterpublics “denote particular political positions” (p. 3). They argue that matters of concern do not always have to travel from the periphery to the mainstream; they can also travel from the dominant public attempting to impose the dominant view on others, thus for example calling upon the “sanctification of the nuclear family” hence discrediting and demonizing non-traditional domestic arrangements. They maintain that counterpublics can mirror the dominant public sphere, hence the need for investigating them ethnographically so as to determine the extent to which they serve emancipatory functions.

For example, by treating sex tourism as a “public,” Marie-Eve Carrier-Moisán’s anthropological study of sex tourism in Natal, Brazil, revealed that international feminist campaigns to fight the “vice” were entangled in the local politics, which

further entrenched the marginalization of the very women they meant to rescue (Cole, et. al, 2013, p. 50). On the one hand, the campaign against sex tourism is led mainly by middle-class residents who see the *gringos* (white tourists) and *garotas* (Brazilian women seeking social mobility through association with the tourists) as a threat to their erstwhile respectable neighborhood. On the other hand, NGOs, feminist activists, and academics have joined the campaign against sex tourism, viewing the activity almost exclusively as a system of reducing the local women into objects of pleasure for the foreign visitors.

Carrier-Moisán's ethnography, however, showed that sex tourism as an emerging public empowered its practitioners to move up the socioeconomic ladder, and was not entirely vicious. In fact, the young women who engaged in it saw it as more liberating than the factory work their mothers had pursued over against the more grueling labor of agricultural work (Carrier-Moisán, 2012, p. 5). These *garotas* identified with the "images of a global youth in which consumption, money and mobility were central" (p. 5), seeing themselves as consumers rather than as the workers their mothers had identified as. Thus, the campaigns against sex tourism ended up being against an emerging public of young women who did not see themselves as hapless oppressed victims.

Those feminist activists who were opposed to this new public unwittingly became complicit in taking away the agency these young women found in associating with the white tourists, whom they saw as partners in an interaction that offered them an opportunity to move up the socioeconomic ladder, and even the possibility of emigrating to Europe. This, I believe, points to the nuance and delicacy that public-

sphere scholarship should approach its field with; discourses can indeed travel from the mainstream to the periphery, thus quashing the emancipatory power of potential counterpublics. This, for example, offers important insights for my analysis of the global atheist feminist Facebook group, Women Without Religion.

### **Pan-Africanism and Africanist Thought**

Wachanga and Mazrui (2011) argue that “[a]lthough most of the newly independent African countries engaged [the wide-ranging] theoretical conceptualizations [of Pan-Africanism] differently, paying attention to their ethnicized particularities, the architects and students of Pan-Africanism seemed united by a stronger transcendental motif of Africa as a home for the Blacks” (p. 205). Indeed, Cecil Blake (2011) says that to properly understand Pan-Africanism, one must go back to its precursor, what he terms “Pan-Blackism.” He defines this term as the movement which believed in the precept that Africa was for Africans (p. 8).

Pan-Blackism originated in the United States, especially among African Americans during and soon after the antebellum period. Its proponents believed racism and slavery could not be resolved unless Blacks returned to Africa, and that “we shall never receive the respect of other races until we establish a powerful nationality” (p. 9, quoting West-Indian-Liberian journalist Edward Wilmot Blyden, 1861). They wanted to establish a nation in Africa, and believed all Black Americans should return to the Motherland to do so. Liberia was founded as an American colony for this purpose, although it was not successful, in achieving its goals.

Pan-Africanism, founded by Henry Sylvester-Williams in 1897, was less coherent in its goals and philosophy, or even in who comprised it. For example, W.E.B.

DuBois was surprised to find a Pan-African movement which represented “the white rulers of Kenya, Rhodesia, and Union of South Africa, to rule the African continent in the interest of its white investors and exploiters” (Kedourie, 1970, p. 387)

Nevertheless, as noted by Wachanga and Mazrui, Pan-Africanism did have an underlying uniting motif of Africa as a home for Blacks. The people behind this motif, most of them the founding fathers of the newly independent African nations states, relied heavily on the media. Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya were among the African freedom fighters who had used the media in the independence struggle. They now, upon independence, hoped to unite the continent through the media, but were unsuccessful, mainly because the vast bulk of the population was illiterate, but also because the newly-formed governments found it increasingly expedient to promote national unity by quelling dissent through censorship (Wachanga and Mazrui, 2011, p. 206).

Wachanga and Mazrui treat ICTs and other social media as part of this information revolution that brought Africans together in solidarity during the Arab uprisings beginning in 2011:

In 2011, Arab and African regimes under siege suffered from technophobia, fear of communication technology. Protesters in the Arab streets, on the other hand, were stimulated into technophilia, enthusiasm for the new technology of communication. Ease of communication between neighboring Arab countries resulted in empathetic behavior across the national lines. (p. 209)

Most telling of the potential of social media and new ICTs to revive and revitalized Pan-Africanism, continue Wachanga and Mazrui, is “a conspicuous presence of cultural signs and symbols” (p. 212). These include screen savers made from photo-shopped maps of Africa, webpage borders that simulate Egyptian pyramids, Maasai

artifacts being used to represent the navigation buttons of websites, and beating African drums providing the soundtrack of blogs. Indeed, the image below (Figure 2) is the cover picture of the Pan-African Network Facebook group:



*Figure 2: Cover picture of the Pan-African Network Facebook group*

Wachanga and Mazrui see these developments as evidence of an expanding public sphere, where easily accessible technologies can be used to enhance the participation of everyone everywhere in ways that were formerly unimaginable. Using Thomas Friedman's theory that the digital information revolution has "flattened: the world, they argue that the global accessibility of new ICT's has changed the way African immigrants in North America and other host nations view themselves, with "an imaginary global reality that is far more multifaceted than the imagined communities envisaged by Benedict Anderson's print capitalism" (p. 215).

Thus, the previous image created by the one-to-many media of yore, that Africa is a monolithic and exotic world of intractable social, economic, and political problems, is being challenged by counter-discourses articulated via social and digital media. I posit that not only PAN, but all three Facebook groups studied in this dissertation, are joining in the creation of these discourses, and that they most definitely are expanding

the potential for participatory democracy. Below, I examine how this phenomenon is expressing itself in Kenya.

### **Virtual Counterpublics in Kenya**

Frederick Ogenga (2010) uses Hall's "encoding-decoding" theory to analyze how Kenyan audiences overcome the hegemony implied by political economy, through the use of the Internet to "contest media content" (p. 155). He cites the political developments in the country that have seen a rollback of the media freedoms that had been gained in the 1990's, such developments as the creation of the Media Council of Kenya by President Mwai Kibaki, whose ostensible reason was to enable self-regulation of the media, but which resulted in covert censorship by the state. Then, he argues that the same audience that is receiving censored media content is "debating the very same [censored] issues through improved internet technology like blogging, mixit and facebook" (p. 158, sic). He lauds the advancements born by such endeavors as communications infrastructure improvements, especially the 5,000-kilometer fiber-optic cable running from Fujairah, in the United Arab Emirates, to Kenya, under the Indian Ocean; this drastically cut the cost of telecommunications across the African continent. Kenyans are thus using new communication technologies to become citizen journalists.

Likewise, Okoth Fred Mudhai (2010) concludes that "ICTs do not replace existing socio-political networks and face-to-face communication, but are added to them," citing the example of a Zambian listserv that generated a carefully worded letter to then President Frederick Chiluba to address national grievances (p. 328). The letter,

signed by forty individuals based in the Zambian Diaspora, eventually made its way to *The Post of Zambia*, an independent newspaper that has become a chief oppositional voice. This example demonstrates how Internet discussions can generate “real-world” effects.

Ogola and Owuor (2016, pp. 229-243) find that while citizen journalists in Kenya are using social media, especially Twitter, to constitute effective publics that are able to challenge state power, this “third space” is also proving itself vulnerable to capture by the state, as demonstrated by government officials who have been trained to use social media to control public attention. Nonetheless, “[t]hese [Twitter] hashtags enable fairly substantive discussions, with participation largely unhindered as long as one has access to the Internet” (p. 241).

Their study therefore reveals that the Internet and social media as an alternative public sphere is two-pronged, allowing on the one hand greater freedom to create discourses that are in the interests of the average citizen, but on the other hand creating asymmetries based on some of the citizen journalists who are most effective being the ones who already had a prominent social standing in the offline world. They give the example of an extremely visible blogger, Ory Okolloh, an alumna of Harvard Law School, and former Policy Manager for Google, Africa. Her enormous social capital enables her to control many online discourses, and people regularly tag her in their tweets to ensure a much wider public reach through her retweets. She was instrumental in the formation of the Ushahidi forum that helped map the 2007-08 post-election violence. This kind of social capital gives her a gate-keeping function that though different from the traditional one of the established media is still an indicator of the



power asymmetry found even on the virtual public sphere. This raises interesting questions that I explore further in the findings chapters of this dissertation: are there certain members of the Facebook groups I study who are more powerful than others? How does this affect the discourses being created by the groups? In what ways?

George Ogola (2015) finds that in Kenya social media, particularly Twitter, can create “a heteroglossic text and space” in a media landscape otherwise dominated by a “duopoly” of the country’s biggest media houses. He observes that counter-discourses challenging the hegemony of the dominant classes are being effectively articulated by Kenya’s online community, with a focus on social and political justice rather than on “generic news values” (Ogola 2015, p. 78). The result, he holds, is that as more and more Kenyans adopt various communication technologies, “Kenya’s public sphere will undoubtedly expand even further” (p. 79). Citizen journalism, expressing itself through “the Internet and other new media technologies [that] now offer myriad communicative possibilities” (p. 72), is recovering the archive of “subjugated knowledges,” augmenting entrée and involvement of excluded others, and dislocating the norms and orders that characterize mainstream news production and distribution. Citizen journalism, therefore, is actually creating “a tool of citizenship” that helps constitute a form of citizenship in its own right.

A study that employed semi-structured interviews with young adults in Nairobi, half of whom were living in a slum area (otherwise known as an “informal settlement”), while the other half were from middle class families, found that “social media were perceived to enable young adults to voice their concerns and communicate their opinions also at the societal level” (Jäntti 2015, p. 106). Coupled to such traditional

media as radio and television, Facebook and Twitter are seen to be advancing the voice of the people nationally as well. One of the interviewees, for instance, observed how media houses are “these days” using social media to “actually reach to the Kenyans who are on the ground and the young people cos the nation is made of young people” (p. 106).

Furthermore, social media serve a development function. In addition to provoking interest in learning how to use computers, mobile phones, and other forms of information and communication technologies (p. 106), social media are useful in “participatory development communication,” particularly for the youths in the informal settlement (p. 122). Development communication is mass communication that is geared towards enhancing the socioeconomic development of poor nations, especially in the Global South. This study found that middle-class (i.e., relatively well-to-do) youth were less interested in using social media for development communication, while poor youth in the slum found social media important for improving the socioeconomic well-being of their communities (p. 122). Thus, many of these lower-class youths said that social media were important for bringing people together to overcome such catastrophes as the severe drought in some parts of the country. Additionally, many of the interviewees said that using social media has helped them to not only find employment but to market their products and services as well.

Evan Mwangi’s (2011) ‘Queer Agency in Kenya’s Digital Media’ showed that homophobia online is as strong as that in the dominant off-line sphere. Mwangi studied how the wedding of two Kenyan men in Britain, and their divorce two years later, were reported by *The Daily Nation*, the leading Kenyan newspaper, and its sister publication,

*The Sunday Nation*. Reportage of the wedding appeared on the front page of *The Sunday Nation* on October 17, 2009, in contravention of “the Nation Media Group’s products [which] are characterized by a staid, nonsensationalist coverage of events, especially in its print editions” (p. 101). The purpose of this unusual placement, argues Mwangi, was to treat it as both spectacle and national shame. It caused a record number of the Nation’s online readers to post comments in reaction, almost all virulently homophobic.

When the couple divorced, the *Nation* published the story as a celebration of the failure of gay unions, leading to “a 3,433 percent increase” in “likes,” from the wedding story to the divorce story on the paper’s fan page (p. 105); i.e., the divorce caused that much more celebration than the marriage. The comments that followed were just as homophobic as the ones that came after the wedding. Thus, it would appear that a recurrent theme of social and digital media is to treat them with a certain degree of leeriness, taking cognizant of the fact that while they have enormous potential to engineer change, they can go only so far as their users and audiences are willing to take them.

## ***Conclusion***

Using a rationale similar to the one by Squires above, I investigated if the groups in this dissertation use similar safe spaces where they can cultivate and develop voices and identities that are not predicated on the dominant public sphere. The pilot group, FIKA, was found to sometimes embrace such a strategy. By virtue of being in a closed Facebook group, closed off from the rest of Facebook and the world, some of the members argued that they were able to articulate discourses in opposition to the

dogmatic and intolerant pronouncements of the heavily religious Kenyan society, without the risk of having these discourses published to the wider society for fear of the possible reprisals.

Similarly, I applied her narrower definition of counterpublics to help answer the following questions: do these Facebook groups engage the wider public through the use of such resources as the mass media? Do they take their previously enclaved discourses to the wider public as oppression decreases? FIKA, for example, has been featured in newspaper articles and radio and television talk-shows, articulating their atheistic ideas, thus dispelling such popular myths as atheism being the preserve of fiendish anti-social cranks and crackpots, or downright “evil” sociopaths (Robson, 2018). The members who were thus featured were found to be quite “normal,” thus helping to reinvent the public image of atheists in Kenyan society.

Also, while the stated goals of the Facebook groups in this study make them appear less as satellites and more as counterpublics in this sense, some FIKA members described an “inner core” of some “elite” and “more radical” members that is secretly constituted on Facebook. This one does not seek to engage the wider public in debate, but is more concerned with maintaining pure atheism and rationalism. Likewise, some posts on the Pan-African Network page speak to uniting blacks and people of African descent in a pure fashion removed from the rest of the world, which world is argued to be “almost always and everywhere” violently opposed to anything African. Such posts include espousal of the radical views of Malcolm X when he was a leader of the Nation Islam under the tutelage of Prophet Elijah Muhammad. It would thus appear that this

notion of publics as satellites can also be useful to answer such questions as follow: Do these groups function as satellite publics? When, how, why, and to what effect?

In addition, these Facebook groups engage in forms of publicness that blend emotion and affect into their arguments and debates in the style described by Papacharissi above. FIKA, for example, has developed a repertoire of words and phrases that represent a vocabulary which can be understood only by members who participate in its conversations. Particularly during volatile and highly-charged moments in time, such as the Kenyan general election period between August and October 2017, the word “sheeple,” a coinage denoting religious fundamentalists who follow the doctrines of their religions as blindly as sheep, came to be used by the very same religious people to denote members who had otherwise presented themselves as the epitome of reason and logic. The skeptics and atheists who previously caricatured religious zealots as sheeple were now seen to be as blind in their fervent adherence to the calls made by their political leaders.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY**

### ***Introduction***

Democracy is participatory and in the interests of the general citizenry, meaning that the citizens have the means to advise and inform the state on the issues that affect them as a body politic. Journalism and the news media are charged with the responsibility of sharing this advice and information between the state and the citizens. However, as discussed in the previous chapter on theory, the corporatization and institutionalization of the mainstream news media outlets created a situation where citizens are treated as

a mass of consumers who should only be presented with content that ensures they buy media products for the profit of the corporations. Social media groups formed for the specific purpose of challenging the dominant public opinions have the potential to provide an avenue for redressing the power imbalance created by the corporatized news media.

To understand how social media are serving as a channel for the communication needed for citizens to participate in the government of their societies, the present study investigates the shape and form three Facebook groups take, as a case study of how social media groups afford their members the opportunity to further the principle of participatory democracy. I focus on Facebook groups chiefly because I am an active member of two of them; moreover, in my experience, Facebook has been relatively successful in giving participants a forum that allows debate on matters they believe are of communal concern, but have been given short shrift by the mainstream public sphere.

## **Chapter Layout**

This chapter is organized into the following sections:

1. An analysis of the methods that were used in the research and the philosophy behind them
2. A description of the Facebook groups studied, and how they were selected
3. The process of gaining access to the groups for the study
4. Collection and analysis of the data
5. Presentation of findings, and

6. A conclusion that summarizes the chapter

## ***Methods and Methodology: Ethnographic Interviewing and Participant Observation of Online Activity***

John Brewer notes that ethnography

“is premised on the view that the central aim of the social sciences is to understand people’s actions and their experiences of the world, and the ways in which their motivated actions arise from and reflect back on those experiences. Once this is the central aim, knowledge of the social world is acquired from *intimate familiarity* with it, and ethnography is central as a method because it involves this *intimate familiarity* with day-to-day practice and the meaning of social action” (2000, p. 11, emphasis mine).

I used ethnographic methods for two main reasons: “the philosophical assumptions that [I] bring to the study...and the specific methods or procedures...that translate the approach into practice” (Creswell 2014, p. 5, emphasis in original). In general, I am deeply fascinated by people, their actions, their beliefs, their practices. When considering what professional career, I was going to pursue, I found myself torn between becoming a physician or a priest. I studied medicine for two years, but left after I found that the doctors and medical students were looked upon, and regarded themselves, as gods, and the farthest thing from their vocation was a desire to help people. I converted from my childhood Presbyterian faith to Roman Catholicism at the age of 24, and applied to join the Eastern Africa Province of the Society of Jesus. Unfortunately, even the Society of Jesus proved a disappointment, leaving me with feeling of being caged by a God who could be limited to one creed. I eventually found myself in the world of story-telling, where I devoted my time and effort to understanding people and the meanings they made of their lives, and writing about what I learned from them. Hence was born a journalism career, which finally led to “writing

culture” (Clifford 1986), or ethnography.

Tony L. Whitehead, an anthropologist at the University of Maryland, explains that ethnographers have a philosophical stance which views the world less as an object out there to be studied and described as it is, or, in other words, “as some *exact* phenomenon...the more positivist orientation,” but more as something that “will *vary* based on a range of factors, including social, economic, political, situational, or experiential/personal” (2004, p. 8, emphasis in original).

Epistemically, ethnographers are what John Creswell calls “social constructivists” (Creswell 2013), who believe that individual members of a group seek understanding of their worlds by developing meanings that are subjective and specific to their experiences. The role of such researchers is to make sense of these meanings by staying true to the “lived experience” of the group members. They do not try to reduce them to one or a few basic patterns, but retains their varied and complex views, adding interpretation of them only when appropriate, hence being “constructive” rather than “reductive.” This is echoed by Clifford Geertz’s observation that “societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations” (1972, p. 29), that instead of using predetermined categories, such as Freudian psychosexual theories or Marxian socioeconomic concepts of capital and labor to explain the Balinese cockfight, “one has only to learn how to gain access” to the interpretations contained within the culture being studied itself.

Method is also informed and determined by the research problem or question. I had the following overarching question: “How do oppositional groups use social media to build and articulate identities that question the dominant public opinion about issues



that have traditionally been controlled by hegemonic voices?” To tackle the question more effectively, the following research questions were asked.

**R1:** To what extent do the groups afford their members an affective form of community, in which they not only communicate their own ideas, needs, desires, strategies, hopes, and aspirations, independently of the prevailing dominant society, but where they also find fellowship and sisterhood formed by their sharing common experiences, causes, and goals and objectives?

**R2:** To what extent does belonging to and/or identifying with these [online] groups equip members with an identity that is independent of the dominant public opinion of their society(s)?

**R3:** In what ways does this in turn lend a voice, which can speak independently of the dominant society, to the group members? How do the community and identity furnished by these groups empower members to articulate themselves to a world that wants to silence them?

“Like astronomers encountering new galaxies or zoologists studying the habits of whales, ethnographers conduct field-based research to study phenomena as they occur in context,” write Boellstorff et al. (2012, p. 32). To answer the questions posed above, it seemed to me the best approach would be ethnographic, in the natural setting, or the field, or the context, where the group members act.

Whitehead (2005) notes that ethnography is increasingly being used in applied settings and its methods are being adopted “by researchers outside of the disciplines of ethnography and anthropology” (p. 2). This they do because what he terms “Basic Classic” methods are the most amenable to “other social settings, such as organizations,

institutions, meetings, and just about any setting in which humans are interacting” (p. 2). Chief among these basic classic methods are “observation, interviewing, participating, and making interpretations” (p. 10). Whitehead likens the procedures these methods apply to a child first learning the rules, routines, and meanings of a new cultural system, i.e., of the family to which the child belongs. in like fashion, I sought to come to an *emic* understanding of the groups in question, which is to say, an understanding from the inside of the groups, or as Whitehead, citing Malinowski (1922, p. 25), calls it, “to grasp the native’s point of view...to realize his vision of the world” (p. 5).

For these reasons, I chose ethnographic interviewing and participant observation of the groups and their members as the best tools for this research.

### ***In Search of Facebook Groups***

In 2011, a group of friends came together to challenge the claims of a self-styled prophet who was asking people to give their belongings to his church because the world was slated to end in July of that year. These friends felt the need to do so because they were incensed by a trend they had seen in their society (Kenya), in which con artists would don the mantle of “Man of God”, then proceed to fleece their followers of their money in the name of getting blessings in heaven. Being young and tech-savvy, the four friends thought a good way to reach a wider audience would be by going online. They thus created a website as well as a Facebook page to disseminate their anti-religion views. They called this initiative the Freethinkers Initiative Kenya, and adopted the acronym FIKA. In 2014, I conducted an ethnography of FIKA as the pilot study for this dissertation.

Since the issues addressed by FIKA mainly consisted of politics, culture, and science, I searched Facebook for other groups that addressed themselves to such matters. The first search yielded groups that were not based in Kenya, including “Sam Harris & The Future of Reason,” “Politically Incorrect Freethinkers,” “Atheist vs Theist Debates,” “Atheists Unite,” “The Discordian Society,” and “The New Horsemen.” Because I wanted groups that were based in Kenya, or that addressed comparable issues as those faced by FIKA, I searched for similar issues in Kenya and Africa. I found “African Atheists”, “Kick tribalism out of Kenya”, “Nostalgic East Africa”, “Grief Beyond Belief”, and “Cultural Stereotypes, Stigma, Superstitions, and Taboos”. These were, however, either offshoots of FIKA, or almost the same as FIKA.

I therefore conducted a third search, this time seeking the help of a prominent FIKA member, a highly vocal and active feminist who campaigned for the political rights of Kenyan women and ran a shelter for girls who had suffered rape and incest. She helped me find two political groups that she thought would be in line with what I was looking for: “Mwananchi Watchdog” and “Raila’s Think Tank.” I, however, learned that Mwananchi Watchdog was a group with no discernible philosophy. The only description it gave of itself was “Lets choose wise leadership,” and its posts sporadically varied between commercial advertisements and an occasional account of an interesting politician or political event. Raila’s Think Tank (RTT) campaigned for the political ambitions of Raila Odinga, the leader of the Official Opposition in Kenya. Although RTT qualified as an oppositional group that resembled FIKA in that sense, it’s scope seemed to be too wide to compare well with FIKA.

Some of the FIKA debates that involved feminism and women's rights had historically been linked to another Facebook group named "Women Without Religion" (WWR). Between late 2013, when I joined FIKA and the summer of 2014, shortly after the pilot study, many women and feminists regularly posted on FIKA content that addressed women's issues. For some reason, however, beginning in 2015, such posts had shrunk in frequency and in the amount of interest they generated among the members. Many of the women who had been active between 2013 and 2014 stopped posting and commenting on the group page. I thus felt studying WWR would be a counterweight to the overwhelming masculinity that had become increasingly prevalent in FIKA.

Of the highly vocal and active members on the FIKA Facebook page, quite a few identified as Pan-Africans. Two of these were very gung-ho about the necessity for people who claim to be freethinkers in Africa to support the Pan-African cause. I thus thought a Facebook group dedicated to Pan-Africanism would be quite germane to compare to FIKA and WWR. I found one such group, "The PAN-AFRICAN NETWORK" (PAN), by typing the term "pan-African" in Facebook's search box.

In summary, therefore, I chose to study three groups: FIKA, WWR, and PAN. I give a detailed overview of the groups' description in Chapter One of this dissertation.

### ***Gaining Access***

Hudson and Bruckman (2004) observe that "for some researchers, the Internet is like a public square, and for others, a private living room, a town hall meeting, or a newspaper letters column" (p. 128). The adoption of these different metaphors results in different ethical positions. If it is a public square, the researcher may make general observations

and report research findings as summary results. The researcher who sees the Internet as a private living room will seek the permission of participants. The researcher who sees it as a newspaper letters column needs only to cite sources appropriately. However, Hudson and Bruckman recommend the human subjects approach, which sees Internet chatrooms as a private space (p. 128). Such a stance demands both anonymization of the people who contribute in such forums, and informed consent from the subjects of the research (p. 128).

In addition, their study investigated whether a researcher who seeks consent from the research subjects is more or less likely to be granted permission to study chatrooms. To this end, they offered the chatrooms the option to “opt in” or “out” of the study. Their results showed that “[t]here is no significant difference between these two conditions” (p. 135), indicating that the researchers were as likely to be kicked out if they sought consent as when they did not. A third suggestion from their study was therefore that because studying chatrooms was unlikely to cause harm, and that even the very process of seeking consent was likely to be perceived as harmful by participants, “obtaining consent for studying online chatrooms is impracticable” (p. 135). For this reason, Hudson and Bruckman proposed that “research in preexisting chatrooms can be conducted most productively when subjects are unaware of the study” (p. 136), although the researcher in such a situation must obtain an IRB waiver of consent.

The Facebook groups in this study function as the sort of chatrooms described by Hudson and Bruckman, and I adopted the human subjects approach as my ethical framework. My choice was informed by *The Belmont Report* and by the fact that the

topics of discussion the groups engaged in were sensitive, and therefore had the potential to cause harm (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1979). Thus, I sought the informed consent of the group members, and more generally followed the protocol required by the Internal Review Board (IRB) of the University of Maryland, which demanded ethical approval of my interview questions by the IRB (Appendix 1), a signature given by each interview participant on a form of informed consent (Appendix 2), and an announcement/request for permission (Appendix 3) posted in each group indicating my desire to study the group.

In addition to posting a general announcement about my research on the walls of the three Facebook groups, I wanted to gain the confidence and support of the administrators. I believed that to achieve the kind of intimacy described by Brewer (2000), I ought to seek a deeper relationship with potential participants. To this end, I “friended” the founder and chief admin of WWR on Facebook, and sent her a private message about my research. I asked her to post the announcement seeking research participants on my behalf, which she did very gladly. Indeed, she introduced me to the group in general, and encouraged as many participants as possible to volunteer for the study, assuring them that they would be protected by anonymity and confidentiality, if they so desired, and pointing out that the research would possibly help them understand themselves and what they fight for better.

As I had done during the pilot study, I approached specific members to request their participation in my study, thus using purposive sampling. In this, I followed Hayes Mawindi Mabweazara’s study of newsmaking practices in Zambian newsrooms, in which “interviewees were purposively sampled using convenience sampling rather

than random sampling” (Mabweazara, 2011, p. 102). As Mabweazara explains, this method of sampling is appropriate when a researcher has “the need to select” (p. 102) certain characteristics in his research subjects. Owton and Allen-Collinson used similar sampling procedures where “recruitment of participants was via purposive, criteria sampling, initially using convenience sampling in terms of having access to friends and colleagues” (Owton and Allen-Collinson, 2013, p. 288).

As with the pilot study, the research question I was seeking to address involved members’ use of the Facebook group wall to communicate oppositional ideas and identities. I, however, followed John Brewer’s call on ethnographers to be more than merely reflexive but also to employ the “ethnographic imagination,” which, among other things, “show[s] the complexity of the data...by...discussing negative cases which fall outside the general patterns and categories employed to structure the ethnographic description” (Brewer 2000, p. 54). Therefore, I included participants in FIKA who were unequivocal in their commitment to their religious faith. I interviewed three Christians and one Muslim, who throughout their engagement and membership in the group had stayed true to their religion, despite the constant denigration they received from the majority atheist members. Their insights went a very long way in contributing to my interpretations, thus illustrating the apposite utility of purposive sampling.

Initially, I had presumed FIKA would be the easiest and most straightforward group to gain access to. After all, I had interviewed 20 members for the pilot study, and the admins were close friends of mine. Again, I sent all four admins a private Facebook message to inform them of my proposed dissertation study, and to request their

permission to study the group. They all said I was more than welcome to study them, but the chair quipped, “I am not sure why you need our input to interview FIKA members as they do not usually listen to us anyway 😊” (Facebook message, June 24, 2017).

Recruiting FIKA participants for the second larger study, however, proved significantly more difficult than for the pilot. I found myself having to coax and cajole the members I believed would meet the criteria I was looking for. The exercise was reminiscent of my days as the editor of a university campus newsletter back in Kenya, when I had been forced to use almost as much effort to get stories out of the campus community as a dentist pulling out teeth. “Coax and cajole” are the exact same words that kept coming back to me during both instances. I coaxed and cajoled my purposively sampled participants, by sending emails, Facebook messages, and commenting on their Facebook posts. I persisted until I pinned down 20 FIKA interviewees.

But gaining access to participants from PAN turned out to be even harder. First, I posted the IRB-approved general announcement on the group’s Facebook wall, requesting for participants. A week later, I posted an update with more details about the study, indicating that any volunteer could email me privately, or send me a private Facebook message. My doctoral advisor suggested that potential volunteers might feel better protected by the knowledge that their participation was anonymous. At first, this strategy did not appear to be any more effective; however, the second post yielded one volunteer, who made the following comment on the post:

Hey, I didn’t volunteer because I’m not an active member in pan african groups. Mostly I only read the threads and have not real knowledge of african



issues and political experience to contribute, so I don't know if I have the profile you're looking at.

I responded to this comment, saying, “Yes, any volunteer is much appreciated.” While I had hoped for “active members,” it became quite evident that few members commented on original posts. In addition, the pilot study had revealed that such groups may not have many active discussants in the posts that are put up, but “silent readers” do qualify as “substantially active” members because “mere reading” can indeed contribute a great deal to the formation of opinions about the various issues presented on the forum. I thus felt that interviewing this member, despite his caveat that he did not consider himself active, would provide the kind of data I was looking for. He and I agreed to conduct the interview via Facebook messenger, although my initial preference had been to do it on Skype, which has the advantage of mimicking a live face-to-face interaction. We both decided on messenger because, as he explained, “I don't really speak English... Not sure if I can answer properly.” I sent the interview protocol to him, and he sent back the answers as text messages, one at a time.

I waited another month, during which time I got a total of only three interviewees. I started to get increasingly concerned that I would not get anywhere close to my goal of 20. I thus decided to follow the same general steps as I had done with WWR and FIKA, seeking the friendship of the admins and a couple of members who were regular posters on the group's wall. The first of such admins, whose Facebook profile identified him as Walter King, was based in the U.S. I sent a friend request to him on Facebook, to which he responded in the positive almost immediately. I then sent him the following private message on Facebook messenger:

I have a special request for you as an admin of Pan-African Network (PAN). I am a PhD candidate studying Facebook groups and their potential for enhancing democracy, especially for those who have been historically voiceless. I believe the work PAN is doing has great potential to give a global voice to Africans and other people of African descent around the world. ... I am therefore humbly requesting that you assist me in gaining access to the group as a researcher. I will need to interview at least 15 members, and to analyze the content of about 30 original posts on the group's page.

Please advise on how I can go about this. My school (University of Maryland), approved a general announcement that I can post on the PAN Facebook page calling for volunteers to participate in the interviews, but I believe it is best to go through you as an active admin, as well as a friend. I have learned so much from the posts you put up on the page and will forever be in your debt if you assist me in this research endeavor. ...

He replied 20 days later, saying that he would be willing to help any way he could. By then, I had sent messages to another admin—a university student in Uganda named Leopold Yizhak—who tagged Walter King, as well as two others, in a comment on my original post. King's response thus appeared to have been on the prompt from the Ugandan one. I immediately messaged him, thanking him for his response and telling him I was looking forward to all the assistance he could give me. Unfortunately, that was the last I ever heard from him. King told me that, in his experience, the King was wont to take his time to respond to such queries; but he advised that he was in discussion with all the other admins, and would soon get back to me on what they had decided. He grilled me for slightly over an hour, trying to determine if my research was genuine, and whether I had gained anything from my membership to PAN. He implied that PAN members would be unhappy if my sole reason for joining the group had been to study it.

Eventually, Yizhak sent me a message saying that the rest of the admins had okayed my research and that he would be more than glad to be interviewed. He told me to keep sending private messages to members whom I thought would make good

participants, and advised that I should give the whole process good time, even up to three months. He promised to try and get the other administrators to participate but made no promises that they would. I did interview him, and what I learned from him was immensely educative, both in terms of what the group was about, as well as on Pan-Africanism in general. He also pinned my post, thus ensuring that it stayed at the top of the group's wall, and to this day, anyone who visits the page is met by my post as the first thing they see. It has subsequently generated a large number of comments, including three that led to interviews which were as informative as that with Yizhak, if not more so. All in all, I ended up with eight actual complete interviews, although I had two conversations that can be used as interviews albeit not as part of the protocol approved by IRB. One other participant agreed to participate but pulled out after answering only a few of the questions, saying that he felt inadequate to contribute any more information than I had already gathered.

“Multiple judgments are possible, and ambiguity and uncertainty are part of the process,” write Markham and Buchanan (2012, p. 5). They add that while people may “acknowledge that the substance of their communication is public” (p. 6), the specific context in which it appears implies privacy. Perhaps, the taciturnity displayed by members of PAN is a factor of such a situation. I suspect that many of them were hesitant to make their positions open to the unrestricted scrutiny that they would be subject to under research. Unlike WWR, which is an open Facebook group, PAN is closed, so only members can see what is posted in it. Perhaps, the interviews presented a different context than the one they were accustomed to in their group. Indeed, one member told me when I first tried to gain access that the interview questions, which I

sent to him via email, “violate my personal security and that I just would not be interested in” participating (personal communication, July 2016). The Ugandan admin had also noted, “the group is a closed group, which, in my opinion is meant to be closer to a Secret Group than a Public one.” He added that had we not been friends by the time he saw my post, he would have deleted it, “not because we are a snobbish lot but simply because we are aware that there are individuals who like to use such platforms for sinister schemes and sabotage” (private Facebook message, July 2016).

My PhD advisor suggested that I could offer to donate money to a charity of their choice to potential participants, but Yizhak advised strongly against this, saying such an offer would highly likely be seen as a bribe, or could make some members volunteer to participate for mercenary reasons, rather than for the genuine desire to aid in the research. I agreed with his assessment and chose not to offer any incentive.

Thus, the subject of this dissertation ended being composed of the three Facebook groups of WWR, FIKA, and PAN. The data I collected is comprised of 48 interviews (or, more officially, 45, if I was to count only the ones that strictly adhered to the IRB-approved protocol), 20 from FIKA, 18 from WWR, and ten (or, more officially, seven) from PAN; and content from 93 original posts from all three groups. While the interviews were largely limited in number to the access I was able to get, the content is limited by saturation, which means that I stopped collecting more Facebook posts when I determined that I was not getting any new categories or themes from analyzing the content.

## ***Data Collection and Analysis***

### **Interviews**

I began the interviews three days after the founder and chief admin of WWR (who went by the Facebook pseudonym of Annie Chant) posted my announcement and introduction on June 25, 2016. The post read as follows:

Hi everyone,

Please meet James who is currently undertaking his PhD at University of Maryland (US). Along with two other Facebook groups, he has asked for permission to investigate and develop an understanding of how members of this group relate to each other and what role WWR plays in those relationships.

For members that would like to be involved in the study, you will be asked to read and sign a consent form but please be aware that you will have the option of keeping your identity confidential. I am happy for WWR to support James in his endeavours to understand the mechanisms operating against the usual societal pressures that keep this group pumping along. If you have any questions please feel free to ask them in this thread or message James or I.

The post generated 28 comments, most of them welcoming me to the group, others of members volunteering for the study. I interviewed the first volunteer on July 28, 2016, via Skype video. The second interview was face-to-face, at a Starbucks in Braintree, Mass., with a member who was excited to be “on the other end of research”, seeing that she was a graduate student in anthropology who had spent a great amount of time conducting ethnographic interviews for her own research. This turned out to be the only face-to-face sit-down.

Of the 48 interviews, I transcribed the face-to-face as well as all the Skype and phone interviews. The rest were composed of instant messenger on Facebook or of email responses to the interview questionnaire. Table 1 below gives an example of a

Facebook messenger interview, analyzed and coded into the three themes—identity, community, and voice. I used grounded theory analysis to arrive at these three themes.

### **Grounded Theory**

As Kathy Charmaz explains, “grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves” (2014, 2). I used grounded theory analysis because this is for the greater part an exploratory study. Charmaz gives the example of a patient recently diagnosed with a life-threatening disease to illustrate the use of grounded theory methods. The patient’s reflections offer points (categories of data) at which to start gathering and analyzing data about people who face a similar fate. A researcher could, for instance, interview other patients recently diagnosed with terminal diseases, and compare what they say to the categories developed from the first patient. As this comparison continues, the researcher is able to put similar categories into one pool, and others into another, and so on, until all the instances of the data fit into whatever number of categories the researcher finds. Themes and general interpretations can then be drawn from these categories, and eventually, broad concepts, even new theories, can be generated from the themes and interpretations.

Therefore, grounded theory analysis involves grouping all instances of data into the emerging categories, identifying new codes for the data that do not fit into these categories, putting whatever instances of data that match the new categories together, filling up the categories with all matching data, and so on, until all the categories reach saturation, or, in other words, until all the subsequent data reflect the already identified categories and no more new categories can be derived from the data. The resulting

themes and interpretations thus work in a dialectical manner with the theories posited at the beginning of the study. The theories are not containers into which the data is poured, but rather are guiding principles that inform the general tendency of the emerging concepts. They are therefore always open to revision, and can even be discarded if they are found to be untrue to the reality at hand.

Starting with my initial interactions with members of FIKA, my first interview with the group's chairman, and the pilot study that resulted from interviewing the other 19 members, I designed research questions that would explore how similar groups experience the world. I formulated interview questions that would guide semi-structured in-depth interviews with group members, and observed, as a participant, how the group members interacted with each other in their groups. I then subjected the data I collected from these interviews and participant observations to coding, categorization, distillation, conceptualization, and synthesis into the following three themes:

1. Community
2. Identity, and
3. Voice

Table 1 below illustrates one such analysis of an interview with a 21-year-old FIKA member; the content in bold represents my questions and responses to the interviewee's answers and accounts:

<b>Identity</b>	<b>Community</b>	<b>Voice</b>
I was born in Nairobi but I've since temporarily relocated to Nakuru. I double as a student	I've been a member of FIKA possibly about two years now. The group was	The anonymity afforded

<p>and head of finance in a company where I'm co-founder (MAMA Ventures Group Limited). I'm in my final year at Egerton University where I'm an economics and sociology double major.</p> <p>I'm an (unapologetic 😊😊) atheist.</p> <p>Officially identified as one for about a year now. After struggling for about six years with skepticism. (Sidebar: It really did feel like a struggle. Like learning how to swim.)</p> <p><b>Q: Fascinating! I don't want to sound like an old fogey but at 21!? That's really something!</b></p> <p>😂😂 Why, thank you! A product of not knowing</p>	<p>introduced to me by a really active member who I was seeing at the time.</p> <p>Talk about useful relationships 😊</p> <p>Said significant other sold the group's agenda really well. I'm always on the look out for interactive communities where I can peek at other people's relatively unconventional ideas.</p> <p>I couldn't join the physical group because of location so I settled for online. The anonymity afforded makes people a little more honest about their unorthodox opinions.</p> <p>That man is Vasquo Lordez. You must have come across his online presence at some point. He might make a good candidate for your interview (if he hasn't already).</p> <p><b>What?! You are kidding? Vasquo is a genius! I see where he gets his brains from!</b></p> <p>Weeeeeell, genius is a streeeeeeeeetch. 😊</p> <p>He tries :)</p>	<p>makes people a little more honest about their unorthodox opinions.</p> <p><b>What role does the group play in your life?</b></p> <p>Well, I get to meet some awesome people through thread interactions and alternative platforms (some guy called 'Jacob' Gachau is a</p>
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<p>exactly what it is I want with my life.</p> <p><b>(You are a woman after my own heart! I'm learning how to swim now, at 40! and it does feel as hard as struggling to lose my religion. Kind of like Jacob wrestling with God. Side bar: my first name is James, which is a variant of Jacob.)</b></p> <p>Learning how to swim is so difficult. I'm on a looooong hiatus.</p> <p>James = Jacob? Your parents set you up for this 😊</p> <p>I had no idea!</p> <p><b>What would you say is your political leaning?</b></p> <p>Kenya's? Indifference is more like it. I think it's relatively dull (blame this on American media). I'd argue for the sake</p>	<p>Also, he has a big head. It mustn't be encouraged for the good of humanity.</p> <p><b>Would you thus say the group serves as a community?</b></p> <p>It does. All the way to taking care of that inherent need to identify.</p> <p><b>Have you made meaningful connections with other members since joining?</b></p> <p>I certainly have! This is a good example despite the fact that it's still in its infancy. 😊😊</p> <p><b>*bows and tips his fedora*</b></p> <p><b>Any of them offline?</b></p> <p>😊😊 But there have been others.</p> <p>From the physical meetings, you mean?</p> <p><b>Yes, and also otherwise. As in have the friends you've made in FIKA more than virtual?</b></p> <p>Yes, I have exactly one 😊😊</p>	<p>good example).</p> <p>I learn quite a bit as well.</p> <p>Reading comments can make for a great class if it's a subject that interests you.</p> <p>It's offers amazing ego boost. Again reading comments can prove how well your mind is doing.</p> <p>The posts that interest me the most are the ones on atheism and</p>
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<p>of it and pick on the mind games at play but I generally don't care much.</p> <p><b>Would you identify as a liberal, conservative, anarchist, communist...?</b></p> <p>Think of what would be birthed if liberalism had a baby with capitalism.</p> <p><b>Do you find that the group gives you a sense of identity that you would otherwise not get in the wider society?</b></p> <p>I'd say so. Thinkers are in the minority. It doesn't help that I'm not particularly social in real life. I'm picky about my interactions so the group is a good social filter.</p> <p>I hadn't noticed this but my time is really running short. Perhaps we could pick this up in the evening?</p>	<p>(That was bad English, but I hope you get what I mean)</p> <p><b>Do you attend any of the physical activities, like the Friday meat, camping, hiking, etc?</b></p> <p>No, location, remember?</p> <p><b>Ah, I see. Yes, that can be tricky.</b></p> <p><b>Would you, if you could?</b></p> <p>Oh, definitely!</p> <p><b>They're fantastic, I can say unreservedly. Especially the book club?! Just something else.</b></p> <p>(Side bar: Freaking safari ants. SAFARI ANTS! It's like a jungle. Can you believe this madness?)</p> <p>Oh, yes! The book club. I'm on the online group but I have never participated. 😊</p> <p>Please refrain from asking why. I have no idea.</p> <p><b>Wah! Safari ants?! That's horrible.</b></p> <p><b>Make sure they don't get into your</b></p>	<p>feminism.</p> <p>Although there's a kind of feminism I don't agree with. I think of it as a corruption of the original idea. It's more female chauvinism than feminism.</p> <p>An example of the extremism I'm talking about is an argument for Hil, for example, simply because she's a woman and</p>
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<p><b>Sure. Sorry for going off in tangents.</b></p> <p>It made the interaction a whole less rigid.</p> <p><b>Thanks for saying that.</b></p> <p>I preferred it like this.</p> <p>I didn't notice the time move 😊:</p> <p><b>... Hey. How you doin? Is now a good time to finish up?</b></p> <p>Hello. Campus electricity. I am so sorry. Also, I have an ant infestation.</p> <p><b>What?! Pole sana. (Kiswahili for "so sorry!")</b></p> <p>I freaking came home to an ant infestation! 2 days away and they are all over even my wallpaper. I'm actually charging my equipment right now. Again, sorry I couldn't let you know on time. So, let's do this while I try to figure out</p>	<p><b>clothes. Otherwise, you may be forced to undress in public! 😬</b></p> <p>I know what you mean but at the moment I am more worried about them getting into my bed. It's happened before. About two years ago.</p> <p><b>I have also participated in the book club only once, but it was great! Online, I only comment once in a blue moon, on a random night.</b></p> <p><b>That is scary! (The ants)</b></p> <p>Yeah. On days like this, I wonder why I don't have roommates. They'd notice them before the entire clan is in.</p> <p><b>Oh my! I feel your pain. So sorry.</b></p> <p>I'll live. Bed bugs are the worst. This I can handle.</p> <p><b>Good to hear you're in charge. 😊😬</b></p> <p><b>Well, that pretty much covers all the interview questions I had. Just one final one: is there anything else you would like to talk about about FIKA?</b></p>	<p>"it's time for women to take over" instead of because her solid ideology (assuming it is solid or better than the opposition).</p> <p>It's tribalism all over again in terms of approach.</p> <p>Candidate x solely because they are from my tribe.</p> <p>[Interestingly]</p> <p>I haven't actually posted in my</p>
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<p>what in Buddha's name I did wrong.</p> <p><b>Sawaz. (Sheng for “ok”. Sheng is a slang language that urban youth in Kenya created from a hybridization of English, Kiswahili, and local languages. “Sawa”, for instance, is Kiswahili for “ok”; the addition of a “Z” at the end makes the word more English sounding, thus giving it an air of urban chic.)</b></p>	<p>No, my mind won't conceive anything further at the moment 😊😊</p> <p>It was a pleasure taking part in this.</p> <p><b>I'm glad you liked it. It was so much fun. Stay in touch. You're a lovely person.</b></p> <p>Cheers 😊😊 You're really pleasant as well. I most certainly will.</p> <p><b>All the best with the ants. I hope you manage to sleep.</b></p>	<p>entire time as a member. :-o</p> <p><b>In addition to giving you a chance to interact with brainiacs, does FIKA help you develop a voice to articulate issues that are important to you?</b></p> <p>I'd say so. I may not have exploited that till now but I know I'd get great audience.</p>
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*Table 1: Themes developed from interview data*

Spencer et al (2003) say that the concept of analytic hierarchy “relates to thematic, largely cross-sectional analysis based on interpretations of meaning” (p. 213). It is “the process through which qualitative ‘findings’ are *built* from the original raw data” (p. 213, emphasis mine). More specifically, Creswell lists the following steps in data analysis:

1. Organize and prepare the data for analysis, including typing up field notes, transcribing interviews, and sorting and arranging the data into different types depending on the sources of the information.
2. Read or look at all the data, to get a general sense of the information and an opportunity to reflect on its overall meaning.
3. Start coding all of the data, by bracketing chunks and writing a word representing a category in the margins.
4. Use the coding process to generate a description of the setting or people as well as categories or themes for analysis. *Description* involves a detailed rendering about people, places, or events in a setting. Researchers can generate codes for this description...Use the coding as well for generating a small number of *themes* or categories – perhaps five to seven themes for a research study. These themes are the ones that appear as major findings...and are often used as headings...They should display multiple perspectives from individuals and be supported by diverse quotations and specific evidence.
5. Advance how the description and themes will be *represented* in the qualitative narrative...

6. A final step involves making an interpretation, asking, “What were the lessons learned?” These lessons could be the researcher’s personal interpretation, couched in the understanding that the inquirer brings to the study from personal culture, history, and experiences. It could also be a meaning derived from a comparison of the findings with information gleaned from the literature or theories. Findings may confirm past information or diverge from it. It can also suggest new questions that need to be asked – questions raised by the data and analysis that the inquirer had not foreseen earlier in the study. Ethnographers can end by stating further questions. Moreover, when qualitative researchers use a theoretical lens, they can form interpretations that call for action agendas for reform and change (2014, 197-201, paraphrased).

I followed this general procedure, which is reiterated by Spencer et al (2003), and Brewer (2000). For Brewer, “it is best to consider analysis as a series of processes or steps, which are time consuming and laborious but end up with an exhaustive and comprehensive analysis” (109). The steps he outlines are as follows:

- Data management/organization
- Coding/indexing into categories and themes
- Content analysis
- Qualitative description
- Establishing patterns
- Developing a classification system of ‘open codes’
- Examining negative case/exceptions that do not fit the analysis.

Following Brewer's model, I developed three broad themes in accordance with "the original questions that were generated in the planning stage and prompted the research in the first place" (109). The research questions I had developed at the proposal stage of my study had been R1, which was concerned with community, R2 with identity, and R3 with voice. Furthermore, the interview protocol asked participants questions aimed at generating responses that would answer these general queries. Table 1 above illustrates classification of the interview data into these three broad themes.

### **Facebook Content**

The other type of data I collected consisted of media content group members posted on the groups' Facebook walls and the discourse these posts generated. I started collecting this set of data, which consisted of 93 posts in total, in January 2016 and stopped in December 2017. Again, just as I did for the interview participants, I followed a method of purposive sampling, picking posts that followed the general criteria laid out below:

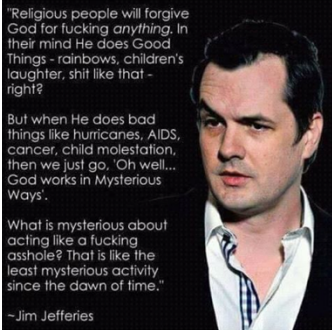
- The post addressed any or all of the three general issues the groups identify as their primary concern, viz. race (for PAN), religion and politics (for FIKA and WWR), and/or feminism (for WWR)
- The post generated debate that illustrated the positions various members took on the issue addressed
- The post was timely and relevant to contemporary affairs, such as the 2016 US presidential election (which generated heated debates throughout the three groups, for various reasons that will become evident later in the findings sections of the dissertation.)

Again, I used grounded theory analysis to code and categorize this data set. Table 2 below illustrates this coding scheme:

Title & Origin of Post	Identity	Community	Voice
<p><i>Women Beyond Belief: A Conversation with Author Karen Garst</i></p> <p>WWR</p>	<p>“Karen Garst [a member of WWR] has collected the stories of twenty-two diverse women who have done just that, broken away from religion. I recently talked to her about her book, <i>Women Beyond Belief: Discovering Life without Religion.</i>” – HuffPo</p> <p>“With scripture often cited as justification for the marginalization of women, it is time</p>	<p>Karen, congrats on the publication – member</p> <p>Whenever I read of the struggles people have to through, emotional and psychological, and the real deep losses when loss of faith sets in I realize how lucky I am in having been brought up by atheist parents. Who nevertheless</p>	



	<p>to acknowledge supported me</p> <p>that one of the final when I did go on</p> <p>barriers to full my own quest to</p> <p>equality for search for faith. –</p> <p>women is another member</p> <p>religion.” –</p> <p>amazon.com</p> <p>description of the</p> <p>book</p> <p>“And there was</p> <p>another woman</p> <p>who also wrote</p> <p>under a</p> <p>pseudonym, Ann</p> <p>Wilcox. The</p> <p>struggle she went</p> <p>through to get rid</p> <p>of the</p> <p>psychological</p> <p>impact of being</p> <p>told not only that</p> <p>she commits sin,</p> <p>but because she is</p>	
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	<p>a woman, she is sin.... she called me a few weeks ago from the Oregon coast and said, ‘I’m sitting out here and I had an epiphany. I’m okay.’ Decades of going through processing the idea that she’s an okay person; that she’s not sin.” – author, during HuffPo interview</p>		
<p>Hilarious</p>  <p><i>Figure 3: Post made on FIKA critiquing the Christian God.</i></p> <p>FIKA</p>	<p>“Its funny that Narcissistic atheists think God owes them something.” – first commentator (C)</p>		<p>“And why is he assigning the bad things that happen to God? Why not to the devil? And we might have had a</p>

	<p>“What?? Where in the fvck in that post do you see him asking for anything?? He's pointing out to he religious hypocrisy of assigning only the good things that happen by chance to their skydad but don't blame him for the opposite..”</p> <p>– OP</p>		<p>conversation.” – second C</p> <p>“Who made the devil??” – OP</p> <p>“Because he(God) says he is the one responsible for everything! – third C</p> <p>“...read your bible , God clearly boasts about creating evil and bad things . – fourth C</p> <p>“By his nature God cannot do</p>
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			<p>evil. Then again there is judgement, there is His wrath, and such. And sometimes He permits evil to happen, I don't know why, I guess He has His reasons.” – second C</p> <p>“And do I need to add, ‘God owes you nada’” – second C</p> <p>“...I guess he works in mysterious ways, doesn't he???” – fifth C</p>
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			<p>“...coz he can stop them if he is all powerful, coz he is the grand designer, so everything good and bad is his design is his responsibility.” – fifth C</p> <p>“But again, that is assuming the christianity world view, which i think is bullshit” – fifth C</p>
<p><i>PrisonLogic.com video</i></p> <p>A mockumentary that challenges the mainstream</p>			<p>This content gives voice to the “one in four” African American men</p>

<p>cultural and media trope about “The War on Drugs”, talking about how it is used by politicians, from Richard Nixon through Ronald Reagan to Bill Clinton, to further the “Convict Lease System” and the “Prison Industrial Complex”.</p> <p>PAN</p>			<p>who are sent to prison for crimes that whites would get a slap on the wrist for.</p>
<p><i>Table 2: Thematic analysis of Facebook content</i></p>			

### ***Presentation of Qualitative Research Findings***

White et al (2003) argue that while all researchers, whether quantitative or qualitative, must present their findings “in an accessible form that will enable the audience to understand them,” qualitative researchers face unique challenges (p. 288). The first of these challenges is explaining to readers the limits and boundaries of qualitative research. The second challenge described by White et al is documentation: “Written accounts...need to explain not only how the research was conducted but also why particular approaches and methods were chosen to meet the aims of the research” (p. 289). Third is integrity. The researcher’s explanations and conclusions must be shown to be grounded in the data (p. 289), walking readers through the analytic and interpretive process without making assumptions about transparency and authenticity,

to ensure that readers can see how the explanations and conclusions came from the data presented, and not *imposed* from without. In other words, researchers must be able to demonstrate that they did not come to the data with preconceived or prejudicial “theories.” The interpretations must emerge from the data.

Fourth, qualitative researchers must convey the rich depth of data coherently and readably. Ethnography is messy. The intimate familiarity it demands, and at the same time produces, almost absolutely necessitates that researchers and participants will get emotionally involved with each other. Researchers must therefore have enough presence of mind to disentangle these emotions from the data, and report them reflexively so that they are seen to be aware of the effect of emotions on findings. Researchers must order the chaos of ambiguously relayed information, and unravel the complexity of in-depth experiences, fears, hopes, and frustrations, into a coherent story.

Regarding the judicious use of verbatim passages, White et al advise using “original passages sparingly and for well-judged purposes” (290); otherwise, a research account becomes too tedious for the reader, and also distracts from and obscures the main point being made.

Last, qualitative researchers must report and explain atypical data. This echoes Brewer’s (2000) point on the importance of presenting “negative cases” as part of the research report. As White et al say, “a report or presentation which focuses only on the dominant message may well be misleading because it will provide only a partial map of the evidence” (2003, 290). To illustrate this, I draw upon an encounter I had with one of my interview participants, whom I will call Marjorie to keep her identity anonymous. She was a member and admin of WWR. While the majority of the

interviewees were not opposed to my making their identities known, quite a few indicated that they preferred anonymity. Thus, for consistency, I use pseudonyms throughout this dissertation<sup>3</sup>.

I was driving home in the middle of the night, when a message on Facebook Messenger pinged on my cellular phone. The phone was hanging on the windshield by its holder, where I had placed it to make it easier to read the GPS navigator. I glanced up at it and saw the message scrawling above the Google Maps navigator:

*hi*

*i just left the admin group bc of white feminism. idk if that would be helpful for your paper*

My heart literally skipped a beat. I had come to a stop since I was at an intersection, and I managed to tap the Messenger icon to see if there was more to it. No, there wasn't, but the Messenger app showed me that Marjorie was typing another message. In response, I typed, "Can I interview you?" and even before I could hit send, another message came in:

*it was a pretty epic exit*

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<sup>3</sup> The founder of WWR, Annie Chant, told me in a private message: "Wolty (her husband, with whom she does most the admin work) and I both work under pseudonyms which given my work as a teacher, frees me up and allows me to be honest online without worrying about fallout at work." Nonetheless, a search of "Annie Chant" on Facebook shows her posts, including photographs of her real persona. She did explain, however, that though they "have many online friends that know us in real life too so our online presence and real life are not mutually exclusive," she likes to keep WWR away from her workplace.



*i was called out for being too harsh on that [post about racism] (She cited the exact subject matter of the post but I withhold it for the sake of confidentiality.)*

*was told to "back off"*

*yes ! (In response to my question if I could interview her for my study.)*

*and i didn't back down and called them out...at length.*

Following Kvale's advice that "the interview traveler...walks along with the local inhabitants, asks questions and *encourages* them to tell their own stories of their lived world" (2007, p. 19 my italics), I felt that I needed to encourage her to talk about this experience and said, "I love that!"

This message thread from Marjorie continued for the greater part of two hours, and its content fills up more than ten pages of a word document, and runs for about 3,500 words. Brewer writes: "Talk-based ethnographic data are voluminous. I collected over three thousand pages of typed field notes..., contained in over half-a-dozen large box files, and over 92 hours of tape recordings..., plus other field notes and material. Bulk and complexity thus both characterize ethnographic data" (2000, p. 105). I later interviewed Marjorie formally, using the protocol approved by the IRB, and after she signed the requisite consent form. While the two-hour interview, conducted via Skype video, was very informative and helped me to get to know Marjorie at a very deep and personal level, it left me feeling so emotionally drained that I was compelled to seek the counsel of my committee co-chairs, more so as a way to "debrief" myself.

Boellstorff et al. (2012) say: "We discover ideas through a systematic process of reading the literature, discussing our research with colleagues, and taking note of whatever strikes us as interesting and pertinent as we experience it in the field.... A

sustained passion for talking, thinking, and reading, for forging collegial discussions in domains of interest—these activities are the source of the good ideas that populate the ethnographic literature...” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 159-160). Throughout this research, I sent a large number of emails, and had Skype calls, phone conversations, and in-person meetings with my advisors as part of that “sustained passion for talking, thinking, and reading.” In addition, I presented some of the issues I was grappling with in terms of gaining access to participants in general, and on how to ethically present Marjorie’s case with the dignity and respect it deserved, at the 2016 Association of Computing Machinery Doctoral Consortium conference. One of my doctoral colleagues strongly recommended intersectional feminism as a possible solution for the racial issue in WWR.

### **Feminism, and How to use it in Research**

On the discussion board of the WWR group on Facebook, Marjorie had posted an article from the online magazine *Everyday Feminism* titled ‘If We Divide, We Don’t Conquer: 3 Reasons Why Feminists Need to Talk About Race’. In keeping with the rules pinned on the group’s wall, she accompanied her post with a caption that read:

I really can't say it better myself. There is a peculiar compartmentalization in feminism that seems to see different kinds of women's oppression as a separate issue, when really they are all interwoven as described here... (Facebook post on WWR, August 2016)

The article’s author, Carmen Rios, cited three reasons why feminists should talk about race: “feminism isn’t just about women,” “gender justice is racial justice,” and “talking about race has only made feminism stronger.” On this last point, Rios cited Kimberlé Crenshaw, who is credited with coining the term intersectionality in her 1989

‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics’ essay:

Many of the concepts feminists now champion began as rebellions by women of color against or within a movement that often excluded, forgot, or devalued their contributions and their struggle. (Rios, 2015)

Crenshaw showed, through the powerful metaphor quoted at length below, that “a lack of intersectionality leads to an erasure of people and their identities” (Rios, 2015).

Imagine a basement which contains all people who are disadvantaged on the basis of race, sex, class, sexual preference, age and/or physical ability. These people are stacked—feet standing on shoulders—with those on the bottom being disadvantaged by the full array of factors, up to the very top, where the heads of all those disadvantaged by a singular factor brush up against the ceiling. Their ceiling is actually the floor above which only those who are not disadvantaged in any way reside. In efforts to correct some aspects of domination, those above the ceiling admit from the basement only those who can say that “but for” the ceiling, they too would be in the upper room. A hatch is developed through which those placed immediately below can crawl. Yet this hatch is generally available only to those who—due to the singularity of their burden and their otherwise privileged position relative to those below—are in the position to crawl through. Those who are multiply-burdened are generally left below unless they can somehow pull themselves into the groups that are permitted to squeeze through the hatch (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 151-152).

In the afore cited message thread, Marjorie informed me that she had been taken to task for posting more than seven race-related messages within the past one week, that she should stop trying to make the group about race. She told me this was “not new to me. Textbook fragile white women protecting their privilege at all costs...” (personal communication, August 26, 2016).

Another article in *Everyday Feminism* said:

White feminism is a set of beliefs that allows for the exclusion of issues that specifically affect women of color. It is ‘one size-fits all’ feminism, where middle class White women are the mold that others must fit. It is a method of practicing feminism, not an indictment of every individual White feminist, everywhere, always. (Uwujaren and Utt, 2015, quoting the BattyMamzelle blog)

I discuss in greater detail in the findings sections of this dissertation how I worked with Marjorie, Annie, and other members and admins of WWR to address this charge of racism. I also in the same section endeavor to be truthful, fair, and sensitive to all parties involved. Suffice it to say here that I found the adoption of a feminist standpoint epistemology (FSE) and methodology, as discussed briefly below, helped me to not only navigate these choppy waters, which jeopardized my various friendships, but also to grow and expand myself as a scholar and researcher.

### **Feminist Standpoint Epistemology, Friendship, and the Ethics of Care**

Sandra Harding argues that an epistemological standpoint gives an inquirer who is in a position of interest, and also “is interested in the sense of being engaged” (1987, p. 107). From this vantage point the researcher can see the ways that knowledge produced by and for the ruling classes obfuscates the power differential between dominant and subordinated classes . Borrowing from Marx, who showed how the proletariat were aware of a reality more concrete, hence more actual, than the bourgeoisie, Harding writes:

Once we undertake to *use women’s experience* as a resource to generate scientific problems, hypotheses, and evidence, to *design research for women*, and to *place the researcher in the same critical plane as the research subject*, traditional epistemological assumptions can no longer be made. (Harding, 1987, p. 183, my italics)

She explains that these three criteria (women’s experience, research designed for women, and critical reflexivity of the researcher) are “prerequisites for producing *less partial and distorted* descriptions, explanations, and understandings” (p. 12, my italics). Traditional epistemological assumptions assume that the origin of scientific

hypotheses or problems is irrelevant. However, critical reflection on scientific questions reveals that “there is no such thing as a problem without a person” (p. 6). Thus, traditional social science has unwittingly sought answers for problems arising from the experience of “white, Western, bourgeois men” (p. 6). Feminist Standpoint Epistemology (FSE) demands that social science aimed at addressing the concerns of women be based on the experience of women, explicitly, seeking to find answers for problems arising from women’s lives, and following a logic based on hypotheses generated by the experiences of women. Such social science, applying FSE, should also be designed to provide explanations that women want and need, not what serves the patriarchal establishment, because often that establishment has made inquiry into the lives of women in a bid to “pacify, control, exploit, or manipulate” them (p. 8).

The third criterion “insists that the inquirer her/himself be placed in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter, thereby recovering the entire research process for scrutiny in the results of the research” (p. 9). The basis of this demand is recognition that the race, class, gender, and culture of the researcher influences not only the choice of methods but also the results of that research. Instead of speaking anonymously, in the fashion of an “objective” authority that is beyond question, the researcher should reflexively make known the dynamics that shaped his research project, thus allowing each reader to determine the veracity of the researcher’s claims.

Since much of the data in this dissertation comes from and is about women without religion, using a methodology that is grounded in feminism makes sense. FSE serves this end. Nancy Hartsock reinforces this point, saying that “a feminist standpoint can allow us to understand patriarchal institutions and ideologies as perverse inversions

of more humane social relations” (Hartsock 1987, p. 159). By listening attentively to all my participants, and doing my best to place myself in their shoes; by endeavoring to be critical of the interpretations I made of the data they presented to me, and constantly asking them to critique my interpretations, and correct them where necessary; by being suspicious of my natural predisposition as a man in a patriarchal society, and questioning that predisposition at every juncture, I hoped to tell their truth as fully as possible.

As mentioned earlier, I found that being friends with my research participants was beneficial both at a personal as well as at a scholarly level. I think neither Marjorie nor Annie, or any of my other participants, would have divulged the richly textured details of their personal lives had they not been confident I would treat this information with the care and integrity demanded by friendship. Axel Honneth advances a political theory that holds mutual recognition as the centerpiece of democratic life. He argues that social institutions provide the means by which moral autonomy, that is, the freedom *from* external coercion, is made real and becomes actual freedom *to* be what one *is*. Such institutions begin with friendship, where “being with oneself in the other means entrusting one’s own desires in all their diffuseness and tentativeness to another person without compulsion or fear” (2014, p. 140). In my friend, Honneth suggests, I can be fully and unreservedly myself, because my potential freedom becomes actual when my “ego can see an element of the external world in the strivings of its partners in interaction—an element that allows it to implement its autonomous aims objectively” (p. 44).

When my advisor told me it was probable that my research style “actually produced” the responses I got from my participants, and made a note about “the nature of FB groups (and other social media platforms/technologies) as serving people who are geographically/physically separated but connected affectively...the ‘quality’ of life in Kenya, in other African nations, or being refugees/exiles or just plain migrants far away from home...” I believe she was alluding to some aspect of Honneth’s mutual recognition, and how my need to affectively connect with these people who represented for me kindred spirits, family away from home, fellows and sisters, drove me to so strongly identify with them. This, I posit, goes way beyond the danger ethnographers face of “going native.” It is an essential part of who I was at various levels of identity as a Kenyan living in Boston, a black man living in an age that has seen incidences of overt racism increase in frequency and intensity, and as an atheist feminist in a world where the religious right seems to be taking over the helms of leadership in an erstwhile secular liberal West.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to interrogate to what extent my research is informed by the feminist ethics of care (Steiner, 2011), but I dare say that I have both consciously and perhaps even more unconsciously treated all my research participants with a regard for their intellectual and emotional well-being. My first instinct when Marjorie told me about her experience with racism in WWR was to immediately side with her. But as soon as I recalled the warmth with which the same admins she found to be “wanting in their intersectionality” had treated me, I had to pause and seek to hear their side of the story.

In fact, I eventually confronted Annie with not only Marjorie's charge, but that of two other Black women who had told me that WWR was racist. In response, Annie sent me screenshots of discussions in the secret admin group of the larger unrestricted WWR group, showing what had transpired in all the instances where the racist charges were levelled. So deeply pained was she by these charges that she formed another secret group that she named 'James and WWR'. She asked nine others of her admin team to answer whatever questions I had as a result of my perusal of the screenshots she sent me.

Again, I discuss the details of this part of the research in the chapter on "Community" as one of my findings. Suffice it to say here that not only did my analysis of the screenshots reveal nothing close to racism, I was delighted by the tenderness and obvious affection shared among the members of the admin group, regardless of gender, race, or national origin. I hope this exercise in giving one and all of the parties a full opportunity to speak and be heard reflects less of what Hartsock calls "the construction of the self in opposition to another who threatens one's very being [which] reverberates throughout the construction of both class society and the masculinist world view and results in a deep going and hierarchical dualism" (1987, p. 169).

### ***Conclusion and Summary***

*"...If the problems feminist inquiry addresses must arise from women's experiences, if feminist social science is to be for women, and if the inquirer is to be in the same critical plane as subject matters (which are often about women and gender), how could men do feminist social science?"*

- Nancy Hartsock



This chapter has examined the techniques (methods) I used to investigate three Facebook groups, and the philosophical foundations (methodology) behind those methods. Because of its exploratory nature, the study needed to be flexible enough to allow itself to address unforeseen developments in the research. Such developments included ethical dilemmas with regard to access to research participants, and conflicts within groups that had been presumed to be founded upon common intellectual, emotional and political interests. I found the qualitative methods of ethnography and grounded theory germane to address this unpredictable nature of the research, for as Boellstorff, et al note, these methods “try to be responsive and open to shifting our interests as we encounter the unexpected” (2012, p. 160). In addition, the epistemological standpoint of feminism proved to be quite useful in making the study true to the “traveler model” (Kvale, 1996) of qualitative research.

I hope that my methodological stance was informed by FSE, which forces me to “engage in the intellectual and political struggle necessary to see nature and social life from the point of view of that disdained activity which produces women’s social experiences instead of from the partial and perverse perspective available from the ‘ruling gender’ experience of men” (Harding 1987, p. 185). This allows me to understand and portray the social worlds of these three Facebook groups from the vantage point of an engaged member.

The next three chapters will present the findings in accordance with the themes derived from the analysis of the data collected, viz. community, identity, and voice.

## CHAPTER FIVE: COMMUNITY

### Facebook Groups as Virtual Communities

#### *Introduction*

This dissertation's central thesis is that the Facebook groups studied here are counterpublics that serve their members as virtual communities. By *virtual community*, I mean a group of people with common social ties whose lives are bonded together *via* a common medium of computer-mediated interaction. Thus, FIKA, WWR, and PAN are communities when their members interact with each other with the recognition that they belong to the same group, and for interests and issues that are of common concern to them as a group.

The groups are also counterpublics that present discourses running in opposition to those of the mainstream publics in which they are located. By counterpublic, I mean a public that is brought into being through discourse that addresses a community that recognizes itself as occupying a subordinate position vis-à-vis a dominant mainstream public (Warner, 2000). FIKA, WWR, and PAN function as counterpublics by engaging in discourse pragmatics that express a subaltern position and that seek to be transformative (Fraser, 1990). In other words, members of these three groups regularly post on their groups' Facebook walls discourses that challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions of the mainstream societies in which they are located.

In this chapter, I analyze ethnographic data that consists of in-depth interviews with members of the three groups, participant observation of the interactions of the active members of the groups, and the content of media stories shared on the groups'

Facebook walls. The data revealed that by and large, these groups functioned as communities in the fashion described by Malcolm Parks (2011) and discussed in Chapter Two, i.e., they follow the general patterns of action as listed below:

1. Members of the group *think* of themselves as a community
2. They *identify* with the community
3. They share information among themselves in ritualized fashion and on a regular basis
4. This regularized information exchange leads to the growth of larger patterns of interaction among members
5. They possess the ability to engage in collective action

### ***Group Members Perceive themselves as a Community***

Out of a total of 45 in-depth interviews, 31 participants said they got a sense of community from the particular Facebook group by answering “YES!” in response to the interview question whether the particular group gave them a sense of community. Two of these 31 qualified the statement, with Janet Grady, a WWR member from Ontario, Canada, saying that the connections she had made with other members were transitory and “merely built around the comments.” Yohanna Mkulima, a 54-year-old Ghanaian chief of a village in Accra, felt that PAN gave him a sense of community, but noted that the group needs better direction and organization, and that its leaders should have “clearer goals and aims for the network.”

Chimendewu Ogbija, a 40-year-old Nigerian who worked as an assistant director in the country’s Department of Defense, gave a resounding “YES!” to the interview question whether PAN is a community:

I've made friends. The group has helped me to know fully who I am, and helped me to cherish and appreciate my rich culture and blackness. My association with the group has widened my knowledge about other blacks not within my reach, and the level of sophistication and beauty inherent in the various African cultures. Above all, I've learnt to discard lots of misinformation imbibed via colonial mentality. I wouldn't fail to mention the role played by the group during the Ebola scourge, especially in my country Nigeria. The group was at the forefront of the calls for supply of drugs to save humanity. I remember personally working with the founder of the group Mfalme to this effect. A big kudos here. We look forward to more offline activities.

Alan Jakom, a 24-year-old Kenyan studying nuclear and quantum engineering at Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology, a public research university in Daejeon, South Korea, exemplified the typical active FIKA member. Interviewed in October 2016, Jakom said he joined FIKA in a quest to find people of like mind when he realized he was an atheist. He was happy to find a group where people based their opinions on empirical facts, logic, and reason, "rather than on authority, jingoism, or speculation." While he was first drawn to posts and discussions that exposed "the fallacies and lies of religion," he had with time become more interested in geopolitics, and posts about Pan-Africanism. For him, only Africans living in, or originally from Africa, can be genuine Pan-Africanists. African Americans, he said, are actually only Americans, and he could not understand why they preface their identity with the "African" qualifier. Geography, he maintained, is crucial to what constitutes community and identity. He said that his sense of community with FIKA was strengthened by a hiking expedition in Kenya during the summer break of 2016, where he met and bonded with members of FIKA. They later formed a WhatsApp group that has brought them even closer together.

Birney Mwangaza, whom I interviewed in October 2016, was one of the four FIKA admins. She was also the secretary of the group in general. In addition to being

a Facebook group, FIKA was registered by the Registrar of Societies of Kenya, a branch of the Attorney General's Office. One of the requirements for a society to be registered is the appointment of a chairman, a secretary, and a treasurer. During the interview, she said that as the group had continued to grow, many members have expressed the desire to have more offline activities than the regular weekly Friday evening meetings. The hiking expedition Jakom said he attended, although not formally organized by FIKA, is an example of what members would like FIKA to do more of. To this end, Mwangaza and the inner core of FIKA members had since 2014 organized an annual team-building activity for interested members. Such activities included climbing Mt. Kenya and camping at one of Kenya's tourist attractions. The members who attended these activities expressed a strong perception of the group as a community. Possibly, the offline activities attracted members who were interested in experiencing stronger communal ties, or, alternatively, the offline activities engendered the strong ties of community.

One of the FIKA members who expressed the strongest sense of the group as a community was Linda Kanyuira, a 33-year-old doctoral student in psychology. She said that through FIKA, she had been able to better understand gender-based violence because on this forum, people did not hide behind masks but spoke their minds. She joined when she was going through a tough time in her life, during which she had very many questions about the meaning of existence, her childhood faith, cosmology, and so on. "I found FIKA seductive," she said, "because I was like, 'I'm not the only one!'" At the time of this interview, she explained, "I am now past the excitement phase. Now I am more of an observer. I like to observe the thought processes of people."

Kanyuira saw FIKA as a platform where one could see how people arrived at the various identities they adopted; this, she said, had allowed the members to present their genuine selves, unlike in “real-life interactions, where people put on masks. Here you can even see the patterns behind people’s collective psychology.” In turn, this authenticity had allowed very deep and lasting friendships to develop among the members, especially the ones who had had opportunities to participate in offline group activities. For example, after Muthomi Mugambi, one of the founder members, died in a road accident, a handful of FIKA members attended his funeral. Kanyuira was deeply impressed by the camaraderie expressed by these friends; although none of them knew the family, one spoke in homage to Mugambi.

Kanyuira was also a member of another Facebook group that grew out of FIKA. In total, FIKA had spawned five offshoot groups: (a) FIKA Book Club, (b) FIKA Marketplace, (c) the inner-core secret group, (d) Atheists in Kenya (AIK), and (e) Kenya Psychology Network (KPN). KPN drew members who are particularly interested in psychology, and boasted among its members a prominent Kenyan psychiatrist, Professor Lukoye Atwoli, who was at the time of this research the dean of the medical school at Moi University, one of the leading public universities in Kenya. Atwoli would occasionally post both on FIKA as well as on KPN, but his high profile as an eloquent columnist for *The Daily Nation* was probably behind the reason for his drastically reduced presence in either of the online platforms. Kanyuira, Mwangaza, Nathan Ochola (the fourth member of the FIKA admin team), and around six other members, met every Wednesday evening at a downtown Nairobi restaurant to discuss

trending topics in psychology, much in the fashion of the FIKA Friday evening “meats.”

Kerry Kiragu, a 25-year-old currency trader, was one of those FIKA members who traversed all the five offshoot groups. He was a regular contributor to the AIK blog, and when AIK was denied registration as a society by the Attorney General, he wrote an incisive rebuttal to the AG’s claim that the words in the Constitution of Kenya that say “We, the people of Kenya—ACKNOWLEDGING the supremacy of the Almighty God of all creation” made an atheist group illegal by definition. During my interview with him in August 2016, he told me that in FIKA he found friends who were as dear to him as his childhood playmates. This was especially so because as far back as he could remember, his life’s goal has always been the pursuit of knowledge. Indeed, his personal Facebook profile showed him posting antitheist content as early as when he was only in his late teens. Therefore, for him to have found a group where one could speak one’s mind without fear of censure was a great boon, and he described it as “a fellowship of freethinkers.” The post below, which he made on FIKA on May 31, 2015 illustrates the intellectual fellowship he alluded to in the interview:

A few days ago, I went on a date (a first date). For some reason, the subject of children came up, and I revealed my intention never to have them. That set off an explosion. What kind of man am I who does not want to see his own flesh and blood? Am I scared of responsibility? Do I have esteem issues? Was I abused as a child? She was very appalled. I do not need to be told there will not be a second date.

I still do not get it. What is so wayward about wishing to go through life childless?

This post received 232 comments. Of the first 20 comments, only one agreed with Kiragu’s date: “It’s selfish n narcissistic... n who’ll take care of u when ur old??”

The vast majority of the commenters, who by a rough estimate were equal in number between women and men, and many of whom were parents who expressed the joy they derived from their children, said categorically that there was nothing wrong with Kiragu. One, whose profile picture showed her as a youngish woman, said:

It's more selfish to want kids then impose that belief that you should have them on others. Kids are a joy FOR YOU. Kids are YOUR legacy. Kids are love and look up to you and admire YOU without calling you out on your bullshit. I'm not saying I don't want any necessarily. I've said time and again, my primal biology will probably bully me into reproduction but it's overrated to think that they are fun. It's mostly struggle and worry. Kerry, that date was unenlightened or talking out of her hormones.

Another, a man who later turned out to be a psychologist with a very nuanced and empathetic approach towards others, opined:

I'm a father. And while it is very hard work to both provide for her and raise her, it is very fulfilling to see my daughter grow up. It's a very special kind of happiness. But that's me (and others like me), and not necessarily everyone else. There is nothing wrong with being child free, and those who don't want children and chose not to have them should be celebrated and applauded, not condemned.

A member I interviewed for the pilot study told me he had to hide his identity via a false profile name and picture due to his living in a highly religious and illiterate neighborhood in a semi-rural area of Kenya. He said:

Being a minority is pain in 3rd world. I've related 'problems': i am polyamorous. And godless. I make that clear the moment a mate show interest. And that's why i prefer to meet women on the web than at traditional places nowadays. A stranger takes a look at your profile or read your wall-posts, and have a great deal of an idea of what you are. A day of inbox chat is worth months oral communications. (sic)

A woman, a 50-year-old real estate divorcee who currently lives in Kansas:

There is nothing wrong with you. Most people seem incapable of making their own decisions without societal pressure, and so, they cannot relate when one knows what they want and verbalizes it. You do you. I know enough ladies who are also childfree by choice right here in Kenya. And yes, they are Kenyans.



These comments, I contend, show that Kiragu was right to view FIKA as a fellowship of freethinkers. The many commenters who came out to support him represent a community of non-judgmental people who “stand with” one of their own. It is also a prime example of counterpublic discourse. Kiragu’s distress at being called selfish and narcissistic, or being asked whether he had endured abuse as a child to explain why he would not want to sire children, reflects the dominant public’s presumption that everyone ought to have children. The one or two members who sided with his date’s position represent the taken-for-granted assumption that children are the biggest blessing anyone can have.

Johnny Okoth is a 31-year-old accountant with a high school education and office administrator for a business start-up that has 35 employees. Serving as a wooden pole supplier, the firm has a plant in Nakuru, the largest town in the Rift Valley province, and its main offices in Nairobi. said that he likes the company because it is growing and is run by very young people; “even the directors are not over 40,” he said. He said that he had formed meaningful connections with FIKA members, “especially those I feel I can learn from, from different fields, so that I can learn many various things.” FIKA gives him a definite sense of community, since he keeps in touch with the members he has developed connections with. He also believes that the group “views him as one of them.” Okoth further explained that he spends a lot of time on FIKA, and has been castigated by quite a few people for doing this, because they say that “social media is for idlers.” For him, on the contrary, being on FIKA is educational.

One of the chief admins of WWR, Jeana Greer, a 71-year-old Australian woman, who has been part of the group since Annie started it, answered the question whether WWR was a community for her:

Yeees...in terms of its being an internet group, yes, I'd say it is as near a community as such things have yet evolved to be.

Mmmm...thinking of that—there's a definite difference between virtual and actual communities (well obviously) but I think the virtual is much more fragile, more ephemeral—possibly because the face of the internet persona is likely very different from the reality, and we never really know who someone is. But as nearly as it can be, WWR is a community—and a fairly close one. I have to say, though, for all that it confers on one, there is none of the intimate camaraderie I would expect in, say, the theatre, or a sports or community group. Mainly because of the face-to-face knowledge of each other that's possible there.

Greer explained she had been a life-long feminist, and viewed WWR as an echo of the very first women's rights movements, which she said had begun as nothing more than women sitting together to discuss their own issues, and trying to mutually understand themselves vis-à-vis the larger world where women had been denied equal rights with men for centuries. They had not set out to be revolutionary, but “a lot of really good stuff came out of those groups—some formal, but more just the general growth of women's consciousness of their power, and their future.” In this sense, WWR was similar to women sitting together to discuss their experiences of other atheist movements that discriminate against women due to an erroneous assumption that equality between the sexes has long been achieved.

Greer's qualification about the ways in which WWR gave her a sense of community is reminiscent of Zizi Papacharissi's affective publics. Her observation that “the virtual is much more fragile, more ephemeral,” echoes Papacharissi's note that “these publics are activated and sustained by feelings of belonging and solidarity, however evanescent those feelings may be” (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 310). I believe that

those of my participants who said they did not get a sense of community from the groups probably had a more traditional view of what the term means, more of what Greer called “the face-to-face knowledge of each other.” Perhaps, if I had framed the question more clearly as to indicate by community I meant a sense of belonging and shared interests, some, especially the likes of Banderas and King’uriu, would have answered differently. Having said that, by the criterion given by Parks, I conclude that these three Facebook groups do not give all their members an unequivocal sense of community. But at least for *some* members, FIKA, WWR, and PAN as Facebook groups provide a sense of community, and that such members *perceive* the groups as communities. There was no clear indication by either the interview data or the content posted on the groups’ walls to suggest that any of the three groups was better at fostering community than the others.

Fourteen of the 45 participants I interviewed said the particular Facebook group in question did not give them a sense of community. Camille Itimu, a 24-year-old woman who said that she identified with the Christian religion, “although the word ‘religion’ is not quite accurate but a ‘relationship’ with the Most High is,” had developed only superficial connections with FIKA members. However, she had found quite a few of the men attractive, especially because, as she said, “I do love an intelligent mind.” Mgotaji Ajengaye, a 24-year-old actuarial science student and insurance underwriter, said PAN appeared to be a community around the comment interactions between some regular members, but he did not himself get a sense of community from the group. This, he explained, was partly because he had joined the group during a time when he was relatively inactive on Facebook. On the other hand,

he found much higher interactivity with FIKA members (of which he was also a member), and could therefore say that FIKA gave him a sense of community. Daudi King'uriu, also a college student, said that connections with FIKA members were minimal, although he had made friends, both online and offline, from the group.

Wangechi Muraguri, the 50-year-old realtor who now lives in Kansas, told me in December 2016 that although she found FIKA very liberating due to its having people who were not afraid to make their stand on controversial matters clear, she did not feel any personal connection with the members. "I don't feel it," she explained. "I've been in groups where you connect so deeply you actually want to meet the members. FIKA doesn't do it for me. Otherwise, I would have met with them when I was recently in Nairobi."

Similarly, Natalie Refurbishment, a 34-year-old health supplies procurement executive who was trained by and has worked with the U.S. Department of Defense, said she had not formed any meaningful connections with members of WWR. She said that the group "is very cerebral," and that she participated in the discussions on the group's wall because she was a "godless irreverent person." Thus, the memes that made fun of God and religion were very appealing to her. She also liked to read the articles that posted on the WWR wall, to see how much she "fits under this banner [of women without religion]." Because she already had a large network of friends who were not religious, she did not feel the need to be part of WWR as a community.

Antonina Banderas, a 34-year-old human resources specialist for a non-profit organization in New York, also said WWR did not provide her with a sense of community. Originally from Lima, Peru, she was raised as a Catholic, and did not

openly talk about her atheism, especially with her family members, who were still practicing Catholics. She had lived in Lima all her life until she got transferred to New York in 2014. At first, she had been a member of a Peruvian atheist Facebook group, but she left it when the admin turned out to be “a jerk who made fun of people who disagreed with him.” When she found WWR, she was very glad because the group was feminist in addition to being atheist. She liked its international perspective, which she said was rare on the “U.S.-dominated Facebook.” However, she had not formed any meaningful connections with members, and she did not feel that the group gave her a sense of community.

### ***Group Members Identify with the Community***

One of the themes identified by Parks as essential to virtual communities for participants in social networking sites is that they “were emotionally bonded to others in a way that conferred a sense of belonging and group identification” (2011, p. 118). Therefore, even more than merely feeling that the Facebook group gave them a sense of community as depicted in the examples in the preceding section, Parks’ criteria suggest that a community should confer upon its members a sense that they *belong* to the group, and that they *identify* with the group.

Peter Wolty perhaps best represents this ideal. He had been “together with Annie for about six years” at the time of my interview with him in September 2016. As a 51-year-old middle-class Australian, he had been self-employed for the past 25 years as a carpet-cleaner. He had been raised as a “cultural Christian,” which he said meant that he identified as Christian although he had never been able to believe any of the faith’s teachings. Being an atheist was originally not important to him, but because

religious people intruded on his life by for example voting against marriage equality for non-heterosexual couples, or being opposed to the freedom of terminally ill patients to choose euthanasia, he found that he had to stand up to them. Therefore, he joined the Australian Atheist Foundation (AFA), where he met Annie.

They soon found out that most atheist spaces in the country were misogynistic, with women receiving constant “bashing.” Annie therefore thought it necessary to start an atheist group that was woman-friendly, and so was the concept of Women Without Religion born. Wolty agreed, and he supported her, seeing it as a safe place where women could “hang out” without the threat of misogyny. WWR soon became the only place where Wolty’s and Annie’s female friends could speak about their experiences as atheists without being shouted down by “white middle-aged men.”

Wolty and Annie created a secret admin group to guide the main WWR group, based on ground rules from the AFA, even though they made it clear right from the outset that WWR was not a debate group. Their purpose was not to convert anyone, but to offer like-minded people a place to share their views and experiences. In this sense, WWR is a counterpublic in the fashion of Catherine Palczewski, who says that, instead of seeing counterpublic sphere theory through the traditional lens of direct political participation, protest theory should be asking such novel questions as this one: “In those systems where a dominant public, often unfortunately coexistent with the state, marginalizes large segments of the population, how do we generate spaces in which dialogue may flourish?” (Palczewski, 2001, p. 164).

Palczewski proposes that scholars should recognize new social movements’ “ability to function outside the dominant public as a site of critical oppositional force...

[and as sites] of identity creation and self-expression to the disempowered” (p. 165). Quoting Rita Felski, she argues for the “affirmation of specificity” that counterpublics provide, thus empowering marginalized identities by giving them the comfort of being with others who are like themselves.

Therefore, these movements have a two-fold nature; that of convincing the dominant social order to change, and, more importantly, that of validating the sense of identity and worth of their members. WWR seeks to do exactly this, by having rules about who can join the group, and what kind of discourses are carried out by members. Every request to join has to be vetted by the admins, as does every post. And yet, the group is a *public* Facebook group, which means that “anyone can see the group, its members and their posts” (Facebook, 2017). Annie purposely wanted it to be public so that it could show everyone everywhere that people like these exist. As Wolty concluded my interview with him: “We are trying to change the world without changing the world.”

Rizza Talbot, a 60-year-old African-American nurse who lived in Harlem, told me over Skype, that PAN had enabled a situation where people of African descent from around the world could get a sense of identity that was not predicated on what the dominant social order says:

This is the first time in history that we are able to connect with our roots back in Africa, and with our cultural history. We were torn away from the communities we came from, which spoke a great variety of languages; for this reason, scholars have not been able to reach the masses of black people with vital information about our original identities. Social media is now allowing us to learn about these communities, about our community.

Europeans, she explained, have for centuries sought to break black communities apart. During the scramble for Africa, they occupied the ancestral lands of Africans, put the

natives in reserves, or, worse, concentration camps, beat their bodies, hearts, minds, and wills, to drive out their sense of dignity and self-worth, then turned them into cheap manual labor for their own colonial enterprises. Here in America, Talbot continued, Europeans<sup>4</sup> go into successful black communities and steal their best brains to employ them in their white industries, causing a brain drain, and turn these communities into ghettos, where only mediocre minds can survive. Calling it assimilation, they woo enterprising and successful blacks into their affluent neighborhoods, so that “they can keep the majority of our community poor and dependent on government handouts.... We, through a group such as this, now have the opportunity to reverse this trend.”

Talbot made black dolls, which she intended to use for raising awareness the world over about the rich diversity of the African race. She said that once she retired from nursing, she would start a business making cultural dolls, “intending to represent what you normally don’t see in dolls; there are some cultural groups that are not well represented by the media.” Talbot told me that her repertoire of dolls would include blond-haired Africans with blue eyes. “People are not even aware that you can be African and have blond hair and blue eyes,” she said. She also said that the first cherubs and seraphs to be imagined and portrayed were African, that even Christianity itself was a perversion of indigenous African religion. A website she created contains images of black cherubs and seraphs, which she said were aimed at raising awareness on the African origins of Christianity.

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<sup>4</sup> Consistently, Talbot referred to Whites, whether in America or elsewhere, as Europeans. As I interviewed more of the members of PAN, I came to realize that this was a tendency embraced by individuals who identified White supremacy with a Eurocentric view of the world, rather than with skin color.



PAN, it is worth remembering, identifies itself on its Facebook wall as a self-help group, and as “a platform for knowledgeable, pragmatic think-tanks and concerned Global Africans (Africans and African descendant people) to engage in intellectual discussions on matters relevant to the progress of the Global African race...” (‘Description’, Pan-African Network, Facebook, 2017). Talbot thus would make the ideal member of this group, as she not only engages in and posts about intellectual discussions and debates, but also actively wants to participate in the socioeconomic development of her race.

Gaga Tracey, another member of the group, espoused much the same thing. She was a 51-year-old African American, who had recently moved back to her homeland, Ghana. She told me via email interview that heeding Kwame Nkrumah’s call in the early 60s, her parents moved to Ghana, and lived there for 4 years during which time she and her sister were born.

Tracey said she joined PAN upon the behest of Mfalme Yaoundé, one of the chief admins with whom I had been in communication during my struggle to recruit participants for the study. Yaoundé contacted her because of one of her “DAILY WOKE” posts. She joined the group “to bring awareness to the plight of the African in America and the perils we face there; our children being murdered in droves and we too stuck in ignorance to leave.” Prior to the interview, she wrote me a long email introducing herself as “a Black Panther baby, [who] was always instilled with Black pride and love for all things African.” She said:

[I] HAD to run away from the U.S. because the everyday killing of our youth in every city and town has become too much for me. Knowing my son and daughter have been informed of or have attended over 300 funerals of their peers is too much unnatural living; the future of our entire Black race is

becoming extinct in America. I live now in Ghana because my parents raised me with the knowledge of African ways and cultures as well as the cultures of the Caribbean, Haiti, Cuba and other places where Africans were carted off to...

Karani Koro, a 39-year-old Rwandan musician who now lives in Paris, told me he believed that the future of Africa lay in creating a union of African states that could stand up to European “conquistadors.” He quoted Marimba Ani (1994), whose ethnography of Europe from the perspective of an African anthropologist showed how Europeans were actually different from other people: they possess what she calls “Yurugu,” and defines as a culture of a dualism that sees the world, including all the people in it, as an object for its conquest and dominion. Through PAN, Koro said, he hoped to bring young Africans across the globe together in the “form [of] a peer mechanism where we could meet once a month to discuss faster implementation of the New African World Order.” He added:

We should quit the existing monetary systems that force Africans to be under the thrall of foreign masters; for example, France controls Francophone African countries by demanding they convert their currency to French Francs and hold 65% of it in France.

He said that he and Yaoundé were in consultations on how to give the members a voice, and pointed out that he already had the advantage of being a musician who could speak to large audiences. Again, as an example of how such a group is not so much about direct political participation à la Palczewski, Koro said: “Our intention is not to win elections but to encourage current leaders to be Pan-African.”

On April 30, 2017 a PAN member shared on the group wall an article with the following caption:

#TRUTH!!!! “They took away our spirituality and gave us religion; they banned us from gathering under a tree by the fireside and herded us into

churches.” How can anyone of African descent be worshipping the same tool used to uselessly murder their ancestors? (See Figure 4 below.)



Figure 4: Image of Ghanaian Musician Azizaa’s “Black Magic Woman.” Linked media: <https://youtu.be/bfeGpcmfMBA>

In Michael Warner’s terms, this is counterpublic address *par excellence*. As I discussed in Chapter Three, Warner defined counterpublics as publics that mark themselves off from not merely “a general or wider public but a dominant one” (p. 119). This post points to European Christian missionaries and colonizers as the dominant public against which the subordinate counterpublic of “anyone of African descent” marks itself.

The article linked to the post was from the September 2015 online issue of *The FADER*, a magazine which describes itself as “the definitive voice of emerging music and the lifestyle that surrounds it” (The FADER, 2017). It was an interview with a famous Ghanaian musician, Azizaa, about her music video “Black Magic Woman”, featuring Wanlov, a highly vocal African rapper. It cited a 2012 “global” poll of religiosity per nation, which found Ghana to be the most religious country in the world.

In the interview, Azizaa and Wanlov decried the poverty of the majority of Ghana's population vis-à-vis the wealth accumulated by their pastors:

In the video we bring light to a huge problem in Ghana, or Africa as a whole, one that many refuse to acknowledge. Many religious leaders are abusing the people in different ways and taking advantage due to vulnerability and desperation of the people. It's also a mental problem. Hoarding—to hold on to as much money as possible, in order to live like colonial masters. (Lebrave, 2015)

Wanlov noted that while the older generation in Ghana might not like the video, due to its depiction of a black magic woman positively, “the seeking youth and the open-minded will love her” (Lebrave, 2015). Here, we can see an appeal to the affect described by Papacharissi. Affective publics, argued Papacharissi, consist of and are sustained by “soft structures of feeling” (2014). Both the anticipated audience of the video—as a Warnerian imaginary public that is *not yet*—as well as the members of the PAN Facebook group to which the *FADER* article was shared, represent affective publics. Shareability, maintained Papacharissi, is the central quality of online publics; by posting the video on YouTube, Azizaa made it *scalable* (Papacharissi's term denoting the potential of online discourses to go viral), while the poster on PAN augmented that potential even further. In addition, by sharing this article on the group wall, the poster was indicating her identification with PAN as a community, a community of people of African descent, whom she felt should not be worshipping the foreign god of the European colonialists.

Mkulima, the Ghanaian village chief, said that he joined PAN through another group, an NGO he founded called the African Call Foundation, which was linked to PAN because of pursuing similar ideals. Living in Accra, the capital city of Ghana, at the time, he told me that he identified with the group because, mainly, of its name, but

also because it consisted of “people who are coming together to share ideas from various parts of the African continent and the world, with Africa’s interests at heart.” He said he believed that representative democracy does not work for Africa, and it should be replaced by participatory democracy. Having been educated in Russia and Britain, with a master’s degree in economics, he said the best form of transformation needed in Africa was through the strengthening of what he called the “I” principle. He defined this as “the importance of developing an African personality with strong values as the vital ingredient for development.” Asked for further clarification, he gave me a link to his website, <http://www.africacallfoundation.com/>.

I prodded Yohanna further for his view on whether PAN gave him a sense of community with the rest of the membership, and from his response, I would have to conclude that it did not. He said that “with its broad membership it is definitely a community. But all communities need organization, purposeful leadership and a definite aim.” He seemed to think that PAN was not living up to its potential, especially in mobilizing Africans to achieve what he believed they are capable of. A perusal of his website showed that the mission of his NGO:

is to bring into being a Pan African Organization with a worldwide membership. A membership dedicated to the self-discovery and realization of what we have come to define as the ‘I’ PRINCIPLE. A membership of individuals that live their lives to the fullest, whilst demonstrating the unity in the diversity of all creation.

In Yohanna and his quest, I see what Papacharissi calls the “not yet element [of] affect [which] contains anticipation, promise, hope, and potential, or, what Seigworth and Gregg term ‘an inventory of shimmers’” (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 311). PAN seems to

be the most evanescent of the three counterpublics studied in this dissertation. To quote Papacharissi again, online

...publics are activated and sustained by feelings of belonging and solidarity, however *evanescent* those feelings may be. The connective affordances of social media thus awaken what Arendt might refer to as the in-between-bond of publics. They also invite forms of expression and connection that frequently help liberate the individual and collective imaginations. (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 310, my italics)

### ***A Community Regularly Shares Information Among Members in Ritualized Fashion***

The most common posts shared on the PAN Facebook group wall either celebrated outstanding African leaders or castigated European atrocities against Africans. For example, on November 8, 2016, a member posted a direct copy of the Wikipedia entry on Thomas Sankara, and captioned it thus: “Know your African history – Thomas Sankara.” (Figure 5 below.)



*Figure 5: Post on the PAN Facebook group about late Burkinabé president Thomas Sankara*

The post chronicled the achievements of the late Burkinabé president, highlighting such points as his being compared by admirers to Che Guevara. Sankara led a “popular coup” to take over power after a long series of coups since the country gained independence from the French in 1960. As part of breaking away from the colonial legacy, he changed the country’s name from Upper Volta to Burkina Faso. He took away the traditional Burkinabé power of tribal chiefs, and embarked on a program of promoting the rights of women, becoming the first president to appoint women to high government positions. In short, the post praised Sankara as a peerless African luminary, reflecting PAN members’ ritualized celebration of heroic Africans. The post elicited four comments and 14 likes.

Another example of the typical content posted by PAN members, made on October 22, 2016, was shared on the PAN wall from a page with similar goals and interests, the Pan-African Renaissance, which was registered on Facebook as a non-profit organization. The post was in praise of another African luminary, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, and started with the following message:

Muammar Al-Gaddafi inherited one of the poorest nations in Africa; however, by the time he was assassinated, Gaddafi’s policies had turned Libya into Africa’s most prosperous nation. Libya had the highest GDP per capita and highest life expectancy in Africa. Less people lived below the poverty line than in the Netherlands. (Pan-African Network, 2016)

The post decried the assassination of Gaddafi, which it averred was based on his rejection of Western imperialism, particularly the American brand. According to the post, Barack Obama “confiscated US\$30 billion from Libya’s Central Bank, which Gaddafi reserved for the establishment of an African Central Bank” (Pan-African Network, 2016). Gaddafi had always been opposed to the establishment of American

military bases in Africa, and had doubled every financial offer made by the US to African governments “to host an AFRICOM (United States Africa Command) military base” (Pan-African Network, 2016).

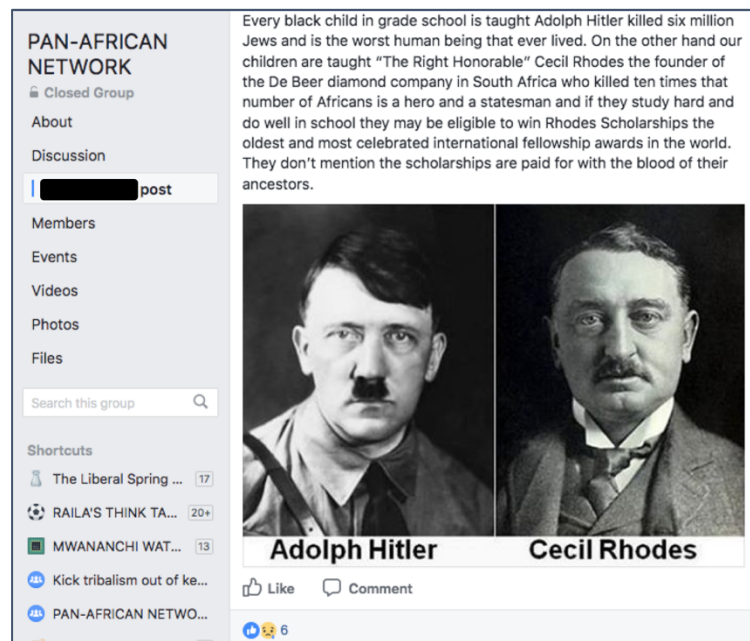
This post made a strong case for the post-Westphalian world as conceived in Nancy Fraser’s later critique of the Habermasian conception of the public sphere. Fraser asks: “If states do not fully control their own territories, if they lack the sole and undivided capacity to wage war, secure order and administer law, then how can their citizenries’ public opinion be politically effective?” (2007, p. 16). Gaddafi’s Libya clearly could not control its own territories. It was invaded by NATO and made a “prime beef” example of. Libya could not wage war against the US. It could not even secure order and administer law. Its citizens, and those of other African nations, could barely have politically effective public opinions vis-à-vis the West.

While PAN cannot provide a means for empowering Africans with a voice that can speak to the dominance of the West, its ability to still engage in conversations that do not appear in the mainstream global media system give it the potential to be a counterpublic in which members can get “training” on the things that matter to them. In this sense, it functions as what Fraser (1992) called “training grounds” for debate, which purpose she explained subaltern counterpublics serve when they enclave themselves and “function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment” (p. 68). Ideally, in Fraser’s conception, this enclaving is not meant to be permanent as it can and often leads to separatism, which is not conducive for democracy. It should only offer some respite from the wider “inter-public” space, to enable the subalterns to better articulate and formalize their counter-discourses before taking them into that wider arena for



contestation with the dominant publics. Thus, I propose that through the sharing of such information as this post in praise of Gaddafi, the PAN member who posted it was hoping to contribute to the group's sense of a community that ritually shares information, and also to strengthen it as a potential counterpublic.

As another example of how these groups regularly share information as virtual communities, Joy Munene, the PAN member who in the previous section posted the article about the Ghanaian musician's celebration of black magic, made the following post in March 2017 (Figure 6, below):



*Figure 6: A post made on the PAN Facebook group wall on March 11, 2017, comparing Cecil Rhodes to Adolf Hitler*

The post garnered six likes, with one as a sad emoticon, and three comments. The first comment expressed anger and anguish at “Those Heartless Minionz!” The second one opined that so long as Africans continued to depend on Western countries, Blacks were bound to remain in colonialism. The commenter called on his fellow Africans to look up to such former African leaders as Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah, and Nelson

Mandela, against whom the current leaders cannot compare. The third comment noted that the “Pale face punk they call King Leopold of Belgium. Killed a lot more than Hitler in Congo,” yet, the history books “never call him a terrorist or evil man.”

The sharing of information by these groups that makes them communities, as suggested by Malcolm Parks, is emphatically not merely for the sake of sharing information by itself; rather, it has to be marked by its being in ritual fashion, in a manner that bonds the members together affectively. The meaning of ritual here is in the order of James Carey’s view of communication as ritual. Contrasting it to the transmission model, where “communication” is linked to the geography of early American industrialism to denote the movement of goods and people from one place to another, Carey pointed to the ritual view as a case where

communication is linked to terms such as “sharing,” “participation,” “association,” “fellowship,” and “the possession of a common faith.” This definition exploits the ancient identity and common roots of the terms “commonness,” “communion,” “community,” and “communication.” A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs. (Carey, 1989, p. 18)

Thus, the kind of information that is shared by the current Facebook groups acting as virtual communities is aimed at underlining their commonness and their shared beliefs. FIKA, for example, has clear rules of engagement that prescribe what the group believes in, what kind of information its members are expected to share, and what kinds of posts are forbidden. Rather than merely serving as a medium for transmitting or imparting information, the group sees itself as a fellowship of brothers and sisters who are bonded by their opposition to dogma and tradition in favor of freethinking, science, and empiricism. For instance, earlier mentioned Birney Mwangaza posted the message below:

This group is meant to create a space for healthy discussions and debates. Advertising unless through the admins is not allowed. The files section provides for Fika guiding rules. Henry Okullu mark this as a last warning for breaking the rules. Fika does not promote atheism nor Raila presidency but is interested in critical thought. ~Admin.

As the 2017 general elections drew closer in Kenya, Okullu had been posting advertisements of his support for Raila Odinga's campaign for the presidency. A quick search on the FIKA group wall reveals that he first got a warning from Solomon Marshall, the group's chair, in July 2017. Marshall's post cautioned Okullu for putting up posts that bordered on advertising, which was directly forbidden in the rules of engagement. However, Marshall continued, Okullu would be allowed to maintain his posts if he gave "rational reasons to vote for Raila" (Marshall, FIKA, 2017). Marshall clarified that by "rational reasons," he did not mean reasons for why one should not vote for Uhuru Kenyatta and his running mate, because, after all, there were eight presidential candidates on the ballot. In addition, Marshall said that Okullu would be asked to "tear down" all his posts on this if he failed to provide the requisite rational reasons. Marshall's post ended thus: "In any case I still request that you reduce the frequency of posts on your current obsession."

Marshall warned Okullu three more times, pointing out what rules his posts were infractions against. Some members complained that Marshall was being too lenient, that Okullu should have been banned from the group way earlier than August 20, 2017, when Marshall finally made a comment on one of Okullu's posts that "you were given a final warning on what will happen if you ignore our rules. Please say bye to the folks here." An analysis of the posts around the removal of Okullu from FIKA reveals that his posts were not in the spirit of "community building." They did not

represent a shared sense of beliefs and practices as ritual sharing of information is supposed to foster. Indeed, all the political posts that were put up on the group wall during the Kenyan general elections were bitterly divisive, leading to many members of old to voice grave concerns that FIKA had lost its way as a forum for freethinkers.

On the contrary, posts that adhered to the stated goals of questioning tradition and dogma proved to serve the purpose of maintaining the group as community. In January 2017, for instance, Marshall made a post that posed a question raised by a member on another post: “Daniel Ng’ang’a asked ‘Can a universe that has no meaning/purpose ever have truth?’” He tagged seven members, including Ng’ang’a. The post generated many and varied comments, and extended over the course of an entire week. One of the comments evoked 297 replies; below is an examination of how it portrays the ritual sharing of information as a hallmark of community building.

The comment with 297 replies came from Ng’ang’a, and said:

Truth is our intellectual perception of objective reality. We usually arrive at truth by deduction or logic (philosophy), or by induction (science). Both logic and science as systems use principles that are discovered rather than invented. But why should the universe be intelligible to us Solomon Marshall? This question has puzzled physicists like Einstein and Jastrow.

Einstein said something like... “The most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible.” It is puzzling that the universe seems to have anticipated us. As though it was designed!

Festus Ndegwa, one of the members tagged by Solomon in the OP, gave the first reply to Ng’ang’a’s comment. He explained that the God alluded to by Einstein’s apparent reference to intelligent design was clearly not the personal God of Christianity followed by Ng’ang’a. Rather, Einstein had meant that the universe has deterministic laws which lends it a sense of order. This seeming underlying order found in the universe is what Einstein referred to as God, and it was what led him to make the now famous

pronouncement that “God does not play dice!” in his rejection of the uncertainty and indeterminacy of quantum physics. Ndegwa posted a link to a website created by Stephen Jay Gould entitled “Thoughts of a Freethinker.” The website was a collection of quotes by Einstein. The opening quote stated:

I do not believe in a personal God and I have never denied this but have expressed it clearly. If something is in me which can be called religious then it is the unbounded admiration for the structure of the world so far as our science can reveal it.

Antigone Ngaroiya, one of the most avid Christian apologists in FIKA, gave the next reply, cautioning Ng’ang’a to “tweak” his definition of “Truth.” She asked him how truth could “be a perception if perceptions can be wrong and therefore untrue?” In her opinion, “truth is reality in and of itself.” Shepard Mwaura, an agnostic, countered this with the observation that because perceptions can be right, therefore true, and that because even “the untrue is truly untrue,” certainty is not attainable.

The thread continued in this fashion, with Ng’ang’a offering rebuttals to his critiques, and they in turn giving rejoinders to those rebuttals. A few other interlocutors joined in the debate, and the tone and color of the debate changed with time and with the ensuing exchanges between the various interlocutors. Sometimes, it would appear to get “personal,” with Ndegwa especially using sarcasm and jest to poke fun at the theists’ opinions and arguments. When called out about this, when told that he was losing the objective spirit of the debate, he defended himself with the assertion that he was “yet to find a reason to not be irked by such a monstrosity of a God as the one [Christians] worship.” The exchanges would then take different tangents and twists and turns, sometimes being dominated by a single argument between Ng’ang’a and Marshall, or Ng’ang’a and Ndegwa, or Ngaroiya and Ndegwa. On various occasions,

a debater would invoke another discussion thread on FIKA, or another one of the recurrent themes on most online debates about God and religion. In the end, nothing new seemed to have been learned by anyone, and each person seems to have entrenched their beliefs and positions only deeper.

What is unmistakable from the debate, however, was that it brought its participants closer as members of FIKA. Even when Ndegwa seemed to get really “riled up” by Ng’ang’a, he would again and again tag him and prod him and goad him to respond to his often-scathing attacks on Christianity. Even when Ngaroiya expressed her dismay at Ndegwa’s “emotional ranting,” she would ask him to consider the positive aspects of the Bible, reminding him that she acknowledged the positive sides of atheism. Even when Mwangi told Ng’ang’a, “presuppositionalism is your only retort?” for saying “All of us presuppose,” he continued to engage in what he was already admitting was a predetermined debate.

As one goes down the comments and replies and rejoinders and rebuttals, it becomes increasingly clear that the aim, or perhaps the result, of this exchange of information is not to change anyone’s mind, or to convince anyone of anything. Rather, it becomes increasingly clear that the debaters are performing a ritual that affectively binds them together as a community. This post, like many others similar to it, exemplifies Carey’s model of communication as ritual, and Park’s suggestion that one of the key characteristic of a community is regular and ritualistic sharing of information. As Parks noted, this regularized information exchange leads to the growth of larger patterns of interaction among members, which is the characteristic of virtual communities I examine next.

### ***Regularized Information Exchange Leads to the Growth of Larger Patterns of Interaction Among Members***

The development of larger patterns of interaction between members who posted and commented on the group walls has already been implied by the various interactions described in the preceding sections. The interactions between atheists and theists in FIKA, for example, were characterized by a pattern of atheists seeing theists as either intellectually dishonest, or just plain feeble-minded. Theists, on the other hand, regarded atheists as amoral hedonists who could not justify why anyone should not just follow whatever course of action one desires because there is ultimately no such thing as an objective moral code. Another example of the patterns of interaction engendered by posts and comments is that of the handful FIKA members who regularly disagree with the position of the mainstream media's: they say that freethinkers ought to question the claims of CNN, the BBC, and the *New York Times*, because these media houses are part of the propaganda machinery of the West. The majority of the other members of FIKA respond to this by calling them conspiracy theorists. Thus, a pattern of interaction has developed around the majority, of expecting from this sub-group of members, posts that are labeled outlandish, out of touch with reality, and unscientific.

I interviewed one of these “conspiracy theorists”, Suleiman Juma, via Skype in September 2016. As a 36-year-old Muslim living “to and fro between Nairobi, Mombasa, and Zanzibar” (Juma, personal communication, 2016), he said that he joined FIKA because a friend told him about the group as a place where he could engage in philosophical discussions and debates. He said that he had always been keenly interested in the ideological basis of current affairs because he believed in making the

world a better place by challenging taken-for-granted assumptions that led to evil outcomes. As a peace-loving Muslim, he believed he had the responsibility to speak up against evil. For him, Islam was one religion of peace, without any schisms or –isms. Even Prophet Muhammad, Juma pointed out, did not believe Islam should be forced on anyone. The terrorists who committed violent acts of murder and destruction did so not on the basis of Islam but as part of “someone else’s proxy wars.”

The mainstream media were therefore in Juma’s view part of these proxy wars, which were engineered by the West to keep the rest of the world in captivity. In his opinion, there are no genuine “wars of religion.” Rather, they are all economically and politically motivated. Religion, he said, is a spiritual thing; it cannot be imposed on anyone, and the real motivation behind acts of war that claim religion is wealth and power. asked about the role of the group in his life, he seemed hesitant to say that it provided him with a sense of community. Instead, he said

It gives me a platform to reach out to people to try to explain things they have misinterpreted. Instead of trying to make everyone follow one single ideology, people should try to co-exist. Muslims, Christians, atheists, should all live together trying not to offend each other. I went to a Catholic school, and also through Madrasa. My family is composed of both Christians and Muslims. The best we can do is co-exist up until our time here is over, instead of trying to force each other to follow any particular ideology. It’s ok to advocate for whatever you believe in, but do it respectfully without force. There is no need for compulsion. (Juma, personal communication, 2016)

As an example of the posts Juma likes to participate in, Alan Jakom, cited earlier in this chapter, had posted the following:

Lol...

NATO (the EU) under the stewardship of Nobel “piss” laureatte Barrack Obomber and the US military Industrial complex goddess of war Hillary Killington are responsible for launching the wars on African and middle Eastern countries that have led to the immigration/refugee crisis in Europe.

And now immigration is leading to the disintegration of Europe.



It appears comrade Muammar Gaddafi (may he rest well with the ancestors) was right.

The first commenter on the post said, “I see you’re back.”

Jakom commented: “Yes. Fcuk (sic) the EU.”

“Welcome back,” another commenter, Fritz Onyango, said, “it was getting boring here without you. Almost send (sic) you a friend request,” adding to another commenter’s observation that said: “Guess who is baaaack!”

“War is their most profitable economic activity...,” Juma said, “either by proxy or physical engagement. Immigrants are also an advantage to their corporations as they provide cheap slaves.” He then explained that the immigrant issue addressed by Jakom’s original post would only affect the lower classes of the host country because the immigrants would be seeking low-paying jobs, thus bringing the market value of unskilled labor down. “On the other hand, it’s a dream come true for the cream team... they have ‘willing’ slaves (under duress) kissing their feet...”

A few comments later, a white FIKA member, Hans Kreuder, said, “I thought Kenyans worship Obomba and Killary, that was my Impression. Criticising the ‘Nobel Peace Price Winner’ is racist, that’s what I’ve been told.”

Jakom replied, “Only the ignorant and true racists worship war criminals like Obomber and Killary.”

Another commenter, Musa Matheka, who considered himself one of the leading voices of “rationality” on FIKA, rejoined “Instead of conspiracy theories, would you kindly relate Obama and Hillary with the ongoing wars in Syria and C.A.R. for instance.”

WWR provides perhaps the best illustration of the larger networks of interaction that arise from ritual sharing of information. I briefly talked about the conflict occasioned by race in Chapter Four. As a recap, Annie had set up a secret admin group to moderate and monitor WWR. When WWR was founded, the chief goal was to create a safe space for women who had left religion and embraced atheism, but found no respite in the extant atheist organizations. To ensure the safety of their members, Annie and the first friends who brought the group together created safeguards to weed out trolls and scammers from taking advantage of WWR. One of these safeguards was the *secret* admin group, where the admins would “meet” to discuss the issues that arose in the main *public* WWR group.

Nate Sasha, an Australian male admin of WWR, had recommended Marjorie Heinrich, a young European woman of mixed-race origin, to be added to the admin group because he had seen her efficiency in another group. She was very well-read and very eloquent, as well as very forceful in her convictions. And her self-identification as a Black woman added to the diversity, flavor, and strength of the admin group. When Heinrich accused WWR of racism for supporting the actions of a White South-African member, which actions she deemed racist, Rakael Braxton, another Black European member of the admin group, told me of the occurrence of something similar about a year earlier with a Kenyan woman who had been a member of the admin group. I give a brief account of this and how it turned out in the methods section (Chapter Four) of this dissertation. I will now examine it more deeply.

Denise Omollo, the Kenyan woman who had been a member of the WWR admin group, was also a Facebook friend of mine, whom I “met” on FIKA in early

2014, and in person in the summer of 2014 when I conducted the pilot study of this dissertation. She is a feminist who has dedicated her life to fighting the historical injustices occasioned by patriarchy in Kenya. She founded a non-governmental organization named “Save my Sister” to rescue young girls from sexual predation by men in her community. Braxton told me that Omollo had tried to get support from Annie and the rest of the admin team for the work this NGO was doing, but had been removed from the admin group as well as from WWR because of Annie’s and her team’s racism. She said she saw the same thing happen with Heinrich, and regretted not having stood up for her friend Omollo when it mattered. Upon asking Annie about these allegations, she sent me more than 300 screenshots of the discussions that had taken place during the two incidences. I will now proceed to tease out those aspects of these discussions that demonstrate how ritual sharing of information builds wider networks of interaction between members of a community.

When interviewed in October 2016, Omollo said she had approached Annie to help her with money to “go into hiding” because her life was under threat from a high-profile politician she had exposed as a pedophile. Annie contacted an international NGO that aims to protect advocates of human rights who are at risk. They said they would fund Omollo for her to relocate to a safe place. They said they would send the money to Annie, who would in turn relay it to Omollo. Omollo said during the interview that in the course of the usual posts and discussions on WWR, Annie had made derogatory remarks about Africans, and Omollo had confronted her. They had a falling out, and Annie turned the other WWR admins against Omollo. She “unfriended” them all except Braxton.

From the screenshots Annie sent me about this incidence, I concluded that Omollo attempted to bilk Annie of money. Annie, and many of the WWR admins, found so many inconsistencies in the stories Omollo told them, as well as on her Facebook wall. She kept on posting on Facebook in a manner that indicated her being in any sort of danger was highly unlikely. But the clincher came when she posted pictures of her vacationing at an exclusive resort. Annie felt she had no recourse but to tell the humans rights NGO not to send the money, although she had personally raised some money through a GoFundMe account and sent it to Omollo a few months before this incident. Annie commented that neither she nor any of her friends was thanked, and they never heard what the money was spent on.

The conversations in the screenshots portray Omollo as someone with a typical opportunist's tendency; she had asked another WWR admin for money:

Waaay back when Omollo first joined, she contacted me about coming to Toronto...there was a whole story about coming for a workshop/classes on women's studies here. She asked me for help getting funding to go. I am wary of requests like that, having been badly burned by someone claiming to have stage 4 breast cancer who I helped support emotionally and a little financially while I was getting treatment for my own cancer...

Further comments reveal that the story Omollo told me about Annie turning the other admins against her was false. One asked, "I STILL can't get a clear answer on why she asked the money go through you in the first place. She is just dead set on blaming you, as though you had ulterior motives. MAKES NO SENSE."

Annie had explained that "she didn't want me to use her name on the main gofund me link as 'it would upset the other people involved.'"

Selina Machel, another member, commented: “I’m just going to say it. She is manipulative as fuck. I feel bad for whoever she grifts next because she’s learned a lot in the last few months.”

In counter to this, another member asked, “Do you really think she is a genuine grifter, or could there be more going on...I really don’t want to think of her as vampiring Annie like that...”

“I think it’s a come up,” Machel replied. “I think she stumbled onto something she used to her advantage. When she first joined, she was always sick. Dying wtf ever. Everyone was concerned and sympathetic. Then it graduated to donations for a newly formed organization.”

As these interactions continued, the members of the admin group reached the general conclusion that Omollo was not “a genuine grifter” but had merely stumbled upon a group of people who seemed willing to help, and then she had “spread herself thin” trying to get something from each one of them. In my assessment, she was exploiting an irresistible opportunity. During one of my conversations with her when I was in Kenya in 2014 for this dissertation’s pilot study, she had told me that she was a politician who came from a family of politicians. She said: “I am a realist. You cannot get anything done in this world if you do not have power. Politics is everything.”

Interspersed in the conversations about being manipulated by Omollo were other comments such as the ones below:

**Machel:** I am not unfriending her, because then she’ll be in my inbox

like whyyyyy, so, yeah Jeana Greer, don’t block her. I would

just keep her at arm's length or whatever makes you comfortable.

**Greer:** That's what I plan to do. Thanks, butterbean.

**Machel:** Love you boobookitty.

**Wolty:** Love you all flutterbys.

**Moria** [another member of the admin team]: ...this all makes me feel like I dunno dirty? And like I wanna say I really am Mariah, I really do live in Kansas, and I have zero interest in any of you all's money. I just love all of you and our time computer chatting...

**Annie:**  back to you and thanks for being part of this awesome team.

I love everyone here very much and you all, along with cute animals, give me hope for the human race. You are all my family. Hugs to you Ms Moria.

**Greer:** I am so loving your words, Mariah Moria. I needed them!

you give me a boner

not a penis boner

but a boner in my heart

a heart on

an affection erection

I submit that these words of playful affection portray an unmistakable sense of community among people who are physically thousands of miles apart. WWR, through

the networks of interaction created among the members through posts and comments, was indubitably a virtual community of the first order.

### ***Communities Possess the Ability to Engage in Collective Action***

In addition to the larger patterns of interaction generated by the sharing of information, communities also possess the ability to engage in collective action. The WWR admins in the discussions I analyze above from Annie's screenshots expressed their intention to help Omollo and her *Save my Sister* organization. One of them said she had been planning to send "sanitary wear" to the NGO, using money from her first paycheck. This, while not a necessarily significant form of action, and although it would not have been done in the name of the group, does stem from the community created by the group, and it would have had a collective effect on the intended recipients. In addition, it was generated by the group collectively, as was the comment made by the poster:

Annie and Jeana you both did your very best for her and she threw it back in your faces. Shame on her and kudos to you and the rest of us. I was going to try to send some sanitary wear when I got my first wages because I was trying to give her the benefit of the doubt but of course I won't be doing that now. As you say Annie you live and learn. Unfortunately sometimes it's the hard way.

Howard Rheingold describes the kind of form collective action takes in online communities. A tick latched onto his daughter's scalp in the summer of 1986. He logged onto the WELL while his wife called the pediatrician at 11:00 p.m. Within minutes, he got the answer on how to remove the tick and had it out by the time the pediatrician's office called his wife back. But what impressed him most was not merely the speed with which he was able to get the information he needed; this information was also available whenever it was needed, at any time of day or night. And the knowledge that the WELL had real doctors, nurses, parents, and midwives who would

be there for him whenever he needed them gave him an “immense inner sense of security... [brought by the knowledge that] we’re talking about our sons and daughters in this forum, not about our computers or our opinions about philosophy, and many of us feel that this tacit understanding sanctifies the virtual space” (Rheingold, 2000, p. 1).

Toni Browne, a 46-year-old senior executive with the Department of Justice in New South Wales, told me that the most important reason for her being a member of WWR was the sense of community engendered by the sharing of information by people going through the same things she did. “I was raised a Catholic,” she said, “but have been an atheist since I was seven. I was forced to go to church through my childhood, but at 14 I dug in my heels. My mother still thinks this is a phase I am going through.” When Annie told her about the idea of starting a Facebook group specifically for women, she was instantly sold because the Australian Atheist Foundation, to which she and Annie belonged at the time, was “predominantly composed of old white men.”

The support of women who have experienced the effects of male supremacy from “the Abrahamic religions,...information from all over the world being posted by the members,” is what gives Toni the support she needs at a collective level. However, she has also had the pleasure of engaging in offline collective action:

I went to Brisbane, and Melbourne for meetings on atheism, and supported a woman who left the Hillsongs [one of the largest and most powerful mega churches in Australia] and got excommunicated from their church. She needed to face them and I, and a couple of other friends, took her there for support, seeing as she was quite afraid of them. Incidentally, she was arrested for trespassing when she went back to the church after being told by one of them to keep away.



Nevertheless, the collective action that WWR has managed to engage in as a group has not been of remarkable effect, which is perhaps only in the nature of an affective public brought together not so much by revolutionary political zeal as by the “soft structures of feeling” identified by Papacharissi. When I asked her what offline activities they carry out, Annie explained that they occasionally had “barbeques or dinners without gods” (Chant, personal communication, 2016; see Figure 7 below).



*Figure 7: Annie Chant and Peter Wolty (in the foreground) with their friends. Ten of the adults are in WWR, with six being part of the secret admin group (Chant, personal communication, 2016).*

FIKA also made attempts to have an offline impact, although it clearly fell short of its goals. When I first studied the group in 2014, the members I spoke and interacted with were very gung-ho about reaching out to various “stakeholders” in Kenyan society, especially high schools and colleges, aiming to make Kenya “less irrational and religious.” However, they now appeared to have settled more for the less ambitious goal of dispelling the predominant myths about atheists, seeking more to show that they were not abnormal. In this sense, they acted in the fashion described by Michael Warner when he observed that counterpublics are characterized by discourses that aim to be

different, rather than revolutionary, to make what has hitherto been regarded as abnormal normal (Warner 2000).

Thus, two of the founding members, Birney Mwangaza and Henry Okullu, for example, were interviewed by KTN, one of the leading Kenyan TV stations, on a feature about “parenting without God.” Mwangaza shared on her timeline a photo Okullu posted on September 10, 2016 captioned “With Birney Mwangaza at KTN earlier today! She did very well discussing godless parenting! #GodlessParenting.”

Various friends commented on the original post as well as on the one shared by Mwangaza. One, Francis Kung’ang’ana, said, “Look let’s wait until their son is say 20 years then we can exchange notes,” to which another, Peter Van Volk, replied, “Idiot already now their son surpasses you like an eagle surpasses a fly.” Kung’ang’ana retorted to Van Volk’s reply with an attempted insult that he had been “chased from his country [Belgium]” because he was a “bugger.” Van Volk told him he goes back to his country twice a year, so he was clearly lying, to which Kung’ang’ana said, “That’s why you are gay because you have reversed thinking. Confusing an ass for a vagina.”

This comment thread continued with Van Volk correcting each false accusation leveled at him by Kung’ang’ana with a factual statement. Thus, when Kung’ang’ana said that Van Volk was gay with the intention of insulting him, Van Volk responded that while he would have had no problem with being gay even if he actually was, he told Kung’ang’ana to send him his wife for one night and she would never go back to her husband. Kung’ang’ana in turn told him “you are a fag you have zero kids and no wife, [you’re] just a Mombasa sex tourist.” Van Volk corrected this by pointing out that he had two kids, a daughter in Quebec studying for her second PhD, and a son who

worked as a statistician for one of the biggest banks in the world. He then added, “And being a fag is not even an insult, it is only evidence of your closed mindedness.” Kung’ang’ana was unrelenting in insisting that atheism is somehow linked to childless homosexuality, but Van Volk’s repeated logical responses eventually wore him down to saying, “loosen up it was a bluff, relax and enjoy your stay in this corrupt nation.” A few other commenters joined in this thread, one siding with Kung’ang’ana, while four others pointed at the irrationality, immaturity, and stupidity behind the name calling.

Other than such TV interviews and Facebook posts, FIKA members have also on occasion attempted to take their activities offline. For instance, they visited the most famous state-funded high school in Kenya, where they gave talks on astronomy and critical thinking, administered an IQ test on the students, and gave them the opportunity to look at the night sky through a telescope they purchased in 2015 for taking on road shows they had planned to have across the country with high schools. When Mwangaza posted pictures of this visit to Alliance High School, many members expressed their admiration and said they hoped to be part of such exercises in the future.

Another collective effort that FIKA was pursuing was the expansion of its online presence through a YouTube channel, a Twitter handle, and a Website. The admins were planning to hire a professional web developer, preferably a FIKA member, who would convert the current website to a WordPress forum that can allow cross-linking with other social media. They have also crafted a protocol they will use for video interviews about their members.

PAN is the one group of all three that seemed least likely to engage in collective action, even though the members I interviewed said they hoped they could have such

action. Leopold Yizhak, one of the chief admins of the group, told me that the group did occasionally carry out offline group activities, but he emphasized that “action for the sake of action” is ultimately of little consequence. “I tend to put more emphasis on ideological groundedness about Pan-Africanism,” he said. “Before you move,” he continued, “you need to think. You cannot do much if you are not yet fully convinced of the cause. Thus, ideological soundness is more important than action.”

### ***Discussion***

In this chapter, I used Malcolm Parks’ (2011) categories of what constitutes a virtual community to interrogate to what extent the Facebook groups served their members as communities. By and large, the majority of the members of each of the three groups said that they *perceived* the particular groups as a community. The handful of interview participants who said they did not see the group in question as a community were in the group for reasons other than what Jeana Greer, the 71-year-old WWR admin, described as the “intimate camaraderie I would expect in, say, the theatre, or a sports or community group.” For example, Wangechi Muraguri, the 50-year-old Kenyan realtor who now lives in Kansas, said that although she found FIKA very liberating due to its having people who were not afraid to make their stand on controversial matters clear, she did not feel any personal connection with the members. When I asked her why this was the case, she said, “I just don’t feel it.” Other Facebook groups that she was a member of, she explained, gave her a better sense of camaraderie than FIKA because she connected with them at an emotional level.

Likewise, Natalie Refurbishment, the 34-year-old health supplies procurement executive who worked with the U.S. Department of Defense, said she had not formed

any meaningful connections with members of WWR. She said that the group “is very cerebral,” and that she participated in the discussions on the group’s wall because she was a “godless irreverent person.” Because she already had a large network of friends who were not religious, she did not feel the need to make personal connections with the members of WWR.

Many of the interview participants also *identified* with the community formed by the group, and some were offended at being treated as less-than-full members of the group in question. The charge of racism leveled vociferously against WWR by three of its Black members represents their feeling of exclusion from a community they identified with. Even though one of these members, Omollo, later turned out to have had less than noble motives for presenting herself as a campaigner for atheism and religious tolerance, thus as a spokesperson for WWR in Kenya, she did identify with the group as a community, and found backing and support from the black European member, Braxton, who defended her even after she was shown to have been trying to swindle money from Chant.

Chant and her team of admins did not take the accusation of racism lightly, and neither did they excommunicate Omollo easily. Chant, in response to my query whether the charges of white feminism and racism were genuine, said that they “shook the group to its core.” Her formation of another secret group specifically to address my questions as a researcher, a group where she invited me to question the admin team about these charges, indicates the seriousness with which the community of WWR wanted to be inclusive. They all knew that Omollo was my friend. They all knew that I was a black

man, and that I was Kenyan like Omollo. Their candor and willingness to expose their warts to me point to the seriousness with which they regarded their community.

Thus, even though I have noted that PAN appeared to be the least of these three Facebook groups to exhibit the *Gemeinschaft* of community, its members clearly possessed a keen sense of attachment to the group's identity as a movement opposed to the oppression of Africans and *other* Black people by White Europeans. From the posts on the group's wall, I would say that the reason for PAN members having less tight communal ties to each other is attributable to a theme that permeates many thinkg African: the post about the "Black Magic Woman," the member who said she believed Bathsheba and King Solomon were African, the post comparing Cecil Rhodes (after whom the famous Rhodes Scholarship is named) to Adolf Hitler, all bring to mind the sense of subjugated knowledges that have been denied the light of day.

Talbot, the Black American nurse who made black dolls in Harlem, Koro, the Rwandan musician living in Paris, and Tracey, the Ghanaian-born American who moved back to Ghana in her middle-age years, all expressed their attachment to the group's quest to advance the black race in opposition to the legacy of exploitation by Europeans. Whereas one may ask why a group that calls itself Pan-African would exclusively focus its rhetoric on fighting White domination, as if all Africans are black, an examination of the profile pictures of its members reveals that the vast majority of them, if not all, *are* black. Of course, a good number of these profile pictures bear an avatar, or some other image from which one cannot deduce the race of the member. What is indubitable, however, is that the posts on the group's wall almost exclusively

address the oppression of Blacks by other races, most especially by Whites. Perhaps this rhetoric only attracts people who identify as Blacks who are oppressed by whites.

This in-group identification based on blacks as representative of the oppressed African gives an unmistakable attachment and belongingness to that subaltern position, and, I posit, makes the group a counterpublic in the sense defined by Palczewski as a site that provides the “affirmation of specificity.” Perhaps the idea that Pan-Africanism should include White South Africans, Arab Egyptians, Indian Kenyans, or any other “non-black” race, was not “specific” enough for what ought to count as African as far as PAN members were concerned. The fact that South Africa had more than 4.5 million white people (Statistics South Africa, 2011), or that the 2009 Kenyan Census showed the country had 46,782 citizens of Asian origin (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2009), seems to be beside the point.

The one characteristic identified by Parks as essential to community that seemed most germane to all groups was the regular and ritualized *sharing of information* within each group. James Carey’s (1989) model of communication as ritual thus stands as the most patent truth about these Facebook groups. To recap, this theory holds that mass communication has as its central role the maintenance of culture through time. The members of a community exchange information with each other to keep themselves together as a cultural unit. This information exchange does not have as its purpose the *transmission* of facts. Instead, it fosters the *participation* of members in the cultural life of the community. The stories they read about and tell each other serve to enact the drama of the life they share in common.

PAN was therefore found to share information that celebrated the overcoming of oppression from European colonialists and imperialists, and championed blacks who embraced their own uniquely African culture while repudiating European mores. For WWR, talking about the ways women were oppressed by Judaism, Christianity, or Islam acted as the social glue that held these socially and culturally diverse persons as a community opposed to the lies and pretensions of belief in the supernatural. By embracing the material here and now of their experiences—which Nancy Hartsock argues comes more naturally to women due to their historical role of reproduction and child-rearing (Hartsock, 1987)—and rejecting the “pie in the sky” doctrines of a better future life, they shared information that strengthened their ties as an “atheist feminist group ... [that] eschews all unsubstantiated supernatural claims, not just deities” (WWR, 2018). FIKA, by regularly sharing and exchanging information that promoted science, critical thinking, and logic, enacted the drama of a freethought culture. The debates they engaged in, and the media content they shared on the group wall, served as a ritual, not dissimilar to the Catholic Mass, meant to maintain the culture found in the group’s Facebook description:

Freethinking is being willing to accept new information that might invalidate your earlier conclusions even when those ideas have stood the test of time and even when they may be diametrically opposed to what have been your guiding principles over the years. (FIKA, 2018)

These information rituals in turn led to the development of *larger networks of interaction* between and among the members. Again, PAN members did not seem to portray this theme as clearly as FIKA or WWR. As noted earlier, while PAN had a deluge of quite interesting and thought-provoking posts, very few comments were generated by these posts. FIKA, for instance, had its “resident conspiracy theorists,”



so-named by other members due to the content they posted and the comments they made. WWR, on its part, had interactions between members from Australia and New Zealand, who often distinguished themselves from American members, calling the latter “insular,” and using this notion to castigate them for electing Donald Trump<sup>5</sup> as the “leader of the free world.” WWR members from other parts of the world also made distinctions among themselves in the comment and discussion threads, again reflecting the sub-theme of networks of interaction.

Finally, Parks’ notion that communities should engage in collective action was found to be less true of the groups, especially for such a widely diverse and dispersed group as PAN. Gaga Tracey, the Ghanaian-born Black woman who returned to her birthplace, did say that PAN got involved in collective action during the Ebola crisis in West Africa, but this seems to be an isolated case. Yizhak, the Ugandan admin who grilled me for an hour when I first sought access to the group, said during my interview with him that the group had on occasion been involved in offline activities, but he admitted that such activities were few and far between. Similarly, the only records of collective action I found in WWR were the one instance some members took one of their friends to confront a church that she had been extremely afraid of confronting after leaving it, the “barbeques without gods” that occasionally brought Annie Chant and her admins together for a meal, and the fund-raising efforts Chant and her friends made for Denise Omollo. FIKA, probably because the inner core members were in close geographic proximity to each other, appeared to have more collective action than

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<sup>5</sup> More often than not, this rebuff against American members of WWR was used as a snide remark; it did not reflect any truth as to whether American WWR members voted for Trump or not.

the other two groups. The promotion of atheism on the local Kenyan media by several of the admins is a good example of this, as was the roadshow at Alliance High School, one of the top-ranked and most famous schools in Kenya.

Malcolm Parks concluded his study thus: “it may be more accurate to say that virtual communities are often simply the online extension of geographically situated offline communities” (2012, p. 120). This resonates with Driskell and Lyon’s (2002) observation that even though internet relationships cannot replace “the *Gemeinschaft*-type relationships found *in the place called The Community*, ... they can *reinforce* community by providing the initial or supplemental connections that lead to the *Gemeinschaft*-like community” (2002, p. 387-389, italics in original). As Howard Rheingold (2001) discovered, his “iconic” virtual community depended on actual face-to-face get-togethers of the members based in San Francisco. In like fashion, FIKA, PAN, and WWR had weak *Gemeinschaft*-type relationships, which seemed to gain strength only when supplemented by offline activities.

## CHAPTER SIX: IDENTITY

### Identity as Performativity

#### *Introduction*

In this chapter I analyze data relevant to identity from the 45 in-depth interviews, the content that members of the Facebook groups post on the groups' walls, and the discourse that surrounds those posts. I use Rob Cover's conception of identity as performative: he says that subjectivity online is performed through the management of the user's profile, and through identification with others. Cover maintains:

[T]here is no core, essential self from which behaviors and actions—both offline and online—emerge, only a set of performances that retroactively produce an illusion of an inner identity core: the actor behind the acts is an effect of those performances. (Cover, 2012, p.180)

I argue, however, that belonging to clearly defined Facebook groups and identifying with the philosophies promulgated by these groups adds an extra layer of coherence to members' identities. Thus, I add the layer of identity borrowed from John Dewey, as “having a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs” (Dewey, 1954).

Following Cover, I posit that the members of these Facebook groups perform their identities through the following activities (repeated from the section on identity from Chapter Two above):

1. Management of one's own profile [as a member of the particular Facebook group]
2. Identifying in a relational sense with various members of the group as well as with networks affiliated with the groups (Cover, 2012, p. 179).

The members of the Facebook groups I studied here said they experienced a sense of exclusion from the norms of the societies they found themselves in. The predominantly

religious Kenyan society saw atheists and agnostics as an aberration due to their discourses of unbelief. PAN members conducted discursive practices that challenged the assumptions of hegemonic Whiteness and the abjection of black and African identities, while the members of WWR espoused identities that ran against the prescriptions of the Judeo-Christian religions. Through performance of counterpublic discourses, these Facebook groups gave their members identities that were predicated upon rhetoric generated by the group, rather than by the dominant publics of their societies. I will now investigate precisely how they did this.

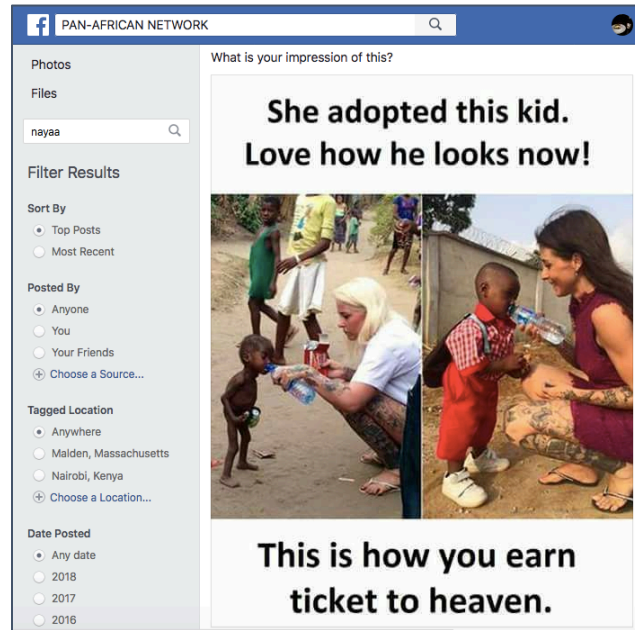
### ***Management of One's Own Profile as a Member of the Particular Facebook Group***

In this section, I analyze the performance of identity by members of the three groups via the management of their profiles through the content they post on the groups' Facebook walls. I also explore the ways in which the interview participants used their biographical data to identify with the goals, activities, and discourses of the groups they belonged to.

Mfalme Yaoundé, one of the chief admins of PAN, made the post in Figure 8 below, and asked, "What is your impression of this?"

The post generated 14 comments. The first of these was by the original poster (OP) himself; he noted that while "Global Africans busied themselves doing blah blah blah, arguing, and hopping from commenting on one problem to the other as they occur by the day....," others were investing on the resource-rich continent and making

fortunes. In addition, they were using the money they made to take care of Africa's poor and neglected. When, he asked, would Africans in the Diaspora do likewise?



*Figure 8: Screenshot of post made on PAN by one of the chief admins*

Gaga Tracey, the PAN member who moved back to her homeland Ghana at the beginning of 2017, gave the first response to Yaoundé's post. "Bullshit," she wrote. "How about she and her kind never create situations around the world where babies have to ever starve? Then they don't get to accrue 'saint hood' by trying to undo their own horrors." Another commenter, Liberty Mtumwa, said that the image of the saint was a subterfuge created to keep Africa under slavery to Global Capital. Africa, he explained, had never been poor but was impoverished by the "White Supremacists," who were the "architects" of capitalism. Yaoundé corrected him that while "they" were the architects, Africans were the "condoners" who enabled the self-same enslavement. They were thus to blame for their own poverty, for allowing "others to orchestrate such

calamitous misdeeds against us.” Furthermore, he added, the woman who saved the starving child had done well for saving at least one life.

Mtumwa disagreed with Yaoundé’s assessment, saying that saving lives is everyone’s moral duty. He added that the meme in the OP was being used to praise and glorify a white person for one good deed as though there were no Africans working in Europe, who were involved in coming to the aid of many poor white street urchins. In counter to this, Yaoundé said that Africans were welcome to post images of the help they were giving to European children, and posted the picture in Figure 9 below as an example:



*Figure 9: Picture posted by PAN admin, Mfalme Yaoundé to show that Africans in Europe can give charity to white Europeans.*

He explained that he posted about good deeds because he wanted humankind to be compassionate to each other. He added that he was especially interested in seeing his fellow “Global Africans” being compassionate towards other “Global Africans.” Another commenter noted that the current values practiced across the world were “totally un-Afrikan,” and were a direct result “of our enemies’ divide and conquer/rule tactics, that we have been falling for since contact with the European, i.e., religion,

male vs female, political grouping, and all of the other dichotomies that make [us] see the differences between [us] instead of the similarities, which are much greater and empowering.” Another commenter pointed out that there were Africans all over the continent “who are helping zillions of kids without a lot of fanfare. We aren’t telling the story well.” Yaoundé agreed and said, “You are right. We for instance, are not advertising the charity actions to humankind, [which can be] brown, white, yellow, African, European, Arab or whatever.”

Claire Piedmont, a PAN member who joined the group in April 2017, made three posts on the group’s wall within one month of joining. The first one, posted on May 2, gave an account of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Her point was that, between 1661 and 1807, Britain took by force 3.1 million Africans across the Atlantic Ocean (PAN, 2017) and brought them to British colonies in the Caribbean where they were sold to work on plantations.

Yaoundé, the first to comment on Piedmont’s post, expressed his admiration for the slaves’ rebellion. He noted that freedom is part of human nature, and that anyone who seeks to enslave another cannot be human, just as anyone who willingly accepts to be enslaved reduces his or her status as a human being. Soon after, another member posted a comment copied from his blog, the *Afrobeat Culture Federator*. He explained that the enslavement of Africans was a very well-thought-out plan, having been designed by the Popes and Princes of Europe since the Middle Ages. Spain and Portugal, for example, released psychopathic and sociopath criminals from their prisons to become their “spearheads of hell,” charged with the responsibility of

conquering “the interior of Africa to found new nations to conquer and form their dreamed European Empire” (Madiwo, 2017).

Piedmont’s post insisted that Africans are victims of centuries of subjugation and oppression by Europeans. Rob Cover explains how a user exploiting social media for the performance of identity does in effect the same thing “we do when we have a conversation, perhaps in a cafe’, with a friend and speak of ourselves, desires, experiences, recent actions, tastes” (p. 181). The interchanges between Piedmont, Yaoundé, and Madiwo constitute a cafe’-like conversation. Piedmont performed her identity on PAN by expressing her desire that her people recognize their history as forced into slavery, rather than accepting “the lie” promulgated by European historians that slaves were sold by their fellow Africans. Her interlocutors embrace this identity, and fortify it by providing support and admiration for the slaves who never stopped fighting for their freedom, and by quoting history written by Africans. This history constitutes counterpublic discourse, challenging the dominant mainstream history which maintains that Africans willingly sold each other into slavery.

Piedmont, again illustrating Cover’s observation that identity is never fixed nor prior to communication, posted on May 21, 2107 an article that queried the Biblical account of the Queen of Sheba as coming from Arabia. Piedmont acknowledged that “Getting to understand who the real Queen of Sheba was is very complicated.” However, she maintained that she firmly believed the narrative that identifies the Queen of Sheba as “Queen Makeda of Ethiopia.” Cover observes that the identity performed through the reading of media texts available to us is never linear, but is rather constituted retrospectively and through the “fabrication” of a new subject upon

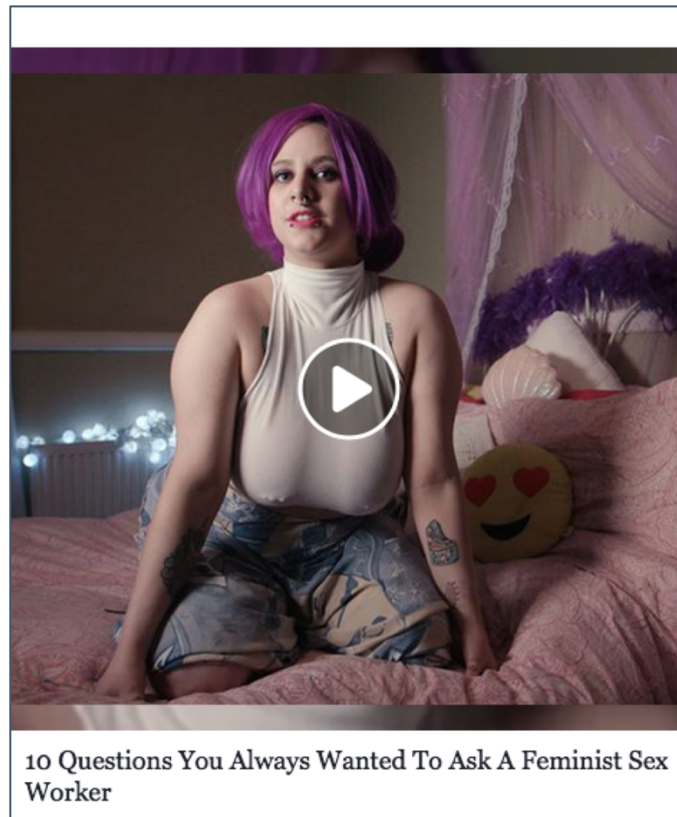


“recognition” of oneself in the newly acquired text (Cover, 2015, p. 65). For example, the “avowed heterosexual” who recognizes herself as a lesbian at 53 has to retrospectively constitute performances that reconstitute herself as a lesbian subject who must now perform cultural codes that reflect her new sexual orientation. Cover notes how complicated such a performance of identity is, underlining the observation by Judith Butler that “there is no ‘I’ who stands behind discourse and executes its volition or will through discourse” (Butler, 1993, p. 225). The “I”, in other words, is produced by discourse, by being called, named, interpellated. The 53-year-old lesbian thus recognizes herself as a lesbian only by being interpellated by the discourse that defines what a lesbian is. Similarly, Piedmont, by citing the Ethiopian version of the story of the Queen of Sheba, performs an identity that is consistent with her being “called forth” by this newly-discovered text.

In response to this “new” identity that Piedmont performed by her profile management on the PAN group Facebook wall, other members supported her embrace of this subjectivity that averred not only the Queen of Sheba as African, rather than Arabian, but also King Solomon, and his father King David before him, as “really African.” Another member, conversely, asked if Piedmont could prove that Solomon and David were Africans, rather than Jews. She responded that she doesn’t accept the “Jewish explanation,” but believes the Ark of the Covenant is located in Ethiopia, that Africans are the real Jews, and that, in fact, the mother of all humans is “Lucy”, the oldest human fossil, which was unearthed in Africa by archeologists. Again, this interchange, both pro and contra her identity claim, is performative, and is dependent on discourse.

Danielle Hunter, one of the American-based admins of WWR, posted a video (Figure 10 below), which she captioned as follows:

This video was made by a feminist sex worker -- she goes over a series of 10 questions a few of us probably think of when we think of feminism and sex work, and she does so very candidly. As this group is both sex positive, and sex worker positive, we wanted to share this video with you all.



*Figure 10: Video posted on WWR from vice.com on July 28, 2017.*

The first two commenters lauded the post, saying they “loved” the interview and its support for the legalization of commercial sex work. Another commenter said that the sex worker in the video was misrepresenting feminism by supporting work that was degrading to women and supportive of the male-supremacy status quo that treated women as objects of pleasure for men. In counter to this, another admin, Nellie Hitchens, posted a comment that reiterated WWR is sex-positive and sex-worker-friendly. She reminded commenters to bear this in mind, and to be “respectful of

women (and men) who sell sex.” Another commenter, Holly Krugman, whose profile picture reveals her as a White middle-aged woman from the UK, said, “The future I’d like to see is one where men are not so fucked up about sex and would find the idea of paying for sex abhorrent!!”

In response to Krugman’s comment, Hitchens observed that paying for someone to drive you somewhere, or to clean your house, is not abhorrent. Why then should paying for sex be abhorrent? The problem, she said, “comes in when sex work is seen as less than or shameful in some way.”

Krugman sarcastically replied: “Yea I know. Just a job like any other. That’s why so many middle-class people ‘choose’ to do it!”

Karjin Stillman, a forty-something American woman who identified as of mixed-race origin, hence as a person of color, responded to this comment thus:

The stigma and the lack of safety deter most people from disclosing that they do sex work, middle-class or otherwise (and yes, a lot of middle-class people do choose it -- and a lot of people are able to go from poor to middle-class via sex work). If it were legal, licensed, regulated, and had the same protections as massage or physical therapists, more people might not enter a sex work career, but more would likely choose to disclose that they do it.

I have done sex work. I have friends who have been or currently are sex workers. I have considered doing sex therapy, specifically for men who struggle with finding sexual partners. Instead I chose to become a neuroscientist, which doesn’t pay anywhere near as well.

Krugman:

you paint a rosy picture. I know many young women working as prostitutes with a much grimmer story to tell. More like the women working in Holbeck Leeds that the BBC did a series about. Tell me again about ‘choice’!

Stillman:

Right, and that grimmer picture, along with the horrors of human trafficking and sex slavery, is exactly why prostitution needs to be legalized, regulated, and protected.

Do not make the mistake of assuming that I am naive or sheltered or ignorant. I am educated, experienced, and tapped into the social services community here.

My argument boils down to the fact that it SHOULD be a job just like any other -- complete with legal protections. So that both sex service providers and customers can have their human needs met in safety and dignity.

This topic turned out to be a “thorn in the flesh” of many participants. One member, Michelle Neighton, pointed out that sex work leads to sexual slavery and human trafficking, especially for poor and oppressed races, nationalities, and classes. The admins tried to keep the discussion on track, reminding participants that the current thread was dedicated to consensual acts regardless of race or class. Neighton was warned three times for derailing the discussion, but insisted on her path of equating sex work with slavery and human trafficking, even when asked to start her own thread on human trafficking. After the third warning, she was removed from the group.

A woman admin from Sydney, Australia, ended the thread with the following comment:

Le sigh, sex trafficking is different from consensual sex work. Once it's seen as any other Labor, taxed and regulated as such, then sex trafficking and sex slavery will end (goodbye what Michelle Neighton was talking about, goodbye bacha boys) hello sex workers providing safe services for those who have needs that can't be met by a relationship, people with disabilities not getting used in pretend relationships while seeking a sexual outlet. Hello, sex workers, having access to superannuation, sick days, holidays like a lot of other industries.

This discussion thread is at once identity-performative and counterpublic discourse at the same time. The sex worker in the *Vice* video, as well as the WWR members who supported her right to engage in and promote sexual activity as a legitimate profession, were performing an identity of sex-positivity in a world that is otherwise dominated by the puritanical ideals of Christianity. Like the drag queens on the cover of Michael Warner's book, who posed in sexually provocative lace and lingerie, the subject of the

video posted by Danielle Hunter posed in a sexually alluring blouse, immediately invoking an oppositional identity. The opening shot in the 5:24 long video shows her asking: “Would you consider a grown-ass man shitting into an adult diaper, and you having to clean it up, gross?” This rhetorical question asks why society finds no shame in geriatric nursing but shames adult women who choose sex work as a legitimate profession.

All the above discourses are developed from interactions within the particular groups. The persons who express them perform identities generated by discursive interactions within the said group. However, the identity so performed is not a shared communal identity. This is reminiscent of the theme of community in the previous chapter: none of the groups functions as a unit. My interpretation is that the members of these groups are so self-aware, a factor I would attribute to their belonging to a highly educated demographic, that they do not place the value of the group above individual identity.

Jeana Greer, the 71-year-old Australian WWR admin, made the post in Figure 11 below on July 17, 2017, performing the identity of a member of WWR to the letter. First, the pinned post, the one that every member is recommended to read before posting anything, says that every claim must be supported with empirical logical evidence. When Greer said that “Religion poisons everything,” she was quoting journalist Christopher Hitchens’ book titled *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Hitchens summarized the book in an April 25, 2007 *Slate* article this way:

There are four irreducible objections to religious faith: that it wholly misrepresents the origins of man and the cosmos, that because of this original error it manages to combine the maximum of servility with the maximum of solipsism, that it is both the result and the cause of dangerous sexual

repression, and that it is ultimately grounded on wish-thinking. (Hitchens, 2007)



*Figure 11: Post shared on WWR by Jeana Greer, a 71-year-old WWR admin.*

The article Greer posted from ABC, Australia, referred to research that showed churches which enforced the supremacy of men over women were highly likely to engender domestic violence against women. It cited Steven R. Tracy, theology professor at Phoenix Seminary in Phoenix, Arizona, who wrote that “[i]t is widely accepted by abuse experts (and validated by numerous studies) that evangelical men who sporadically attend church are more likely than men of any other religious group (and more likely than secular men) to assault their wives” (Baird, 2017).

The first commenter on Greer’s post said, “Fuck. That.” She received seven likes for this comment. The second commenter wrote a longer response:

Hateful -- but I have known at least two men who switched churches to move to a more male-dominant life style. And this article goes to such lengths to argue that the Bible doesn't \*really\* endorse abuse...but doesn't utter a peep about all the man-dominant, woman-subservient hogwash which permeates the text. Teaching women to be chattel, and teaching men that the only good women are the ones who kneel to men, is severely damaging. If you have hip

waders, check out CDD -- Christian Domestic Discipline. What a sick sad world they want.

Another one made a similarly long comment:

Ugh. That was a really hard read. I honestly am a bit gobsmacked that an actual journalist at the ABC spent such a huge chunk of text discussing the various interpretations of the Christian notion of male "headship". If it wasn't such a serious problem for so many women and children, I would have just laughed uncontrollably at the sheer nonsensical bullshit of people in positions of community power explaining the degree to which their imaginary friend decrees female inferiority.

And all the WOMEN defending this shit - laydeez, stop licking your chains!

Greer replied to one commenter who said that she had been told the same, to be patient and long-suffering as this was God's plan, but had eventually found the courage to leave her abusive husband. Greer said, "When the fucking bastards say 'long suffering' - that is PRECISELY what they mean - life-long suffering!" To this the original commenter responded:

Yip...that's true.... I thought 16 years was long enough... and got myself free....

A lot of the emotional healing I've had to do has been dealing with the religious guilt I felt as letting god (I can't put a capital letter before that word) down ....thankfully I've managed it and living life to the full as a result

The final comment was the longest one. I quote it ad verbatim in its entirety because it contains thick layers of data that a mere paraphrase would fail to do justice to:

I have a friend that married a guy who ended up being a sociopath that used religion to justify his behavior. He was charming and attentive (too attentive) while they were dating and a darling in their church. The day after their wedding the switch got flipped and he became mentally abusive. And their church bought right into it. He ended up bringing church leaders into their marriage to "lay hands" on her to get out the evil (I guess) that made her unhappy in their marriage. They met with a fellow church couple for counseling who, of course, blamed her. She finally got out when he started being physically abusive to her son from another marriage. The weird thing is he skeeved me out from the very moment I met him. I just felt like he was "off." She was just coming out of a bad marriage and he latched onto her and wouldn't let go. She was vulnerable so her alarm bells just didn't go off. Her church is very popular in our community and I just can't help having anything but contempt for anyone affiliated with it. I live in an area of the US that tends

to be progressive so most church going people are religious but rational-mostly Catholics and Lutherans-so the fact that these non-denominational fundamentalist churches have gained a foothold with people who were raised differently is concerning.

This discourse around Greer's post and the ABC article creates an identity of women repudiating religion because of its upholding male supremacy as a God-given absolute standard. The commenters on the post perform this identity by showing support for rejecting this norm, and by giving examples of how embracing religious doctrine leads to the subjugation and abuse of women by their husbands. Some cite general statistical information, while others use biographical anecdotes to perform the anti-religious identity.

### **“Biographization” of the Self in Identity Performance**

Performance of identity, Cover explains, is assisted by biographical accounts. These often take the *available categories* given by the social medium in question, such as gender, birth date, relationship status, profession, political views, education, and likes and interests on Facebook. Cover's point is that subjectivity online is created by “taking” the identity categories provided by the discursive medium, rather than occurring prior to discourse, as “a fixed and relatively unchangeable necessary facet of selfhood” (Cover, 2015, p. 15). Thus, during my Skype interview with her in October 2016, Annie Chant said, “I didn't really come out or even know I was an atheist until I read *The God Delusion*.” This is a book by Richard Dawkins, one of the most celebrated atheists in the world<sup>6</sup> (Slack, 2005). The online *Encyclopedia Britannica* says that

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<sup>6</sup> Writing for *Salon* from the Atheist Alliance International annual conference in Los Angeles, 2005, Gordy Slack called Richard Dawkins “the world's most famous out-of-the-closet living atheist.”



Dawkins used the book to launch his career as the most vocal public defender of atheism. It helped him found the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, and the Out Campaign, through which he urged atheists to publicly declare their beliefs.

When Chant says she did not know she was an atheist until she read Dawkins, she performs an identity category that was unknown to her until she encountered it in discourse. Prior to this identity performance, she saw herself in opposition to her childhood faith of Catholicism:

I was raised a Catholic, born in Ireland, in Dublin. My parents are Irish, highly catholic. I have never believed any of the crap they taught in church; the nuns were very hypocritical. I liked one priest, though, who was a very decent person, who made me not hate everything to do with religion. My mother has a long line of horror stories about the harm caused by religious people. What makes you good, is not religion. I know so many people who have no religious hair on their head who are very good and decent.

Similarly, Antonina Banderas, the 34-year-old Peruvian human resources specialist, said that although she had from a very young age been interested in women's rights she had become much more attentive in feminist education since joining WWR. The group had made her more acutely aware of the patriarchal origins and effects of Christianity, even though her initial motivation for joining the group was to find a place where she could comfortably express her atheism. She said this in response to the interview question "Do you find that the group gives you a sense of identity that you would otherwise not get in the wider society?" Therefore, the group had expanded the categories available for Banderas to perform her identity, in this case adding "feminism" to "atheism."

Tanamarie Nauchester is a 27-year-old English teacher in the National Capital Territory of Delhi, India. She said that she was born a Hindu but lost her faith "somewhere along the line." She explained that despite its multiplicity of religions,

India is very concerned with which religion people practice, especially since 2014 when the central government was taken over by Hindu-centric politicians. In addition, Nauchester continued, it is a very conservative society, and many topics are never talked about. Thus, since joining WWR, she had found people of like mind, who allowed her to express her concerns in a “safe place.” She said that the group’s courage to question taken-for-granted assumptions had emboldened her to “stop being a push-over for men.” When asked what types of posts on the group’s page interested her the most, she said:

Sexual abuse because I went through it, and when I see people talking about it I feel very safe. I was molested when I was six by an adolescent. My family doesn’t talk about it, and in India it’s not easy to get a shrink; so, getting people who talk about it is very encouraging. I still have emotional baggage about it and finding this group has been very helpful. The abuse made me have a very emotional relationship with food. Whenever I am nervous, I eat a lot, and this has made it very hard for me to manage my weight. Like yesterday, I ate two plates of biryani in anticipation of this interview, after we chatted about it. I mean, who does that? It’s just an interview, right?

The members of WWR allow discourse about sexual abuse, thus enabling Nauchester to perform an identity that is oppressed by the dominant Indian public sphere. Despite her “emotional relationship with food,” she was able to tell me, a stranger she “met” on Facebook, about her identity as a survivor of sexual abuse. Like the *garotas* of Carrier-Moisan’s ethnography who are denied inclusivity in mainstream classist Brazilian society, Nauchester’s experience of sexual abuse was suppressed by conservative traditional Indian society. But like the *garotas* who find a new identity by embracing their relationships with the *gringos*, she is able to perform the identity of a sex abuse survivor by engaging in the discourses promulgated by WWR.

Maureen Yakub, a 40-year-old English teacher in Tunis, Tunisia, said during a Facebook Messenger interview that WWR gave her “a broader sense of belonging that

I fit in somewhere.” She said this in the context of the Arab Uprising, during which, she explained, “people were fed up with the regime, the abuses, and what made it worse was that civilians were killed while peacefully demonstrating.” Although Tunisia had gained more freedom of speech and expression following the country’s 2011 revolution, Yakub said that she felt even less safe as an “atheist woman.” WWR was thus a safe place for her to express herself as a woman with no religion. Her encounter with the group’s discourse of feminist atheism provided her with the opportunity to perform an identity that would otherwise have been regarded with hostility by the wider Tunisian society, which is 98% Muslim. In addition, WWR was different from the other atheist groups she had belonged to, which “were quite hostile to women through sexist, misogynistic comments or jokes.”

Henry Okal is a 50-year-old Kenyan I met in Nairobi during this dissertation’s pilot study in 2014. During a July 2016 Skype interview, he said that he had learned as a WWR member that feminism involves much more than fighting for women’s equality with men. Okal is trained as an engineer, but currently works with women, trying to empower them against Kenya’s overwhelmingly patriarchal culture. He said that he had been trying to register a non-governmental organization called the “Feminist Agenda”, and by the time of this interview, had been denied registration by the Attorney General eight times. Underlining the rigor with which WWR is administered, and in response to the question on how he came to know about the group, Okal said, “The moment some of my friends found their way there, I got some Facebook notification that so and so has joined; I applied to join, and my application took about two weeks to be approved.”

Okal had many reasons for joining the group: he found the name, for starters, “very intriguing.” He wanted to know what these women without religion were doing. What was their agenda? What could they teach Kenyan women about living life without illusions? When first interviewed in 2014 as a FIKA member, Okal had identified as an agnostic. In the 2016 interview, he identified as an anti-theist. He said that since the 2014 interview, he had met many “informed thinkers” who helped him realize that “the main reason women are oppressed is religion.” He had thus taken feminist atheism as his life’s mission. He planned on working with other feminist Kenyan men to liberate his sisters from the shackles of illusions:

Even as much as atheists are demonized here, we want to empower people to feel that they are not evil by nature, as taught by religion. A woman is not a rib. They can do much better than men. We want to call it “saving by reason.” Nobody is a nobody. Everybody can do whatever they set their minds on. We want people to understand that you can do good without having to depend on a god or other imaginary beings.

As Cover wrote, “selves are constituted in discourse but can be reconstituted or reconfigured differently in the encounter with different, new, imaginative discursive arrangements” (2012, p. 179). Okal’s self had been constituted as agnostic in 2014. Upon encountering the feminist atheist discourse of WWR, he reconstituted himself into an anti-theist by the time of the 2016 interview.

In like manner, Alan Jakom, the 24-year-old Kenyan nuclear and quantum engineering student living in South Korea, joined FIKA because he had been looking for like-minded atheists. However, upon encountering media discourse about the imperialism of the West, and the concomitant propaganda about the “dictatorship of the East,” he reconstituted his identity, adopting a more complexly “biographized” self (Cover, 2015, p. 14). His posts on FIKA, thus his profile as a member of the group,

changed in tone from opposing the “fallacies of religion” to “highlighting the lies of the White Imperialists.” (See for example Figure 12 below, which Jakom posted on FIKA in reaction to the death of Cuban leader Fidel Castro.) For this reason, he was categorized by the rest of the FIKA membership as one of the “resident conspiracy theorists.”



*Figure 12: Post shared on FIKA by Alan Jakom, a member who had come to be identified as a “conspiracy theorist” by the majority of the group’s members for challenging the claims of such mainstream Western media as CNN, BBC, and the New York Times. In this video, a British expert on Cuba, Dr. Denise Baden, dismantled the claims of a BBC TV interviewer who tried to pin the conventional assumptions made about Fidel Castro, that, for instance, he had consistently abused the freedoms and rights of Cubans. Baden argued persuasively that a majority of Cubans remember Castro fondly, are proud of being Cuban, and that if the US was to be held against the same standards as it held Cuba to, it too would fail.*

As an example, one of the leading lights of the group, Peter Van Volk, a 50-year-old Belgian businessman who lives on the Kenyan South Coast, always demands peer-reviewed evidence for any claim made by Jakom. In turn, Jakom has adopted the practice of captioning his anti-Western posts with the opening words: “Peer reviewers.... Would you mind peer reviewing...”? This case illustrates Cover’s thesis that there is no self prior to discourse, and the theme of this chapter that identity is an

effect of discursive performativity. Such performance, of course, depends on one's relational interactions with others on the particular online medium (Cover, 2012, p. 179). The next section will examine how group members perform identity by identifying in a relational sense with other members and with the group in general.

### ***Identity Performance Through Relationality***

In addition to the management of one's social media profile, digital identity according to Rob Cover (2015) is performed through the relationships one establishes with others online. In fact, Cover argues that *all* forms of online identity performance are relational, requiring the citation of discursive categories of identity, performance for recognizability, and operating within constructed "truth regimes" (p. 10). Mutual surveillance is key to identity performance, by which he means users of social networks watch what each other says to determine consistency and coherence of the identity categories they adopt. Thus, for example, a man who identifies as a political liberal may in one context express support for a laissez faire market economy, citing the individual liberty required and engendered by such an economic arrangement. His friend may then remind him, "But last week you said that the state should establish a health safety net for those living under a certain income threshold," thereby demanding a clarification of his identity performance.

These relational performances of identity, writes Cover, take the form of the kind of friends one adds to one's profile, also known as *friending*, and the maintenance of one's list of friends. Secondly, they take the form of *networked communication*, by which Cover means engaging with one's friends via interactive communication, such as updating, commenting on status updates, responding to posts and comments by

friends, and tagging friends in either original posts or in commentary sections. “Both,” he explains, “are performative acts of identification articulated through frameworks of relationality and belonging; specific activities which produce, constitute, and stabilize the self” (p. 16).

In this section, I use these concepts of friending and networked communication to analyze the groups. My central thesis is that the members of these groups performed identity through the ways they related within the group, for example by calling each other out when they did not perform as “genuine” freethinkers, Pan-Africanists, or irreligious women. I thus suggest that the surveillance performed in the groups is more stringent and less unwitting than that found in Cover’s theorizing. Cover argues that “the relationality of online social networking can be understood as a nonostensible activity taken up *unwittingly* by users as part of the ‘biographical “narratives” that will explain themselves to themselves, and hence sustain a coherent and consistent identity”’ (p. 17, quoting Buckingham, 2008, my italics). Belonging to the Facebook groups in this dissertation, however, demands adherence to certain rules of engagement. Therefore, the members of these groups practiced a relationality that was taken up manifestly *explicitly* and *wittingly*. I thus suggest that such groups add a layer of work to performativity, and propose that in this way, I advance Cover’s theorization beyond social networking sites in general to specifically address groups that have clearly stated goals and objectives.

### **Friending**

Cover uses Judith Butler’s approach to performativity to argue that identity performance is an act constituting the account of selfhood, establishing in hindsight

“the subject who speaks the self through the performative acts of friending” (p. 17). This follows from Butler’s thesis that identity is not prior to performance, but is actually created through the particular performance. In other words, I do not *friend* my Facebook friends because of who or what I am but rather *become* who or what I am on Facebook as a result of the people I *add* to my friends’ list. Friending, adds Cover, is not restricted to individual Facebook users. “Liking” of pages and groups also forms part of this act. “Facebook,” he explains, “frequently uses the signifier *like* as a means of response to friends’ comments and the terminology for joining a group fan page” (p. 18, italics added). This friending, and liking and joining of groups, become part of the identification markers that our Facebook friends use to make a coherent and consistent sense of *who* or *what* we are, or, as Cover terms it, to surveil us.

The surveillance meant here is however different from the Foucauldian Panopticon policing. The question posed by the friend who wants to understand why the political liberal supports laissez faire market principles *after* supporting state-mandated health care, for example, is a result of the “activated meanings” the friend brings to the new status update which seems to contradict the previous one. The question is not intended to police the borders of the community of friends on the social networking site, but rather underlines the fluidity and multiplicity of meanings that online discourse invokes. Different friends, and the different forms of network nodes and hubs they create, will surveil differently, unlike the Panopticon, which polices in only one way. Not only that, different times and circumstances will produce different forms of surveillance from the same friend about the same identity category. Cover gives the example of a user being asked by a friend, “but I had no idea you’d slept with



women, so are you bisexual or what . . . ?” To this the friend may respond, “I’ve always found both genders attractive.” The difference is that on social networking sites, communication, hence surveillance, is two-way. In Foucault’s Panopticon, it was one way, and was meant to restore order and normativity in only one direction, from author to audience, from “police officer” to citizen. For Facebook and other social networks, communication is two-way, and normalization occurs in multiple directions. This paves the way for a democracy that is more participatory than representative.

For example, Camille Itimu, the 24-year-old woman who said that she identified with Christianity as “a relationship with the Most High,” joined FIKA in late 2014 upon seeing it on her Facebook wall without initially knowing that it was a group for atheists. When she saw the kind of discourses the members engaged in, she wanted to immediately leave, but the intellectual rigor of the debates in FIKA made her stay. As she said during an email interview in October 2016:

[T]he posts challenged my faith and that in itself motivated me to continue participating. I do love a good challenge. The members have indirectly helped me research better about Christianity, and as a result, deepened my faith; respect other people’s views and treat them accordingly; and enhanced my debating skills. (sic)

Itimu came to be known as one of the most vocal theists of FIKA. This meant that most active members, especially the ones who saw religion as the reason for Kenya’s socioeconomic and political backwardness, saw her as one of the “sheeple,” a neologism which means “sheep-like people.” They berated her constantly, sometimes going so low as to call her an imbecile. On one thread back in early 2015, three members subjected her to a verbal harangue that made her eventually leave the group for a number of months. They said that she was either of two things: She must have

been too stupid to realize she was no match for the mature atheists who had come to their position after a life-time of trying to apply the principles of Christianity only to realize that they cannot work, and that these principles are fraught with unresolvable contradictions. Or, she must have been a masochist who enjoyed being made a fool of over and over again.

After a five-to-six-month hiatus from the group, Itimu came back to FIKA, explaining that she had taken a break to attend to her higher education. She appeared to have indeed matured in her debating skills. She was also able to incorporate such nuances as the difference between macro- and micro-evolution in debates involving intelligent design and natural selection as the origin of species. As time wore on, she earned greater and more respect from the FIKA membership. This, I posit, is a complex case of identity work. During the 2016 interview, she said that belonging to FIKA heightened her self-awareness of why she was put on this earth by God:

I do get a sense of identity from the group. They help me touch base with why I was put on this planet - purpose; to continue fellowship with the Most High and to help others with the knowledge He gives me.

Also illustrating how Itimu performed her identity as a Christian member of FIKA is the case when she resorted to using “curse words” against other members. This occurred in a heated debate over the volatile political climate in Kenya during the August 2017 general elections. One member was aghast and asked her what had happened to her Christianity for her to stoop so low as to use the F-word. She nonchalantly retorted that cursing had no bearing on her faith, one way or the other. Christianity could not be used as an excuse for molycoddling sheeple, she said. Here, she used the identity category reserved for blind followers of religion to denote blind

followers of politicians. She gave the term her own “activated meaning” (Fiske, 1987) to surveil members who claimed to be critical thinkers as far as religion was concerned, but who failed the test when it came to politics.

Annette Omare, a woman in her thirties, said during an October 2016 Skype interview that she joined FIKA in late 2012. She said her reason for joining was “boredom,” but clarified that she did not mean this in a negative sense:

When I said that I joined FIKA because I was bored, you should not interpret this negatively. I am the kind of person who when bored goes looking for something constructive to do. For instance, I came to America because I was bored with living in Kenya, and once just told folks back home that I am going to America, much to their disbelief. I also started working for this charity that caters to the LGBTQI community out of boredom and a curiosity to learn what these people were all about.

As Cover notes, joining a group is akin to friending someone on Facebook. It represents a user’s identification with the group or with the friend. Cover further explains that *friending* and *joining* is a “double-performative” act of identity work because it simultaneously allows access to one’s profile and serves as an act of relationality. Asked if FIKA as a group gave her a sense of identity that she did not otherwise get from the wider society in general, Omare said that initially, because she was a Catholic, her interactions with other FIKA members were full of bickering and bitter arguments.

“FIKA is a community of buddies and siblings,” she said, “where people have gotten to know each other. There has been intellectual maturity over time, and people I had disagreed with in the past have now become my friends.” About three years after joining FIKA, Omare developed a romantic relationship with Benny Ogwak, an atheist whose comments usually encouraged tolerance for differing views on most matters discussed in the group. She told me that she found his atheism very refreshing

compared to that of the vocal antitheists who were hell-bent on ridiculing and denigrating religion. “Religion is a personal thing about which arguments are never-ending,” she explained.

Omare said: “In writing, I am very passive-aggressive, but in person I am very reserved and introverted.” Indeed, her posts and comments on FIKA were very abrasive, sometimes marked with vulgar insults. My initial motivation for requesting to interview her for this study was to get a perspective about the group from a member who did not fit the typical atheist or agnostic FIKA identity. In fact, the majority of the active group members referred to her as a “fundie,” a derogatory term that denotes religious fundamentalists who are best represented by American alt-right conservatives. These are usually opposed to such things as the bodily autonomy of women, separation of church and state, and evolution and climate change in science.

However, Omare proved to be way more complex than such a simplistic identity. Even though she identified as a theist Catholic, she was a pharmacy student who told me she used ideas she had learned from debates on FIKA in some of her classes. For example, she had researched deeper into the highly controversial topic of male genital mutilation. She came from a culture in Western Kenya that traditionally circumcised boys as a rite of passage. Quite a few of the men on FIKA have campaigned strongly for the eradication of male circumcision on the grounds that the foreskin is one of the most sexually sensitive parts of the penis. She presented these ideas during a class discussion in pharmacy school, and she told me she was most grateful to FIKA for it.

Omارة's identity work via FIKA was thus complex and multi-faceted. During one of the debates about theism, atheism, and Catholicism, which involved two other Catholics in addition to her boyfriend Ogwak, she posted the following comment:

...I have an agreement with God, once I turn 60, I will be very faithful. Before then, after the babies come, nitaenda kanisa [Kiswahili for *I'll go to church*] to do the Catholic things: baptism, Eucharistic etc. Hukuz Kanisa [*Here, Church*] is so boring, old and tired. I cannot relate to what they are saying. ...I am active on the young Catholics circuit which focuses on social/environmental justice. We meet a couple of times in a month, talk, plan, hike...while relaxing with beer/wine and pizza. Kuenda church ndio ngumu [*Going to church is what is hard*], ...but once a catholic, always a catholic.

### **Networked Communication**

Cover argues that users of online social networking sites stabilize their identities “through commentary, updates, discussions communication and interactivity” (p. 19). Relationships and belonging are performed through the maintenance of communication flows, and depend upon the manifold paths of friendship and relationality found in the online environment. These manifold paths engender nodes and hubs of friends and relationships that can lead to the disruption of coherent and consistent identity, thus forcing the participants in these networks to do “greater identity work” (p. 24). Due to their wide and varied memberships, FIKA, PAN, and WWR all possess a greater number of such nodes and hubs, and more possibility for the undoing of coherent and temporally consistent identities for their members. This is the reason why I opened this section by noting that the surveillance carried out in such groups is bound to be more stringent than that in a user's general Facebook wall, or on other social networks.

For instance, FIKA, as noted in Chapter Five earlier, had spawned five extra groups based on highly specialized topics and interests. It also had different categories of members, with some regarding themselves as “more true” to the group's identity,

goals and vision. In a September 2016 post, Kerry Kiragu, the 25-year-old currency trader quoted earlier in Chapter Five, bemoaned the decline in quality of the debates found in the group. He said that he had noticed “many of the FIKA old-timers rarely post or comment on posts nowadays.” He attributed this to “the sheer number of morons we now have on this page.” He added: “The FIKA of 2012-2015 has been replaced by a complete circus.”

Kiragu’s post engendered a richly diverse commentary that represents Cover’s point about the greater demand for identity work caused by “the multifarious vectors of friendship and relationality on social networking sites” (p. 19). The main comments totaled 41. Most comments had at least three replies, and many had as many as 40 replies. Some of the old members did agree that as the membership grew in number, the number of posts that demanded a high level of intellectual rigor had become fewer and farther between. Others said the original poster was pretentious by presuming to call others morons, and proposing to impose censure on them. One or two said Kiragu was looking for an opportunity to impose his own suspect standards on the group. A few complained about laxity by the admins, saying the responsibility of maintaining high standards of debate and engagement was an administrative one. Yet others blamed the current political climate in Kenya, pointing out how crude and debased by tribe Kenyan politics were. One member said, “It happens in every group.” Another one, cited in Chapter Five in the debate on God, meaning, and morality, said FIKA was a good training ground:

Bwana [*Kiswahili* for “Mister”] Kiragu, this group is great for beginner’s thinking. Nothing more. I am eternally grateful for the opportunities it provided me to free myself from 17 years of Catholic school. For fuck’s sake this season’s psycho who suffers from Dunning Kruger’s effect thinks that he

has a ‘fresh’ perspective with his tired 1800’s ethics. Worse even is that he doesn’t know of the tens of old members endlessly bored by the quality of his posts.

Omare, the Catholic woman cited above, asked the above commenter why he felt the need to speak for others, to which he replied, “Because these people are extremely busy on their own walls and not on FIKA’s.”

Kiragu had been one of the founder members, helping craft the group’s constitution and rules of engagement. He would get deeply engaged in posts that questioned the existence of God, the authenticity of Pope Francis’ popularity and ostensible humility, the claims of democracy that it was a popular form of government, and, his favorite, the “hypocrisy of American Liberals.” This latter topic was guaranteed to get him into long debates, tallying the failings of such icons of the American Left as Franklin Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy. His favorite authors included Carl Menger, Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek, and Hans-Hermann Hoppe. His call for a return to the good old days of FIKA reflected the paucity of posts and comments that could rise to these authors’ challenges, especially in the wake of the populism that had been sweeping across the world, culminating in the sham elections of 2016 in the U.S. and 2017 in Kenya.

In like manner, the relational exchanges that were engendered by Yaoundé’s and Piedmont’s posts on PAN sought to surveil the consistency of the identities each member performed. Yaoundé, for example, performed charity positively, regardless of the race or skin-color of the person practicing the charity. Tracey, one of the members who disagreed with him most vehemently, saw charity through race-tainted lenses. She said that the white woman who had rescued the starving African child was merely

aggrandizing herself, and if Europeans had not colonized and exploited Africa in the first place, the child would not have been starving and in need of the charity given by the white woman. Yaoundé disagreed with this, and, to prove his point, posted another picture of Africans giving aid to Europeans.

Meanwhile, the members on WWR who equated sex work with slavery and human trafficking performed relational identities that wanted to limit the range of sexual expression available to women. Hunter, the admin who posted the video from *Vice* celebrating sex work had said that the purpose of her post was to ratify the group's identity as "both sex positive, and sex worker positive." The thread ended with the admins underlining the fact that the nay-sayers to the post were wrong and did not belong to the group.

## ***Discussion***

Basing his analysis on post-structuralist and feminist theory, especially that of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, Rob Cover argues that subjectivity, both online and offline, is "contingent, multiple, and fluid" (p. 11). He says that this view belongs in the critical theory tradition, and, to be sure, it does resonate with my own position articulated in Chapter Two of this dissertation, and borrowed from John Dewey, that identity consists in "having a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs."

Online identity calls upon what Cover calls normative discourses, where people *perform* their identity in accordance with culturally given norms for consistency and coherence. The people who belong to the cultures that produce these discursive identities demand that *our* identities cohere around certain norms, and they surveil us



to ensure that our identity claims are consistent over time and space. Digital environments call upon citation and reiteration of these discourses to articulate and maintain the identities that we perform on social networking sites. The groups we belong to and the friends we add to our profiles add to these surveillance measures, and demand greater work from us to maintain the identities we portray digitally.

In this chapter, I have argued that FIKA, PAN, and WWR as Facebook groups demand of their members performances of identity that cohered around and were consistent with the norms established by the particular group. Therefore, these Facebook groups gave their members a sense of identity that was predicated on the discourse and rhetoric produced by the *group*, but, more importantly, this discourse and rhetoric was produced and directed by the self-same *members*. In other words, the group was made by and sustained by the multifarious members, and the members were made and sustained by the group as a body of subjective interlocutors, acting as a public composed of members who wrote and read the norms they expected each other to follow.

In my estimation, however, the cardinal theme was that instead of the members adopting a group identity that adhered to the cohesion of the specific group as a unit, every member seemed to want to interpret what the group stood for for herself. Interestingly, one of the founders of FIKA had been severally quoted—often as a reflection of the complexity of keeping independent minds on one track—as saying, “Herding freethinkers is like herding cats!” There was thus a deep sense of individualism behind all this identity performance.

Thus, Itimu, the 24-year-old Christian member of FIKA, said, “I do get a sense of identity from the group. They help me touch base with why I was put on this planet—purpose; to continue fellowship with the Most High and to help others with the knowledge He gives me.” Furthermore, she found that the group made her a better debater, and she was able to hold her fort against the members who had accused her of being a member of the “sheeple” for following the tenets of her religion blindly, but who did the same thing when following the calls of their political leaders.

Identity is indeed multiple and fluid, a point made not solely by Cover’s discursive concept of identity as performativity, but also by Kwame Appiah in Chapter Two of this dissertation: we all possess many different identities, and to reduce someone to only one of these has the potential to lead to more, instead of less, oppression. The old-guard members of FIKA wanted to reduce the group’s identity to opposition to religion; Itimu challenged them and showed them that the same scales they used to judge critical thinking with regard to religion were equally applicable to politics.

These cases point to WWR, as conceived by the admins, being somewhat more geared towards upholding a more cohesive group identity that sought to be more inclusive hence less oppressive. In fact, one of the members who kept insisting that sex work is synonymous with human trafficking and slavery was removed from the group. A closer reading shows that this did not necessarily translate to WWR being more inclusive than either PAN or FIKA. For sure, WWR had a much larger group of admins than the other two groups, and their close involvement in the running of group discussions led to a more tightly controlled group. FIKA’s more openness towards the

encouragement of debate, while implies a less controlled group, can in another sense be interpreted as actually more inclusive. And PAN, despite its stated goal of discouraging debate, unwittingly showed itself as engaging in the self-same debate. I think all of this underlines the notion that identity, whether that of a group or that of an individual, is multiple and fluid. Although I say that identity ought to correspond to the individual's "responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs," I cannot help but conclude that every member of each of these groups prized her own interpretation of what that "responsible share" ought to be.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: VOICE

### *Introduction*

Participatory democracy, I have argued throughout this dissertation, requires facilities and structures that allow human beings to communicate directly with each other as members of a public, about matters that are of common concern to them as a body politic. As discussed in Chapter Three, arrangements that allow the formation of multiple and contestatory publics are better equipped to foster democracy for this precise reason of political communication. To recap the argument on publics, counterpublics, and the public sphere: people who live together need to form an opinion about how they ought to govern themselves as members of a community. For this opinion to be common to all the members of this community, it needs to be formed through deliberation in an unrestricted fashion (Habermas, 1974). And such deliberation, for it to be free and inclusive, demands that all the members of the community can *speak*, by developing what Nick Couldry calls the “skills which are necessary for anyone to give an account of themselves and others at a certain depth and with a certain freedom” (1996, p. 322).

Couldry refers to voice as a process in the sense given by Judith Butler, i.e., “giving an account of oneself” (Butler, 2005). By this, he means the telling of a story, a narrative, about one’s life and one’s experience of the world. Neoliberalism, however, imposes a politics that devalues voice and reduces everything to market principles. Couldry rejoins that neoliberalism is hegemonic for this precise reason of reducing everything to only one narrative, that of the market (2010). All our stories, in other words, are supposed to be reducible to the rationale of the free market economy, which

renders us voiceless, because we cannot tell our own unique life stories except only if they toe the line of the market.

In opposition to this totalizing effect of the market hegemony, Couldry proposes that for voice to serve as the “skills which are necessary for anyone to give an account of themselves and others at a certain depth and with a certain freedom” (1996, p. 322), certain general principles are required:

1. Voice is socially grounded
2. Voice is a form of reflexive agency
3. Voice is an embodied process
4. Voice requires a material form which may be individual, collective, or distributed
5. Voice can be denied by voice-denying rationalities

In this chapter, I use these five principles from Couldry to explore how FIKA, PAN, and WWR give their members tools to tell the stories of their lives as members of these Facebook groups, following the same order as they are listed above. The underlying premise of the chapter is that the Facebook groups are affective counterpublic communities that bring together individuals with identities opposed to the mainstream public opinion of their societies. By “community,” I do not mean that they speak in unison, or that the group is more important than the individual members who constitute it. Instead, I mean that the individuals who speak as part of the group do so in response to the group’s core values and identities.

## *Voice as Socially Grounded*

Couldry argues that voice depends “above all [on] the shared resources of material life” (2010, p. 9). Not only do these resources include language but also the status that allows others to recognize one as having a story to tell that is inextricably intertwined with those of others. For example, Tracy Sherman, a 38-year-old woman, was born and raised in Florida in a “fundamentalist Baptist” family. She was required to wear dresses that ran from her collar bones to her knees, to “always cover up and wear panty-hose.” The man was always the head of the house, and all the wife could do was pray that he was always right, even when he was *objectively* wrong. During the sit-down face-to-face interview at a Starbucks café in Braintree, Mass. (where she now resides), in July 2016, Sherman was a full-time graduate student in anthropology. For the past two years since joining WWR, she had found a community with men and women who were as smart as professional anthropologists, but who were much more diverse and interesting. But, more importantly, she “found religion” in the irreligious Facebook group:

There’s always something that spurs my righteous indignation. I would compare it to a religious community, and you are there with your sisters and brothers, and they share your “faith”. It is reinforcement and validation of my beliefs and who I am as a person; it is a truly religious experience. We feed each other intellectual things to grow on; we find out about the world through each other; we get to learn more about the world, seeing that the group is not US-centric, unlike many other such Facebook groups.

Sherman explained that she had joined the U.S. Army as soon as she became an adult, believing that she “would fit right in,” because she had grown up in a similarly regimented household where she was constantly shouted at and required to take orders like in the military. The army thus seemed to her as “an opportunity to get out of a

world where women were at the very bottom of the totem pole.” She however quickly learned that it was the farthest thing from what she had anticipated:

I was disappointed and left after two years. There were many incidences of rape, sexual discrimination, and when I got pregnant, I sunk even lower on the totem pole because the epitome of a soldier is a “man’s man”. A pregnant woman cannot in any way be that, and I was made a complete outcast.

Sherman said that she had hoped to find a voice as a soldier in the United States Army, as a socially shared place and resource. This hope was based on her social background of military-like regimentation; she had believed she would fit in the military world because her life’s story, her “voice,” was socially grounded in order and discipline. But she had also hoped that her status would be elevated by her being a soldier. She had hoped that—unlike in her family—in the army, she would not be without status. She had thought that she would be equal with everyone in the army, including the men whom she had been taught were always right and beyond question. Couldry explains that voice depends on being recognized by others as having a status that allows one to give an account of oneself. All soldiers, Sherman had hoped, recognized each other’s voices as intertwined with each other. But she learned that women soldiers were of no socially recognized status, especially if they got pregnant.

In WWR, fortunately, she found like-minded people who posted on ideas and issues that were important to her: “The members here think deeply and broadly, like anthropologists. They have been sources of inspiration for the papers that I have had to write as a grad student.” WWR thus gave her the voice she had been denied by her religious upbringing and by the misogynistic US army. Even though the interactions with WWR members were only online, she said that she would feel at home with them

in real life: “If I was to be in a room with these women, I would feel like they were my community.”

In a similar vein, Karjin Stillman, the WWR admin mentioned in Chapter Six as supporting prostitution as a legally protected profession, constantly questioned the taken-for-granted opinions prevalent in Western industrialized society. She for example got deeply engaged on the debates that ensued from the post in Figure 13 below. The original poster was also an admin.



*Figure 13: A post made on January 2018 on WWR from the online magazine patheos.com.*

Stillman was the first one to comment:

I share a lot of her feelings. I'm not sure I make a good wife or am cut out to be one. The word "wife" is loaded with so much cultural expectation, so much baggage about what it means and what it ought to mean. Husbanding often sounds so much easier; just have a job! The responsibilities pretty much end there. I'm engaged to remarry, and all of the weight around "wife" sometimes scares me. I want a marriage of equals, between spouse and spouse, not a



marriage between a husband and wife with all the centuries of expectations and implications that come with it.

Stillman reflects Couldry's thesis (quoting the "existentialist" philosopher Soren Kierkegaard) that "the fact of having kept silent...this is the most dangerous thing of all. For by keeping silent one is relegated to oneself" (Couldry, 2010, p. 150). When commenting on the above post, she was engaged to be married. Yet, she voiced the fear that she was not ready to be the centuries-old text-book-case wife. She was afraid that she was not cut out to be a good wife, just like the original poster on WWR, just like the author of the *Patheos* article. And, just like them, she found her voice by *not keeping silent*, and by being in a group that validated her voice. Like Sherman, who left the army because she could not keep silent like a good pregnant woman soldier, Stillman spoke up about her misgivings regarding marriage because of the historical injustices the institution imposes on women. WWR gave both women the social ground and wherewithal to make their voices heard.

Raleigh Khimani, a 31-year-old member of PAN from Barbados, indicated during a Facebook Messenger interview in July 2016 that the main reason for his being in the Facebook group was it gave him a social resource through which to voice his concerns. He joined PAN after the admins of another Pan-African group he had been a member of changed the settings so that members who were not admins could only comment on posts, but not make original posts, i.e., only admins could make original posts. My selection of him as a research participant was partly motivated by the number of posts he made in the group. He would post news articles and videos up to three times a day. He was also the first member in the group to volunteer for this study. At the time of the interview, he had been a PAN member for a few months.

At the beginning of 2018, Khimani had continued to post on PAN with the same level of intensity and regularity as he did in mid-2016. In January 2018 alone, he made 32 posts in total. I interpret this frequent posting about matters that are of vital significance to him and other Africans in the diaspora as a reflection of what Couldry calls “an irreducible part of [our] human agency” (2009, p. 580).

As an example of how Khimani would use PAN for voice, the posts he made on PAN in January 2018 revolved around news stories that highlighted such discriminatory practices as Latino infants (and those listed with an “other” ethnicity) receiving the worst treatment in California hospitals, while hospitals with the best patient outcomes treated white patients better (Coleman, 2017); a “report from the Anti-Defamation League showing that murders by white supremacists doubled in 2017 — and that they killed more people than Muslim extremists” (Al-Sibai, 2018); celebration of Donald Trump’s “s\*\*thole comments” by Neo-Nazis indicating that they think like him (Lusher, 2018); and the video in Figure 14 below, which gave the reason for the constant question by Whites about why blacks “can’t get over *IT*,” the *IT* being slavery.



*Figure 14: Video posted by Raleigh Khimani, a PAN member, on January 11, 2018. The video is about the efforts made by a retired New Orleans lawyer to transform an estate that formerly served as a sugarcane plantation for a family which had owned 101 slaves into a museum.*

The video traced the roots of all of America's racial problems to slavery. It featured John Cummings, an elderly New Orleans lawyer who bought Whitney Plantation, "one of the antebellum estates that line the Great River Road between New Orleans and Baton Rouge" (Read, 2014), and transformed it into the only museum in the United States dedicated to slavery. As a white man, Cummings explained in the video, he had spent up to eight million dollars to make the museum a memorial for the Africans who were subjected to "systematic deprivation" by his ancestors, "so that everyone would understand how strongly the deck was stacked against the Africans here." By posting this video, I posit, Khimani was giving himself, and other descendants of African slaves, a voice through PAN. The Africans who were sold into slavery were denied their human agency, torn from their sociocultural roots, and broken into tools for the free use of their masters. The mass incarceration of blacks in 21<sup>st</sup> Century US and the poverty faced by African Americans, Khimani's video explained, was a direct result of that dehumanization of the African race.

### ***Voice as a Form of Reflexive Agency***

Couldry uses John Dewey's vision of democracy as "social cooperation" to explore what forms a post-neoliberal politics may take. As far back as 1918, Dewey had cautioned that democracy should not be identified with "economic individualism as the essence of freedom of action" (Dewey, 1954). Instead, he saw freedom as grounded socially in the human experience of "communicative (not merely economic) exchange through which individuals orient themselves to the world" (Couldry, 2010, p. 133). These exchanges are composed of narratives that people construct about their lives to forge coherent identities. In other words, voice is necessary to communicate the identity

that we perform in order to be recognized by our social networks. Voice, identity, and community, the three central themes of this dissertation, are also the three strands of genuine participatory democracy as understood by Dewey.

The narratives our voice take in this communicative exchange, Couldry explains, involve our taking responsibility for them, disclosing who we are as “subjects.” They do not *happen* to us, and they are also not “random babblings that emerge, unaccountably, from our mouths, hands and gestures” (p. 8). We create them in response to the world around us, both material and social. We create them to make meaning of our lives, to orient ourselves to the world. They are a form of agency in this sense.

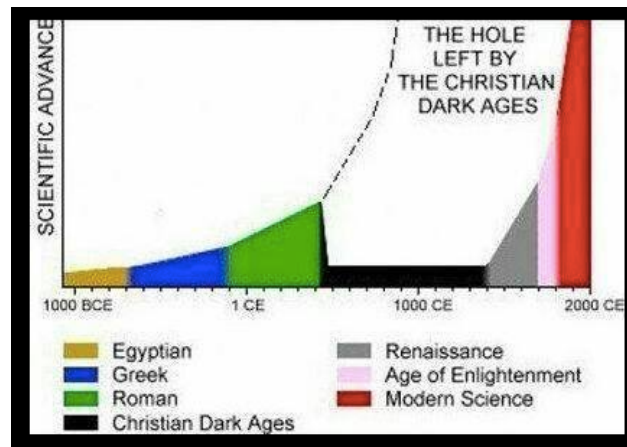
Because we *recognize* ourselves as the agents of our voice, as the narrators of our stories, voice is *reflexive*. Through voice, we *reflect* upon the stories we create and tell, examining how those stories cohere together over space and time, between ourselves as individuals, and between us and our social surroundings. For example, on January 1, 2017, one of the most active members of FIKA posted the meme below (Figure 15):



Figure 15: A meme posted on FIKA in January 2017.

The third commenter on the post asked the OP (original poster) what he was doing now that he knew there were starving people in Africa. This comment generated 71 replies, the majority of which were between Daniel Ng’ang’a, earlier cited in Chapter Five as one of the most vocal apologists for theism, and Muchiri Kabugi, an atheist member I interviewed in October 2016. Kabugi asked, “Well isn’t that God’s work? How can a mere human make it rain in drought areas?” Ng’ang’a told Kabugi to compare the accomplishments of those who believed in God to those who did not; he said that belief in God had advanced human rights and science, while atheism had not only not done anything for the world, it had “impeded progress in every direction.”

In turn, Kabugi asked Ng’ang’a to provide evidence for his claim, and offered the following chart (Figure 16) as his own proof of the contrary:



*Figure 16: A graph offered by a FIKA atheist as evidence for how religion and theism impede progress.*

Ng’ang’a responded to this as follows:

Hm... that’s a colourful chart, did you draw it yourself? Incidentally, it has woeful historical inaccuracies.

The “Dark Ages” were actually just the Middle Ages, a relatively peaceful time in which universities like Cambridge and Oxford were founded. Incidentally, universities like Harvard, Yale, Princeton were founded by Christians. Spectacles and mechanical clocks were also invented in your “Dark

Ages”. Foundations for modern science were laid in this period by priests in monasteries who believed they were studying the handiwork of God.

Kabugi, in response to Ng’ang’a’s observation, noted that the only reason science came from the church was because no other institution was involved in the generation of knowledge. Furthermore, he added, most scientists of that period greatly doubted the existence of God but had to maintain the appearance that they were theists to ensure funding, and, even more importantly, to avoid being burned at the stake. To this, Ng’ang’a asked for historical evidence for the claim that scientists during this time feigned theism for political expedience, calling Kabugi’s statement an assertion fallacy. He added that history shows many scientists attributed their success to divine inspiration.

This exchange illustrates the reflexive agency of the two FIKA members. The atheist supported the OP that belief in God is ridiculous because it requires suspension of effective human action, while the Christian maintained that effective human action is possible only through divine inspiration. FIKA was therefore for this reason a quite effective social ground for the creation of effective voices for its varied members; while at first blush it seemed to be a group principally dedicated to denigrating the claims of religion, upon further examination, it proved itself to be more complex than that. Ng’ang’a, as a Christian apologist, strengthened his identity by engaging atheists on their own turf. He is reminiscent of the 24-year-old woman who had left the group for insulting her faith, but came back because it strengthened the self-same faith, and affirmed her voice as a Christian who was put on this earth to “share God’s love and majesty.” Even after the protracted effort of FIKA’s atheists to show her how daft she

was for believing in the “irrationalities” of religion, she said that the group gave her the opportunity to tell a story that was uniquely hers; in other words, it gave her a voice.

As Peter Wolty, quoted in Chapter Five above, had clarified, WWR was formed to give a safe space for irreligious women and their supporters, *not* to give voice to their opponents. He averred that WWR was not a “debating club.” Therefore, the first post anyone who ventures into the group would see was a pinned one, pinned to ensure it was at the top of the group’s wall, and that all and sundry would see it. It gave an explanation of what the group stood for, allowed and tolerated, in exacting detail. It held a list of rules that outlined what was forbidden, for example:

**\*\*Thou Shalt Not Witness.**

This is a no proselytizing zone – this is our safe haven. ...

Hint: Sincere discussion *\*does include\** questions concerning the issues atheist women face, questions about their experiences and opinions on relevant topics. The entirety of the internet, other than our group, is your place to blather on about your personal salvation and why you’d like to be Ken Ham’s personal testical washer.

We don’t have to give you a platform here. ...

These stringent rules would result in rigorous rebuttals to ill-thought-out posts. For instance, a man posted an article from *ABC News*, Australia, and captioned it with the remark that he wondered whether it was time for segregated education in science, due to his hearing of “story after story of male harassment.” None of the commenters agreed with him. The majority criticized the post as ill-thought and corrected him that the solution to the problem of sexual harassment was for men to be taught how to behave appropriately towards women. One commenter said:

Segregated education? Perhaps you aren’t fully aware of how ridiculous that idea is. For starters, it is a victim-blaming mentality. Rather than hold men accountable for their harassment and predatory behavior, you are taking women out of the equation. Men who do this to women will never stop

committing these violations in other scenarios, because (a) they aren't being told it is wrong, and (b) they have no consequences. Why should women be removed from the mainstream, when they aren't the problem? Men who engage in sexual harassment and assault in any environment should be removed immediately, banned from the event and disciplined accordingly.

In his defense, the OP (Jerry Michaels) said that, when he wrote it, he was thinking men should be segregated because the evidence showed that they cannot be trusted. He told the above commenter to stop making too many assumptions, and to "try asking next time." The commenter, Matt Garvin, replied by suggesting to Michaels to be the pioneer of his own idea by segregating himself. "That way," he explained, "women will be rid of men of your ilk who can't/won't control themselves, while the remaining men won't face the risk of being associated with you. Still too many assumptions for you? Try thinking next time."

"Do you know the data on segregated education?" Michaels asked

"Weak deflection. Try again... or, not," Garvin countered.

"So, no," retorted Michaels.

Stillman stepped into the debate, observing that as an academic she was indeed aware of the data on segregated education, but asked Michaels whether he had "considered the social context contributing to disparities in educational quality for groups in positions of lesser power in society."

"As someone with a PhD in social science, I have," Michaels replied. "Thanks for sharing."

Stillman, expounding on her point, said:

The fact that women fare better in all-woman schools is because of social disparities and discrimination against women in co-ed schools. Separatism not



only fails to address this problem, it actively perpetuates it. Women can graduate from all-women's schools with an excellent education and potent workplace skills, but since segregated education does exactly nothing to address the social barriers that lead to women having poorer educational outcomes in co-ed environments in the first place, it simply dumps highly-qualified women into the same sexist environments that have caused the problem in the first place. Try thinking systemically, rather than throwing patches at the problem.

She told Michaels that his PhD should have better prepared him to consider these contextual elements. Michaels defended himself that he had offered his idea not as a solution but “as a starting point for thinking about solutions.” Stillman responded that Michaels had “thrown his idea out there” and it had been “largely panned” in the group. Michaels continued to try and defend himself and his idea, but this comment thread and the entire post saw him receive a highly sustained critique, being called out for “back-pedaling, gas-lighting his opponents, and appealing to his authority as a PhD.”<sup>7</sup>

This discourse illustrates how the requirement listed by Couldry as necessary for the fostering of a voice, that of reflexive agency, functioned in WWR. The narrative Michaels was trying to propagate in the group clearly went against the social ground provided by WWR. All the commenters on his post, including four admins, rejected his narrative, asking him to think twice about what he was proposing, and to be more reflexive. Instead of acting as the full agent of his post, he got into a defensive strategy,

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<sup>7</sup> Obviously, this exchange constitutes debate between Stillman and Michaels. But the essence of the debate appears to be for reminding Michaels what social ground WWR stood on; unlike FIKA, whose rules allowed debate between members, so as to encourage them to change each other's mind, WWR's rules were meant to keep the group as a safe haven for women and feminists. This instance of allowing debate to continue without direct interference by the admins probably indicates their intuition that the debate would show who was wrong through the strength of the argument. Conversely, perhaps Wolty's claim that the group was not a debating club reflected an ideal he hoped they could achieve, rather than a hard and fast rule.

betraying himself as less than the feminist ally he considered himself to be, despite a review of the group's history revealing him to have been posting actively since 2013.

I posit that WWR's adherence to its rules and guidelines added to the reflexive agency of the members when they spoke as members of the group. The rigor this required perhaps contributed to the group's appeal for highly educated and intelligent people. During a Facebook Messenger interview, I asked Stillman if she found that the group gave her "a voice to articulate things, issues, ideas that are important to you but that you wouldn't be able to articulate otherwise." She gave me the following response:

Hmmm. That's a complex question. Because WWR has a high proportion of academics, and the group ethic pushes members to think through their ideas thoroughly, what I find is that when I post in WWR, I spend more time developing my idea and checking it for soundness. Other members are more likely to point out specific flaws in my thinking, which allows me to refine my writing. I find that I often "harvest" my own posts in WWR to expand into more in-depth essays. So, I think WWR serves multiple valuable functions; as an idea incubator, an idea refinery, and an idea disseminator.

This, I suggest, is Couldry's reflexive agency at its best. WWR provided its members with the means to own their voice, and to be aware of how to do so, through its rules, but also, more importantly, by *embodying* those rules. PAN, as suggested by the paucity of comments on the majority of posts, seemed to have less "reflexive" voices than WWR and FIKA. Undoubtedly, it had a huge volume of original posts, with an average of more than 20 per day, but very few comments, if any at all, on the vast majority of the posts. Of course, I cannot make any conclusive assessment of how reflexive the members were on the basis of the comments, and it is clear that those self-same posts were not by any stretch of the imagination thoughtless. My point is that the only difference I saw between PAN and the other two groups was that FIKA and WWR

would have a multitude of members commenting on almost every post, while the posts on PAN provoked very few comments, or hardly any at all.

### ***Voice as an Embodied Process***

Whereas voice is a product of social processes, must be socially grounded, and requires a reflexive agent to create it, Couldry adds that it also needs a particular individual to embody it. This embodiment is unique, with a set of unrepeatable historical circumstances, well-captured in Couldry's quote of Adriana Cavarero: "uniqueness is an embodied uniqueness – this and not another, all his life, until who is born dies" (Cavarero, 2000, p. 21). Each individual reacts to and processes the world differently, and the account he or she gives of this reaction and process is uniquely his or her own.

Cavarero elsewhere writes:

[S]peakers are not political because of what they say, but because they say it to others who share an interactive space of reciprocal exposure. To speak to one another is to communicate to one another the unrepeatable uniqueness of each speaker. (Cavarero, 2005, p. 190)

Cavarero's chief point is that voice is the primary medium of political exchange, because it conveys the *who* rather than the *what* of the speaker. The *who* is prior to the *what*, she argues, making voice more about communicating the irreplaceable *subject* of its bearer rather than about the symbolic *object* of language. In other words, the *sound* of the voice, thus the person conveying this voice, is for Cavarero superior to the *meaning* of the words in the voice. In fact, she harks back to the prelinguistic relationship between mother and infant to illustrate that language is not necessary for interpersonal communication, showing how the voice of the infant invokes an intersubjective (political) response from the mother merely by its unique individuality.

The politics she invokes is reminiscent of Papacharissi's affect, the soft structures of feeling that are evanescent: in their review of Cavarero's *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, Burgess and Murray note that "She demonstrates, therefore, that political life is *ephemeral*; expanding beyond the borders of national identities, it appears only to disappear" (Burgess and Murray, 2006, p. 168, my italics).

Couldry further explains that speaking always already demands listening for it to count as voice: "Voice as a social process involves, from the start, both speaking *and listening*, that is, an act of attention that registers the uniqueness of the other's narrative" (Couldry 2010, p. 9-10, italics in original). Like the mother responding to the demands of the infant's cry in Caravero's account, our interlocutors *should* respond to our unique stories for us to have a voice in any meaningful sense. In like manner, the members of the Facebook groups in this study engage in a political exchange, at the very least in affective form, when they post on their group walls. Their voice is embodied in these posts, and the discourse that arises from them. They interact with each other in a shared "space of reciprocal exposure."

A post in June 2017 on FIKA illustrates this embodiment of voice by the original poster and the commenters. The OP, Salome Woods, said that she had always held a grudge against Europeans and whoever else brought her ancestors to America from Africa, but after a recent conversation with some friends she came to the following conclusion:

For anyone who is a descendant of a slave, we, well I often feel cheated of my culture, heritage and roots. We know so little about who WE ARE. ...Then it hit me. The Europeans and Arabs are not to blame for slave trade. They're

absolved. They were simply offered a commodity. By whom? Africans. Thank y'all for selling us.

By expressing herself as a descendant of slaves in America, Woods embodied the voice of the African American, whom, in popular culture, many African immigrants to the US see as rootless and shiftless. Annette Omare, cited in Chapter Six above, commented:

I hear this rubbish from my African American cousins..., especially high school dropouts. I can also say that in some quarters, we of African ancestry face hostility from AAs. I do not recall selling anyone, I also know my ancestors did not sell anyone.

Emily Portman, a Kenyan woman in her mid-twenties, whose profile shows her as living in Switzerland, said, "This self-pity mentality in majority of black people really drives me crazy." She explained that in all of human history, the strongest societies have always taken the weakest ones as slaves. She continued that since we now live in a civilized world, where people have the power to choose whatever they want to be, black people should stop all this whining and playing the victim card. "Everyone has already moved on and no one can make you feel inferior without your consent," she added.

Peter Van Volk, the Belgian real estate developer, commented that because "indeed the West was guilty of slave ownership, and in a very bad way," he was sorry. He noted, however, that "the story is not black and white, no pun intended." Arabs, he explained, were the slave catchers and suppliers, while Africans were not without blame, although to focus on the latter would be to blame the victim since the vast majority of the victims of the slave trade were Africans. He went on to say:

But it is history, history is full of immoral stories, wars, corruption, exploitation, misogyny, mass murder and so on, we all have our historical

occupiers, exploiters, abusers, but we have to live in the now, and concentrate on making the now and the here a better place to live, we own that to our next generation, so having this hate because of crimes that were not committed to yourself is not helping anyone, we need to forgive and move on, we cannot blame the children for the mistakes of the parents how wrong and harsh those mistakes might have been, but we should also not forget those atrocities happened, to prevent them from ever happening again.

Van Volk embodies the voice of the European immigrant to Africa. I quote him at length ad verbatim to capture his sensibility of the wrong his ancestors were guilty of, and his apology for this wrong, but also, more importantly, his sense of pragmatism. Since its inception in 2011, he had been a very strong supporter of FIKA as one of the best initiatives Kenyans had to improve their lot in a society beleaguered by government corruption, religious intolerance, poverty, ignorance, and disease. He was perceived by the inner core of the group as an invaluable resource due to his practical intelligence, which among other things had helped him establish successful enterprises on the Kenyan south coast city of Diani (a lucrative tourist destination) after retiring from an illustrious career as a Michelin star chef in Belgium. The handful of naysayers in FIKA saw him as a privileged white man who took advantage of his race and status to enrich himself by exploiting the cheap labor of poor Kenyans. One of his fiercest opponents would get into spats with him that often ended with her calling him a sexual predator who preyed on beach boys on the Kenyan coast.

The comment quoted above shows, among other things, that even though English is not his first language<sup>8</sup>, he did have quite a mastery of it, reflecting his commitment to own the language used by other Kenyans. It also shows that he was a thoughtful man who recognized the role of history, without wallowing haplessly in it.

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<sup>8</sup> As a Belgian, Van Volk's first language is Dutch.

In addition, it mentioned some of the issues that mattered to him and that he often posted and commented about, for example misogyny. Indeed, another one of his nemesis, Alan Jakom, cited earlier in this dissertation, saw him as the typical member of the “global cabal of capitalist profiteers” who used such “fashionable fads” as feminism and secular humanism to detract attention from their exploitation of underprivileged populations. I contend that by making that long comment on Woods’ post, he was affirming the uniqueness of the voice he embodies. He was saying that he was not just any other generic privileged white man, but an individual with a unique and unrepeatable personal history. Nonetheless, Van Volk’s comment, like the other comments on Woods’ post, emphasized the individual over the collective form of voice.

As another instance of the embodiment of voice, Nate Martin, an Australian member of the WWR admin team, posted an article from [katykatikate.com](http://katykatikate.com) in response to the story about Aziz Ansari and Grace, in which the woman going by the pseudonym of Grace had accused the Indian-American actor for sexual assault as part of the ongoing “me too” movement. The gist of the article was that the women who were so upset at Grace calling her sexual encounter with Ansari assault were afraid that they all would have to admit that they too had been sexually assaulted at some point in their lives, if not at several points. The author of the article, KatyKatiKate, wrote:

Women have already taken enough of a painful personal inventory to be able to say #metoo; I am not eager to go back over what I’ve come to comfortably accept as “crappy hookups,” or “shitty sex,” and come to realize that yes, that was sexual assault too. (KatyKatiKate, 2018)

Martin captioned his post with the warning “Please read the link before commenting.”

The second person to comment on the post, Sarah Thiever, said, “Read it. I disagree.”

Martin asked her to explain what she disagreed with. She explained that saying Grace had been sexually assaulted was taking her agency away:

She was not reading his signals. She was not establishing her boundaries. She was not taking charge of her actions. I think both are equally responsible. I also don't see my "bad sex" experiences as assault and I resent being told that I am lying to myself about them.

Another commenter said, "She was repeatedly telling and showing him she was uncomfortable. Remember, consent has to be enthusiastic. If she wasn't enthusiastic she didn't consent. It's upsetting to see these comments on a feminist page."

Yet another:

Please stop painting coercion as normal and expected. Even if from Ansari's point of view it was a misinterpretation of signals or however he's putting it, the issue is the utter ordinary-ness of men being unable or unwilling to read cues that a woman, particularly a young one, as [the] woman in this case is only 23, isn't enthusiastically consenting. If she said slow down and he kept pushing, the culture of politeness that keeps women in awful situations kept her doing things she wasn't that into.

Jeana Greer, the 71-year-old admin:

Perhaps we need to be teaching young men in particular that sex isn't a 'right'? That it's more than just relieving a transient appetite - getting your rocks off 🙄 Our societies are so mixed up about it - and about how we should regard it: so many men see it as a form of casual recreational hunting, with women as the target and sex as the score. And far too many people of both sexes see women who enjoy uncommitted sex as immoral sluts. Combining both mindsets makes for the kind of situation we're discussing here - arrogant assumption of privilege, indifference to feelings, and contempt for the object of passing lust. Woops! Looks like I only described the male POV. Wonder why?

Another one, Leslie Marsupial:

Really tired of people treating women like they are incapable of making their own choices. Did he force her to give him a blowjob? No. Did he force her to accept oral sex? No. He was insistent and probably a jerk, but he did not force her. Did she regret her actions afterwards? Yes. That's not sexual assault. She made a choice that she regrets. She blames him for the choice she made. I am finding that many women seem to enjoy blaming everyone but themselves for their own choices. It needs to stop.



Marsupial's comment received nine angry emojis, two thumbs-up, and one love-heart. She tagged one of the members who posted the angry emoji and said, "Doris Herring, Back at ya. Stop being a victim and take responsibility for what you choose to do. Very simple." Herring at first did not respond, but Marsupial tagged her in another reply two minutes later and attached a kissy-face emoji. Herring said, "Gross. I hope you don't have any daughters.... Or sons. Just don't breed."

**Marsupial:** Doris, keep going. Get that anger out. Maybe I can save someone in your physical vicinity.

**Herring:** I'm not angry. I'm too used to this level of internalized misogyny to waste the energy. I'm just disgusted.

Marsupial kept goading Herring, but soon, Danielle Hunter, the American admin, intervened and said:

Leslie is on a mute for the next 12 hours. >\_> I have absolutely no patience for victim blaming today. This encounter reeked of coercive behavior. I'm absolutely shocked by the number of people who can't see that. You don't have to agree with us on that, but like hell are we going to allow people to blame or shame victims. #admin

This exchange shows how the voices on WWR were differently embodied. Hunter represented the group's collective voice, which steered the conversation back from blaming Grace for her bad encounter with Ansari. The members who agreed with Marsupial represented an embodiment of voice that threatened to fracture the group's collective will to support victims of sexual assault and harassment. I posit that this conversation shows WWR as more committed to a collective voice than FIKA.

As for PAN, such conversational exchanges were rare, almost non-existent. Nevertheless, the group had no dearth of controversial and thought-provoking content, as Figure 17 below illustrates:



*Figure 17: This picture of Kirk Franklin kissing Billy Graham's hand was posted on PAN. It illustrates that the voices in this group were less embodied and more distributed than those in WWR and FIKA. By this, I mean what Couldry calls the inability to determine if a certain voice represents a certain speaker(s). PAN, due to the general lack of commentary on the vast majority of posts, appeared to possess more of such voices.*

Couldry observes that beyond an individual and unique form, voice should take a material form that does not negate experiences and narratives silenced by dominant social and political systems. In the next section, I analyze the material forms taken by voice in these Facebook groups.

### ***Voice Requires a Material Form which may be Individual, Collective, or Distributed***

In the last section, a number of FIKA members were seen to embody voice in the unique identity of the individual as speaking his or her own voice in the liberal individualistic sense that is the subject of Couldry's critique. The Belgian member of the group, Peter

Van Volk, offered a germane example of this. As already mentioned, he was loved by the majority of the members who saw freedom in terms of individual autonomy, where the individual's voice was uniquely his own, not mired in the "superstitions" of the general sociocultural collective.

For instance, after the annulled August 8, 2017 Kenyan presidential election, he made the post in Figure 18 below. The first commenter said the post was great and asked if Van Volk could make it shareable, so he could share it on his own wall. The second commenter mocked the OP, calling him the "young wise mzungu<sup>9</sup>." The fifth one posted a long comment, which I paste below in its entirety to display its nuance and concomitant gravity:

Your argument is full of holes and supremely obvious biases. You present your argument against the ruling power but launch your attack against their challengers instead. And maybe these challengers did not make as much noise against the injustices you point out as you may have liked but that doesn't make them responsible for said injustices. And much of this argument has been had over and over again. I don't see why you keep going back to it. But I will say this, I don't think that those at the reigns are interested in elections that are immanipulatable (I know the word doesn't exist, but anyway) and it makes sense for one in their position, but the rest of us are not in their position. It would be in our own best interest to push for institutions that we can stand by, whether they are for our individual interests at one time or the other or not. Participating in an election when the referee has made it clear that 'he' can't guarantee a credible outcome is fooling ourselves to put it lightly. The football team you allude to didn't just choose to forfeit. They tried to push for additional time to allow the ref get 'his' house in order but this was not in the best interest of the ruling power. So they failed to do so, needless to say. So you trying to talk all 'Mutahi Ngunyi' doesn't work. Your argument is lacking.

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<sup>9</sup> "Mzungu" is Kiswahili for "White person." Calling Van Volk "young" is ironic, because he was one of the elderly members of FIKA. During the pilot study for this dissertation in 2014, he said he was 50 years old.



Figure 18: Post by Belgian FIKA member, Peter Van Volk

Another opponent of the OP commented:

Thanks for listing the things that went wrong with the Jubilee government these past 5 years - at least you can see why the country wouldn't want them back in power. Unfortunately in the same breath you try to paint Raila as the one at fault. #CognitiveDissonance

Another commenter, a woman who unabashedly opposed Uhuru Kenyatta's government and FIKA's tendency towards the marginalization of women, said, "Go comment on politics in your country. You're so ignorant of the dynamics here."

Van Volk's opponents represented a collective voice. Severally, he had strongly defended the free market system as the antidote to backwardness and the illiberalism of religious ties. Not without reason does religion share etymological roots with "tying back" or "holding together." Free market liberalism holds the autonomous individual as the supreme bearer of moral agency. Ironically, this self-same ideology leads to subjugation of the individual to the market. Van Volk's OP leaned heavily on this Enlightenment-era ideal of Immanuel Kant's bootstrap "Sapere aude!" self-liberation. While it clearly gave voice an individual form, it failed to take cognizance of the collective world of Kenyan politics.

Couldry cites Dubois' concept of "double consciousness" to explicate the way institutionalized norms can stultify the voice of an entire population. "'Race' is a fundamental dimension of how the material conditions of voice are shaped," he argues (p. 122). Kenyans see their political history as the record of an elite political and tribal class taking over the colonial legacy of racism inherited from the British. The disenfranchised and misrepresented sections of the Kenyan populace identify with Raila Odinga and his "rabble rousing." For an upper middle class white entrepreneur, that racial material form of voice is invisible. When the community of the Luo tribe likened the use of state resources for curbing demonstrations against Kenyatta's win of the presidential election to police brutality against blacks in the U.S., their invocation of the rallying cry "Luo Lives Matter!" came as no surprise.

Dorothy Smith's idea of the "bifurcated consciousness" of women, closely resembles Dubois' double consciousness and Franz Fanon's "masks" of the colonized (Fanon, 2008). Women's consciousness is bifurcated, Smith explained, because they

are acutely aware of the two worlds in which modern industrial society is organized. The world we live in in our everyday lives is governed by abstract concepts made possible by escaping from the concrete world of the body. A man fits into the world of government because society is split into a “transcendental realm,” where rules, concepts, and observations are made, and an actual realm, where “[t]he irrelevant birds fly away in front of the window” (Smith, 1974, p. 9). In the latter realm, “a woman...keeps house for him, bears and cares for his children, washes his clothes, looks after him when he is sick and generally provides for the logistics of his bodily existence” (p. 10). Men who succeed in this world become alienated from the concrete world and lose consciousness of it, while the women who take care of that concrete world so that men may escape into the abstract transcendental realm remain acutely aware of how they must live and work in this world for the sake of that other one, hence their bifurcated consciousness.

Although the world Smith described is definitely anachronistic in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the media content posted and shared on WWR shows that the subordination of women is still alive and well. Annie Chant, for instance, posted an article on June 20, 2017 from *The Sydney Morning Herald* about the reactions to another article in which “[m]other after mother shared their stories, of thwarted expectation, of muscle-sapping fatigue and a life lost they could never recover” (Gray 2017). The article described the reactions of many readers who judged such women as mentally ill, with post-partum depression that “has somehow lasted for 9 years or more.” It cited a study by the Australian Council of Trade Unions showing that pregnancy and motherhood often leads to overworked and underpaid women, overworked because they must take

care of their children and their homes, underpaid because they are expected to be less productive in the workplace. “Anyone shocked by women who regret motherhood,” the article concluded, “isn’t *listening* to women” (my italics).

Finally, the form voice takes, as described by Couldry, can be distributed. Distributed voice, he explains, is found in complex societies, especially in “a large ‘community’ that involves many groups, organizations and institutions, and provides multiple roles for individuals” (p. 100). The problem with distributed voice, argues Couldry, is that it is difficult to assess its effect from the speaker to the hearer:

For me to feel that a group of which I am a member speaks for me, I must be able to recognize my inputs in what that group says and does: if I do not, I must have satisfactory opportunities to correct that mismatch. (Couldry, 2010, p. 101)

Distributed voice, as in social networks, holds the promise of horizontal as opposed to hierarchical organization and cooperation. The problem with this potential is that it often leads to effects that are on the one hand of little or no consequence, as evinced by the Occupy movements, or that foster on the other hand, a stronger more stringent form of centralized power and hierarchy (p. 102). Egypt after the 2011 uprising offers a good example of how the latter happens.

Atheists in Kenya (AIK) is a group that grew out of FIKA. Its president, Henry Okullu, said during a Skype interview in September 2016 that he, and a handful of other FIKA members, created AIK because they felt dissatisfied with the impact FIKA was having on “the national front: Nil!” While he agreed that FIKA gave him a sense of community, identity, and voice, saying that the group affirmed his ideas, showed him that he was not alone in being an atheist humanist, and made his views more concrete from the encouragement he got from the membership, he also felt that FIKA was

nothing more than a chat-group. This is the kind of distributed voice Couldry is leery of.

On the other hand, as recounted in Chapter Five, Okullu was suspended from FIKA in September 2017 because he violated the group's rules by openly campaigning and advertising for atheism and for Raila Odinga during the 2017 presidential election. A number of FIKA members saw this ban as hypocritical, observing that Okullu had always been a campaigner for atheism on FIKA, and had once been a darling of the same admins who now removed him from the group. Indeed, a simple search of the group for his name shows him as far back as 2014 courting the national Kenyan media to shine a light on atheism, which he maintained was held in irrational fear and superstition by the majority of the Kenyan populace. An analysis of the posts that feature him reveals that the controversy surrounding his name is based on his attention-seeking; many of his opponents on FIKA called him a "publicity whore." To be sure, even Solomon Marshall, the chief admin and chair of the group, said during a sit-down interview in 2014 in Nairobi that Okullu and AIK were "all about 15 minutes of fame," while Marshall hoped for a more lasting change in Kenyan society. As the OP by Okullu on December 25, 2015 below shows, he indeed loved controversy and publicity, and made no bones about it:

Whenever a story is covered by the media about Okullu, be it about my opinion about Christmas or religious studies, I see a few folks saying that [I] am seeking cheap publicity. Some atheists are of this opinion as well! They rage, rant and throw all sorts of tuntrums (in public). I actually love publicity just to set the record straight. I love being in the news. I love being in the media, press. I therefore look for publicity. And I get it. As for how anyone classifies my publicity is really not my cup of coffee! If you don't like cheap publicity, don't be public. Stay closed up! Stay cocooned! And if you can do a better job at publicity, be public! Write articles, request to be on TV, go on Radio, brand yourself! Nobody stops you! Am a publicity kind of guy! Really no apologies!

#publicity



I interpret this phenomenon as a manifestation of distributed voice. On the one hand, many FIKA members, including such admins as Marshall, expressed the fear that the group, despite its efforts to have offline effects on Kenyan society, seemed to be no more than a chat-group where atheists came to find respite from the overwhelming religiosity of the dominant mainstream. This resonates with Couldry's caution that distributed voice is difficult to measure and trace back to concrete persons. On the other hand, Okullu represents the centralization of the self-same horizontal power of distributed networks. Because no one seemed willing to embody the ideals that drew people to FIKA in the first place, Okullu's love for publicity made him a hog of the group's voice. This became both his and the group's boon and bane. When his publicity "stunts" bode well for atheism and humanism, he was embraced by the rest of the group as speaking for it. When the stunts bordered on "prostitution" of atheism and humanism, the group shunned him.

In the section below, I examine the fifth and final of the general principles Couldry gives as guiding and affecting the creation and sustenance of voice.

### ***Voice can be Denied by Voice-Denying Rationalities***

Couldry reiterates Judith Butler's concept of "abject beings," which I referred to in the chapter on identity. He observes that for anyone to be recognized as a subject, she or he must satisfy certain "norms of intelligibility." These norms are prescribed by the rationale of a gendered and sexualized structure of interpersonal relations in heterosexual societies. Abject beings are those who do not fit into these roles of feminine women and masculine men, who are also supposed to follow sexual orientations and inclinations that are mapped onto their bodies. Because they "do not

correspond to this preconditioned grid of gender and sexuality” (Couldry, 2010, p. 121), they simply cannot be recognized as subjects with a voice. They cannot speak or tell their stories, because first of all they have no concepts or norms on which to peg their narratives, and second because they cannot be listened to by the heteronormative culture. In fact, their abjectness lies in the fact that they are the bodies, hence the voices, that those who matter must define themselves as *not*, and must silence.

All three Facebook groups studied here expressed in one way or another how their voices were “fore-closed” by the dominant norms of their societies. Annie Chant for instance posted a video from *Everyday Feminism*. The video, illustrated in Figure 19 below, showed men who had transitioned from living as women talking about their experiences in the world after making the transition. The gist of the discussion was that as men, they now no longer had to worry about things that had regularly happened to them as women. Such things included being stared at, followed, or assaulted upon leaving a pub late at night. One interviewee in the video said that *now* no one would have to ask him to smile, where he was going, whether he was married, or if he could walk with him. Another one added:

As a man, I have the privilege of getting on a New York City subway train at 1:00 in the morning and don’t have to worry about a man wagging his dick at me. That is a male privilege that I like.

These experiences seem so normal and every day that many men who have lived as cis-gendered all their lives do not recognize them as “privileges.”<sup>10</sup> Not only does

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<sup>10</sup> These experiences represent a rationale that not only denies the voices of women, but, in my view, sanitizes blatant misogyny into a so-called male privilege. As a man who revolts at the thought of anyone invading my personal space, I find it abhorrent to call the objectification and denigration of half the world’s population “male privilege.”

heteronormativity make non-binary identities as the ones described by Butler abject, it in addition relegates women to a lesser status than men, so completely and utterly that an actual biological reversal of sex is needed to bring into sharp relief how unequal the traditional “sexes” are. The last interviewee to speak in the video clinched the illustration by saying, “You know what else is male privilege? We actually have a bunch of men to talk about what male privilege is even though women have been talking about this for years. We ain’t sh\*t!”



Figure 19: Video from Everyday Feminism posted on WWR by Annie Chant. Linked video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0KGJS0IhSoE&feature=youtu.be>

Leopold Yizhak, in answer to the question whether PAN helped him develop a voice to communicate ideas and issues that were important to him, said during an August

2016 Skype interview that it did. More importantly, he added, it assisted him to give other members a more holistic vision of what Pan-Africanism stands for. He quoted Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president, who said that a Pan-Africanist is "He in whom Africa is born, not one who was born in Africa." Pan-Africanism, Yizhak explained, was not synonymous with denigrating the white man, or replacing white supremacy with black supremacy. To clarify what he meant, he gave the example of how the Black Lives Matter movement had been co-opted by #AllLivesMatter as "a diversionary tactic. #BlackLivesMatter means that #BlackLivesAlsoMatter, not that #OnlyBlackLivesMatter." This may be a jarring thing to say, because, obviously, Africa is not limited to blacks, and not all Africans are black, but PAN as a group, from its membership to its posted content, seemed to equate African with black.

An analysis of the posts frequently made on PAN, however, revealed a less direct correlation between the posters and their view whether the group gave them a means to redress circumstances and rationales that would otherwise have silenced them. Of all three groups then, PAN was the one that best fit the distributed form that Couldry describes as difficult to track the cause and effect of voice on, or, indeed, of any of the other themes addressed by this dissertation, a point I will return to in the discussion section below.

## ***Discussion***

This chapter sought to answer the question "How do FIKA, PAN, and WWR give their members voices to tell the stories of their lives as members of these Facebook groups as subaltern counterpublics?" The findings suggest that a well-organized oppositional Facebook group is able to afford its members the means by which to articulate a

coherent narrative of what their lives as members of a subaltern class mean. Specifically, I examined if and how the three groups manifested the five principles identified by Nick Couldry as necessary for affording the “skills ... necessary for anyone to give an account of themselves and others at a certain depth and with a certain freedom” (1996, p. 322).

The first of the five principles is that voice is socially grounded. The findings indicated that the voice afforded by the Facebook groups is grounded in the sociocultural milieus of the group members. The women in WWR, for example, shared a history of being oppressed by patriarchal religion, especially that of the JudeoChristian tradition. Having been brought up in households where the father was the supreme authority, and where this authority was reinforced by church doctrines and practices that subordinated women to men, they found “religious and spiritual nourishment” by “communing” with each other in a Facebook group that sought to challenge, or even abolish, these roles. By sharing their experiences of leaving a religion that had oppressed them, they found a way to give an account of themselves that was deeper and more authentic than the traditional one of their dominant societies. Similarly, PAN members posted news stories that highlighted the discriminatory practices institutionalized against blacks and other people of color, predominantly in Western societies, but also around the world. PAN therefore served as a newsroom of sorts, with the group members acting as reporters, editors, presenters, and recipients of information that told their story in ways the mainstream media outlets of their societies did not.

This finding echoes James Carey's (1989) model of communication as symbolic ritual, where reading a newspaper, for example, unites the reader with the characters in the stories she reads about. Communication in this view is therefore cultural, rather than instrumental. Its goal is not so much to give its recipients information necessary for the running of their lives as it is to maintain their society as a cultural unit in time. The finding therefore places this dissertation in the cultural studies field, traceable back to John Dewey and the Chicago School. As Robert Park astutely observed:

The newspaper must continue to be the printed diary of the home community. Marriages and divorce, crime and politics, must continue to make up the main body of our news. Local news is the very stuff that democracy is made of. (Park, 1923, p. 278)

The posts and media content shared by the members of these groups served similar functions as local newspapers, aiming to create the Chicago School's vision of the Great Community as the bedrock of democracy. Park noted that the newspaper evolved as an extension of the gossip found in small villages, and the community found in the village could be found in the cities only if newspapers "continue to tell us about ourselves" (p. 278). The members of these Facebook groups can thus be said to have been seeking to establish a form of democracy, where even though they did not have the wherewithal to influence actual public policy in the real world, they were at the very least aware of how it impacted them, and, more importantly, how it *ought* to have served them. By telling themselves stories about themselves, they side-stepped the corporatized mainstream media and punctured the canopy of hegemony those media tried to impose upon them.

The second principle of effective voice à la Couldry is that voice is a form of reflexive agency. This means that the narratives people tell of themselves and others are not random happenings to them, but consciously created stories involving sustained and continuous reflection upon them. When FIKA atheists debated Christians on theodicy—the question why there is evil in a world created by a good God—they enacted this reflexive agency of voice. The atheists, for instance, said Christians worshipped a monster of a God who creates children only to let them starve to death. The Christians in turn responded by asking atheists to stop misrepresenting them and their God, asserting that famine is caused by mismanagement of God’s good earth. Thus, FIKA afforded the segment of Kenya’s population that rejected the tenets of religion a means to create stories that reflected their own authentic experiences, rather than the taken-for-granted assumptions of the dominant public sphere. The meme that caricatured the Christian God as more concerned with the outcome of a football match than with starving children in Africa served similar functions as Michael Warner’s “monsters of impudence” depicted in the counterpublics of drag queens and transvestites.

In similar fashion, WWR, by having its members follow strict rules of engagement, enforced a reflexive voice, demanding of their members a stronger sense of agency than would be found in a free-for-all chat group on the one hand, or the one-sided narrative of a market-controlled media house on the other hand. Such groups therefore have the means to reverse the trend bemoaned by media political economist Bob McChesney, when he writes:

But the global media system plays a much more explicit role in generating a passive, depoliticized populace that prefers personal consumption to social

understanding and activity, a mass more likely to take orders than to make waves. Lacking any necessarily “conspiratorial” intent, and merely following rational market calculations, the media system simply exists to provide light escapist entertainment. In the developing world, where public relations and marketing hyperbole are only beginning to realize their awesome potential, and where the ruling elites are well aware of the need to keep the rabble in line, the importance of commercial media is stated quite candidly. In the words of Emilio Azcarraga, the billionaire head of Mexico’s Televisa: “Mexico is a country of a modest, very fucked up class, which will never stop being fucked. Television has the obligation to bring diversion to these people and remove them from their sad reality and difficult future.” (McChesney, 2015, p. 113)

These Facebook groups, in other words, have the power to create voices that do not kowtow to the Global media system, or reduce citizens to passive consumers. In this light, this dissertation acquires a critical theory angle and adds to the literature on emancipation struggles, even though only at what would count as an entry level position into that struggle.

Couldry’s third principle of voice, that it ought to be embodied in an individual subject as a particular person, is perhaps the most fragile in the corporatized neoliberal economy of today’s world. I make this suggestion because as indicated in the findings, the members of FIKA who seemed to have the loudest voice were those who spoke the language of neoliberalism, i.e., the Belgian businessman immigrant to Kenya, the Kenyan woman living and working in Switzerland, and the pharmacy student worker in Chicago who thought her “African American cousins” displayed too much of a victim mentality. Thus, while the native Kenyan FIKA members were somewhat able to rally against the Belgian’s condescending post on Kenyan politics, it is quite evident that their rebuttals were of little consequence in the real-world politics of their country. Indeed, Uhuru Kenyatta did win the elections, the voice of the opposition parties led by Raila Odinga has dwindled to a faint whisper, and as of this writing, the country is



rapidly sliding back to the tyrannical days of Strongman Daniel arap Moi (Dixon, 2018).

As for the material form that voice needs to take, WWR seemed to be the group of all three that best fulfilled this requirement. I suspect this is mainly because of the tight way it was managed, with 22 admins overseeing it from all around the world where it was represented. In addition to the number of admins, WWR also had a very hands-on fashion of moderation and guidance. Any post that started to veer off-track was sooner than later brought back in line with the hashtag #Admin, which indicated that everyone involved in the discussion needed to take a breather. Of course, such close administration also points to the fact that the regular members were also just as engaged in the discussions that emanated from the content posted in the group. Thus, while PAN had only six admins, and FIKA four, and this could be interpreted as a factor in explaining why the voice in WWR took a stronger material form, such an explanation is not sufficient to say why PAN, with all of its up to 20 posts a day, had very few members make comments in response to the posts.

My hunch is that PAN was much more diverse in membership and much more distributed both in content and in mission. WWR was very clear in its goal and mission: the emancipation of women from patriarchy and the attendant religion seems to be a fairly narrow and focused field in which to play. PAN, on the other hand, sought to emancipate “Global Africans and people of African descent” from white racial hegemony. This is a much more pervasive yet at the same time extremely distributed and ubiquitous phenomenon. In addition, what constitutes African? The field seems too large.

With FIKA, the level of involvement, hence the material form of its voice, seemed to be somewhere in between that of WWR and PAN. Its content tended to be more closely attuned to Kenyan affairs, and, although it often went beyond the stated goal of fostering critical thinking and freethought, it mostly questioned the basic assumptions of Christianity and Islam, and campaigned for science as the best method by which to live.

To sum up, the analysis in this chapter found that all three groups afforded their members a voice to tell their stories as reflexive agents who were aware of the forces they had to contend with from the mainstream publics of their societies. Whether this voice had real-world political effect is a question I cannot answer, nor is this the point, if Carey is correct about the central function of communication to create and sustain a shared landscape in which a social group can live a meaningful world. What is indubitable, however, is that the groups did expand the democratic space of their members' worlds. By democracy here I mean it in the sense of the Chicago School, especially as understood by John Dewey, Robert Park, and James Carey, as communicative exchange and direct participation in matters that are of public concern, or, in other words, as social cooperation.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

### *Introduction*

This dissertation is predicated on the assumption that marginalized classes can use social media groups to participate in the democratic governance of their societies, at least potentially. I understand democracy to be based on social cooperation, following Chicago School scholars such as John Dewey. By this, I mean equal participation by the various members in the life of the societies in which they are found. As far back as 1918, Dewey had cautioned that democracy should not be identified with “economic individualism as the essence of freedom of action” (Dewey, 1954). Instead, he saw freedom as grounded socially in the human experience of “communicative (not merely economic) exchange through which individuals orient themselves to the world” (Couldry, 2010, p. 133).

These communicative exchanges are necessary for people to live an authentically human life that enables them to be the moral agents of their own actions. In other words, people lead a genuinely free existence in society only to the extent that they are able to communicate their experiences, needs, hopes, and aspirations to each other. In the widely dispersed societies of the twenty-first century, journalism and mass communication are necessary for this communicative exchange. As Habermas, Fraser, and other theorists of the public sphere showed, “modern media...in enabling communication across distance, could knit spatially dispersed interlocutors into a public” (Fraser, 2014, p. 12).

This dissertation begun in part from a pilot study which found that members of an oppositional group had built quite solid identities through the online community

they formed on their Facebook wall (Gachau, 2016), and in part from literature about the role of journalism and political communication in democracy. That study indicated that belonging to the Facebook group, which was named Freethinkers Initiative Kenya (FIKA), gave its members an identity that was independent of the dominant public opinion of their society. This identity in turn allowed the members to nurture a voice that could speak for their interests and *provide the potential* to further their participation in the democratic governance of their society. To flesh out better how such a group can facilitate participatory democracy, I compared it two other groups, the Pan African Network (PAN), and Women Without Religion (WWR).

FIKA is a closed group. Facebook describes a closed group thus: “Anyone can find the group and see who’s in it. Only members can see posts” (Facebook, 2018). FIKA was created in 2012 by a group of friends who attributed the bulk of the problems facing their society, Kenya, to religion, dogma, and tradition. According to its constitution,

The FREETHINKERS INITIATIVE KENYA (FIKA) is a non-profit making non-governmental organization that aims to promote secularist ideals in Kenya. This organization shall operate in an open, democratic manner, without discrimination as to gender, religion, race, age, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, nationality or ability with the ultimate aim to better Kenyan society.

Two of its eight objectives that are particularly apposite to this dissertation state: “To provide a sense of fellowship, community and validation for secularists,” and “To actively promote legislative measures and other government actions protecting religious freedom and particularly secularism” (FIKA, 2012). As of March 16, 2018, the group had 18,867 members with four admins.

PAN is also a closed group whose Facebook description says

The PAN-AFRICAN NETWORK is a Worldwide Platform promoting the perpetual advancement of Global Africans (Africans/African descendant people/African Diaspora) and the African continent. We are dedicated to finding lasting solutions to situations affecting Global Africans, and we tackle every situation with this intent.

By March 16, 2018, PAN had 17,645 members, of whom 5 were admins.

WWR is a public group, which according to Facebook is one in which “Anyone can see the group, its members and their posts” (Facebook, 2018). According to the group’s description, “This group is for Women Without Religion or anyone who is interested in the lives and perspectives of Women Without Religion. We are an atheist feminist group and eschew all unsubstantiated supernatural claims, not just deities” (WWR, 2018). As of March 16, 2018, the group had a total of 7,270 members, with 18 admins. Pinned at the top of the group’s Facebook wall is a post that gives a detailed description of what the group stands for, its “commandments,” and a link to a page that describes logical fallacies to guide members on how to frame the content they post. The admins have a separate secret group, where they often deliberate on controversial posts to determine how to moderate and guide them; thus, one of the paragraphs on the pinned post says:

We have a fantastic admin team, with a separate group that maintains a constant dialogue to ensure we can properly monitor the group and make sure we all know what’s going on in the posts. As a result it is no coincidence that we will all show up in the same thread at the same time – we keep an eye out for situations that are likely to go south and try to make sure the situation will not get out of hand, as we all know certain topics are likely to do. (WWR, 2018)

Every post on WWR has to be approved by an admin for it to appear on the group’s wall. Neither FIKA nor PAN has such strident rules, and any member can make a post without having to go through admin approval. Although PAN has rules about what kind

of content it accepts, noting for example that the platform is not a “pulpit” on which to preach or engage in religious arguments, and also that it is not an advertisement platform, posts on religion and commercial advertisements litter the page. FIKA, however, has strident rules against commercial advertisements, and the admins remove any that come to their attention. In fact, during a time when adverts became too many for the admins to handle in a timely fashion, they created an offshoot group they called FIKA Marketplace.

### ***Conceptual Background***

Taking the critical theory approach of such thinkers as Nancy Fraser, Nick Couldry, and Craig Calhoun, I proposed that these three Facebook groups had the potential to enable their members speak over against the prevailing mainstream public opinion of the societies in which they were located. To test this proposal, I studied whether the groups were counterpublics in the fashion described by prominent counterpublic theorists such as Nancy Fraser (1990), Catherine Squires (2002), Michael Warner (2002), Catherine Palczewski (2001), and Zizi Papacharissi (2014). The findings of the study indicated that purposefully well-designed social media groups can function as effective and affective counterpublic spheres. To a large extent, the findings also indicated that all three groups, in varying degrees, served as communities that enabled their members to perform identities and give voice to ideas, concerns, and aspirations that were often neglected or suppressed by the dominant publics of their societies. In the next section below, I briefly analyze these three concepts of community, identity, and voice to illustrate the conclusions that I drew from these findings.

## *Community*

I used Malcolm Parks' (2011) categories of what constitutes a virtual community to interrogate to what extent these Facebook groups served their members as communities. Parks found the following five recurring themes to be operational criteria for evaluating the extent to which online groups function as virtual communities:

1. the ability to engage in collective action;
2. the sharing of information among group members in ritualized fashion and on a regular basis;
3. the larger patterns of interaction that grow out of this regularized information exchange;
4. the requirement that the group think of itself as a community;
5. and that members identify with the community (p. 108).

Parks concluded his study thus: "it may be more accurate to say that virtual communities are often simply the online extension of geographically situated offline communities" (2012, p. 120). His findings suggested that "local, geographically shared connections may form a foundation for high levels of activity." In addition, users "who have rich sets of offline connections that can be transported to MySpace are more likely to become active users and to have rich sets of online connections" (p. 117).

More importantly, Parks' findings indicated that "the majority of people who create MySpace accounts clearly fail to visit them enough, interact enough, or make enough contacts to meet even the most minimal requirements of a 'virtual community,'" (p. 119). Only "between 15%–25% of members were active enough, had established a sufficient identity, and had forged enough social ties to at least meet the

minimal requirements for the formation of virtual communities” (p. 119). Most importantly, Parks found that the greatest difference between highly active users of MySpace and those less engaged lay in the former’s ability to gain the social affordances of community more extensively from pre-existing offline networks, especially local ones. Of course, MySpace is currently almost dead with regard to web traffic (Alexa, 2018), but at the time of Parks’ study, it was the leading social networking site (Cashmore, 2006). At the time, therefore, it would have counted as today’s Facebook.

My analysis of FIKA, PAN, and WWR, appeared to somewhat echo Parks’ findings. Of the 45 in-depth interviews that I completed with members of all three groups, only 29 wholeheartedly said that the specific group gave them a sense of community. Obviously, I did not use similar criteria as Parks to define what counted as a virtual community; while he used what he called a somewhat arbitrary basis, I specifically asked my participants if the group served as a community for them. Nonetheless, I see a parallel between Parks’ findings and mine in the sense that about a third of the members of these groups did not derive community from membership in the groups. Similarly, just as Parks found virtual communities on MySpace were made stronger by pre-existing social networks, and Rheingold’s virtual community of the WELL was strengthened by summer picnics and winter potlucks, the three Facebook groups in this study exhibited strong community ties to the extent that they were able to have offline impact in the local geographical locations of members. The point is that genuine community, even of the virtual kind, appears to need some measure of geographic propinquity.



By and large, the majority of the members of all three Facebook groups in this dissertation said “YES!” in response to the interview question whether the particular group gave them a sense of community. Tracy Sherman, a 38-year-old woman member of WWR, said, “If I was to be in a room with these women, I would feel like they were my community.” She explained that she was really glad to have found the group. As a graduate student in anthropology, she found that the group, “with quite some smart women and men,” provided her with a lot of support beyond her normal academic support system. In anthropological circles, she would “hear the same thing over and over again.” In WWR, she explained, “we get to learn more about the world beyond our immediate surroundings.” She said that because of the group members’ posting of news content from a wide array of sources, she felt no need to make original posts herself, and preferred to enjoy and learn from these other members. She added that most other groups she belonged to were “U.S.-centric,” posting content that only addressed issues facing the U.S., and so she found WWR extremely refreshing.

Sherman’s account reflects Parks’ second category above: the sharing of information among group members in ritualized fashion and on a regular basis. Although James Carey does not use “information” to denote communication, Parks borrows from his theory of communication as culture. Carey argued that the ritual view of communication differs from the transmission model as follows: “If the archetypal case of communication under a transmission view is the extension of messages across geography for the purpose of control, the archetypal case under a ritual view is the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality” (Carey, 1989, p. 18). Communication in this view draws from the same etymological roots as

“commonness,” “communion,” and “community.” Indeed, as ironic as this seems, Sherman said that she could compare WWR “to a religious community, and you are there with your sisters and brothers, and they share your ‘faith’.”

Carey argued that the reading of the newspaper in the ritual model of communication differs from the transmission model because in the former, the purpose of reading news is to share in the life of the participants in those news stories. In the transmission model, the purpose of a newspaper is to “impart” information for the effective control and regulation of action. In the ritual model:

[N]ews is not information but drama. It does not describe the world but portrays an arena of dramatic forces and action; it exists solely in historical time; and it invites our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles within it. (p. 17)

He further explained that in the ritual model, “communication is linked to terms such as ‘sharing,’ ‘participation,’ ‘association,’ ‘fellowship,’ and ‘the possession of a common faith’” (p. 18). Peter Wolty, one of the first members of WWR, said during a Skype interview in September 2016, “We are trying to change the world without changing the world.” He said this to expound on his explanation that the group was not a “debating club.” He said this to emphasize that the information they shared in the group was not principally meant to change people’s minds but to create a sense that the sharing of anti-religious or anti-theist content was okay.

Similarly, Jeana Greer, the 70-year-old WWR member, said that she saw WWR in similar terms to the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century women’s movement:

Although the Women’s Liberation movement built on the earlier Suffragist ideas, and had the definite goal of achieving formally ratified legal rights for women, much of what we think of as feminist theory was thrashed out at those meetings—as was what I can only call the “spirit” of feminism: the internalized awareness of intrinsic worth: that we are the intellectual and moral equals of men. Really effective social change is not wrought from the top

down—it has to be the grass-roots stuff first. In short: you have to want it, and to know what it is that you want, and how to go about it, before you can get it.

In the same way that the great revolutionary movements were thrashed out between small groups of people looking for a better way. I think, in a smallish way, WWR may be an echo of those things.

Kerry Kiragu, the 25-year-old currency trader, and a regular contributor to a blog that was part of another group engendered by FIKA, said that in FIKA he had found friends who were as dear to him as his childhood playmates. He said that he had made many deep and meaningful connections with FIKA members both online and offline, and that he deeply felt that these connections constituted a community where he could speak without fear of censure. “It is a fellowship of freethinkers,” he added. This is another reflection of Carey’s ritual view of communication, where Kiragu saw his ability to speak his mind in the group as a practice in fellowship with intellectual peers.

In like manner, Rizza Talbot, the 60-year-old African-American doll-maker from Harlem, said, “Social media is now allowing us to learn about the communities from which we were torn when Europeans invaded Africa and took our ancestors away as slaves.” Through the sharing of information on PAN, she felt that she was reconnecting with her sisters in the “Motherland,” and was planning to work with them in her doll-making business. She believed that the regular sharing of information on the group’s Facebook wall would empower African-Americans to appreciate their rich history, and how European-Americans were robbing their communities of intelligent, hardworking, and entrepreneurial members, and sending them to work in White-owned industries, thus causing a brain drain. Kiragu and Talbot found intellectual community in FIKA and PAN respectively.

The handful of interview participants who said they did not see the group in question as a community were in the group for reasons other than the ones specified by Parks. Wangechi Muraguri, a 50-year-old Kenyan realtor who now lives in Kansas, said that although she found FIKA very liberating due to its having people who were not afraid to make their stand on controversial matters clear, she did not feel any personal connection with the members. When I asked her why this was the case, she said, “I just don’t feel it.” Other Facebook groups that she was a member of, she explained, gave her a better sense of camaraderie than FIKA because she connected with them at an emotional level.

Likewise, Natalie Refurbishment, the 34-year-old health supplies procurement executive who worked with the U.S. Department of Defense, said she had not formed any meaningful connections with members of WWR. She said that the group “is very cerebral,” and that she participated in the discussions on the group’s wall because she was a “godless irreverent person.” Because she already had a large network of friends who were not religious, she did not feel the need to make personal connections with the members of WWR.

Thus, it appears that although these groups gave the majority of members a sense of community, a few of the members were not interested in finding community in the particular group, because they got it elsewhere. The data did not point to any of the three groups providing either less or more feelings of community. FIKA’s constitution explicitly states that the group was formed, among other objectives, to “provide a sense of fellowship, community and validation for secularists,” and one of the founders and admins said that the group would organize offline activities to foster

the experience of fellowship. WWR's secret group of admins also saw themselves as a strong community of atheist women and their friends, who got together to have "barbeques without gods." Yizhak, the PAN admin who served as my point of contact with the group said he knew of at least two offline activities the group had undertaken as a community, and Tracey, the Ghanaian-American PAN member, recounted the humanitarian efforts the group had performed as a community under the leadership of Yaoundé, the other chief admin, during the Ebola outbreak in West Africa. I thus interpret this to mean that the members who said they did not get community from the particular group were drawn to the group by other factors. In other words, the difference lay in the particular member's needs or desires, rather than on the group's failure to be a community. Moreover, no other patterns, whether demographic or geographic, emerged as differentiating between the participants who found community in the groups, and those who did not. My inference is that Facebook groups, just like all other groups in the world, both online and offline, are composed of various and varying individuals.

Many of the interview participants also *identified* with the community formed by the group, as per the fifth criterion listed above in Parks' analysis of virtual communities. Palczewski proposes that scholars should recognize new social movements' "ability to function outside the dominant public as a site...of identity creation and self-expression to the disempowered" (2001, p. 165). Quoting Rita Felski, she argues for the "affirmation of specificity" that counterpublics provide, thus empowering marginalized identities by giving them the comfort of *being with others* who are like themselves.

Talbot, for example, said that the black cultural dolls she made were intended “to represent what you normally don’t see in dolls; there are some cultural groups that are not well represented by the media.” She said these dolls would include blond-haired Africans with blue eyes. “People are not even aware that you can be African and have blond hair and blue eyes,” she said. She also said that the first cherubs and seraphs to be imagined and portrayed were African, that even Christianity itself was a perversion of indigenous African religion. A website she created contains images of black cherubs and seraphs, which she said is aimed at raising awareness on the African origins of Christianity. In this endeavor, Talbot was identifying with PAN’s mission of advancing the socioeconomic development of her race and affirming the cultural aspects of African identity that were less-known in the wider world.

Gaga Tracey, the African American who had recently moved back to her birthplace, Ghana, joined the group “to bring awareness to the plight of the African in America and the perils we face there; our children being murdered in droves and we too stuck in ignorance to leave.” Her identity as “a Black Panther<sup>11</sup> baby, [who] was always instilled with Black pride and love for all things African” by her father resonated with one of the goals of PAN to “to engage in intellectual discussions on matters relevant to the progress of the Global African race” (PAN Facebook wall, 2018). In similar fashion, Karani Koro, the Rwandan musician who now lived in Paris, said he believed the future of Africa lay in creating a union of African states that could stand up to European “conquistadors.” Through PAN, he said, he hoped to bring young

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<sup>11</sup> Referring to Bobby Seale’s Black Panther Party.

Africans across the globe together in the “form [of] a peer mechanism where we could meet once a month to discuss faster implementation of the New African World Order.” These three members of PAN therefore identified with the group as a site for the identity creation and empowerment à la Palczewski, and in accordance with Parks’ categories.

### ***Identity***

To analyze how these Facebook groups afforded their members the means to enact identities that represented ideas which stood counter to the dominant publics, I used Rob Cover’s (2012) concept of identity as performance of discourse, in which he says:

[T]here is no core, essential self from which behaviors and actions—both offline and online—emerge, only a set of performances that retroactively produce an illusion of an inner identity core: the actor behind the acts is an effect of those performances. (Cover, 2012, p.180)

A good example of how the members of these groups performed identity according to discourse arising from posts and discussions on the groups’ Facebook walls is provided by the post made by Mfalme Yaoundé, one of the chief admins of PAN, in September 2017. Yaoundé asked Africans to emulate a white woman who had rescued a starving African child, instead of wasting their time making meaningless comments and arguments on social media. The discourse generated by this post afforded Yaoundé the ability to perform the identity of an African reversing the trope found in mainstream media. He posted three photographs of Africans giving aid to needy Europeans, thus showing that aid and charity does not have to necessarily flow from the Global North to the South. As he averred, he posted about good deeds because he wanted

“humankind to be compassionate to others,” and especially hoped that “Global Africans” would be more compassionate to their fellows.

Yaoundé’s post was similar to that of Claire Piedmont, which gave an account of the Transatlantic Slave Trade as the taking by force of 3.1 million Africans across the Atlantic Ocean by the British, and the subsequent revolt by the slaves. Yaoundé, the first to comment on Piedmont’s post, expressed his admiration for the slaves’ rebellion. He noted that freedom is part of human nature, and that anyone who seeks to enslave another cannot be human, just as anyone who willingly accepts to be enslaved reduces his or her status as a human being. Soon after, another member named Madara Madiwo, posted a comment copied from his blog. He explained that the enslavement of Africans was a very well-thought-out plan, having been designed by the Popes and Princes of Europe since the Middle Ages. Spain and Portugal, for example, he said, released psychopathic and sociopath criminals from their prisons to become their “spearheads of hell,” charged with the responsibility of conquering “the interior of Africa to found new nations to conquer and form their dreamed European Empire” (Madiwo, 2017).

These two posts on PAN were typical of the group’s Facebook wall, and exemplify the group’s identity as oppositional. Not only would members regularly read various texts and posts against the grain, for instance Yaoundé’s insistence that the portrayal of a white woman aiding a black African child does not necessarily indicate cultural imperialism, they would also make historical claims that were revisionist of mainstream historical accounts. A good example of this was another one of Piedmont’s posts which insisted that not only Bathsheba, but King Solomon as well, was a black



African, rather than of Middle-Eastern origin. Yaoundé, perhaps because he was a central member of the group (Tracey told me he was the one who founded the group, although my efforts to ascertain this either from Yaoundé himself or from Yizhak yielded no results), would be very supportive of oppositional discourse. He for example defended Piedmont against a member who tried to belittle her insistence that the authors of the Bible were not originally Jewish but African, an exchange that seemed to contradict one of PAN's stated rules that:

We do not encourage that a member uses this platform to teach, preach or advertise their confessions or religious views, to engage in controversial discussions or matters that are deemed derogatory. We know from experience that such discussions, advertisings, teachings and preachings among a gathering of multinationals of various spiritual, religious, cultural and social backgrounds most often tend to disunite rather than unite. We must guard against this. (PAN, 2018)

In fact, the few original posts that generated considerable discussion on PAN were exactly the ones that made controversial claims, like Piedmont saying the people in the Bible were of African rather than Jewish origin. The controversy in Piedmont's assertion lies in the fact that Judaism and the Bible are universally considered to belong to Semitic Jews. Although for a long time Jews have been considered a race that is neither Caucasian nor Middle-Eastern, to claim that their ancestry lies in Black Africa is quite a stretch that sounds outlandish. Similarly, the post comparing Cecil Rhodes, of the world-renowned Rhodes Scholarship, to Adolf Hitler for the murder of millions of Africans in the Congo, is controversial because it claimed that Rhodes was a far worse monster than Hitler, yet very little is said of this in mainstream discourse. Such controversial claims evince PAN to be more of an oppositional group and counterpublic than even its own admins were willing to admit.

In like manner, the majority of WWR members performed an identity that stood against the mainstream public opinion which shames sex workers via a video post from *Vice.com*. The majority of the WWR members who commented on this post supported sex work as a perfectly legitimate profession that should be legalized the world over. The post was an interview with a feminist sex worker who argued that providing care for adult patients who had lost control of their bowel movements was no less shameful than getting paid to provide sexual services. An eloquent and vocal member of the WWR admin, Karjin Stillman, in opposition to one commenter who disagreed with the *Vice* video, explained that she had in the past worked in the sex industry, and could now say that it paid better than neuroendocrinology, the profession she was currently studying for as a graduate student. In other words, Stillman was performing the group identity of WWR as a sex-positive space where women could embrace and celebrate their sexuality without fear of reprisal from the repressive mainstream public opinion.

Similarly, Alan Jakom, the 24-year-old Kenyan nuclear and quantum engineering student living in South Korea, performed an identity that other FIKA members had come to identify as that of a “conspiracy theorist” by posting a BBC video that praised recently deceased Fidel Castro as a heroic leader. Ordinarily, FIKA performed a group identity of freethinkers who based their opinions on logic and empirical evidence. Jakom was by posting this video challenging the authenticity of this group identity; the video was of an expert on Cuba, and logically demanded that the mainstream view of Castro as a dictator who abused the rights of Cubans be regarded as false. The majority of commenters on his post agreed that the interviewee was very well-balanced in her responses to the questions by the BBC TV presenter.

Perhaps expressing surprise that his post had gone over so well, Jakom tagged Franklin Mutemi—one of the members who had labeled him a conspiracy theorist—and referred to him as one of “the couple of lads with their priorities all jumbled up.”

Mutemi, in response to Jakom, said: “Come again...spreading a little laughter while at a very depressing situation with our being surrounded by religious warriors and their logic gymnastics to me feels empowering...so hey like it or not I see me going on....” Jakom, in turn, said, “No [I] am talking about how the interviewee in the video has rubbished claims you have publicly made in this forum.”

This exchange reflected the ongoing tension between various members of FIKA as to what exactly the group should have identified with. The majority of FIKA members held that that group’s chief purpose was to disabuse Kenyans of the lies of religion, especially Western Christianity and its promise of the “pie in the sky,” by promoting freethinking. Such members as Jakom, on the other hand, maintained that freethinkers in Africa needed to oppose everything Western, not just religion. Thus, the majority opinion in FIKA almost automatically identified human progress with Western-based secular news media content, hence the tendency of some members, such as Jakom, being labeled the “resident conspiracy theorists,” for promoting skepticism against such content.

## ***Voice***

Drawing on Nick Couldry’s definition of voice as the process by which a person can give an account of herself as an autonomous reflexive agent, I found that these Facebook groups afforded their members the means to create narratives about their lives that did not depend on the dominant public opinions of their societies. Annie

Chant for example shared a video on WWR that gave material form to the idea of male privilege through the stories of transgendered men who had transitioned from living as women. The point of Chant's post was that mainstream heterosexist society denies the existence of male privilege; this video gave an account of women who had transitioned to identities as men, and their experience of the privileges they now enjoyed. One commenter on Chant's post expressed her joy at finding this video, saying, "On point! Man, I needed this video earlier today, dealing with a man in another group who just didn't understand or accept the idea of male privilege!"

Using Feminist Standpoint Theory, Stevens et al (2016) found that social media, particularly Facebook, broadened the experiences of inner-city youth and "provided them with a voice that transcended their immediate environment" (p. 962). Social media created "digital third spaces" in the fashion of Soukup's 2006 study, which argued that such spaces contribute to connectedness among individuals. These third spaces promoted civic responsibility as well as the maintenance and revitalization of community (Stevens et al. 2016, p. 951). The Facebook groups in this dissertation provided similar third spaces. Through posting news media content that highlighted issues they faced as subalterns, the members of these groups created a digital third space where they could voice counterpublic discourses. The video about the first museum in the U.S. dedicated to slavery, posted by Raleigh Khimani, the PAN member, is an example of a "space" that provides the group members a voice to articulate their experiences as descendants of slaves. The video showed why African Americans continue to experience the effects of slavery (for example by being the most

impoverished group in the nation), centuries after slavery was abolished, and why White Americans need to understand why Blacks can't seem to "get over *IT*."

In like manner, Henry Okullu, the "publicity-seeking" FIKA member, found a voice in the third space provided by FIKA, to openly express his views as an atheist in the predominantly Christian Kenyan public. He made frequent appearances on national television, and gave interviews to the major newspapers, thus raising the profile of atheism to the point where the group he formed as an offshoot of FIKA, Atheists in Kenya (AIK), challenged the Attorney General's denial of its registration as a society, and won the case at the High Court of Kenya. This latter case stands as a good example of how a counterpublic can bring marginal conversations to the mainstream, thus expanding the public sphere, and consequently enhancing democratic participation. Okullu said during my Skype interview with him that he formed AIK because he found FIKA too ineffective in achieving the kind of effect he desired. He found its members too shy of the public limelight, hence their labeling him an "attention whore." In this I see something similar to Squires' (2002) account of the Black American public sphere, which started out as an enclave that engaged in discourses only within the "hidden space" of the enclave, before later taking their discourses to the wider mainstream public. Thus, FIKA was the enclave that Okullu used to muster the critical muscle required to create the more external-facing AIK.

### ***Discussion and Conclusions***

The concept of counterpublics as discursive arenas that challenge the dominant views and opinions of the wider inter-public sphere (Fraser, 1990) is the central organizing theory of this dissertation. However, it does not stand alone as a concept or a theoretical

framework, but is built and organized into the study as a component of democracy. Just as Habermas developed his conception of the public sphere as part of the bourgeois quest to convert monarchies into liberal democracies, and Fraser based her critique of his idea in “actually existing democracy,” this study is concerned with how the public sphere serves the democratic ideal of self-governing citizens through exchanging discourses about their needs and concerns.

The mass media, if owned and operated by the state, can reduce the public sphere to one that represents the state rather than the citizenry. Similarly, “corporate-owned media run the risk of serving the interest of private corporations over the people” (Butch, 2007, p. 6). Tracing the place of the media in liberal political theory to the eighteenth century when communication media consisted of “the printing press, handwritten notes and the human body” (p. 7), Butsch asks how today the media can serve the public sphere when they are owned by corporate conglomerates. While traditional liberal political theory claimed three roles for the media, viz. watchdog over the state, information agency for democratic participation of the citizenry in their government, and the *vox populi* against the state, today’s commercial media have as their “first master” the drive for profit (p. 8). Rather than providing information for public discussion, they provide “what sells”, thus reducing citizens to consumers in a market. Media users and viewers become mere consumer audiences who are sold to the profit-making system. As Habermas argued, the system infiltrates and colonizes the lifeworld that the media were originally meant to foster by bringing spatially-dispersed persons together as communities through discourse (Habermas, 2007). This colonization of the lifeworld by commercialized communication systems robs the

media of their role as a genuine public sphere, where truly free public opinion can be formed.

To answer Butsch's question about how contemporary media systems can serve the public, one can point out that even such large news conglomerates as the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*, can have and have had oppositional journalists who do not toe the bottom line of profits, but uphold the watchdog role of the press.

In similar fashion, Facebook groups constituted as oppositional discursive arenas, specifically and explicitly, can reverse the trend of the lifeworld being colonized by the system, by creating "safe spaces" where members can share content not covered by the mainstream media. This is not to say that Facebook as a social medium is less profit-driven than the corporatized mass media. In fact, Facebook as a company is a strictly for-profit business entity, and an immensely profitable corporation, which harvests users' private information and sells it to corporations to tailor ads to them. Facebook in general is indeed much more profit-driven and colonized by the system than traditional media outlets.

The point made by this study, however, is not about Facebook *per se*, but Facebook groups that are explicitly oppositional. The members of the groups in this dissertation used the group function of the medium to carve out an arena where they could engage in counterpublic discourse pragmatics. FIKA, PAN, and WWR were like the private room which the drag queens "performing glamor" used to transform a private performance into public discourse (Warner, 2002). To reiterate, Facebook is not a public-oriented medium, but the opportunity to create groups where people can

engage in virtually all kinds of discourse, holds the promise to expand the public sphere.

Even in the advanced democracies of the Global North, Butsch explains, “the sheer scale of modern media corporations overwhelms the relatively minute institutions of the public sphere, as a skyscraper enshadows a small public park” (p. 8). The resulting situation is a public sphere overwhelmed by the interests of the dominant social classes. Just as Bartholomew Sparrow (1999) pointed out that the news media had become a political institution with a stake in the status quo, and therefore were unlikely to challenge it, Butsch argued that as media grew in scale and centrality, journalists became mere representatives who stood in for citizens in public debate. The citizenry in turn was reduced to passive audience observers. Indeed, the question under such circumstances becomes not so much whether subordinate classes have a voice, but rather whether *any* of the citizens have a voice any longer in the mediated public sphere.

The findings of this dissertation suggest that the Facebook groups studied in it, *qua Facebook groups*, can and are stepping into the void left by the corporatized news media. Butsch contends that to circumvent the failures of the media to offer a public sphere in the Habermasian sense, we should accept the presence of multiple public spheres, as advocated by Fraser.

The findings of this dissertation fall within the foregoing body of work. The chief contributions this dissertation makes to scholarship, therefore, are the following:



## **Democratic Theory**

This study suggests that Facebook groups specifically and expressly constituted as counterpublics, have the potential to enhance participatory democracy by posting media content and engaging in discourses that challenge the mainstream. This dissertation, thus, contributes to scholarship in political and democratic theory by showing how three oppositional groups use Facebook to create a form of citizenship based on discourses generated by bringing to the fore “subjugated knowledges.” In the case of FIKA, the subjugated knowledges take the form of opposition to dogma and tradition. For PAN, the discourse generated by the group consists of challenging white hegemony, and advancing the ideals and ideas of blacks as a subjugated race. Meanwhile, WWR creates and promotes a safe space where women who have experienced oppression from the patriarchal religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam can talk about their experiences without fear of censure. Since democracy, as conceived by John Dewey, involves communicative exchange for social cooperation, the findings of this study contribute to democratic theory by showing how Facebook groups can enhance *that* exchange, to create more inclusionary and cooperative societies. To be sure, this is as yet only at the potential stage for all three groups, and any political action that can be attributed to them is very inchoate. What is indubitable is that for those group members who so wish, the groups provide a space where they can speak their mind more freely than in the mainstream societies where they are located.

## Communication Theory

The findings of this study extend scholarship in communication as culture and in public sphere theory. It shows that Facebook groups can serve as virtual communities that provide affordances for the performance of oppositional identities, and the articulation of voices that go against a mainstream perceived as oppressive. Agreeing with Nancy Fraser, I make the case for social arrangements that allow a multiplicity of publics: FIKA, PAN, and WWR are subaltern counterpublics in the fashion envisaged by Fraser, and other major counterpublic theorists. By providing these three affordances of community, identity, and voice, FIKA, PAN, and WWR enabled their members to engage in discourses that stood over against the dominant public opinion of their societies. All three groups thus emerged as affective counterpublics.

As Papacharissi (2014) explains, affective publics are networks of public formations mobilized and connected by the sentiments and feelings that accompany thoughts and ideas. As structures of feeling, affective publics bring together emotion *and* reason, and open up discursive spaces where participants can tell their stories of what brings them together. The members of PAN, for instance, were brought together by structures of feeling that were sustained by the experience of living in a world where people of African descent were treated as second-class citizens, or where they experienced themselves as foreigners in the various diasporas where they found themselves. Their rallying around the “Black Lives Matter” campaign, for example, gave them an opportunity to tell their stories of how the societies they lived in subordinated, marginalized, and excluded blacks. FIKA members in turn were brought together by the structures of feeling that accompanied their identity as atheists and

freethinkers in a dominantly Christian society that regarded atheists and atheism with hostility. For WWR, societies that drew their heritage from the religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were perceived as oppressive to a feminist atheist identity. For instance, they would post content that demonstrated the denial of reproductive rights could be linked to the patriarchy behind these religions. By promulgating the doctrine that women's chief role as given by their Father God is motherhood, these religions take away women's right to bodily autonomy. WWR members were therefore able to create discourses that could help them question and oppose public policies that threatened their identity as atheist women.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

I began with the presumption that oppositional groups can use social media to build and articulate identities that question the dominant public opinion about issues that have traditionally been controlled by hegemonic voices, through the creation and sustenance of affective counterpublics. Nothing I found contradicted that premise. Of course, the study was limited to Facebook groups, and cannot therefore be extended to all social media, or even to Facebook in general. In addition, the groups were highly specialized in terms of the structure they adopted, as well as in the content of the discourse they engaged in. To address this limitation, future studies ought to investigate Facebook groups with more explicit political goals, to test whether the articulation and pursuit of such goals would lead to more measurable political effects. FIKA, PAN, and WWR all had goals that were less concerned with electoral or representative democracy, and more about enhancing the potential for the communicative action of their members. This study was therefore limited in its very design. Goals and effects

that can be measured in future research can for example include the ability of such groups to mobilize members to vote in general elections or for policy change and implementation.

Future studies should also expand the comparison to a larger number of groups so as to test the hunches and speculations that arose from the research. PAN in particular left many lingering questions especially about the reluctance of its members to participate in this research, and about the dearth of commentary on the huge number of original posts. Was this because the majority of members were African? Is it possible that the centuries of being colonized and exploited by other races and nationalities have made people of African descent too wary to allow themselves to be subjected to the prodding of research? I plan to explore this question further by studying other African groups and by reviewing literature on African journalism and communication studies more comprehensively. Not only would this address my questions better, it would also offer contributions to journalism and communication theory about Africa and Africans, which currently is much less represented on the global stage than Europe and North America.

Although the findings showed that the affective counterpublics so formed allowed the members of the groups to maintain themselves as virtual communities to some extent, I cannot measure the impact of this affordance. As Stevens et al. (2016) found, the sharing of information that occurs on Facebook does not necessarily “bolster social capital” (p. 963). Thus, although if by democracy is understood “social cooperation” and as such I can argue that these Facebook groups enhanced the democratic potential of their members, I cannot say to what extent they did so. The

question regarding how much they put to use the potential availed to them remains unanswered. A quantitative research design would be germane to address this question, and I foresee this as a plausible way to pursue farther research on the subject. I could for example design a survey to measure how belonging to the Facebook group has impacted members' interactions with the wider society, whether for good or for ill.

In conclusion, the findings of this study indicate that whereas the communities, identities, and voices enabled by belonging to these groups are a first step towards promoting and enhancing participatory democracy, they do so only at a rudimentary level. To be sure, a number of members used the means provided by the groups to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions in the societies where they lived. One of the FIKA atheists went so far as the High Court of Kenya to challenge the Attorney General's denial of the registration of a group he founded as an offshoot of FIKA, Atheists in Kenya. His persistence in taking the discourses generated in the group to the wider society saw him exercise a fundamental democratic right. In like manner, a handful of PAN members got together under the group's auspices to help in the fight against Ebola in Nigeria.

Therefore, to clarify, the central claim of this study is that social media, through well-organized groups such as these three Facebook groups, have the potential to enhance participatory democracy, *potential* being the key word.

## APPENDICES

### *Appendix 1: Interview Protocol Approved by University of Maryland*

#### ***IRB***

1. Could you please tell me a little about your background?
2. How old are you?
3. What do you consider to be your occupation or vocation? In other words, what do you do for a living?
4. Where do you currently reside?
5. Do you identify with any religion? If so, which one?
6. What would you say is your political leaning?
7. For how long have you been an active member of this Facebook group?
8. How did you find out about this group?
9. How did you join?
10. What was your initial motivation for joining the group?
11. What has motivated you to continue participating in this group?
12. What role do you think this group plays in your life?
13. What types of posts on the group's page interest you the most? What types of issues do you typically post about?
14. Do you find that the group gives you a sense of identity that you would otherwise not get in the wider society? How so?
15. Does the group help you develop a voice through which you can communicate ideas and issues that are important to you?
16. Have you made meaningful connections with other members of the group?  
Have these connections helped you forge connections with the group that give you a sense of community with other group members?
17. Have you made offline connections with people you met in this group? How deep or meaningful would you say those connections are?
18. Does the group engage in any offline activities amongst its members? If so, how effective in your opinion are these activities in helping the group achieve its goals?
19. Is there anything else that you would like to discuss about the group that I may have left out?

## ***Appendix 2: Informed Consent Form***

<b>Project Title</b>	An Ethnographic Study of Oppositional Facebook Groups
<b>Purpose of the Study</b>	This research is being conducted by James Gachau at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you represent the most active members of the group under study. The purpose of this research project is to understand the mission, purpose, roles, and objectives of the group as a communication counter-public vis-à-vis the wider dominant society.
<b>Procedures</b>	<p>The project will involve an in-depth interview.</p> <p>The interview will be conducted for the purpose of understanding you as a member of this group. We will thus collect demographic data from you including your age, occupation, religious affiliation, and political inclination. We will also ask you about the benefits you receive from being a member of this group.</p> <p>Please see below an example of the questions we will be asking you:</p> <p>“What in your opinion are the main benefits of an online group such as this one?”</p> <p>The interviews will be conducted in person, over Skype, by phone or via email depending on your availability or preference. It is anticipated that the interview will last an average of a half hour.</p>
<b>Potential Risks and Discomforts</b>	If at any time you feel participation in the study puts you at any form of risk or discomfort, you are free to withdraw from it without any risk of penalty.
<b>Potential Benefits</b>	There are no direct benefits from participation in this research. We hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of social media for developing and communicating dissent.
<b>Confidentiality</b>	<p>Only the principal investigator will have access to any personally identifying information, and he will ensure that none of it can be deduced from any of the reports he generates from this research. He will do this by using composite identities any time he makes reference to a member. He shall also scramble the information collected so that no data set can be linked to any one individual.</p> <p>Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by storing the data in a secure location. Any electronic data will be stored in a password-protected computer, while any physical data, such as this</p>

	<p>consent form, will be stored in a locked steel desk drawer in a locked office. As soon as we have analyzed and used the data for our research, we will permanently destroy it. We anticipate this will happen by the end of September 2017.</p> <p>If we write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information will not be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park, or any governmental authorities of any jurisdiction whatsoever, unless you or someone else is in danger.</p> <p>Under no circumstances shall any information collected from this study that you consider private, confidential or otherwise authorize the investigator not to make public, be shared with any third party, unless you or someone else is in danger.</p>	
Statement of Consent	<p>Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.</p> <p>If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.</p>	
Signature and Date	NAME OF PARTICIPANT [Please Print]	
	SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT	
	DATE	



### ***Appendix 3: General Announcement posted on each of the Facebook Groups***

Dear Members of ...(insert name of group here)...,

I am conducting a study of Facebook groups to better understand how they serve their members and the society at large. I am looking for active members of this particular group to participate in this research. Please feel free to respond to this announcement in the comments section below to indicate your desire to participate in the study. There are no direct benefits to be accrued from participating in the study, apart from the knowledge gained about how such a group can advance the theory and practice of participatory democracy. Your participation will be highly appreciated and the investigator will forever be in your debt for it.

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