

“Feminists and Feminisms in the Public Sphere” Roundtable
Liz Ellcessor
UW Madison

In popular news and entertainment media, looking for representations of feminism is currently an exercise in frustration. Most often, feminism is invoked in order to posit a post-feminist world in which feminism’s goals have either been achieved, or been revealed as misguided. Furthermore, print and television news coverage in particular has taken to rendering feminisms irrelevant through promoting the notion of an intergenerational conflict in a monolithic feminism. This kind of coverage uses differences of opinion or experience as evidence that “the movement” is in jeopardy; taking for granted that one could ever speak of a single, unified feminist movement. When the mainstream media sets up feminists as examples of progressive failure, it ignores the growing volume and diversity of feminisms taking root online.

Blogs seem to offer a particularly valuable medium for feminist expression, as their form and usage replicates many elements of feminist practice. To begin, blogs borrow from the DIY ethos of riot grrl zine publishing. They are generally free to set up and require no specialized coding knowledge to begin publishing, which allows women and feminist allies to produce their work outside of the constraints of corporate media outlets. Furthermore, blogs go beyond DIY culture in two key ways: first, by offering an easy-to-achieve professional presentation; and secondly, by allowing for widespread distribution without the constraints of physical media. Where zines can often look amateurish, blogs offer easy

to use tools for creating a professional aesthetic. Where zines were difficult to physically produce and often even harder for readers to get their hands on, blogs are digital, relying solely on the availability of internet technology and the relative absence of online censorship. As a result, audiences are larger, more diverse and perhaps more durable than zine audiences. Feminist bloggers and their readers range in age from preteens to senior citizens, and include a variety of racial, sexuality, ability, cultural and class identities. They can provide points of identification that are missing in mainstream media, giving otherwise isolated individuals a chance to recognize their own experience in someone else's words regardless of real-world circumstances.

 Blogging also draws on the established practice of sharing women's experiences through writing and discussion, historically a cornerstone of both feminism and women's culture in general. Blogs support a range of written expression; it is conducive to both short posts and in-depth theoretical essays, and subject matter is unlimited, often resulting in a blend of the serious, frivolous, personal, cultural and political on a single blog. Linking to other online material is central to blogging as well, which facilitates criticism of existing cultural and political artifacts. Linking also enables the formation of blogospheres, in which cross-blog dialogue can challenge existing notions of feminism and bring under-examined issues to the table. These links redirect audiences, increase exposure to different forms of feminism, and encourage complex thought about culture and politics. Finally, the ability to leave comments and engage in discussion on blogs also supports the central role of

community and dialogue. The notion that “the personal is political,” in which the indignities of one’s personal experience came to be recognized as the shared hurdles of women’s lives and led to political action, is replicated in blogging. Blogs and their comments allow for similar experiences of identification, education, and cultural or political action, without real-world limitations such as geography. Comments, which are an a/synchronous form of communication, can offer immediate feedback, support and disagreement, and can also stretch over time to enable ongoing discussion of controversial or complex issues. Readers are not merely passive, but can express their own views and engage one another in substantive discussion.

Finally, blogging has fostered a new generation of feminists who now receive mainstream media attention. Jessica Valenti, Amanda Marcotte and others have moved from blogging into book publishing, and received mainstream media attention in the form of newspaper articles, appearances on *The Colbert Report*, and NPR interviews to name a few venues. The inherent complexity of much feminist thought may not translate well into the soundbite- or stereotype-driven formats of news and entertainment media, but these women offer new representations of feminists as savvy, humorous, and down-to-earth. However, despite the wide range of women and allies represented in the feminist blogosphere, feminist bloggers who receive mainstream media attention are still usually middle-class, heterosexual, young and conventionally attractive white women. Last spring, elements of the feminist blogosphere were torn apart by the continued exclusion of queer

women, women of color and others from these opportunities. Thus, while blogging offers opportunities for diverse feminisms to find a voice and an audience, it remains unclear that these advantages can translate into other situations.