

*The personal is political: articulating women's
citizenship through three African feminist blogs*

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

Mediated public spaces both on and offline privilege the educated male elite, and thus cannot address the specific needs of women (Huyer and Sikoska, 2003:2), or their points of view. This study aimed to explore the extent to which three African feminist blogs realise the democratising potential of the blogosphere as well as the ways in which they articulate the concerns and perspectives of women whose vantage points are often silenced by mainstream discourses of citizenship. As a specifically gendered platform within a feminist public sphere, these blogs offer insight into the fluidity of the private/public dichotomy in online media spaces, and how this determines particular discourses of citizenship both on and offline.

Using a qualitative-quantitative content analysis of 45 blog posts across three African feminist blogs (Adventures from the Bedrooms of African Women, Her Zimbabwe, and MsAfropolitan) during July and August 2016, this study investigated how women's engagement with feminist issues is enabled by alternative online media spaces, and in what ways blogs offer African women a relatively democratic space for sharing and discussion.

Through an analysis of blog content, the study revealed that contributors deploy particular communicative strategies such as first-person narration, reflection of personal experience in relation to broader social, economic and political issues, and a confessional intimacy that altogether prioritise women's voices and personal lived realities. The topics discussed in the content of blogs cut across public and private life, testifying to a need to move away from ideological conceptualisations of public engagement that delegitimise women's participation in the public sphere. It also makes a case for the reconsideration of the terms "public" and "politics" and what counts as both in a technologically dynamic society in which marginalised groups are continuing to explore alternative avenues for communication and self-expression.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“The view that women were excluded from the public sphere turns out to be ideological; it rests on a class- and gender-based notion of publicity, one which accepts at face value the bourgeois public’s claim to be the public”

Nancy Fraser, 1992:61

Free and unbridled access to social media is fostering a revolution which has been phenomenal for allowing women’s voices to be heard.”

“Alternative media: amplifying women’s political voices”,

Her Zimbabwe, 22 August 2016

In an ideal democracy, society should be underpinned by an inclusive media that reflects an equality of access, a diversity of viewpoints, and a multiplicity of voices connected together in public conversation (Adams, 2006:2). Participation in this democracy, particularly through the media, is thus a prerequisite for social advancement and power (Byerly and Ross, 2006:100). Habermas offers a model for the public sphere, and therefore for the ways in which the media can function as a channel for public communication within the public sphere. Yet this ideal is not always realised in practice; the Habermasian public sphere has therefore been the subject of widespread critique, especially with regards to its feasibility in a democratic society fragmented and stratified along lines of race, class, and gender. Particular critiques of the exclusionary nature of Habermas’ model point to women’s inability to participate in the public sphere by virtue of their gender, and their subsequent relegation to the private sphere (see Fraser, 1992; Benhabib, 1992 and Landes, 1988).

Habermas’ theory, while problematic in many ways, advanced the ways in which scholarship understood the role of the media in a democratic society, and thus how we now think of mediated citizenship within a rapidly changing, digitised media environment. Within this altered media landscape, blogs offer an alternative media platform to the mainstream mass media, particularly for women and other marginalised groups who do not have access to the dominant public sphere. With its

democratising potential, the blogosphere thus offers a unique research area for explorations into the changing nature of mediated citizenship in contemporary society.

As such, this research paper aims to explore the democratising potential of three African feminist blogs, *Adventures from the Bedrooms of African Women* (hereafter referred to as *Adventures*), *Her Zimbabwe*, and *MsAfropolitan*. It explores the ways in which these blogs serve women whose vantage points are silenced by mainstream discourses of citizenship. As a specifically gendered platform within a feminist public sphere, these blogs offer insight into the fluidity of the private/public dichotomy in online media spaces, and how this determines particular discourses of citizenship, both on and offline.

1.1 Statement of purpose

Access to information through information and communication technologies (ICTs) forms part of a discourse of development that sees technology as key to the democratisation of society. According to Radloff, Primo and Munyua (2004), access to information can be equated to knowledge and power, and thus “provides a tool for mobilisation and participation in decision-making processes” (p.6). Similarly, Hafkin and Taggart (2001) argue that information technologies can be “a potent force in transforming social, economic, and political life globally” (p.1). However, these views encapsulate a somewhat utopian idea of ICTs and their uses in the information age – one that tends to gloss over the structural and socio-political inequalities that hinder access to information technologies. As such, this theorised transformational and democratic potential of ICTs does not, in reality, reach African women who occupy “the deepest part of the [digital] divide” (Hafkin and Taggart, 2001:1). Women encounter numerous barriers to use of ICTs, including a lack of education, poverty and a subsequent inaccessibility to technological infrastructure, as well as technological illiteracy. Moreover, Radloff et al. (2004) suggest that there is a domination of communication by a small powerful male elite “who use the existing communication technologies to coordinate and reinforce social and cultural dominance” (p.9). There is thus a threat posed by these technologies to further entrench gender differences and reproduce social injustices (Radloff et al., 2004:8), so

long as the status quo of access is maintained. Altogether, these barriers prevent women from harnessing the potential of ICTs to improve their development in social, political and economic spheres of society.

Nevertheless, information and communication technologies, in principle, have the ability to contribute to the political empowerment of women by “giving a voice to women who so frequently in developing countries have been isolated, invisible, and without a voice” (Hafkin and Taggart, 2001:4), thereby allowing them to carve out their own spaces in public political life. As such, scholarly explorations of new media technologies’ ability to shape and reshape public spheres in any given context points to the ways in which research on this subject must adjust its scope in order to remain relevant in the midst of social, economic, and political changes in different regions of the world. It is therefore important to consider the ways in which changes in media formats and technologies are opening up new spaces for public engagement, especially for women and feminist communication on issues of concern to them outside of mainstream media spaces that tend to ignore their vantage points.

Furthermore, there is very little existing research on African women and blogs. Blog research has primarily been confined to regions of the world where access to the Internet is relatively easy and unproblematic. Robins (2002) admits that communication and media researchers privilege western perspectives, often overlooking women’s experiences with and uses of new media technologies in developing countries such as those in sub-Saharan Africa (p.235). The literature review in Chapter 2 outlines several studies conducted on US-based blogs, including one by Rajani (2014) on popular US feminist blogs Jezebel, Feministing, Racialicious, Ms., and Bitch Media. On the other hand, the pool of scholarly research on new media use in Africa seems to be limited either to an exploration of online journalism practices in Africa or follows a development discourse of Internet technologies as a tool for social, political and economic empowerment, and is comparatively well researched compared to an exploration of the African blogosphere. Henceforth, it would be beneficial to look into the African blogosphere, and the African feminist blogosphere, as an extension of existing research.

1.2 Statement of Problem

Radloff et al. (2004) and Huyer and Sikoska (2003) offer an in-depth exploration into the various ways ICTs can empower African women. Access to information through ICTs is a prerequisite for social advancement and power (Byerly and Ross, 2006:100), without which African women will continue to fall victim to the gender inequality that cements their subordination through inaccessibility to education, poverty and discrimination. However, despite the empowering and developmental potential of ICTs, the majority of women in Africa do not have access to the Internet. According to the United Nations International Telecommunication Union's (ITU) Facts and Figures report of 2016, only 21.9% of African women have access to ICTs compared to 28.4% of African men (ITU, 2016). In fact, the Internet user gender gap grew from 20.7% in 2013 to 23.0% in 2016 (ITU, 2016), indicating a growing problem of a lack of Internet penetration for women across the African continent.

According to Radloff et al. (2004), women's access to ICTs in developing countries is limited to a small population of educated, wealthy, urban-based citizens (p.5). Barriers to ICT access and use include the following: low levels of education and literacy, content that does not "reflect their identities and does not teach, affirm or reinforce them" (Radloff et. al., 2004:13), content that does not reflect indigenous knowledge, poverty and economic inequality (Huyer and Sikoska, 2003:2), traditional cultural beliefs and practices (Huyer and Sikoska, 2003:2), and sociocultural and institutional barriers that reaffirm patriarchal systems and discourage women's participation in ICTs (Radloff et al.,2004:13). It is thus clear that these barriers transcend issues of technological infrastructure and socio-economic environment (Radloff et al., 2004:8) to include the socioculturally constructed gender roles that shape the capacity of men and women to participate on equal footing in the Information Society (Radloff et. al.,2004:8). The result is what some are calling "the second digital divide" (Sow, 2014) or "the gender digital divide" (Huyer and Sikoska, 2003:2).

Gender inequality both online and offline thus affect an individual's capacity to act as a citizen, ~~thus~~ challenging traditional notions of citizenship that are premised on belonging and participation. The result is a citizenship that includes some while

excluding others. –Mediated public spaces both on and offline privilege the educated male elite, and thus cannot correspond to the specific needs of women (Huyer and Sikoska, 2003:2), thereby ignoring their points of view. Without the ability to access and use ICTs, women are consequently unable to participate in deliberation and decision-making processes in the public sphere that may benefit their social and political development as citizens. To combat this gendered exclusion, Hassim (1999) asserts that the transformation of gender relations towards achieving a more egalitarian citizenry requires women’s presence in public spaces of deliberation and decision-making (p.16).

1.3 Background and context

In an ideal democratic society, part of the media’s role is to act as a functioning public sphere, to enable a participatory space for deliberation and discussion to take place. According to Adams (2006), the media serves a primarily democratic purpose “to create an inclusive and diverse space for conversation between members of society about issues affecting their lives” (p.3). However, Adams goes on to attest to the limitations on practices of journalism, arguing that gatekeeping “has the capacity to create gaps and silences” (2006:2) creating structural barriers to the dissemination of information that give a voice only to those already in power (2006:2). This excludes women, the poor, and the uneducated, whose voices, needs and perspectives are often excluded from mainstream media coverage. The same can be said for commercial interests and corporate/government ownership of media, which Adams fails to mention, and which also seek to regulate and control the production of specific content for specific consumers.

Within this context, the Internet and other new media technologies offer a way to combat the exclusionary nature of the mainstream media. In terms of ease of use, unlimited access and the absence of gatekeepers to regulate and control the spread of specific information, the Internet offers a comparatively democratic medium to the mainstream media. Writing at the advent of the Internet, Moore (1999) suggests that the Internet “enable[s] a renaissance of open public discussion – a peek at a more open democratic process” (p.48). Similarly, Adams suggests that the Internet offers “new ways to revive public conversation” (2006:2) by creating a multiplicity of

spaces for “diverse and interconnected public conversations” (2006:3). The nature of this multiplicity of spaces is similar to what Papacharissi (2002) calls the virtual sphere, the space created specifically by new media technologies for “politically oriented conversation” (p.9) that has the potential to revive the public sphere through enhancing and furthering democracy. Some, like Moore (1999; see also Bryan, Tambini, and Tsagarousianou, 2002; Friedland, 1996 and Watson and Mundy, 2001) refer to this new type of political engagement as electronic democracy, which he describes as:

the use of electronic networking to bring about a more direct form of democracy, to short-circuit the representative process and look more to net-supported plebiscites and ‘official’ online debates in deciding issues of government policy.

p.55

One way in which the democratic potential of the Internet is harnessed is through user-led content creation, particularly through the medium of blogging. The advent of blogs and blogging coincided with the introduction of the more interactive and user-generated Web 2.0 in the late 1990s. Initially, blogs were open only to those with knowledge of information technology and HTML coding. These blogs functioned as filters for the mass of online content according to a specific theme or topic. According to Blood (2002), “filter blogs” ensured that the web was, in effect, “pre-surfed” (p.9) for Internet users. However, the introduction of blogging software such as Blogger, Pita, and later, Wordpress, opened up the platform to anybody with access to the Internet, regardless of whether they had technical knowledge or not, leading to a genre of blogs that resembled online journals. Today, the blog is defined as a website that consists of regular (or daily) posts arranged in reverse chronological order and archived (Papacharissi, 2007:21; Adams, 2006; Tremayne, 2007a; Blood, 2002:11-12; Hookway, 2008:92).

Because blogs are created and maintained outside of the mainstream media, they can function as an alternative media platform. According to Atton (2014), alternative media is

about offering the means for democratic communication to people who are normally excluded from media production. They typically go beyond simply providing a platform for radical or alternative points of view: they emphasise the organisation of media to enable wider social participation in their creation, production, and dissemination than is possible in the mass media... They must be available to ordinary people without the necessity of professional training, without excessive capital outlay and they must take place in settings other than media institutions or similar systems. Such media will then have the potential to more closely reflect the everyday practices of decentralised, directly democratic, self-managed and reflexive networks of 'everyday-life solidarity'.

p.343

Atton draws attention to the production of alternative media; to be democratic, the medium itself must be considered, and not just what is said on that medium. At a productive level, blogs are user-led mediums that can be actively created, used, maintained, and engaged with by individuals who may exist outside the production processes of mainstream media.

1.4 The African feminist blogosphere as a feminist public sphere: an outline of the sample

1.4.1 Case Study 1: Adventures from the Bedrooms of African Women

Adventures was founded in 2009 by Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah and her friend Malaka following “a frank and open conversation” (Sekyiamah, 2013) among a group of their friends about their sexual experiences, both good and bad. Sekyiamah is a Ghanaian woman who identifies as “a feminist, an African woman, a blogger, a sister, a daughter, a writer, a life coach and a trainer” (Sekyiamah, 2016). The blog documents the experiences of African women around sex, sexuality and relationships (Sekyiamah, 2013), particularly within an African context that shuns such conversation as westernised and anti-religious.

Too little is known about women’s sexuality and even less is known about the diverse sexualities of African women. I think African women need safe spaces

to learn and share knowledge about our diverse sexualities. I believe the anonymity of the Internet may be able to provide one such space which is why I have started a blog on African women's sexualities.

Sekyiamah, 2016

Adventures thus exists as a space to combat “a serious lack of relevant and useful information about the sexuality of African women” (Adventures, n.d.). The taboo nature of openly discussing sex and sexuality has much to do with Ghana being, according to Sekyiamah, “the world's most religious country...where in the public domain conversations about sex are largely conservative” (Sekyiamah, 2014):

The majority of Ghanaians describe themselves as Christian. Mosques are not dotted all over the country in the same way churches and prayer camps are, although approximately 18% of Ghanaians are Muslim, with just over 5% practicing what is described as 'traditional' religions. In practice, a significant proportion of Ghanaians combine traditional practices with theist religions. Ghana designates key events in the Christian and Muslim calendar as public holidays, and it is very common at state events to officially start events by pouring libation, followed by a Christian prayer, and a Muslim prayer...often in that order. I wasn't surprised at all when I heard a couple of years ago that Ghana was the most religious country in the world.

Sekyiamah, 2014

On the other hand, it is in the private sphere where “anything goes down” (Sekyiamah, 2014) and it is Adventures that provides a space for discussions and expressions of this aspect of private life. In the context of religious conservatism, Adventures thus actively works to challenge and subvert prevailing discourses of sex and sexuality by bringing them into the open. At Ghana's first Social Media Awards in March 2013, the blog won awards in the categories of ‘best overall blog’, and ‘best activist blog’. Sekyiamah attests to feeling “especially proud that people recognise that providing a safe space for African women to talk about their sexualities was an act of activism” (Sekyiamah, 2013).

The blog is divided into seven categories: fiction (e.g. “Amazons and Supergirls”), heterosexual (e.g. “Do you wanna lick me?”), lesbian (e.g. “Pleasure squared”), vlogs (e.g. “How can women keep themselves safe in fauxnogamous relationships?”), relationships (e.g. “Sex and the differently abled African woman”), series (a collection of regular columns/stories), and sex education (e.g. “Goal setting for a successful sex life”). Articles posted on the blog often overlap in subject matter, appearing in more than one of these categories. The overall tone of the blog is intimate, playful, cheeky, and uninhibited, much like that of contemporary women’s consumer magazines, often using profane and explicit language in its descriptions of sex, e.g. “Ryan slammed into her from behind, thrusting his hips and slapping his balls against her soft, brown ass” (“Wash the shower before you rent”).

A list of the latest, as well as the most popular, blog posts appears on the right side of the homepage, together with a roundup of the latest comments from readers. According to Sekyiamah, the site’s policy is to focus on the stories of women in particular, with only the occasional contribution from men (Sekyiamah, 2013). The most recent readership statistics (from 2013) indicate that roughly 60% of the blog’s readers are women, 38% are men, and 2% identify as transgendered (Sekyiamah, 2013).

1.4.2 Case Study 2: Her Zimbabwe

Her Zimbabwe was founded in 2012 by Fungai Machirori. The blog seeks “to harness the potential of digital media to share and tell Zimbabwean women’s stories, as well as nurture young women’s digital activism” (Her Zimbabwe, n.d.):

Her Zimbabwe is an alternative platform for Zimbabwean women to articulate their stories no matter what their background, no matter what their story. We want to hear the authentic voice of each and every woman in Zimbabwe, we want to count everyone. We want to say ‘here we are, here are our stories and we are willing to share them and we are willing to change the course of the path of Zimbabwe’s story’.

Fungai Machirori in Regan, 2012

Accordingly, there is a strong emphasis placed on Zimbabwean women as the target readership, as well as the promotion of stories about and written by/from the perspective of Zimbabwean women specifically. This is encapsulated in the blog's logo, an image of Zimbabwe overlaid on the title of the blog, as well as the blog's tagline, "Her Voice, Her Revolution". The latter suggests that there is something revolutionary and subversive about allowing women's voices and perspectives to occupy centre stage in the production of content on the blog.

Her Zimbabwe's primary target audience is Zimbabwean women aged 20 – 35, as Machirori and her team are more familiar with the issues that target this group (Davidson, 2012). However, participation in and contributions to the blog are accepted from women of all ages in order to achieve a more "holistic representation and discussion" (Fungai Machirori in Davidson, 2012). The blog also promotes active participation by prioritising user-led and user-generated content. This requires that they target women with access to the Internet, and who are computer literate so they may have "the right of response" (Fungai Machirori in Davidson, 2012). Machirori says:

[W]e want the women to be technologically empowered to respond to issues and matters and [sic] arising from their stories. Where a story has been sought from a woman without the digital components to be able to access the site, the story is no longer authentically hers, but rather something that we have extracted from her for other people to view.

Fungai Machirori in Davidson, 2012

The blog is divided into various categories: Her Views, Her Photo, Her Africa, and Her Projects. Each category offers commentary and discussion in subcategories ranging from Current Affairs (e.g. "The plight of migrant domestic workers: we need solutions), Arts and Culture (e.g. [Misguided] lessons for women from African movies"), Politics and Rights (e.g. "Alternative media: amplifying women's political voices"), and ICTs and Innovation (e.g. "Engage with the African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms"). Notable is a category called His Africa. Her Zimbabwe claims to target men as a "secondary audience" because "women's issues

cannot be separated from those of the men with whom they co-exist as partners, relatives, friends, work colleagues” (Her Zimbabwe, n.d.). Overall, the blog is equal parts journalistic, primarily dealing in “serious” topics such as politics and current affairs as opposed to pop culture and entertainment, and recreational and laid-back in its content and tone.

1.4.3 Case Study 3: Ms Afropolitan

MsAfropolitan was created in 2010 by Minna Salami, a Nigerian-Finnish journalist who is the sole contributor to the blog. Because of Salami’s African-European identification, MsAfropolitan, unlike the other two blogs in the sample, adopts a “pan-African cross-continental stance” (Salami, 2012). In other words, the blog is invested in writing the experiences of not only African women across the African continent but across the African diaspora: anyone “who vests a part of her identity in the African continent” (Salami, 2012).

Salami is adamant that her blog refutes the common narrative of “the pitiable African woman” who is depicted as having little agency in the mainstream media (Salami, 2012). As such, she aims to write against the image of the “poor woman in rural Africa that automatically needs helping” (Salami, 2012) to include a wide selection of topics such as “social media, sex, literature, art, pop culture, love, philosophy, fashion, food, hiphop and more” (Salami, 2012). Although she writes sometimes of rural African women, she admits her blog is read mostly by women in urban cities, both in the west and in Africa (Salami, 2012).

The blog is categorised according to the following topics: feminism (e.g. “Pastor Adeboye’s misguided marriage advice”), Africa (e.g. “Post-Brexit, time to question neo-colonialism”), pop culture (e.g. “A feminist analysis of masculinity in J Cole’s 4 Your Eyez Only”), social criticism (e.g. “Do we really live in a patriarchy?”), decolonisation (e.g. “An African utopia in Ethiopia – on the need for imaginative ideas”), African feminist resources (a list of African feminist blogs of Salami’s choosing), and Afropolitanism. The latter is a term shaped by Salami, and which serves as the driving concept behind the blog’s name. According to Salami,

afropolitanism is “a conceptual space in which African heritage realities are both interrogated and understood with the tools and nuances of modern-day globalisation” (Salami, n.d.). As Salami is a noted writer of social and feminist commentary (she writes for *The Guardian* and *The Huffington Post* regularly), her blog posts tend to offer commentary on trending topics and current affairs and are subsequently academic in tone.

Minna Salami is the winner of numerous awards including “Outstanding Achievement in Media” at the Africa Diaspora Awards 2013 and the Women 4 Africa 2013 “Blogger of the Year”. She is also shortlisted “Blogger of the Year” by ‘RED Magazine Hot Women Awards’ 2012. She is listed as one of “Nigeria’s 100 most influential women” by YNaija, one of the “Top 100 Most Influential Black People on Digital/Social Media” by Eelan Media, one of “40 African Change-makers under 40” by Applause Africa and one of “50 Remarkable Women Connected” by Nokia, as well as one of 12 women changing the world by ELLE magazine Malaysia (Salami, n.d.).

1.4.4 Feminist blogs as counterpublics

As feminist media blogs, Adventures, Her Zimbabwe and MsAfropolitan function as a feminist public sphere. Defined by Byerly and Ross (2006), a feminist public sphere is

a feminist communicative space in which women articulate their experiences in their own voices, critique gender inequality, advocate for women’s advancement, and identify related social concerns that are often inseparable from gender (e.g., race, class, and ethnic) inequality...the feminist public sphere is its own communicative space, as well as a component of the dominant public sphere.

p. 116

The concept of a feminist public sphere arose out of critiques and revisions to Habermas’ model of the public sphere, outlined in detail in his seminal book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1991). Adapted in contemporary

societies as a crucial feature of any democracy, Habermas' theory offers a model for a well-functioning public sphere, and therefore for the ways in which the media can function as a channel for public communication within the public sphere. Ideally, the public sphere is the space in which citizens can come together to deliberate and debate issues of common concern. However, this ideal is not always realised in practice. Habermas' concept of the public sphere has been problematised by a large body of academic research (Byerly and Ross, 2006; Fraser, 1992; Burgess, Foth, and Klabe, 2006; Griffin, 1996; McLaughlin, 2004; Benhabib, 1992, and Calhoun, 1992); but within feminist research, it has been critiqued primarily for its gender blindness. Traditionally, participants within the public sphere were white males who formed part of the educated, propertied elite. Independent of the state, this space was one of rational-critical debate and civic deliberation on issues of common concern to citizens. As such, the public sphere is indispensable to democratic practice, but, due to its exclusionary nature, only as an ideal and not as a practical reality.

Furthermore, and perhaps as relevant to this study as these critiques, is Habermas' own disillusionment with the mass media, "the public sphere's preeminent institution" (Habermas, 1991:181), and its negative impact on the public sphere. Habermas contended that the mass media associated with the twentieth century led to a decline of rational-critical debate as the press became concentrated within the hands of private owners implicated in a network of societal power relations. As such, the mass media became privy to the ideological and commercial interests of its owners, beginning to shape debate in the public sphere in specific ways rather than merely transmitting it. From this perspective, it is necessary to consider the ownership and control of the mainstream media in contemporary society in order to determine who is allowed and who is prevented from participation in it. In Africa, women continue to struggle to "take their rightful places in public life and decision-making" (Robins, 2002:246) through the use of technology that is meant to empower them because ownership of that technology is concentrated within the hands of a small, male educated elite. This has the effect of deepening the digital divide "between the haves and the have-nots" (Robins, 2002:238) and further entrenching gender inequality in public spaces.

In her widely cited feminist revision of the Habermasian public sphere, Fraser (1992) offers up the concept of the subaltern counterpublic as the sphere formed by marginalised groups that do not have access to the dominant public sphere:

[Subaltern counterpublics are] are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs.

p.67

Subaltern counterpublics are a necessary component of political participation for subordinated groups without which “deliberative processes in public spheres will tend to operate to the advantage of dominant groups and the disadvantage of subordinates” (Fraser, 1992:66). Alternative spaces for political engagement are thus necessary for the realisation of a participatory democracy:

Members of subordinated groups would have no arenas for deliberation among themselves about their needs, objectives, and strategies. They would have no venues in which to undertake communicative processes that were not, as it were, under the supervision of dominant groups.

p.66

It is suggested in this paper that, as a feminist public sphere within which hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality are subverted and reframed, these blogs are an example of this kind of counterpublic. Within it, these blogs encapsulate Byerly and Ross’ (2006) notion of women’s media activism; the act of advancing women’s status through public communication (p. 102) in a space that represents women’s sustained efforts to exercise their right to communicate in order to participate in public life (p. 115). As such, these three blogs may illuminate the fluid conceptualisations of participatory politics within a rapidly changing new media landscape, and therefore the ways in which blogs offer women the opportunity for civic engagement. These blogs demonstrate the existence of a feminist public sphere outside of the male-dominated (political) public sphere of Habermasian tradition, a kind that Fraser

(1992), in her discussion of counterpublics, suggests can “contes[t] the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behaviour and alternative norms of public speech” (p.61).

1.5 Research questions

Using a qualitative-quantitative content analysis of 45 blog post across three African feminist blogs from July to August 2016, this study aimed to answer the following questions:

- How is women’s engagement with feminist issues enabled by alternative online media spaces?
- Do blogs have the potential to offer African women a relatively democratic space for sharing and discussion?
- What kind of content is produced on these blogs?
- How are topics approached in discussion?

1.6 Outline of dissertation

African feminist blogs function as alternative media spaces, i.e. those that operate outside of the mainstream media, offering an example of a kind of female counterpublic or feminist public sphere. It is one that blurs the lines between what is and what is not discussed, or public and private issues, a dichotomy upon which the Habermasian theory is centred. The advent of digital media, propelled by increased use of ICTs and new media technologies, is opening up new spaces (such as websites, blogs and social media platforms) for feminist engagement with public issues. It is within the framework of this changing media landscape that calls for a scholarly exploration of the ways in which online spaces enable the construction of a feminist public sphere must be analysed.

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 is a literature review that outlines two bodies of literature: 1) studies that broadly address the gendered nature of Internet-mediated communication platforms, and 2) studies on blogging, blogging trends and practices, and the blogosphere. It begins by investigating the dynamically developing nature of the blogosphere since its inception in the late 1990s. Specific focus is given to the

gendered nature of the blogosphere as a means to determine whether research has established the democratic potential for blogs to act as alternative media spaces for marginalised and previously oppressed groups.

Chapter 3 outlines a qualitative content analysis, the methodology used in this study. It explores the strengths of combining both quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches, before considering the various ways in which the method is practised within a changing media landscape influenced by changes and developments in technology. A specific focus is given to blogs as the medium of study. The rest of the chapter outlines this study's research design.

Chapter 4 offers an analysis and interpretation of the study's findings based on the methodology used. The chapter examines the various strategies deployed by contributors to carve out a space to share written accounts of personal experiences, both real and fictitious, as well as social and political commentary. These strategies are interpreted against a backdrop of institutionalised journalism and the delineation of private and public spaces that dictate conceptualisations of politics in order to better understand how African feminist blogs offer a relatively democratic online space for women whose vantage points tend to be silenced by mainstream discourses of citizenship. Based on these findings, a reconsideration of traditional conceptualisations of citizenship is offered.

The conclusion to the study presented in Chapter 5 offers a summary of the findings, and how these relate back to the original research questions, as well as ways to improve this study and suggestions for future research. More importantly, this chapter sheds light on the need to move away from ideological conceptualisations of publicity that prevent women from public participation. In so doing, it forces a reconsideration of the terms "public" and "politics" and what counts as both in a technologically dynamic society in which marginalised groups are continuing to explore alternative avenues for communication and self-expression.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

New media technologies (NMTs) have undoubtedly altered the media landscape, particularly for marginalised groups whose interests are not necessarily represented by the mainstream media. For women in particular, the Internet and new media offer the opportunity for what Faludi (n.d.) calls a “female-defined fourth estate” (p. 1), a type of feminist public sphere that operates as an alternative media space for women. As an entirely user-generated and maintained channel, blogs offer a relatively democratic medium for discussion and debate.

This review will explore two bodies of literature: 1) studies that broadly address the gendered nature of internet-mediated communication platforms, and 2) studies on blogging, blogging trends and practices, and the blogosphere. The second section will begin by investigating the dynamically developing nature of the blogosphere since its inception in the late 1990s. Specific focus will be given to the gendered nature of the blogosphere as a means to determine whether research has established the democratic potential for blogs to act as alternative media spaces for marginalised and previously oppressed groups.

2.1 The gendered nature of internet-mediated communication platforms

A growing pool of academic research has sought to explore the relationship between women, gender and new media. During the initial rapid proliferation of Internet-mediated communication technologies, it was believed that, due to its infrastructural features, such as anonymity, which renders gender differences invisible (Herring, 2003), the Internet would work towards dismantling the gender hierarchy of the offline world (see Herring, 2003; Carstensen, 2009 and Wajcman, 2009). In 1993, media professor Elizabeth Lane Lawley claimed that the Internet held the “promise for a reforming of individual and societal conceptions of gender and inequality” (p.1). Optimistic about the potential of the Internet in this regard, Lawley noted that the construction and articulation of gendered identities was influenced by computer-mediated communication (CMC). She suggested that the Internet could provide its users with the power to transcend fixed biological gendered identities, specifically “to

redefine themselves outside of the historical categories of ‘woman’, ‘other’, or object” (p. 8).

However, a decade later, a decidedly less optimistic Herring (2003) looked at the various ways in which gender relations are affected in and through Internet communication in a detailed examination of factors such as its theoretically universal access, propensity towards anonymity, and asynchronous and synchronous CMC. She concluded that, despite the optimistic expectations for the Internet to level the gendered playing field, “the Internet reproduces the larger societal gender status quo” (p.19) as the gender disparity of the online world mirrors that of its offline counterpart.

Her findings mirror those of Van Zoonen (2001), who claims that the Internet “is not simply a women’s haven” (p. 68), and that there is enough evidence (such as pornography, sexual harassment and flaming, a type of cyberbullying using profane or vulgar language [Siegle, 2010:15]) to “disclaim any utopian vision of the Internet as an unproblematic feminine environment” (p. 68). Wacjman (2009) goes so far as to claim that the gender disparity online is determined by the exclusionary design and development of Internet technology, which favours male interests, needs and priorities, thereby extending the patriarchal project of dominance over women’s bodies. Using examples ranging from the microwave oven and the contraceptive pill to robotics and software agents, Wacjman suggests that the persistent absence of women from the technological community has “a profound influence on the design, technical content and use of artefacts” (2009:7). Men still have the monopoly on the skills needed to create and use technology, as well as access to these technologies (Herring [2003] calls this the “gender digital divide” [p.204]). In addition, speaking to the mirroring of offline gender disparities online, Herring (2003) suggests that women are forced to carve out their own spaces in the male-dominated online world because “the default activities on the Internet address the interests of men” (p.19). This evidence supports the notion of technology as hegemonically masculine.

Furthermore, like Carstensen (2009) who claims that gender and technology are socially co-constructed and thus mutually constitutive (p.108), Wajcman (2009) uses technofeminism as a lens through which to assert that “concrete practices of design

and innovation lead to an absence of specific users, such as women” (p.8). Wajcman calls this the “mutual shaping” of technology and gender (2009:6), a sociological process that asserts that technological artefacts are treated as “sociotechnical products” that cannot be separated from society but are bound up in it “as part of the social fabric that holds society together” (Wajcman, 2009:7):

Instead of treating artefacts as neutral or value-free, social relations (including gender relations) are materialised in tools and techniques. Technology was seen as socially shaped, but shaped by men to the exclusion of women.

Wajcman, 2009:5

2.2 Blogs and alternative media as a feminist public sphere

Despite the gender disparities of online communication platforms, there is a prominent branch of scholarly research that investigates the potential of the Internet to act not only as a space of gender equity, but also as a feminist public sphere. Scholarly explorations of the concept of a feminist public sphere abound in the social sciences in general (see Benhabib, 1992; Griffin, 1996; Byerly and Ross, 2006). Even before the advent of the Internet and its resultant communication platforms, some of this exploration, although not much, fell within the field of mass media and communication. In a study of *New Directions for Women*, a feminist public affairs series aired on cable television public access channels in the USA, Steiner (2005) explores television as representative of women’s agency in the public sphere. She argues that the feminist cable series is an example of public sphere activity, an indispensable characteristic of democratic political practice, which offers “ordinary people” the opportunity to “reframe the ideologies of commercial culture, to represent themselves to the larger community, and to exercise their democratic rights to free speech in ways not allowed by mainstream media” (p. 327). Moving away from television, Mitchell (1998) investigates the ways in which women’s community radio in Europe functions as a public sphere, arguing that structural factors such as access and training in community radio must be considered when understanding its emergence as a legitimate public sphere for women. Using feminist readings of Habermas’ theory of the public sphere, Mitchell explores the ways in which

alternative media can be used as a tool for women's empowerment and civic participation.

While studies of feminist public spheres in mainstream media formats like television and radio do exist, a growing body of research considers the burgeoning use of online and new media as alternative spaces for deliberation and debate. This has moved the discussion of feminist public spheres in the media in a new direction. The advent of digital media, propelled by the increased use of ICTs and new media technologies, is opening up new spaces (such as websites, blogs and social media platforms) for feminist engagement with politics and public issues. It is within the framework of this changing media landscape that research is beginning to explore the ways in which online spaces enable engagement with civic issues in new and innovative ways, as well as the construction of a feminist public sphere.

Within an African context, issue 18 of *Feminist Africa*, entitled "e-spaces : e-politics" (2013), focuses on the ways in which the increased use of new media and ICTs in Africa facilitates the construction of alternative spaces for women to communicate issues of common concern outside of the mainstream media. In a study of young South African women's use of ICTs at a historically marginalised university in South Africa (the University of the Western Cape) and its surroundings, Lewis et al. (2013) explore how the use of ICTs can open up new spaces for feminist activism and engagement. They argue that women's interest in new media technologies is motivated by a "politicised need for 'authentic' communication" (2013:47) channels that, unlike mainstream media spaces, do not ignore women's vantage points.

Similarly, O'Donnell (2001) explores the Womenslink mailing list, a global NPO that links women's organisations in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, as an alternative media space for the articulation of social movements and social activism. They found that, ultimately, the mailing list did not function suitably in this regard due to institutional constraints placed on participants that prevented free and open discussion of political issues. Similarly, Skalli (2006) discusses the public sphere in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region from the perspective of women's use of ICTs. She argues that women play a crucial role in shaping the public sphere, specifically by producing discourses and images of "womanhood, citizenship and

political participation” (p.35) using new media technologies in the context of socio-political transformation in the MENA region. Likewise, Jurkiewics (2011) explores blogging as a counterpublic in Egypt and Lebanon in the Middle East. She begins by acknowledging that there is a lack of valuable scholarly conceptualisations of blogging, especially in this region, and concludes by noting that blogospheres act as potential spaces for social and political engagement and activism. In doing so, she reframes the parameters of Fraser’s (1992) widely cited definition of counterpublics¹ to take into account the significant influence of new media on the mainstream media landscape, something she purports the theory fails to acknowledge.

2.3. A breakdown of studies on blogging

Jurkiewics’ study highlights the potential of blogging as a specifically Internet-mediated communicative practice to act as a public sphere for women who are economically, socially, and politically marginalised because of their sex. The blogging phenomenon began in the late 1990s to early 2000s, particularly as a result of user-friendly blog creation software Pitas and Blogger (Blood, 2002) that allowed ordinary users of the Internet, i.e., those not necessarily skilled in the uses of Internet technology and computer science, to easily create their own blogs. Initial research in the face of the proliferation of blogs aimed to achieve a broad understanding of the blogging phenomenon, by, for instance, establishing the nature of the blog genre (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus and Wright, 2004) and by exploring the ways in which blogs were linked in “conversation” in the blogosphere (Herring, Kouper, Paolillo and Scheidt, 2005). As such, initial research focused on the infrastructural features of blogs and how these facilitated its ease of use, ultimately leading to the widely agreed-upon definition of blogs: a website that consists of regular (or daily) posts arranged in reverse chronological order and archived (Papacharissi, 2007: 21; Adams, 2006; Tremayne, 2007a; Blood, 2002:11-12; Hookway, 2008:92).

¹ Nancy Fraser’s concept of “counterpublics” is a critical response to Habermas’ narrow definition of the public sphere as a singular male-dominated space for the educated, literary, propertied elite. The counterpublic is predicated on the ideological exclusion of women and other marginalised groups from the public sphere in recognition of the existence of “a multiplicity of public arenas (Fraser, 1990:61) that operate outside of the “mainstream” public sphere.

Still more research aimed to investigate *who* blogged and *why*. Leow (2010) investigated feminist academic bloggers and their particular blogosphere, noting, in terms inspired by Habermas' theory of the public sphere, that the platform created "modern salons" (p.235) that "occup[ied] grey areas between traditional scholarship and its uncertain future" (p.242). Stein (2008) examined the use of blogs by women lawyers who used the platform to negotiate workplace tensions and disputes. Furthermore, a body of psychological research aimed to investigate who took up blogging: Guadagno, Okdie, and Eno (2008) investigated whether the Big Five personality traits (neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience, and conscientiousness) predicted blogging and blogging behaviour, while Stefanone and Jang (2007) investigated how a combination of extraversion and self-disclosure affect the size of blogging networks and communities. Similarly, Gurak (2008) found that blogs illustrate "the fusion of key elements of human desire" (p.60), such as the desire for self-expression, with the technological affordances of digital communication. Further still, Chen (2015) found that women are psychologically predisposed to blog because of "a strong need to self-disclose information about themselves" (p.171). A widely cited study by Papacharissi (2007) uses content analysis, much like this study does, to consider audiences as producers of media content through an examination of the uses and content of 260 blogs. The study thus aims to explore the personal and social gratifications obtained from blogging, thus expanding the understanding "of the overall utility of the blog" (p.24).

Very few studies of blogs adopt a content analysis method, useful for understanding blogging practices and the changes therein over time. A study by Herring, Scheidt, Kouper, and Wright (2007), alongside the study by Papacharissi (2007), are the most widely cited content analyses of blogs. Herring et al., on the other hand, move away from an investigation of the users of blogs to focus on the uses of blogs, particularly the ways in which external events, primarily political in nature, shaped the blogosphere over time. The results ultimately shed light on the dynamism of new media technologies, and seek to make predictions based on its findings about future trends in blogging practices.

Similar to Herring et al.'s focus on political communication in blogging, an early branch of blog research that is perhaps more significant to the needs of this particular

study focused on political blogs and the ways in which they were used in campaign and other political communication. Lawson-Borders and Kirk (2005) examined the use of blogs as an “emergent technological tool in campaign communication” (p. 548), particularly by journalists who used the platform as a journalistic device to supplement news articles offline, to eliminate gatekeepers in the production of news, and to produce “truthful” content “in lieu of the information produced by the mainstream media” (p. 557).

In a similar vein, Kahn and Kellner (2004) explored the potential of political blogs to create “new public spheres” (p. 94) that opened up politics to ordinary citizens, fostering an online participatory culture through blogging practices. As such, both Lawson-Borders and Kirk and Kahn and Kellner explore the potential of blogs to act as alternative media spaces, although they may not use this particular term, that provide a channel through which ordinary citizens can engage with politics on their own terms.

In a slightly different approach, Pole (2010) explores political blogs created and maintained by LGBT individuals, a minority blogging population (like that of women) operating within a predominantly heterosexual male blogosphere (p.53). She finds that the LGBT blogging community has a strong political affiliation, using blogs as “a vehicle for encouraging readers to participate in politics” (p .74). Like Pole, media scholar Valois (2015) also looks at political blogs maintained by LGBT individuals, but she does so in the context of resistance to anti-gay discourse that dominates the Ugandan public sphere (p.145). In this context LGBT Ugandans use blogs and the Internet in general as a channel through which to engage with and resist specific political discourses, thereby acting as a “site for claims to equal citizenship” (2015:145). Similarly, Kang and Yang (2009) investigate LGBT blogging practices in China, finding that blogs, particularly their ease of use and anonymity, allow for a practice of “reverse silence” in which homosexual bloggers feel free to discuss their sexuality. This occurs in a comparatively unhindered and uncensored media platform in a context in which the media is rigidly regulated and controlled. Additionally, Hunter (2015) explores the community building that takes place between “lesbian mommy bloggers” in Canada, two-woman parents that subvert the ideological notion of a heterosexual nuclear family. These blogs are used as a means of cathartic self-

expression. These lesbian mommy blogs allow a space for lesbian women to question their sense of belonging in a society that still grapples with the notion of homosexuality, despite their being no official law against it. For LGBT minority groups, blogs offer more than just a space for community building. Through a persistent discussion and subsequent negotiation of homosexual identity, LGBT individuals engage with the politics of belonging in a heteronormative society, thereby engaging with discourses of politics and citizenship that regulate their social and political existence.

2.4. Blogs as an alternative medium

The potential for blogs to act as alternative media spaces becomes particularly significant to the needs of disenfranchised or marginalised groups such as women. Herring (2003) suggests that since Internet technologies are configured to support the “default activities of men” (p.19), women need to use the medium “to form their own groups to address their interests” (p.19). Blogging, the activity of creating, maintaining and contributing to a blog, thus becomes an alternative space outside of the mainstream media in which this can be achieved. Research suggests that the blogosphere is an online media space inhabited particularly by women. Gregg (2006) and Wei (2009) explore the gendered nature of blogs, especially with regards to their content and production. Gregg differentiates between the content of “filter blogs”, politically charged blogs associated with men that function as the standard against which all other blogs are judged, and “online journals” produced by women that usually adopt a “domestic and personal sphere of reference” (p.1). Since its inception, blogging has come to be most closely associated with the online journal (Blood, 2002). Blood (2002) goes so far as to assert that, despite the infinite malleability of the blogging format (p. 12), blog creation software such as Blogger ensured the direction of the development of blogs towards “a sort of short-form journal” (p. 10). Papacharissi’s (2007) content analysis of 260 blogs, published at a time when the presence of blogs was growing exponentially, concludes that most blogs “feature personalised accounts of information that resemble the diary format more than the journalism ideal” (p. 35) in that they consist of largely self-referential daily musings (2007:35).

This is not to say that online journals are any less important than filter blogs. For example, Lopez (2009) investigates what she calls “the radical act of ‘mommy blogging’” (p.729), a form of autobiographical blogging that exists outside of and as an alternative to “the masculine construction of the blogosphere” (p.729). Mommy bloggers use the online diary format to discuss issues of motherhood, stories that are “given new power when they are posted on the Internet for the public to view and discuss” (p.744). Mommy blogs exist within a genre of blogs that focus on domesticity as a central theme, one that is usually deeply personal and autobiographical in nature.

Domestic blogs cover such topics as motherhood and parenting, food, and lifestyle. Sandoval (2014) considers domestic blogging from the perspective of three specific “cupcake blogs” created and maintained by women who abandoned successful corporate jobs to find fulfilment in the home. This happens in the context of what author Emily Matchar has come to define as the “New Domesticity” in her seminal book *Homeward Bound: Why Women are Embracing the New Domesticity* (2013). The term describes a chosen retreat by women who have the means to old-fashioned forms of domesticity to find personal fulfilment when the workplace can no longer offer this. Sandoval suggests that while these domestic blogs still echo the “lingering gender expectations” (p.15) that determine women’s perceived role in society, they nevertheless demonstrate “a narrative of liberation and fulfilment” (p.8) in an expression of modern femininity. Similarly, Salvio (2012) investigates the composition of digital domestic life on food blogs. She establishes food blogs as memoir (a type of autobiographical writing), arguing that they “offer a transnational, primarily female readership, a means to explore tastes and fantasies of home, family, friendships—in short, a ‘lifestyle’—that spans national borders” (p.32). Seddon (2011) also explores the expression of domestic femininity through blogging by investigating the Japanese “bento” (boxed lunch) blog. Bento is “a medium of visual and affective communication between a mother and her child” (p.301) by creating playful imagery made out of food. The practice is a conscious act of self-expression and creativity, and the blogging of bento offers an online space to “perform a prescribed socio-domestic role” (p.315).

Domestic blogs, through an expression of domestic fulfilment, therefore offer insight into the functions of blogs as online journals and the gendered nature of such online journals. They also demonstrate how a public online medium such as the blog offers the potential to transgress the public/private dichotomy through publicising personal information and the community-building that happens as a result.

The differentiation between online journals and filter blogs confirms ingrained notions of who should participate in what kinds of issues in the public sphere. However, that women's blogs are usually more personal in nature does not necessarily mean that they lack the potential for political participation. As such, Gregg explores the concept of "politics", redefining what counts as politics and engagement with it, thereby negating the notion that it is a self-evident concept. Similarly, in their study of gender inequity on political blogs, Harp and Tremayne (2006) found that a lack of links to women's blogs in the political blogosphere could be based on a narrow definition of politics that do not include women's issues (p.259). In reference to topics like the cost of childcare and healthcare, they claim that such discussions are a "rearticulation of 'politics' that fall outside of a normalised definition of politics – officials doing official business in official places" (p. 258).

Through their discussion of blogs and online media platforms as alternative media spaces in which women can participate both socially and politically, Gregg and other researchers explore the increasingly blurred dichotomy of the public and private realms in terms of how women exercise their citizenship through online media. As such, some research explores the nature of this civic participation and the kind of citizenship it articulates. Skalli (2006) suggests that women's gradual redefinition of the public sphere in the MENA region destabilises the division between the private and public realms. This is echoed by Simmons (2008) who looks at the ways in which blogging can potentially reshape political spaces, particularly through sharing intimate stories on the *Mum's Army* blog, a blog about antisocial behaviour in children, that encourages political mobilisation. Essentially, Simmons' study demonstrates how discussions of politics "increasingly foregrounds the personal and the intimate" (p.18). That political issues are articulated within a personal sphere of reference does not necessarily make them any less significant or "political". Rajani (2014) asserts that personal experiences and observations form the basis of women's

civic engagement; essentially, personal experiences are politicised. Shaw (2012) suggests that such narrow definitions of politics result from Habermas' public sphere theory itself (p.41), which foregrounds rational-critical debate by males in male-dominated spaces. Shaw thus opts to move away from consensus-based understandings of politics to consider the role of affect in discursive politics online. While blogging offers women a degree of socio-political liberation within traditionally male-dominated spheres of influence, many studies acknowledge the similarities between sexual discrimination and harassment in the offline and online realms. Faludi (n.d.) and Shaw (2013) both question the so-called liberation of women's voices online, concluding that women are vulnerable to trolling and harassment, but, perhaps more significant to an understanding of the gendered nature of the online realm, online media platforms mirror the sexual hierarchy of the offline world in that men's voices are prioritised over women's, who occupy the feminised space of lifestyle writing in the "pink ghetto".

Although not limited to women and feminist engagement in particular, Burgess, Foth and Klæbe (2006), much like Skalli and Lewis et al., explore the potential of online media to open up alternative spaces for public engagement; however, they do so from the perspective of cultural citizenship, arguing that everyday digital creativity and the practices of everyday life facilitate a new form of civic engagement and participation in the public sphere. Burgess et al. draw on a crucial element of contemporary studies of the uses of new media technologies and the kinds of engagement they facilitate within the public sphere: that of popular culture.

Oftentimes, women's blogs, feminist and otherwise, converge with popular culture. In her monograph, *Dishing dirt in the digital age: celebrity gossip blogs and participatory media culture*, communications professor Erin A. Meyers (2013) explores celebrity gossip blogs as a space of liberation. In a review of the book, Nayar points out how Meyers' work explores how blogs empower audiences to "collectively negotiate the meanings and values of celebrities and produce alternatives to the hegemonic ideologies of gender, race, and sexuality offered by traditional celebrity media gossip outlets" (Nayar, 2014). Meyers does, however, problematise the expectation that the interactive quality of new media platforms necessitates a participatory culture as online audiences are stratified according to the type of

engagement produced, i.e. joining conversations vs. merely reading posts.

Some research extends the exploration into intersections of blogging and popular culture. Using popular US feminist blogs Jezebel, Feministing, Racialicious, Ms., and Bitch Media, Rajani (2014) discusses the intersections of popular feminist discourses and online media by looking at how the young women who use them perceive feminism through the relatability of popular culture and celebrity gossip. Much like Gregg (2006), Harp and Tremayne (2006), and Simmons (2008), Rajani concludes that feminist media blogs offer users a platform to participate in “micropolitics” – politics that impact their everyday lives.

Blog research has primarily been confined to regions of the world where access to the Internet is relatively easy and unproblematic. In Africa, which provides the context for this particular study, problems affecting access to and use of the Internet, referred to broadly as the “digital divide”, confine Internet access to “a small elite of high-income, urban-based citizens” (Radloff, Primo and Munyua, 2004:5), a group that does not encompass the majority of African women. Studies that do explore Internet use in Africa do so from the perspective of these marginalised groups, and how the Internet can be used as a tool, an alternative media space, through which to encourage and increase social and political participation where other media do not.

-Lewis et al.’s (2013) study of young South African women’s use of ICTs to promote civic participation is one of a very small number of studies that serve as an example. Additionally, an unpublished Masters thesis written by Atagana (2009) finds that blogs play a role in South African journalism, and can serve as an effective public sphere. Similarly, and related more specifically to blog research, a study by Somolu (2007) explores broadly the ways in which African women (Somolu does not specify which population or group of African women specifically) have “embraced the blogging phenomenon” (p. 477) and, more specifically, how in doing so blogs provide African women with the tools to produce and disseminate knowledge in ways that promote their equality and empowerment.

-Only as recently as 2014, compared to Internet and blogging research published as early as the late 1990s, Mabweazara, Mudhai and Whittaker (2014) edited a complete

collection of scholarly research and essays on online journalism practices in Africa. This volume does not focus on blogging practices per se; its goal is to explore the various ways in which the convergence of old and new media technologies has transformed journalism practices in Africa, and thus does a good job of covering the more broad uses of ICTs in various regions within Africa. Similarly, volume 34, issue 1 of *Ecquid Novi* (2013) explores the convergence of new media and traditional journalism practices in contexts throughout Africa. Evidently, the pool of scholarly research on new media use in Africa seems to be limited to an exploration of online journalism practices in Africa, and is comparatively well researched compared to an exploration of the African blogosphere. While blogs can and do play a role in online journalism, particularly by supplementing already existing print publications, they can also exist outside of and have little to no involvement with the sphere of professional journalism.

It is very clear that more research into the practice of blogging in Africa is necessary to understand the various ways in which Internet technologies and Internet-mediated communication is taken up by people in Africa and, by extension, developing countries, and how these can be used as an alternative media space for the social, political and economic enhancement of marginalised groups.

Further research into the participatory culture of blogs and other new media platforms can offer unique insight into the gendered nature of social and political spaces, both online and offline. Understanding how women use these platforms to articulate their citizenship may illuminate the innovative ways in which women overcome their repression in the public sphere to participate in civic issues, thereby restructuring the social order and revitalising social relations (Papacharissi, 2007:21). Given that blogging is an under-researched area of new media (Jurkiewics, 2011), more research is needed on blogging, particularly in the under-researched African context, the nature of the blogosphere as a new media platform, and the ways in which it is used to enhance civic participation for women in Africa.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The following chapter will outline the method of content analysis, with a specific focus on qualitative content analysis and its increasingly acknowledged usefulness in media and communication studies. The chapter will begin by defining content analysis and its systematic processes of data collection, before exploring the strengths of combining both quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches to content analysis in what Neuendorf (2002) calls an “integrative model” (p. 41). Subsequently, it is necessary to consider applications of a traditional methodology such as content analysis to contemporary and dynamic media platforms characteristic of new media technologies. Therefore, this chapter will also consider the practice of content analysis within a changing media landscape influenced by changes and developments in technology, with a specific focus on blogs as the medium of study. The rest of the chapter will outline this study’s research design.

3.1. Defining content analysis

Widely used in a variety of disciplines, content analysis is also frequently used in the field of mass media and communication research, because it is the most rudimentary method of analysing the meanings of media representations of people, events and situations (Bell, 2001:13). Bernard Berelson’s seminal monograph, *Content Analysis in Communication Research* (first published in 1952), was the first long-form exploration of the uses of the method in the field of mass media and communication, and has thus influenced scholars, many of whom will be discussed below, in their own definitions, critiques, and uses of content analysis ever since.

Berelson’s definition of content analysis in studies of mass media and communication has become so widely quoted that it is almost canonical, the benchmark on which all contemporary understandings of the methodology are based. Drawing on key characteristics attributable to procedures of scientific research and experimentation, Berelson, in his particular definition, rooted content analysis within the scientific method:

Content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of manifest content of communication.

1971:18

Therefore, based on this scientific criteria, traditional content analysis in mass media and communication studies has come to be understood as a highly technical and systematic quantitative process that involves quantifying recorded data according to explicitly defined categories (Bell, 2001:13; Berelson, 1971:15, Neuendorf, 2002:1; Kerlinger, 1973 in Wimmer, 1987:138). Since then, numerous scholars have adopted his definition, some of the most prominent of which include Wimmer (1987), Neuendorf (2002), and Krippendorff (2013). Neuendorf (2002) in particular explicitly affirms that content analysis “must conform to the rules of good science” (p. 2), stating from the outset that her own methodological guidebook, *The Content Analysis Handbook* (2002), works according to this rule.

From this literature, the general consensus is that content analysis, at least in the traditional sense, is distinguishable by three defining characteristics, namely that it is systematic, objective, and quantitative. Systematicity refers to a set of explicitly defined rules that are consistently applied to the process of analysing content (Berelson, 1971:17; Wimmer, 1987:138), i.e. “one and only one set of guidelines for evaluation is used throughout the study” (Wimmer, 1987:138).

On the other hand, objectivity is the characteristic that designates the parameters of the coder’s role within the process of analysis, primarily to ensure the elimination of any bias on the part of the coder. It is intricately related to reliability, “the extent to which a measuring procedure yields the same results on repeated trials” (2002:12). According to Neuendorf, “reliability is paramount in content analysis” (2002:12; see also Krippendorff, 2013:24). Importantly, it is a prerequisite for replicability, the notion that the analysis must be able to be reproduced and yield the exact same results (Berelson, 1971:16, 125; Wimmer, 1987:138). According to Krippendorff (2013), replicability is “the most important form of reliability” (p. 24). A type of reliability called intercoder reliability or reproducibility refers to the “level of agreement among two or more coders” (Neuendorf, 2002:12). Essentially, this means that in replicating the study, the analysis must yield the same results when more than one individual

codes the texts (Weber, 1990:17). If we are to agree with Neuendorf who suggests that there is no such thing as true objectivity (2002:11) because “‘knowledge’ and ‘facts’ are what are socially agreed on” (2002:11), then reproducibility is of the utmost importance in at least “striving for consistency” (2002:11) in the attempt to eliminate the bias caused by subjectivity as far as possible. Reproducibility thus considers each coder’s inherent subjectivity and attempts to overcome it by measuring “the consistency of shared understandings [or meanings] held by two or more coders” (Weber, 1990:17).

Objectivity, or striving for empirical consistency, depends upon validity, another strict requirement of traditional content analysis. Validity refers to “the degree to which an instrument actually measures what it sets out to measure” (Wimmer, 1987:156) and is reflected primarily in the formulation of the research design, as well as the parameters of the coding procedure. A valid content analysis is “one whose categories are rigidly and satisfactorily defined” (Wimmer, 1987:157), and whose analytic process is strictly followed. However, related more closely to intersubjectivity (see above), validity refers to the extent to which human coders agree on the definition of a specific concept (Babbie, 1995:127 in Neuendorf, 2002:12). In order to achieve objectivity as far as possible, it is essential that, despite human subjectivity, there is a correspondence between the shared understanding of a category and the abstract concept that it represents (Weber, 1990:18).

Above all else, this traditional definition of content analysis understands quantification to be the most essential characteristic of the method. According to Berelson (1971), it is “the most distinctive characteristic of content analysis” (p. 17). Echoing this view, Neuendorf (2002) suggests that the goal of content analysis is in fact “a numerically based summary of a chosen message set” (p. 14). As such, traditional (i.e. quantitative) content analyses code for the numerical *frequency* of visual or textual/linguistic elements of a media text. Quantitative content analysis thus uses the repetition of specific units of analysis (a word, phrase, etc.) within a text to identify patterns in the content and thus make inferences about media content and its meaning.

In its strict commitment to the scientific method, quantitative content analysis limits the method to an analysis of manifest content (Berelson, 1971:16). Manifest content refers to observable data, i.e. those elements of the text “that are physically present and countable” (Gray and Denston, 1998:420). In other words,

Content analysis proceeds in terms of what-is-said, and not in terms of why-the-content-is-like-that (e.g., ‘motives’) or how-people-react (e.g., ‘appeals’ or ‘responses’)

Berelson, 1971:16

Unlike manifest content, the “motives”, “appeals”, and “responses” fall under the umbrella of latent content or unobservable data. Simply put, latent content is the deeper meaning of a text, that which can only be understood by “reading between the lines” (Krippendorff, 2013:26). As such, latent content cannot be gleaned from a quantitative analysis of content at face value, but requires a more immersive and subjective process of contextualisation and interpretation that does not abide by the rules of the scientific method upon which traditional content analysis is based.

A content analysis is thus an empirical or objective procedure that involves coding data, or “manifest content” (Bell, 2001:16), of a media text according to explicitly defined categories or “variables” (Bell, 2001:15; Krippendorff, 2004:155) based on the aims of the research question. These variables must be indisputable (i.e. objectively assessed); an important requirement if one is to replicate the procedure. Replication of a content analysis of the same data that renders the same results points to a consistency in the coding procedure that is ultimately indicative of the study’s reliability and validity of inferences made (Weber, 1990:10; see also Krippendorff, 2004:18; Berelson, 1971:16 and Bell, 2001:21), an important consideration to make when conducting a content analysis.

3.2. Quantitative vs. Qualitative content analysis

Traditional quantitative content analysis is deliberately premised upon the scientific method, going so far as to denounce the use of qualitative methodology in content analysis. The result is a tendency in the literature to consider the two modes of

analysis as “antithetical” (Weber, 1990:10) or as “divergent paradigms” (Gray and Denston, 1998:419), ultimately leading to what Berelson (1971) calls a “silly dichotomisation” (p. 128) of qualitative and quantitative methodology that exaggerates the supposed differences between them (Gray and Denston, 1998:419). However, there is a growing acknowledgement of the usefulness of qualitative methodology to compensate for the limitations of its quantitative counterpart, and to enrich the study overall. In fact, many scholars have conceded to the belief that the best content analyses effectively combine both quantitative and qualitative methodology (Berelson, 1971:114; Weber, 1990:10; Neuendorf, 2002:14; Macnamara, 2005:14; Krippendorff, 2013:26) in what Neuendorf has named “an integrative model” of content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002:41), although she does not necessarily subscribe to it.

Definitions of quantitative content analysis (discussed in section 3.1.) have been criticised for being too restrictive (Berelson, 1971:114; Macnamara, 2005:2). Wimmer (1987) outlines three particular limitations of quantitative content analysis:

1. Alone, quantitative content analysis cannot account for the impact of content on an audience
2. A purely quantitative content analysis cannot be used to “make claims about media effects”
3. The findings of a quantitative content analysis are limited to the framework of the coding categories and definitions used in that particular study

p. 141

Like Wimmer, Macnamara (2005) suggests that quantitative results achieved through the coding of content cannot account for or even determine the media’s social impact (p.5). Additionally, Shoemaker and Reece (1996) suggest that a mixed methodological approach to content analysis is more useful because “quantitative data ... does not provide a complete picture of meaning and contextual codes, since texts may contain many other forms of emphasis besides sheer repetition” (p. 32). It is useful here to be reminded of the misattributed quote by Albert Einstein: “Not everything that counts can be counted”. This preoccupation with measuring the numerical frequency of textual elements can be reductive as large, complex bodies of

data are reduced to simplistic, easy-to-code frequencies. Essentially, quantitative content analysis is purely descriptive; describing *what* is there without accounting for *why*, i.e. inferences cannot be made about the relationship of that text to the context in which it exists.

Although the use of a quantitative research methodology may seem inept in subjects that deal with the nuances of meaning and interpretation, its usefulness lies in its ability to allow the researcher to extract patterns or trends that can inform understanding of wider social and institutional phenomena, such as the gendered landscape of new media platforms, which can be further explored through the use of qualitative analysis. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) assert that quantification has great value in summarising what can be found in media content, and that the numerical frequencies extracted from coding quantifiable data is advantageous in that it allows the researcher to “compare media content to some reality benchmark” (p. 29). In turn, they suggest that these “systematic repetitive patterns” (1996:29) more often than not reflect “some underlying cultural pattern or organisational logic” (1996:29). However, this can only be explored using the interpretative measures characteristic of qualitative analysis. These kinds of findings, the exploration of latent content, are gleaned from subjective inferences, rather than the objective empirical findings that underpin content analysis, and are achieved through qualitative methods of interpretation and analysis.

As such, when used alone, a quantitative research method such as content analysis is not sufficient to make statements about the “deeper” meaning of content (Berelson, 1971:23), i.e. latent content. While quantitative content analysis focuses on the content itself, qualitative content analysis contextualises the content, demonstrating a more imperative concern with the content as a “reflection” of “deeper” phenomena for which the content is only a cue (Berelson, 1971:124; see also Neuendorf, 2002:14 and Krippendorff, 2013:89). This logic aligns itself with Shoemaker and Reese’s (1996) humanistic tradition of analysis that situates a text within context. It is concerned with what content says about society and the culture producing it, and the “truths” content reveals about society (Macnamara, 2005:3). According to Shoemaker and Reese, this approach considers media content as “an *integral part* of a real

culture, not as something divorced from that culture” (1996:28, emphasis in original). As Macnamara accurately summarises:

Qualitative content analysis examines the relationship between the text and its likely audience meaning, recognising that media texts are *polysemic* – i.e. open to multiple different meanings to different readers – and tries to determine the likely meaning of texts to audiences. It pays attention to audience, media and contextual factors – not simply the text.

2002:5, emphasis in original

In order to understand the cultural context of the text, researchers therefore need to consider “the many worlds of others” (Krippendorff, 2013:89), i.e. the “diverse voices (readers), alternative perspectives (from different ideological positions), oppositional readings (critiques), or varied uses of the texts examined (by different groups)” (Krippendorff, 2013:89). This is usually accomplished by reading widely about the context within which the text exists, and weaving quotes from that literature, as well as the sample of texts analysed, into the discussion of results.

Essentially, traditional (quantitative) content analysis focuses on the analysis of “manifest content” (Bell, 2001: 16; Berelson, 1971: 16), or content that is visible and “physically present” (Gray and Denston, 1998:23). On the other hand, a qualitative content analysis delves further by using quantified data to uncover latent meanings of texts, or “latent content”. However, as research increasingly acknowledges the significance of latent content, some scholars have come to question the distinction between manifest and latent content that lies at the core of defining content analysis methodologies. For one, Berelson (1971), despite his adherence to a traditional quantitative content analysis, draws on the objectivity/subjectivity dichotomy to suggest that there is in actual fact no such thing as manifest content, as the analytic procedure is subject to the subjectivity of the researcher:

As soon as meanings are attached to the symbols, the psychological predispositions of the reader become involved and to some degree they distort his comprehension of the ‘manifest content’. Thus there is no guarantee that the meanings in the ‘manifest content’ are the same as the meanings actually

understood by the different readers or intended by the writer; and thus only latent content can exist wherever meanings are involved.

1971:19

Berelson's claim calls into question the emphasis placed on objectivity and, as a result, the reliability upon which validity in content analyses is dependent. His claim suggests that the subjectivity of the coder/researcher will always threaten the collection and interpretation of the data; thereby contradicting his own assertion that content analysis abides by the rules of the scientific method. In much the same vein, Krippendorff draws on Berelson's widely quoted definition of content analysis to critique the quantitative/qualitative dichotomy and draw attention to the influence of human subjectivity in the content analysis procedure. He suggests that reading, an integral part of any content analysis, is an inherently qualitative process:

Reading is fundamentally a qualitative process, even when it results in numerical accounts. By including the attribute 'manifest' in his definition, Berelson intended to ensure that the coding of content analysis data be reliable; this requirement literally excludes 'reading between the lines', which is what experts do, often with remarkable intersubjective agreement.

2013:22

Krippendorff nevertheless suggests that consistency (i.e. intersubjective agreement) can still be attained despite the impact of subjective involvement with the data.

While Berelson nevertheless continues to subscribe to a quantitative content analysis, both he and Krippendorff make compelling critiques of the stringency of the traditional content analysis method. More importantly, both expand on their criticism, directing it to the very crux of the definition of content analysis: its quantitative requirement. Berelson argues that the distinction between quantitative and qualitative is actually fluid, as qualitative analyses usually contain quantitative statements "in rough form" (1971:117). These rough quantitative statements, he says, are visible in the language used for discussion: words like "repeatedly", "rarely", "usually", and "often", while not numerical, are still quantitative (1971:117). Berelson refers to this type of analysis as "quasi-quantitative" in that measurements are quantified but not

precisely numerical (1971:129). Like Berelson, Krippendorff goes so far as to suggest that both quantitative and qualitative analysis do much the same thing, “albeit less explicitly so” (2013:88):

There is no doubt that proponents of both approaches sample text, in the sense of selecting what is relevant; unitise text, in the sense of distinguishing words, propositions, or larger narrative units and using quotes and examples; contextualise what they are reading in light of what they know about the circumstances surrounding the texts; and have specific research questions in mind.

2013:88

Krippendorff goes on to suggest that using precise quantitative measurements is merely a matter of convenience and not a requirement for obtaining valid results (2013:88). Ultimately, both criticisms of the so-called “silly dichotomy” of quantitative versus qualitative analysis make an important distinction between the precision of “numerical” and the generality of “quantitative” statements, essentially suggesting that a distinction should be made between different types of quantification instead of between quantitative and qualitative methodologies in general.

Despite the apparent fluidity of content analysis methodology, what is clear is that both approaches are dependent on the research problem and research question under investigation, i.e. “the appropriateness of the procedures used relative to a chosen context on the other” (Krippendorff, 2013:88). Neuendorf (2002) says “the researcher needs to evaluate his or her needs and the outcomes possible from both quantitative (i.e. content analysis) and nonquantitative analysis” (p. 15). Despite her explicit adherence to quantitative content analysis, Neuendorf admits that the rigidity of its scientific character (she refers particular to its *a priori* or deductive design) does not allow for innovation. Krippendorff (2013) explains this particularly well (see also Figure 1):

In other words, the research design is inductive, constantly developing and altering according to engagement with the texts, as well as the researcher’s own subjective positionality and its influence on interpretations of the texts.

This continually developmental process continues until a satisfactory interpretation is reached.

p. 88

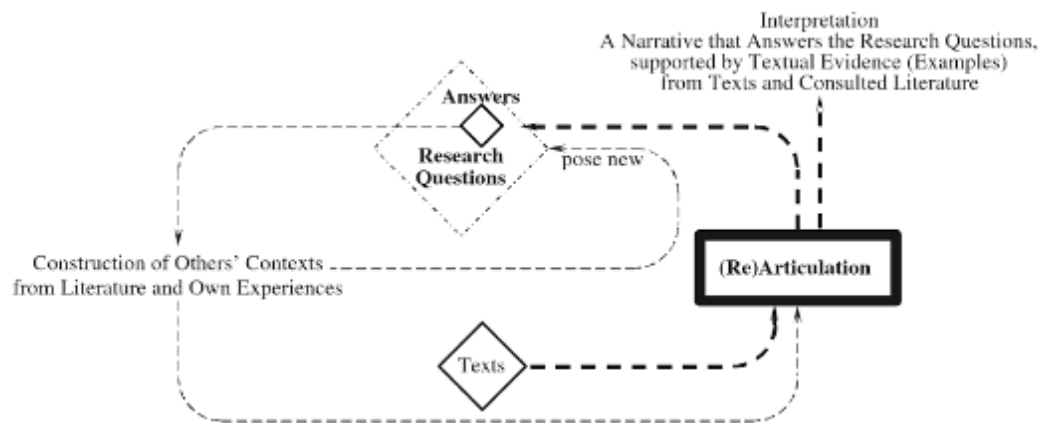


Figure 1. Qualitative content analysis according to Krippendorff (2013)

Whatever approach is chosen, it is important to consider the content analytic process as an effective combination of both quantitative and qualitative methodology, and as a process of both induction and deduction (Neuendorf, 2002:11). Guiding this notion is Weber’s (1990) assertion that “there is no simple *right way* to do content analysis” (p. 13, emphasis in original). He suggests that researchers must decide on the most appropriate form of analysis for their particular research needs. Similarly, Gray and Denston (1998) suggest that selecting specific techniques that are suited specifically to the needs of the research question will inevitably minimise the seemingly rigid distinction between quantitative and qualitative analysis (Bryman, 1998 in Gray and Denston, 1998:419).

3.3. Doing content analysis in a changing media landscape

Content analysis, whether quantitative or mixed-methodological, is usually applied to traditional “linear” media for which the boundaries of the text are clearly marked (Weare and Lin, 2000:280), such as print media. Content produced within this type of media is usually static with very clear boundaries to outline the text. Content analytic procedures have been well established to suit this type of “offline” media. However, there is a growing acknowledgement in the literature that this methodological

paradigm needs to adapt in accordance with the development of the media landscape due to increasingly rapid technological innovation.

The novelty of new media means that little exploration has been made into best practice methods for applying content analysis to such a dynamic medium. Although it is widely acknowledged that the Internet provides new opportunities for social research (Hookway, 2008:92), new media simultaneously presents a host of challenges to these well-established analytic procedures, particularly to the requirements of reliability and validity. This is due primarily to the inherently ubiquitous nature of new media and, more specifically, to its multimodal and hyperlinked structure. Hookway (2008) goes so far as to describe the blogosphere as “a dark and twisted labyrinth” (p.98) that he found “unwieldy” and “overwhelming” to deal with in his own research. In particular, the structural complexity of blogs poses problems for unitisation in that random sampling is almost impossible (Herring, 2004:49) due to the sheer size of the blogosphere, and of the Internet and its communications as a whole.

Despite these challenges Weare and Lin (2000) suggest that traditional content analysis can be used for studies of online content, but it must be conducted in ways that consider the complex character of new media platforms. In much the same vein, Herring (2004, 2009) asserts that researchers of new media need not “reinvent the methodological wheel” (2004:49), but should instead “draw upon, and benefit from, well-established traditions” (2004:49). Herring is one of few scholars, if not the only one, to engage with the methodological paradigm of content analysis within the new media landscape in ways that offer concrete and usable suggestions for ways to evolve the method. In particular, she claims that content analysis is too narrow in its application to an emergent, rapidly developing and multimodal medium. Traditional content analysis, she asserts, must therefore expand its paradigm to integrate other sociological methodologies, such as discourse analysis and social network analysis, in order to compensate for the diversity and structural complexity of new media platforms. In order to work with the unique features of the blogosphere in particular, Herring proposes an expanded Web Content Analysis (WebCA) paradigm “in which insights from other paradigms are operationalised and implemented within a general

CA framework” (2009: 2), rather than stopping the analysis “where traditional content analysis methods leave off” (2004:49).

One such way in which to do this is to apply qualitative research methodologies to studies of new media and its communications. Of the few content analyses applied to the World Wide Web, these have been quantitative in nature, including a longitudinal study of blogs from 2003 to 2004 conducted by Herring, Scheidt, Kouper, and Wright (2007), and a longitudinal study of 260 blogs conducted by Papacharissi (2007). Papacharissi investigates the personal and social gratifications obtained from blogging, while Herring et al. move away from an investigation of the users of blogs to focus on the uses of blogs, particularly the ways in which external events, primarily political in nature, shaped the blogosphere over time. Although entirely dependent on the research question under investigation, these studies tend to fixate on surface-level analysis of blog interfaces and structural characteristics without attempting to explore the relationship between these blogs and the ways in which their structure and content have been shaped by external contextual factors, as this study aims to do. Herring et al. (2007) suggest that qualitative methodology is the only way to explore this. In summary:

Narrow applications of CA can be revealing about certain types of blog content, but [a] broader conception of CA is required in order to capture important features of blogs that the narrow approach does not.

(Herring, 2009:10)

Nevertheless, the fact that new media is an emerging platform, and the research methodologies applied to this medium are newly evolving, the application of content analysis to the blogosphere, and the Internet in general, requires a certain degree of innovation. According to Herring (2009):

Innovation is a vital process in the evolution of any research paradigm. Innovation is especially needed when new phenomena present themselves.

p. 13

There is a need for a broader understanding of content analysis “that allows new media to dictate new methods tailored to the analysis of digital content” (Herring, 2004:57). Innovation of analytic procedures thus becomes part of content analysis within Internet-mediated communication systems. While this, in combination with the qualitative nature of the proposed content analysis, poses challenges to the reliability and subsequent replicability of the study, there is no agreed-upon blueprint for how to apply content analysis to new media. Researchers must therefore rely upon themselves to create a best practice methodology while attempting to achieve as far as possible some measure of consistency in the analytic procedure.

3.4. Research design

This study aims to answer the following question: do African feminist blogs offer an alternative democratic communicative space for African women? The question has a strong focus on the intersection of the socio-political and gendered contexts within which participation takes place on blogs; blogs and the articles they post must therefore be interpreted within this context. As a result, both quantitative and qualitative data were considered and interpreted accordingly. A qualitative content analysis, unlike its quantitative predecessor, offers researchers the unique opportunity to make inferences about the sample of texts within a contextual framework (Krippendorff, 2004:18; Weber, 1990:9). Thus, a qualitative content analysis that uses both simple methods of quantifying data and qualitative methods of interpretation was used in this study in order to better understand the ways in which women use blogs as a means of articulating a voice within a public sphere online. A qualitative content analysis therefore offers researchers the unique opportunity to make inferences about the sample of texts within a contextual framework.

3.4.1 Population and Sample

Using all the articles posted on three African feminist blogs within a two-month period from July to August 2016, this study used a qualitative content analysis to explore the ways in which women use blogs as an alternative space for the articulation of a social, political and civic identity in Africa. The three blogs that provide a case study for this research originate within the African continent (and not

the African diaspora) and deal explicitly with a variety of intersectional feminist issues, or issues of interest to African women ranging from politics, to popular culture, to fictional stories of sex and relationships. These blogs are MsAfropolitan, Adventures from the Bedrooms of African Women, and Her Zimbabwe (see sections 3.4.1.1.– 3.4.1.3. below, as well as section 1.4 in Chapter 1.). All three were chosen from a list entitled “African Feminist Blogs” which appear on a page on MsAfropolitan entitled “African Feminist Resources”. A simple Google search of “African Feminist Blogs” did not return any results, so this list (or blogroll, “a list of other blogs which come recommended by the author” [Somolu, 2007:478]) from arguably one of the most prominent African feminist blogs, was used as the primary resource to delineate the sample. This list resembles what Weare and Lin (2000) call a collector’s site, a collection of lists and links to other, related sites (p. 279). According to Weare and Lin: “These collector sites are most useful for analyses of sites from particular sources or concerning a particular topic” (2000:279). In this case, all the blogs listed on this page are placed within the topic of African feminism, making it a useful departure point for narrowing down the population of blogs within a medium as ubiquitous as the World Wide Web.

The collector’s list includes links to 15 blogs, all of which were visited and explored before choosing the final sample. The following criteria were borrowed from Somolu’s criteria (2007:479-480) of African blogs and used to choose the final sample: 1) the blog was based in Africa, and not in the African diaspora; 2) the blog was authored and maintained by African women; 3) the blogs were active, i.e. regular posts were made; 4) the blog had posted consistently within the last two months, and 5) the blogs were written in English, as the researcher did not have the ability to translate text.

The final choice depended upon whether the blogs self-identified as feminist, regardless of MsAfropolitan’s designation of them as feminist, as well as the type of content produced on the blog. For example, blogs such as Our Space is Love and African Feminists Rock! are primarily visual in nature, posting images and videos with little to no accompanying text to anchor the visual material to a specific meaning or desired message. As such, they were eliminated and it was decided that only blogs that are more text-based would be allowed in the sample as they offer the potential for

richer analysis. In addition, several of the blogs on this list are inactive, have since shut down, or have not posted in months. These were also eliminated.

3.4.1.1 Blog 1: MsAfropolitan

MsAfropolitan is written and maintained by Nigerian-Finnish writer Minna Salami. The blog offers commentary on issues relating to politics, economics, current affairs and popular culture. It has a Pan-Africanist brand of feminism. Posts are consistent, albeit less frequently than the other two blogs in the sample. However, the page remains active through links to MsAfropolitan's social media pages.

3.4.1.2 Blog 2: Adventures from the Bedrooms of African Women

Adventures was created by Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah, a Ghanaian woman who identified a need to discuss issues of sex and sexuality more openly in a religiously conservative country. As such, topics are limited to sex and sexuality as part of a feminist project to draw attention to women's sexual agency and diverse sexualities. Posts are frequent, and authored primarily by contributors to the site.

3.4.1.3 Blog 3: Her Zimbabwe

Her Zimbabwe was created by Fungai Machirori from Zimbabwe. Unlike the other two blogs, Her Zimbabwe possesses an exclusively nationalist stance, focusing on a variety of issues relevant specifically to Zimbabwean women, ranging from sports, politics, ICT and innovation, current affairs, and popular culture. Posts on this blog are more frequent than the other two blogs in the sample, with posts going up every day. The page is thus very active.

The unit of data collection, i.e. "the element on which each variable is measured" (Neuendorf, 2002:13) was each blog, while the unit of analysis, i.e. "the element on which data are analysed and for which findings are reported" (Neuendorf, 2002:13), was each blog post posted within the two-month period of analysis. A two-month period was chosen so as not to overwhelm the researcher with data given the short length requirement of this study's write-up. The specific months examined (July to August 2016) were randomly chosen. Given the diverging nature of blog posts' hyperlinked structure, unitisation in the traditional sense of a content analysis proved challenging. It is suggested by Herring (2004) (who draws on Bates and Lu [2007]) to take the blog homepage as a basic unit of analysis because the homepage is the "the

minimal unit that defines a website” (2004:52): “it is the part [of the blog] that users are most likely to encounter” (Herring, 2004:52). As such, all posts from the homepage were picked for examination within the chosen time frame. This amounted to 4 posts on MsAfropolitan, 17 posts on Adventures, and 24 posts on Her Zimbabwe, resulting in a total of 45 posts coded.

3.5. Data collection

Given that to analyse means to “break a thing down to its constituent elements” (Bell, 2001: 15), it is useful to break down one’s hypothesis in order to gauge which variables need to be used to code the data, an important task since, according to Kassarian (1977), “content analysis is no better than its categories, since they reflect the formulated thinking, the hypotheses, and the purpose of the study” (p.12). The elements contained within the hypothesis underpinning this study reflect the following: the gendering of blogs and online media platforms, the type of engagement with discourses of femininity, and the type of participation this allows for within the public sphere online. With this in mind, data has been coded according to the following variables: the sex/gender of the author, format/type of article, narrative voice, the inclusion of images/other visual material, and the inclusion of hyperlinks. These variables were determined by the content itself, after a primary examination of the blog posts. Categories were also determined by a similar study conducted by the author in 2015 in which US-based feminist blogs served as the sample. While these blogs are from a different context, and therefore offer different interpretations of women’s and feminist issues, they share similarities with African feminist blogs in the type of issues covered, and were thus used to guide the author in formulating coding categories for this study.

These variables can, however, be difficult to extrapolate, as sex and gender exist on a spectrum of variations within the binaries of male/female and masculine/feminine (Fausto-Sterling, 1993). This is especially important to consider within the context of blogs that support the existence of alternative sexualities that do not necessarily adhere to the conventions of heteronormativity. Additionally, some authors post on the blog anonymously. Moreover, it is well known within feminine discourse that identities are intersectional; as such, each blog post within the sample of blogs does

not deal with topics in isolation; rather, they cover a web of issues that are relevant to various facets of the author's identity. The kinds of topics coded for were politics (e.g. "Kereke's conviction exposes more about our judiciary system than just 'delayed justice'" on Her Zimbabwe), body politics (a branch of political discussion that focused on the regulation of women's bodies through policy and social expectation/perception, e.g. "Politics of the vagina" on Her Zimbabwe), popular culture (e.g. "Lady Squanda was wrong – no to gendered excuses" on Her Zimbabwe), sex and relationships (e.g. "Goal setting for a successful sex life" on Adventures), and news and current affairs (e.g. "Post-Brexit, time to question neo-colonialism" on MsAfropolitan). While topics were made to be as specific as possible, they tended to overlap due to the intersection of issues that concern women. For example, posts that fell under "news and current affairs" often coincided with "politics". Examples of such posts include "Magaya's case: insight into the challenges of reporting rape in Zimbabwe" on Her Zimbabwe which uses the rape case of a prominent religious leader to explore how the media upholds systems of patriarchy and ingrained patriarchal ideology that favours the rape accused. As such, this study will only be able to supply a broad overview of the topics that are deemed relevant across the spectrum of blog posts.

These overlapping categories can pose problems for the coding process, as they cannot be appropriately unitised. Interpretation was therefore broad and not so much mathematical or quantifiable. Focus was thus placed not so much on the topics under discussion, but *how* they were being discussed and engagement with it. In doing so, this study could shed light on why women blog and, more importantly, whether the platform offered an unhindered space for engagement with issues that usually exclude women in the mainstream media. A focus on how this engagement manifested, i.e. in the language used, and whether a personal sphere of reference was used (both indicated by narrative voice, see below) was thus prioritised in the coding process.

Emphasis was therefore placed on the narrative voice (first or third person pronouns) used. Narrative voice indicates either a personal or more distant objective engagement with a topic, thus indicating the kinds of ways women choose to engage with broader social and political issues, and their perceived role in them. Moreover, this indicates the different ways in which blogs allow posters to discuss "political" issues that are

not necessarily permissible in mainstream media. Narrative voice is also indicative of the entry point women need to talk about issues in a way that is personal to them and therefore relatable to others.

These variables can be further broken down into mutually exclusive “values” (Bell, 2001:15), i.e. a principal feature or representation of each variable. Variables will thus be broken down into the following values (excluding the category of hyperlinks for which simply the presence or lack thereof was coded for):

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Value</u>
Author:	Male Female Not specified/unknown/anonymous
Narrative voice (sphere of reference)	First person Third person
Format/type	Story (fiction) Story (true) Poem News/feature article Commentary Interview
Topic	Politics Body politics Popular culture Sex/relationships New/current affairs
Images	Illustration

Photograph

Advert

None

Each article within the sample will be coded for according to the above categories. It is important to note here that, due to its concern primarily with content as a “‘reflection’ of ‘deeper’ phenomena” (Berelson, 1971:123) for which the analysis of purely manifest content is insufficient, qualitative content analysis “employs less formal categorisation” (Berelson, 1971:125) than its quantitative counterpart which requires absolute simplicity in its categorisation in order to ensure the precision of data collection. As Berelson asserts: “Categories are, so to speak, picked up where they come to hand” (1971:126), echoing once again the tendency for analytical innovation in qualitative content analysis. As such, the importance and relevance of each variable to the study only became apparent once all the data has been coded for and interpreted according to the hypothesis, reiterating once again that content analysis should ideally encapsulate a combination of both inductive and deductive design (Neuendorf, 2002:11).

3.6. Analysis

The great importance placed on reliability in quantitative content analysis places a restriction on the complexity of choosing units of analysis (Berelson, 1971:126). In other words, simple units of analysis, such as a single word, name, or phrase, are used in order to ensure the reliability and replicability of results. However, by its inherently flexible and imprecise nature, as well as its preference for the analysis of latent content, qualitative content analysis willingly circumvents the formulation of simple units of analysis in favour of analysing larger bodies of texts. According to Berelson:

Qualitative analysis is more likely to take them in the large on the assumption that meanings preside in the totality of impression, the *Gestalt*, and not in the atomistic combination of measurable units.

1971:126

Krippendorff supports Berelson, suggesting that qualitative analysis must consider bodies of text “as a whole/holistically” (2013:89) in order to do justice to interpretations (2012:89). He further suggests that this kind of analysis justifies a continuous “revisiting” of previous interpretations in light of continuous engagement with the literature throughout the data collection process, thereby alluding again to the innovative nature of the kind of inductive-deductive research design typical of qualitative content analysis. As Berelson asserts:

In ‘qualitative’ analysis the interpretations (i.e. inferences about intent or effect) are more often made as *part* of the analytic process whereas in quantitative analysis the interpretations are more likely to *follow* the analytic procedure.

1971:122, emphasis in original

As such, this study will consider each blog post/article in its entirety, coding each one according to the categories presented in Section 3.5. Weber (1990) rightfully suggests that larger bodies of text are much more difficult to code, given the potential for the researcher to be presented with “conflicting cues” (p. 22) due to the inclusion of more information and, subsequently, a larger diversity of topics (1990:22). However, since reliability is generally of less concern to the qualitative researcher (Krippendorff, 2013:89), this can be overlooked. Other limitations of qualitative content analyses are discussed below.

3.5. Limitations

While a qualitative content analysis is the most appropriate methodological approach to the sample (as opposed to other forms of visual analysis such as semiotics which is used instead to conduct more individual textual analyses), it is important to note that the use of a qualitative content analytic approach is susceptible to various limitations and methodological problems (Bell, 2001:24). While objectivity is a defining characteristic of a content analysis, that is one based on quantitative methods, the simultaneous use of qualitative methods of interpretation and understanding quantified data can threaten the objectivity of the study simply because interpretation is a subjective process. Moreover, increased subjectivity threatens the reliability of the

study (i.e. the ability to reproduce the study with the same results), what Kassarjian (1977) suggests is “one of the distinguishing characteristics of content analysis as contrasted with other techniques of describing communications content” (p. 13).

Additionally, a sample of three blogs may be too small for a traditional content analysis; however, qualitative content analyses usually opt for a smaller sample study because analysis is generally time consuming and technically tedious (Macamara, 2005:5) and the primary focus is usually on analysis of the more text-heavy latent content. This is also the case because qualitative researchers usually carry out the analysis alone as opposed to with a team of coders or computer coding programme. Altogether, these factors are considered unscientific, threatening the reliability upon which content analysis depends.

Macnamara suggests that, given the relatively newfound interest in applying qualitative methodology to content analysis procedures, the precise methodology for how best to conduct a qualitative content analysis is “poorly defined” (2005:15) in comparison to the carefully curated procedures of quantitative content analysis. However, it has already been suggested by Weber that there is “no simple *right way* to do content analysis” (1990:10, emphasis in original). Given that there are no guidelines for conducting a good qualitative content analysis, the researcher must use his or her own discretion, making sure to adapt the most appropriate methodology to the requirements of the research question.

Collectively, it appears that it is the threat to reliability that characterises the variety of supposed limitations to qualitative content analysis. However, it has already been established that in seeking to uncover the latent meaning of texts within a particular context, reliability, and thereby replicability, is not generally of concern to researchers.

Additionally, the study focuses on the content of blogs and not the ways in which its audiences interpret this content. To make assumptions about the audiences’ interpretation of the blogs content would require a far more complex study with a strong component of audience research. Moreover, the influence of the study is somewhat limited given its focus on only three feminist blogs within a singular

(African) context, albeit those whose explicitly feminist stance, accreditations, and aim to advance the feminist movement differentiates them from other similar blogs. The choice of a small sample was also due to a lack of research on blogging in the African context, as well as a lack of blogs that met the criteria for the sample. Nevertheless, feminist blogs, and other blogs created within the shared interests of its users, do share certain characteristics in common in terms of content, production and structure. Generalisations therefore can be made to other feminist blogs, although the context within which each one situates itself must be considered, especially because concepts of feminism are context-specific.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following chapter offers an analysis and interpretation of the findings gleaned from a qualitative content analysis. It examines the various strategies deployed by contributors to the blogs in the creation and maintenance of an online space tailored to the needs and wants of a female population excluded from participation in the mainstream media. These strategies include the use of the first-person narrative, the use of a personal sphere of reference to anchor discussions of relevant socio-political issues, as well as the creative use of storytelling to communicate experiences of oppression. Furthermore, these strategies are analysed against a backdrop of institutionalised journalism and the delineation of private and public spaces that dictate conceptualisations of politics in order to better understand how African feminist blogs offer a relatively democratic online space for women whose views tend to be silenced by the traditionally male-dominated political public spaces. Based on these findings, a reconsideration of narrow conceptualisations of citizenship is offered.

4.1. Blogging as an alternative medium

Like most blogs, all three blogs in the sample consist of regular posts arranged in reverse chronological order and archived (Papacharissi, 2007:21; Adams, 2006; Tremayne, 2007a; Blood, 2002:11-12; Hookway, 2008:92). At least in the case of *Adventures* and *Her Zimbabwe*, content on the blogs is derived from the contributions of readers who form a “community” of users responsible for sustaining the blog by posting regularly (while *MsAfropolitan* does not rely on a community of users for its longevity, it is maintained by a single “ordinary” [Hermes, 2006a:296] person situated at the intersection of both producer and actor in the news). These three blogs thus share in common with most other blogs and new media platforms the tendency of its users to walk the ambiguous line between producers and consumers (Papacharissi, 2007:21; Hermes, 2006a:296; Moore, 1999:40). Bruns (2008) refers to this user-led content creation as “produsage”: he suggests that the collaborative and participatory environment of the new media landscape breaks down the boundaries of the traditional producer/consumer dichotomy. As such, the role of consumers in a

digitally mediatised world is altered, as participants who use new media technologies are able to become both users and producers of information and knowledge.

Users of all three blogs may post anonymously or under a pseudonym, thus making it difficult to determine the sex or gender² of contributors. Often, however, this can be determined from the content of blog posts in which the author refers to him/herself. For example, a post on Adventures titled “Spirit Women: Connecting with Femininity and Womanhood” is written by an author who uses the pseudonym Timehin. The sex and gender of the author is unspecified; however, the article speaks to the personal experiences of birthing a child, so it is safe to assume that the author is a woman. Of the 45 articles in the entire sample, 33 were authored by women. Two were written by men. The authors of the final twelve posts were indeterminable or irrelevant as they were press releases, event adverts or calls for submissions to journals.

Blogs, particularly with regards to online journals, are often perceived to be the domain of women, and this is supported by the above findings. Given that these blogs are created for and used primarily by women, this is inevitable. Gregg (2006) suggests that blogs offer women a way to break down the isolation and social exclusion they experience as a result of persistent social expectations that they remain within the realm of domesticity (p.152). As a result of their exclusion from mainstream communicative platforms, and a subsequent need for “independent and ‘authentic’ communication” (Lewis et al. 2013:47), it is necessary for women to form their own groups or communities to address their interests (Herring, 2003:19). As such, Somolu (2007) suggests:

Many women capitalise on the ability of blogs to be a powerful conversational tool with the potential to reach a wide audience and to empower by giving a voice to the unheard.

p. 483

² “Sex” is rooted in biology and refers to an individual’s genitalia and secondary sexual characteristics that determine whether they are male or female. “Gender” refers to a social construct that determines an individual’s perceived role in society (i.e. masculine/feminine).

This idea fits well with the users of the three blogs in the sample who use the platform as a means to articulate their concerns in a social and political environment that often silences their perspectives. These concerns ranged from domestic abuse, maintaining a healthy sex life, the role of religion in relationships, the digitisation of protest action in Zimbabwe, women's involvement in parliament, and the depiction of sex and gender stereotypes in the media. While men, on the other hand, do not necessarily face the same social exclusion as women, contemporary feminist discourse does extend its influence to the lives of men who are just as susceptible to heteronormative gendering practices as women are (see Warner, 2015). The equality of both men and women is the defining principle of contemporary feminist movements, and it is therefore becoming increasingly acceptable for men to identify as feminist today. As such, one of the two male contributors to the sample posts, Farai Siebert Mabeza, used *Her Zimbabwe* to reflect on what it means to be a feminist and a man. Throughout the piece, Mabeza grapples with the privilege he is afforded simply by being a man, continuously juxtaposing his maleness with the plight of the women around him. In one such instance, he makes reference to a friend, a single unemployed mother, who is forced to seek work with her child in tow while her husband is free "to roam the plains like a wild stallion". In spite of his commitment to gender equality in Zimbabwe and beyond, Mabeza acknowledges that male involvement in the movement can be "counterproductive" and "unhelpful", often due to men's need "to want to take the front seat":

How do you get yourself to be taken seriously? How do you get yourself to not be treated as something of a novelty?...How will I be perceived, not only by those in whose corner I will be fighting but also by my own kind...the ones whose attitudes need to change?

Like his female counterparts, Mabeza situates himself within the contemporary feminist movement through personal experience, first considering himself a "feminist ally" until he learns to navigate the feminist movement as a man. He attests to doing so for his mother, "for the opportunities that she missed, the education that she couldn't get because she was a girl, and the sacrifices she made because she is my mother and everyone expected her to do so". As such, he is propelled to join the movement as a result of personal experience, not unlike his female counterparts

whose daily existences are determined by larger institutional structures that favour a patriarchal, capitalist, heteronormative way of life. Furthermore, he shares in common the marginalisation of progressive men's voices in a society that is only slowly starting to accept the idea that men can be feminist.

The use of personal experience to comment on contemporary feminist issues such as bodily autonomy (e.g. "Breastfeeding as nature would have it" on Her Zimbabwe) and sexual autonomy (e.g. "I am tired of bad sex" on Adventures) is a common feature of all three blogs,³ and is by no means limited to those posts by men. In this vein, Tremayne (2007b), Gregg (2006), Wei (2009), and Papacharissi (2007) differentiate between filter blogs and personal or online journals as two categories of blogs whose content and production is gendered. Personal journals are usually the domain of women. Focused inward (Tremayne, 2007b), they are self-reflective and resemble the catharsis of diary writing or journaling more than the objective, reasoned journalism ideal (Papacharissi, 2007:35). Blogs that possess the online journal format became popular as a result of user-friendly blog creation software Pitas and Blogger (Blood, 2002:10)⁴. Filter blogs, on the other hand, are focused outward (Tremayne, 2007b) and are considered to be more engaged in political debate. By virtue of this kind of political content, and that the political arena is one occupied primarily by men, filter blogs are presumed to be the domain of men. Given their content, they are also believed to have a greater impact on mainstream media than the online journal format of other blogs (Tremayne, 2007a:ix). Filter blogs have their origin in the early proliferation of blogs whose function it was to "filter" the mass of online content according to a specific theme or topic. According to Blood (2002), filter blogs ensured that the web was, in effect, "pre-surfed" (p.9) for Internet users. Filter blogs are thus the domain of men, the authentic blog form against which other styles of blogging are judged (Gregg, 2006:153).

The distinction between these two genres thus creates a hierarchy within the online media space that privileges men's voices over those of women, trivialising some issues while deeming others more important:

³ A detailed description and analysis of this finding can be found in section 4.2

⁴ This source focuses on blogs from a Western context.

By privileging filter blogs and thereby implicitly evaluating the activities of adult males as more interesting, important and/or newsworthy than those of other blog authors, public discourses about weblogs marginalise the activities of women and teen bloggers, thereby indirectly reproducing societal sexism and ageism, and misrepresenting the fundamental nature of the weblog phenomenon.

(Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, and Wright, 2004:2)

Neither Adventures, Her Zimbabwe, nor MsAfropolitan can be neatly categorised as either an online journal or filter blog, although all three possess characteristics of both genres. The style of Adventures in comparison to the other two blogs is decidedly more personal and intimate, as posts resemble personal musings, both fictitious and real. Adventures thus encapsulates the online journal blog format's intimacy, which Papacharissi (2007) describes as "the presence or divulgence of personal information through use of a narrative structure" (p.37). (The use of narrative is discussed in more detail in section 4.2.) The intimacy evident on Adventures is, however, not necessarily private in nature, but a kind of "confessional intimacy" that is meant to be shared with others, due to the relatability of content and subsequent accessibility to other readers.

Her Zimbabwe and MsAfropolitan resemble the filter blog the most: content is based predominantly on trending topics and current affairs, such as Brexit, the rape case of prophet and religious leader Walter Magaya, and the viral video scandal involving musician Lady Squanda, all of which the reader is directed to through numerous hyperlinks. These two blogs thus function as an extension of or supplement to both offline and online journalism,⁵ one that possesses a uniquely feminine perspective of these topics.

However, both Her Zimbabwe and MsAfropolitan also contain posts of a personal, confessional and self-referential nature. It is thus difficult to evenly categorise each

⁵ Although, unlike professional journalistic blogs that exist to complement an already existing offline medium, these blogs both originate from outside the boundaries of institutional journalism – thus, a type of alternative media. This is discussed in more depth in section 4.3

blog. Blood (2002) asserts that “the weblog has always been an infinitely malleable format” (p.12), most probably susceptible to the continuous and rapid development of digital technologies and the absence of an extensive publishing process. It is this, Blood suggests, that makes each blog unique: “the particular mixture of links, commentary, and personal observation unique to each individual site has always given each weblog its distinctive voice and personality” (2002:12). All three blogs therefore resemble not a filter blog or an online journal but a hybridised form of both.

Gregg (2006) suggests that the distinction between filter blogs and online journals follows a long tradition of philosophical thought that places women’s culture in the domain of emotion and affect as opposed to the rationality and reason historically associated with men (p.153). As such, generalisations of the genres of blogs confirm ingrained notions as to the “proper” participants in, and issues appropriate for, the public sphere (Gregg, 2006:151). While the personal sphere of reference used in the sample posts may support this, the extent to which it does so is limited. The next section will explore the material significance of self-reflective and personalised narratives for participation in the social and political realms of a public sphere.

4.2. Blurring the private/public dichotomy

Despite the personal and reflective nature of the posts on Adventures, Her Zimbabwe and MsAfropolitan, topics such as women’s social and political rights⁶, sexual rights⁷, and pop cultural phenomena⁸ reflect broader social and political issues relevant to the lives of contributors. Of the 45 blog posts, thirteen were subjectively positioned by virtue of the use of personal pronouns (I, we, us), each of which explicitly used an individual experience or sphere of reference as the departure point for discussions of these topics. Discussions and commentary of broader social, political and institutional phenomena were thus explored and understood by situating the self within the external world in which contributors navigate their social existence. These

⁶ e.g. “#ThisFlag is my flag: musings of a young feminist” and “The plight of migrant domestic workers: we need solutions” on Her Zimbabwe, “Pastor Adeboye’s misguided marriage advice” on MsAfropolitan

⁷ e.g. “Sexualisation of women’s bodies – a breast is apparently not just a breast” and “Politics of the vagina” on Her Zimbabwe, “Pleasure squared” and “Trust sex positive feminists with the #Afrifem revolution” on Adventures

⁸ e.g. “Lady Squada was wrong – no to gendered excuses” on Her Zimbabwe

phenomena included posts on the discursive challenges of defining feminism (“Trust sex positive feminists with the #Afrifem revolution” on Adventures), critiquing the inadequate health care system in Zimbabwe (“#ThisFlag is my flag: musings of a young feminist” on Her Zimbabwe), and challenging the traditional roles of men and women in marriage (“Pastor Adeboye’s misguided marriage advice” on MsAfropolitan), amongst others.

Each blog was coded for narrative voice as indicated by the pronouns used; for example, “I”, “we”, “us”, “me” and “our” indicated the first person, while “he”, “she”, “it” and “they” indicated the third-person narrative. Some posts were not applicable to this category, as they were calls for submissions to journals, job adverts, or event adverts. While the sample taken from Her Zimbabwe contained 15 out of 24 posts written in the first person (5 were written in the third person and 4 were not applicable), 8 out of the 15 first-person posts used the first person simply to situate the author simultaneously within the readership or population under discussion. For example, in an article titled “The changing faces of protests in Zimbabwe: part 2”, the author makes use of first-person pronouns (“*I’m more interested*” and “*I wonder*”) to indicate an opinion, but does not use a personal sphere of reference or experience to anchor the discussion. The piece reads like a journalistic feature article, using case study examples of contemporary protest action to discuss the broader issue of how digitisation is changing the nature of protest action in Zimbabwe. The remaining 7 of the 15 posts also used first-person pronouns but went beyond this by explicitly using a personal experience or sphere of reference in their writing to anchor seemingly abstract discussions to broader social, political and economic issues. It appears that contributors do this to create an entryway into discussions of topics that may seem detached or difficult to digest if not for a personal experience to relate it to. For example, in a review of a viral video advertisement for sanitary ware known as the Red.Fit Campaign, the author uses her own struggles with menstruation to discuss the various ways in which the advert depicts the actualities of experiences related to menstruation, and not the unrealistically “girly, cheerful representation” of women in most sanitary ware advertisements:

These are good adverts, showing how sweet and happy I am when my menstrual hormones are raging and I am counting down the days until the agony ends.

Most of the blog posts (11 out of 17 – only 2 were written in the third person and 4 were not applicable) on Adventures are written in the first-person narrative. However, unlike the 7 posts on Her Zimbabwe that use the first-person narrative simply to align the author with the readership without using a personal sphere of reference, all 11 posts are text-based and exclusively self-referential, encapsulating a characteristic of intimacy. In accordance with Papacharissi's definition of intimacy, sometimes this personal information is presented and divulged through the use of narrative structure (2007:37). One article, "Caller cock block", begins with an introduction – a prologue of sorts – directed toward the reader:

A good friend of mine – whose sexual history is far more exciting and expansive than mine will ever be – once told me that when a woman is questioned about her body count, she must respond with a number that is both realistic and respectable.

The introduction is then followed by a seemingly fictitious story, but which the reader knows to be true because the author asserts that it is based on a real-life interaction between her and a man with whom she has just had sex. It begins with the following line:

We were standing in front of his stove, post-coitus and just showered.

Another post, titled "Pleasure squared" describes one woman's first experience of sexual intercourse with another woman. It begins with the following opening paragraph:

My head is resting on a brick wall and I am standing in front of her. I indeed need support to hold my body up because I am using all my effort to stop trembling. We came down together to finish organising the books that were

donated to the church. It was a quiet Sunday night and we were on Christian duty.

Both excerpts follow a narrative structure, situating the author as the protagonist in her own self-reflexive story. Each excerpt follows the style and format of a fictitious story, using the opening paragraph to “set the scene” and introduce the characters and topics of the story. Both authors use a narrative format as a means of discussing broader social and political issues related to women – bodily and sexual autonomy, and lesbianism. (See section 4.4 for a more detailed discussion of narrative storytelling and digital creativity.) As is the case on Her Zimbabwe, both women, as well as the majority of the other contributors, use personal experiences to anchor discussions of broader social, political and institutional phenomena that are relevant to their existence as women within a patriarchal and heteronormative society.

According to Gregg (2006) the domestic and personal sphere of reference of certain blogs leads to the misperception that women’s blogs are less noteworthy than those of men (p.151), a typical response to a subordinate position within the wider structures of society (p.152). But blogs, she argues, have for this very reason been celebrated for their capacity to give voice to the marginalised whose experiences have historically been “trivialised, denigrated or ignored in the past, particularly the views of women and younger members of society” (2006:152). Unlike the traditional diary format, however, privacy is not guarded and blogs are open for all to see. Papacharissi (2007) argues that blogs therefore allow the private domain to become public:

Blogs present an interesting paradoxical combination of private and public information that challenges our conventional understanding of the private and public sphere and follows in the tradition of new media technologies that empower the individual to project personal experiences, usually considered private, to a mass audience.

(2007: 35)

As such, the articulation of social, political and institutional phenomena through personal experience on Adventures collapses the public/private dichotomy by personalising public issues. Papacharissi (2007) calls this process “a true melange of

private and public information” (p. 36). This encapsulates what Hermes (2006a) refers to as a cultural use of ICTs, one that “offers new means to connect information and experience” (p. 304) by bridging public and private spaces, and by adopting a unique mixture of entertainment, consultation and information, and communication (Hermes, 2006a:304). Somolu (2007), whose study on African women’s blogging practices found similar results, suggests that in describing their everyday experiences, and in “link[ing] related experiences or examples from their lives” (2007:481) to the topic under discussion in their respective posts, the bloggers offer a written perspective of their experiences living as women in Africa, and the challenges that come with that reality (Somolu, 2007:481). Although Somolu speaks to the specificities of her own sample, the very same can be said for the three blogs that comprise the sample for this study.

Not only do all three blogs challenge the conventional news format (see Section 4.3 for more detail), they also challenge conventional understandings of what is considered private and public. According to Papacharissi (2007), blogs present a “paradoxical combination of private and public information” (p.35) because they “empower the individual to project personal experiences, usually considered private, to a mass audience” (p.35). In so doing, these blogs publicise the private domain while privatising a portion of the public sphere (that in which the women blogger is situated) by carving out a personalised space on a public platform (Papacharissi, 2007:35-36).

4.3. Subverting the journalistic format

Because of their user-led content creation, blogs are becoming increasingly valued for their participatory potential, allowing users to become active producers of information, in addition to and instead of mere consumers thereof (see Section 4.1.). This has a profound impact on institutionalised journalism, which, up until the rapid development and proliferation of new media technologies, had a monopoly on the production and dissemination of news and other information. Domingo and Heinonen (2008) suggest that blogs can be seen as an emerging “new category of news and current affairs information” (p.3), a type of publishing that is more democratic, and free from the constraints of corporate and government ownership and control. The

result is a revitalisation of voices that altogether underpin a paradigm shift in journalism in the era of the Internet (p.3).

Section 4.1. explored briefly the filter blog/online journal dichotomy, and, in particular, the ways in which Her Zimbabwe and MsAfropolitan subscribe to the journalistic format of the filter blog the most out of the three-blog sample. In both blogs, content is based predominantly on trending topics and current affairs, all of which the reader is directed to through numerous hyperlinks. Hyperlinks were the defining feature of the initial filter blog, indicating to readers the source of blog content, the inspiration for commentary on and discussion of a particular topic, usually from mainstream news media. While only 6 out of 17 articles on Adventures contained hyperlinks, all of the articles on HerZimbabwe and MsAfropolitan (a total of 24 and 4, respectively) contained hyperlinks. In addition, the hyperlinks included in the articles on Adventures were linked primarily to Twitter accounts, event hashtags, and the personal and professional biographies of guest authors. Only once did a hyperlink provide a link to another news article (in “Trust sex positive feminists with the #Afrifem Revolution” the link was to a *Mail and Guardian* piece). In contrast, all the hyperlinks documented within the sample on Her Zimbabwe and MsAfropolitan contained links to other news articles and opinion pieces all based on current affairs and trending topics. By an observation of the use of hyperlinks alone, these two blogs are journalistic in nature, functioning as an extension of or supplement to online journalism. Moreover, the inclusion of hyperlinks “increases the reliability” (Domingo and Heinonen, 2008:6) of these posts and indicates a level of journalistic accountability (Blood, 2002) in identifying the sources used.

A number of articles within the sample follow a journalistic style and format, whether that of a news report or a feature article. Two articles on Her Zimbabwe report on the matches played by the Zimbabwean U18 girls’ rugby team at a tournament that took place in South Africa. Both articles are written by Grace Chirumanzu, a Zimbabwean sports journalist and photographer. The two articles open in the following:

1. *The Old Mutual Zimbabwe Girls Under-18 rugby team will on Monday seek to build on their last year performance to make an impressive start of*

the annual 'National Girls Under-18 Week' Tournament happening in Kimberley, South Africa from the 4th to the 8th of July 2016.

- 2. The Old Mutual Zimbabwe U18 girls dismissed South Western Districts (SWD) 20-5 in their opening match of the Girls Rugby Week held at Griqua Park in Kimberly [sic], South Africa on Monday.*

Both introductions follow the style of a conventional news report, and each make use of the traditional “5Ws and H” format (who, what, where, when, why, and how) of traditional information gathering in news journalism.

What is significant about these articles in the context of institutionalised journalism, and the sample of posts in general, is their uniquely feminine and personal perspective of these topics. For example, another article, “The plight of migrant domestic workers: we need solutions” on Her Zimbabwe, follows the same journalistic format of a news report as the two abovementioned articles on the women’s rugby tournament. In addition, it provides quotations from relevant stakeholders, as news reports are required to do. However, the article looks at the general socio-political issue of human trafficking but through the lens of the feminisation of migration, particularly the trafficking of Zimbabwean women to the Middle East. By prioritising the plight of women in instances of human trafficking, the author has chosen to frame the topic in a way that may create a relation between reader and subject based on similarities of sex, thereby evoking the most emotional response from the reader. Framing is a common journalistic practice (and one that has brought into question the legitimacy of the objectivity ideal) that is used strategically to reflect a specific perspective. In the abovementioned article, not only is a broad topic focused within a women’s interest perspective, but priority is given to quoting people who work in organisations that seek to prevent the outsourcing of female labour to foreign countries; one such source even describes the resulting work dynamic as a “master and slave relationship”, thereby using emotive and provocative language to create a negative perspective of migrant labour for the reader.

Additionally, the “we” in the title of the post situates the author within her readership, indicating a personal investment in the piece by aligning herself with the general

population of Zimbabwean women who may be affected by this issue. Wahl-Jorgensen (2013), who conducted a content analysis of Pulitzer Prize-winning articles to explore the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity in journalistic writing, concludes that some of the most successful journalistic writing is “pervaded by subjective language”, as well as “the narrative construction of emotive appeals” (p.305). She suggests that journalists prioritise “build[ing] affective force” (p.307) in their writing in order to create an emotional response in the reader. The latter is achieved by discussing the emotions and experiences of the subject and other sources. While she refers specifically to the articles in her own sample, Wahl-Jorgensen’s findings below adequately reflect the sample in this study;

The use of the language of subjectivity contributes to building up narratives designed to engender emotional resonance with the audience and to illustrate, in concrete and embodied ways, the larger social, political and economic themes at the center of award-winning stories

2013:307

The combination of a feminine perspective that prioritises women’s stories with news-related information personalises the conventional news format. It adds a subjective feature to the reporting of news, a genre of journalism which values objectivity as paramount, and where journalists are required to fulfil the role of “non-committed observers” (Heinonen, 1999:19-20 in Domingo and Heinonen, 2008:5).

The result is a subversion of the conventional news format (Papacharissi, 2007:36). While Papacharissi suggests that some blogs presuppose a journalistic approach (2007:21), it is limiting to impose journalistic standards on all blogs because “blogs are oriented towards providing individuals with a public forum that can be used to provide news of a personal or a general nature” (2007:36). Whether that news is of a personal nature does not make it any less valuable than that which maintains journalistic objectivity as its central tenet. Although they may not subscribe to the standards of institutionalised journalism, the blogs in this sample perform the same social function as that of institutionalised media: “to collect, analyse, interpret or comment on current events to wide audiences” (Domingo and Heinonen, 2008:6). This focus on using subjectivity to appeal to the emotions of the reader suggests a

reworking of what is considered “truthful”, with a reconsideration of the value of personal experience in journalistic storytelling. While objectivity remains the “cornerstone of the journalistic profession” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013:305), and that upon which “truthfulness” is dependent, the blog posts discussed here necessitate the consideration that something can also be true because somebody experienced or felt it.

The prioritisation of women’s perspectives points to the capacity of the blog medium to function as a platform for the production of alternative news media and journalism, or citizen journalism, particularly for women whose perspectives are ignored by the mainstream media. During the initial proliferation of the blogosphere, blogs were created and maintained by journalists to supplement already existing news outlets, thus serving as an extension of mainstream media. Lawson-Borders and Kirk (2005) conducted a study of political campaign communication during the 2004 US election that found that blogs were used primarily as a “journalistic device” (p.557). Importantly, in supplementing the news content of the mainstream media, these blogs focused on eliminating gatekeepers in the production of news content, allowing for the production of “truthful” content in lieu of the information produced by mainstream media. Nowadays, blogs continue to fulfil this role, offering an unhindered space for the production of alternative news media (Adams, 2006; Papacharissi, 2007), free from the corporate and governmental control that invariably sets the agenda for what is produced in the mainstream media. As outsiders “unaffected and less corrupted by power” (Tremayne, 2007a:xvi), the women who maintain and contribute to the blogs in this sample offer raw, unmediated commentary on current events (Tremayne, 2007a:xiii). Domingo and Heinonen (2008) formulated a typology of journalistic blogs in order to understand the ongoing shifting relationship between citizens, the media, and journalists, and the role of the blog in symbolically representing this relationship. According to this typology, Her Zimbabwe, MsAfropolitan, and, to a lesser extent, Adventures, all fall under the category of “citizen blog” or blogs produced by the public (in this case women) outside of media institutions. Citizen blogs, “challenge journalism from the outside, without any of the constraints of the media institution” (Domingo and Heinonen, 2008:7). Indeed, the three blogs in this sample are sustained by ordinary women who are not journalists but belong to the general public or citizenry.

One particular article from Her Zimbabwe titled “Alternative media: amplifying women’s political voices” draws attention to this by highlighting the role of social media in promoting and enhancing Zimbabwean women’s voices in parliament and other male-dominated political spaces:

In Zimbabwean political spaces, women’s opinions had often been side-lined, sometimes ignored because of gender prejudices. Traditionally politics was believed to be for men...we the citizens are not hearing enough meaningful contributions from women’s voices when it comes to politics.

The article goes on to suggest that it is as a result of new media technologies and the platforms they offer that women are able to participate in the political sphere: “free and unbridled access to social media is fostering a revolution which has been phenomenal for allowing women’s voices to be heard”.

The Internet, and blogs in particular, thus offer a space for women to come together and build communities based on shared interests; they do so on their own terms, challenging the traditional modes of journalistic communication to reflect their own experiences and the unique and complex intersection of private and public issues that characterise their social and political lives. The participatory and subsequently subjective nature of these blogs thus challenges the role of traditional journalism and journalists, demonstrating that the production of news “need not be objective in the sense of being estranged” (Domingo and Heinonen, 2008:12) from the very people who are being written about.

4.4. Redefining politics

As online media platforms such as blogs, particularly the blogs in this sample, continue to alter the conventions of mainstream journalism by blurring the line between public and private by drawing on personal experiences to anchor discussion, it becomes necessary to redefine “politics”. This is especially necessary for an understanding of the democratising potential of blogs. For example, a post entitled “Sexualisation of women’s bodies – a breast is apparently not just a breast” that appeared on Her Zimbabwe explores the politicisation of the female body. The author

uses her experiences of breastfeeding in public, particularly the reactions of discomfort and outrage to it of male passers-by, to demonstrate that a women's body is not her own – it is always subject to the regulation and control of men in a patriarchal system:

Our ovaries have been tossed about like a ball on the congressional football pitch as our big behinds are giggled and slapped by rappers on larger than life TV screens. In some of these actions, there is freedom of expression yet we still find ourselves bound to political processes that make the female body a federal asset. This constant “asset mapping” of women's bodies and our reproductive rights by government is problematic. Our bodies are not our own.

The female body is thus brought out of the private domain to become a subject of scrutiny in the political public sphere.

Politics traditionally underlie the content of filter blogs (i.e. “men's blogs”) and conventional news journalism from which it takes its lead; it encapsulates the kind of public issues considered appropriate for discussion within the public sphere and has thus become synonymous with other terms such as “newsworthy” and “important”. In “Alternative media: amplifying women's voices” on Her Zimbabwe, the writer explains political representation, that which grants access into mainstream public spheres where debate and discussion takes place, as a male-dominated space:

In Zimbabwean political spaces, women's opinions had often been side-lined, sometimes ignored because of gender prejudices. Traditionally politics was believed to be for men; from pre-colonial times where women were only considered relevant to provide the guerrillas with basic needs, to 2008 where violence and torture discouraged a lot of women from joining any opposition movement.

Proportional representation in parliament was introduced and there was hope that women's participation in politics and their influence over party decisions would be more impactful. However, women's voices were still subdued.

However, politics, according to Gregg (2006), is a “static” concept because it is believed to be self-evident (p.3) and therefore does not need to be debated. The definition of politics is thus assumed, or, as Gregg asserts, is undefined (p.1).

In the same vein, Nash (2001) asserts that politics, and what counts as politics, is an “uncontested terrain” (p.85). In attempts to define this taken-for-granted concept, she further proposes the idea that politics and political activity can take place in numerous other places apart from the traditional bounded nation state. This is because the forces of globalisation are displacing the concept of the nation state so that it is no longer the “power container” of modern society (2001:84-85). The development of new media technologies, and the media in general, contribute significantly to the socio-political processes of globalisation through its ability to collapse the boundaries of time and geography; the media is thus inherently transnational. Against the backdrop of Nash’s assertions, blogs, as part of these new media technologies, thus have the potential to foster a type of “imagined community” (Anderson, 1982) in which disenfranchised groups in particular are given the space to articulate their political perspectives and experiences. Nash’s assertion introduces the possibility that blogs can function as a space outside of the nation state for the enactment of such political activity. As a result, the definition of politics and what counts as politics, as well as the arenas in which political activity traditionally takes place, is challenged by the forces of globalisation so that a reconsideration of the seemingly static concept becomes necessary.

According to Fraser (1992), the exclusion of women from the public sphere is ideological in that it rests on a class- and gender-based notion of publicity. This exclusion is predicated on the notion that politics is an “in-crowd” domain (Hermes, 2006a:306) comprised primarily of men. The collapse of the public/private dichotomy on blogs in particular, however, calls into question that which constitutes politics and so-called important or politically relevant issues. Kahn and Kellner (2004) argue that the Internet and new media platforms such as blogs have revolutionised the political realm, offering “new public spheres” (p.94) that open politics up to ordinary citizens through the participatory culture they encourage. It has already been found that women, in curating and maintaining their blogs and in contributing to the blogs they frequently read, use a personal and domestic sphere of reference to introduce or anchor discussions of political issues. In support of this finding, Wasserman (in

Lewis, Hussen and Van Vuuren, 2013) argues that women use ICTs as “cognitive spaces to articulate their consciousness of their social, cultural and political world rather than as a platform for direct political commentary” (p.48). It is thus clear that these women engage with politics using unconventional means, at least according to the static and uncontested definition of politics as rational, the domain of men. Essentially, to consider the personal experiences of blog users as frivolous and trivial is to undermine their political significance:

It is often through ‘rediscovering’ the ordinary and the everyday that some of the most penetrating insights into the ‘political’ emerge...

Lewis, et al., 2013:51

Basically, personal and everyday experiences and observations frequently form the basis of many young women’s civic engagement – so personal experiences are politicised. As such, Gregg argues that feminism has shown that there is no easy separation between individual experience and political perspective (p. 154), and it is clear that emergent technologies are being used to rearticulate traditional notions of politics and political activity. Not only does the existence of blogs such as Adventures, Her Zimbabwe and MsAfropolitan prove this, but the paradigmatic shift in conceptualising politics is also clearly evident in the structure and narrative of the content produced for the three blogs.

4.5. When the personal is political: subactivism, lifeworld politics and digital creativity

An understanding of the public/private dichotomy, and more specifically the shifting boundaries of the two in the context of digital media, offers insight not only into contemporary needs to reconceptualise politics and political activity, but also into civic engagement, and how citizens interpret, internalise, and practise their civic duty through online media platforms such as blogs (Papacharissi, 2011:26).

The distinction between private and public is central to an understanding of how the online public sphere operates, at least according to the Habermasian ideal of the public sphere. The Internet and the various communication platforms it possesses

offers a democratising potential, one that Bakardjieva (2009) suggests “casts light on facets of democracy located outside of the visible arena of politics...influenced by changes unfolding at the level of meaning and individual agency” (p. 91-92). It is through the articulation of this individual agency, at the level of lived experiences and interactions in the context of everyday life activities, that people develop their political identities and engage in citizenship practices (Bakardjieva, 2009; Mascheroni, 2013). This subversive notion of civic engagement underpins the concept of subactivism, “a kind of politics that unfolds at the level of subjective experience and is submerged in the flow of everyday life” (Bakardjieva, 2009: 92). A “politics of lifestyle” or a “politics of life decisions” (Bakardjieva, 2009:95), subactivism takes place within the private sphere, the traditional domain of women, and is “rooted in the subject” (Bakardjieva, 2009:96).

The concept of subactivism offers a theoretical understanding of the way contributors to each blog collapse the public/private dichotomy in their adoption of a personal sphere of reference to illustrate public issues in ways that are easier to relate to. While bloggers do participate in broader social and political issues through their online posts, they are filtered through the lens of personal interests (Mascheroni, 2013: 94). Yet rather than trivialise this kind of participation, it should call for a reframing of restrictive definitions of citizenship as bound to engagement with traditional politics and rational discourse. One such example, apart from those already mentioned, is a blog post from Her Zimbabwe titled “#ThisFlag is my flag: musings of a young feminist” written by the author Black Widow ZW. In this post, the author sheds light on the dysfunctional state of the Zimbabwean health system, questioning the lack of government initiative in rectifying the obviously complex problem. The post begins in the following way:

Nine years ago I lost my father. It was only after he had passed away that his medical test results were released with information of what was actually wrong with him. The condition could have possibly been managed had we discovered it earlier, but this could not happen as Westend Hospital where he had been admitted had no power.

The author draws first on the experiences of her family and, later, of others, mixing the structure of both narrative storytelling and journalistic reporting as a way to understand a wider institutional problem that may otherwise seem abstract or impersonal. The author skilfully uses her own experience as the primary tool with which to connect with readers who have more than likely suffered at the hands of the same inadequate health system, or who can imagine being in that same position, thereby appealing to the emotions of the reader to make her writing more impactful. This is particularly evident in the way she moves from using “I” to “one”, inviting the reader to reflect on their own similar experiences:

How heart breaking is it to watch as your dear one’s health deteriorates because you cannot afford to buy the blood that they need which costs so much? Imagine you get involved in an accident and you are referred to a hospital where you are told that doctors cannot attend to you unless you pay cash up front.

Another post featured on Adventures titled “Trust sex positive feminists with the #Afrifem revolution” explores the tension between African feminist thought and discourses of sex positivity and sexual freedom, and the socio-economic privilege the latter purports to indicate. The post is introduced using a similar narrative structure:

Recently I had, what can only be termed, [sic] as a showdown with some fellow African feminists. Talking about sex over chardonnay is standard and being a queer collective of women the talk ranged from everything from polygamy to the thirst of having not seen another vagina in many a moon. At some point talk turned to the notion of sleeping with men and got, lit, as the youths say.

In the same way as the abovementioned post from Her Zimbabwe, this post uses the author’s personal experience, an encounter with her peers, to introduce the topic of bodily and sexual autonomy in a patriarchal heteronormative society that seeks to control women’s bodies. The image created by the author of a group of female friends engaging in healthy debate over a glass of wine perhaps makes the complex issues under discussion not only more relatable to the reader and her own personal

experiences, but more palatable, given the weighty nature of the topic. The opening paragraph thus introduces a political issue through the lens of a personal interaction that occurred between the author and her friends, again, using a personal sphere of reference to anchor a broader political issue to the life of the author and her readers. According to Mascheroni (2013), it is within this domain of everyday life, the space in which interactions like this one occurs, “where media content is interpreted, made sense of, and circulated in order to inform the civic talk where citizen identities are shaped” (p.97). The posts above, and many others within the sample, embody a subactivist practice of women’s citizenship, one that privileges the female subject and her personal experiences of the social world.

In their study of the relationship between everyday creativity and civic engagement, Burgess et al. (2006) suggest that digital creativity contributes to new forms of citizenship within the networked public sphere. Online creativity is transforming individuals’ relationship with politics through an active resistance to the “sit back and be told” culture of traditional mass media platforms (Mascheroni, 2013:95). Through online creative practices, bloggers thus have the opportunity to interpret politics in whichever way they see fit, and within their own framework of understanding. Four examples of digital creativity arise out of the sample study, all from Adventures. The first, a short ten-line poem titled “*La petite mort*” (French for “orgasm”), is a creative exploration of the female orgasm and the sensations it arouses in the female body. The other three posts are works of fiction and follow the structure of a narrative story. One of these posts, titled “Friendly Fire is the Worst Fire”, tells the story of Auntie Gladys, a well-known woman in her small religious community who, after being urged by her friends, family, and church to be a good wife and remain married to her abusive husband, died as a result of a severe beating. The post is introduced using poetic language that imaginatively creates an image of the innumerable people, represented by “voices”, who have died and been laid to rest in a cemetery:

There are a myriad of voices to be heard in a cemetery if you listen. There are contented sighs from people enjoying well deserved rest from their labors, gnashing of teeth by evil persons only remembered with curses, and the stunned unrest of people taken suddenly in sickness, accident, or disaster.

There is the oblivious peace of stillborn babies and dead infants who escaped the corruption of the world albeit unbeknownst to them; and the tormented wails of vengeful souls longing for a justice they were denied in life, and can only hope for in death.

This seemingly abstract description is used to create a solemnity within the reader surrounding the phenomenon of death and the afterlife. Later, we see that the author has used this image of the cemetery and its inhabitants to introduce the main character of the story, Aunt Gladys, as well as her unfortunate fate:

Then there is, in the middle of it all, the confused, disbelieving frustration of people killed by misguided hands that meant well. Hands that tried to help the best they knew how, and ended up committing murder. Well, manslaughter. Or is it being accomplice to murder? What does that matter to the corpse? Such was the case with Aunt Gladys' death – a death that stunned everyone in the neighborhood and beyond.

While there is no indication that Aunt Gladys was a real person, and it is unclear whether the story is based on fact or not, the author has carefully curated a moving story to introduce the topic of domestic abuse, femicide, and, more specifically, the role that friends and family, religious and cultural belief, and tradition play in enabling domestic abuse to take place. Much like in the piece by Black Widow ZW, this author uses poetic language and realistic characterisation to tap into the emotions of the reader. This type of emotional engagement is particularly significant to the ways in which women relate to broader, seemingly abstract political issues in the external world. Hermes (2006b) asserts that “emotion is part of how we come to interpret the world around us and form opinions about it” (p.30). Not only that, but it is through emotion and bonding that community building, that which underpins citizenship, can take place, in this case through participation in blogs online, and not necessarily through traditional politics (Hermes, 2006a:303). Bickford (2011) calls this “emotion talk”, “the way we talk about emotions, which is often intertwined with or prompted by talk that is emotionally expressive or that uses emotional appeals” (p.1026), much like the narrative devices used in these posts. Bickford acknowledges the link between emotion talk and citizenship, asserting that it is through emotion that

people “negotiate and dispute meaning and value in political communication” (2011:1029):

[Emotion talk] is a means of challenging and reinforcing power, and it can be used to expand or constrict relations between citizens, groups of citizens, and publics.

p.1029

While the Habermasian public sphere privileges rational-critical debate, supposedly masculine traits, over emotional discourse and debate, supposedly feminine traits, (Ratto, 2014:13), Hermes (2006b) claims that emotion and experience must become an accepted part of the processes of opinion formation, inevitably calling for “a new type of citizenship commitment” (p.35).

Both posts see their authors interpreting personal experiences and interactions with the external world in a way that offers innovative and nuanced ways of understanding wider social and political issues. While Burgess et al.’s concept of digital creativity aptly describes these posts, Ratto (2014) also offers the concept of “DIY critical making” to understand the relation between creativity and the systems of power that determine an individual or group’s articulation of their citizenship. Critical making refers to the hands-on (DIY) productive or making practices to link digital technologies to the social world, thereby opening up and extending critical reflection of society. It is in many ways a creative process, one that Ratto suggests is “politically transformative” (p.1) because it intervenes in systems of power that control individual and group identity:

[Critical making is] an activity that provides both the possibility to intervene substantively in systems of authority and power and that offers an important site for reflecting on how such power is constituted by infrastructures, institutions, communities and practices.

p.1

By this definition, it is useful to consider Adventures, and the other blogs in the sample, as an alternative media platform that challenges the institutionalisation and

promotion of patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies that govern women's existence in the social world. In the story of Aunty Gladys in particular, the author takes creative advantage of the blog medium to call into question the debilitating effects of patriarchal ideology on the lives of women, effects that can at worst include death. Digital creativity or critical making in this regard takes place at two levels: the first through the creation and maintenance of the blog itself, an alternative media platform that prioritises the stories of a socially and politically marginalised group, and the second through the creation of narratives within this medium that use emotion and personal experience to challenge dominant ideologies and systems of power through self-expression.

Digital creativity is therefore one aspect of the ways in which blogs offer women and other marginalised voices a platform for the articulation of a civic identity and civic culture. Burgess et al. suggests that fostering digital creativity “will favourably nurture societal and cultural values – promoting a socially inclusive innovation culture and economy” (2006: 2). Moreover, they suggest that these kinds of creative practices facilitate a new form of civic engagement (p.3) by interweaving everyday life experience and creative production (p.5).

4.6. Writing African experiences: Digital creativity and the conflict between African cultural values, religion, and sexuality

While digital creativity proves to be a significant practice for the ways in which the blog contributors in the sample articulate their lived experiences online, the use of narrative storytelling also underpins a persistent theme within the content across all three blogs in the sample: that of the conflict between African cultural values, Christianity and women's bodily autonomy. Particularly on Adventures, but also on MsAfropolitan, sex and sexuality is the domain in which this conflict comes to light.

Given that Adventures is a blog devoted primarily to sharing information about African women's sexuality, it is unsurprising that the majority of the posts detailing this conflict come from this blog. Aunty Gladys' story in “Friendly fire is the worst fire” is one such example. While this particular post has been discussed already, it is useful to describe here the specific ways in which the author attributes Aunty Gladys'

death to the persuasive power of religion to dictate the relationships between men and women. The author juxtaposes the independent and resourceful Aunty Gladys with the impressionable members of her immediate community, describing in detail how religious beliefs (for instance, that “God hates divorce”) and societal expectations influenced the opinions of her family and friends, all of whom urged Aunty Gladys to remain with her abusive husband, to be “a good wife”, despite ending up in hospital as a result of a beating. This conflict is a persistent theme throughout the post, and it is only after Aunty Gladys’s death that we read about the guilt felt by her family, friends, and religious community. The author says:

Aunty Gladys’s death is a testament to our patriarchal society where a woman who insults her husband is made to buy a fattened ram and apologise for disrespecting him, but a man who beats his wife is begged to take her back with schnapps by her own family who return her in shame when she goes home to seek refuge from the beatings...It draws light to the way we gladly hid behind religion and the laws in the Bible which agree with our personal and cultural dispositions to turn our fellow (wo)man away when they come to us in need.

Similarly, the author of “Caller cock block” describes her sexual relationship with her male partner as transactional, offering to cook for him as a reward for sex:

He told me he was hungry and since he’d done such a good job eating my pussy, I was feeling domestic and willing to settle into the traditional role of “wife”.

Here it is clear that the author (and protagonist) does not necessarily tend towards domesticity, but she acknowledges that it is a role she is expected to fulfil in a relationship with a man. She continues later in the post:

I mean, this is part of the politics of being an African woman, right? If you can’t cook, why are you here???

A post on MsAfropolitan titled “Pastor Adeboye’s misguided marriage advice” also draws attention to the expectation of women to be fully domesticated, critiquing in particular Nigeria’s “leading spiritual teacher”, Pastor Adeboye⁹, and his declaration that female domesticity is essentially a God-given decree. She quotes the pastor:

“Don’t marry a girl who cannot cook. A girl needs to know how to do chores and cook.”

Similarly, Pastor Adeboye advises women on the most suitable man to marry:

“My beloved daughters...don’t marry a man who has no job. Before God gave Adam Eve, he gave him a job. He said, ‘this is the garden, keep it’”.

Importantly, MsAfropolitan’s reference to Pastor Adeboye’s sermon highlights the intricate relationship between African cultural values and a religion that together inform a patriarchal ideology underpinning an African society in which the roles of men and women are stringently defined.

While the post on MsAfropolitan does not necessarily follow a conventional narrative structure (it is a column), it uses the stories of others that the author has read to introduce the discussion. In fact, the piece begins with the following line: “I recently read a story titled *The Habit of Loving* by the irreplaceable Doris Lessing”. Both this post and “Caller cock block” thus use narrative storytelling in different ways as a means to mediate the conflict between African cultural values and religious beliefs in a patriarchal society that seeks to define and categorise men’s and women’s perceived roles in society.

Another post that utilises the narrative format to discuss the conflict between African culture, religion and sexuality is “Pleasure squared”. A brief discussion of this post’s narrative structure can be found in Section 4.2 but it is necessary to note here that it

⁹ The post on MsAfropolitan refers to a 2015 sermon by Pastor Adeboye, arguably one of Nigeria’s most influential religious leaders, that resurfaced online at the time of this study. In it, the pastor offers marriage advice to young people. His sermon came under fire for its adamant promotion of traditional, and somewhat archaic, gender roles.

differs in that it describes not a heterosexual relationship, but one between two women. Given that Christianity values reproduction as a women's God-given responsibility, heterosexuality is, consequently, favoured by God. The use of a lesbian relationship to discuss these issues is interesting, especially considering that the protagonist and her partner are "proper married housewives, mothers, Christ-worshippers". Given the religious context from which these stories come, the relationship in this post can therefore be considered un-Christian and un-African, and this is persistently communicated via the protagonist's inner turmoil:

I am a respectable married woman. What is happening to me?...Should I be doing this in a church basement? What demon has possessed me?...My mind racing and my pussy is pulsating, and I need to feel her vagina on mine, just once, urgently, and then I promise I'll go back to being a church-going wife.

Interestingly, 'Pleasure squared' is written by Naike, a pseudonym for an anonymous contributor. The post is one of only 5 anonymously written posts within the sample on Adventures. Anonymity is flagged as an appealing characteristic of online communication due to the unbridled freedom of expression it allows. Somolu (2007), in writing about African women's blog use, says "the ability to write anonymously is regarded as an important factor in enabling women to share their experiences and opinions honestly and openly". However, the relatively low number of anonymous posts in the sample may suggest that since Adventures is understood to be devoted to discussions of sex and sexuality specifically, the space is a relatively safe one to do so. The same can be said for the other two blogs in the sample. No posts on MsAfropolitan were written anonymously, and only 1 out of 24 posts on Her Zimbabwe was written anonymously. This was an Agony Aunt type letter submitted to the blog by a man whose anonymity can more than likely be credited to his invasion of a primarily female dominated space, or his embarrassment at not being able to satisfy his wife (the reason for his letter). There is therefore a shared understanding amongst visitors and contributors to the blogs about their content and who reads it, so there is little to no pressure to remain anonymous. However, in the context of tension between sex and religious and African traditional belief, 'Pleasure squared' describes an extremely taboo topic, regardless of the safety of the space in which it was posted, so anonymity in this case is understandable. In speaking about

her blog's ability to provide an open space for the discussion of sex and sexuality in Ghana, Nana Darkoa says, "the anonymity of the Internet seems to offer Ghanaians the freedom to be themselves, a freedom they don't seem to feel they have in regular life" (Sekyiamah, 2014).

While no definitive conclusions are reached in any of the abovementioned posts as to how to settle the conflict between religion and sexuality, it is clear that digital creativity, specifically the use of narrative storytelling, is used as a method through which to work through the construction of sexual identity in a patriarchal society.

In general, storytelling is used in the sample as a means to subvert ideologies of gender and sexuality. Interestingly, Delgado (1989) explores the benefits of storytelling for what he calls 'ingroups' and 'outgroups'. An ingroup is a dominant group or population of people in society, whereas an outgroup refers to those "whose marginality defines the boundaries of the mainstream, whose voice and perspective – whose consciousness – has been suppressed, devalued and abnormalised" (p.2412). In the sample of blog posts, both the contributors and the characters they create in their narratives form part of the oppressed outgroup. According to Delgado, for this group stories offer a kind of "counter-reality" (p.2412) to the status quo, and therefore a powerful means to challenge and subvert the hegemonic ideological beliefs (p.2413) that determine their identity construction, and the way they choose to live their lives:

[Stories] can open new windows into reality, showing us that there are possibilities for life other than the ones we live. They enrich imagination and teach that by combining elements from the story and current reality, we may construct a new world richer than either alone...They can show that what we believe is ridiculous, self-serving, or cruel. They can show us the way out of the trap of unjustified exclusion. They can help us understand when it is time to reallocate power.

Delgado, 1989:2415

Storytelling within the blogosphere thus serves a subversive ideological function. It assists users in working through their personal problems in relation to the social world. Moreover, these stories are embedded with personal experiences that are used

as “interpretive structures” (Delgado, 1989:2415) in the construction of alternative social realities. This is particularly significant for women who share stories of their experiences in order to construct a shared reality about their status vis-à-vis men (Delgado, 1989:2436) in a patriarchal world.

4.7. Conclusion: Towards an understanding of cultural citizenship

The subactivist nature of the sample of blog posts signifies a “cultural turn” (Mascheroni, 2013:97) in theories of citizenship and the practice of citizenship in the public sphere. Habermas’ theory of the public sphere, while flawed in many ways, advanced the ways in which scholarship understood the role of the media in a democratic society, and thus how we now think of mediated citizenship within a rapidly changing, digitised media environment. Here, it is useful to look to scholarly conceptualisations of “cultural citizenship” in order to understand the type of civic engagement characteristic of the blogs in this sample, and possibly other feminist blogs.

It is clear by now that changes in the media landscape call for changes in the way politics, political engagement, and, subsequently, the public sphere are defined. A healthy democracy depends on participation from its citizens, and this usually occurs via engagement with the media. Dahlgren (2009) suggests that the media are a prerequisite for “shaping the democratic character of society” (p.2); like Hermes (2006a) who claims that the media functions as “democracy’s watchdog” (p.295), Dahlgren deems the media to be the “bearers of democracy’s political communication beyond face-to-face settings” (2009:2). It is thus the media’s role to make politics visible to citizens (Dahlgren 2009:2), usually via its interaction with political institutions and citizens themselves (Dahlgren 2009:2). Historically, this was accomplished primarily via the newspaper, but changes to the media landscape, particularly the rise of the Internet and the development of new media technologies, have changed the way information is sourced and communicated to the public.

While traditional media such as the newspaper was modelled according to a linear one-to-many model of communication, the Internet facilitates a many-to-many model of communication in which “ordinary people” fulfil the role of both producers and

actors in the news (Hermes, 2006a:296). In this context, the Internet has facilitated a paradigmatic shift in the production of news content in which the need to be informed has been replaced by a desire for more subjective, experiential accounts of every day life (Hermes, 2006a:303). This is perhaps a result of what Reitsamer and Elke (2014) assert to be an alienation from formal political practice in general, which is encapsulated by Mascheroni's (2013) "disengagement thesis" – a decline in newspaper reading and subsequent political participation which he suggests is not solely because people have become disconnected from politics, but because "politics itself has disconnected from citizens" (p.94). The reason, Mascheroni asserts, is a very restrictive notion of participation, one that "focuses exclusively on conventional forms of political engagement" (p.94) that ignores the new and innovative ways in which citizens participate in politics as a result of technological development, usually outside of the public domain. As a medium, the Internet, according to Hermes (2006a) has consequently come to represent ordinary people (p.295). Due to technological changes to the media landscape, "participation is filtered through the lens of personal interests" (Mascheroni, 2013:94), resulting in new forms of civic and political participation located within the private sphere and the subjective experiences of ordinary people. That the political communication upon which traditional notions of citizenship is dependent takes place only via an interaction between political institutions, the media, and citizens is a narrow assumption that dismisses the private sphere as a legitimate space for the enactment of political activity. Dahlgren suggests that this problematic "transmission view of communication" ignores how meaning can be culturally constructed through subjective experience with everyday life activity (p.3).

Citizenship and political engagement thus occur "elsewhere" (Hermes, 2006b:28). McGuigan (2005) suggests the concept of a cultural public sphere (as opposed to the political public sphere of Habermasian tradition), which can perhaps be considered as the space in which these kinds of "cultural politics" emerge as a legitimate means of constructing identity and engaging with broader social, political and institutional phenomena. The three blogs in this sample, then, form part of a "cultural public sphere" because, while they do not deal with "serious" issues like politics and economics in the conventional sense, they deal with the "articulation of politics,

public and personal, as a contested terrain through affective – aesthetic and emotional – modes of communication” (2005:15). He says:

Why should people be expected to treat official politics, where they have so little power to influence what happens, with the same passion that they devote to their own personal lives and lived or imagined relationships with others? In actual fact, though, keen popular engagement in something like a public sphere, when it does happen, more often than not takes a predominantly affective mode, related to the immediacy of lifeworld concerns, instead of the cognitive mode normally associated with experience of a remote, apparently unfathomable and uncontrollable system. The concept of a cultural public sphere may go some way to explaining what is going on in this respect.

p.15

A cultural public sphere is thus grounded in dialogic and relational engagement with the everyday. Within the blogosphere, it fosters a sense of community with other readers and contributors who bond over their related experiences, and they do so through emotional connection (Hermes, 2006b), not through an engagement with traditional politics (see section 4.4. for a discussion of “emotion talk”). Obviously, this has implications for the way in which citizenship is defined and practised; a broader definition of citizenship is required, one that does not prioritise male-led rational-critical debate over the value of emotion and everyday experience (Hermes, 2006b:305), and which takes into account the process of community building and bonding through use of new media technologies (Hermes, 2006b: 304). To compensate for this cultural dimension of citizenship, the term “cultural citizenship” has come to describe the type of citizenship that takes place as a result of an engagement between the media and the private sphere.

Hermes (2006b) suggests that the processes of bonding that form the basis of cultural citizenship take place through discussion and sharing of popular culture in particular. One particular post on Her Zimbabwe, entitled “Lady Squanda was wrong – no to gendered excuses”, describes an incident in which Lady Squanda, a popular Zimbabwean dancehall singer, assaulted comedian Skimbo. While the topic of this story may seem trivial or irrelevant, it evokes within readers an emotional reaction

that helps them to interpret the world around them and form opinions about it (Hermes, 2006b:30). The post uses an incident involving pop cultural personalities to open up a conversation about the much-stigmatised topic of male abuse at the hands of women. Within the African context in particular, Dolby (2006), who explores the connection between popular culture and public space in Africa, asserts that popular culture is “the true spirit of the people” (p.33) and “must be a central component in understanding emergent public spaces and citizenship practices” (p.32) in Africa:

Popular culture is understood as a site of struggle, a place for the negotiation of race, gender, nation, and other identities and for the play of power... Thus, popular culture is a site that is an important locus of public debate and of individual and community agency.

Dolby, 2006:33

Affective communication that comes from the engagement with and consumption of popular culture thus offers an opportunity to think reflexively about lifeworld concerns and the systems that are constitutive of those experiences, of social and political identity (McGuigan, 2005:16).

Burgess et al. (2006) connect the concept of such cultural citizenship to new media, suggesting that

the significance of new media lies in the shift from a ‘common’ cultural public sphere where politics and identity can be dramatised and affect can be politicised, to everyday active participation in a *networked*, highly heterogeneous and open cultural public sphere.

p. 5, emphasis in original

They go on to suggest that, in order to be useful in an investigation of cultural citizenship in digital culture, “the concept must also take into account the interweaving of everyday life, creative content production and social life that are characteristic of digital culture” (p.4). An exploration of digital creativity and personalisation of public issues within the sample has already been conducted as proof of this (see section 4.5).

An exploration of all three blogs thus urges a redefinition not only of politics and what counts as politics, but subsequently of the kinds of citizenship articulated within the online public sphere. The cultural uses of the Internet and other new media technologies demonstrate a bridging of public and private space, offering new means to connect information and experience (Hermes, 2006b:304). As such, blogs and other online media platforms within the new media landscape call for a reframing of definitions of citizenship to include the nuances of women's social existence and other marginalised groups.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Adventures, Her Zimbabwe, and MsAfropolitan embody a creative DIY culture of “critical making” (Ratto, 2014), linking new media technologies to the social world by intervening in the patriarchal and institutional systems of power that determine their identities as African women and articulate their citizenship. In challenging the institutionalisation and promotion of patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies through reflective content and social commentary, whether about their sexual experiences, the rape trial of a famous religious leader, or criticism of a lack of female representation in parliament, these blogs create a space for civic engagement for women in the context of a mainstream media that tends to ignore their voices and viewpoints.

It is also interesting to note the ways in which the blogs identify themselves in terms of nationality. While Adventures and MsAfropolitan originate from Ghana and Nigeria respectively, neither blog asserts a specifically national identity, ascribing to a more generalised brand of *African* feminist blogs that can serve all African women. On the other hand, Her Zimbabwe, by its very title, espouses a specifically nationalist identity, and deals with issues related specifically to Zimbabwean women. However, the experiences of women in sub-Saharan Africa are similar, and so the blog is often still relevant and interesting to women from other African countries. This is important, as the Internet and new media technologies are by their very nature transnational, collapsing boundaries imposed by time and geography. By this logic, these blogs can also serve African women in the diaspora. Therefore, while each blog serves and sustains a specific community of users, the transnational nature of the blog medium means that there can be no geographic or nationalist boundaries on these communities or on users’ sense of belonging, especially because feminist and women’s issues are not wholly specific to any one region. Further research would do well to explore the nature of online blogging communities, how they are formed and how they are sustained, within this context of transnationalism.

As an alternative media space outside of the mainstream media, *Adventures*, *Her Zimbabwe* and *MsAfropolitan* act as a feminist public sphere particularly according to Byerly and Ross's (2006) definition:

A feminist communicative space in which women articulate their experiences in their own voices, critique gender inequality, advocate for women's advancement, and identify related social concerns that are often inseparable from gender (e.g. race, class, and ethnic) inequality...a space within which women bring their perspectives to issues and problems of the day.

2006:116

As feminist public spheres, all three blogs challenge the singular ideal public sphere theorised by Habermas, ascribing instead to Fraser's concept of the subaltern counterpublic, one of many of a multiplicity of alternative public spheres created by members of subordinated social groups such as women (1992:67). Fraser's definition speaks specifically to the ability of the subaltern counterpublic to allow its members to "invent and circulate counterdiscourses" and to "formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (p.67). Similarly, in promoting counternarratives of African women's lived experiences, these blogs promote a feminist counterdiscourse by privileging the production of content by women written from their own perspectives.

Part of the gendered exclusionary nature of Habermas' public sphere is predicated on the style of deliberation embedded in communicative processes in the public sphere (Fraser, 1992:59). According to Fraser, the rational-critical debate favoured in the public sphere encapsulated an "austere" style of deliberation that was deemed "virtuous" and "manly" (p.59). As such, "masculinist gender constructs were built into the very conception of the republican public sphere" (p.59), to the exclusion of women. Similarly, Ratto (2014) claims that the Habermasian public sphere "privileges rational (i.e., masculine) as opposed to emotional (i.e., feminine) discourse and debate, which further diminishes women's legitimacy as authoritative participants" (p.13). The communicative strategies deployed on all three blogs, namely narrative storytelling, recollections of personal experiences, and the confessional intimacy that characterises the sharing of these experiences, are quite

unlike this masculinist style of talk. The posts on these three blogs thus encapsulate a style of writing that challenges the specific mode of talk in which traditional public sphere activity is grounded. This is particularly evident on Adventures whose contributors often use explicit and profane language when talking about sex in ways that are meant to be amusing or cheeky, and which serve to create a specific discourse of openness and uninhibitedness.

In subverting traditional and gendered modes of civic engagement, these three blogs, and possibly many other feminist blogs, call into question static definitions of deliberation, public engagement, politics, and, subsequently, citizenship. Despite the widespread use of the term, politics is not easily or often clearly defined, more than likely, Gregg suggests, because it is “self-evident” (2006:6), ultimately leading to a concept of politics that is static, “assuming an unchanging list of priorities for political debate” (p.6). On the other hand, Janks (2012) attempts to define politics, differentiating between what she calls “capital *P* politics” or politics in the traditional sense, and “little *p* politics”:

Politics with a capital P is about government and world trade agreements and the United Nations’ peace-keeping forces; it is about ethnic or religious genocide and world tribunals; it is about apartheid and global capitalism, money laundering and linguistic imperialism. It is about the inequities between the political North and the political South. It is about oil, the ozone layer, genetic engineering and cloning. It is about the danger of global warming. It is about globalisation, the new work order and sweat shops in Asia.

p.151

According to Gregg (2006) the kind of politics described by the examples Janks uses is just as easily interchanged with such terms as “important” or “newsworthy”, emulating a kind of “formal politics” that Reitsamer and Elke (2014) suggest is associated with voting, political parties, and political organisations (p.332). On the other hand, Janks describes little *p* politics:

Little p politics, on the other hand, is about the micro-politics of everyday life. It is about the minute-by-minute choices and decisions that make us who we are. It is about desire and fear; how we construct them and how they construct us. It is about the politics of identity and place; it is about small triumphs and defeats; it is about winners and losers, haves and have-nots, school bullies and their victims; it is about how we treat other people day by day; it is about whether or not we learn someone else's language or recycle our own garbage. Little p politics is about taking seriously the feminist perspective that the personal is the political.

p.151

Janks' explanation describes politics not as static but as a varied and multifaceted concept that cuts across public and private life. This is evidenced by contributors' deployment of various communicative strategies, such as the use of the first-person narrative and creative storytelling, in the production of blog content. These strategies prioritise and draw attention to the power of the personal to define politics, and the personal experiences and personal investment of contributors in broader social and political issues. The discussion of everyday lived experiences in relation to a social and political context requires a reconsideration of what counts as politics and who gets to participate in discussions of politics. In fact, all three blogs certainly see themselves as political and even revolutionary. Her Zimbabwe in particular boasts the tagline "Her Voice, Her Revolution", describing its blog as a form of "digital activism" that prioritises the Zimbabwean woman's voice. Similarly, Adventures asserts itself as a pioneer in creating a space for the discussion of diverse sexualities in a context that shuns such unbridled honesty about private matters. MsAfropolitan brand revolves around social and political commentary. All three blogs are thus politically revolutionary.

The result is a collapse of the public/private dichotomy upon which public sphere participation is determined. Through their contribution to these blogs, users set the agenda for what they deem important to the social, economic and political lives of African women. Fraser rightfully notes in her critique of Habermas' public sphere that "only participants themselves can decide what is and what is not of common concern to them" (1992:71), thereby refuting the Habermasian notion that certain issues, i.e.

matters of the private domain, are deemed inappropriate for discussion in the public sphere. Fraser goes on to assert that despite Habermas' theory, "there are no naturally given, a priori boundaries" (p.71) when it comes to discussion in the public sphere and "what will count as a matter of common concern will be decided precisely through discursive contestation" (p.71). In the context of a reconceptualisation of politics to include matters of the everyday and the personal, "there is no warrant for putting any strictures on what sorts of topics, interests, and views are admissible in deliberation" (p.72). Therefore, as a counterpublic, the free and unbridled nature of the blog medium allows women to prioritise content that is relevant to them, with no specifications and boundaries as to the kind of subject matter that can and cannot be posted.

While traditional notions of politics (and therefore what "counts" in the public sphere) serve as a prerequisite for public sphere participation and citizenship, the collapse of the seemingly antithetical private and public domains within the democratising spaces of the online world, particularly as this is reflected in the content and production of these blogs, lays way for a more nuanced understanding of contemporary citizenship practices. Women are thus using the Internet, and blogs in particular, as a tool for rearticulating their gendered and civic identities in an increasingly digitised media environment.

While all three blogs provide bloggers with the space to articulate specific civic cultures and civic identities, it is beyond the scope of this study to determine whether this citizenship is reflected in the offline realm. While these blogs act as a medium for the communication of alternative viewpoints and perspectives, it is useful here to draw on Papacharissi's (2002) differentiation between a public *space* and a public *sphere* as the two are not synonymous (Papacharissi, 2002:10):

As public space, the Internet provides yet another forum for political deliberation. As public sphere, the Internet could facilitate discussion that promotes a democratic exchange of ideas and opinions. A virtual space enhances discussion; a virtual sphere enhances democracy.

p.10

A public space is a medium that promotes the discussion and deliberation that underpins the democratic ideals of participatory citizenship, while a public sphere is the practice of these ideals in real life. Therefore, according to this definition, the key difference between a public sphere and a public space is action, i.e. can the discussion and deliberation that occurs in a public space translate into recognisable change in reality, outside of the medium that provides that space? In answer to this question, the blogs in this study are public spaces rather than public spheres, as it is not clear whether the content produced on these blogs has resulted in greater coverage of women's perspectives in mainstream media coverage. While online connectivity ensures greater participation in political discussion, this does not necessarily have an impact on political processes or lead to policy formation (Papacharissi, 2002:13) that will improve the social and political wellbeing of women in African countries. This is something that can be investigated through further research with a specific focus on blog audiences.

Most research on feminist blogs is focused on blogs that originate within the USA or the UK (see Rajani, 2014; Wazny, 2010 and Hendrickson, 2009). In spite of the globalising tendency of new media technologies, research on feminist media blogs in these regions is relevant only to that specific geographic location, especially because the discourses of gender and sexuality engaged with via these platforms are context specific. As such, despite the small sample used, this study has proved useful as a departure into studies of feminist media blogs in Africa where studies of new media are more often than not limited to digital literacy and access. While these factors ultimately do play an integral role in how African women use feminist media blogs and other new media platforms, the way in which women engage with existing platforms is equally important and can help us to determine what kinds of address, content and presentation attracts and inspires women audiences.

CHAPTER 6: BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Addendum: Titles of blog posts per blog

ADVENTURES FROM THE BEDROOMS OF AFRICAN WOMEN

TITLE	DATE	AUTHOR	WEBSITE LINK
Friendly Fire is the Worst Fire	04-Jul-16	Nana Oye Odame/Guest (published)	http://adventuresfrom.com/2016/07/04/friendly-fire-is-the-worst-fire-by-nana-oye-odame.html
La Petite Mort	11-Jul-16	Nana Darkoa	http://adventuresfrom.com/2016/07/11/la-petite-mort.html
Wash the Shower Before You Rent	15-Jul-16	Malaka	http://adventuresfrom.com/2016/07/15/wash-the-shower-before-you-rent.html
Goal Setting for a Successful Sex Life	21-Jul-16	Malaka	http://adventuresfrom.com/2016/07/21/goal-setting-for-a-successful-sex-life.html
Pleasure Squared	22-Jul-16	Naike/Nana Darkoa (published)	http://adventuresfrom.com/2016/07/22/pleasure-squared-by-guest-contributor-naike.html
Caller Cock Block	01-Aug-16	Malaka	http://adventuresfrom.com/2016/08/01/caller-cock-block.html
Calling All Spirit Women	02-Aug-16	Nana Darkoa	http://adventuresfrom.com/2016/08/02/calling-all-spirit-women.html
Forums: How Do I Win My Wife Back	07-Aug-16	Unknown/Nana Darkoa (published)	http://adventuresfrom.com/2016/08/07/forums-how-do-i-win-my-wife-back.html
Trust Sex Positive Feminists with the #Afrifem Revolution	08-Aug-16	Kagure Mugo/Guest (published)	http://adventuresfrom.com/2016/08/08/trust-sex-positive-feminists-with-the-afrifem-revolution.html
Ethical Slut	12-Aug-16	Nana Akosua Hanson/ Guest (published)	http://adventuresfrom.com/2016/08/12/ethical-slut-by-guest-contributor-nana-akosua-hanson.html
"Adventures" at Chalewote 2016	16-Aug-16	Nana Darkoa	http://adventuresfrom.com/2016/08/16/adventures-at-chalewote-2016.html
"Spirit Desire" at Spirit Women	18-Aug	Nana Darkoa	http://adventuresfrom.com/2016/08/18/spirit-desire-at-spirit-women.html
Spirit living	19-Aug	Unknown/Guest (published)	http://adventuresfrom.com/2016/08/19/spirit-living.html
"Spirit Women:	25-	Timehin/Guest	http://adventuresfrom.com/2016/08/25/spirit-

Connecting with Femininity and Womanhood	Aug-16	(published)	women-connecting-with-femininity-and-womanhood-by-guest-contributor-timehin.html
I am tired of bad sex	26-Aug-16	Ruby Woo (Nana Darkoa) (published)	http://adventuresfrom.com/2016/08/26/i-am-tired-of-bad-sex-by-guest-contributor-ruby-woo.html
Body Politics: A Conversation Between Awino Okech and Nana Darkoa	29-Aug-16	Awino Okech and Nana Darkoa/Nana Darkoa (published)	http://adventuresfrom.com/2016/08/29/body-politics-a-conversation-between-awino-okech-and-nana-darkoa.html
Amazons and Supergirls	31-Aug-16	Kayy/Guest (published)	http://adventuresfrom.com/2016/08/31/amazons-and-supergirls-by-guest-contributor-kayy.html

MSAFROPOLITAN

TITLE	DATE	AUTHOR	WEBSITE LINK
Post-Brexit, time to question neocolonialism	03-Jul-16	Minna Salami	http://www.msafropolitan.com/2016/07/neocolonialism.html
An African Utopia in Ethiopia - On the Need for Imaginative Ideas	19-Jul-16	Minna Salami	http://www.msafropolitan.com/2016/07/awra-amba-talk.html
Do We Really Live in a Patriarchy?	12-Aug-16	Minna Salami	http://www.msafropolitan.com/2016/08/do-we-really-live-in-patriarchy.html
Pastor Adeboye's Misguided Marriage Advice	21-Jul-16	Minna Salami	http://www.msafropolitan.com/2016/08/pastor-adeboye-misguided.html

HER ZIMBABWE

TITLE	DATE	AUTHOR	WEBSITE LINK
Call for Applications: Urgent Action Fund Op-Ed Workshop	01-Jul-16	Her Zimbabwe	http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2016/07/call-applications-urgent-action-fund-op-ed-workshop/
Preview: Girls Under-18 Rugby Team Ready for Kimberly Tournament	02-Jul-16	Grace Chirumhanzu	http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2016/07/preview-girls-18-rugby-team-ready-kimberly-tournament/
Good Start! Zim under-18 Girls Team Win First Match in Kimberley	05-Jul-16	Grace Chirumhanzu	http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2016/07/good-start-zim-18-girls-team-win-first-match-kimberley/
Dapirivine Vaginal Ring: Could This Be the Ideal HIV Prevention Method for Women	08-Jul-16	Pretty Chavango	http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2016/07/dapirivine-ring-another-hiv-prevention-option-women/
#ThisFlag is My Flag: Musings of a Young Feminist	14-Jul-16	BLACK WIDOW ZW/Her Zimbabwe	http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2016/07/thisflag-flag-musings-young-feminist/
#BeatThePot: Of Sexism, Gender Stereotypes and Comic Relief	19-Jul-16	Vimbai Chinembiri	http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2016/07/beatthepot-sexism-gender-stereotypes-comic-relief/
Lady Squanda Was Wrong - No to Gendered Excuses	20-Jul-16	Tendaishe 'Tishe' Changamire	http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2016/07/lady-squanda-wrong-no-gendered-excuses/
Opportunity: Mobile Community Zimbabwe is Hiring!!!	25-Jul-16	Her Zimbabwe	http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2016/07/opportunity-mobile-community-zimbabwe-hiring/

Engage with the African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms	27-Jul-16	Her Zimbabwe	http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2016/07/engage-african-declaration-internet-rights-freedoms/
Review: The 'Red.Fit' Campaign Advert: Why I Think the Producers Nailed It	28-Jul-16	Samantha Tatenda Majonie	http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2016/07/review-red-campaign-advert-think-producers-nailed/
The Plight of Migrant Domestic Workers: We Need Solutions	29-Jul-16	Sharon Sigauke	http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2016/07/plight-migrant-domestic-workers-need-solutions/
Anti-Human Trafficking: Call for Submissions	31-Jul-16	Her Zimbabwe	http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2016/07/anti-human-trafficking-call-submissions/
Why Feminism is More Than Just About Women	01-Aug-16	Farai Siebert Mabeza	http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2016/08/feminism-just-women/
Inclusivity is the Core of Our fight Against HIV: An interview with Martha Tholanah	02-Aug-16	Tendaishe 'Tishe' Changamire	http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2016/08/inclusivity-core-fight-hiv-interview-martha-tholanah/
Kereke's Conviction Exposes More About Our Judiciary System Than Just 'Delayed Justice'	03-Aug-16	Chamunorwa Mufaro	http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2016/08/kerekes-conviction-exposes-judiciary-system-just-delayed-justice/
Press Release: IIFF 2016 Showcases World Wide Dynamic Cinema	04-Aug-16	Her Zimbabwe	http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2016/08/press-releaseiiff-2016-showcases-world-wide-dynamic-cinema/
Sexualisation of Women's Bodies – A	05-Aug-16	Paida Chikate	http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2016/08/sexualisation-womens-bodies-breast-apparently-not-just-breast/

Breast is Apparently Not Just a Breast			
Project Qeqesha Changing the Lives of Girls in Rural Filabusi	15-Aug-16	Vimbai Chinembiri	http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2016/08/project-qeqesha-changing-lives-girls-rural-filabusi/
Breastfeeding as Nature Would Have It	16-Aug-16	Taonga Annie Kandemiiri	http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2016/08/breastfeeding-as-nature-would-have-it/
The Changing Faces of Protests in Zimbabwe: Part 1	17-Aug-16	Ndana Mayo	http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2016/08/changing-faces-protests-zimbabwe-part-1/
The Changing Faces of Protests in Zimbabwe: Part 2	18-Aug-16	Samantha Tatenda Majonie	http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2016/08/changing-faces-protests-zimbabwe-part-2/
Alternative Media: Amplifying Women's Political Voices	22-Aug-16	Chamunorwa Mufaro	http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2016/08/womens-political-voices-amplified/
Magaya's Case: Insight into the Challenges of Reporting Rape in Zimbabwe	24-Aug-16	Chamunorwa Mufaro	http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2016/08/magayas-case-insight-challenges-reporting-rape-zimbabwe/
Politics of the Vagina	25-Aug-16	Vimbai Chinembiri	http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2016/08/politics-of-the-vagina/