

How Social Media Users Negotiate Self-Censorship in the Online Public Sphere

by

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Abstract

Research about the public sphere and social media often focus on what is being posted, rather than examining what is being omitted or why. The aim of this research is to explore this gap by providing ethnographic, qualitative research on how social media users negotiate self-censorship while engaging in the online public sphere.

Keywords: Social media; ethnography; public sphere; self-censorship

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents for a lifetime of encouragement, my friends (especially Mela, Sherwin & Beth) for always having time to talk about my ideas, and to my partner, Bernard, for his love and support.

I would also like to thank the people who participated in this research. I am very grateful for your willingness to share this glimpse into your lives with us.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Consider the following story about Max, a 28 years old man who recently immigrated to Canada. He works in the food service industry and described himself as working class. His passion is talking to and mobilizing others about political and environmental issues, especially climate change. When we met for the first time to discuss how he used social media for these endeavours, he excitedly told me about an image that was widely shared earlier that year. Max's friend had taken a photo of him and superimposed an inspirational quote from one of his blog posts. At the bottom, his friend put Max's full name and the title "activist and blogger." His friend then shared this image on a Facebook page for people with progressive politics. By the time I saw the image on Facebook, it had close to 8,000 likes and had been shared 3,200 times. Max said the image had also been retweeted countless times on Twitter.

The image, which he referred to as a meme, urged people to put aside their political differences and work together to fight climate change. Although Max was excited about how far the image spread, he was most enthusiastic about the conversations it inspired. One of these was with Max's co-worker, who had seen the meme online. Max told me, "There was a guy at work that I didn't talk to. He's only 19. He seemed to me to be quite cocky and just not interested in politics. But one day, he came up to me and he said, 'I've seen your meme on Facebook. Are you a political activist?'" After that initial conversation, Max started inviting his co-worker to organizing meetings and meeting with him outside of work to talk about politics. He said, "Without that meme, maybe nothing like that would have happened."

This story is one example of the many ways that people are using social media to talk about issues that are important to them. According to statistics released by Facebook, Max is among the 19 million Canadians who access their Facebook accounts at least once a month – over half of this country's population (Oliveira, 2013). In British

Columbia, where Max lives and my research was conducted, social media usage is higher. A survey by the market research company Insights West reports that 67% of adults in British Columbia use Facebook at least once a week — 21% for Twitter (Brown, 2013).

Some social media creators and supporters hoped that sites like Facebook and Twitter would provide people with new ways to engage in public discourse, as they did for Max. These promises recall Habermas' concept of the public sphere as "a new opening in the social and political fabric of Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries" (Poor, 2005). Habermas believed that people who had previously not been able to participate in public debate or democracy were able to meet and discuss ideas in newly formed salons and coffee shops. He believed that this new public sphere was open to everyone, as personal differences such as race, gender or class were set aside and everyone was considered as equals. The conversations that took place were critical, rational debates where ideas were presented in a logical, disinterested manner. The focus was on developing a consensus how to achieve the common good for the world at large. As will be demonstrated in this thesis, researchers and activists often use this idealized version of the public sphere when debating how discussions about political and environmental issues should be conducted on social media.

Habermas' critics believe that this version public sphere most likely never existed, and even if it had, it would not have been desirable. Fraser (1990) writes that women, non-propertied men and people of all racialized ethnicities were excluded from the public sphere of the 1700 and 1800s — as they still often are today. She also argues that a singular public sphere is not beneficial for these groups, as deliberative processes tend to favor those in power. Instead *subaltern counterpublics* are important places for subordinate groups to have discussions amongst themselves before bringing issues to the larger public sphere. This theoretical perspective is helpful for understanding why some people do not seek large, general audiences when discussing political and environmental issues. As will be discussed in this thesis, some prefer to tweet with those who share similar beliefs or post on Tumblrs where their identities can be partially obscured.

Despite the potential for social media to play a role in public discourse, not all social media users feel they can speak as openly. Hampton et al. (2014) found people were more willing to share their opinions on social media if they thought their audience would agree with them (p. 3). In their research about self-censorship on Facebook, Sleeper et al. (2013) developed five categories for the reasons participants did not share something on Facebook, including not wanting to start an argument and not wanting to offend anyone. In another study, Das and Kramer (2013) found that 71% of users exhibited some level of last minute self-censorship during their 17-day research period. They speculated that all users would exhibit this behaviour if the research period were long enough. Self-censorship is the act of suppressing speech out of fear or deference to perceived sensibilities of others without overt pressure from a specific authority to do so. When referring to social media use in a more open country like Canada, self-censorship most often refers to people withholding their privately held attitudes for self-imposed reasons, such norms, morals or decency. Social media presents an opportunity to broaden opportunities for public discourse. However, the ability for people to use social media in this way is affected by the desire to self-censor in order to avoid criticism or other negative outcomes.

This research will explore the following question: how do social media users negotiate self-censorship while engaging in the online public sphere? Research about self-censorship and social media is still in its infancy and is usually focused on general social media use, rather than people choosing to engage in the public sphere. Research about the public sphere and social media also often focuses on what is being posted, rather than examining what is being omitted or why. The aim of this research is to explore this gap by providing ethnographic, qualitative research on how social media users negotiate self-censorship while engaging in the online public sphere.

In this thesis, I chose to write in highly narrative and descriptive style. This decision was guided by my use of social media ethnography as the method of inquiry. Ethnography prioritizes observation as its primary source of information, making it ideal for this type of research. Although I asked participants to describe their online activities and motivations, the most revealing part of the research was often what people actually did online. Social media ethnography is an emerging practice based on Hine's (2008)

virtual ethnography. Virtual ethnography often focuses on earlier Internet technologies like static websites and email. Social media ethnography incorporates Web 2.0 technologies like Facebook and Twitter, while also acknowledging that it is impossible to decenter the researcher's experiences. Postill and Pink (2012) describe social media "as a messy fieldwork environment that crosses online and offline worlds, and is connected and *constituted through the ethnographer's narrative*" (p. 126). As such, I wrote much of this thesis in the first person, describing what I saw on social media and recalling stories told to me by participants — all while striving to be aware of my own position as a participant observer. My purpose as a researcher is not to disseminate an objective truth, but to organize my observations and apply theoretical concepts in a way that produces new insights and meaning.

In this thesis, I will argue that social media users perform self-censorship based on a compromise between which audiences they would like to reach and what negative repercussions they anticipate. In this research, some participants wanted to reach a very broad audience online, while others wanted to primarily engage with others who shared their beliefs. Some had no or very few concerns about engaging in the public sphere. Others had concerns about potential criticism; consequences for their public image; possible impact on their employment; concerns about government surveillance; fear of threats and violence; and a general mistrust of social media platforms. These considerations often impacted what they chose to say in the online public sphere.

This thesis begins by discussing some of the core concepts and reviewing the existing literature about social media, the public sphere and self-censorship. Next, I will discuss my research design, including my approach to social media ethnography and my strategies for recruiting participants and conducting fieldwork. I will then share the data analysis that I arrived at by performing three levels of coding: open, axial and selective. The thesis will conclude with a discussion of my findings and a look at some of the significant contributions of this research.

Chapter 2. Core Concepts and Theoretical Framework

Social Media, Social Networking Sites and Web 2.0

In an increasingly networked society, social media is a significant way in which Internet-connected citizens engage with the world. At the time of this research, Facebook had over 1.35 billion active users; Instagram had 300 million; and Twitter had 284 million; (“Company Info”, 2015; “About Twitter,” 2015; “300 Million”, 2015). The steady growth and immense popularity of these SNSs (social networking sites) is part of a larger trend of Web 2.0 and social media, including the growth of user-generated media and online collaboration. This section of the literature review will explore how researchers have defined social networking sites and social media, as well as larger social and technological trends in digital culture.

In an article about the history of social networking sites, danah boyd and Nicole Ellison (2007) define SNSs as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and 3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 211). Although the phrase ‘social networking site’ has the word “networking” in it, boyd and Ellison stress that people are not using these sites in the traditional sense of networking, as in initiating relationships between strangers. What makes SNSs unique is that they allow people to connect with others they already know. This article outlines not only this general definition of SNSs, but also a brief history of SNSs from 1997-2006. The authors highlight the rise in popularity of Friendster in 2002, as well as its rapid decline due to “a combination of technical difficulties, social collisions, and a rupture of trust between users and the site” (p. 216). This decline created space for other profile-centric SNSs to compete for Friendster’s former users. At the time of publishing their article, the most popular site in

the United States was MySpace. MySpace “differentiated itself by regularly adding features based on user demand,” whereas Friendster regularly blocked its users from using the site in unintentional, innovative ways (p. 217). Boyd and Ellison also discuss how different SNSs continued to grow in popularity to serve populations in other countries and different niche communities, such as certain ethnic groups or religious communities. Although the particular SNSs people use have continued to evolve since this article was published, boyd and Ellison’s definition of SNSs is still relevant today.

For example, a recent article, “Understanding Facebook: Social Computing Isn’t ‘Just’ Social” (Lampe and Ellison, 2012) also focuses on the importance of SNSs in connecting people who already know each other offline. They argue that Facebook was one of the first large scale social networking sites that prompted “people to create profiles using their real names rather than pseudonyms” (p. 98). When Facebook launched in 2004, the site initially limited membership to individuals at certain universities, which meant that those registering for the site already had a web of connections with classmates they knew offline. According to Cliff Lampe and Nicole Ellison, this pre-established network and the encouragement to use their real names created a situation that had a powerful impact in how people interacted online. It made Facebook a place where people were more likely to “maintain existing offline ties instead of meeting new people online and forming relationships with them based on mutual interests” (p. 98). The researchers also found that Facebook use increased users’ social capital, or the benefits people derive from maintaining interpersonal relationships.

Many authors consider social networking sites to be part of a wider trend in digital communications. Andrea Kaplan and Michael Haenlein (2010) describe SNSs as a type of social media, a phrase that describes collections of user-created-content such as blogs, collaborative projects such as Wikipedia, content communities sites such as YouTube and virtual worlds such as Second Life. They argue social media was made possible by two other trends in digital culture, Web 2.0 and user-generated content. Web 2.0 as a term was first used in 2004 to describe how people began to use the Internet in a way where content was “continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion” rather than content mainly being published as individuals (p. 61). While Web 2.0 represents the “ideological and technological foundation” of this change,

user-generated content describes how people use social media (p. 61). Kaplan and Haenlein define user-generated content as creative content that has been created outside of a professional environment and is available to the public or to a select group of people online. Using these two terms, they define social media as a “group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (p. 61). Although they argue that definitive classifications of types of social media are not possible, given the ever-changing digital environment, they loosely define SNSs as a type of social media that requires a high level of self-presentation and self-disclosure in an environment that has a medium-level of media richness.

A particularly influential book, *Convergence Culture*, by Henry Jenkins (2008) also focuses on the importance of user participation in digital culture. Jenkins discusses some of the cultural shifts towards user-generated content in the mid-2000s that Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) also describe. He discusses several instances of media convergence, which he defines as the flow of information across various multiple platforms. Each chapter of his book focuses on a case study about popular culture. For example, in one chapter he discusses how Harry Potter inspired many people to write fan fiction and share their work online with other fans. Part of what makes this convergence possible is what Jenkins calls “participatory culture.” Instead of fans simply reading novels or watching movies, the Internet has enabled ordinary people to share media they create. As Jenkins argues, “Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands” (p. 2). Jenkins cautions that not all participants are equal, as corporations still have considerably more power than average consumers. Jenkins believes that although participatory culture and convergence culture begin with popular culture, the impacts of what people are learning and how their behaviour is changing may have wide-ranging effects. He writes, “The skills we acquire through play may have implications for how we learn, work, participate in the political process, and connect with other people around the world” (p. 23). Jenkins is open to the possibility of seeing how the participatory nature of social media and convergence culture may influence other realms, including the political process.

The Public Sphere

For a number of reasons, this investigation of social media is framed by the concept of the public sphere. First, as Nicholas Garnham argues, the concept of the public sphere remains resilient and influential, and “continues to be a major thematic perspective in media analysis” (2007, p. 201) Second, conducting research for my thesis, has made it clear that while much of the literature concerned with the relation between the public sphere and communication studies has focused principally on traditional media, the application of the concept of the public sphere to new media (such as social media) is an emerging area of research (Gustafsson, 2011). Finally, the ongoing debates between the normative, modernist approach to the public sphere (as described by Jürgen Habermas) and its postmodern critiques provide an informative lens through which to examine questions such as “What is political participation?” and “What is democracy?” The ways in which authors describe the public sphere often have a significant impact on how they understand the potential for the Internet to be used for political communication, sometimes even more than their views about technology itself.

Although many researchers have written about the public sphere, Jürgen Habermas’ perspective is the most influential as the originator of the concept. In *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas (1989) explains how during the late eighteenth century, a new political class emerged in Britain, the bourgeois. Public spaces, such as libraries, salons and coffeehouses, became new spaces for the bourgeois to debate important topics, away from the traditional authorities of the church and state. Before this time, the mind was primarily used in service of a patron who financed the creation of art or literature. In these new bourgeois public spaces, “‘opinion’ became emancipated from the bonds of economic dependence” and issues about business, culture and politics could be freely discussed (Habermas, 1989, p. 33). According to Habermas, there are a few key features of this public sphere. One is that the public sphere was open to everyone as speakers, listeners, writers and readers. Personal status or individual differences were to be bracketed so that conversations would take place between “equals.” Another was the importance of critical, rational debate. Rather than allow emotions or personal biases to influence discussions, debate would focus on ideas presented in a disinterested, logical way. The focus of these

discussions would be to work towards developing shared public opinion about how to achieve the common good. This exchange of ideas was the way in which ordinary people could influence the political process and was essential for a healthy democracy. Small, non-commercial newspapers were an important part of the establishment and creation of the public sphere. Although Habermas acknowledges that this idealized version of the public sphere only existed for a short period of time (and many of his critics do not believe this version was particularly ideal), the concept of the public sphere remains an important theoretical tool for understanding the role of media in democracy.

A number of researchers have critiqued and expanded on Habermas' public sphere, further extending its usefulness as an analytical tool. In this literature review, I will limit my discussion to some of the most influential from a range of perspectives, including: "Habermas and The Public Sphere" by Nicholas Garnham (2007), *Jürgen Habermas* by Luke Goode (2005), "Rethinking the Public Sphere" by Nancy Fraser (1990) and *The Public Sphere* by Alan McKee (2005).

Nicholas Garnham provides historical context to Habermas' original text as well as his own critique of three books included in this review. Garnham argues that is important to consider what was motivating Habermas' thinking while he was writing *Structural Transformation*. He writes, "Coming to intellectual maturity in West Germany in the immediate aftermath of the cataclysmic fall of the Nazi regime and the Holocaust, the central problem facing any responsible German intellectual was how to construct a viable democracy" (p. 203). Therefore, he argues the public sphere should be seen as a way to think about the problem of democracy, also demonstrating how Habermas' later work also focused on this subject. Garnham offers a defense of Habermas from some of his critics, including McKee (2005) and Crossley and Roberts (2004). For example, Garnham defends Habermas' critique of the welfare state by explaining it as a "common position among radical progressives" at the time. Garnham also argues that Habermas has already acknowledged many of his critics' comments about *Structural Transformation*. For example, Habermas has conceded that his historical account of eighteenth century Britain may not be entirely accurate and that multiple public spheres can exist. Overall, Garnham argues Habermas' vision of the public sphere is still

significant today, but the historical and cultural context of his writing including the year (1989) that the book was translated into English need to be considered.

Luke Goode (2005) states in the introduction to his book that his purpose in writing is to give an overview of Habermas' critical theory as well as the context of subsequent developments in his thinking. Goode hopes that by doing so, he can show how the concept of the public sphere can be brought forward intellectually and politically. In the first chapters of his book, he reviews the public sphere, as well as some of the critical responses to *Structural Transformation* and an overview of Habermas' subsequent research. The fourth chapter is the most relevant to this research, as Goode looks outward and considers the role of media in discourses about the public sphere including the Internet. Goode acknowledges that Habermas may not be much of an "e-mail junky" and he takes a skeptical approach to the role of technology in the public sphere (p. 106). Goode discusses some of the "digiphilia" of the 1990s that was effusive about the "radical potential of new digital media" by promising to increase interactivity and media convergence (p. 108). He remains doubtful about these trends and does not think new technology will have any positive or lasting effects on political communication or analysis of the public sphere. He does not believe the public sphere should be analyzed in the abstract, but rather should include the broader socio-political and cultural context.

The remaining two pieces included in this review take a postmodern approach to Habermas' theory of the public sphere. Perhaps one of Habermas' most well-known critics, Nancy Fraser (1990) writes that the public sphere is "politically and theoretically important to those theorizing the limits of democracy in late capitalist societies" (p. 56). However, she also writes, "the specific form in which Habermas has elaborated this idea is not wholly satisfactory" (p. 57). She begins her essay by outlining four assumptions underlying the bourgeois conception of the public sphere. The first assumption is that the bourgeois public sphere required an ideal of unrestricted rational discussions that were open and accessible to all. However, in reality women, non-propertied men and people of all racialized ethnicities were excluded from the official public sphere. This leads to the second assumption of Habermas' theory, that the confinement of public life to "a single, overarching public sphere is a positive and desirable state of affairs" (p. 66). Fraser

challenges this assumption by noting that where societal inequality exists, deliberative processes will tend to favour dominant groups to the disadvantage of other subordinate groups. *Subaltern counterpublics* are important for women, workers, peoples of colour and gays and lesbians, as spaces in which they can discuss important issues amongst themselves before bringing these issues to the larger public sphere. The third assumption Fraser addresses is the notion that what is considered public (or of “common interest”) is a straightforward designation. She provides an example of domestic abuse, which was once considered a private issue until feminists succeeded in making this a public concern. Which topics are considered private and which are considered public is part of the deliberative process. The fourth assumption she identifies is that the public sphere requires a separation between civil society and the state. Fraser writes that this implies “a system of limited government and laissez-faire capitalism” is necessary for a well-functioning public sphere (p. 74). Although Fraser does not explicitly develop a new theory of the post-bourgeois public sphere, her feminist, postmodern criticisms undermine the Habermasian public sphere as a normative ideal.

Alan McKee (2005) also takes a post-modern, critical approach to his analysis of the public sphere by illustrating how different social movements can introduce positive cultural differences into the public sphere. For example, he describes how women’s issues can often be dismissed as trivial and not relevant to the official public sphere. However, feminist publications such as *Ms.* magazine work to bring these issues into the public sphere and advocate for non-state forms of political action on women’s issues. As McKee writes, “Many of the trivial issues that were politicized and publicized in this way related not to official political rights, or to material goods, but to what we might call ‘cultural goods’ – the right to be treated well” (p. 45). In this way, McKee is arguing to expand the notion of what is considered a public concern or political participation to include non-state related political action. Garnham (2007), who takes a modern approach, argues that McKee is claiming to “redefine democracy to mean something other than representative politics ruling a unified polity” (p. 207). Neither author disputes that this is what McKee is trying to accomplish — Garnham simply sees this as negative development and McKee sees it as a positive one. In the remaining chapters of his book, McKee continues to connect issues such as commercialization, spectacle, fragmentation

and apathy to social movements such as working class, Black, LGBTQ and youth cultures while arguing that the particular issues these groups brings to the public sphere broadens the scope of what is considered public and political in a positive way. He argues throughout his book that cultural politics have political importance:

If we accept the arguments made by new social movements that cultural politics is real, then it makes sense to argue that the consumption of culture is part of the political process. And 'post-modern' thinkers, far from seeing an apathetic population, passively consuming the public sphere, in fact see the most informed and engaged political citizenry that has existed in the recorded history of humanity. (p. 187)

This argument is relevant to this thesis, as it can be argued that one of the ways that people passively consume media is through surfing the Internet. Using McKee's analysis, it would be possible to argue that reading, commenting and liking posts on a SNS can be in certain contexts at certain times a form of political communication, even action.

Online Public Spheres

The Internet

Limited research has been conducted on social media and social networking sites of the public sphere. Therefore, this section will include research that discusses both Internet-mediated communication, as well as some articles that specifically focus on social media and SNSs. I will begin by highlighting some of the most significant research about the Internet as a public sphere: "The Virtual Sphere" by Zizi Papacharissi (2002), "Expanding Dialogue" by James Bohman (2004), "Habermas' Heritage" by Pieter Boeder (2005), "The Public Sphere, Social Networks and Public Service Media" by Petros Iosifidis (2011) and "Is the Internet a Better Public Sphere?" by Jürgen Gerhards and Mike Schäfer (2010). Most of these articles take a cautious or even pessimistic view of the Internet as a new, improved or even existing public sphere. This is in contrast to a number of other works discussed that are rather more optimistic about the potential for social media to function as a public sphere.

Zizi Papacharissi's (2002) "The Virtual Sphere" was published over a decade ago as Web 2.0 was just beginning to emerge, and earlier than any other article included in this review. Although Papacharissi acknowledges that the Internet has developed as a new place for public discussion, she writes this did not necessarily mean it is a new public sphere: "It should be clarified that a new public space is not synonymous with a new public sphere. A virtual space enhances discussion; a virtual sphere enhances democracy" (p. 11). Paracharissi argues that the Internet replicates many of the same exclusionary problems of Habermas' bourgeois public sphere. She also writes that greater access to information online does not necessary mean that citizens are more willing to engage in political discussions. Much has changed since this article was published. The emergence of Web 2.0 and user-generated content has shifted the dynamics of the Internet away from static websites and towards more participatory use. Although issues of the digital divide still exist worldwide, computer and Internet use is much more widespread than it was when this article was written. However, this article remains relevant as a way of comparing how changes in digital culture and technology can effect the political possibilities of the Internet.

Similar to Papacharissi's (2002) argument, James Bohman (2004) speculates about what might be possible for the Internet as a public sphere, rather than describing what currently exists. He writes, "If we ask the question of whether or not electronic communication contributes to deliberation in representative institutions and to national public spheres, the answer is that more than likely it contributes little or even undermines them" (p. 131). However, he argues that when the political context is shifted and a "broader array of institutional alternatives are opened up to include transnational public spheres," the Internet may solve some of the difficulties of the offline public sphere. Any public sphere that might form would be a transnational sphere, rather than one anchored in a particular nation or state. In this context, he writes that if a new Internet-enabled, transnational public sphere emerges, it may be able to effect national democratic institutions and issues of global democracy.

"Habermas' Heritage" by Pieter Boeder (2005) is the third article included in this review that was written at the birth of Web 2.0 and the emergence of participatory culture. His take on the Internet and the public sphere is by far the most optimistic of the

three authors. He argues that the notion of the public sphere is subject to change and thus “the theoretical concept of the public sphere is being used to work out viable options for a digital future and models for positive change” (p.1). He reviews some of the skeptics’ arguments, such as the fear that digital communication is too commodified to be used for public discussion and that the potential lack of privacy and surveillance will be used to control and misinform citizens, thus eliminating deliberative discussion. However, he argues that others researchers see the potential for a digital public sphere. For example, he argues that new technologies are transforming every aspect of social life, so it is important to develop new “technopolitics” to support a digital public sphere. In his conclusion, Boeder argues that the public sphere has always been virtual, as its meaning lies in abstraction. If the traditional public sphere is threatened by power structures, perhaps the Internet may help people circumvent this control.

The remaining two articles about the Internet as a public sphere were published within the past five years, but are similarly cautious about the potential for the Internet to be a public sphere. Petros Isofidis argues that the “democratizing and empowering function of the Internet and the new social media is being exaggerated and represent technological optimism” (p. 620). He maintains that this is the result of a number of factors: that the participatory nature of the Internet can be chaotic, the probability of censorship, lack of inclusiveness, the commercial nature of much Internet communications and the likelihood of highly partisan communication. Isofidis takes a modernist approach to the public sphere, often measuring the potential for “critical rational debate” and advocating for the “globalization of the public sphere and public opinion” (p. 623). He focuses on static websites for political parties in general elections as a way to measure the capabilities of the Internet as a public sphere. In contrast to McKee (2005), who argues that sharing political views online could be interpreted as cultural (and also real) politics, Isofidis writes that people “sharing political news and joining a political cause or civil movement might simply imply a wish to broadcast their own activism to friends” (p. 627). By coming from a modernist perspective on the public sphere and a Web 1.0/non-participatory perspective of Internet, Isofidis argues that is unlikely the Internet can function as a public sphere.

Taking an empirical approach, Jürgen Gerhards and Mike Schäfer (2010) also find “minimal evidence to support the idea that the Internet is a better communication space as compared to print media” (p. 155). Their study compares two types of communication that have high levels of openness for participation and influence on society: print media and communication organized by search engines. They examine human genome research as covered by print mass media and on websites in order to compare what actors, evaluations and frames were present. They find that Internet communication does not differ greatly from the types of debate in offline print media. In addition to this empirical evidence to support the claim that the Internet does not function as a better public sphere, the authors also develop a framework for differentiating levels of political communication. They argue that interactions can be divided into three levels by the amount of openness for participation, organizational structure required and societal impact. In offline media, these three levels are: 1) everyday conversation between citizens, 2) public events, and 3) and mass media. Online, the parallel levels are: 1) email, chat and some blogs, 2) discussion boards and blogs with a wider readership, 3) mass media online. As online communication covers such a wide variety of interactions, these levels could be useful in other research projects discussing the Internet and the public sphere.

Social media

This review considers three arguments on the relationship of social media and the public sphere: “The Political Power of the Social Media” by Clay Shirky (2011), “Social Media as a New Public Sphere” by Tatiana Mazali (2011) and “From Spectacle to Spectacular” by Mohamed Nanabhay and Roxane Farmanfarmaian (2011). In contrast to the discussion of the Internet as a public sphere, these authors largely argue that social media can help more than they can hurt, perhaps even creating a better, more expansive, and certainly more decisive and impactful public sphere.

Approaching this issue from a policy perspective, Clay Shirky (2011) asks the question “How does the ubiquity of social media affect U.S interests, and how should U.S. policy respond to it?” (p. 28). Shirky writes that social media have become “coordinating tools for nearly all the world’s political movements,” the powerful impact of

which is evidenced by the fact that most authoritarian governments (and even some democratic ones) have tried to limit access to these tools (p. 28). For example, he describes one way in which social media can be an influential tool is by promoting “shared awareness” of an important cause or situation through social networks. Citing Zuckerman’s Cute Cat Theory of Digital Activism (2008), Shirky argues it makes sense to invest in social media technology in general rather than tools to promote governance exclusively, as places that have both political and apolitical communication have much greater reach and possibly even protection from censorship. Although Shirky acknowledges some people feel that social media are used for “slactivism”, he says that the use of social media for this purpose does not negate the fact that other people use it effectively. He writes, “The freedom of personal and social communication among a state’s population should be the highest priority, closely followed by securing the individual citizen’s ability to speak in public” (p. 41). He advocates that the U.S. government should work to ensure Internet freedom worldwide, while raising the question of how to ensure social media companies also support freedom of speech for their users.

The other arguments that address social media as a public sphere are empirically orientated. Tatiana Mazali (2011) writes about her research on megaphone.net, an online platform that was used to create specific projects for communities such as “Madrid prostitutes, Sao Paulo motoboys and motogirls, Mexico city drivers and persons with limited mobility in Barcelona and Geneva” (p. 291). The site allowed users to upload videos, photos and text as well as connect with other users. Mazali describes this tool as a “new active public sphere” because it is a place for social criticism that affects “real” communities (p. 291). She describes megaphone.net as a “reinvention of public sphere,” which she defines as:

a place/space being independent from any institution; a form of public life, or civil society that performs its constitutive function of criticism; a form of open public space in which new symbols, new images and new shapes of social and collective identity appear. (p. 291)

She argues what helps make megaphone.net a public sphere is the participatory nature of the site, which she describes as a culture where people believe their contributions matter and people feel connected to others. It also helps to activate the

agency of already existing social relationships, which is why the project has strong political outcomes.

In the final article about social media, Mohamed Nanabhay and Roxane Farmanfarmaian (2011) investigate YouTube videos about the Egyptian uprising in 2011. Focusing on videos posted during 18 days of the revolution, the researchers analyze who created the videos (citizens or mainstream media); what trends emerged in regards to number of views; who links to the videos; and if and where the content was repurposed. Among their findings, Nanabhay and Farmanfarmaian discover that citizen videos accounted for 15% more views than videos produced by mainstream media (p. 584). Both citizen and mainstream media videos often recycled each other's footage by sampling, reediting, linking to each other's content. The researchers argue that this is an example of an "amplified public sphere." They write, "activists on the street fed information onto social networks and to the mainstream media, which was then diffused nationally and internationally, further emboldening the protesters, strengthening their resolve, increasing their numbers and spreading their message" (p. 574). The researchers argue this was an example of citizens who reached the public directly without the mainstream media, and who had a real world political impact.

Social Networking Sites

The final two articles in this review address SNSs, a specific type of social media: "This Time It's Personal" by Nils Gustafsson (2010) and "Facebook as a Tool for Producing Sociality and Connectivity" by José van Dijck (2011). In his research, Gustafsson argues that social networks and Internet-mediated communication enhance the importance of what he calls *viral politics*. Viral politics are defined as "the rapid sharing of evoking media content in social networks online in the realm of political and social activism" (p. 9). He argues that the focus on these types of messages might be interpreted as an "emergence of a new political elite rather than mass participation" (p. 4). Using Putnam's classical model of political stratification, he writes that society is divided into six strata ranging from decision makers and those closest to them (political elites) to the majority of citizens who simply vote or do not participate at all. The emergence of participatory media such as SNSs allows some people to temporarily

obtain more political power than they otherwise could. Although this is a positive development in some ways, as it allows more people to become political elites or activists, it still largely reinforces the traditional inequality in political participation. Gustafsson argues that although the emergence of temporal elites (activists with limited influence on certain fields with unpredictable success) and viral politics may save democracy, “what will be saved is not the egalitarian ideal model of democracy, but the elitist realist model we actually live in” (p. 15).

José Van Dijck (2011) uses Facebook as an example to ask whether social media “warrant identification of a new *public* sphere, another *private* sphere, or a different *corporate* sphere,” three categories of social formation first identified by Habermas (p. 161). Although van Dijck discusses social media in general, his use of Facebook as a specific example that is particularly pertinent to this analysis. While van Dijck maintains that Habermas’ public sphere is still a useful analytical tool, he argues that it does not make sense to call sites such as Facebook new or expanded public spheres. In particular, he notes that Internet-mediated communication is too complex to simply argue that SNSs blur different types of spheres (public, private, corporate). For example, he argues that any personal information on Facebook may become publically available at any time, even if it was originally understood to be private, thus making the traditional private-public dichotomy very fuzzy. Instead, van Dijck believes that research should highlight “how communicative practices are mediated and how social media platforms foster connections between people, things, and ideas” (p. 172). In this way, he argues that one can research social media platforms as a consequence of culture, where “networked publicity strategies mediate the norms for sociality and connectivity” (p. 172).

Critical perspectives have clearly struck a more optimistic note with the emergence of social media, and the capacities of social media to function as a public sphere. The works reviewed here demonstrate precisely the change in perspective from analyses of Internet-mediated communication to analyses of social media. One explanation is that several of the articles included in the Internet section were written prior to or at the very beginning of Web 2.0 (Boeder, 2005; Bohman, 2004; Papacharissi, 2002). At this point, the Internet was mostly static content created by professionals or

those knowledgeable enough to write web code. This is a very different landscape than has emerged with social media, making producing and consuming content much more accessible. In contrast, another reason for the optimistic outlook for social media as a public sphere may be that this media is still developing and literature about it may be indicative of a technological optimism. Similar to Howard Rheingold's unbridled optimism about the Internet in the early 1990s (as seen in *The Virtual Community*), perhaps authors such as Mazali (2011), Shirky (2011) and Nanabhai and Farmanfarmanian (2011) can be taken to task for somewhat inflated claims about the potential of new media. One can also argue, as Gustafsson writes, "soon enough, the technologies will become so ubiquitous that they turn invisible to us" and research establishing the connection between social media and democracy will diminish (p. 6). Additional research and additional hindsight will help uncover on which of these explanations is the most relevant.

Self-censorship and Social Media

Self-censorship is the act of suppressing speech out of fear or deference to perceived sensibilities of others without overt pressure from a specific person or institution to do so. In contrast, censorship is the suppression of speech at the direction of an authority, such as the government. Speech can be widely interpreted to include anything from books and newspaper articles to videos, photos and podcasts. Self-censorship is a concept that is often used in research examining what forces impact journalists, especially in a global context. However, it can also be used to describe people's behaviour in social media. In this thesis, self-censorship refers to a situation in which someone wants to post something, but consciously decides not because of out of regard to other people's perceived preferences¹.

¹ In some situations, this could be analogous to Foucault's panopticon where control is maintained through the visible yet unverifiable surveillance. In this theory, responsibility for enforcement is downloaded onto the individual rather than relying on action from a central authority.

Although self-censorship in social media has not been widely researched, related work provides context for this thesis. Philip Cook and Conrad Heilmann's (2013) discussion of two types of self-censorship, public and private, is particularly relevant to this research. They write, "We suggest that *public self-censorship* refers to a range of individual reactions to a public censorship regime. ... *Private self-censorship* is the suppression by an agent of his or her own attitudes where a public censor is either absent or irrelevant" (p. 179). This distinction is important as much research about self-censorship often focuses on external censors, such as the government, restricting speech. However, private self-censorship is a common type of censorship when using social media in a more open country such as Canada. Private self-censorship captures the behaviour of a person suppressing their privately held attitudes for self-imposed reasons, such norms, morals or decency.

Cook and Heilmann also discuss the effectiveness of censorship. Self-censors can have two kinds of attitudes: those that are privately held and those that they express publicly. Depending on how public and private views align, Cook and Heilmann argue that an individual can respond with 'perfect alignment', 'perfect non-alignment', and various forms of 'weak alignment' between their privately held and publically expressed beliefs. In the case of perfect alignment, a self-censor strongly expresses publicly what she believes privately. This may be either because she shares the censor's beliefs or opposes them. Perfect non-alignment describes when a self-censor's publicly expressed beliefs are directly opposed to what he privately believes. For example, this may describe a very cautious individual who fears consequences for even expressing indifference to the censor's views. Weak alignment usually refers to when an individual feels or expresses indifference, for example when an individual appears indifferent about an issue publicly but opposes it privately.

Two researchers have directly addressed self-censorship and social media. Manya Sleeper et al. (2013) conducted qualitative research exploring the reasons why people self-censor posts on Facebook. Sauvik Das and Adam Kramer (2013) approached their research quantitatively by collecting data from 3.9 million Facebook users to explore last minute self-censorship. The research conducted by Das and Kramer was conducted in collaboration with Facebook, which allowed them to secure

access to such a large amount of user data. They found that 71% of users exhibited some level of last minute self-censorship during the 17-day research period, but they speculate that with a longer observation period, that all users would have employed this behaviour (p. 125). What Sleeper et al. found surprising was how much content was censored at the last moment. They found that 33% of all posts and 13% of all comments were not shared within ten minutes of beginning to compose them, which was their operational definition of self-censorship. Different people censored more than others, depending on what they were sharing and with whom. Sleeper et al. write, "People censor more when their audience is hard to define and people censor more when the relevance or topicality of a CMC 'space' is narrower" (p. 125). It is more difficult to conceptualize the audience for posts, as they are "undirected projections," which is why the researchers believe more posts are censored than comments. They also found that posts directed towards a specific group were censored substantially more than posts on a friend's timelines or in events. Das and Kramer believe this is because far fewer topics are relevant to smaller, targeted groups of people.

Through qualitative research, Sleeper et al. (2013) explore possible explanations for why people self-censor social media posts. They asked 18 participants to report all content they thought about sharing before deciding not to post on Facebook over a seven-day period. They subsequently interviewed some participants about their reasons for not sharing posts. Sleeper et al. found that primary reasons for not sharing content fell into one or more of five categories:

- Argumentation/discussion: Didn't want to start or participate in an argument or discussion
- Offend: Didn't want to offend or hurt someone
- Boring/repetitive: Felt the content was redundant, boring, or not interesting enough
- Presentation of self: Felt the content went against the way the participant wanted to present him/herself (e.g. "seemed silly" or "don't like to post that kind of thing").
- Inconvenient: Prevent from posting due to time or technology (e.g. location made it difficult to post) (p. 797)

Especially relevant to this research is what Das and Kramer observed about political content. They found that about half of content they coded as political was not shared

because participants did not want to participate in an argument or fight (p. 797). Participants also said they would have shared about half of the self-censored content given the ability to better target specific audiences for their posts (p. 800). However, some participants said they found Facebook's privacy settings too complicated to use. Others said they did not trust Facebook to maintain their privacy settings.

Research about political participation self-censorship is also relevant to this research. Andrew Hayes, Dietram Scheufele and Michael Hoge (2006) discuss how nonparticipation can be a form of self-censorship in offline settings. Hampton et al. (2014) explore how social media affects the tendency for those holding minority opinions to refrain from sharing their thoughts. Both articles frame their arguments using the "spiral of silence theory" (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). This theory argues that people refrain from expressing their beliefs if they believe others do not share their opinions and from a fear of being isolated from others. Hayes et al. argue most forms of political participation involve a public form of expression, with the exception of voting. Self-censorship can be used as a way of avoiding the negative opinions of others that can result from advocating an unpopular decision. Hayes et al. argue that "the combative, argumentative and divisive tone of politics may inhibit public forms of political participation more so among those who are particularly averse to volatile social situations" (p. 261).

This research was conducted before the advent of Web 2.0, participatory culture and widespread social media use. Keith Hampton et al. (2014) have explored how social media affects this tendency for someone to self-censor when they believe their own point of view is not widely shared. Hampton et al. write, "Some social media creators and supporters have hoped that social platforms ... might produce different enough discussion venues that those with minority views might feel freer to express their opinions, thus broadening public discourse" (p. 3). However, what Hampton et al. found is that the spiral of silence persists online. By conducting telephone interviews, researchers asked Americans questions about their willingness to discuss their opinions about a timely and controversial news story: Edward Snowden's 2013 revelations about the United States government's widespread surveillance of its own citizens. Hampton et al. found that people were less willing to discuss this story in social media than they were in person (p. 3). They also found that both offline and online, people were more

willing to share their opinions if they thought their audience would agree with them (p.3). Social media also did not provide an alternative platform to talk about this story for those who were not willing to discuss it in person (p. 3). Supporting the research of Das and Kramer (2013), they also found that people tend to self-censor rather than use audience selection tools provided by social networks to target messages at specific people (p. 25). This research provides an important background when exploring how participants negotiate openness and self-censorship in social media.

As discussed, research about self-censorship and social media is still in its infancy and is usually focused on general social media use, rather than people choosing to engage in the public sphere. Research about the public sphere and social media also often focuses on what is being posted, rather than examining what is being omitted or why. The aim of this research is to explore this gap by providing ethnographic, qualitative research on how social media users negotiate self-censorship while engaging in the online public sphere. This research will supplement the quantitative research about social media and self-censorship (such as Hampton et al.), by exploring how people make decisions about what to post and what not to in an in-depth, qualitative way.

Chapter 3. Research Design and Methodological Strategies

This chapter will detail the framework for inquiry chosen for this research, as well as describe my research methods and procedures. It will begin with an overview of why I chose ethnography and how I adapted components of both traditional off-line ethnography and virtual ethnography into the research design. The definition of the research setting will also be detailed, and this will include a discussion of some of the challenges of defining a research setting when research is not confined by the boundaries of a particular physical location or single social media site as a conventional ethnography might be. I will review my process for conducting fieldwork, including online participant observation and ethnographic interviews, and finally I will discuss my strategies for data analysis.

Why ethnography

When exploring how people negotiate openness and privacy online, ethnography offered the most appropriate approach in that it “gives priority to observation as its primary source of information” (Gobo, 2008, p. 5). Although I asked people to describe their online activities and the reasons behind their decisions during initial interviews, the most revealing part of the research was what people actually did while they were online. As I discovered, participants’ answers to interview questions sometimes differed from what I observed. According to la Pierre and Gilbert & Mulkay (as cited in Gobo, 2008), there is an oft-documented gap between attitudes and behaviours and what people say and do (p. 5). For example, many people described their activity on social media as more consistent than it was. Some posted less often than I thought they would from our initial conversations. Sometimes, people’s situations appeared much differently online than they were offline.

One afternoon, I was scanning the pictures that one participant had recently posted to Instagram. Interspersed between graphics of feminist memes (such as “Cats Against Cat Calls”), she had posted many selfies showing her wearing fashionable clothes and meticulously applied makeup. She seemed like the pinnacle of a happy, popular young person. As I was sitting at my desk wondering if I would get more likes if I posted more selfies, I received an email from her. She described how she was going through a “mental breakdown” and was feeling extremely overwhelmed by school and life. She said she was trying to wean herself off social media as she felt it was harmful to her mental health, and apologized for not giving me “much to work with” for this research. This disconnect between what I thought was happening in her life and how she felt was jarring, enough so that I shut down my computer and stopped observations for the day. For the first time, I had confirmed something I long suspected: I never really could know what was happening in the inner lives of my online connections. These and my other insights into my research questions would not have been possible if I had conducted interviews or done text analysis alone. Using an ethnographic framework for inquiry, I was able to develop relationships with people over time, observe what they were posting, participate with my own accounts, and ask questions both off and online. This helped me develop a deeper understanding of the social media landscape I was engaging with and the participants involved in my research.

Some researchers have questioned if online research can ever really be considered ethnographic. In *Doing Ethnography*, Giampietro Gobo (2008) writes:

It is difficult to associate [online research] with ethnography when it more closely resembles conversation analysis, discourse analysis, or more generally text analysis. ... The Internet ethnographer merely observes and analyzes the text that appears on the screen, without being able to meet the writers ... or have any perspective other than what the Internet people write about themselves. (p. 110)

However, this understanding of virtual ethnography is very much limited in scope. Virtual ethnographer Christine Hine agrees that watching without participating is probably not ethnography. She writes, “to lurk implies a lack of engagement and an ability to develop the in-depth understanding from the inside that ethnography requires” (Hine, 2008, p. 262). Hine describes how a researcher who was not participating would not, for

example, know how it felt to post something and wait to see if it ever received a reply. This lived experience as a participant observer is an important part of being able to understand what it is like to be part of an online environment. Online research usually requires more than just observation to be considered ethnography.

The idea of applying ethnographic techniques to online environments became popular in the 1990s, with the study of online social life and Web 1.0 technologies such as email, newsgroups, bulletin boards and MUDS (Hine, 2008, p. 258-9). In the mid-2000s with the rise of Web 2.0 technology, virtual ethnography began to explore the connections between offline and online spaces. As Hine wrote in 2008, “A key challenge for the future is to develop forms of ethnography that take seriously the social reality of online settings, whilst also exploring their embedding within everyday life” (p. 258). John Postill and Sarah Pink (2012) have built on this foundation of virtual ethnography to experiment with what they call *social media ethnography*. They write, “as social media practices cannot be defined as phenomena that take place exclusively online, we were concerned with Internet-related ethnography, rather than Internet ethnography” (p. 125). Building on Hine’s rejection of the idea that an Internet researcher is able to study bounded units, Postill and Pink write, “we can understand the Internet as a messy fieldwork environment that crosses online and offline worlds, and is connected and *constituted through the ethnographer’s narrative*” (p. 126). Due to the indistinct nature of online communities and their online-offline nature, Postill and Pink argue that social media ethnographers shift the focus from the study of communities to socialities. This approach focuses on the qualities of social relationships, rather than the problematic concept of being part of a “community.” Community can be interrogated in terms of its meaning to research participants, but is not an empirical unit that can be used in research. Pink (2009) writes that an ethnographer brings together diverse sources throughout the research process, creating the collection of things that are studied, rather than focusing on bounded or physical localities. Thus in social media ethnography, the research setting is a combination of both online and offline encounters, with digital traces of the researcher and her ethnographic process woven throughout.

In order to explore my research question, I modeled my research design on social media ethnography as described by Postill and Pink (2012). I began to

conceptualize my research setting in terms of understanding socialities, rather than looking for a discrete physical or online community. Martyn Hammersly and Paul Atkinson (2007) define an ethnographic setting as “a named context in which phenomena occur that may be studied from any number of angles” (p. 33). In many offline ethnographies, a setting is often a single physical location such as a hospital or school. In some virtual ethnographies, the idea of a research setting is transferred to a singular online place, such as a listserv or a particular social networking site. However, this research was about how people negotiate openness and self-censorship anywhere they were engaging in the online public sphere — a behaviour that spans various digital environments. For this reasons, I focused on digital socialites. This is a concept that allows the ethnographer to focus on behaviours, relationships and interactions as they move across different social networks and offline environments. In this model, behaviours are centered rather than a particular location. Therefore, I asked participants to share in shaping the research setting by asking them which of their accounts I should follow, rather than deciding ahead of time which social media sites I would include. Focusing on generic social processes (of negotiating openness & self-censorship) in this way will also hopefully give the results of this research some longevity, given that the results are not limited to one social media site that will eventually change or disappear. In order to provide focus and cohesiveness to my research, I recruited potential participants from small progressive social change organizations based in Victoria, BC. Although not all participants lived in Victoria throughout the four months of the observation period, they all were all connected enough to one of these predominantly offline social change organizations. The group of participants also ended up sharing connections in unexpected ways, which reinforced the idea of observing socialities rather than a discrete location. Sometimes participants were following the same people on Twitter or had joined the same Facebook groups. Sometimes I unexpectedly discovered that we shared mutual friends, which gave me pause to reflect on traces of myself as the ethnographer in this research. Another way in which I embraced social media ethnography was by designing research that included both the virtual and offline world. Not only did I follow social media postings, but I also talked with each person at least once, usually in person but sometimes over Skype.

Research Design

Now that I have provided a general overview of the guiding principles I followed in my research design, I will discuss the details of my recruitment process in further detail. I started this research by looking for a small group people who were 1) using social media and 2) were participating in the public sphere. These two criteria were independent variables, as I did not want to limit my participant pool to people who were only engaging in these topics online. I believed it was also important to talk to social media users who cared deeply about participating in these types of dialogues, but mostly did so offline. Noting the absence of certain kinds of online conversations was an important part of this research as much as observing what was posted. As Hayes et al. (2006) argue, nonparticipation in political communication is a type of self-censorship. I began my recruitment by contacting small progressive social change organizations located in Victoria, BC. Social change organizations are groups that aim to address systemic problems in a way that will increase the power of marginalized groups, communities, or interests. They represent a grassroots response to social problems (Chetkovich & Kunreuther, 2006). After explaining the goals and purpose of my study to these organizations, I asked organizers to pass along a recruitment email to their members. The purpose of recruiting individuals from these particular groups was to locate politically involved, active citizens who are passionate about various issues. My hypothesis was that people who worked, volunteered or were associated with progressive social change organizations would be more likely than the average citizen to be engaging in the public sphere both off- and online.

Victoria has an active community of people who are focused on social justice and environmental issues. It is also the place I call home since moving here in 2006. I have been involved in a number of social justice organizations while living in Victoria, mostly focusing around queer activism. This work has brought me into contact with a number of other social justice organizations. Choosing my home and community as my research location has had the benefit of making entry into the field easier in some respects, but more difficult in other ways. It also increased the demands on me to be self-reflexive and to constantly question my assumptions. As Hine (2008) writes, ethnography is not just about making the strange familiar, but also “making the familiar strange by questioning

taken for granted daily practices and aiming to expose the cultural assumptions through which they make sense” (p. 261-2).

I began the recruitment phase by planning which social change organizations I would contact, making sure that I selected a variety of organizations. To define my categories, I first turned to McKee (2005), whose conceptualization of the public sphere I found most relevant for this research. He separates his book, *The Public Sphere*, into chapters that connect issues such as commercialization, spectacle, fragmentation and apathy to social movements such as working class, Black, LGBTQ and youth cultures. I used these as a starting point for developing my categories, but also recognized that we have a different cultural landscape in Victoria. For example, Indigenous activism is very important in Victoria, while advocacy surrounding Black culture is not as widely discussed as it is in the United States. I also wanted to include environmental groups as social and environmental justice issues are interdependent and often advocated for by the same people. I began researching online for possible social change organizations in Victoria, searching for keywords on search engines, Facebook and Twitter. I also posted on my own social media accounts asking people for recommendations for groups. I also relied on my own experiences working in social justice groups in Victoria. I compiled a list of 31 organizations to contact, which are detailed Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. Organizations contacted for recruitment

Type of organization	Number of organizations contacted
Environmental organizations	8
Social justice organizations	23
LGBTQ	5
Harm reduction	3
Violence prevention	3
General interest advocacy groups	2
Indigenous	2
People of colour	2
People with disabilities	2
Women	2
Youth organizations	2

I started by contacting four organizations that I had personal connections with, as I thought it would increase the chances I would receive positive responses from potential participants. I also started with a small number of organizations so that I could manage a potential high volume of responses from interested participants. About six months before I started this research, I conducted a different research project about social media. With just one Facebook post, I unexpectedly received three times more inquiries than the number of people I planned to interview. I was initially concerned about being similarly overwhelmed with responses for this research. Unfortunately, I need not to have worried. Here is an excerpt from my research journal from two weeks after I sent the first recruitment letters:

Well the last week or two was pretty horrible. I don't even know where to begin. [An environmental organization] agreed to pass along my recruitment letter, but no one responded. I asked [a friend] to pass things along to [a social justice group], but she came back with a lot of constructive criticism. Very valid points about what right an outsider had to come in and research them. They did not trust me or my intentions. I think are totally valid points, but just not sure how to proceed next. Then I also emailed [another social justice group], which is a group I've had some contact with over the years. No response.

Next, I decided to talk to an organization where I thought I was almost guaranteed to have positive response, as I had volunteered with the group. I went to the next organizing meeting and asked the group if I could send out a recruitment letter over the organization's email list. After a brief discussion, the group decided that I could not. The reason for not allowing me to use the group's listserv was that it was only for organizing purposes only. I respected this perspective, as I could see how my emails could be considered spam to some; however, I was left unsure what to do next. I later discovered I was experiencing a common problem with ethnographic research. As Hammersly & Atkinson (2007) write, "The problem of obtaining access to the data looms large in ethnography ... it often comes as a rude surprise to researchers who have not anticipated the difficulties that could be involved" (p. 41). After these failed attempts, I realized that I needed to rethink how I was attempting to enter the field.

I started by taking about two weeks to revise my recruitment materials and reshape my personal online presence. The first step was to remove much of the

academic language from my recruitment letter and replace it with terminology more commonly used by the prospective participants. Next, I sought feedback from people who were part of the communities I wanted to reach. They helped me see what information was missing for potential participants, such as making the eligibility requirements clearer and describing in greater detail what activities would be involved. Lastly, I decided that I needed to consciously shift how I was presenting myself online, which was likely potential participants' first impression of me. As Gobo (2008) writes, "The researcher's roles and identities are constantly constructed during the research process, regardless of his or her intentions and effort (p. 122). After my initial recruitment efforts failed, I realized I had unconsciously presented myself as a distant researcher, rather than a person who was involved in these communities, interested in these causes and in the outcomes of the research for personal reasons as well. Following the lead from several other social media ethnographies I admired (Cho, 2011; Croft, 2013; Postill & Pink, 2012), I decided to present more of my non-academic self. I posted information about my research on my personal blog and also included the link to my blog in my recruitment letter, so that people could easily read more about me before deciding to respond to the letter. I also created an about.me profile and linked to it from the signature of my email that I used to communicate with potential participants. This profile is a single page that described my research interests, social justice and activism work, hobbies and linked to all my personal social media accounts. (A screenshot of this can be seen in Figure 3.1.) Although this was a more authentic representation of myself, it did leave me feeling more vulnerable. Part of the reason I have been drawn to study self-censorship and social media is my hesitancy to put much information about myself online connected to my real name, while also realizing much can be gained by authentically participating in online discussions. After this revision process, I began sending out my new recruitment materials, which were much better received. Luckily for me, as Gobo (2008) writes, "Any errors, lapses or 'false starts' can be repaired intentionally with the cognitive mechanism whereby the present tends to rewrite the past," (p. 123). Fourteen people expressed an interest over the next two months many with leads to other potential participants. People responded to me by email, on my blog and occasionally through my social media accounts.

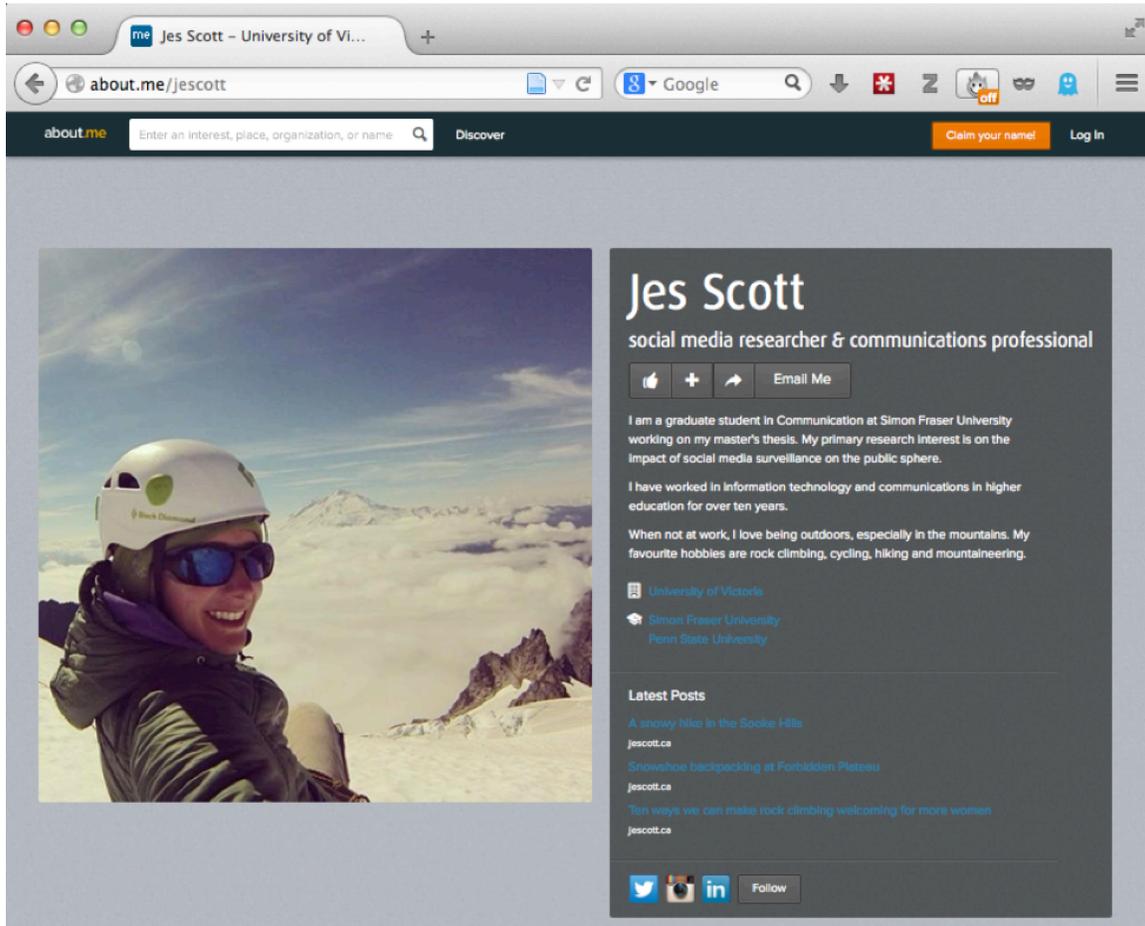


Figure 3.1. My about.me profile used when recruiting participants

I was guided by theoretical sampling to select the first participants for initial interviews. Theoretical sampling, as defined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) is where “the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his [sic] theory” (p. 45). In my research study, most people volunteered information in their initial contact with me about their social justice or environmental interests and how they used social media, including links. Sometimes, I prompted them for more information. As I was selecting people to be part of this study, I read the most recent content on their social media profiles. From the messages I received and the information I read about each person online, I selected the first participants and set up initial interviews. My earliest interviews included Alivia & Hettie, who were very enthusiastic about using social media to engage in political

conversations, and Jane, who was much more cautious. After each interview, I wrote field notes on my thoughts and observations. I coded these field notes to begin looking for themes that would be important in developing my research question. Themes such as how much someone used social media; whether they were politically active mostly online or offline; and current and future career plans, began to emerge as important factors. I selected additional participants based on who would continue to provide new insights and perspectives on these emerging themes. Ten people ended up participating in my research. They ranged in age from 19-55. Five participants identified as female, four as male, one as a gender-questioning.

As discussed previously, I decided to not limit participant selection to people who were currently living in Victoria. Conversations on SNSs are not usually limited by geographic location, so it did not make sense to treat the current location of someone during the research period as the most important piece of information about them. The participants in my study were all connected to one of these social change organizations based in Victoria at some time and remained engaged enough to receive my recruitment letter. Everyone lived in British Columbia at the beginning of the observation period: eight lived in Victoria, one lived elsewhere on Vancouver Island and one lived on the mainland. One person moved to another province near the end of the observation period to pursue a university-related opportunity. I sent most of my recruitment letters using email, instead of using social media. I also selected social change organizations that conducted significant offline activities, i.e. holding meetings, organizing events or offering services in person. I wanted my research to be reflective of people who, although they engage in social media, are connected to these causes and/or this place by more than social media alone.

I began my fieldwork by conducting ethnographic interviews of participants. Although ethnographic interviews traditionally take place after a period of observation, they also can be conducted in the beginning of a research project as a strategy to gain acceptance or establish trust (Gobo, 2008, p. 191). My questions focused on gathering background information about each person to get to know them better and asking clarifying questions about ideas that could not be understood by observation alone. I spoke to all participants in person (in coffee shops or their homes) or over Skype using

in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewee to have more power in deciding which topics will be discussed. Hallberg (2006) writes that the “participant should be active whereas the interviewer should listen actively and encourage the participant to talk and to clarify details” (p. 143). This allowed me to be open to and be guided by topics the participants found to be important, rather than imposing my specific questions on their experiences. Throughout the interview process, I revised my interview guide several times to incorporate new ideas that emerged through the research. I quickly discovered a bias in my research, as my questions were geared towards negative experiences and concerns they had about being monitored online. Many people had very few concerns and many had positive stories to share. Another assumption I had made was that all participants would be very active in social media, while this also turned out not to be true.

After the initial interviews, a four-month period of participant observation and informal dialogue with research participants began. During interviews, I asked participants to share links to any of their own social media accounts for me to read as part of this research. These links became the foundation of my fieldwork. I began by friending, following and/or privately bookmarking all social media sites that participants shared with me. I friended people on Facebook, followed them on Twitter, Instagram, Goolge+, Tumblr and YouTube. I also read several blogs on WordPress, Tumblr and Blogspot. Participants also recommended that I read many Facebook pages and groups where they regularly posted or sought information. Three people shared just one social media link with me, two shared seven links and the rest shared three to five. Details about the types of social media accounts that I followed are detailed in Table 3.2. In order to respect their privacy, I asked each participant how they wanted me to publicly interact with them online as part of the informed consent document. All but one participant consented to me connecting to at least one of their personal social media accounts with my own, as well as allowing me to like and comment on their posts. At first, I was hesitant to comment or like comment on some people’s posts. I didn’t want to be obtrusive in their usual social media routines. I began to know them better through their posts and as they started commenting on mine, I gradually began to comment more as well.

Table 3.2. Types of social media accounts shared by participants.

Social networking site	Number of accounts
Facebook (personal account)	6
Facebook groups	1
Facebook pages	4
Twitter	5
Blogs (Blogger, Tumblr, self hosted & WordPress)	6
Instagram	3
Google+	3
LinkedIn	2
Acid Planet (Music sharing website)	1
YouTube	1

I also reflected on how this research was shaping my behaviour while using social media. One change I noted in my research journal was that I started feeling inspired to post more content about social justice topics:

I started this project feeling really resistant to posting anything that was very public — like Twitter or my blog. But I've heard enough positive things from participants that I am willing to put myself out there more now. I realize this may not be the right decision for everyone for a lot of different reasons, but I'd like to give it a try.

A few weeks into the observation period, I wrote a somewhat feminist blog post about women in a male-dominated sport that I love. Although most comments were supportive, I did receive a few negative reactions on my blog and on my social media accounts. Going through this process helped me relate to some of the participants in this study, who posted controversial comments and sometimes sought out conflict online — something I typically did not do. This was another way in which I engaged as a participant observer in this ethnographic research. I also noticed that in the beginning of my fieldwork, I felt hesitant to post things I usually would, as I wasn't sure how they would be perceived by my new connections. Early in the observation period, I wanted to

post a trailer for the new season of a television show that I loved. However, the show had been widely criticized for being misogynistic, though I did not personally agree with that analysis. I wondered if it would damage my credibility if I talked about how much I loved this show in social media, so I decided not to post anything. I also wondered if the effect was reciprocal: were participants refraining from posting what they usually did because they were being observed? After the first few weeks, I returned to using social media in a less censored way without any negative effects that I could observe.

I started the four-month fieldwork period by following the general routines that Postill and Pink (2012) described as part of their social media research: catching up, sharing, exploring, interacting and archiving. Everyday I read, shared and interacted with people on the most active social media platforms in this study: Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. I spend about two or three hours using social media every day for personal use and for my job, where I co-manage a company's online and social media presence. During the first few weeks, I followed Croft's (2013) strategy, where he found that interacting was more important than daily note taking. Robin Croft initially had tried to write a daily blog post about what she observed during his research, but discovered "what mattered was immersion on the subject matter, where a record of my various interventions was being maintained independently in a virtual world." I immersed myself in the experience of being connected to ten new people and them being connected to me. After the first few weeks, I began to delve deeper into each of the participants' accounts by exploring and archiving. I started reviewing one or two participants' accounts in depth every week. I generally limited myself to things that were posted during the four-month observation period, unless I noticed something seemed particularly relevant to the research. On average, I spent about four to six hours reading material posted by each person. Sometimes, I spent much more or less, depending on how many and what type of links were shared. For participants who shared seven or more links, I spent upwards of 15 hours reading their blogs and accounts. One person provided me with so little information that I spent only about thirty minutes reviewing the links she sent. When conducting the in depth analysis of each person's posts, I transitioned to keeping detailed field notes of this stage of the research for later data analysis. Inspired by Alexander Cho (2011), I took screenshots of participants' posts, as well as my observations and reflections. Following Gobo (2008), I took four types of

notes: observational, methodological, theoretical and emotional notes (p. 206). In addition to taking field notes, I also asked participants follow up questions about what had changed for them since we last talked. Most of these informal interviews happened over email, but some took place in person.

Using fully transcribed interviews, field notes and email conversations with participants, I conducted three levels of data analysis: open, axial and selective coding. I conducted incident-by-incident, open coding using the questions suggested by Kathy Charmaz (2006): “What is this data a study of? What does the data suggest and from whose point of view? What theoretical category does this specific data indicate?” (p. 47). I used constant comparative analysis to look for relationships between codes, incidents and categories, iteratively referring back to previous transcripts and codes as I collected new data. Throughout the research process and especially at the earlier stages of research, I wrote extensive memos to record how I made decisions about data collection and coding, following the style modeled by Corbin & Strauss (2008).

As an active Facebook user with an educational and professional background in information sciences and technology, I came to this research with beliefs about how reality and knowledge are created, as well as assumptions about the types of information I was seeking. Memoing helped me to be self-reflective about these assumptions and cultivate theoretical sensitivity as I conducted this research. These memos also served as an audit trail when I began conducting higher-level analysis. After open coding, I began axial coding, which Birks and Mills (2011) describe as “reconnect[ing] the data in ways that are conceptually much more abstract” (p. 12). Lastly, I conducted selective coding by structuring the data into a framework organized by the core categories and selecting the excerpts that best represented this framework.

Chapter 4. Data Analysis

I identified three distinct ways participants engaged with social media while discussing environmental or social justice issues: the Habermasian public sphere, subaltern counterpublics, and non-engagement. Several participants used social media to attempt to reach broad public audiences to debate important topics, as envisioned by Habermas when writing about the public sphere. As discussed in the literature review, critics have argued that Habermas's notion of the public sphere is idealized and have suggested that there are few resonances of this idealized notion in reality (Crossley and Roberts, 2004; Fraser, 1990; Goode, 2005; Garnham, 2007; McKee, 2005). Although participants spoke with awareness of the many limitations of this type of engagement, their behaviours and beliefs could still be described as emulating components of the idealized Habermasian public sphere. This was in contrast to another type of engagement where participants mostly used social media as way to have conversations and exchange resources with people who shared their values and beliefs. Sometimes, participants would also use these safe online spaces as a springboard to engage in debates with the wider public that may not necessary share their same values.

These behaviours were aligned with Fraser's concept of the subaltern counterpublic. She argues that counterpublics are training grounds where people can learn more about ideas, network with others, and launch agitational activities in the wider public sphere. Finally, I also observed instances of people largely choosing not to discuss the social justice and environmental issues on social media, even though they said these topics were important to them. By choosing to recruit participants through offline social change organizations, I was able to speak with and observe people who engaged in the public sphere offline, but felt a great deal of hesitation about doing so online. This third category is important to consider as it showed a high degree of self-censorship.

Through observation and interviews, I found that depending on how participants were engaging in the online public sphere, they thought about self-censorship differently. Those who openly engaged in the public sphere had little fear of negative repercussions from what they did or said online. They told me they spoke freely without concern over what others would think. In contrast, the people who participated in the subaltern counterpublics in this research did not have a unified approach towards self-censorship. Some participants chose to restrict what they posted when they perceived negative consequences. One said she continued to post openly in spite of the risk, and another said he felt no risk. In the final group, the two participants who engaged minimally in the online public sphere both reported high levels of self-censorship. I developed a different set of axial codes to describe how participants negotiated self-censorship and openness for each of the three types of online engagement. In the following section of this thesis I will explore each set of axial codes further by sharing excerpts from interviews that were chosen through selective coding in order to highlight the properties of each.

The Public Sphere

I developed four axial codes to identify instances where participants were engaging in something that resembled the structures or categories of the Habermasian public sphere: *open to everyone*, *conversations between equals*, *rational debate* and *the common good*. These codes were developed by analyzing what Habermas identified as key components of the public sphere in *Structural Transformations*. I found that three of the participants (Dave, Max and Dylan) primarily engaged in the public sphere with their social media accounts.

When considering which social media accounts contained posts that were primarily *open to everyone*, I considered two factors. One was that the conversations were technically available for anyone to read, such as public Twitter and Facebook accounts as well as blogs. The other important factor was that participants wanted their posts to be read by a wider audience. The accounts of Max, Dylan and Dave all fit this description. All three told me during our initial interviews that they believed everything they posted online was public and they intended for it to be that way. In addition, all three described how they also sought larger audiences than their family and friends. For

example, consider Max's story from this beginning of this thesis. He was excited to have his meme shared widely on social media. His Facebook and Twitter accounts are public, as is his blog where he publishes using his full name.

Dylan also wanted a larger audience for his posts, but was struggling to find one. He is 25-year-old gay man, has an undergraduate degree in public administration, and describes himself as "underemployed." Dylan told me that his blog posts do not receive many views or comments, though he wished more people read them. "I don't know if I just haven't found the niche that would accept my writings, but I would like a wider audience of people to see it." He often sends articles to prospective publishers, but none have been republished yet.

Of the three, Dave had perhaps the greatest success finding a larger audience online. He has close to 2,000 followers on Twitter, 1,800 on Google+ and 400 on Instagram, making him the person with the largest online influence in this research. He is 38 years old, has an undergraduate degree in social sciences and works only about seven weeks a year by choice. He writes a popular blog about hiking, his personal life and environmental issues with a focus on "how absolutely shitty the Canadian government is." He says he does not pay much attention to who is following him on Twitter, as he wants the focus on his life to be on spending time outdoors. "Sitting at a computer and fretting about how many followers on Twitter I have, it doesn't mesh with that at all." However, he does try to find a balance between self-promotion and enjoying the outdoors by networking with a group of other likeminded bloggers. "We have a pretty tight group of 100 to 150 writers, bloggers and photographers. We all have our own websites and we all mass promote each other." Although others in this research also had social media accounts that were public and open for anyone to read, the intended audiences of these three participants' accounts seemed to most closely resemble the Habermasian idea of having conversations that were *open to everyone*.

When identifying social media accounts where conversations were happening in the public sphere, the second category I coded for was *conversations between equals*. Habermas believed that in the ideal public sphere, status and personal differences could be temporarily bracketed while engaging in debate. When I analyzed my data I found

that only Max was attempting these types conversations. He used his Twitter account to tweet at famous politicians and journalists who he believed were “climate change deniers.” Due to the social status of these well-known journalists and politicians, Max would not ordinarily be able to talk to these people; however, since their Twitter accounts were public, he is able to send them messages and hope for a response. Unfortunately for Max, I saw only one person respond. Unlike most of the people he tweeted at, this person did not appear affiliated with any major organization. Instead, their profile had a cartoon animal as a profile photo and a bio that described future bloodshed in the United States. Max and this person exchanged a few polemic tweets, but that was the only two-way conversation I saw Max conduct on Twitter about climate change. Max was attempting to use social media to have *conversations between*; however, it was shown to not be possible for him.

The third code that I used when determining if conversations were part of the public sphere was *rational debate*. The ideal public sphere is where people can discuss and listen to different sides of an argument. Max, Dylan and Dave were open to this type of engagement to varying degrees. Max was the most eager to embrace rational debate. Instead of “preaching to the converted” he said wanted to debate with people who held different views. “I can educate them, I can inform them. I can persuade them that I’m right.” Unlike his mostly unanswered tweets to “climate change deniers”, I saw a great deal of this type of conversation on his Facebook account. Max often posted links to articles and photos about political and environmental issues. His friends almost always responded, debating with Max for as many as 15 comments on a single post. The discussions were about the issues at hand and did not devolve into personal attacks or exaggerated claims. Dylan also welcomed this type of debate. He also frequently posted articles and short quotes about Canadian politics, capitalism and democracy. Most of the discussion on Dylan’s Facebook posts came from his one friend Michael, who seemed to contradict almost everything Dylan wrote. For example, Dylan posted an article about democracy from the *Economist*. Michael wrote several comments saying the article was “commie propaganda” and that people were susceptible to “propaganda bots” and thus could not be trusted to vote. After reading Dylan and Michael’s Facebook debates for a few months, I asked him if he ever considered unfriending Michael. He said he was not going to, even though his friends had complained to him about Michael. Dylan said, “I

think not engaging him will only make him harden in his beliefs.” He also said that he, “refused to unfriend him or tell him to stop because it’s his right to say something.”

Dylan remained open to the idea of debate and changing people’s minds, no matter how futile others may see it. Dave’s take on debating with people online was less optimistic than Max and Dylan’s. He told me, “I find a lot a people pick fights. They don’t want their mind changed, and they won’t change their mind no matter what. Might as well ignore them and not give them a pulpit to stand on.” Dave’s popular outdoor blog attracted readers and Twitter followers who were much more conservative than he was because of their shared hobbies. During our first conversations, we looked through his Twitter followers together. I noticed many of his followers described themselves as American, Republican, pro gun rights and Christian. When I asked Dave if any of those things were important parts of who he was he said with a laugh, “I might swear by saying ‘Jesus Christ’ once in a while, but that’s the extent of it.” As we continued talking, Dave softened his view on being open to debate. “They’re welcome to comment and say why they disagree with me. But I won’t accept any sort of personal attack or just gibberish.” He also described several debates he had with people in his online community about politics and climate change. Although Dave was frustrated about these debates, he remained open to having them under certain conditions. Perhaps most importantly, he regularly had interactions with people who had very different political beliefs than his own. The openness to debate with people who have different beliefs is a core component of the Habermasian ideal of nurturing *rational debate*.

The last axial code I considered while looking for conversations happening in the public sphere was *the common good*. Habermas believed that a public, critical debate should take place in order to improve society as a whole. This is a problematic concept, as Fraser (1990) describes, because conflict between groups is often inevitable, making it difficult to find an outcome that all groups agree is desirable. She writes, “After all, when social arrangements operate to the systemic profit of some groups of people and to the systemic detriment of others, there are *prima facie* reasons for thinking that the postulation of a common good shared by exploiters and exploited may well be a mystification” (p. 72). Acknowledging that it likely impossible to know what issues (if any) actually benefit society as a whole, I chose to focus on conversations that participants

thought would work towards improving the world when coding this data. Dylan, Max and Dave all discuss environmental and social justice issues in their social media accounts. All three have public blogs that discuss these issues. They also share articles, photos and commentary about issues that are important to them on their Facebook, Twitter and Goolge+ accounts. They also posted about other topics, but I have not included those posts in this analysis, as they did not fit the idea of the *common good*.

Self-Censorship: “I don’t care who reads and disagrees.”

It has been demonstrated how Max, Dylan and Dave all engaged in the online public sphere with their social media accounts. Their posts were not only open for anyone in the public to read, but they also welcomed the attention of larger audiences. They attempted to break down barriers and communicate with others as equals. They were open to having critical, rational debate on issues they believed would change the world for the better. The next section will discuss the other factor they also had in common: how they also expressed very low levels of self-censorship in their online posting. Max, Dylan and Dave all discussed their aversion to self-censorship in our initial interviews and subsequent email exchanges. Their online behaviour also seemed consistent with this belief. By analyzing my field notes and interview transcriptions, I developed three axial codes to describe their behaviours and attitudes towards self-censorship: “I have nothing to hide”, taking minor precautions, and “It’s all more publicity.” Where possible, I used in vivo codes to ensure codes stayed close to participants’ experiences.

The first code, “*I have nothing to hide*” is a popular view that is often expressed in response to concerns privacy or surveillance. As Daniel Solove (2011) writes:

The nothing-to-hide argument is everywhere. The data-security expert Bruce Schneier calls it the “most common retort against privacy advocates.” The legal scholar Geoffrey Stone refers to it as an “all-too-common refrain.” In Britain, for example, the government has installed millions of public-surveillance cameras in cities and towns, which are watched by officials via closed-circuit television. In a campaign slogan for the program, the government declares: “If you’ve got nothing to hide, you’ve got nothing to fear.” (p. 1)

The idea is that only people who have done something wrong need to be concerned about what they say or who is listening. When I asked participants if they had any concerns about their information being read online, Max was the most confident that he had nothing to hide. Max told me a story about his father expressing concern about photos on Facebook of Max at an anti-Harper rally. Max immigrated to Canada less than a year ago, and his father was concerned that this public criticism of the government might impact his ability to become a permanent resident of Canada. Max told me, “I don’t break the law. I know what I am legally allowed to do and I’m legally allowed to protest.” He continued by describing how he felt protected by being part of a larger demonstration. “It’s not like I’m on my own with a sign or anything. There are lots of other people there as well.” When looking at his Facebook account after our interview, I saw that Max had used one of the pictures of himself from this protest as his public profile photo. He also posted a photo of himself from the protest that was published in a local newspaper, complete with a link to the article. Max’s Facebook account was full of similar photos: at protests, giving a speech at a community organization, shaking hands with a local politician, holding homemade signs with environmental messages. Later Max told me, “I probably should worry, but I just don’t. You know? I think it’s fine. Actually, I think the main reason I don’t worry is because I’m not that radical.” Max believed regulating his offline behaviour by ensuring he was not doing anything illegal or radical would protect him from any negative repercussions of online surveillance. As he a result, he could freely post about his offline activism without censoring what he posted online.

Dave expressed a similar belief that his activities were not interesting enough to warrant negative attention. When I asked him if he had ever experienced any negative consequences of people reading his accounts online, he said he had not. He described his online posts as “pretty banal.” He told me he did not get into arguments with others online, even when he did not like what they wrote. “When it comes to posting stuff, I’m a pretty easy going person for the most part.” Despite the political nature of some of his posts, Dave does not see himself as an activist. When I asked him about why he wanted to participate in this research, he said, “I figured if you needed 30 people and I was number 30, you know, I was going to be there for you.” This attitude of not being interesting or controversial enough to garner negative attention was similar to Max’s belief that he was not radical enough. Dave, however, was somewhat ambivalent about

his freedom from negative attention. As a geologist, he was often hired to do work that he described as antithetical to his public, pro-environment persona. He told me that the company he had been working for the past three and a half years had been hired to help with a project to build a controversial mine in an environmentally sensitive area. There has been significant resistance to this mining project among environmentalists, especially in the online community that Dave is part of. He told me there could be repercussions if his employers found out about his online activity or his online community found out about how he made a living. He told me, “Essentially, you could out me and I would not get work in the industry ever again.” When I asked if these concerns effected what he posted online, he said the only change he made was to his name. On his social media accounts, he goes by Dave. When applying for jobs, he goes by David. He told me, “I’m pretty sure when somebody does a Google search, David Graf its totally different what comes up as Dave Graf.” I was at first skeptical that this minor name change could protect him. Later I searched both names and confirmed what he said about Google search results. I coded this concern as *minor precaution*. It reflects that he did take one small step to protect his online identity, so that when he writes as “Dave” online, he felt that he had nothing to hide and very little to fear.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, Dylan explicitly brought up the argument of “having nothing to hide” only to reject it. He told me, “I understand the line of logic there, but I don’t fall into that camp.” Dylan believed that if he were to experience negative outcomes, it would be regardless of what he did or said online. The reason for this was that he believed that one’s computer could be maliciously controlled by the government or private individuals without one’s knowledge. To illustrate his point, he told me a story about a hypothetical political candidate. “If you’re running as a Green candidate and the other person doesn’t like you -- maybe they’re an incumbent and they have some influence, or their friends do -- they’ll put child porn on a computer. It’s done. You are tarred for life when you have child porn on your computer. There’s nothing you can do even if you were able to prove it.” As a result, Dylan felt that he did not need to censor what he posted online. I saw evidence of this belief in what he posted, especially in his blog. For example, one of his blog posts about race used the word “Nigger” in the title.

Dylan was aware of how offensive many people would find this, especially coming from a White person. In a preface to this post he wrote², “I know that employers or some people are afraid to engage with someone who is controversial. I understand what you’re thinking, why bother? But it’s cowardly and missing the point. Critical thinking above all!” His other blog posts were on topics such as how people could prevent rape by abstaining from alcohol and the injustice of needing to have a job to support yourself. For Dylan, a component of his philosophy was definitely trying to be controversial to generate attention. He said, “It’s all more publicity and I’m used to crickets.”

All three men’s beliefs were similar in that they had very little fear of negative repercussions from what they said online. Max believed that he had nothing to hide, as his beliefs and actions were not illegal or radical. After taken a minor precaution to hide himself from future employers with his name, Dave also believed he has little to worry about as his posts were “banal”. Dylan differed in the source of his beliefs, as he willingly embraced controversial subject matter. He wanted a larger audience and believed negative outcomes would come regardless of his online behaviour. None of them talked about censoring themselves in any significant way. Max did mention trying to use humour to keep his less political friends interested and “not too annoyed” by his social media posts. Dave also tries to avoid posting about his work on social media for the reasons mentioned above. But beyond this, their attitudes are summed up best by something Dave said to me: “I don’t care who reads and disagrees.” This shared attitude of participants engaging in the public sphere, differs greatly from the variety of concerns and behaviours of those primarily engaging in subaltern counterpublics.

Subaltern Counterpublic

According to Fraser (1990), separate public spheres are necessary for subordinate groups to discuss needs, goals and strategies. She argues that “arrangements that accommodate contestations among a plurality of competing publics” better promote participatory parity than a single public sphere (p. 66). She called these

² Quotations from online sources have been altered to protect participants’ anonymity.

spaces “subaltern counterpublics.” Based on this research, I developed two axial codes to identify when participants were engaging a subaltern counterpublic: *withdrawal and regroupment* and *training grounds for agitational activities*. I found that five participants primarily engaged in subaltern counterpublics: Rachel, Walter, Alivia, Hettie and Serafina.

When considering what posts should be coded with *withdrawal and regroupment*, I looked for accounts where the intended audience was limited and where participants were seeking a community of people who shared their values. First, I looked for instances where participants used the social media platforms to hide their posts from specific people or the general public. One example would be making a Twitter account visible to only approved followers. The second was when participants expressed a desire to speak to a limited audience, usually people they already knew or people who shared their views. I considered these two factors as independent of each other. This means that even though it could be technically possible for anyone to read a post online, it did not necessarily mean that the author wanted a large audience. Anil Dash (2014: p. 1) illustrates this distinction. He asks, “What if the public speech on Facebook and Twitter is more akin to a conversation happening between two people at a restaurant? Or two people speaking quietly at home, albeit near a window that happens to be open to the street?” In the offline world, not all public conversations are the equivalent of speaking into a megaphone in front of a crowd. Similarly, not every public tweet was written with the intention that it might be embedded in a major newspaper. The intent of the author matters as much as if the public can technically read their posts or not. These two elements of limiting the audience and seeking community are the core of what I consider *withdrawal and regroupment*.

Rachel, an outspoken advocate for Indigenous rights and environmental issues, tweets publically from both her personal account and an account for her part-time job as a social media coordinator for an Indigenous social change organization. Rachel is a full-time student in a professional program and identifies as White and lesbian. Given her outspoken activism on her public Twitter account, I initially considered coding her accounts as part of the public sphere. However, after analyzing our interview, I realized Rachel’s intended audience was not the general public. She told me, “I’m not going to

convert the people who say really negative stuff. I'm going to convert my friends and my family. So the more I can educate myself, the more I can build it out through there." During this research, I saw her welcome new Twitter followers by commenting on their shared interests and values. She gathered this information from their Twitter profiles or an event that they just both attended. Her audience was not the general public. It was people who were open to learning more about indigenous issues: her friends, family and strangers who already shared some of her views.

Walter's accounts were similarly public but also focused on a limited audience. A former organic farmer from Alberta, Walter is 55-years-old and married with two adult children. He told me about getting online in the early 1980s and deciding "I was going to be a content producer." He posts regularly to his Facebook, Twitter, Google+ accounts and blogs. His personal blog focuses on food security and his personal philosophy about food, with over with 25,000 views over the past three or four years. Walter told me that he wrote with a specific audience in mind, which he described as people like himself. He said, "You should have had at least a popular introduction to the topic of food security. I'm trying not to simply replicate that same information over and over again." Instead, he said, "I'm writing for the people who know there's a problem and who want to take the next step, look a little deeper, want a little better understanding of what's wrong and what are some alternatives." During our interview, Walter talked about a blog post he was writing about his philosophy of food, using a recipe as a metaphor. Later when I read the post, I highlighted a quote: "Keep it simple. Concentrate on the flavor. Don't use too many ingredients. Take your time." This post was representative of his writing style, where he talked about political topics by using everyday experiences as metaphors. I later saw a compliment on Walter's Facebook wall thanking him for this post. He said that knowing other people were reading and sharing his blog posts was very gratifying to him. "It means I'm part of a bigger conversation than just myself in my room." Walter wanted to withdraw from the larger public sphere and concentrate on people who already shared many of his values, which is why I coded this as *withdrawal and regroupment*.

Similarly, Alivia and Serafina also wanted to use social media to connect with friends and new people who shared their views. Unlike Rachel and Walter, these two

women were most concerned with what certain people they knew offline would think about what they posted. Alivia is a 19-year-old college student who identified as pansexual and gender questioning. A few months before we met, she had started volunteering with a social change organization. This had inspired her to post more feminist content online. Since this shift, she said that her friends from high school, family and even boyfriend were not as interested in her posts anymore. "I'm alone in this. I think its actually starting to affect whether I go on Facebook," she told me. "It's not like my crowd isn't very accepting. It's just that they don't really interact with me very much." She told me she blocked her father from her Facebook account after they had a disagreement about something she posted, even though she lived in the same house as him. Finding people she volunteered with on Facebook helped her counteract the feeling of loneliness. "They all have same views as me because we all learned the same things. It just kind of reinforces a feeling of connectedness," she told me. Alivia also said she found community online by posting feminist and lesbian illustrations, quotes and photos on her Instagram account and tagging them with particular hashtags. She said, "I was looking for something with the hashtag 'lesbians' and I thought this wasn't going to be good. And then I saw actual lesbians! Sending pictures of themselves, not like porn." She told me she thinks many of her 500 followers on Instagram have come for LGBTQ related hashtags. "I feel more accepted on Instagram than Facebook," she said. Alivia used social media to find a way to find community and gather the support she desired when she was not always finding it from her family and friends.

Serafina also posted more feminist, queer and ant-racist content when her accounts were less connected to her offline identity. Serafina is a 25-year-old, queer woman with an undergraduate degree working in the service sector. Serafina regularly posts to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Tumblr. She used Facebook to share content about social justice, but only her friends could see her posts. Limiting her audience was important to her. She told me, "You can't even just search for me on Facebook. You actually can only friend me if you're friends of someone I know or we belong to the same group." She told me this was part of her attempt to make herself difficult to find online by searching for her name. Her Instagram account, where she posted photos of food, her hobbies and herself, was also limited to approved followers. However her Tumblr was open to the public. She told me she felt mostly anonymous here, as she the did not use

her offline name, avoided posting photos of her face and did not tell most of her friends and family about her Tumblr. This is where she posted the highest volume of social justice articles and photos. She told me that Tumblr was a great place to find community. “Especially if you live somewhere where there’s maybe not a lot of diversity,” she said. “Tumblr is easy to use and there’s such lovely people on there.” The relative anonymity of her Tumblr account allowed her to reach a specific audience of people, who shared her views but did not necessarily know her offline, and foster a sense of community.

Unlike Walter or Rachel, who were open to reaching new people online, Hettie’s focus was on communicating with people she already knew offline. Hettie is a 26-year-old graduate student and teaching assistant. She described herself as an introvert and talked about how this made her feel less comfortable going to events. She said, “Sometimes it is meetings, other times it’s a social justice event where I feel like I don’t know anybody. Or I know two people who are going that I know, but I can see that there are 50 people going. So I just won’t go.” Using social media was an important way for her to connect with causes and people that she cared about, as it gave her time to compose her thoughts. “I’ll grab an article from Facebook, think about it, write up some comment and send it to a family member or my partner or something like that. That’s more where I feel really comfortable.” Hettie used Facebook as her main social media account. She used a different name on this account than her offline name and had also implemented increasingly tighter privacy restrictions. She said she had only added a few people on Facebook over the past few years. “Facebook to me is one of two things,” she said. “A medium to share ideas that I think are important and need to be talked about. And then keeping in touch with the friends that I can’t see on a regular basis.” For Hettie, social media was a safe place to talk about issues that were important to her with an audience that was limited to people she knew well.

When looking for posts to code as *training grounds for agitational activities*, I identified four types of activities that participants were engaged in. The first two were focused on the *training* aspect of this code. One of these was using social media to teach others about social justice and environmental issues. The second was a complementary activity: using social media to read, watch and learn. The other two activities I looked for were related to *agitational activities*. Participants used social media

to take action in the offline world or encourage others to do so. This included joining groups, going to events, signing petitions and other forms of taking action. The aspect of *agitational activities* I coded for was when participants brought issues into the larger public sphere with the support of their community. Although I did not witness this happening very often, it is an important component of Fraser's conceptualization of the "subaltern counterpublic", and worthy of discussion and analysis.

First I will explore how participants used social media to teach others about social justice and environmental issues. Much of what participants posted related to this code was sharing articles, videos and photos created by others. As an introvert, this activity was very important to Hettie. She carefully selected articles and wrote a brief commentary before posting. From her perspective, she added value by using her scientific background to ensure that she only selects articles that were "legit" and "not pseudoscience." Most of the time, she received no comments or one comment from someone who agreed with her. Occasionally, people engaged in an extended dialogue about the resource she posted.

Serafina also did not receive many comments on Facebook on her social justice related posts. On Tumblr, she told me that she disabled comments. Instead of a platform for discussion, she used social media as a way of helping spread content between different communities. Serafina told me, "If I see that a blog article is getting posted by like six or seven people on Facebook then I'm like 'Oh this must be a really thought provoking piece.'" She would then post the article on Tumblr. "I know I have a lot of followers on Tumblr that I don't actually know who they are, so I want to make sure it spreads out." Serafina called this practice *signal boosting*.

Rachel also posted articles and videos on Twitter about Indigenous issues and gender equality, usually retweeting them without additional commentary. She also told me she believed that her personal role in teaching others was important. "I'm of the opinion that if someone wants to engage about it, like let's have a dialogue." She said Twitter was not always the best place for these dialogues and preferred to move those in depth discussions offline. In addition to posting articles, participants also used images to teach others about issues they cared about.

This was a strategy often employed by Walter on Facebook. I saw him post a few images from small organic farms. He also posted a number of photos about being opposed to Prime Minister Stephen Harper. One example was a photo of a billboard that said, “A free Canada is a Canada free of Stephen Harper.”

Alivia also favoured posting pictures to Facebook. In one example, I saw her post a version of a popular meme using a photo from *The Lord of the Rings* with a funny caption criticizing pipelines. Another example is when she posted a photo of a woman holding a piece of paper saying why she needed feminism. The articles and pictures these participants posted were one way that they participated in the subaltern counterpublic by teaching others and raising awareness about issues that were important to them.

Participants also discussed how they used social media to learn more about issues that were important to them. When I spoke with Alivia, she was just starting to learn about social justice issues. “I love the communities where they post really cool articles,” she told me. “That’s one of my favourite things on social media. For me it’s really valuable as an activist.” Serafina also stressed the importance of social media in helping her to learn. She said, “Even though I have ideas of where my feminism is at, I like to challenge those ideas.” An important part of this for Serafina was learning more about social justice issues beyond her personal experiences. For example, she posted articles, pictures and videos about racism and being a person of colour, being transgender, being Indigenous, fat positivity and sex workers’ rights. She started telling me she read these articles to help her become a better ally, before stopping herself mid-thought. “The idea of ally is actually bullshit and should not be claimed.” Instead of using a label, she described her actions instead. “I don’t necessarily join the conversations online, but I definitely read them. Then when I hang out with friends, I can tell them about it.” Walter, Hettie and Rachel did not directly talk about using social media as a tool for learning about issues, but they undoubtedly did absorb information from the links that they read and shared online. This act of using social media to learn more about issues is an important component of the *training* aspect of Fraser’s subaltern counterpublic.

Participants also used social media for *agitational activities*, such as taking action and encouraging others to do so. Rachel often used Twitter to promote events and rallies, including reporting back from the ones she personally attended. In one example, I saw her post a photo from a protest in Victoria that she described as “citizens rallying against harper [sic]” in her tweet. In another, I saw her tweet a photo from a high school where she said she was talking about LGBTQ issues. Serafina also used social media to occasionally promote events, but without mentioning her personal involvement in them. She also used Twitter to live tweet from an event she attended with a famous speaker addressing violence against women. “I was exhausted by the end of it, cause of listening and tweeting at the same time. It’s like taking notes in class. But it was fun too because you’re joining the conversation.” Alivia also discussed how social media helped her take action. After our interview, she told me she was leaving to go to a reading group about First Nations issues and White privilege. Her friend had invited her to the group through Facebook. Alivia had also set up her smartphone so that Facebook events like this one showed up in her calendar, making it easier for her to remember to attend them. As an introvert, Hettie rarely felt comfortable attending events. Instead, she preferred signing online petitions that were sent to her by the online organization Lead Now.

Walter did not prioritize attending events, as he said he was no longer convinced they were an effective way to create change. He told me about an event he had attended recently where the speaker said, “You guys are doing exactly the same thing we were doing 40 years ago. We’ve got a resistance network in place and not infrequently we can turn out a fair number of people. We had the ‘no pipelines rallies across Canada’ protest. But it’s not going to stop the pipeline.” Walter agreed with this speaker and instead believed his activism was carried out by the choices he made every day. He told me, “I’ve really come to believe one of the things we have to do is start by ignoring the power structure and just building the world we want to live in.” Walter used social media to help connect with others about food security, farming and living cooperatively. He spoke optimistically about how crowdfunding websites like Kickstarter might help people to be able to start their own cooperative farms. Each participant had different life experiences, personalities and priorities and consequently approached their activism in different ways. However, they all used social media to take action in the way they felt was most effective and appropriate for them.

The final aspect of *training grounds for agitational activities* to be explored is taking issues from the subaltern counterpublic to the wider public sphere. Although I frequently observed participants responding to comments or posts, I decided to not include most of those instances in this discussion, as they were mostly talking with friends who shared their views. These conversations were more likely to be part of the learning and teaching aspect of this code. The instances I will discuss here are when participants ventured outside of the subaltern counterpublic to interact with the wider public sphere.

The first example is a story Alivia told me about speaking out about a post on a popular, general interest Facebook page that was making fun of people who had unusual pronoun preferences. She told me the post said, “Why are people so really sensitive? They all have something up their ass.” She was the first person to comment on the thread that talked about why pronoun choice was important to transgender and genderqueer individuals. She said this started an “intense argument” with about five people. “I was kind of fighting my own little battle in there, and I’m so new to this that I was kind of struggling,” she told me. Then two Facebook friends saw her comments and became involved in the discussion. She told me, “It was an awesome feeling, like I’m not the only one. I have lots of people supporting the same thing and that was really monumental for me.”

Serafina also described receiving support from friends on Facebook. She told me she shared a post from a popular sociology blog that was critiquing single stall, gendered washrooms. A friend from high school commented on her post saying that he disagreed with the post. Serafina said she was relieved she did not have to respond, as another Facebook friend responded to him instead. This friend from high school was not part of Serafina’s desired audience for her posts. Fear of receiving comments such as this were one of the reasons she posted less of this type of content to Facebook and more on Tumblr.

I also observed Rachel have a debate on Twitter with someone who did not share her views. She tweeted an article critiquing pay inequity between women and men in a particular field. This was a type of article that Rachel often shared, usually without

any negative response. However, this time someone tweeted at her saying that the pay inequity was justified because women could choose to work in other fields. This person described himself as a radical conservative in his Twitter profile. They exchanged five tweets, ending with Rachel asking him how he had more authority on women's issues than she did. Rachel said she did not find discussions like this very productive, as she doubted any minds were changed by the exchange. No one else on Twitter joined the exchange. These were the three instances of bringing issues from the subaltern counterpublic to the public sphere that I observed during this research. Although there were not many examples, I include them in this discussion to illustrate how this aspect of Fraser's subaltern counterpublic was part of participants' experiences.

Self-Censorship: Varying Attitudes

Rachel, Walter, Hettie, Alivia and Serafina engaged in subaltern counterpublics with their social media accounts. They used their accounts to withdraw from the wider public sphere and seek audiences of people they knew and people who shared their values. In these subaltern counterpublics, they learned more about issues that were important to them, shared information with others and used social media as a springboard for taking action. Unlike the participants who primarily engaged in the online public sphere, these five participants had very different attitudes towards self-censorship. Walter was the only one who said he did not have many concerns about negative repercussions and did not feel the need to censor what he posted online. Rachel also strived to avoid self-censorship on social media about the issues that are important to her, but she said she did this spite of significant concerns. Hettie, Alivia and Serafina described not always posting the content that they would like to post and the workarounds they have developed to find places to post more openly. In the following section, I will discuss these various attitudes towards self-censorship by exploring six themes that emerged from this data: *potential criticism*, *public image*, *employment*, *government surveillance* and *fear of threats and violence*.

All five participants discussed how the potential for criticism and conflict over what they posted online impacted their behaviour. Rachel and Serafina both spoke at length about how the fear of criticism from other activists impacted them. Rachel told

me, “When you advocate, people love to criticize. ‘Looove’ to criticize.” As a White person advocating about Indigenous issues, she said most criticism she has received has come from other non-Indigenous people. Rachel described this as “lateral violence” and said it was distracting people from focusing on more significant problems. Rachel told me, “It’s hard to advocate things from your heart and have these things not affect you.” She said her strategy was to focus on advocating “from a place of love, instead of being critical and bashing.” For Rachel, this meant she would criticize “a giant amorphous body” like the government, but she would not publically criticize an individual. By adopting this philosophy, Rachel tried to help keep herself from self-censoring out of a fear of being criticized.

Serafina was also concerned with being criticized by other activists online, a phenomenon she described as being called out. She said the fear of being called out greatly impacted her decision about what she posts on social media. She said, “People are vultures with the calling out.” She said this is why she seldom responded to comments on Facebook, rarely responded to people on Twitter, and was part of the reason she disabled comments on her Tumblr. Serafina said her fear was not that she would unknowingly say something problematic, as she was open to learning from her mistakes. She said her fear was that her mistake “would be stuck on the Internet forever.” Only partially joking, she said she was worried that people would take screenshots of her “mistakes” and show them to her and others years later. As an alternative approach to calling out, Serafina told me about a blog post called “Calling IN: A Less Disposable Way of Holding Each Other Accountable” from the blog *Black Girl Dangerous*. She summarized the post as, “If you’re constantly calling out, it creates this culture of fear. No one wants to talk about the mistakes they’ve made, which everyone makes.” The alternative was what the post referred to as “calling in.” Serafina said, “This is where you sit down with someone, and you’re like ‘I care about you deeply and you’re also saying this really messed up thing’, or ‘You’re hurting me unintentionally or intentionally by these things and we should have a conversation.’” Serafina said if she was going to have a conversation like this with someone, she would rather do it in person. She said this is because “your memory is a lot more forgiving.” Both Rachel and Serafina said they avoided criticizing others online. While Rachel tried to continue to be

open about her advocacy on social media, Serafina said the fear of being called out greatly impacted what she was willing to say and in what contexts she would say it.

Alivia, Hettie and Walter did not discuss being criticized by other activists, but they did discuss how the opinions of their friends and family affected what they would post. Hettie told me that she sometimes did not post content because she is worried about how her family and friends would respond. She told me, "I like to avoid conflict if I can." To help avoid escalating conflict, she often responded to comments on Facebook in a private conversation instead. If she did respond to comments publicly, she said she often felt stressed about it. She would say to herself, "OK. Here's my comment. It's going out in public. I think I've thought this through enough. Do I need to edit this anymore, or send?"

Serafina, despite being very concerned about being called out by activists, was less concerned about what her family thought. She said this was because her family did not use social media very often. She said she made small adjustments to what she would post. "I'll try to keep the pharmaceutical industry stuff on the down-low because a lot of my family works at that." She also said that her family did not know that she is queer, but they never asked her about her posts related to queer activism. Although she did change what she posted in some ways because of her family, it was not a significant concern for her.

Alivia, however, said she was very worried about what her family or friends would think. Despite this, she made an effort to appear unconcerned online. In one example, Alivia wrote a post about the carcinogenetic chemicals found in cosmetics. She told me, "I got a comment from an old friend saying like 'It's all going to be alright', which just reinforced the fact that people don't really understand." On Facebook, I saw that Alivia responded to her friend by writing "lol too many hours reading." This seemingly light-hearted response to her friend contrasted the distress she expressed to me in her email. Alivia told me that feeling as if her friends and family were not interested in the same issues as her impacted her willingness to talk about these topics on Facebook.

Walter and I also discussed how his family reacted to his social media posts. Unlike the others, Walter said his children, his wife and his friends shared his political

beliefs. He had no concerns about criticism from his family or friends and said it did not impact what he posted online at all. Walter said his father was politically conservative on a number of issues, but had shifted on other issues such as the environment. Walter said he helped his father read his blog by printing posts and mailing them to him. He said, “I send them with a letter. He calls me up and he chats for a while about it.” This is very much in contrast to Alivia, Serafina and Hettie’s experiences with their friends and family.

Crafting a desired public image was also a reason that some participants gave for self-censorship. Hettie and Serafina both were concerned about being taken seriously. Hettie told me, “I want to be seen as someone who is careful, and conscientious and thoughtful about the things that they post.” As a graduate student with a scientific background, she was very concerned with the factual accuracy of the posts she was sharing about the environment. She said an article might appear interesting, but then she would realize, “Oh, this is pseudo-science and I was had.” Making sure she only posted accurate information was an important part of how Hettie crafted her public image as an intelligent researcher.

Serafina was concerned about being perceived as a “serious activist.” She told me a friend once mentioned to her that Serafina was tweeting “a lot of lifestyle things.” She said she felt ashamed, because she realized she was tweeting about going for a walk and reading a new science fiction book, while her friend was only tweeting what she called “serious business.” Serafina said, “I stopped doing that because I guess I found it too cutesie or something.” Instead, she refocused on tweeting articles and events.

Alivia also expressed concern over her public image, but she wanted to resist the pressure to always appear happy. She told me, “I kind of wish I could be real on my page sometimes.” She said learning about social justice issues was overwhelming sometimes and she wanted to express her feelings on social media. “Sometimes I want to make a status that is basically like ‘Why is everything so fucked up in the world?’ or even explaining something I am learning about,” she said. However, she was apprehensive about posting things such as that, as she felt her friends on Facebook did not share her feelings. She said that when she did try to post about her feelings, family

and friends would respond by “shaming her for being sad” even though she knew they meant to be comforting. This led her to post less on Facebook about her feelings and instead use Instagram. “I feel like I have more of a random crowd of people on Instagram. There’s people I know on my Facebook who would worry what I post.” Alivia, Serafina and Hettie all discussed crafting a particular public image with social media as influencing what they choose to post on social media. Hettie and Serafina were concerned with being taken seriously enough in their areas of expertise, whereas Alivia wanted to break the pressure to always appear happy and composed.

Concerns about employers or future employers reading social media accounts was discussed earlier in this chapter. Walter, Rachel, Serafina and Alivia were conscious of the need for some level of self-censorship, but not overly concerned with this impacting their being open about issues that were important to them. Walter told me that if he applied to a business like Walmart, he might not get hired based on his anti-capitalist views on his social media accounts. However, he said he would never work for a business like Walmart, so it did not concern him. He said many companies are not concerned with food security and he doubts his views would concern most employers.

Rachel felt that she would be able to find work that aligned with her values. She was currently working as a social media coordinator for a social change organization that advocated for Indigenous and environmental issues. After she finished her program, she said she would continue to look for work at companies that specialized on these issues. Her one concern was that the profession she was training for required a license and her conduct outside of work may be taken into consideration when applying for that license. She said, “I am very wary at protests because I don’t want to get too involved in nonviolent direct action.” She said in the past when first applying for internships that she removed her last name from her social media accounts. Since then, she had put her last name back on her accounts. Mostly she says she tries to not let this concern affect what she posts on social media, other than making sure her language is not “too racy.”

Serafina also hoped she would be able to find work that would align with her values. She said, “In a way, it’s hard for me to worry about companies Googling me because I mostly want jobs in the sector that will value these things.” She was currently

not working in her desired field, and said businesses in the service sector where she worked now did not care about what she posted online.

Alivia, who had recently graduated high school, had no concerns related to social justice related content. Instead, she worried about future employers seeing photos of her partying or the “sassy” pictures she sent her partner on Snapchat. However, she said this did not stop her from posting what she wanted to online. “If they don’t hire me for that, I don’t really think I’d want to work there.”

In contrast, Hettie believed her employer had a significant impact regarding what she felt she could post online. Before returning to graduate school, she worked for the provincial government. She said, “I don’t know what it was in the contract that made me say, ‘Oh, I can’t just freely post on Facebook anymore,’” but after she started that job she was very selective with what she posted online. She was very careful to never appear to be criticizing the provincial government or the controversial project that she was hired to work on, even though it was being widely discussed in the media at the time. She also said she did not mention where she worked on Facebook and did not add any people she met from her job as Facebook friends. Through her graduate research, she had also talked to other government employees who said they were careful about what they posted online. She told me that this unexpected finding from her own research had motivated her in part to participate in this research. Hettie’s experiences were very different from the other participants. In this regard, participants’ experiences varied greatly depending on their areas of interest and the industries they worked for.

I asked each participant about their concerns about government surveillance and whether it affected what they posted online. I brought up this topic in the interviews, as participants in the previous research study I conducted expressed a great deal of concern about government surveillance. For example, in my past research, an Indigenous person who was advocating about Indigenous issues, said that they³ felt the government was likely surveilling them and their friends. Most participants in this

³ This person prefers the pronoun “they”.

research project were not concerned with government surveillance, with the exception of Rachel who was also advocating about Indigenous issues. She said, "I don't mean to be narcissistic about it, but I know I've been at protests and my picture's been taken. It's definitely a concern. We were just told that you would probably get a file started because you're a student activist. I don't know, I was 24 and I just thought it was going to be part of life, which doesn't make it right." She told me stories about people who later discovered that friends, roommates and romantic partners were government employees hired to surveil them. To illustrate her point, she told me that she had no way of knowing whether I was working for CSIS. However, she told me she tried not to focus on the potential for being surveilled. "I don't want to start not trusting my friends because I think that's a super negative way, 1984 way to live. And I don't want to live like that. I'd rather risk it and live a happy life." She said this fear of surveillance had the potential to increase self-censorship online because "you feel that someone's watching you." She said she tried to counteract this tendency in herself with "self-love, self-acceptance" and advocating from a place of love.

However, the other four participants in this section had no concerns about government surveillance. Serafina said, "Actually out of all the concerns, it would be kind of nonexistent." Alivia said she did not know much about the issue and also did not feel like it was very relevant to her. She said, "I don't feel like its very on my mind in what I'm doing cause I'm not organizing huge rallies or something." Walter felt like having the government's attention was a sign of success, not a concern. He told me he wrote a letter asking to be added to the Prime Minister's "enemies list." He told me that his letter said, "Look, if Stephen's got an enemies list and I'm not on it, there's something wrong with your enemies list. I want my name attached to that." Hettie also talked about a list of people that the "Conservatives are keeping an eye on because they're an environmental radical." She told me, "There's a small chance I could be on that list just cause of all the things that I post that are related to anti-pipelines and anti-tar sands development." However, she said it did not affect what she posted online, as she did not think that anyone could consider her a "terrorist or somebody who's committing a crime." The potential for government surveillance was something that greatly concerned Rachel and may have impacted the content she posted online, though other participants said it did not greatly impact them.

The final issue to be addressed concerns the fear of threats or violence from strangers, an issue that only Rachel and Serafina discussed. Rachel told me a story about how someone called her a terrorist online on Twitter. Rachel was in the Vancouver airport wearing a large *Idle No More* button on her bag, preparing to fly to the United States. Feeling nervous about going through security while showing support for Idle No More, she removed it. After she went through security, she tweeted about her experience. Then a man she did not know sent a tweet calling her a terrorist, describing her location and mentioning her Twitter handle. This situation was upsetting to her. "What do you do? Tell me, what you do?" she asked me. "I blocked the person." Serafina also discussed the fear she faced being a woman who posted about women's issues online. She told me, "I think it's so vicious to be female and be on the Internet, actually to be anyone who's not White, male and straight and has like a pretty buff bod." She said that women in particular are often harassed online, to the point where they fear for their physical safety. "I don't want to get to the point where people are sending me threatening, like 'I'm going to cut you up, bitch' letters because of what I write. And because of their deeply misogynistic attitudes and I know it happens." She said this fear is why she kept her Tumblr anonymous, did not post information about where she works or lives, and attempted to keep pictures of her face from being posted publicly. Serafina said she has not received any threats, but feels that this is because she chose to post things that are not very progressive or radical. The other side to this issue is that social media gives Serafina a chance to say things she would not feel safe saying offline. She told me a story about being catcalled while she was walking down the street in Victoria. She said, "I didn't feel comfortable yelling at him, but I totally felt comfortable doing it on Twitter and being like 'Avoid this corner right now, people are being really patriarchal.'" Although other participants did not explicitly discuss this issue, it was an important aspect that impacted Rachel and Serafina's approach towards self-censorship and openness on social media.

All five participants had different approaches towards self-censorship online. Walter had very few concerns about the opinions of his family, friends or future employers. He said he could be very open about what he posted online. Rachel was aware of the risks she faced by openly posting about Indigenous issues, but said she tried to "advocate from her heart" and not let fear impact what she posted. Alivia, Hettie

and Serafina all were aware of the potential for negative repercussions for posting about political topics online and described changes to what they posted. Hettie avoided particular topics while she was employed by the provincial government. She also tightened her Facebook privacy restrictions so she felt more comfortable sharing articles and discussing issues with her friends. Alivia and Serafina both struggled with deciding what to post on Facebook, where their friends and family would see what they posted. Both enjoyed the relatively anonymity of posting social justice related content to social media accounts that were further separated from their offline relationships and identities. The people who participated in the subaltern counterpublics in this research did not have a unified approach towards self-censorship. Some participants chose to restrict what they posted when they perceived negative consequences. One said she continued to post openly in spite of the risk, and another said he felt no risk. Factors other than participating in a subaltern counterpublic drove their desire to self-censor.

Minimal engagement

Two participants, Esther and Jane, had minimal engagement in social media compared to the other participants during this research. For example, I finished my observations and writing field notes for Esther's Facebook account in less than an hour. For Jane, I spent 30 minutes searching for any mention of her online at all. As a comparison, I spent an average of four to six hours on my field notes for most participants and upwards of 15 for Walter and Max who shared a large number of links. Both women had a history of being active in local social change organizations and speaking out about causes that are important to them. When I spoke to both during initial interviews, both also described how they were posting less frequently on social media than they did before. I developed three codes to describe their level of engagement: *minimal posting*, *decreasing frequency* and *offline engagement*. Despite their minimal levels of engagement in the online public sphere, Esther and Jane are an important part of this research. Learning more about why they decided to refrain from posting allowed me to explore more extensive levels of self-censorship.

Jane is a 27-year-old student in a professional graduate program and hoped to work for the government after she graduates. During our initial interview, she sent me a

link to a group on Facebook for an environmental nonprofit that I will call the Salish Sea Society. She was on the board of this nonprofit. When I asked if she wanted to share any personal accounts with me as other participants had, she declined. She told me that she did use Facebook to follow others who posted information about environmental issues, but did not post many articles or status updates herself. She also told me she did not use Facebook to post comments or have conversations about political topics. When I explored the Facebook group she sent me, I could not find any posts by her. Curious to see if I could find any information about her online at all, I eventually did find one mention of her through a Google search. Her name and photo were on the Salish Sea Society's website on their list of board members. Jane's online presence was extremely minimal, both on social media and other places online.

Esther, on the other hand, used social media more extensively than Jane. Esther is a 48-year-old queer woman with a master's degree who works full-time in information technology. Unlike Jane, she also allowed me to connect with her on Facebook as part of this research. At first, I debated including Esther in the subaltern counterpublic section, as she did use Facebook occasionally for posting about topics that could be considered part of the public sphere. For example, she posted several memes criticizing the Conservative party, organized religion and the privatization of education. She also shared articles about social justice topics about race and heteronormativity. However, I decided to include her in this section, as her decisions to self-censor sometimes seemed very meaningful to her. She told me, "I definitely post stuff to promote my perspective about certain issues. And as much as that, I also don't post things." This did not only apply to sharing articles, photos or status updates, but deciding to not comment on certain posts as well. For Esther, the absence of certain types of posts was as important to her as what she posted.

The second pattern I observed with both Jane and Esther's social media accounts is that they used social media to engage in the public sphere less often over time. Jane told me that she occasionally shared posts on her personal Facebook page about the nonprofit, but only related to recruiting people for their educational programs. She also told me that she used to share articles in the Salish Sea Society's public Facebook group; however, she said that decreased after she started her professional

program. Her reasons will be discussed further in the self-censorship section. Esther discussed how she used to maintain a blog before it was hacked a few years ago. After that, she decided to not start her blog again. We also talked about how she had tried using Twitter a few years ago before stopping. She told me, “It felt too much like a ball and chain to keep it alive, to be interesting all the time, to have things to say.” When looking at her Facebook feed, I also noticed she had posted several blog-like posts using Facebook’s “notes” from 2011-2013. Her notes were on topics such as gender, politics, social media and social justice, as well as poems that she had written. Her last note was written over a year before this research began. Although notes have become a less popular way to share information on Facebook, it was an easy way to see how Esther had used Facebook to share thoughts about political issues. In this way, both Jane and Esther posted with *decreasing frequency* to their accounts over time.

What makes both Jane and Esther relevant to include this study is the fact that they were engaged with social change organizations and were accustomed to speaking out about issues that were important to them in offline public spheres. As discussed previously, Jane is a board member on the Salish Sea Society. This organization plans educational opportunities for people, especially teachers and university students, to learn about the ocean and how to protect it. When I asked her how she recruited participants for the Society’s educational programs, she said she focused on offline efforts. She told me, “A lot is through word of mouth. And we’ve put up posters everywhere that we have past participants.” Before starting her graduate education, she also worked for a number of nonprofit organizations that focused on outdoor education. For Jane, being involved in offline social networks, promoting causes using physical media and helping to organize offline educational programs were more important ways of reaching people about issues she cared about. Esther had an extensive history of being involved in social change organizations. She told me, “I’ve worked for labour organizing, I’ve worked in employment equity and I was involved in a really huge community battle to save a conservation area from being developed.” Social media was never an important part of her work on most of these projects, though we talked about other technologies that played a large role. When describing a project that started in 2007 she said, “We rallied the community with email, which was fabulous. Couldn’t have done it without it.” We also talked about the importance of websites in helping to share

information about issues. For Esther, participating in the public sphere primarily happened offline, but was also facilitated by technologically mediated communication. However, social media was not a major form of expression for the organizations she worked with. In this way, both Jane and Esther focus their participation in public spheres through *offline engagement*.

Self-Censorship: “I don’t post things that give me that concern.”

I have now discussed how Jane and Esther minimally engaged in the online public sphere, despite actively engaging offline. Unlike the previous two groups of participants, both Jane and Esther described how they significantly self-censored what they posted online. Jane said social media was never very important to her, but her decision to pursue a career in public service inspired her to mostly stop posting on social media about the environment. Esther spoke more broadly about her reasons for self-censorship, but our conversations often focused on how she imagined her Facebook friends might respond to what she posted. These two themes were discussed in the previous section: employment and potential criticism. Both women also spoke about an additional theme, the inability to trust Facebook’s privacy settings in terms of keeping posts from unintended audiences. In this section, three predominant codes will be discussed: *employment*, *potential criticism* and *the mistrust of Facebook*.

The first issue to consider is how Jane’s concerns over her future employers reading her accounts inspired her to censor her posts. Jane had recently started a professional graduate program and hoped to work for the government after she graduated. She told me, “No one says that you can’t do volunteer work or non-profit work at all, definitely not something they say. But they do warn you pretty strongly about your social media presence.” She told me about a time when people who were working for the government visited one of her classes to talk about social media. She said, “The impression I was left with was that, if your social media presence portrays you as partisan in a particular way — like if you’re an environmentalist, which I am and the organizations that I work with are — that you could be perceived as NDP. Or you could be perceived in a certain way, which could be very limiting. And they used that word, career-limiting move. Like they even have an acronym: clm.”

A few weeks later, Jane relayed a story to me by email about her friend who was interviewed for a position with a particular political party. During the interview, the employer mentioned that they noticed he “liked” the leader of another political party on Facebook. Her friend said he followed the pages of all political party leaders to stay informed. However, the interviewer then said that they couldn't consider him further for the position because they couldn't hire someone affiliated with another party. Jane finished her email by saying, “Just an interesting true story that reinforces the fact that employers monitor our social media presence.” These experiences were similar to Hettie's, who also worked for the government. Esther mentioned that she had signed an agreement when she got her current job saying that she would not defame the company on social media. She said that “If I think about any employer going and looking through the posts that I've made the last year, there's no problem with anything there.” She said she chooses to not post about work or her employer on social media. Although both Esther and Jane self-censor because of work, Esther's self-censorship is limited to speaking about her company while Jane feels she must appear to be nonpartisan. This limits her from being able to speak about the environment, which she cares deeply about and a cause to which she dedicates significant hours volunteering.

The second theme for consideration is the fear of criticism. In the previous section, this theme was divided into two audiences: potential criticism from other activists and from friends or family. For Jane, there was no meaningful distinction between these two groups. Currently, she only posts to Facebook, where she has limited the visibility of her posts to her 200 friends. She does not have a way of easily reaching a larger crowd of people she does not know offline. However, many of her Facebook friends are people she has met through her involvement in various social change organizations. Esther echoed the concerns that Rachel and Serafina had about dealing with criticism from other activists. Esther shared how watching others get called out on social media affected her. One example Esther shared with me was an example of something that I had posted on Facebook. She said, “I remember you posted something not so long ago about feminism, about women in technology. I thought it was really well done. I was just enjoying it and then boom out of left field. It's hate, it's all hate!” One of my friends commented on my post saying that the message was transphobic. I moved the conversation to a private message with this person, but did not respond publicly. I

was personally affected by this event, but I was surprised that Esther remembered it, as it was only one comment on one of my many posts. However, this example illustrated what she was afraid may happen to her if she posted more about social justice topics. Esther told me, “I feel more vulnerable cause I do my best to stay up to date, to maintain a contemporary and political analysis, but I think maybe as we age, there’s only so much we can do. Maybe my analysis will also come under fire for being short sighted and blank-phobic or whatever-phobic.” Instead, she described how she chooses to post things that are “safe personal” like her photography. She said, “There’s something about Facebook that makes me want to share something personal. But I don’t like to talk about those kinds of things where I might be vulnerable to attack or questioning or bias or judgement or discrimination or whatever. But everybody loves a photo. So I get to share something personal that everyone can enjoy, but it won’t be controversial.” In this way, Esther describes how her fear of criticism directly influences her choices to not participate in the online public sphere.

Both Jane and Esther also discussed how their mistrust of Facebook influences their decision to extensively self-censor what they post on social media. For Jane, when I asked her what steps she took to make sure unintended audiences did not read her posts, she said, “Mostly, I’m not posting.” She said she did not trust Facebook’s privacy settings at all. She told me, “It feels like they’re being sneaky, like they changed the wording of things. It’s not very clearly set out to someone who’s not really up on social media stuff.” Jane feels the negative consequences of future employers seeing what she posts are potentially high and does not trust Facebook to protect her privacy. As a result, she said she was not posting. Unlike Jane, Esther was very experienced with technology from her career in this industry. However, she said she did not trust Facebook’s privacy settings either. Esther described how Facebook constantly changing its privacy settings has led her not to trust them. She said, “Basically Facebook says, ‘We have this thing and it protects you from this.’ Then they go, ‘We’re not using that anymore.’ So you’re like, ‘What happened to all the stuff that I did with that setting?’” She also discussed how she was frustrated when she wanted to restrict a certain type of post, but Facebook would override her wishes. Even though she understood their reasons, she said it was frustrating not having control over who saw her posts. Esther also told me she occasionally fantasized about unfriending a large number of people. She told me, “It’s all

these people I've collected whose extremist opinions are really annoying to me." She said she regularly went through her Facebook friend list and removed people; however, she did not unfriend everyone she wanted to. Both Esther and Jane, with varying comfort with using computers, felt frustrated about how Facebook managed privacy settings and how they were inadequate to match their desire to control who saw their posts. Both responded by posting less frequently.

Both Jane and Esther had similar approaches towards self-censorship online. For Jane, this desire came from wanting to avoid career-limiting moves that would prevent her from finding the public service work she desired. For Esther, she wanted to avoid criticism from people who did not share her views. They both felt as if the potential negative repercussions for posting made it more attractive to post less often. Unlike participants from the previous section, Jane and Esther felt relatively at ease with their behaviour on social media. I asked Esther if she had any concerns about people she wished were not reading what she posted having access to her posts. She said, "There was a time when I had concerns about that, but I've integrated that concern into how I post. So I don't post things that give me that concern." Esther and Jane had significant concerns and no trustworthy way to mitigate them, so they chose not to be engaged.

Chapter 5. Discussion

In this thesis, I have demonstrated how social media users perform self-censorship based on a compromise between the audiences they would like to reach and the negative consequences they perceive. For the majority of participants in this research, there was a comfortable alignment between these two variables. The four men in this research had very few concerns about potential negative repercussions from what they posted online and thus spoke openly in their chosen platforms to the audiences they wished to reach. Although Walter wanted to reach a narrower audience than Max, Dave and Dylan, he made this decision because he felt it would be the most effective way to communicate his ideas, not due to any fear or concern of negative outcomes. The three who wanted to participate in the wider public sphere did so openly and without many reservations. Similarly, Esther and Jane had a close alignment between what they posted and their concerns about posting on social media. Both women expressed concerns about potential negative repercussions including limiting career prospects and receiving criticism from friends. Both also chose to refrain from posting much content about these topics. In this way, these two groups had surprisingly more in common than it seemed at first glance.

This alignment is very different from the experiences of the four remaining participants, who chose to engage on social media despite their concerns. Rachel, Hettie, Alivia and Serafina all participated in online subaltern counterpublics. As discussed in the previous section, all four had concerns ranging from fear of criticism to reservations about government and employer surveillance. This research illustrates some of the ways they attempted to reach their desired audiences despite this discord. Some of the strategies they employed were:

- Disregarding concerns: Despite suspecting that sharing a message might have negative repercussions, some participants decided to post the content anyway.

- Blocking: Participants sometimes chose to unfriend or block someone's account after having a negative interaction.
- Using pseudonyms: Using alternate names for certain accounts helped participants manage who knew about a certain account. Sometimes they wanted to keep the account hidden from strangers (like future employers), other times they wanted to prevent certain friends and family from finding an account.
- Turning to community for support: When participants become involved in a controversial discussion on social media, they sometimes asked others to join the conversation and publicly support their point of view.
- Finding alternative platforms: When participants felt like they could not express themselves on one account (such as Facebook), they sometimes turned to other sites where they had smaller, more specific audiences (such as Tumblr).

Although not exhaustive, this list illustrates the major ways participants with concerns negotiated a compromise that allowed them to continue to engage in the public domain.

Contributions

In terms of empirical research, this ethnographic thesis provides additional context to the existing quantitative data about social media and self-censorship. These stories offer a way to look at self-censorship not just as statistics, but as complicated stories about individuals negotiating multiple considerations and making compromises. For example, Hampton et al. (2014) found that people who do not feel that Facebook friends or Twitter followers agree with their opinion are more likely to self-censor their views (p. 8). These researchers write that they did not explore why someone might choose to self-censor; however, my research does — especially in the stories of Alivia, Serafina, Hettie, Esther and Jane. As discussed in the data analysis section, they were concerned about potential criticism, public image, employment, government surveillance and fear of threats and violence. My research also examines some of the reasons why people choose not to self-censor when their friends and followers do not share their views, especially the story of Dylan. He felt controversy was another form of publicity and welcomed the attention. Although his attitude is not common, it is one of the many stories that help to explain the thinking processes behind this range of statistics. In

another example, Sleeper et al. (2013) discuss types of content that were not shared on Facebook. They found that 10% of unshared content in their research referenced “politics, current events, or activism” (p. 796). My research provides context for why people may have decided to not post political content and how they negotiate those compromises.

This thesis also broadens the scope of traditional social media research by including participants who were mostly older than 25. In the early social media research, participants were often teenagers or undergraduate students, age groups that traditionally adopted new technologies first and are often more accessible to researchers. However, in 2015, people of all ages are using social media on a regular basis. By including participants who were mostly 25-55 years old, I was able to capture experiences outside of the typical high school or undergraduate student life. I believe my research demonstrates that there are new insights to be gained from investigating how adults of all ages are using social media.

From a theoretical perspective, this thesis provides additional data for those investigating how social media fit into theories about the public sphere. The stories of Max, Dave and Dylan lend support to other research exploring how social media can be considered part of or a new public sphere. This work also supports the emerging research examining how social media functions as a *subaltern counterpublic* or “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser, 1997, p. 81). For example, Cho (2011) examines how queer users of Tumblr create a networked counterpublic on that social networking site. Bryce Renninger (2014) also uses Fraser’s (1990) subaltern counterpublic to compare communication among the asexual community on Tumblr with postings on a popular website’s bulletin board. My research differs from the work of these authors in that I do not focus on a particular identity (such as sexual orientation), but on a broader group of people engaged in similar online practices. In this way, my research is more broadly applicable to how conversations about political topics are conducted online.

My research also provides support to challenge normative interpretations of communication about political topics in social media. For example, Smith, Rainie, Himelboim and Shneiderman (2014) created composite maps of thousands of Twitter conversations in order to identify dominant patterns in communication. One pattern they observed they called the “polarized crowd,” which is what often emerges around conversations about political topics. Smith et al. write that “two big and dense groups that have little connection between them form,” even though both groups are discussing the same topic (p. 2). There is little conversation between these groups and both are referencing different media sources in their tweets. My research also showed this pattern. For example, in the four months I followed Rachel on Twitter, she had only one conversation with someone with very different political beliefs, while she often connected with and welcomed new followers with those who had similar political beliefs. Smith et al. describe this in a negative way, writing “They are ignoring one another while pointing to different web resources and using different hashtags.” However, from my research I know that Rachel and the others who were connecting in subaltern counterpublics did not view themselves as ignoring others. They saw themselves as choosing to withdraw from the wider public sphere, learn more about issues they cared about and connect with others who supported similar causes. They also sometimes drew on the support of their community and took their issues to the wider public sphere. My research focused on only a few people, so I cannot say what the majority of Twitter users intentions are. However, this thesis offers an alternative way to consider these Twitter maps. These Twitter users may not be just ignoring each other – but rather some people may be connecting and supporting each other in a subaltern counterpublics. Looking for reasons why people are not engaging with each other on social media is an important area for future research.

Methodologically, the research of this thesis contributes to the growing field of social media ethnography. Although Hine pioneered the field of virtual ethnography in the early 2000s, social media ethnography was still emerging as I was developing this research. The term “social media ethnography” was coined by Postill and Pink (2012) in “Social Media Ethnography: The Digital Research in the Messy Web.” This thesis utilized Postill and Pink’s concept of the “messy web” where fieldwork would intersect both offline and online worlds. This inspired me to meet with people offline whenever I could,

as well as follow their social media accounts online. This also motivated me to abandon the idea of limiting my research to one particular social networking site, as people's online activity is rarely contained in one place. Postill and Pink's focus on digital socialities over communities also influenced my decision to connect with people who were engaging in the public sphere on a variety of topics, rather than focus on a particular group or association.

Since I deviated from many of the benchmarks ethnographers use to define the boundaries of their research, at the outset I was not sure if I would see meaningful connections emerge among my participants. For example, in the same week I listened to Hettie talk about how signing online petitions was an important part of her activism, Dylan told me that attending events in person was necessary for creating real change. Participants also reacted to the same potential threats quite differently. For example, Rachel felt uneasy about the potential of government surveillance, while Walter told me he wrote a letter asking to be put on the prime minister's "enemies list." However, as I continued my fieldwork, the network of relationships began to emerge. I noticed that some participants followed each other on Twitter and belonged to the same groups on Facebook. I unexpectedly ran into participants at community events and was able to follow along on Twitter as they live tweeted. As I began my initial coding, I also saw themes emerge around engaging in the public sphere, subaltern counterpublics, and not engaging much online. Even though an individual's decisions about what to say, what audiences to reach and what constituted risky behaviour were sometimes very different, at the end of this research I feel as if I have been a part of a web of loosely related social connections and conversations. My hope is that this research will help others build on this model to further develop what social media ethnography is and how to define the boundaries of a researcher's particular focus.

Limitations

It is impossible to generalize from this research about social media users in Canada, British Columbia, or even Victoria. In this research, I did not choose participants based on finding a representative sample of demographic characteristics. Instead, I used theoretical sampling to find participants that would help me find diverse approaches

towards self-censorship and social media. Instead of focusing on gender, race or class, I searched for participants who were engaging with different audiences online, as well as those who had varied attitudes towards self-censorship. However, this method has its limitations. As social media researcher boyd (2015) writes, “social media use is significantly shaped by race and class, geography and cultural background” (p. 1). Although I contacted a highly diversified group of social change organizations, the people who responded to my requests for participation were not representative of the general population. For example, six participants in my research identified as White (and the other four did not specify a racial identity). According to Statistics Canada, about 11% of people identify as “visible minorities” and 4% identify as “Aboriginal” in the Capital Regional District (Government of Canada, 2011).

The participants in my research are also much more highly educated than the general population. All participants had completed at least an undergraduate degree, besides Alivia who had started her first year of studies. By comparison, only 27% of people 15 years old and over in the Capital Regional District had a bachelor’s or higher (Government of Canada, 2011). Despite their high level of education, most participants had a low income and described themselves as “underemployed,” “semi-retired,” partially supported by family and/or full-time students. The one exception was Esther, who worked full-time in information technology. Four participants also identified as something other than heterosexual (lesbian, gay, pansexual and queer), which is much higher than the general population. A variety of genders were represented in this research, with four men, six women and one gender-questioning person. As previously discussed, there was also a wide variety of ages, especially compared to other research focused on social media. In some ways, participants in my research represented a group with relative privilege in some regards (e.g. race and education), but disadvantages and potential discrimination in others (e.g. income, sexual orientation). However, the purpose of this research was not to get a representative sample of social media users in Victoria. The purpose was to elicit a variety of experiences to help further understand of how people negotiate self-censorship while engaging in the online public sphere. Although I have strived to include a diverse range of experiences in this research, it is important to note that the people of all backgrounds are not represented in this paper.

Questions for further research

Although this project's small sample size limits the generalizability of the results, some patterns emerged that are worth considering for further research. One of these was the correlation between gender and self-censorship. In this research, the group that had the fewest concerns about self-censorship was male, while the group that reported self-censoring the most was female. Serafina also discussed the fear of threats of violence from people for speaking out as a woman online. This of course came as no surprise. Researchers, individuals, and news outlets have long reported similar stories about the difficulties women face online. Additional ethnographic research into gender would gather new and important insights. How do the particular challenges that women and trans people face in social media affect what they post and where they are willing to post?

Another area for further research is the impact of employers reading social media posts. The experiences of participants in this research on this topic were highly varied. Many said that for the type of work that they wanted, employers either would not care or would appreciate their engagement in social media. This was true for Alivia, Serafina, Rachel, Dylan and Max – all of whom wanted careers where a background in politics or activism would be considered an asset. For those who had jobs or wanted careers working in the public service, these experiences were quite different. Hettie told me how she limited what she posted and who she connected with while she was employed by the provincial government. Jane also told me that she significantly reduced her engagement with social media when she started preparing herself for a career in public service. In a pre-social media world, it was possible to talk to friends about ideas or join an organization without one's employer knowing. Now similar conversations between friends on Twitter or liking a page on Facebook can be seen by employers. Further research is required to know if Jane and Hettie's experiences are representative of those working in the public service or other fields where activism and political involvement is not considered an asset.

With the growing use of mobile phones, another area for future research would be to explore how using a mobile app versus a web browser impacts what one is willing

to say on social media. Mobile phones allow people to post instantly without time for reflection or having moved from the physical location where an incident is happening. For example, Rachel mentioned how she feel unsafe tweeting about Idle No More button in the airport, as people who disagreed with her politics and were in the same location as her could approach her without her knowing. In contrast, Serafina mentioned that she felt empowered tweeting about the men that harassed her on the street, as she felt unsafe confronting them in person. Future research could explore many aspects of mobile phone and social media use on self-censorship, such as: the physical location of the person when they are posting how much time has passed between thinking about the update and posting it, as well as how the interface of the mobile app (and often lack of privacy options) influences decision-making.

According to public sphere theory, a healthy democracy's laws and policies should be directed by the public sphere. Therefore it is important to understand what perspectives are missing from these conversations. This information is also important to those designing social media platforms. Some features, such as having the option to block other users and allowing pseudonymous accounts, allowed some people in this research to post where they might have otherwise self-censored. As social media companies try to increase participation on their platforms, understanding what the barriers their users face to posting would be a benefit.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

This thesis has argued that social media users perform self-censorship based on a compromise between the audiences they would like to reach and the potential negative repercussions from sharing content. I identified three distinct ways participants engaged with social media: the Habermasian public sphere, subaltern counterpublics, and non-engagement. Those who openly engaged in the public sphere had little fear of negative repercussions. They told me they spoke freely without concerns. In contrast, the participants in this research that engaged in subaltern counterpublics had various attitudes towards what the risks of posting would be. Some had no or very few fears, while others had concerns ranging from fear of criticism to the potential impact on employment. This often impacted what they chose to share in the online public sphere. It is important to note that engaging with a more narrowly defined audience did not seem to function as a method of self-censorship. Rather, many chose to engage in a subaltern counterpublic in order to find and lend support to others who shared similar values. In the final group, the participants who engaged minimally in the online public sphere reported the highest levels of self-censorship.

This thesis began with an examination of core concepts and a review of the existing literature about social media, the public sphere, and self-censorship. The research design was then discussed, including the approach to social media ethnography and my strategies for recruiting participants and conducting fieldwork. Some of the unexpected challenges were detailed with regard to the analysis of social media through the perspective of an ethnographer. Narratives were presented that demonstrated how participants were engaging in the public sphere, subaltern counterpublics, and also minimally engaging. Different attitudes participants had about

self-censorship were also detailed. Finally, the various empirical, theoretical and methodological contributions of this work were presented.

I believe the broader significance of this work is that it helps to challenge the normative assumption that conversations about important issues are more effective when targeted at the broadest possible audience. For example, as previously discussed, Smith et al. (2014) describe the tendency for people with conservative and progressive political beliefs to not engage with each other on Twitter as each sides disregards the other. Another example is the analysis of Hampton et al. (2014) in their examination of people's willingness to discuss the controversial Snowden story in social media. In the introduction to their research, they write that they believe the hope of social media was that "those with minority views might feel freer to express their opinions thus broadening public discourse and adding new perspectives to everyday discussion of political issues" (p. 1). Even some of the participants in my research shared this belief, saying that they wanted to avoid "preaching to the choir" by debating topics with those that disagree with them. However, my research also shows that some people consciously chose to engage only with people who share their beliefs. They value the opportunity to communicate with a narrower audience on social media. In these subaltern counterpublics, social media users learn and teach each other about issues that are important to them. They reinforce existing social relationships with other members of the group that help lead to stronger ties both on- and offline. They coordinate agitational activities ranging from responding to sexist comments on Facebook to staging offline protests. Those participating in these subaltern counterpublics find this opportunity to communicate away from the wider public sphere valuable. My hope is that this research is able to contribute to redefining this type of social media usage not as a deficiency – but rather a way for people connect and support each other in a subaltern counterpublic.

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