

Session 3a: Feminisms and Feminists in the Public Sphere  
Melissa Click, University of Missouri-Columbia  
Asserting feminist perspectives in the blogosphere

In repeated evaluations of this new media form, blogs have been heralded for allowing average citizens to by-pass mainstream media to, in many cases, reach greater numbers of readers than many small newspapers and magazines. Through blogs, everyday people can become reporters; they can publish what they want without editorial supervision and readers can easily search, read, and respond to blogs. It makes sense, then, that media scholars have taken an interest in blogs and blogging. As media scholars, we have repeatedly witnessed the arrival of new technologies and even though we know to be critical of the hopes (and fears) we have for new technologies, I think we've let blogging off the hook a little too easily, praising its revolutionary potential while disregarding the ways the blogosphere reasserts offline hierarchies and excludes some voices. My examination of blogging media scholars explores the possibilities and limits of blogs and blogging, with a particular focus on gender, and argues that female media scholars must blog in order to ensure that gender issues are not sidelined and that a feminist perspective is regularly and repeatedly represented in public discussions about politics, economy, and culture.

Most research focuses on two distinct types of blogs: the majority document bloggers' personal experiences in order to share them with others (journal-style blogs) and the minority include bloggers who view their blogging activities as contributing to political dialogues (filter-style blogs). While bloggers are roughly equally women and men, research has found differences in the kinds of blogs women and men write: women are more likely to blog about personal

experiences, while men are more likely to write to engage in public discussions. And even though there are more journal blogs (71%) than filter blogs, the volume of media attention praising the innovative nature of blogs has focused disproportionately on filter blogs—these reports marginalize women’s activities, construct men’s blogs as more important and interesting, and misrepresent the composition of the blogosphere. Further, praise of filter blogs reinforces the idea that the public issues men write about are political while the personal issues women write about are not.

Female bloggers’ devalued status is compounded by the way that blog popularity is measured: by the number of links pointing to a blog. “A-list” blogs tend to be filter-style created by men (women create fewer than 20% of A-list blogs). Studies have found that fewer than 20% of the blogs in blogrolls (usually A-list blogs) lead to sites of female bloggers. Blogrolls thus can create narrow networks that bolster the perceived popularity of men’s blogs and contribute to female bloggers’ invisibility. As you can see, women’s relative invisibility in the blogosphere replicates familiar offline patterns of exclusion.

These hierarchies and inequalities are replicated in my study of academic blogs produced by media scholars. The initial data I have collected about the experiences of academic bloggers makes it absolutely clear that we need to make sure that feminist voices are represented in the blogosphere. My respondents reported that they began their blog to fulfill their interest in being a public intellectual—to share their thoughts with a wider audience (particularly a non-academic audience). Many lamented that their audiences are more limited than they had hoped (something I’d like to explore elsewhere), but celebrated the

ways their blogging activity contributes to their development as scholars. Specifically, respondents suggested that blogging builds their reputation as scholars in the field, puts them in contact (and regular conversation) with other scholars, allows them to test (and receive feedback on) new ideas, stay current by regularly writing about developing events without the lag of publishing, and sharpen their skills as writers. Many shared specific opportunities that developed from their blogging activities, such as invitations to publish, conference panels, paid speaking opportunities, and major media appearances. One respondent said their decision to blog was “the best career decision I ever made.”

My respondents also discussed the strains of blogging, many of which I am sure prove to be barriers for those who do not currently blog (particularly women). The work untenured faculty and graduate students put into blogging, for example, is not recognized in the workplace, and thus must be an extracurricular activity. For women especially, the demands of the second shift limit the time available to pursue extracurricular activities like blogging. So, while blogging is clearly opening doors for some in our field, lack of time is producing an obstacle for many and this obstacle has the potential to marginalize feminist issues and female scholars in the blogosphere. What I would like to discuss in the roundtable are creative strategies for feminist media scholars, activists, and intellectuals to work collaboratively to maintain a strong presence in the blogosphere, to reap the career benefits of blogging, and to make sure that issues of gender, race, class and sexuality remain firmly on the agenda of media studies.