Dissertation Abstract

FEMINISTING ▾ COMMUNITY ☑ | VIDEO ☑ | CAMPUS ☑ | EVENTS ☑ | MY FEMINISTING ☑

SEARCH FEMINISTING GO

Community-Sponsored Literate Activity presents a selected version of the story of *Feministing*, a primarily online community of young adult feminists, and builds conversations about how and why feminists are, and are not, using literacies of technology to enact feminist activism in a digital age. My findings build out of ethnographically informed methods: interviews with three members of the *Feministing* editorial team, surveys completed by seventeen registered users of *Feministing*, and observation and coding of over nine hundred pages of text from the last eight years of the *Feministing* archives.

I situate my data within larger historical contexts and exigencies of digital literacies and feminist activism, particularly in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Likewise, I join scholars who argue material conditions are key components in understanding women's (but for me, feminists') texts and literate practices. My analysis combines aspects of material rhetoric and rhetorical genealogy to model a way to study digital texts and literate practices and, as a result, I argue for the importance of design and literacy sponsorship for *Feministing* while also highlighting ways design can challenge traditional notions of feminist space as non-hierarchical and uncensored. My analysis also demonstrates how to use rhetorical ecology as a theoretical framework to trace digital texts' circulations across other spaces and time and, as a result, I complicate discussions of trolling and theories of invitational rhetoric and argue the importance of technofeminists knowing feminist histories, including very recent histories beginning to unfold in digital spaces.

In addition to these findings, I call for feminist writing studies scholars to recognize that literate activities within/of certain communities or people exists within larger continua of literate activity and to lend, among other skills and knowledges, awareness of the importance of writing not only as a tool for activist work but also as a crucial component of continua of literate activities that help to build feminist histories and which must be remembered and learned from. By bringing cultural theories about gender and technology to bear on conversations within writing studies, this project adds to conversations that challenge notions of digital space as inherently democratic or more inclusive of traditionally marginalized populations and to conversations of digital space/activities as distinct from offline space/activities.

Chapter Descriptions
The first chapter of my dissertation introduces and situates my project. First, I discuss definitions of some key terminology (literacy/multiliteracy/literacies of technology; technology; literate activity/writing/rhetorical activity; and feminism/cyberfeminism/technofeminism) used in my project. Then, I introduce the site of my study—*Feministing*—and as called for in feminist methodology (Kirsch, Mortensen and Kirsch), detail my own position in relation to that site, though more thorough detail about the site and my participants can be found in chapter two. Next, I position my dissertation within the field of writing studies, highlighting major points and overlaps in scholarship at the intersections of the borders of feminist rhetoric and feminist work within computers and composition and illustrating the research gaps this dissertation fills. Chapter one concludes with

discussion of my research goals and questions as well as overviews of the remaining four chapters.

Chapter two provides discussion of the methods and methodologies I adopt in this research project in order to ground my project within the field and within larger discussions of feminist research and of digital research on literate activity within communities. The chapter includes a description of the research site as well as discussions of how the participants were selected, how I carried out my ethnographically informed data collection, how I analyzed and interpreted my data with grounded theory and situational analysis, and how and why I applied digital postcritical and feminist methodologies.

Chapter three focuses on the internal landscape of *Feministing*, which includes thick description of the site as well as places it within the context of the larger blogosphere, particularly the feminist/social justice blogosphere. I begin with discussion of the founding of Feministing.com and then move to discuss the changes and expansion of *Feministing* from 2004–2012, with attention to Queen's concerns for rhetorical genealogy and Collins' concern for materiality. By moving between thick description and analysis of *Feministing* and larger considerations of rhetorical genealogy and materiality, I mediate macro- and micro-levels of analysis Sheridan-Rabideau argues is necessary in literacy research. I argue for the importance of feminist design and feminist literacy sponsorship and discuss how shifts in the commenting policies expose differing expectations of what a digital feminist space is or should be (i.e., open to everyone and all opinions vs. moderated) and challenge traditional notions of feminist space as non-hierarchical and uncensored.

Chapter four also includes local and historical framing as I turn my attention to more external aspects of *Feministing*. In this chapter, I address questions of what fosters and delimits *Feministing* members' literate activity and argue for the benefits of using rhetorical ecology to understand the complexities of community and community building in digital spaces. I demonstrate how the public nature and accessibility of *Feministing's* webspaces (i.e., the various digital spaces they have inhabited or do inhabit such as Facebook, Twitter, Feministing.com) lead to increased interactions with uninvited/unintended audiences. Consequently, I consider how trolling functions as a rhetorical strategy, and I consider how *Feministing* complicates theories of invitational rhetoric. Additionally, I reveal that long-running debates among feminists about race and intersectionality carry over into digital space, which both affects *Feministing* members' literate activity as well as various literate activities dispersed across adjacent rhetorical ecologies within the feminist blogosphere, which in turn also shape the literate activity within/of *Feministing*

Chapter five highlights three key themes that emerge throughout my dissertation: visibility, amplification, and continua of literate activity. In discussing these three themes, an additional three terms come up—terms that have not yet been focal points but that will guide further research and data collection as I continue to work with this project in the future: the complicated relationship of economics and feminism, embodiment and emotions, and rhetorical listening in digital spaces. In this final chapter I also return to my final research question—*where does the literate activity of* Feministing *seem self-sponsored, and where does it seem community-sponsored (underlying question, can the two be differentiated)?*—in order to call feminist writing scholars' attention to the overly positive and/or vague ways we often use the term "community." In addition to calling for feminist writing scholars to interrogate their use of the term "community" and to acknowledge the negative aspects of community building, in this chapter I also recommend that feminist writing scholars bring their knowledges of literate activity to the important conversations of feminist history that feminists must continue to have with one another and teach to others.