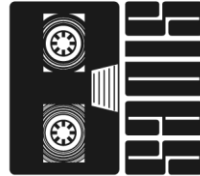


# B Sides

<http://ir.uiowa.edu/bsides>



U of I SLIS Journal

05|25|2010

## **Feminist Communities Online: What it means to be a Jezebel**

Katelyn M. Wazny



cc by-nc-nd Katelyn Wazny 2010

<http://ir.uiowa.edu/bsides/08>

*B Sides* is produced by Iowa Research Online, the University of Iowa's Institutional Repository

**Editors** | Angela Murillo & Rachel Hall**Faculty Advisor** | Jim Elmborg**Associate Editors** | Julia Skinner & Katie DeVries**Layout & Identity design** | Colin Smalter

## Abstract:

This paper examines what it means to identify as a feminist in Western society and whether one can be a feminist while not explicitly stating this aspect of identity. The paper seeks to answer the age-old question (albeit modified slightly,) if it looks like feminist website, and sounds like a feminist website, is it a feminist website? There is much discussion and disagreement over what it means to be a feminist, with different conclusions being drawn by first-, second-, and third-generation members of the movement. Jezebel does not purport to be a feminist website. There is no mention of feminism anyway on the blog's masthead or advertising page; however, at times there have been heated discussions on the site as to acceptable behavior by the blog's editors and what it means to be a member of this online community. Through examination of the past posts, website and literature on the subject, the author determines that it is not necessary for the site to state its affiliation to the feminist position. The site has become a feminist website due to the positions taken by its community members and editors on women's issues and will remain so as long as the members of this online community choose to affiliate with both the site and identify with feminist values. Community member define the sites with which they choose to associate.

**Keywords:**

Feminism | Feminist | Blogs | Online Communities | Websites

The Internet has been envisioned as a vast frontier, a social utopia, and as a place that information knowledge can flourish and be shared. While these designations and environments are debatable, one thing that the Internet has allowed for is the gathering of like-minded individuals online. Internet communities have taken different forms online, as electronic mailing lists, social networking sites, and blogs. Many of these websites and communities self-identify what they are in hopes of attracting a certain type of user. This paper confronts the question of whether a website can be a feminist website, even if the object in question and its creators do not self-identify the site as such, due to the type of content that is posted and the community of users that belong. This paper will be organized into several sections in order to meet its goal. First, feminism itself and what makes a feminist website is discussed. Then Jezebel, a women's blog that self-identifies as such while refraining from mentioning feminism, is profiled as to its content, layout, editorial staff and user community. Finally, based on the critiqued factors, the paper concludes with a discussion as to whether or not the examined website meets the established criteria for a feminist website. One of the major points of examination regarding these factors is the aftermath of a public appearance by two of the editors from the examined blog within the website's community and from the larger blogosphere.

### **Feminism**

Part of the reason that one can have difficulty establishing the criteria for a feminist website is due to the differing opinions on what makes someone a feminist. If one wishes for a general definition of feminism, Fredrick (1999) provides one, writing that "very generally, feminism is about uncovering women's perspectives;" however, she also makes the point of stating that "a summary of feminist theory is difficult because feminism is broad diverse, and changing." The feminist movement has evolved since its inception, with there now being several defined feminist "waves," strains of feminist activity in an era, with the latest two waves comprising most living and active feminists. Herring et al (2002) describe the current online feminist behavior as such: "the early adopter, highly educated, upper-middle class '70s-style feminist of the 1980s and early

1990s has given way to the younger and more demographically diverse feminists who populate Web forums.”

The first wave of feminism occurred during the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and focused on overturning legal obstacles to equality for women, while second-wave feminism worked to address a much wider range of cultural and legal issues for women and placed great importance on political activism; however, the leadership of the second-wave was often white and middle class which “created an ambivalent, if not contentious, relationship with women of other classes and races” (“Feminism,” 2009). This emphasis on the importance of political activism and the racial concerns raised by the second wave of feminism has led to contrasts with the most recently defined wave of feminism beginning the early 1990s. Third-wave feminists often focus “more on the individual empowerment of women and less on political activism” with this empowerment as “a starting point for societal change” (Rockler-Gladen 2007). This spectrum of accepted feminist theory, practices and behaviors has at times led to disagreement amongst some as to what defines a person, and by extension a website, as a true feminist voice. Some users extend this argument further, arguing that a website is not only defined by the content that appears online, but the actions of the site’s contributors and editors offline.

### **What makes a Feminist Website**

Several key hallmarks help to define a feminist website or blog. The first hallmark that one sees with such websites is when a site explicitly defines itself as a feminist site either through the title, tagline or site description. Another way that a feminist affiliation is easily conveyed is through the web address of a website, such as <http://www.feminist.com> or <http://www.feministing.com>. These addresses and their subsequent taglines and descriptions mark the websites as safe zones for similarly-identifying individuals and establish the type of communities and users that the websites wish to attract; however, although this sort of self-identifying as a certain type of website often contributes to an online identity, this self-definition is not enough in itself. If a website were to identify as a feminist website and only post content related to bacon and German Shepherds, it would be difficult for users to consider that website a true

feminist site. Thus it seems that another benchmark of a feminist website relates to content regarding women's issues. Women's issues encompass a broad range of material; nevertheless, this can then lead to a dilemma as to what makes something a "women's issue," and disagreements among a website's users. These disagreements are likely rooted in differences in the users' personal beliefs and the differences in the priorities of the three identified feminist waves. The type of content posted relies on the website's staff, which should be an editorial staff predominantly staffed by writers who care about and write about women's issues, another key trait among feminist websites. These staffers are more likely than not women themselves. This is not to say a man could not write for a feminist website, but cursory glance at various self-identified feminist websites showed that the male staff writers were vastly outnumbered by the women.

Another hallmark of a feminist website is a mission or values statement that speaks to the website or blog's commitment to spreading or furthering the ideals of feminism and feminist causes. For example, the organization Feminist.com defines itself in its "About Us" section as "a thriving online community fostering awareness, education and activism for women all across the world," and that the organization desires "to serve as the Internet's definitive hub for resources and information dedicated to women's equality, justice, wellness and safety," ("What is Feminist.com?" n.d.). Alternatively, Feministing clearly meets the aforementioned criteria as a feminist website, but the website's mission only states that they believe that "young women are rarely given the opportunity to speak on their own behalf on issues that affect their lives and futures," and that through Feministing, they hope to "provide a platform for us to comment, analyze, influence and connect," ("Feministing: About," n.d.). While a statement identifying a website as a feminist one is not necessary to qualify a website as such, it does help to define a site while providing direction and purpose for both the site and the community of participants and readers involved.

### **Jezebel.com: A Women's Blog**

Jezebel.com is a women's issues blog launched on May 21, 2007 under the Gawker Media umbrella, a line of blogs known for their sarcastic and snarky coverage

of the day's events relating to the blog's target area of coverage. Jezebel, located at <http://jezebel.com> (figure 1), was chosen due to my own usage and readership of the blog, and I have been an active commenter since 2007. The tagline for Jezebel sells the site as "Celebrity, Sex, Fashion for Women;" the user base is predominantly female. Gawker Media advertising claims that 97% of the users on the website are female, with 82% of users falling in the 18-34 year-old demographic coveted by advertisers ("Gawker Media Titles, Jezebel," n.d.).

### **Editorial Staff**

All of the writers and editors for Jezebel are women, with one exception among the contributing writers. Only the editors and a few contributing writers author the blog posts that comprise the content of the website, although the site cross-posts articles that appeared on other Gawker Media sites. The editorial staff all list contact information on the blog via Twitter and email. Anna Holmes serves as the editor-in-chief for the blog, and she has since the blog's inception in 2007. The rest of the editorial staff is comprised of a deputy editor, a senior contributing editor, two additional contributing editors, with five additional contributors. There is a degree of ethnic diversity on staff. Both Holmes and Dodai Stewart self-identify as black, as does Latoya Peterson, one of the regular contributors to the site who also serves as the editor for the blog *Racialicious*; at the time of this article, the remaining writers on staff are white, and contributing editor Sadie Stein (2009) has written posts on her experience as a "halfJew."

### **Interface**

There are elements of the design of the website that mark Jezebel as a site intended primarily for female consumption. The masthead for the website is done with the title of blog appearing in a deep fuchsia and the tagline font color a bright pink. All links to other websites also appear in pink, as do links to the editors' and contributors' email addresses. The image that appears next to the title of the blog on the masthead is an illustration of a woman, with her half of her face appearing in black and white, the rest in color. The woman appears to be Caucasian, due to the color of her skin in the colored half of the image, wearing make-up with her blonde hair styled.

The interface options make it clear that although the site might have been originally billed as the snarky, online alternative to fashion and women's magazines such as Cosmopolitan, the website's focus has shifted somewhat since its creation in 2007. The interface has a display option available to users that designates what posts one views on the blog. Users can see all posts or choose to view posts selectively based on topic, for which the categories used to be fashion, entertainment, or politics; however, a very recent site redesign occurring in mid-October 2009 removed the politics and entertainment options. Instead, the links immediately provided to users on the main page let users view posts according to the assigned hashtags "#celebrity," "#sex," and "#fashion," the three key terms that appear in the tagline for the blog, although it is important to note that users can see any content according to hashtags by entering in the correct hashtags at the end of the address [http://www.jezebel.com/tags\(blank\)](http://www.jezebel.com/tags(blank)). Alternatively, users can also choose to view the "top" blog posts of the day which is determined not based on the number of page views or comments, but instead based upon which posts have been highlighted in the featured article slots above the website's banner at the top of the page.

All commenters on Jezebel have a profile automatically created when a member joins the website (figure 2). The profile allows one to set an image to serve as an avatar that appears on one's profile page and next to one's comment. Another part of the user profile allows others to see any and all posts made to the blog, either stories or comments that have been left on stories on the website. A user can also send messages internally from user to user, messages which can either be private or appear publicly to other users. There is a clear hierarchy among the commenters on the blog. Jezebel awards stars to a select number of commenters, just as all Gawker Media blogs do; however, while a commenter from Jezebel can use their profile to post on any Gawker Media blog, star privileges do not carry over from blog to blog unless the user has also been awarded a star on that blog. Having a star attached to one's profile means that a commenter appears in black typeface in the commenting threads below posts on the website. These comments are designated "featured" comments. If one lacks a star, a comment made appears in a faded gray type instead; the only way a gray

comment might appear in black is if a starred commenter or editor chooses to promote a comment to featured-comment status. A comment remains grayed until it is approved, even if the gray comment is in response to a black, featured comment. This can lead to slightly disjointed conversations in the comments section where one cannot always immediately see all the parts of a dialogue. An option exists at the bottom of every page to allow for two different viewing options when it comes to the comments on blog posts; one can either view all comments, or only the featured comments. Additionally, the editors of the blog have the power to downgrade any comment that is deemed off-topic from its featured status. If a reader makes too many off-topic comments or approves the comments of others in a way that the editors deem inappropriate, it is possible to have one's commenting star revoked, forcing the user to attempt to earn the star back through "proper" commenting.

The site has a recently-introduced feature that allows another avenue of reader participation. On the main page of the site there is a box labeled "Let your fingers do the talking." This box enables users to submit tips, comments on articles, or other news and links with the addition of a hashtag, a format borrowed from Twitter, before what is entered into the box. In an interview Nick Denton, the publisher of Gawker Media, states (2009) that "as the front pages of our sites become ever more professional, it's even more important to allow anarchy to bubble up from below. The goal is to blur the line between our editors and commenter-contributors." Starred contributors are more likely than other users to have their tips and comments appear on the tag pages, with users lacking a star needing approval from starred commenters before their posts appear; Denton (2009) claims that the commenters "class system," the system of starred versus unstarred commenters, was necessary before a box like this could be instituted on site.

### **Commenting Rules**

While many online communities have an understood set of rules among the user base that is not explicitly defined, Jezebel instead outlines a very specific system for commenters on the blog. Any time that the editors feel that rules have been ignored, the rules are reposted in order to remind users as to the expectation for posting



comments on the website. The basic commenting structures, as taken from “The Girl’s Guide to Commenting on Jezebel” (2008) are as follows:

**Characteristics of a good comment:**•Insight/additional information•Intelligent critique•Wit/humor•Calm, courteous, reasoned disagreement, either with the opinions/facts presented in a post itself or with other commenters•Sharing of relevant, personal anecdote (within reason)

**Characteristics of a bad comment:**•Personal attacks on other commenters or Jezebel editors•Deliberate provocation/trollishness•Vulgarity•Self-promotion•Banality•Creating/contributing to an echo chamber: (“So cute!” or “I hate...”)  
•Whining/Complaining: (“I don’t want to read about this, can’t we see pictures of puppies?”)  
•Irrelevance: “I don’t know who this person is” or “First!”

Also otherwise frowned upon are behaviors such as threadjacking, “blog pimping” of one’s own blog, or what the editor’s deem “girl-on-girl crime,” body critiques of female figures (2008). “Girl-on-girl crime” was explicitly banned in its own post as part of a New Year’s resolution on the blog to hinder contributing to what the editors’ viewed as an overall negative attitude on commenting on women’s bodies online. Commenters who ignore these posters’ rules face a series of reactions, with more serious rule transgression resulting in the immediate banning or revoking of commenting rights by that user account, the most serious punishment that the site can mete out; however, banning of a commenter is not the only disciplinary step that can be taken. Another lesser punishment for comments deemed inappropriate by the editors or the comment moderator is the practice of “disemvoweling” a comment, an action that does exactly what the name implies: it removes every vowel from a comment leaving only the consonants behind. One can see why disemvoweling occasionally leads to disagreement among the commenters. By leaving a comment still visible, although minus the vowels from the original post, it can contribute to a puzzle effect where one tries to piece together what the original banned comment might have been. This situation then leads one to spend more time deciphering a comment than might have been had the comment remained intact; yet, it continues to be Gawker network policy to

never to delete a comment nor to erase a user profile, so all comments remain despite any editorial privileges that the site's administrators choose to invoke.

### **Cultural Analysis**

As a liberal, young-adult, white female pursuing a post-graduate degree, my background means I am a prime target member of Jezebel's readership. It is my past experience with the blog that led me to examine the website in a more in-depth manner. But while I possess many of the characteristics seemingly desired by the site that is not to say I am its ideal reader.

Based on the website's layout, design, and title it seems clear that the intended audience of the website is female. This is implied by many of the blog posts' titles such as the aforementioned "**Girl's** (emphasis added) Guide to Commenting on Jezebel," implying a readership that is both young and female by the choice of the word "girl" as opposed to the age- and gender-neutral term "user." Also, based on the regular features of the websites, it would appear that the intended audience is one that is both comfortable financially and well-educated. The only daily features of the website are two celebrity gossip columns, published in the morning and evening, and an article titled "Rag Trade," a column that relates gossip and news from the fashion industry. There are no daily or even weekly features pertaining to economic matters, though this is not to say that there are never posts relating to financial or money issues. One past post on asking for a raise, "Woman to Woman: How to Get the Money You Want and Deserve," received over 19000 page views; however, this post is also more than a year old.

There is some evidence that would support that the readership of Jezebel is somewhat naïve to the dangers that presenting too much personal information online can present despite a seemingly high general level of education. Holmes (2009) writes to the readership in a post titled "Commenters, We Have a Problem," a post in which she chided commenters on the site for sharing too much personal information on the blog. Holmes writes that "this blog is not a message board" and that readers need to be careful about giving personal information out over the Internet. "It pains me to say it, but this is not a 'safe space' or a bubble immune to the harsh realities of the outside world," as she outlined how a commenter had recently shared the details of an upcoming

medical procedure (ibid). This is not to say personal information is not allowed at any time; Holmes (ibid) explains to readers, “if you have an anecdote to share about, say, the demise of a recent romance, that’s fine; just do it in the thread of a post that is relevant to your personal story.”

While there is some flexibility in the language used in the hashtags that describe posts, there is some standard jargon on the website. The daily gossip and fashion news columns go by the names of “Dirtbag” and “Rag Trade,” a casual and more insouciant tone than if the columns went with the standard terminology of “gossip” and “fashion news.” All image posts (images posted sans an accompanying article), be they of celebrities in Los Angeles or protesters in Pakistan, are labeled with the hashtag of “#snapjudgment,” (figure 3). The use of word judgment on images posted implies that Jezebel and its editors are seeking personal opinions in order to spark discussion on posts that might not otherwise garner as many hits due to the lack of an additional article. However, despite the tone of some of the hashtags, most articles are presented in a professional if not unbiased manner with accompanying images or videos in that while most article have a very clear tone and point of view on any issue, the authors still suggest that other viewpoint can be valid.

Jezebel appears to be a fairly cliquish website with stringent set of rules that can make the site intimidating to outsiders, a view that Zachary Seward reflects at the Nieman Journalism Lab. Seward (2009) writes that the comments on the blogs of the Gawker Media group, including Jezebel, tend to be “more active, informed, clubby, and acerbic than comments at sites with similar traffic.” This atmosphere on the blog, coupled with the need to “audition” in the comments before one can become an approved commenter, does not encourage outside participation. And while this more selective attitude has been deliberately cultivated on the blog, once one has been accepted into the group user involvement is not only encouraged but desired as evidenced by the box that allows for reader-created content and tips via the hashtags (figure 4). Denton says in an email to staffers quoted by Seward (ibid) that “... we’ve always insisted that tips and letters to the editor are sent in by email and mediated by our editors; that discussions stay on topics that we determine; and that our writers are

the only ones who can initiate stories on the site. No longer.” The hashtags box is not the only way that commenters are requested to participate in the website. There is an email address listed on the front page, “tips@jezebel.com,” where users are specifically asked to funnel tips regarding content in which they believe the site’s users and editors will have an interest.

And while participation by members is encouraged, the policies regarding banning and disemvoweling ensure that commenters will only exhibit the behavior rewarded by the editors and if not, the offending users will not remain commenters for long. While these policies can cut down on the amount of trolling that occurs on a website, this also means that the site can more easily fall prey to an echo-chamber effect in which all commenters are parroting similar views in similar ways.

### **Is Jezebel a Feminist Website?**

After examining the type of content, editorial staff and practices that surround the website Jezebel, the question then becomes whether or not Jezebel is actually a feminist website. If so, the blog’s identification as a feminist website is not through any deliberate actions on the part of its creators; the word “Feminism” and related terminology are nowhere to be seen on the masthead, taglines, or on the official Gawker media page for the blog. Nonetheless, despite the lack of a label identifying the website as such, the search for a list of “Top Feminist Blogs” produces hits that include Jezebel. The website TakePart.com (2008) qualifies the blogs it includes on its list by describing the sites as “written by women for women, these top 10 blogs focus on issues, news, and gossip geared toward educating, entertaining and empowering girls.”

### **Jezebel as a Feminist Website: Content and Staff**

The types of articles posted by the editors and official contributors clearly support the idea of Jezebel as a feminist website. For example on December 16, 2009, the website posted articles relating to violence and women in videogames, the status of Senator Kirsten Gillebrand as a feminist, issues relating to women who commit crimes of sexual abuse, and the larger roles of women in Hollywood. Despite these articles appearing alongside more light-hearted offerings, this does not lessen the contribution the blog makes to feminist community online as these posts sparked a great deal of

conversation. Also, some of these blog posts, such as the one on Kirsten Gillebrand titled “NRSC: Feminists Are Required to Defend Every Woman, At All Times, In All Situations,” have hashtags that explicitly label the post as one which relates to feminist issues; in the case of the Gillebrand post, it receives hashtags relating to both feminism what the blog designates “fauxfeminism.”

In addition to posting content that one can easily identify as applicable on a variety of women’s issues, the editorial staff and contributing writers fit many of described characteristics of third-wave feminists. The staff and other writers are a racially and culturally diverse group of young women, predominantly between the ages of 24 and 40, with different backgrounds, although one can argue that the fact that they all geographically-based in New York City contributes to a certain homogeneity in the viewpoints on the site.

### **Jezebel as a Feminist Website: Thinking and Drinking**

One can also find support for the assertion that Jezebel is a feminist website in the beliefs of the user community that surrounds the website. One of the best single displays of these beliefs can be found in the appearance of two of the blog’s editors on a New York City talk show and the aftermath of this appearance. Over a year ago, in July of 2008, a significant controversy arose regarding the appearance of two of the website’s then-editors, Moe Tkacik and Tracie Egan, appearing on a New York City-based discussion program titled “Thinking and Drinking,” hosted by Lizz Winstead. As the title of the program implies, the women were asked onto the program to discuss various topics while having a drink. Included in topics of discussion were those designated “women’s issues,” most specifically Hillary Clinton and her 2008 presidential run along with issues relating to sexism. Not only was the program a live performance to which tickets were sold, but one can view the entirety of the interview online as well. While on the program, Egan and Tkacik made inflammatory comments relating to rape, birth control and sexuality. Winstead (2008) posted several of these comments on her blog:

**On Rape:**

Egan (on why she has not been raped): “I think it has to do with the fact that I am like, smart.”

Tkacik: “It’s really hard to prosecute them (rapists), so you should try to avoid them at all costs.”

**On Birth-Control:**

Tkacik: “Pulling out always works for me.”

Egan: “And I know it’s an irresponsible thing to say, but it’s (pulling out) the most fun way not to get pregnant.”

Although the women claimed that they were joking after the fact, the reaction from the blogosphere online was huge. Responses to the appearance surfaced on personal blogs, other major blogs such as the Huffington Post (where program host Winstead’s response to the appearance was posted), self-identifying feminist blogs such as Feministing, and finally on Jezebel itself. Egan’s (2008) response to these was a flippant, half-apology post to her personal blog where she explains that “anyway, I thought this thing was supposed to be a comedy show, but to be honest, I didn’t really do my research on how the interview was really gonna go. I tried to make some jokes, but they fell super flat...It all seemed really horrible at the time, but now, looking back, I sort of have to laugh.” Egan also admitted to being drunk throughout the duration of the discussion, or in her words, “fucking blotto”. Very few in the online community which comprises Jezebel were laughing.

There was a reluctance on the part of the Jezebel editors to discuss the comments made on “Thinking and Drinking.” The post might have been viewed as a necessity due to the amount of conversation that the show had sparked on Jezebel in the comments and elsewhere online. Anna Holmes, the editor-in-chief finally responded. Holmes (2008) states the website’s position in a post titled “Thoughts about Thinking and Drinking—complicated conversations.” This post followed the initial appearance of Tkacik and Egan a week after the fact and received a huge amount of traffic, with nearly 90000 page views and over 1000 comments. In the post North questions what sort of dialogue was supposed to have taken place on the show but

expresses her disappointment as to how her editors handled themselves in this situation. Holmes (2008) writes, “Some blame the format, or the participants, or generational differences, or alcohol, or the provocative subject matter, or unrealistic expectations, inarticulateness and lack of preparedness. I believe that everyone, however, can agree that the whole thing was a fucking shame.” Holmes goes on to write that she would officially like readers to weigh in comments section on the post, allowing the site to designate a venue for this conversation, as opposed to in the comments on unrelated posts as they had been throughout the week. But Holmes tempers her call for reader responses with the request that their comments contain “empathy, measuredness and generosity of spirit that was sorely lacking both during and after the event.” Holmes also refrains from listing any sort of official Jezebel position regarding sensitive women’s issues such as those discussed by Egan and Tkacik.

Feministing, one of the other major blogs that responded online, had a different take on the situation. Jessica Valenti (2008) writes that “I have no idea if Moe and Tracie think they represent young feminism... (but) when you agree to speak and do media appearances on feminism, when you use feminism as a justification for writing controversial pieces and when you call yourself a feminist to a tremendous audience, **you are representing feminism whether you like it or not,**” (emphasis theirs). This response was cross-posted in the comments on the “Thoughts about Thinking and Drinking—complicated conversations” post by several different user profiles on Jezebel itself, showing that the community of users on the website was fully aware of the controversy that the blog’s editors had stirred with their public appearance while also highlighting some of the other websites that Jezebel’s users also read. As commenter “philoclea” (2008) states in her response to North’s Thinking and Drinking post, “I’m not sure Jezebel has a duty to represent feminist issues throughout the world. I do think things have evolved in a certain direction, however, and the feminist aspect of the site has become, for me at least, among the most interesting.” As one can see, users identify Jezebel as a feminist website even if the site fails to explicitly define itself as such.

After the Thinking and Drinking Incident, the impact on Jezebel was seen in various ways. Egan and Tkacik both kept their jobs with the website, though Tkacik moved on to the Gawker network's flagship website and later was fired due to company-wide layoffs (Rozvar 2008). Egan remains at Jezebel as a senior contributing editor, although since the event in question there has been one noticeable change in her presentation on the website. Prior to her engagement, Egan used to write and post under the alias of "Slut Machine;" however, with her engagement in the fall of 2008, Egan (2008) explained "I've never really been ashamed of anything I've done in my past, because it's all helped form me into the person I am today. But that part of my life is over now, and it seems silly to go on as a professional slut, so I'm just gonna go by Tracie from now on."

Despite the two women keeping their jobs (in the immediate aftermath), that is not to say there were no consequences because their drunken public appearance and its aftermath. The most important consequences relate to the impact that the comments had on the blog's community of users. In the comments on North's response to the incident, reader responses ranged from understanding to anger, with women commenting for days after the post originally went up on the website. Some commenters demanded that the offending editors be fired; others channeled their anger into protesting what they saw as a wasted opportunity to discuss important women's issues. One commenter writing under the user name "sallyfloyd" (2008) wrote that Egan and Tkacik "had a gift-wrapped opportunity to represent the nuanced and complex world of gender identity and issues, and to show Winstead up as rigid, dogmatic and out of touch. Instead, they refused to prep for a public media appearance [...] then followed that public debacle up with toddler-like defiance."

One of most common refrains among the commenters in this thread is the desire for Jezebel to state some sort of position or some sort of guidelines regarding women's issues in relation to the site's coverage. As noted earlier, the website lacks any sort of mission statement or purpose beyond the initial tagline and the description of the blog on the Gawker Media page. This lack of a defined identity for the blog concerning its position as a feminist blog results in comments requesting guidance for acceptable



conversation relating to the editors' positions on key women's issues as some of the commenters feel as though the standards for commenting were unequal in a way that had a detrimental effect on the conversation. Commenter "lolacat" (2008) states that "I do feel that we, as commenters, are treated a lot more harshly than editors for crossing the proverbial and as yet undefined line. If I said half of SM's rape comments on a rape thread- I would have my ass banned."

Part of the reason for the wide range of responses relating to the events involving Winnstead, Egan and Tkacik might be due to the differences in age of various commenters and how the dominate feminist views of the era which they came of age have affected their world views. Second- and third-wave feminists have disagreed as to what constitutes proper feminist behavior. Although Jezebel's readership is predominantly ages 18-35, there are a fair number of commenters who identify as older than 35. This range of ages on the website likely means that one can find both second-wave and third-wave feminists among the commenters on the site. Some of the readers chose to directly confront the differences in these political philosophies on the Thinking and Drinking post. Under the username "hellomynameisgwen..." (2008) the reader voices the opinion "Seriously, who ultimately cares what second wavers think about and say about Jezebel?" while later opining in the same comment about how she feels "super frustrated with Jezebelian so-called "third wave" feminism, which to me has taken the most het white-girl aspects of the third wave and tried to pass it off as the whole enchilada." Users expressed conflicted feelings as to the site's direction future, and used the opportunity to air grievances with the community at large on the websites. It seems clear that this event likely sparked ideological differences that had been simmering on the blog for some time, with the event on Winnstead's show providing the impetus needed to bring the discussion out into the open. Although North and the other editors failed to identify Jezebel as a feminist blog even in this instance, the discussion sparked by this incident would imply that the user community that had grown up around the website had implicitly become a feminist website due to the commenters' understanding of feminism and how that applied to the content and conversations taking place on the website.

### **Non-feminist Website Attributes**

One reason that some might argue that Jezebel is not a feminist website is due to its exclusivity; liberal feminism is concerned with the idea of equality, and Jezebel is upfront in its declaration that all users are not created equal as is implied by the commenting hierarchy and the need for approval prior to a user being admitted to the community. Part of this is due to Jezebel's role within the larger Gawker network of blogs, but this fact aside, there are steps that could be done to make it easier for a user to become a member of the online community if the website's administrators desired. One can argue that there is good reason for this policy though, as it relates to establishing an online environment where all who wish to substantively contribute to the conversation can do so unhindered by those wishing simply to disrupt or destroy the dialogue being conducted. As Herring notes, "when women gather online, an especially when they attempt to discuss feminism, they are not uncommonly the target of negative attention from individuals, mostly men, who feel threatened by or otherwise uncomfortable with feminism." An exclusive system such as that exists on the Gawker network of sites in theory limits or eliminates the chance for outsiders to disrupt the conversation, and in the case of Jezebel it means protecting the blog as a safe place for women's issues to be discussed. User profiles are unapproved or disabled on a regular basis, effectively banning that user from participating until a point in time in which they might manage to receive approval for a new user profile or until they can effectively state their case to an editor as to why their banning is unwarranted.

One justification for the regimented and closed nature of commenting on Jezebel is the fact that more likely than not the system does help to protect the site from interference by trolls, or those who post inflammatory or off-topic subject material in hopes of invoking an emotional response of some kind from other users. When trolls choose to interact with and effectively attack a site, the users have the choice to shun the troll, which can require a great deal of self-control, or to respond, which is the response that the troll is seeking. The problem with shunning trolls who come onto the site is that the practice is not always effective due to the size and experience of various online communities. Herring et al. (2002) write that "effectively shunning a disruptive

individual requires a group consensus to follow through on ignoring the individual,” and this tactic is not always successful in the case of new users who are not aware of the fact that they are being baited into a response by the troll. So the closed commenting structure at Jezebel.com serves as a paradoxical system; it provides users on the site with the ability to communicate with one another free from the interference and fear of attack from trolls or others who would degrade the feminist goals that are displayed and discussed by the site’s users; however, at the same time it closes off the site in a way that some might find antithetical to the goals of equality espoused by segments of the feminist movement. Nevertheless, it does not appear that the commenting has overly hindered participation on the website, as Gawker Advertising shows that web traffic to the blog has grown steadily throughout the course of the last year (“Jezebel Website Traffic” 2009).

### **Reflection and Questions**

Jezebel is website that seems to be filling a niche role in the blogosphere, catering to young women who are well-educated and Internet-savvy who are seeking content with a humorous and “snarky” edge while still presenting the content in a way that the writers hope will be taken seriously by the readership. Jezebel is an interesting niche blog that is worthy of further study, as the community that has evolved around it is one that is fairly unique on the Internet.

It’s hard to argue with the fact Jezebel is a feminist website despite its lack of any self-identifying feminist labels due to the content on the blog and the community of users that has grown-up alongside the blog. These users have a certain expectation of the type of space that they are contributing to with their comments. The user community on the website seems to be made up of both second- and third-wave feminists, based upon comments expressed on the blog and the ages and genders of the user community, with several competing streams of thought as to what actually comprises a feminist blog and how a feminist should behave. A crucial turning point in Jezebel’s existence as a feminist blog came with the appearance of two of its editor’s on the public discussion show Thinking and Drinking in the summer of 2008. This appearance served to cement Jezebel’s identity as a feminist website despite the fact

that the website's creators did not necessarily intend to do so when the website first went online.

Jezebel has evolved during its existence on the Internet. Some commenters have moved on from the site, forming their own blogs and new communities. This splintering and grouping action is likely due to the large number of commenters on Jezebel, and the corporate owner's desire to attract even more. Despite some users moving on from the site, these past commenters still hover at the fringes as readers and interested parties. In May 2009, a discussion was had on Harpyness, another blog, relating to Jezebel. One of the site's writers posted a response to an article that appeared on the competing women's website doubleX in which the author, Linda Hirshman, authored a scathing critique of Jezebel and the Thinking and Drinking incident. The blogger Pilgrim Soul (2009) defends Jezebel writing "for all my occasional issues with Jez, I can respect it because it has, overall, been a force in my life that forced me to think harder about why I believe what I do," and that while she has not always agreed with everything written there, she believes that the site has been important in "bringing far, far more young women to feminism than Hirshman's finger-waggy, ill-informed, poorly-fact-checked screeds." Despite the original intent of the website, Jezebel has become a feminist website in its content and character, and one that seems poised to further contribute to developing the thoughts of feminists online for the foreseeable future.

Figures

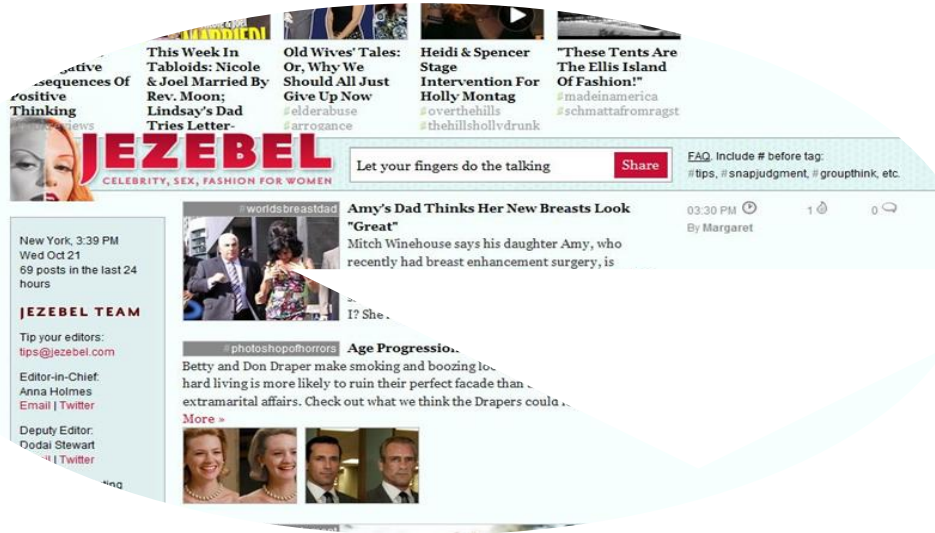


Figure 1: Front Page of http://jezebel.com



Figure 2: A profile page

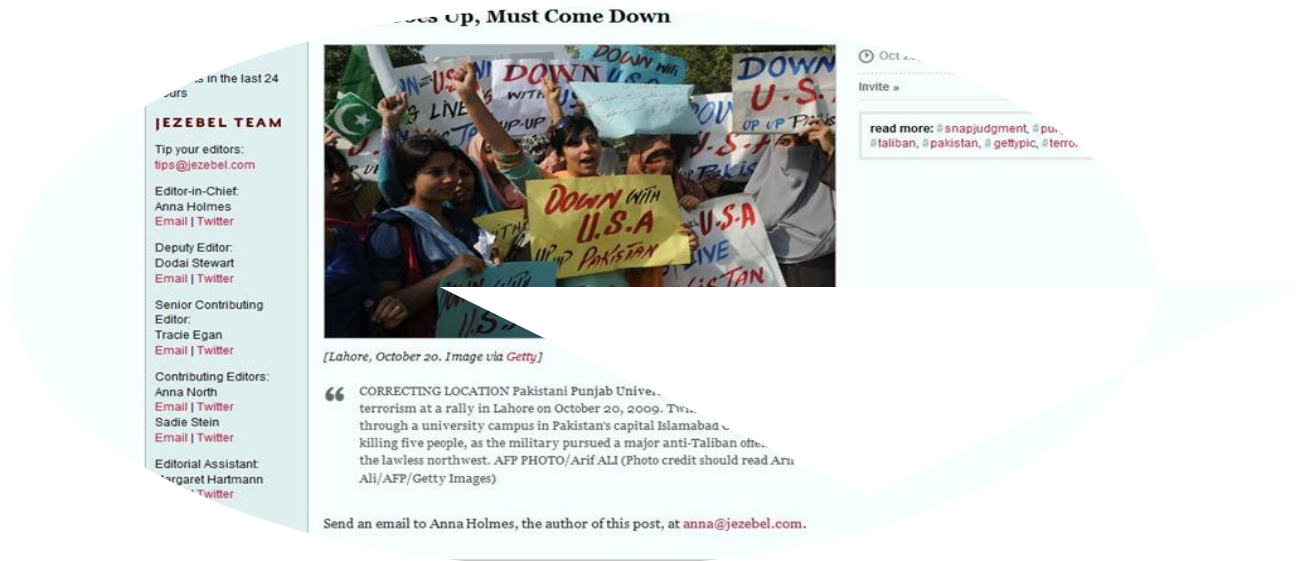


Figure 3: A “#snapjudgment” post

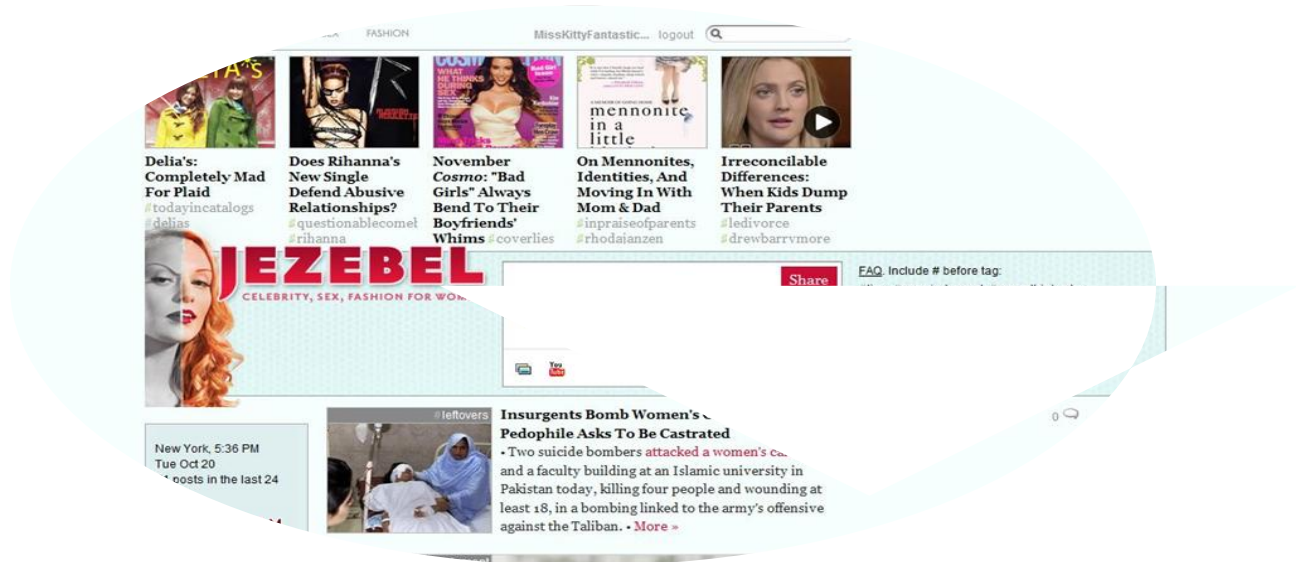


Figure 4: The hashtag box

All images taken from <http://jezebel.com>

## Bibliography

Egan, T. (2008) Rape Can Be Boring. One D at a Time. Retrieved from [http://www.onedatatime.com/dick\\_liker/2008/07/rape-can-be-boring.html](http://www.onedatatime.com/dick_liker/2008/07/rape-can-be-boring.html).

Egan, T. (2008) Somebody's Getting Mah-Reeed! Jezebel. Retrieved from <http://jezebel.com/5046963/somebodys-getting-mah+reeeed>.

Feminist.com. What is Feminist.com? Retrieved from <http://www.feminist.com/about/whatis.html>.

Feministing.com. Feministing.com: About. Retrieved from <http://www.feministing.com/about.html>.

Fredrick, C.A.N. (1999). Feminist Rhetoric in Cyberspace: The Ethos of Feminist Usenet Groups. *The Information Society*, 15, 187-197.

Gawker Media Advertising. Gawker Media Titles, Jezebel . Retrieved from <http://advertising.gawker.com/titles/jezebel/>.

Gawker Media Advertising. Jezebel Website Traffic. [Image File] . Retrieved from <http://advertising.gawker.com/titles/jezebel/>.

hellomynameisgwen... (2008, July 08). Re: Thoughts about Thinking and Drinking. Message posted to <http://jezebel.com/5022871/thoughts-about-thinking--drinking>.

Herring, S., Job-Sluder, K., Scheckler, R., & Barab, S. (2002) Searching for Safety Online: Managing Safety in a Feminist Forum. *The Information Society*, 18, 371-384.

Holmes, A. (2009) Commenters, We Have a Problem. Jezebel. Retrieved from <http://jezebel.com/5136160/commenters-we-have-a-problem>.

Holmes, A. (2008) The Girls' Guide to Commenting on Jezebel. Jezebel. Retrieved from <http://jezebel.com/376527/the-girls-guide-to-commenting-on-jezebel>.

Holmes, A. (2008) This Year, Let's Call it quits on the Nasty Nit-Picking. Jezebel. Retrieved from <http://jezebel.com/339424/this-year-lets-call-it-quits-on-the-nasty-nit-picking>.

Holmes, A. (2008) Thoughts About Thinking and Drinking. Jezebel. Retrieved from <http://jezebel.com/5022871/thoughts-about-thinking--drinking>.

lolacat. (2008, July 08). Re: Thoughts about Thinking and Drinking. Message posted to <http://jezebel.com/5022871/thoughts-about-thinking--drinking>.

North, A. (2009) Do we need websites for Women? Jezebel. Retrieved from <http://jezebel.com/5406726/do-we-need-websites-for-women>.

philoclea. (2008, July 08). Re: Thoughts about Thinking and Drinking. Message posted to <http://jezebel.com/5022871/thoughts-about-thinking--drinking>.

Pilgrim Soul. (2009, May 12). In (Partial) Defense of Jezebel. The Pursuit of Harpyness. Retrieved Dec. 15, 2009 from <http://www.harpyness.com/2009/05/12/in-partial-defense-of-jezebel/>

Rockler-Glader, N. (2007). Third Wave Feminism. Feminism Suite 101.com. Retrieved from [http://feminism.suite101.com/article.cfm/third\\_wave\\_feminism](http://feminism.suite101.com/article.cfm/third_wave_feminism).



Rozzi, G. (2008) Top 10 Feminist Blogs. TakePart.com. Retrieved from <http://www.takepart.com/news/2008/03/13/top-ten-feminist-blogs#comments>

Rozvar, C. (2008, Oct 03). Gawker Media Fires Nineteen Employees. New York Magazine.

Retrieved from [http://nymag.com/daily/intel/2008/10/gawker\\_media\\_fires\\_19\\_employee.html](http://nymag.com/daily/intel/2008/10/gawker_media_fires_19_employee.html)

sallyfloyd. (2008, July 09). Re: Thoughts about Thinking and Drinking. Message posted to <http://jezebel.com/5022871/thoughts-about-thinking--drinking>.

Seward, Z. M. (2009) [Got a #tip? Gawker Media opens tag pages to masses, expecting "chaos"](http://www.niemanlab.org/2009/10/got-a-tip-gawker-media-opens-tag-pages-to-masses-expecting-chaos/). Nieman Journalism Lab. Retrieved from <http://www.niemanlab.org/2009/10/got-a-tip-gawker-media-opens-tag-pages-to-masses-expecting-chaos/>.

Stein, S. (2009) The Half-Jew's Complaint. Jezebel. Retrieved from <http://jezebel.com/5311118/the-half+jews-complaint>.

What is Feminist.com? Feminist.com Retrieved from <http://www.feminist.com/about/whatis.html>

**women's movement.** (2009). In Encyclopædia Britannica. Retrieved December 16, 2009, from Encyclopædia Britannica Online: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/724633/feminism>