Feminist Ethnography in Cyberspace: Imagining Families in the Cloud

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Abstract

This article explores the relevance of the ethnographic study of the Internet for feminist scholars interested in families. The online world is an emerging field site for feminist scholars investigating spousal, parental, and kin relations, one that opens up new arenas of study but also requires novel methodological approaches. The proliferation of cyber-communities and computer-mediated communication has radically altered how we live, communicate, and gather, share, and produce knowledge. This is particularly true for families, as new media technologies have impacted how families form, interact, and understand themselves and the world. Web 2.0 offers the potential for new imagined communities, new forms of social and political resistance, and new identities and networks that can transcend or reinforce traditional understandings of community, nation, and family. This article begins with a critical review of relevant literature (primarily from the United States) and offers several case studies that show the relevance of cyber-ethnography to feminist researchers interested in families. As the cases illustrate, ethnographers face new methodological and ethical issues associated with cyber studies and cyber-ethnography. Given the changing media landscapes families find themselves in, scholars of

gender and families are well served to think through the effects of new media on families and the methodological benefits and challenges for studying these new forms of communication.

Keywords

New media
Family
Gender
Digital ecology
Internet
Cyberethnography

Introduction

The development of new media technologies and practices represents a significant expansion of social life along with a proliferation of new identities and communities (Apple 2011; Hallett and Barber 2014; Wilson and Peterson 2002). These in turn constitute an expanded social field upon which researchers can investigate. The interactive nature of online media create new ways for gender to be produced, consumed, and analyzed, making the study of digital ecologies of interest to feminist scholars (Zacharias and Arthurs 2007). The promise, and challenge, of engaging with studies of digital culture is particularly of interest to feminist scholars interested in family studies. Feminist scholarship has contributed new insights into family dynamics, and worked to elucidate new understandings of families from an intersectional, non-normative approach (Lloyd et al. 2007). The challenge remains to extend the intersectional study of families to include the ways that families are impacted by new media practices and engagement with digital cultures as online venues have affected the ways families are formed and the way that families are structured and interact. Families are often embedded in digital ecologies, as individual family members engage in new identities online, affecting the structure and dynamics of families. New media also facilitate the imagining of kinship

or familial relationships across great distances, creating the possibilities of new fictive kinship and imagined families and communities (Statzel 2006, 2008). Engaging with the relationship between families and digital ecologies contributes new insights into the lived realities of families, new potential research sites, and new ways to access how ideas about and ideologies of the family are circulated.

Ferree (2010) writes that family studies have tended to place the family as an isolated unit, ignoring the broader economic and political context, a failure that tends to ignore the gender dynamics and inequality that often shape family life. This article suggests that the larger media context, within which many families are formed and imagined, is also worthy of attention by scholars interested in studying families. This article provides a review of literature at the intersection of theories and methodologies of digital ecologies, feminist perspectives, and family relationships. I begin with a review of literature on gender, family studies, and new media, focusing on: how the Internet has impacted family life; the politics of gender and the family online; and methodological and ethical considerations regarding the study of online content. The majority of the literature reviewed involves studies done in United States, unless otherwise noted. In conclusion I utilize my own experience conducting a cyber-ethnography of ideas about the normative family in a White nationalist cyber community to elaborate the benefits of conducting cyber studies. The majority of the literature reviewed involves studies done in United States, unless otherwise noted.

The Internet and the Altered Landscape of Family Life

Cyber scholarship is now increasingly recognizing that “the Internet is not growing apart from the world, but to the contrary is increasingly embedded in it” (P. Agre, quoted in Wilson and Peterson 2002, p. 451), as offline and online worlds overlap (Apple 2011; Hallett and Barber 2014). Wilson and Peterson (2002) go so far as to challenge “that the distinction between real

and imagined or virtual community is not a useful one," and instead assert that social analysis should focus on "contextualized identities" that recognize that contingent and historically situated relations shape online identities (p. 456). Rybas and Gajjala (2007) challenge the idea of an online/offline binary, where researchers assume a clear separation exists between online and offline activities and identities. This divide, they insist, does not play out so neatly in everyday life. Virtual worlds are created in tandem with real world identities and communities, and virtual relationships are integrated into everyday life (Carter 2005). Many communities can now be defined as *hybrid*, as a blend of online and offline interactions (Goodsell and Williamson 2008; Ruhleder 2000), and studying online content can serve to better understand offline realities (Hallett and Barber 2014; Murthy 2008).

New media technologies are collectively redefining the conception and practices of families, specifically changing the way families are *formed*. People are dating and finding spouses online, with studies of these practices completed in India (Chakraborty 2012), the Philippines, China, and the US (Constable 2000), Indonesia (Humphreys and Barker 2007), Cameroon (Johnson-Hanks 2007), and Utah (Scott 2002), and forming relationships that sometimes exist solely online, as Whitty and Gavin (2001) find in Australia. Individuals can now create their families online, as individuals can find potential sperm donors and order specimens entirely online, as Mamo (2013) documents in the US. This makes cyberspace the means through which some families secure the very material content for their production. This exchange of bio-material and information also facilitates new opportunities for individuals to form queer families and, as Moore and Grady (2011) show in their cyberethnography of US cryobanks, allows for new forms of commodification of these bio-resources. Mamo (2007) conducted ongoing sociological research on lesbian engagements with fertility clinics in the US, including queer activism through web 2.0 (Mamo 2013), arguing that the Internet is "producing and expanding the possibilities for the queer intimacies that consolidate into new family forms" (Mamo 2013: p. 232). Mamo here

means that many kinship relationships formed through Internet communications would likely not have existed without access to the Internet. A primary example of this is the donor sibling registries that many sperm banks offer, whereby parents may register successful births resulting from the purchase of donated sperm through sperm banks, a phenomenon studied across the US (c.f. Hertz and Mattes 2011; Jadva et al. 2010). In this way many half-siblings and their parents find each other, sometimes forming ongoing online and offline kinship relationships that traverse broad geographic areas and thus would likely not exist without new media technologies.

Digital technologies are also changing the way that families *interact* and are *structured*. There is an ongoing need for researchers to develop methods for studying how parents use the Internet and scholars are increasingly addressing this topic (Dworkin et al. 2013). Parents are increasingly utilizing the Internet to access information and receive support, as Plantin and Daneback (2009) found in a literature review of primarily North American studies. In a study on the use of social networking sites by parents of adolescents, Doty and Dworkin (2014) found that many parents use social networking sites to parent. Utilizing a uses and gratification theoretical perspective, the authors studied 649 parents of adolescents in the US who completed an online survey on their Internet use. The authors found that the majority of parents frequently utilized social networking sites and email for parenting. Parents noted that they used social networking sites primarily to connect with the community and communicate with family. Extensive research shows that parents use the Internet frequently to access parenting information online and to network, share information, and receive social support (Dworkin et al. 2013). There are however, class differences regarding how parents utilize the Internet, as Berkule-Silberman et al. (2010) found in a cross-sectional analysis of mother–infant dyads at Bellevue Medical Center in New York City. Plantin and Daneback (2009) also found in their literature review that older parents and parents with more formal education utilize the Internet at greater rates, but these differences are becoming less

pronounced.

New media also provide the means for developing new understandings of health, as researchers can access individual's self-reporting about their own conditions and experiences in non-clinical arenas (P. Adler and Adler 2007). Atkinson and Ayers (2010) argue that the proliferation of web based health care sites offer an alternate model of care, one rooted in a model of caring relationships that traverse geographic distance (See also Broom 2005). Scholars have even used cyber studies—in the form of Facebook messages—to predict postpartum depression in new mothers in the US (De Choudhury et al. 2014). The proliferation of online health information has varied effects for families. This is particularly true regarding information about vaccinations. As many parents seek out health information online, they often encounter sites hosted by anti-vaccination advocates that share erroneous information about vaccines. This information is presented as factual and often influences behavior around vaccination choices, as Kata (2012) found in a review of several prominent online anti-vaccination websites. The Internet has also become one of the main sources where college students in the US gather health information (Bulled 2011), and public health agencies are even utilizing the Internet to organize public health campaigns (Daniel 2014).

The integration of online communities and activities within homes and families is additionally creating new disagreements and conflicts. Surveys in the US are showing that teen Internet use is at times changing the way that families make decisions (Belch et al. 2005). Parents are forced to negotiate new rules regarding children's Internet use. Wang et al. (2005) studied 749 dyads of US parents and children with Internet access and found that parents and teens report different levels of monitoring, with 61 % of parents and only 38 % of teens reporting parental monitoring of teen Internet use. Through a multivariate regression analyses they found that how parents monitor their children's Internet use depends on SES characteristics and that fathers report more careful monitoring than mothers. This raises new questions about how the prevalence of new media

technologies within households is changing other dynamics between parents and teens beyond discipline (see Belch et al. 2005). New media can also create problems within marriages, as the prevalence and consumption of Internet pornography strains many marriages and parent/child relationships (Manning 2006). The Internet has even been shown to serve as a way for child sexual predators to pursue victims, particularly for predators who are already known to families and children (Mitchell et al. 2005).

The Politics of Gender and the Family Online

There are multiple reasons why feminist scholars should take an interest in cyber studies. Not only has interaction with the Internet impacted much of social life that is of feminist concern, but the Internet has also created new venues for gender inequalities to be produced and challenged. There is important work for feminist researchers to explore how inequalities are produced or transformed in online venues. In this section I review some of the arenas where feminist scholars are exploring the politics of gender and families online. Cooper's (2006) comparative literature review noted that a digital gender divide exists internationally whereby boys are more comfortable using computers than girls. Jackson et al. (2001) utilized a survey completed by 630 White US undergraduate students and found men and women use the Internet at equal rates but in different ways. The women in the study used email more often than men, but men used the Internet more often than women and expressed greater confidence in Internet use. Class and educational attainment also help to shape what researchers have dubbed a "second-level digital divide" (Hargittai and Hinnant 2008, p. 602) based not on access to Internet resources but on how people use the Internet. Researchers who engage cyber studies must acknowledge these constraints regarding who may be online. It is also important for scholars to investigate not just how people use the Internet, but investigate the policies and industrial practices that create the context for cyber socialites, raising questions about "*why* technologies come into existence and *why* women come into interaction with technologies" (Lee

2006, p. 191).

Wikipedia is one example. The online, collectively written and edited encyclopedia, has three and a half million articles in English and articles in over 250 languages, yet surveys show that likely only around 15 % of its contributors are women (Cohen 2011). This gender gap is troubling given the popularity of Wikipedia as a source of information, given that it also points to a possible gap in content relevant to feminist concerns. The user-generated encyclopedia relies on readers to participate as producers in knowledge, and requires contributors with diverse viewpoints to avoid biased entrees. With such a skewed gender gap amongst contributors, feminists must ask what affects this will have on the circulation of information given the power Wikipedia has to define issues, particularly for young adults and teens.

Women *are* producing a significant amount of online content, but often this takes place in the re-articulation of traditional gender~~ed~~ roles, particularly as mothers. Feminist researchers concerned with families thus should ask how these online gendered roles relate to offline family dynamics and identities. Take for instance the proliferation in the past 15 years of *mommy blogs* (Chen 2013a, b), often focusing on parenting and lifestyle issues. Mothers participate in blogging for a variety of reasons and different sites are used for different purposes, i.e., gaining and sharing information, engaging in specific issues, and recreational purposes (Chen 2013b). Much of the literature on new mother's use of the Internet shows that publishing and consuming new media helps many new mothers to alleviate feelings of isolation and to create new cyber communities. McDaniel et al. (2012) gathered media-use and wellbeing reports from 151 new mothers as part of a social networking study in the US. The authors found that engaging in online activities helped new mothers feel less isolated due to online social connections, and found that new mothers spent an average of 3 h each day online. In a qualitative study, Morrison (2011) utilized her own participation in publishing a mommy blog along with a qualitative survey completed by nearly 250 bloggers to study

women's participation in the genre of mommy blogs. She writes, "these writers collectively labor to turn an individual set of private experiences into a public discourse that can nevertheless retain the intimacy of private speech among close confidants" (Morrison 2011, p. 51). These blogs utilize personal, affective experience to generate feelings of a shared public, creating a space for these bloggers to engage in shared experience of the purportedly private experience of motherhood, fostering a sense of identity and community. Thus mommy blogs can change women's experience of motherhood through participating in a virtual public, providing social support through community and recognition and valuation of one's role as a mother.

Chen (2013a) analyzed 29 blog posts and hundreds of comments that discuss the term *mommy blogger* and found that how one defines and labels their online contributions can also reproduce normative identities. The act of producing blogs based on one's role as a mother can enforce hegemonic ideas about women as nurturing, what Chen calls "digital domesticity" (p. 37). The *mommy blogger* world can then reproduce the notion that women are primarily mothers, isolating one aspect of their identity and prioritizing it above others, reinforcing notions of the ideal mother. How new media is changing the experience of motherhood and the politics of this new intimate cyber-public of parent blogs remain important sites for further study.

As new reproductive technologies and transnational adoptions now offer the possibility for families to form across national borders, families use new media technologies to navigate these complex processes. Often adoptive parents negotiate their new identities in online communities (Anagnost 2000; Blasco 2012). One study of US women who adopt Guatemalan children showed they develop identities as adoptive parents partly through sharing their narratives of adoption and travel online (Noonan 2007). Noonan (2007) combined online and offline research, including interviews in Guatemala and several years of research on the adoption.com website, to analyze the meaning that new mothers give to

their often interracial adoptions. She found that collectively, through shared narratives of travel to Guatemala, middle-class US mothers frame Guatemala "as a place unsuitable for children, and the US as a child-appropriate locale" (p. 314). In this instance then, this online community both provides benefits to adoptive mothers in the form of creating community while also reaffirming stereotypes and framing Guatemala as other.

In another instance of reproductive cyber-communities reproducing social difference, Deomampo (2014) conducted ethnographic research on international surrogacy use in India over a four year period to study how new reproductive technologies have lead to stratified reproduction. In interviews with families from the US and Europe who used Indian women as surrogates to conceive and birth their children, Deomampo found that participation in online communities played a role in creating new forms of kinship for these families. Parents of surrogate children connected online, sharing stories about their experiences of foreign travel to India when they picked up their children, discussing their experience with their surrogates, and reviewing their experiences with surrogacy agencies. Parents of surrogate-born children bonded online, and often refer to the children born of Indian surrogates as *cousins* due to their shared experience of surrogacy in India. This new form of kinship was based on the shared experience of having been born through Indian surrogates, while the relationship with the surrogate women who carried and birthed the children is downplayed in these online communities and is not described in the language of kinship, but rather consumption and commerce. Thus cyber communities can be formed to reinforce differences based on national, racial, and class identities as individuals bond over shared experiences, while reproducing differences.

The Internet is also providing new arenas for political activism around families. One of the main places that mother's activism around families is taking place is online (see Kawash 2011). Public breast-feeding campaigns —known as latch ons—are organized through social media and venues that

scorn breast-feeding moms are shamed on twitter. Cyberspace has additionally opened up new arenas for women's political engagement in national contexts that make public political engagements challenging. In one example, Shi (2014) conducted long-term ethnographic research in rural China and explores online reproductive activism there. She argues that access to the Internet is creating "an emerging public space" (p. 126), with new political potential for protest regarding China's one child policy. The Internet provides one of the few spaces where families and individuals can challenge state discourse and policies regarding reproduction and abortion. Abbasgholizadeh (2014) utilizes her own experience with the Iranian women's movement to theorize the new political potential that comes with access to the Internet. In a similar example, Abbasgholizadeh argues that the Iranian women's movement turned the Internet into a political space in response to increasing restrictions on civil society that attended the rise of Ahmadinejad's government. She argues that these alternative political spaces and campaigns were possible due to creative and strategic use of online media. This sampling of studies show that feminists scholars interested in questions of women's agency will benefit from exploring the political potential of engagement with new media.

Feminist Perspectives on/in Cyberspace

The proliferation of the Internet and its integration into US households and families requires the development of multiple methods for studying the impact on families, with Turow (2001) providing a useful exploration of how to study the family in relation to the Web. The popularity of online venues has created new possibilities for researchers of traditional offline spaces by expanding the territory of study, so that one can conceptualize their field site to include offline and online spaces (Beaulieu 2010). Hallett and Barber (2014) argue that as many individuals' natural habitats also involve an online habitat that ethnographers must find ways to study online content. They write, "Studying people and organizations without considering the digital spaces where they define, express, and develop communities, images, and relationship would be inadequate" (Hallett and

Barber 2014, p. 326). The prevalence of Internet activity in contemporary life provides an expanded research field, challenging ethnographers to "incorporate the Internet and CMC [computer mediated communication] into their research to adequately understand social life in contemporary society" (Garcia et al. 2009). In this section I explore some of the methodological and ethical considerations ethnographers of new media should consider.

While cyber sociality has the possibility to traverse boundaries globally, like all cultural practices, cyber activities are also always rooted in local cultural and historical contexts. There has been a proliferation of studies discussing new technologies, but fewer studies explore how the consumption and use of these new technologies are understood through local cultural traditions and understandings. Local context—in terms of gender, racial, and class divisions and broader cultural assumptions and understanding—often shape the meaning ascribed to new media. While new media may be accessible anywhere there is Internet access; the meaning of new media is defined by local context (see Alexanian 2006; Apple 2011; Coleman 2010; Johnson-Hanks 2007; Kaya 2009). Kaya (2009) for instance, found that in contrast to research on young women primarily in the US (i.e., Brown and Thomas 2014), in Jordan, young women who frequent Internet chat rooms do not want to develop identities as Internet users, as they see this as not embodying acceptable norms around femininity. As Castells (1996) reminds us, new communicative technologies are far from monolithic in origin or use, and participant engagement with these technologies is varied. Ethnographers must contend with the contradictory nature of digital media, recognizing that while global distribution of content is easy to achieve, the meaning of online communication and media consumption is always determined by the local cultural context. While new media technologies are impacting cultures globally, local consumption patterns, along with cultural traditions, determine how these are understood and practiced. Ethnography is well suited for investigating the local specificities that determine interactions with new media (Coleman 2010). As families are often already embedded

in digital ecologies, researchers can benefit by exploring how new media practices are changing families and vice versa.

There are several research benefits to conducting cyber studies. The Internet offers researchers the possibility of expanded samples, (Best and Krueger 2004), although one cannot assume that the Internet offers a stable sample. Farrell and Petersen (2010) argue that given increasing rates of Internet use amongst the general population as well as within hard-to-reach populations, researchers can benefit from engaging with cyber research.

Engaging with online content often involves re-conceptualizing one's research methods. Walstrom (2004) suggests calling the cyber ethnographer a *participant-experiencer* instead of the standard *participant-observer*, to reflect the different approach required for online ethnography. Unlike traditional ethnography that involves participating in social activities as a research method, cyber-ethnography does not entail the same type of face-to-face research possibilities. Instead, Walstrom stresses the focus is on experience, and sharing, the experience of the online community. Part of this means the ethnographer should pay attention to the variety of ways people communicate with CMC, including the use of emoticons to convey feeling and to form social bonds (see also Campbell 2006; Mann and Stewart 2000). The mediated nature of cyber ecologies also requires researchers to note the visual (photo sharing, avatar use, webcams, etc.) and audio (video recording, etc.) aspects of online communication (Garcia et al. 2009). Gajjala and Altman (2006) suggest a practice they call "epistemologies by doing" (p. 67) to understand how cyber identities are created through everyday practices. This requires the researcher to enter the cyber ecology in a similar way to those they are studying, so that the researcher constructs their own online cyber identities through the online venues (see also Mann and Stewart 2000), although this is not appropriate in all venues as I discuss later.

Studying the Internet does provide several challenges to traditional

methodological practices that researchers must contend with. Questions of authorship, possibilities of researcher interference, and data selection are all issues of concern in studying data found on the Internet (Bell 2001; Mann and Stewart 2000; Markham 2004; Mitra and Cohen 1999). Researchers need to negotiate how to secure informed consent (Battles 2010; Beddows 2008) and other confidentiality measures online (Mathy et al. 2003). Garcia et al. (2009) suggest several accommodations that ethnographers must make to their research methods to incorporate CMC and cyber studies into traditional ethnographies. They suggest developing methodological tools to analyze online content, learning to manage and negotiate online identities, and developing ethical standards appropriate to the blurring of public and private content that is unique to the Internet (see also, Beddows 2008; Clegg Smith 2004; Elgesem 2002; Mann and Stewart 2000). At times individuals define their online public postings as private, complicating the process of securing consent and protecting informant's privacy. Many IRB boards do not have ethical guidelines for online research and some suggest that this needs to change (Beddows 2008). Researchers must develop research designs and ethical protocols to address these issues.

Many ethnographers have proposed new protocols for conducting online research. Garcia et al. (2009) review a variety of approaches ethnographers have taken to conducting online interviews. These are sometimes done in conjunction with offline interviews and often conducted utilizing asynchronous methods such as email or using video and audio software to conduct real time interviews (p. 66–67). There are also different approaches to recruiting subjects online, including posting advertisements in various online venues (Mann and Stewart 2000).

Gender, Families, and Digital Ecologies: Case Studies

The proliferation of online activity has thus created significant new potential for researchers interested in family studies to access and gather

data. In this section I explore several feminist case studies of new media to show both the types of research possible for family scholars and to provide examples of how traditional methodologies are expanded to explore digital ecologies. Several studies have uncovered new insights about families and health utilizing online research strategies. Adler and Zarchin (2002) conducted a qualitative exploratory study of pregnant women on bed rest by developing an online focus group. The study focused on both gathering data about their research subjects' experiences and assessing the potential for constructing virtual social support. The small focus group consisted of seven women on bed rest to prevent pre-term labor and data collection occurred via email. Half of the sample was recruited via a website and half from a hospital in California. The researchers concluded that the virtual focus group was a useful way to generate data and it served as an important means of social support for the mothers. The logistics of creating an offline focus group for this population were exceedingly challenging, thus the online venue provided the means for conducting this research, along with a virtual community not feasible offline. Battles (2010) conducted online research on a population not generally researched: adolescents and their views on vaccinations. Whereas more research on vaccinations has been conducted on parents, questions have remained about the role of adolescent perspectives on vaccinations in affecting vaccination rates. Battles utilized online chatrooms to develop a qualitative study of adolescent girl's perspectives on the HPV vaccine. The chatrooms are international and primarily used by Australian, Canadian, and US girls. Battles analyzed 72 discussion threads on the HPV vaccine from the chatroom and found that participants were generally supportive of receiving the vaccine. Due to the international nature of the chatroom she was also able to compare how perspectives differed based on nationality, finding that Australians' received the vaccine for free in school, leading to less of an emphasis on decision making for Australian girls since the vaccine was less of a choice than for other girls. Battles also addresses ethical considerations given that their research subjects are adolescents, and developed a method of extending research protocals for offline venues,

including securing informed consent and sharing final written work.

Other studies have focused on the production of online identities and how these relate to offline practices. With the expansion of cyber communities comes the ability to create cyber identities, and scholars have shown how queer (Bryson 2004) and racial and gendered identities (Hughey 2008) are produced in online contexts. How these affect the relationships between individuals and families remains a site for further exploration. Although cyber cultures often appear to allow for new possibilities for constructing one's identity outside of the norms enforced in everyday life, many authors caution that similar social constraints can shape online and offline realities. Many scholars have shown that despite the potential disruption between offline and online racial and gendered identities, many new media users believe that offline identities remain fixed across offline and online spaces (Huffaker and Calvert 2005; Kendall 1998). For example, Brown and Thomas (2014) studied queer and lesbian young women's use of MySpace. Through searching for members who identified as lesbian they observe hundreds of MySpace pages and conducted five interviews. They ask why "the desire to create public, digital selves" online for young women is often self-evident (p. 949), and question the politics of the construction of online selves for queer girls in MySpace. They found many young women use MySpace to find other queer women and to develop and share their own sexual identities. Reviewing the literature on new media and post-feminism, they assert that online spaces are not free of heterosexism, sexism, racism, etc., and that online actors must negotiate with these discourses online as well. They remind us that online racial and gendered practices often mimic offline realities (see also Nakamura 2002).

Boonmongkon et al. (2014) analyzed Thai adolescent girls' use of new media technologies, focusing specifically on how the adolescents used digital media to negotiate their gender and sexual identities. The researchers conducted nine focus groups and fourteen interviews regarding perspectives on new media use and then conducted narrative analysis of the transcripts from this research. The authors focused on a suburb of

Bangkok and employed a postmodernist theoretical frame. The authors argue that the young women in the study used their cell phones and access to the Internet to help construct their gender and sexual identities, and that engagement with these technologies provided additional space for exploring these identities. They found that young women used various devices on their phones to connect with parents and friends, as well as express sexual desire and preferences to romantic partners. The authors found that digital media provided a venue outside of public space regulated by the state and their families within which these young women could develop their gendered and sexual identities.

In another example, Kanayama (2003) conducted a cyber-ethnography of an online community of elderly people in Japan. Through ethnographic participation in a listserv with 120 members and 13 interviews with elderly men and women, Kanayama found that senior users built virtual communities online, utilizing a variety of language forms to communicate. Participants exchanged stories about their family situations, life changes, and their emotional lives. Kanayama suggest that the act of writing about their experiences, including seemingly trivial instances regarding marriage, family issues, etc., provides the authors with meaning. “Writing and reading not only made both writers and readers feel better, but also led to interaction between them” (Kanayama 2003, p. 280). Thus, people who may experience social alienation as they age out of productive familial relationships may find new community and meaning through developing online socialities.

In addition to online identities, researchers have documented how cyber-communities are maintained through digital media. In a cyber-ethnographic study of a dispersed ethnic community, Nemeth and Gropper (2008) studied photo blogs utilized by Romani/Travelers in the US. They found that Romani use blogs to network across great distances and to discuss, among other things, proper age of marriage and ideal mate characteristics. Fay (2007) conducted a cyber-ethnography of the virtual network of the International Women’s University in Germany. Fey

uncovers how the highly mobile women who participate in this online network find a sense of virtual *home* amongst the online network. In a different study of a feminist network, Gajjala (2002) attempted to conduct a cyber-ethnography of a South Asian women's email list that she was herself a member of. The group eventually collectively voted to not allow researchers to study the group, and thus Gajjala's study was halted mid-way, however Gajjala utilizes this experience to suggest methodological considerations for studying such an online community. Through this process she was able to explore the role of authority and the relationships between perceptions about public and private content online.

Some cyber-ethnographies are done completely online, including research on an online eating disorder site (Walstrom 2000), online international wedding planning (Nelson and Otnes 2005), and a listserv focused on women in engineering (Kleinman 2004). Others have taken a hybrid approach that explores cyber socialites in relation to offline practices and communities, including research on international online dating (Constable 2000). Coleman (2010) reviewed the corpus of ethnographic studies of new media and divided these approaches into three broad categories: the "cultural politics of media," the ways that identities are constructed through engagements with digital media; work exploring "the vernacular cultures of digital media," or sites where digital media is central to their functioning; and the final approach, "prosaics of new media," which explore how new media affect other cultural forms (p. 488). Feminist scholars interested in families can benefit from engaging with these different approaches to the study of new media.

Cyber Identities, Families, and Communities: a Case Study

In conclusion, I will provide an extended case study of my own cyber-ethnogaphic research on the normative family and new media, an interest that emerged through an indirect route. In 2004 I began studying an online White nationalist chatroom, Stormfront.org, to further understanding of the

contemporary White supremacist movement (published under my previous name Statzel 2006, 2008). Stormfront.org is a website and online community with thousands of discussion threads divided into dozens of topics. Site monitors keep track of observers and registered participants and the site currently claims over 280,000 members globally. When I first began studying the website in 2004 it boasted a mere 35,000 members. In observing the site, I was immediately struck by the prevalence of discussions on family, reproduction, sexuality, and gender. Throughout the chatrooms, conversations coalesced around ideas about the normative family: fear of miscegenation, congratulatory stories of home births, critiques of feminism as a curse against Whiteness, and everywhere discussions of the importance of White nationalist women having White children.

In the remainder of this article I will share some of the insights developed through this research and how they contribute to feminist understandings of ideologies about the family. Through exploring the meaning of *the family* within White nationalism I show how raced and gendered ideologies, identities, and emotional attachments often shape perspective about the *family* as a normative ideal. These ideals often map onto actual practices and relationships within families.

In conducting this research I had to contend with the ways that new media shaped this movement as well as to develop a methodology appropriate to the study of an online community. I spent two months in 2004 monitoring the content of Stormfront.org daily and intermittently monitored the site between 2005 and 2007. The chatrooms contain hundreds of thousands of threads dispersed between dozens of forums including: Philosophy and Ideology, Lounge (for informal conversations), News Links (discussing current events), a popular dating section, and Opposing Views (engaging with people opposing White nationalism). Over the course of my research I collected a 150-page corpus of chatroom conversation on the topics of gender, family, sexuality, and discussions of racial morality. I then conducted a discourse analysis of my findings to uncover themes regarding

these topics. For a variety of reasons I remained an observer to the website instead of a participant. Becoming a member, and thus developing a screen name and avatar, would signal ideological agreement with the movement and increase their perceived tally of supports, even if just by one. The opposing views forum on the site allows non-members to post, however in my observations I found anyone posing oppositional perspectives was labeled an *anti*, and that engaging with opposition was a key way that White supremacist ideology was cemented on the site. The online venue created a space where White supremacist stigmatized knowledge (Barkun 1998) became a value instead of a detriment in the increasingly multicultural US.

Instead of participating through creating my own online presence, I found that simply observing the site and the variety of conversations taking place there provided the best window into understanding this cyber culture. Through daily observations I was able to note frequent commentators and to see how the creation of online personae did the work of performing raced and gendered identities. Through daily observations in the site I also developed an awareness of the importance of this online community for reinforcing White supremacist ideology and a sense of community for participants. Through this time spent in the thick of the conversation about White nationalism I was a silent monitor. I observed as members polled each other on a variety of relevant and important questions such as: What is your gender?; Where do you live?; Is feminism evil?; Why do you care about race?; and many other issues of interest. Members would post questions asking others how they became involved in the movement or developed what they call racial awareness. Participants then offered the relevant data themselves for this study. To focus the research process, all postings were collected over this period that referenced gender, family, and sexuality. I became immersed in the online community and the boundaries of my research project were decided through my interaction with the data (Hine 2009).

Re-imagining the White Family in Cyberspace

Defending the normative family plays an important role in justifying violent racism on Stormfront. Valorizing the patriarchal, heterosexual, procreative family, constructing it as a racialized space of affection, love, and tenderness, provides the movement with the perception that instead of advocating racism, they are practicing love, a perspective repeated frequently throughout the site. White nationalists root their motivation for advocating White supremacy in dual projects of circulating stereotypes of people of color as inherently violent and criminal, alongside stereotypes of the White family as the center of an idealized, loving morality.

Feminism is frequently critiqued on the site as part of a Jewish conspiracy and as an attack on Whiteness. In the White nationalist imaginary women are important as mothers, as members of patriarchal family units, and as bearers of White children. Feminism is repeatedly critiqued on the site as encouraging women to achieve independence, to see themselves outside of the family unit, and to forgo having children. As one member writes, “The displacement of our traditional family structure has been our enemy’s most powerful weapon against us” (Statzel 2006, p.29). White nationalists believe in an anti-Semitic conspiracy they call ZOG, meaning a belief that a *Zionist Occupation Government* is organizing to destroy White people, and this conspiracy is often referred to as the “enemy.” Feminism is additionally blamed as a Jewish conspiracy. In the *Lounge Forum* a thread was posted asking why women are **attracted to White nationalism**. Several individuals with female avatars discussed the importance of biological reproduction. One member wrote, “if you have no children and desire no children, unless you are physically unable to bear/produce children, I personally will have a hard time taking you seriously as a WN” (Statzel 2006, p.29). Another responded, “EXACTLY! All this talk about preserving the White race, but not actually wanting to produce the next generation that will preserve us. I just don’t get it. I know I am thought ‘divisive’ with these beliefs but this sums it ALL up: Without the next generation of White children, our race WILL die and there will be nothing left to fight for” (ibid.)

Bearing children is thus seen as the most significant contribution women make to the White nationalist movement (see also Ferber 1998, 2004). This emphasis on biological reproduction also leads many White nationalists to oppose same-sex marriage. Another post in the *Lounge Forum* discussed the importance of marriage. One member wrote, "The whole promotion of gay marriage is just one more, of many attempts to destroy our society and redefine our definitions of right and wrong, so they can further weaken and demoralize us" (Statzel 2006, p. 31). A different member responded, "I'll tell you why queers should not be married, nor accepted. It's very simple. Marriage isn't about the two people involved, whether they're queer or straight. It's about the children such a union would produce, and/or care for" (Statzel 2006, p. 31).

Bearing children is also widely celebrated on the site. One discussion thread began with Mrs. Badger, the member name of a frequent contributor, sharing a birth announcement and photos of a new baby (Statzel 2008). Over 60 responses congratulated her. Zoe, a member with a pixie-esque drawing of a young women as an avatar, responded, "He's absolutely beautiful, MrsB. You have a knack for pregnancy & childbirth. Can I borrow you for, say, 9 ½ months?" (Statzel 2008, p. 416). "FightforWhitey," another prominent member, responded, "Congrats Mrs. Badger! You are a credit to your race. And one tough Moma [sic]. Alot of women couldn't have done that the way you did. You are an inspiration" (Statzel 2008, p. 416). FightforWhitey's post contained two sets of smiley-faces clinking tiny beer glasses in a toast. The ability to choose one's avatar and screen name, and to use emoticons in personal communication creates a feeling of intimacy and valorization for members of this community. These personalized elements work together to create support for individuals living out White nationalist ideals.

This type of analysis is important as the ideological celebration of the normative family has actual impacts on families. One concrete example from this research is that I found several discussions on the site dedicated

to discussions about White family members who engaged in inter-racial relationships. Members ask for advice and seek support about a child, sibling, or friend who is dating a person of color, or who has biracial children with a person of color. Stormfront members complain that these interracial relationships bring discomfort to their White families. This online community consistently provided support for discriminating against the person of color, providing advice on how to attempt to break up these relationships. Individuals were even encouraged to reject their grandchildren or other family members if they were mixed race, and, at least from their postings online, many White nationalists followed this advice and only recognized family members so long as they were phenotypically White.

Studying this site for its discussion of the family is useful for a number of reasons. First, this conspiratorial, dispersed movement is challenging to gain access to as a researcher, and conducting offline research comes with its own attendant set of risks that are difficult to navigate. The elaborated discussion on the site provided a window into the beliefs and ideology of movement members. Second, this imagined community could not exist without access to online venues. While many members of Stormfront participate in local White supremacist organizations, not all do. And the site functions to provide a variety of social goods which members come to depend on. Given that overt White supremacist activism and ideas are critiqued in most popular media venues, Stormfront provides an elaborate network to reinforce and justify White supremacist beliefs, along with strategies for cultivating the sense of being part of an online community with attendant benefits in terms of new relationships and feelings of self-worth (Statzel 2008). Feminists should also be interested in this analysis as it shows that discussions about family can often be connected to other cultural forces, such as racism and nationalism, that are not always recognized when analyzing discourse about the family. This analysis of discussion of the family on Stormfront shows the ways that the family can function ideologically to connect ideas about race, gender, nationalism, and belonging. The broader implication being: when we talk about the

family we often touch on broader cultural and political identities and imaginaries to varying affect.

Conclusion

It is self-evident for many of us that new media technologies have changed the world we find ourselves in, along with how we understand and interact with the world. However scholars disagree on whether our participation in digital ecologies matters, how it matters, to what extent, and with what wider repercussions. The dispersed nature of individual, localized engagements with potentially global cyber cultures also provides new challenges for researchers, as our social and cultural worlds have adopted to our new media landscape more rapidly than our research methods have. As Coleman (2010) writes, "Despite the massive amount of data and new forms of visibility shored up by computational media, many of these worlds remain veiled, cloaked, and difficult to decipher" (p. 498). The proliferation of digital cultures also provides researchers with new opportunities, both to access our subject matter and to develop innovative and expanded methodologies. Many if not most families are already affected by their engagement with new media. Feminist scholars who include a sensitivity to digital ecologies in their studies of families will be rewarded with new insights, and possibly new data that tells a more nuanced story of the worlds that families both reside in, and give shape to. As my case study on the family in a White nationalist chatroom shows, new media also provide a forum for the study of how normative ideas about families are produced and to what affect. In conclusion, I will agree with Coleman (2010), that given the complex and variable meaning of cyber cultures, "Long-term ethnographic research is well suited to tease out some of these veiled dimensions" (498).

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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No original new research is published in this article, rather the article involves a review of previously published literature, therefor informed consent documentation is not required.

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