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‘HOTTEST 100 WOMEN’  
Cross-platform Discursive Activism in Feminist Blogging Networks  

Frances Shaw  

Abstract  
Social movement theorists have developed several concepts to explain the role of social networking in maintaining social movements. This is particularly relevant for periods when levels of public activism are low due to backlash, hostile social contexts and structural uncertainties. As part of my study of the women’s movement online and feminist blog networks in Australia, I provide a review of several of these concepts, interrogating their applicability to the study of online communities. This paper explores the relevance of the social movement theory concepts of submerged networks, abeyance structures and the related idea of counterpublics for the study of feminist blog networks. In 2009, the radio station Triple J’s ‘Hottest 100 of All Time’ poll featured no solo women artists, and women played on few tracks. In response to this, several strands of discourse developed in the Australian feminist blogosphere identifying ways that the history of rock music excludes or erases women. Activists developed a cross-platform poll on Twitter, Facebook and email, and promoted it through blogs and Twitter, to counter the ‘Hottest 100 Men’ with a ‘Hottest 100 Women’. This paper shows the ways these women have used blogging networks to challenge mainstream discourses and generate new ones.

Introduction  
The feminist blogosphere in Australia is an online community that is reproducing existing feminist discourses, challenging mainstream discourses and generating new discourses. This is an example of a social movement online, with discourse as the mode of activism. Most research into social movements online focus on protest organisation, whereas I wish to look at the potential for discursive change as a result of online communities. This research is important not just for our understanding of the current situation of feminism in Australia, but also for our understanding of the role of online discursive communities in contemporary social movements.

To briefly contextualise the research that foregrounds this paper, the Australian feminist blogging network is composed of women writing on feminism and social prejudice against women and other intersecting identities, as well as providing a supportive community sharing personal stories and camaraderie with one another in the face of mainstream backlash against feminist ideas. They also lobby and share...
information about political issues that are relevant to women. It is connected to the USA and international feminist blog network and also the progressive political blogging network in Australia and globally, but network analysis shows that a significant proportion of linkages are internal, and that the strength of these connections have increased over time. Blogs also link to Australian and international media content, and comment critically on both popular culture (TV shows, advertisements) and on news reports and opinion pieces.

A discussion of the role of online discursive communities in contemporary social movements is important at a time when movements such as Occupy Wall Street and Wikileaks are using online networks to engage in burgeoning forms of discursive activism that do not fit with existing models of online activism. These developments are of interest to feminist scholars because of the growing networks of feminist blogs and growing influence of feminist politics in internet-based movements. Are we likely to see feminist discursive and political influence growing out of these networks on the scale of Wikileaks and Occupy?

The appearance of online feminist communities has been noted by several commentators on third wave feminism (e.g. Bulbeck 2000, 6; Harris 2001, 128) and cyberfeminism (Rowe 2008; Wajcman 2004, 62); however, the significance of these communities and online discursive communities more generally has not been explored by social movement researchers and rarely by researchers of feminism. Both discursive communities and online activism continue to occupy a marginal place in social movement studies (Downing 2001, 26). Those strands of social movement studies, in particular feminist social movement studies—including work by Taylor and Whittier (1992) and Young (1997)—that do take discursive activism seriously, have never been applied to online contexts. This paper continues the work of feminist strands of social movement studies, applying these insights to contemporary feminist blogging networks.

Aspects of social movement activity that are not explicitly orientated towards traditional political action aimed at states remain undervalued in social movement theory. As a result, despite the theorisation of discursive activism, in particular by feminist social movement scholars, there has been little analysis of the role that online communities might play in discursive politics. Preconceptions about online communications have inhibited social movement research, preventing social movement theorists from recognising the realities of contemporary social movements. I draw on discursive models for political change to propose an understanding of online communities as structures for political action. The challenge here is to develop a toolkit that feminist social movement researchers can use to understand and analyse online discursive activism.

Social movement activity occurs in discourse as well as through conventional modes of protest activity, such as lobbying and protest aimed at states. Social movement theory must be useful for the study of online social movement activity, if it is to remain relevant for the study of contemporary social movements, including contemporary feminist activism. As Baym has argued: ‘[t]he theories that we have developed to explain social organization need to be able to address new media’ (2006, 82–3).

The social movement concepts of abeyance and submerged networks may be usefully developed to challenge the view of social movements as characterised largely by street-based and face-to-face activism, opening the way for a new understanding of the role of new media and internet communities. These approaches take seriously the role of discourse communities in social movements. While concepts that deal with discourse have
been developed in social movement theory, they have not been widely tested in the context of online communities, although they are relevant to research on the ways that online communities can motivate people politically and help activist discourses reach a wider audience.

**Social Movements and Blogging**

Social media has become an increasing part of people’s use of the internet, and activist cultures have developed within these social networks. Networks of political blogs engage with and disrupt the discourse of the mainstream media by responding to political events with alternative perspectives, by criticising the ideological stances implicit in the media and by sharing information on systemic injustices and issues not given coverage in the mainstream press (Bahnisch 2006). Social networking applications have become spaces in which political protests are organised and planned, as well as the locations of political protest themselves, as will be seen in the case study in this paper.

Within blogging networks, it is not usually the individual blog post that is politically significant, but the network of interlinked blog posts on a shared topic (Bruns 2006, 12). Blogs are social, and the networks that form between blogs are dense and highly informal (Lovink 2008, 38; Rettberg 2008, 57), but it is the day-to-day interlinkage and exchange between bloggers that make blog networks a medium for the political. Individuals can become nodes in a network in which the audience becomes capable of broadcasting back, and thus become active agents in discourse, or ‘connected and networked interlocutors’ (Hartley 2009, 95). What significance could such a change in ‘social network markets’ (Hartley 2009, 11) have for social movements and for feminist politics? A lot of analyses surrounding blogs tend to focus on their potential as sites of citizen journalism, in which ordinary people can actively engage with ‘the news’ by engaging in journalism of their own, and thus the discussion tends to take place from within the discourses of journalism, with a focus on journalistic issues such as truth and representation (Bahnisch 2006, 140; Bruns 2006, 12; Rettberg 2008, 84–110). While of course this is a significant development for media studies, I am more concerned with blogging as political action. Blogs that criticise the mainstream press frequently do so from a stated political position or perspective.

How are we to understand the role of blogs from within a discipline that is caught up in its own epistemological crisis? The field of social movement theory is split between the structural approaches of political process theory and resource mobilisation—emphasising political opportunities, activist organisations and mobilisation networks, protest events and actions, and resources—and the constructivist approach that emphasises culture, framing processes, emotions and identity (Klandermans and Staggenborg 2002, xii; Kurzman 2004, 111–12; Mische 2003; Staggenborg 2008, 84; Tilly 2002, 78).

The role of the internet in social movements has been sidelined in these debates, with most studies of internet activism originating firmly from within the former perspective, leading to an emphasis on conventional political action and the structural inadequacies of the net for creating such action. The problem with studying the internet from a structuralist perspective is that the insights of new social movement theory are lost in understandings of politics online, leaving the roles of identity, emotion, culture and discourse unexamined. This leads to a ‘denial of “the political”’ online (Mouffe 2005, 4).
The Internet in Social Movement Studies

How has social movement theory dealt with the internet up until this point? Attention to internet activism has been marginal at best within the discipline. Cohen and Rai’s *Global Social Movements* (2004), Downing’s *Radical Media* (2001) and Van de Donk et al.’s *Cyberprotest* (2004) are some of the few volumes devoted to online activism from the perspective of social movement studies. Activism that takes place in non-face-to-face contexts has not been considered as significant or worthy of study as face-to-face activism. Elin (2003) discusses the perception that if activism does not involve the body it cannot really be activism. It is perceived as a visible and visceral phenomenon, a spectacle that brings to mind images of a man in front of a tank, flowers thrust in the face of police officers or soldiers, unarmed civilians blinded by pepper spray or swept off their feet by water cannons. Internet activism seems to have no place amongst these images. ‘Can you really put your body on the line online?’, ask McCaughey and Ayers (2003, 5), and if not, ‘when can a purely textual presence actually cause political change?’ This implies that it is the risk of activism that actually causes the political change. The majority of social movement theorists’ discussions of online social movements look at the potential for the internet to facilitate conventional protest mobilisation and organisation (Ayres 1999; Diani 2000; Edelman 2001; Staggenborg 2008).

Meyer and Tarrow noted that the internet has led to innovations in information sharing, and enabled activist networks to expand across geographic and social boundaries (1998, 14). In Diani’s comparison of virtual and real social movement networks, he acknowledges the potential of the internet to affect political activism by reducing the costs of communication, encouraging broader discussion and allowing ease of access to information (2000, 388). Diani asks very pertinent questions about whether new types of activism will arise from internet use and whether the ‘virtual’ and the ‘real’ are in fact separate. Diani, however, privileges ‘direct’ (i.e. face-to-face) communication over non face-to-face communication, draws a dichotomy between public and private modes of communication and considers online communication as ‘disembodied’ communication because the anonymity of participants breaks with the conventional concept of the public sphere (2000, 389–90). In a discussion of online social networks, della Porta and Diani state that ‘[e]mpirical evidence on the type of ties established by CMC [Computer-Mediated Communication] so far is mixed’. Some show ‘some degree of solidarity and mutual trust’ while others suggest that online relationships need to be backed up by ‘real social linkages’ in order to develop the levels of trust required for a true community (2006, 133).

Staggenborg sees the internet as an extension or expansion of the possibilities of non-face-to-face communication in movements, and the internet ‘provides a quick, low cost means of reaching a large number of potential supporters’ (2008, 41). Garrett supported this, showing that lower communication costs can increase communication and the benefits of participation (Garrett 2006). Unfortunately, this emphasis on cost effectiveness misses the unique discursive potential of the internet: communication online is not only free, it is also different (Palczewski 2001, 163). Staggenborg (2008) and Garrett (2006) also emphasised the organisational potential of the internet as the most important topic of research for social movement theorists, rather than its discursive potential. Staggenborg, however, elsewhere acknowledged the critical importance of culture and submerged networks, arguing that ‘we need to look for social movement...
activity in a variety of venues rather than only in publicly visible protests targeted at states’ (2008, 84).

In conclusion, there has been little analysis of the role that online communities might play in discursive politics in spite of the growing recognition of culture as a force in social movements. Aspects of social movement activity that are not explicitly orientated towards traditional political action continue to be undervalued. Social movement researchers, including those who emphasise the cultural aspects of social movements, have focused on online movement mobilisation and organisation. Within social movement studies, the role the internet has to play in developing discursive communities has not been explored (Palczewski 2001, 162).

Polletta urged social movement theorists to ‘flesh out the discursive and organizational mechanisms by which culture defines the bounds of strategic choice, rather than locating those mechanisms in people’s heads’ and argued that the field of social movement research is an especially useful field in which to discover the relationship between culture, structure and political efficacy (2006, 5). I argue that, in order to do this, social movement theory needs to address its own epistemological contradictions and develop a toolkit that can adequately address both discursive politics and online social movements. The internet is part of a broader cultural change that impacts on the ways people use and consume the media (Meikle 2004, 76). This has significance for social movements, the processes of which will continue to change as society changes (Everard 2000, 159; Kahn and Kellner 2003, 14).

Discursive Politics and Feminist Social Movement Theory

There are several concepts that have been developed in social movement theory that deal explicitly with discursive politics. The significance of these concepts for the study of social movements online lies in their recognition of the role of discourse in social movements, rather than focusing on social movement organisation and traditional political action targeted at states. These concepts, however, are inadequate to address the significance of discursive politics online, because they carry with them the assumptions of traditional social movement theory by separating political action from discourse. Feminist social movement studies approaches to the study of discursive activism are usefully applied to online networks such as those described in this paper.

The concept of abeyance was developed by Taylor (1989) to offer a model to explain social movement continuity, using a case study of feminism in the USA between the first and second waves. Abeyance is a holding pattern in which activists reproduce the ideology of a movement and maintain its structures, without being highly active and visible in public spaces (Bagguley 2002, 170). The second concept is Melucci’s notion of submerged networks (1989, 1996). Submerged networks are made up of the relationships between participants in social movements that are hidden from public view, through which people communicate and exchange information with each other, while also negotiating a collective identity and developing a sense of belonging (Melucci 1996).

Taylor’s abeyance theory relies heavily on the premises of resource mobilisation theory, which is that ‘political opportunities and an indigenous organisational base are major factors in the rise and decline of movements’ (1989, 761). Taylor characterised abeyance structures as centralised and ‘elite-sustained’ organisations (Staggenborg 2008,
32). Bagguley (2002, 171) argues that it might be difficult to apply Taylor’s theory to movements sustained by informal forms of association, which would include the internet. Taylor does acknowledge the importance of including informal networks such as self-help groups in our understanding of social movements, as such ‘temporary, partial, and fragile relationships’ are characteristic of contemporary society (Taylor 1996, 103).

If, however, abeyance is taking place in new online contexts where before it occurred in centralised organisation, this brings into question the adequacy of a structuralist approach in contemporary social movement research. Melucci’s (1989, 1996) submerged networks expand the definition of social movement networks to include informal, discursive communities. The concept of submerged networks seeks to understand what happens within social movements at the non-visible level, and in the course of everyday life. As Staggenborg summarises, submerged networks are as critical to social movements as the contentious politics that make up their visible part, and help explain the maintenance and development of the social movements themselves (2008, 84). In spite of this recognition, both abeyance theory and submerged networks display a basic ambivalence towards informal networks and the role of discourse in politics. This ambivalence has its roots in the epistemological foundations of these theories.

The word ‘abeyance’ has its origins in Mizruchi’s theory of social regulation, which is a structuralist theory (Mizruchi 1983, 1). Abeyance structures emerge when society lacks ‘sufficient status vacancies to integrate surpluses of marginal and dissident people’ (Taylor 1989, 762). Abeyance structures function to retain challengers to the status quo, during times when the social system will not tolerate direct challenge. In this way the abeyance organisation succeeds in ‘building a support base and achieving a measure of influence’, in spite of a ‘nonreceptive political and social environment’ (Taylor 1989, 762). Ultimately discourse communities function to retain or constrain social movement actors rather than being political in themselves, and even though Taylor (1989) modifies her theory of abeyance structures to show how they had consequences between the first and second waves of the movement, discourse is not valued for its political consequences but for its maintenance properties.

Melucci (1995, 41; 1996, 30) sees social movement communities as having a unique capacity to ‘break the rules of the game’ by expanding the limits of possible social behaviour and discourse; however, he makes a distinction between movements working for political reform or change and those working in the ‘cultural sphere’ (1996, 36–7). Melucci (1996) characterises these networks as only political in the sense that they create the individual, cognitive conditions for engagement in political activity, rather than understanding submerged networks as political communities with impacts on social life and structures of meaning. Melucci claimed that:

> In the past twenty years emerging social conflicts have not expressed themselves through political action, but rather have raised cultural challenges to the dominant language, to the codes that organize information and shape social practices. (1995, 41)

This opposition reifies the public/private split. Cultural, identity-based politics are seen as private, internal, cognitive and personal. Although cultural change is a goal of social movements, it is incidental rather than central and not considered political in itself.

Young criticised this conception of submerged networks in her book on the discursive politics of the feminist movement (1997, 156–65). She argues that while new
social movement theorists have come to acknowledge the importance of cultural change as an outcome of social movement activity, this is located at the level of identity. Social movement actors are understood to participate in social movements for psychological, rather than political, reasons in order to affirm their own identity, and this is ‘a formulation that depoliticises these movements’ (Young 1997, 158).

Within social movement theory, feminist researchers have done much to legitimise discursive activism as a part of protest. Recently, Laube researched women feminist PhD sociologists and acts of discursive protest in academia. She argues that social movement theory ‘must move beyond restrictive notions of potential movement targets, activists, locations, and strategies; and past narrow conceptualizations of collective action and movement goals’ (Laube 2010, 3). This research, like Katzenstein’s work on discursive activism within the Catholic Church (1995), focuses on activism that takes place in an institutional context.

So, while recognising the importance of culture in the processes of social change, Melucci artificially separates discursive politics from the organisationally political (1996, 36–7). In his view there are social movement actors who prepare the public for political change through cultural discourse, and other actors who then ‘process’ the issue through ‘political means’. Although Melucci is a social constructivist, his approach betrays a belief that social discourse only has the power to change the individual and not society itself. While social movement theory has much to offer a social movement theoretical analysis of feminist online communities, by exploring the potential of submerged networks to create ‘cultural’ change, it is limited by its psychological approach.

In the following analysis I apply a model of social movement activity defined by discursive activism, building on the work of previous feminist social movement researchers and applying it to the context of feminist blogging networks. Feminist social movement theory, through its insights into discursive activism and subjectivity as a central part of political action, opens up a space for a different kind of research into online social movements. The work of feminist social movement scholars provide the opportunity for an exploration of how the internet is being used for discursive activism.

**Case Study: ‘Hoyden About Town’ and the Triple J Hottest 100**

On 30 June 2009 a guest blogger on the popular Australian feminist group blog ‘Hoyden About Town’ wrote a post called ‘Alternative Youth Music Station Thinks There’s No Alternative to Being a Bloke’ (Orlando 2009). In the article, she criticised Triple J Radio’s ‘potted history’ of contemporary music that was posted on their website in the run-up to the vote for the 2009 Triple J ‘Hottest 100 of All Time’. This radio music poll, while a yearly event, was different in 2009 because it was an ‘all time’ list rather than being only for the preceding year, and Triple J’s website team posted histories of alternative music on their website. ‘Of the 59 album covers shown to illustrate, NONE were put out by female artists’ (Orlando 2009). The entry is ‘tagged’ with the word ‘erasure’ and the post includes these words as well. She argues that the music industry has worked hard to exclude women, and once they broke through (as many have), ‘now Triple J erases them all over again’ and this ‘erasure of female artists distorts the history of popular music’ (Orlando 2009). Orlando argued for the importance of ‘drawing Triple J’s attention to what it means when they do things like this’ and she and other ‘Hoyden’ readers and contributors wrote letters to Triple
J website manager to complain (Orlando 2009). Eventually, Triple J responded to these criticisms by modifying its ‘potted history’ to include some women artists; however, by that time voting had long since closed for the Triple J ‘Hottest 100 of All Time’.

The initial conversation that developed around this post had several trends. First of all, many of the commenters pointed out that they could not think of specific time periods in the history of music without thinking of many influential female artists, and were amazed that Triple J could have ‘forgotten’, ‘erased’ or ‘excluded’ them from their potted history (see the various commenters remarks in Orlando 2009). Many listed their favourite or most obviously influential female artists. There are ‘so very many women whose music has had a huge influence on alternative music that to leave them all out is just so conspicuously and gratuitously wrong headed’ (fuckpoliteness June 30, 2009, at 4:42 pm in Orlando 2009) and ‘It’s so typical of the erasure of women’s contribution to history: nothing counts until a man does it’ (Orlando July 2, 2009, at 9:40 am). Some expressed dismay that a music station that had been an important part of their youth ‘regards me as non-existent or hard-on-fodder’, and argued that ‘JJJ are just another component of the malestream media now’ (commenters in Orlando 2009).

The discussion continued once the results of the listener poll for the Hottest 100 were being released and people started to realise how few women were actually making the chart. In the end result, no solo women artists were featured; a woman’s voice was present on only a handful of the 100 tracks that were voted as the Triple J Hottest 100 of All Time. In the meantime, several strands of discourse had developed on the comments on this blog entry, and on the many other blog entries that dealt with the issue. These discourses identified ways that the history of rock music excludes or erases women.

The first discourse was that taste cultures become male-dominated by excluding women from the discourse of greatness, such that people are ‘unlikely to include them when asked to name the ten songs that are the greatest ever’ (Orlando July 10, 2009, at 7:04 pm). Another blogger, linking to Orlando’s post, argued that ‘jjj erased women in their selection of top ten from each decade’ and ‘then of course the listeners do that thing where male = great so they don’t bother nominating any chicks’ (fuckpoliteness’ 2009). This was also extended to include the way people are socialised to think of ‘history’ in general; ‘[o]ur history has been made invisible to us’ (Linda Radfem in ‘fuckpoliteness’ 2009); and to ask ‘why do we only think of the male voice as authoritative?’ (godardsletterboxes July 13, 2009, at 3:09 pm in ‘fuckpoliteness’ 2009).

Orlando’s post set in train a process at the end of which Australian feminists could readily identify a systemic problem in Australian media publics: the exclusion and erasure of women from the history of alternative rock music. Certainly the lack of women in the Triple J ‘Hottest 100 of All Time’ poll would have been a glaring fact regardless and was raised in various other media venues. Through this online conversation, however, women in the community developed alternative discourses to explain women’s omission, which they could then use to counter claims that (for example) it was a statistical anomaly, that you cannot blame the radio station for the way the punters voted, that music is simply a matter of personal taste, that women simply have not produced ‘great’, ‘alternative’ music, all of which were arguments raised by commenters in an analogue debate on the popular blog ‘Larvatus Prodeo’ and countered with arguments drawn from those raised in the ‘Hoyden About Town’ and other posts from the feminist blogosphere (see various comments in Kim 2009).
The second important thing to note about the way that the discussion developed in the Australian feminist blogosphere is that the conversation had a political intent. This is signalled in ‘I wonder if [this] would encourage Triple J to reconsider its music programming?’ (shinynewcoin July 14, 2009, at 11:38 am). Many readers and bloggers sent letters to Triple J Radio to have the website changed. Several participants in the debate set up alternative lists such as the ‘@Hottest100Women’ poll (2009) on Twitter and the Women’s Music Appreciation Month meme, which was promoted across many different blogs, in which participants listed their favourite alternative music by female artists, in order to reverse the erasure of women artists from the alternative music taste culture. In this we see the direct engagement of the feminist blogging community with the political, understood as ‘the leveraging of power between connected entities’ through discourse (Senft 2008, 5). The results of this activism were that women in feminist online networks became sensitised to the exclusion of women in popular music discourse and Australian taste cultures. More concrete outcomes—particularly in terms of Triple J’s promotion of women artists—are difficult to measure. Discursive outcomes, however, are the main aim of discursive activism, and certainly the discourse around popular music and women shifted for those involved in this discussion and the ensuing ‘@Hottest100Women’ poll.

In the light of this case study, the advantages and problems of using submerged network and abeyance theory become apparent. Does the Australian feminist blogosphere constitute an abeyance structure? It is very possible that the opposite could be argued. Online communities may have less of a function in keeping a hard kernel of organised Australian feminism alive and more of a function in developing new activist discourses, ideologies and ideas, and identifying areas for activism. The community also builds an alliance of women at a time when feminism is popularly derided in the press and in popular culture, and in this way it does resemble an abeyance structure. As Taylor explained, the women in the abeyance organisations of the 1940s and 1950s found that their politics and commitment to feminism ‘marginalised and isolated them from the mainstream’ (1989, 762). The same has been said about feminists in Australia in recent times (Caro and Fox 2008; Dux 2008).

I am, however, reluctant to declare the Australian feminist movement in abeyance when so many women are publicly, discursively engaged in feminist politics in the feminist blogosphere and outside of it. To declare the Australian feminist blogosphere an abeyance structure is to label it in some way inactive or even apolitical, whereas as the case study suggests, the community is overtly activist, public and political in nature, even if it is composed of a relatively small network of women.

The Australian feminist blog network is an informal network of social movement actors involved in the work of cultural production, developing social ties and negotiating identities. To call the Australian feminist blogosphere a submerged network in Melucci’s (1989, 1996) sense similarly risks denying the highly public and political nature of the discourse that occurs within the network. The primary instrumental purpose of the debate within and between these blogs is to change the way people think about the dominant codes in society, which fits with Melucci’s view of submerged networks, but this is neither unintentional nor can it be separated from the political. While Melucci saw political action as unintentionally or accidentally brought about as a result of the solidarities formed within informal social networks (1989, 1996), I argue that the negotiation of identity, cultural production and development of discourses within social movement networks is...
The concept of submerged networks should be modified to reflect the purposively political nature of discursive activism. The discourse of the Australian feminist blogosphere engages directly with mainstream politics and culture. The aim of this case study is to show that discursive networks are not only engaged in ‘maintenance’ of social movement networks for later organised activism, but in fact have the political aim of changing discursive perceptions, norms and ways of understanding mainstream discourse. In this, Australian feminist bloggers were successful. Michael Warner’s concept of counterpublics shows us why. Counterpublic theory has much to offer social movement theory by showing how discourse communities can be understood as political networks (Young 1997, 158).

Counterpublics

Warner’s counterpublics are discursive publics that are based around texts. They are ‘counter’ in that they differ from requirements of inclusion in the dominant cultural public, and are ‘defined by their tension with a larger public’ (Warner 2002, 56, 113). Their significance lies in their constitutive, transformative social properties. Counterpublic discourses enable new political ways of being (Warner 2002, 57).

Too much research into the political potential of the internet look at the capacity of online social movements to impact upon the state, when instead we should look at how counterpublics online ‘allow us to challenge the very conceptions of the state’ (Palczewski 2001, 162). According to Fraser, counterpublics ‘contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public’ from the beginning (1990, 61). She uses the US feminist subaltern counterpublic as an example, which created an alternative public sphere through a network of publishing houses, theatre companies, research centres and so on, through which the feminist counterpublic could ‘formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs’ and in doing so ‘help expand discursive space’ (Fraser 1990, 67). In contrast with submerged networks, counterpublics are ‘not exclusively defined by identity’, but instead ‘aid in the definition of identity’ (Palczewski 2001, 165). This redefinition of identity is politicised, rather than psychologised.

Counterpublics function as spaces for ‘withdrawal and regroupment’ but also function as ‘training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics’ (Fraser 1990, 68). By definition, counterpublics form ‘under conditions of domination and subordination’ because of their tension with or exclusion from mainstream publics (Fraser 1990, 70). In these ways the concept of counterpublics has a lot in common with the concept of abeyance structures. First, they form as a result of hostility from, or exclusion from, mainstream politics or public spheres. Second, they enable subaltern publics to regroup for political activities.

The concepts, however, differ in two very important ways: firstly through the emphasis on the transformative properties of discourse in the concept of counterpublics (i.e. the counterpublic is political though not necessarily engaged in protest activity); and secondly because the contingent, informal nature of counterpublics themselves differs from the emphasis placed on the ‘organisational base’ in the concept of abeyance structures (Taylor 1989, 761). Counterpublics are formed through informal networks, in a ‘multicontextual space of circulation, organized not by a place or an institution but by the circulation of discourse’ (Warner 2002, 119). Counterpublic theory is consistent with both
the informal networks of contemporary online social movements and with an understanding of the social in which discourse is politically constitutive. Warner’s concept of counterpublics has significance for our understanding of minority discourses online, and the development of alternative discursive publics through blog networks.

Warner expresses doubt that online texts ‘will be assimilable to the temporal framework of public discourse’ due to the continuous rather than temporal nature of most online texts (2002, 97–8). Blogs, however, do fit well with a temporal model of discourse ‘unfolding through time’, although temporality (as well as spatiality) may be structured differently than in other venues (Hine 2000, 103). Conversations within and between blogs reference one another and are clearly located within a temporal framework through timestamps and comments organised into threads which frequently take the form of turn-taking dialogues.

The Australian feminist political community, like other political blog networks, functions as a counterpublic. Blogs allow the formation of opinions within the community, and for bloggers to post calls for activism and advocate for awareness around particular issues (Vatrapu, Robertson, and Dissanayake 2008, 14). The development of the discourse in the community over time leads to changes in the ongoing discursive boundaries of discussion, in that the discourse changes what it is possible for people to talk about.

Blogs add another layer of interpretation to traditional political discourse, and are self-referential in that they link to earlier posts as well as posts by others (Vatrapu, Robertson, and Dissanayake 2008, 12). The layer of interpretation that the bloggers in my case study add to Australian (and international) political discourse is feminist, and in this way they challenge and disrupt mainstream public discourse that is sexist or antifeminist. The engagement of blogs with one another, as well as the engagement of blogs with the mainstream press, leads to changes in both Australian feminist discourse and in the way that people relate to and consume media. In this way they ‘expand discursive space’, ‘aid in the definition of identity’ and finally ‘enable new political ways of being’ (Fraser 1990, 67; Palczewski 2001, 165; Warner 2002, 57). As Mowles (2008) argued in the case of Feministing (an American feminist blog), blogs can reshape conventional political discourse.

The internet has become the site of major political discourse, and of the development of political cultures. It is the national and local level at which this occurs that makes it so interesting (Everard 2000; Goggin 2004, 5). Internet communities have effects on the development of national political discourses (Mitra 1999). Lovink argues that, while the realm of power that makes decisions still largely exists autonomously in ‘face-to-face’ settings, the decentralised networks of online communities are also developing their own forms of power (2008, 205). He asserts: ‘The Internet can be secondary while becoming powerful at the same time’ (Lovink 2008, 203). Online culture ‘makes possible a reconfiguring of politics [and] a refocusing of politics on everyday life’ (Kahn and Kellner 2003, 14). The increasing capacity of the ‘social network marketplace’ online has the potential to increase the productive and progressive capacities of social movement networks, by broadening spaces for discourse (Hartley 2009, 47–9).

**Conclusion**

What I have outlined here is an argument for social movement theorists to take seriously the theoretical concepts they have developed to explain and understand the
contributions of discursive politics to social movements and social change in contemporary society. I also argue that these concepts need to be modified to reflect the political nature of social movement discourses and the realities of internet use within contemporary social movements.

The case study of the debate around the Triple J ‘Hottest 100’ demonstrates the use of the feminist blogosphere in developing discourses to explain the exclusion of women from the history of alternative music, as well as countering that exclusion through the development of a canon of female artists. This example, while ostensibly a minor topic for discussion, demonstrates both the real-world political effects of online discussion and the instrumental intent of discourse.

Scholarship on feminist activism online is enriched by a critique of social movement studies approaches to the study of internet politics. The important point here is that, while feminist social movement studies take discursive activism seriously, these insights have not been applied to the area of internet activism. Discursive activism has been consistently left out of such analyses. The case study in this paper demonstrates that discursive activism is an integral part of the work that feminist bloggers do to further feminist politics, and this needs to be recognised. Such an omission of discursive activism from the study of online activism has further consequences for the study of contemporary social change and contemporary social movements, leaving out models of discursive activism from analyses of movements like ‘Occupy Wall Street’ and other similar recent social movement activities.

The concepts of submerged networks and abeyance structures, while significant developments in social movement theory, prove inadequate to understand online social movements because of their de-politicisation of discourse. Through the deployment of counterpublic theory and other theories of discourse, social movement theory can evolve to engage effectively with modern political movements. This paper is the starting point for the development of better concepts to understand the role of online discursive communities in social movements and political publics generally and for feminist movements in particular.

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