

**Hashtag NZPol:
New Zealand Women Twitter Users and
Political Participation Construction**

By

Sarah Hendrica Bickerton

A thesis

submitted to the Victoria University of Wellington

in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Victoria University of Wellington

2020

Abstract

This dissertation addresses the research question of “How do women Twitter users in New Zealand construct political participation?” On the issue of the potential of the online spaces as political spaces, historical research has tended to be technologically deterministic, and dichotomous. Further, contemporary quantitative research into the impact of online politics on offline political participation has identified a gap: that the qualitative particularities of political participation online have not been sufficiently researched to provide a more nuanced and complete understanding. In a New Zealand context, what little empirical research there has been on online politics has taken a top-down approach. With a focus on political parties, political figures, and campaigning, there has been almost no research into bottom-up citizen-focused online politics, nor political participation construction more widely in New Zealand. It is in these gaps that this research is positioned.

Methodologically, 25 unstructured interviews were conducted using prompt-style questions, either in person or via video-call software, with women based in New Zealand who were active Twitter users. Selective snowball sampling was used as a recruitment strategy, providing a range of participants from different ethnic backgrounds, locations around New Zealand, and levels of political involvement. Interviews were transcribed and then thematically coded from themes based both from the literature and emergent from the interviews themselves. A theoretical framework of narrative analysis was used during this analysis to look for the understandings and social meanings that the participants were invoking in their constructions.

The findings were grouped largely into four areas: 1) a propensity towards prioritising primary relationships in political behaviour rooted in experience, the everyday, the personal, and understandings of social location and relationality; 2) an issue-based approach to being political and how discussion, listening, reading, and engagement are foregrounded over traditional political forms, including forefronting an empathetic imperative; 3) specifically online political behaviour that prioritised impact (but indirect rather than direct), complicated simplistic ‘echo chamber’ conceptions of online groupings and different social media platforms, as well as how negativity and diversity was managed; and 4) understandings of what might be a particularly ‘New Zealand’ articulation of political participation that centred a lack of size, being conflict-averse, and a less party-political culture negotiating between global and local political narratives, concluding with an introduction of *whakawhanaungatanga*.

Chapter 9 analyses the critical findings of this thesis: the centrality of primary relationships and relationality, indirect impact, how an issue-based approach to politics is negotiated, and the emphasis on personal experience and emotion. Further, it examines the priority of discursive forms of political participation over traditional forms, and the location of such in the everyday, both in topic and embedding. This is all analysed using Sociology of Space, looking to constructions of political space, place, and boundaries. The conclusion summarises these contributions, suggesting that New Zealand policy around online politics requires understanding of how New Zealanders conceptualise bottom-up political participation.

Acknowledgments

My journey to this thesis has not followed the traditional path. It started 10 years ago with putting my doctoral studies on hold, almost at the ‘All But Dissertation’ point at the University of Illinois at Chicago. It continued through taking a break from academia entirely for a time, but then returning, and now to finishing my doctorate here in New Zealand. This research is dedicated to everyone who has been with me and given me support over the entire decade-long trek, as well as those who arrived mid-way.

I am deeply thankful to Professor Miriam Lips and Dr Kathleen Kuehn for taking me on, their time, support, and encouragement, even when things did not quite fit. I am especially thankful, beyond mere words, to Associate Professor Karl Löfgren, for being more than a supervisor, but also a genuine mentor and friend, imparting wisdom and guidance. I am grateful for our many discussions, often over coffee and beer, on our individual research, mutual research, and academia in general. I did not expect to find such a fit and ease when I could have been lost, but I am forever thankful that I did.

My thanks to Dr Wonhyuk Cho and Dr Barb Allen, who even given I was a PhD student and them faculty members, made me feel like I was an equal and valued contributor, as well as their friend. Also, thanks to everyone at the NZPSA, particularly Associate Professor Kate McMillan, who all beyond my dreams made me feel like I was a respected part of a community of scholars.

To Autumn Trang Thu Nguyen and Mpaphi Tsholofelo, my office buddies and friends who have walked alongside me this whole time as we hit our yardsticks together. As well as all the School of Government PhD students. Also, thanks to Dr Tara Officer, who was my Word formatting guru and inducted me into university admin roles. And to Madeleine Collinge, my proof-reader.

Of course, this research would not be possible without my research participants, who gave so much of their time and thought. I do hope your efforts through this research contribute to better understandings of how we do politics in New Zealand. Also, to New Zealand Twitter itself, for following along on these travels and all your support.

Finally, my thanks to my friends and family. To Sarah B1, who was not surprised at all when I told her I was applying, Kelly for her unfailing faith in me, Sarah N. for knowing how much this meant, Matt for many nights of geek conversation, and Janine and Katie who saw me. But lastly, and profoundly, to my sister, Megan, and my mother, Cobie, as, without their time, support, and love, this quite literally would not have occurred. I think Dad might have been proud.

Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgments	iii
Glossary	ix
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
1.1 Background	1
1.2 Statement of Problem	4
1.3 Research Question	6
1.4 Research Methodology	8
1.5 Thesis Outline	9
Chapter 2 Literature Review	13
2.1 Political Participation Online	13
2.2 Women, Politics, and Social Media	30
2.3 Empirical Research – Online Politics and New Zealand	35
2.4 Conclusion	46
Chapter 3 Theoretical Framework	47
3.1 Defining Politics	47
3.2 Theoretical Analysis Framework	55
3.3 Sociology of Space	58
3.4 Whakawhanaungatanga	60
Chapter 4 Methodology	67
4.1 General Research Design	68
4.2 Scope	68
4.3 Fieldwork and Interviews	69
4.4 Analysing Interview Data	73
4.5 Narrative Analysis	75
4.6 Ethical Implications	80
Chapter 5 Primary Relationships: Findings 1	83
5.1 Political Figures and Political Fulfilment	83
5.2 Personal Interaction	89

5.3 Values Alignment	93
5.4 Emotionality	96
5.5 Politics as the Everyday	98
5.6 The Politics of Social Location	100
5.7 Being Engaged	105
5.8 Conclusion	110
Chapter 6 Everyday Politics: Findings 2	113
6.1 The Personal as Political	113
6.2 Being Engaged	118
6.3 Discussion and Debate	122
6.4 Being Informed	125
6.5 Reading and Listening	128
6.6 Issue Driven	134
6.7 Conclusion	140
Chapter 7 Being Online: Findings 3	143
7.1 Being Impactful	143
7.2 Distinguishing Social Mediums	150
7.3 Social Media ‘Bubbles’	153
7.4 A Diversity of Voices	160
7.5 Negotiating Negativity	165
7.6 Conclusion	170
Chapter 8 New Zealand: Findings 4	171
8.1 A Lack of Size	171
8.2 Negotiating Networks – an Example of the Public Service	174
8.3 The Centrality of Wellington	175
8.4 A New Zealand Political Culture?	177
8.5 Global and Local Narratives	181
8.6 Whakawhanaungatanga	186
8.7 Conclusion	187
Chapter 9 Discussion	189
9.1 Issues	189
9.2 Discussion, Motivation, and Impactful Political Participation	193

9.3 Negotiating Gender	200
9.4 Primary Relationships and the Empathetic Imperative	204
9.5 Primary Relationships and ‘Echo Chambers’	209
9.6 New Zealand	216
9.7 Conclusion	225
Chapter 10 Conclusion	227
10.1 Research Question	227
10.2 Contributions	229
10.3 Limitations	233
10.4 Recommendations for Further Research	235
References	237
Appendix	253

Glossary

Aotearoa	Name in Te Reo for New Zealand (direct translation: land of the long white cloud).
Bandwagoning/Pile-On	Where a large number of very similar responses occur over a short period of time from different users to a single person/user, barraging them, often to a post perceived as problematic.
Bernie Sanders	US federal independent senator and Democratic presidential primary candidate.
Blocking	Social media feature that denies the blocked user the ability to see your posts, and you will not see theirs either unless you wish to (present on most social media platforms).
Bolshy	New Zealand colloquial slang for being loud and aggressive.
Chloe Swarbrick	New Zealand Green Party MP.
Clapback	An immediate caustic response to criticism, often quoting the criticism in order to display to followers what you are responding to.
David Cunliffe	New Zealand Labour Party MP.
Direct/Private Message	Message sent from one social media user to another on a social media platform that is not visible to other users (also known as a 'DM' or 'PM').
Donald Trump	US Republican President, property developer, and media personality.
Doxing	Revealing personal identifying information into the public (such as physical address, phone numbers, work address, contact information, etc.) of another person with the intent of harassment.
Drive-by	A comment or reply to a post of yours by a user that you rarely, if ever, have interacted with previously, and expect not to again.
Facebook	US social media/networking service.
(A) Fair Go	New Zealand colloquialism referring to an expectation of being treated without bias.

Following	Connecting to another social media user so you can see their posts.
GamerGate	A primarily online harassment campaign, centred around sexism, diversity, and progressivism in video game culture.
Gaslighting	Reframing injury to the point where the injured party begins to doubt that the injury occurred, often performed by the person causing the injury, though not always.
Instagram	US social media service focusing on photos and video sharing.
IRL	In Real Life; offline interactions.
James Shaw	New Zealand Green Party Co-Leader and MP.
Jim Bolger	Former New Zealand National Party MP and Prime Minister.
Judith Collins	New Zealand National Party MP.
Kaupapa	Te Reo word referring to a purpose, or policy, or agenda, also involving a set of values, ideas, or principles.
List	A sub-set group of people you follow on Twitter.
Locked/Private	An account where people can only follow and see your posts with your approval.
Māori	The indigenous Polynesian people of New Zealand, also colloquially ‘Māori’ is often used in place of Te Reo to refer to the language.
Man-splaining	Patronising language with the a priori presumption that the person being talked to lacks knowledge, often as a gendered or racialised phenomenon (though the latter may be referred to as ‘white-splaining’).
#MeToo	Hashtag denoting the political campaign to both express solidarity amongst women who have been sexually assaulted and/or harassed, as well as hold alleged perpetrators accountable.
Muting	Social Media feature that means that you will not see the muted user’s posts, but they can still see yours (present on some social media platforms).
The Nation	New Zealand political affairs television programme.

NBR	<i>National Business Review</i> ; a New Zealand newspaper focusing on business and economic news and analysis.
Overton Window	The range of policies politically acceptable to the mainstream population at any given time (named after Joseph P. Overton).
Pākehā	The name in Te Reo for New Zealanders of European descent.
Quote-Tweet	A ‘retweet’ that allows you to both forward another person’s tweet to your own followers, but also directly comment on it.
Radio New Zealand	New Zealand public radio broadcaster (also known as RNZ).
Reddit	US social news aggregation and discussion website of user-generated content.
Retweet	A Twitter feature allowing you to forward another person’s tweet to your own followers.
Roastbusters	New Zealand scandal involving a group of young men in Auckland who allegedly sought to intoxicate underage girls, sexually assault them, and the perceived lack of response from the NZ police to the complaints from alleged victims.
Roxanne Gay	An American writer, professor, and commentator, particularly around feminism, race, sexuality, and body size.
Sean Plunket	New Zealand political commentator often associated with the right wing.
Spoons	Having sufficient energy (whether that be emotionally, or otherwise) to do something.
Te ao Māori	Te Reo word denoting the ‘Māori World’, which includes Te Reo, Tikanga Māori, and the Treaty of Waitangi, as well as symbolising the interconnectedness of people, the land, and objects.
Te Reo (Te Reo Māori)	Te Reo Māori (often said just as ‘Te Reo’) is the indigenous language of Aotearoa New Zealand.
Thread	A series of tweets connected together so they form either a long monologue by a single author, or a linear conversation between multiple authors.
Tikanga Māori	Māori ways of both conceptualising matters and how to conduct things and protocols.

Timeline	The social media posts you see appearing from those people you follow on respective platforms.
TradeMe	New Zealand based auction website.
Tumblr	US microblogging social media website, generally associated with multimedia posts.
Tweet	A post made on the social media platform Twitter.
Twitter	US microblogging and social media service where users post and interact with each other's 'tweets'.
Viral	When a social media post gets shared at an exponential rate.
Wellington	While nominally the capital city of New Zealand, colloquially the name of the city is also used as shorthand to refer to central government.
Whakapapa	Te Reo word not just for genealogy and wider familial connections, but also connections to a particular geographical area. It is also considered an act (i.e. it exists as a verb and a noun) and a statement.
(Whaka)whanaungatanga	See section 3.4 for a discussion of this concept from te ao Māori.

Chapter 1

Introduction

This chapter briefly describes the background to the literature and research in this field historically, before it is covered in more depth in Chapter 2. It then goes on to a statement of the research problem in terms of the gaps in New Zealand-based research. It then outlines the research question, and how the different aspects of that research question are approached. The chapter continues with a brief description of the methodology, and concludes with an outline of the thesis, both structurally and thematically.

1.1 Background

Since the beginnings of online communication there has been no shortage of speculation on the potential, or from some the lack of potential, for that communication to have impacts on politics (Ward & Vedel, 2006). Particularly, one of the primary questions raised was what the implications of the online would be for political participation, which has been of concern because there has been considerable evidence of a long-term trend of decline in traditional forms of political participation in Western society (Putnam, 2000), involving such things as voting participation, political interest, knowledge, and party membership (Gibson et al., 2008; Ward et al., 2003). New Zealand is not an exception to this, with a similar decline in participation in traditional political activities being experienced here (Edwards, 2012; Hayward, 2006; Vowles, 2012).

Scholars have argued that the internet could re-engage citizens into politics due to its potential to lower barriers to participation, where traditional resource-based restrictions such as time, money, civic skills, and knowledge impact citizens' engagement (Norris, 2001; Verba et al., 1995). Further, the networking characteristics of online communication could make it easier for citizens to be mobilised, to organise themselves, as well as content found and distributed easily, connecting citizens of similar political persuasion (Anduiza et al., 2009). Additionally, the potential exists for political actors to communicate with citizens, to establish better relationships, to actively engage in dialogue and discussion (Norris, 2001).

However, other scholars have questioned this optimistic appraisal for online communication and political participation. For them, online communication would simply reflect offline trends of declining political participation, where those who already have the resources to be political actors would be able to use online methods to continue to use those resources (Krueger, 2002).

Further, the evidence shows that offline disparities in political access, along gendered, racial, income, and education lines, are replicated online (Vaccari, 2013). Moreover, evidence suggests the deep and customisable nature of online content allows for easier ‘filtering out’ of political content from one’s exposure to media (Trilling & Schoenbach, 2013). The ease of information gathering and sharing in the networked online world works as easily to avoid political material as it does to find it; if one is uninterested in politics offline, then the online will reflect or even encourage this (Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Norris, 2001). As such, rather than bringing previously disengaged citizens into political participation, online communication becomes merely another form of “preaching to the converted” (Norris, 2003, p. 24). If political actors merely use online media with the same techniques of broadcast as with traditional media, rather than using them to actively engage, then potential changes to political disinterest are limited (Murchison, 2015b).

A more nuanced approach is one that looks away from the structures and mechanics of online technologies, to investigate how political participation is enacted in the detail of online social relations (Fernback, 1998). Rather than seeing online behaviour as being technologically embedded, this approach positions both the technologies and these behaviours as embedded in wider social relations that exist across online and offline spaces; in other words, the forces that hinder and stratify political participation offline also hinder and stratify political participation online (Papacharissi, 2002). This is not to say that these technologies cannot be used in resistance to those forces, and in fact their embedding in these social relations means that they can be used as vehicles of negotiation with those social relations, repurposing the technologies and creating spaces of political participation. But, that will only be done in such a way that is intertwined with those forces, not separate from them. Any resistances constructed online will also reflect the social and political dynamics of the offline (Fraser, 1990; Papacharissi, 2002). In part, this means that while these resistances to and negotiations with traditional political participation may exist online, an important question to ask is who is enacting, and can enact, these resistances and negotiations, and further, whether these will effect political change more widely at all.

Turning to empirical research on this very question, if political participation online impacts offline political participation, and if so to what degree, Shelley Boulliane (2009; 2015) performed two comprehensive pieces of meta-analysis of existing quantitative research on the effects of online political participation on offline political participation worldwide. She found

a consistent positive association between online political participation and offline political participation, but with weak statistical significance. In her 2009 study, she found strong evidence of the Internet having a positive effect on political engagement (p. 193). However, her finding was that the average effect was small (Boulliane, 2009). Further, two factors decrease the likelihood of finding statistically significant effects, and “these factors are the inclusion of political interest in the causal model and specifying the causal direction as engagement causing Internet use” (Boulliane, 2009, p.205). In other words, any causal link between internet use and political engagement may either be mitigated through political interest, or both may be caused by such, and hence the connection is correlative, nor is directionality established.

A particular finding in the 2009 study Boulliane noted, however, was that in studies where online news access is a measure of Internet use, it increased the likelihood of finding positive effects. Boulliane (2009) recommended further research into the variance of different Internet effects, considering types of Internet use and their connection to specific political activities. This may thus be an expectation of something that my participants construct as a form of political participation in their online behaviour: how they interact with, and interact with others, over news media. Why this is interesting is that consumption of news media has not been considered a traditional form of political participation due to its consideration as passive, rather than active (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013), which suggests the possibility that what is considered political participation is disrupted when shifted into the different context of the online. I shall go into the theoretical conceptualisations of participation more in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

Continuing this research in her 2015 study by looking specifically at social media, Boulliane performed a meta-analysis and again found a positive relationship. Again, as with her 2009 meta-analysis, causal direction could not be determined, and she cites studies that say both social media use and political engagement might be personality driven, or political interest driven (Boulliane, 2015). Boulliane (2015) argues that from her findings additional research should be developed. Particularly, she notes a mixed methodology approach would be appropriate for getting into the nuance of the relationship between political participation and social media (Boulliane, 2015) as well as the how. In other words, qualitative research should be used in addition to the quantitative to answer the complexities and particularities found in her 2009 and 2015 meta-analyses.

This arguing for qualitatively informed research approach is also one advocated by Papachrissi (2014): “A more interesting direction for researchers lies not in the questions of impact but rather in questions of content” (p. 11).

In other words, merely focusing on using the technology as given, as an unquestioned variable, the use of which can be assessed directly as to impact on traditional political participation forms ignores the complexities of social relations that the use of the technology is embedded in. Instead of measuring the what of the technology, we need to look at the how and the why of the technology use, the content that the users themselves construct, users who are embedded in various sociocultural, economic, and political conditions (Parachrissi (2014). The author goes on to pose the following question based on this:

“What is the texture of storytelling that fills online platforms as individuals mobilize online and offline, and what kinds of public formations of political expression does this texture support?” (p. 11).

This question of the ‘storytelling’ nature of online platforms becomes particularly salient in Chapter 4 wherein I discuss the theoretical analysis framework of narrative analysis that I used in this research.

1.2 Statement of Problem

But it is in this question, this gap, that my research is located, research for which the goal is to contribute to the understanding of online political participation, and particularly by New Zealand women Twitter users, by qualitatively understanding how users themselves are defining political participation for themselves. My intention is to do this for a New Zealand context, so that those studying political participation academically in this country can have a framework of understanding how political participation is being performed and understood by users from an online context. Further, it can potentially operate as framework of understanding for strategies developed by those looking to widen political participation in New Zealand in a non-academic arena.

This thesis is primarily located in the discipline of political studies, given the nature of being researched and written from within a school of public policy. As such, much of the subject literature herein can be seen to be located in that discipline. This is particularly pertinent as given the weight afforded political studies as a discipline; what is researched and articulated

by it (and what is not) can be seen as defining politics from outside the discipline. However, while the research in the literature review is primarily located within political studies, as well as conceptions and typologies of political behaviour described elsewhere in this thesis, the methodology and narrative analysis is located within sociology, and there are insights that come from gender and media analysis. Furthermore, the audience for this research, in addition to an academic one, is intended to be policy professionals working to both increase political engagement and participation in New Zealand, as well as those focusing on online. As such, this thesis can be considered intentionally interdisciplinary, with locations for it in policy studies, political studies, and sociology.

In part the question of why research political social media use in New Zealand is answered because it can be argued that social media use in New Zealand operates differently than in other nations. While no comparative analysis exists of political Twitter use in New Zealand with that in other countries, an extrapolation of another form of social media, blogging, can be made. The work of Fitzjohn and Salmond (2007) on the 2005 General Election in New Zealand showed that, unlike in the US, political bloggers in New Zealand broke no news stories of large political import, nor provided ‘checking’ of existing news stories. New Zealand political blogs were also relative latecomers when compared to political blogs in the US. This lack of impact was also found by the likes of Hopkins and Matheson (2005), finding that New Zealand blogs were largely reactive rather than proactive when it came to news and investigation, not really having much of an impact at all on mainstream media agendas, nor providing any real new viewpoints, things that were present in the US ‘blogosphere’. The literature on blogging in New Zealand, while not extensive, corroborated this approach by New Zealand political blogs throughout the elections following the 2005 election, leading Murchison (2016) to conclude that it was questionable whether New Zealand political blogging had any general appeal, but rather would remain niche.

The most colloquially known impact of social media on politics in New Zealand was in the area of political blogging, as outlined in the 2014 book *Dirty Politics* by Nicky Hager (Higgs, 2015; Matheson, 2016). Shortly before the 2014 election, Hager released an exposé of blogger Cameron Slater, and to a lesser extent also blogger David Farrar (of the Whale Oil and Kiwiblog blogs, respectively, both blogs associated with right wing politics in New Zealand), displaying how they used influence over traditional political journalists, as proxies for not just the National Party, but also the Prime Minister’s office, to release ‘scandal’ type stories

(Matheson, 2016) that kept such ‘dirty’ tactics separate from the then Prime Minister’s “nice guy” image (Higgs, 2015, p.199).

National differences in political blogging suggest it is not unreasonable to conclude that other forms of social media in New Zealand could also provide a unique enactment. This is in addition to the further empirical gap of the general lack of bottom-up qualitative research of online political participation in New Zealand more widely. The research has been almost entirely on top-down online media use by political parties and politicians around general elections. This research has found that rather than use the interactive features of online media, and particularly social media, New Zealand political parties and politicians have framed online political participation as something to be limited to a vehicle to channel political interest into traditional offline forms of political participation.

This research then provides a context for how political participation is conceptualised by political elites in New Zealand, and hence a definitional context that my participants could be expected to be negotiating with as they construct their participation online. It is one that keeps interactive political discussion online as separate from traditional political elites, separate from the traditional political process of participation (especially around campaigns). In contrast, the few pieces of research I have found that look to bottom-up political participation in New Zealand have shown that social media is being actively and intentionally used for such, particularly amongst youth, whether this be for searching out and sharing political information and news, or for political organising, particularly if those users had pre-existing political interests.

1.3 Research Question

The objective of this research is to develop an understanding of how alternative ‘bottom-up’ forms of political engagement in New Zealand may be constructed by women who use Twitter. This objective leads to the following research question:

How do women Twitter users in New Zealand construct political participation?

The expectations for my participants that this research question then drives are as follows.

The operating framework that I am taking to define ‘women’ are those individuals who define and identify themselves as such, rather than me applying an outside definition. The reasoning

for only researching women is that (see Chapter 2) experience of politics online is a gendered phenomenon. There is, however, a wider question of what types of women are being included. As has been noted by many researchers, internet usage demographics (while trending towards greater universalism) tends to skew more to those demographics with higher levels of privilege (white, higher socio-economic status, higher education, etc.). I will be taking a ‘purposeful’ variance to my sampling technique (more on this in the methodology section) to ensure that a range of women’s voices are heard. While I am not intending for my sample to be representative of the wider online public (given the nature of this research as qualitative and in-depth, this is not a priority), having a range of perspectives provides for a more robust claim for pattern identification amongst my responses. For more on this discussion, please see Chapter 4.

Further, given that those using online spaces complicate issues like location (not all those involved in the discussion of politics in New Zealand are themselves New Zealand based), I am defining the ‘in New Zealand’ portion of the research question to those who reside in New Zealand (please note that I am not requiring New Zealand citizenship or residency, rather just that they currently live in New Zealand). Additionally, my participants are Twitter users. My reasoning for this restriction is that, given that online context matters (this is discussed through Chapters 2 and 3), restricting the online platform removes any possible variance between social media platform use that might be introduced if I were to expand to, say, include the likes of Facebook. Having Twitter users as participants is also a methodological strategy, as this is the location where snowball sampling for participants will occur within.

Defining ‘to construct’ here refers to the social construction of reality, something covered in depth in section 3.2. At its core, a social construction of reality here means that reality is not something we discover, but rather is something we manufacture ourselves. However, meaning is not something unique to the individual, but neither is it something external to us. Rather, we socially construct reality via our use of shared and agreed-upon meanings. As such, for the purposes of this research, to ‘construct’ political participation, I shall be looking to identify and analyse these shared meanings, these collective constructions, to see how they are built, organised, and give salience thus to certain political behaviours. This is performed analytically for this research via narrative analysis, but also via looking to how ‘space’ is constructed in this. Namely, if political participation is constructed, what are the boundaries of construction, what is considered ‘inside’, and what is considered as ‘outside; how malleable are these constructions for what is considered appropriate and contributive to being political; that is,

what are the boundaries, how permanent is the construction? This ‘sociology of space’ construction is discussed more in depth in section 3.3.

Finally, taking from Chapter 3 the operationalised definition of political participation that I am using in this research is primarily one that my participants themselves will define, which is consistent with the above social constructionist theoretical framework. However, with that said, I have the expectation that those participants will be negotiating with the conventional understandings of such that were raised in the literature review, as well as being located in contemporary articulations of political participation. Particularly, this involves networked political selves that move in and out of different political foci, with different levels of political involvement and forms, constructing a diverse multiplicity of political intersections rather than a singular coherent form of political participation. Note that any discussion in this thesis of ‘self’ is not one of a politics of identity, as the pertinent focus is not on the nature of identity-based politics, but rather what the themes are that political participation is narratively constructed via. Self is articulated here through social location, both in terms of how social location is constructed relationally, but also in terms of how social location contributes to constructing political spaces and boundaries (see section 3.3 for a further discussion of a sociology of space). As such, identity is not a subject of this thesis, but rather exists as a theme, through the orientating vehicles of issues of self and social location. This is also why understanding an intersectional approach to such is important (see section 3.1), particularly given how a nascent articulation is made by my participants to this, via grasping differential experiences of political issues due to shifting intersections of salient social locations and inequalities.

1.4 Research Methodology

This qualitative research was conducted using unstructured in-depth interviews. The reasons for this methodological approach are multifold, in that it allows the investigation of how online political participation is interwoven with offline participation. Focusing solely on online sources of data would preclude this. It also provides for a conceptual depth for the construction of political participation that online sources of data would not include. Moreover, using unstructured face-to-face interviews allows my participants to determine where the foci for the interviews lie in terms of constructing political participation, online and offline, which is central to the research question. Further to the research question, the centrality of Twitter users is in part a methodological concern, because this allows for the snowballing of participant selection,

as well as ensuring participants do have both offline and online components to their construction of political participation, something that merely analysing tweets would not provide.

The unstructured interviews were analysed using a narrative analysis theoretical framework, looking for the underlying meanings that my participants were bringing to their explanations for behaviours and constructions. Themes were identified in these narratives by qualitative reiterative coding in NVIVO software, and the common themes aggregated into the narrative arguments that my participants made. These groupings are then reflected in the four findings chapters (chapters 5-8), which are to be read as progressive constructions of meaning around four central themes of political participation that were identified. The participants themselves were recruited using a selective snowball sample, by which is meant key initial Twitter users in #NZPol were identified, interviewed, and then asked to provide a list of potential interviewees. Taking a 'list' approach had a two-fold intention. One, it ensured the recommending interviewees would not know who amongst those were actually chosen for interviewing, preserving a degree of anonymity. Two, having a number of potential participants to choose from allowed for getting a range of participants. While generalisability was not overly a concern, given the more qualitative nature of the research, I made sure there was a range of perspectives, including such things as location in New Zealand (including rural and urban), ethnicity, degree of political involvement (self-identified), and age. For more information, see Chapter 4.

1.5 Thesis Outline

The overall structure for this thesis is three-fold, looking to how the research done fits with international literature, where this research extends, and then where this research provides new insights for political participation in New Zealand. Chapter 2, the literature review, begins with the more theoretical research on how political participation has been understood online, and how the concept of online publics has been conceptualised. This chapter then shifts to a more empirical focus, looking first to the experiences of women on Twitter, both as politicians and individuals, but then shifting to look at research in New Zealand.

Principally, this New Zealand research is top-down research looking at how political parties and politicians have used online media and the themes therein. While not looking at bottom-up user construction of participation, it nevertheless provides a context for how online political

participation is being constructed by political elites, and particularly so over time. This is a context my participants will have to negotiate with. The chapter will continue to look at the research that has been done on another form of social media in New Zealand: political blogging. This will continue into a discussion of the few pieces of research there has been done in New Zealand into bottom-up user constructions of political participation online. Chapter 3 will then look at understanding how politics itself has been theoretically conceptualised for this research, as well as how social constructionism and a sociology of space underpin such a conceptualisation. Chapter 4 will outline the methodology used for this research, data collection and sampling, analysis, coding, and process, as well as going into depth into Narrative Analysis (that builds off Social Constructionism in Chapter 3) and how it is used for the analysis and coding.

The following findings chapters (5–8) are structured to outline the four major themes that emerged from the research, and are written in such a way that the logic of the narrative arguments structure each thematic chapter progressively, grouped by the common sub themes that were identified in analysis. Specifically to this point, the four themes of the findings chapter are derived from a combination of (as above) the primary organising narratives as identified during the coding analysis of the interviews (for further discussion, see section 4.4), during the interviews themselves, as notes were taken on themes, in discussion with my supervisor, and finally, aligned with the research question, and hence the literature. The first findings chapter, Primary Relationships, is what I have identified as the main meaning-giving narrative theme for what counts as politics for my participants; that is, what is the central driving concept? In other words, the chapter has an overarching theme to look at how my participants orientated themselves politically, and identifying what the narrative is that gave meaning, salience, and import to political behaviour. Note, this theme is situated amongst the wider literature on what counts as political participation, because this is the theme from which political participation is derived.

The second findings chapter, Everyday Politics, follows from the first, in that it takes the orientating concept of primary relationships as that which then drives a certain set of political behaviours. This second findings chapter thus looks to how participating politically is narratively constructed, through the sub-themes such as how personal experience and small acts were seen as intrinsically political, and as well as how they interpreted their lives and their behaviours through the lens of such things as an empathetic imperative and relationality, as

well as particularly the centrality of discourse to all of this. Further, looking to what counts as the impact of political behaviour for my participants, indirect rather than direct becomes a motivating factor for my participants. Particularly relevant here in terms of literature is both the work around political participation, but also Boullaine's publications around where the gaps are in assessing what the impacts of online political behaviour are.

The third findings chapter, *Being Online*, which involves what my participants constructed as salient specifically in terms of the impact of being political online, covers how different social media platforms are used in different ways, how social media 'echo chambers' are constructed and negotiated, and how they maintain a diversity of voices. The previous two findings chapters were positioned in terms of general political participation, the narratives of meaning and import and how these translate into behaviours. This chapter, however, specifically looks at how those behaviours manifest online. Given how much of my participants' interviews were on how the above generalities manifested in their online political behaviour, it was necessary to make this a major theme in the thesis. Further, this addresses the specific part of the research question looking to Twitter users, and the research around such.

The fourth and final findings chapter, *New Zealand*, looks to the narrative constructions around small size, small networks, regional variance, negotiation with global political narratives, *whakawhānau*, and their implications or how my participants saw what might be 'unique' about New Zealand politics. The discussion chapter looks at what findings confirmed intentional trends in the literature, then looked at what findings provide as to an extension to international literature, moving on to what might be new contributions, particularly around an approach to New Zealand. This chapter does this through an overarching analytical theme of relational space creation and boundary work, following on from the initial analysis presented in the four findings chapters. Moreover, given the particularity of New Zealand as a focus in the research question, how much it came through as a specific mention in the interviews, and the dearth of such in the literature (see Chapter 2), having it be amongst the foci in this thesis was immediately apparent.

Note that throughout this thesis I will be referring to participants as 'my' participants rather than 'the' participants. This is taken from feminist research praxis, Women and Gender Studies, as well as Sociology, as disciplines where one locates oneself in the research, as acknowledgement of one's place as researcher within the research itself.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter follows a format of ever-narrowing focus, beginning with a wide look at online political participation and online publics, narrowing then to how women have operated online on Twitter internationally. Shifting then to look at the New Zealand context, I shall cover how online politics has been researched in general in this country, then looking to a specific example of social media, political blogging, ending with the pieces of research in New Zealand that have looked to bottom-up political use by individuals. The first section of this chapter, 2.1, looks at two major theoretical areas surrounding online political participation: the participation itself and the collective nature of online actions (i.e. ‘publics’). The overarching understanding for these first two sections is the potential for destabilisation that online contextualisation provides.

This is not to say that online contexts are divorced from offline social forces, for they are not, nor that any recontextualisation from the online is automatically emancipatory in its potential (the effect of an online context can indeed be negative). As such, the contribution that these sections provide are in tracing how these recontextualisations have been conceptualised. This is also important given that the focus for this research is on conceptual constructions of political participation in this context. The following two sections, 2.2 and 2.3, have a more empirical focus, looking at the experiences of women (both as politicians and individual citizens) politically on Twitter, and the different aspects of research on online politics in New Zealand. As such, they are both situated in the context of the wider research discussed in the previous section.

2.1 Political Participation Online

One of the primary themes on the effects of online participation has been primarily one of discussing potential, where optimistic ideals of online media opening-up political participation have clashed with dystopian constructions emphasising how media and technology reifies existing social arrangements of inequality and representation (Papacharissi, 2008). The former leads with the possibility that online media could drive increased political engagement, to direct democracy, bringing in youth and minorities, and links between citizens and policymakers. The latter argues that online communication was more likely to at best replicate, or worse reinforce, patterns of political communication, widening political knowledge gaps and ‘digital divide’ (Brundidge & Rice, 2008). These sceptics argue that, due to the enhanced ability one has to

control what one is exposed to online, and the preponderance of its use for entertainment, any disposition an individual might have towards excluding exposure to politics online ensures as minimal an impact of such as possible, as opposed to media where you have less control (Boulianne, 2009; Ward & Vedel, 2006). Additionally, such online media use is argued here to take time away from other offline civic and social activities where such exposure may occur outside of a media context.

A more complex argument is one where it is argued that online political participation could have a positive impact on political engagement, but it would be on those who are already interested in politics (Boulianne, 2009). Norris (2001) refers to this as the virtuous circle, a characteristic of media more generally not just online, but one in which media use serves to activate the already involved, rather than mobilising new participants to engage in political process, which then continuously reinforces that divide. Norris (2003) points to how party-political websites have been reliant on citizens having enough prior political interests to visit those sites, and hence do not reach the politically uninterested.

There are those, however, who do argue that online participation could mobilise populations that are politically inactive. They argue that, rather than the ease of access to information having an effect solely on those already engaged, it will also induce new participants into the political process (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Just as online technologies can make it easier to avoid unwanted media, they can also reduce knowledge deficiencies by making it easier to be exposed to a range of perspectives, such as from socio-economic status, gendered distinctions, age differences, and sexuality. This then can encourage engagement across diverse populations, including those that may be disillusioned with traditional methods of political participation (Boulianne, 2009) or are unable to access them. Regardless, both the above approaches, whether focusing on established or new political participants, construct the particularities of online technologies as leading to increased political participation.

However, the above research has been critiqued as being too binary (Howard, 2001) and lacking nuance. Further, it is also criticised as technologically deterministic (Löfgren, 2012; Papacharissi, 2008). This latter critique is one where the characteristics of the technology are seen as the determining aspect of the behaviour performed thereon, and it is these characteristics, rather than the socio-economic milieu that the technology is embedded in, that is the focus. Hence, the technology often becomes seen as a panacea for ills of that socio-economic milieu (Löfgren, 2012) rather than having the potential to merely replicate those ills.

Out of this theme of debate on the potential of online political participation, Ward and Vedel (2006) came to several conclusions: that the ‘hype’ around such technologies was unhelpful for analysis, and the binary nature of that hype was something that needed to be discarded. As with the likes of Papacharissi, Hargittai, Anstead and Chadwick (2010), and Foot et al. (2010), Ward and Vedel (2006) argue that analysis of online behaviour needs to be reconnected to the broader political, economic, and social realities that frame the technology. Further, they argue that much of the analysis has been US-centric, and has been used comparatively cross-nationally without understanding the differences between the political contexts that online spaces are located in. This is pertinent contemporarily in a New Zealand context, as there has been very little research into how New Zealanders specifically are using the technology from a bottom-up perspective, and more often than not the research that does exist on top-down use is compared to the US as a base-line model, which the New Zealand institutions differ from. Why this may be the case has not yet been explored in the literature.

An additional critique Ward and Vedel provide of this theme of research is that the perspective on what counts as political participation could be too traditional. They give the example of viral online political satire and humour as a form that extends what has been considered to be political participation (Ward & Vedel, 2006), something that is not traditionally measured. This point of the online context interacting with existing forms of political participation in ways that differ from traditional expectations of those forms is also picked up in the work of Gibson and Cantijoch (2013), which was a meta-analysis of the research done in the field up to this time.

Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) looked to how far online technologies could be replicating or widening political participation repertoires, and how much online and offline spheres were interrelated or independent of each other. They note that research into political participation prior to online technologies centred around a passive versus active divide for political involvement, where the latter was privileged as having more worth than the former. While some scholars have argued for a more expansive approach that includes both types, what became dominant was the perspective that was “concerned with doing politics, rather than with being attentive to politics” (Verba, 1995, as cited in Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013, p. 702). For instance, this distinction is made in relation to attending ceremonial or supportive activities, or paying attention to politics in the news. More active types of political participation were such forms as voting and election based activities, political turnout, campaigning, and communal and targeted political contact activities.

As such, there has been an acknowledgement, according to Gibson and Cantijoch (2013), of the necessity for a widening of the understanding of political participation to include the non-institutionalised, and critique of the active versus passive theoretical scheme has been a part of this. This is particularly pertinent as the act of political discussion has traditionally fallen into a 'grey' area according to Gibson and Cantijoch (2013), between these active and passive classifications:

In its more persuasive form, political discussion can be seen to acquire the directed and instrumental characteristics of more accepted modes. However, for a number of scholars even its more casual form, political discussion can lay claim to the participatory label (p. 702).

This argument is important, given much of online political practice, as many scholars have noted, is around news dissemination and critique (in fact, according to Boulianne's work in 2009 and 2015, some of the strongest effects came from those who use online technologies for news access and dissemination). However, paying attention to news has been mostly agreed upon by scholars to not be an active form of political participation, according to Gibson and Cantijoch (2013), as characterised by this quote from such a political participation scholar: "political interest, political efficacy, political information ... only gauge the motivations or dispositions inclining people to become involved in politics; they do not tell us whether some undertakes political activity" (Brady, 1999, as cited in Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013, p. 702).

For such scholars, action is the defining element of participation. Further, work from Hamlin and Jennings (2011) has made a distinction between political participation and political behaviour. The distinction here hinges on the more diffuse and symbolic nature of this behaviour, as opposed to the more instrumental and targeted nature of participation.

Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) note that attention to online political activity has not impacted mainstream (offline) political participation studies, mostly due to the fact that the majority of such studies were performed prior to, or on the cusp of, the rise of digital technologies. That is not to say that there has not been research on political participation online, but rather it has existed more as a parallel "second stream" (Gibson and Cantijoch, 2013, p. 703). Though, there is the critique of such a claim to a lack of mainstreaming, given attention brought to 'Occupy', 'Black Lives Matter', and the Egyptian protests during the Arab Spring. But, in contrast to the

frameworks provided above, this research has taken online political activity to be given as political participation, and rather the focus has been on identifying if online activities are having any impact on mobilisation effects.

This theme of research into online political participation has been one that looks to the media itself, what has characterised it, describing how it was used, and has particularly been research that has looked to how political organisations and political parties used the technology. This is present in social media analysis, where for instance most research into Twitter use has focused on use by politicians and campaigners (Jungherr, 2014), and this has certainly been the case in New Zealand. Looking particularly at the work of Davis et al. (2008) on the use of the Internet in US election campaigns as indicative of this kind of research, the definition of participation that emerged was one where bi-directional interaction was minimal (relationships with bloggers, for instance, were treated with caution and user-generated content more generally was highly managed (Davis et al., 2008) – while the campaigns would link to such, there was no discussion occurring). In other words, the use of online technologies has been one that was focused on “getting the message out” (Davis et al., 2008, p. 13) and mobilising people to get involved offline in more traditional forms of political participation. Parties’ attraction to online technologies was not about the affordances it provided in terms of new methods of political participation, but rather because it was less expensive than traditional media avenues for communicating with supporters, raising funds, and mobilising voters offline (Davis et al., 2008).

Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) further note that while these studies (such as the work Boulianne discusses that I have mentioned above) have shown small, but significant, effects of Internet use on political engagement, they have had a focus on those effects, rather than on the conceptualisation of the online political activities, particularly, whether online activities mirror or depart from offline modes of participation. In other words, does the context matter? What counts as active and passive are not as simple when done in an online context. Such studies, according to Gibson and Cantijoch (2013), have raised questions of whether online participation is multidimensional or unidimensional, and, if it is the former, does it replicate offline forms of engagement? Further, to what extent are online activities parallel to, or rather interwoven with, offline activities, and are they problematising previously established distinctions between active and passive forms of participation? These are amongst the negotiations I see from my participants.

A continuation of such an understanding of participation is in the work of Nabatchi and Leighninger (2015) around thick and thin participation. These authors define ‘thick participation’ as a feature of large groups, where there is considerable discussion and deliberation, with an action-orientation focus that comes out of such dialogue and debate. This type of interaction involves such things as network-based recruitment, small-group facilitation, overt discussion sequences, issue definition and framing, and, importantly, an action strategy that comes out of all this interaction. The intention thus is to not just have discussion, but to harness discussion to an end (or ends), to solve problems, and identify processes or policy (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015).

‘Thin participation’, in contrast, operates at the level of individuals, rather than groups. Individual people are motivated by feeling they are a part of something large, a movement or cause. Prior to online technologies, this was evidenced in such things as signing petitions or filling out surveys (Nabatchi and Leighninger, 2015), but now involves such things as ‘liking’ something on social media, retweeting or sharing an opinion or article, donating online, or providing feedback on public policy proposals. These items involve shorter time commitments than in thick participation, as well as less intellectual and emotional contributions. However, this is not to say that these do not have impact, as if a sufficient number of individuals participate in these activities, they can add up to a considerable amount; a critical mass of people can be developed.

Nor is it that thick participation is offline and thin participation is online, as both can develop in each sphere (Nabatchi and Leighninger, 2015). They operate as ideal types, where both may be occurring simultaneously. Further, while thick participation may be action-orientated and thin participation ease-orientated, neither can guarantee longer-term impact (Nabatchi and Leighninger, 2015). Why this is important in light of the above work on active and passive participation, is that they provide a framework for understanding the nature of the activities that are performed online, not just from a perspective of type of involvement (i.e. the active versus passive frame), but one that also involves depth, or how people are being involved, either in groups, with higher levels of time commitment, or as individuals, with ease and passing connection to an activity.

Why thin and thick participation are further interesting is in light of how wider political organisation (i.e. not just participation, but organisation) has shifted, as exemplified in Bennett’s (2012) work around examples of the personalisation of politics online. Focusing

particularly on the mechanics of the Occupy movement, and to a lesser extent the Arab Spring revolts, Bennett (2012) looked to how the organising principles for political movements have changed. Specifically, he argues that the identity politics of the social movements that emerged from the 1960s (such as women, minorities, immigrants) was centred around groups or wider issue-based causes (such as anti-nuclear, environment) that were not unrelated from the formal group identifications that had been present previously (such as party, union, church, class).

However, in contemporary organising this has changed, and instead a new organising principle, that of the ‘individualised collective action’ frame (Micheletti, 2003), has developed. This, Bennett (2012) argues, is rooted in a more consumerist perspective on how individuals interact with society: a citizen-consumer. In this frame, individuals do not identify with the entirety of a group, or a movement’s cause, but rather pick and choose those aspects that connect with them personally. What this means is that organising movements cannot rely on a guaranteed base of supporters, a base that would support them across all that they organise around. Instead, movements are now less like conventional social movements, but rather are “where large numbers of people join in loosely coordinated activities centred on more personal emotional identifications and rationales” (Bennett, 2012, p. 26). This results in shifting, partial, temporary allegiances to movements, and to multiple movements by individuals, in much the same way as they operate as consumers, deciding what particular products and services appeal to them. Bennett (2012) argues that social media networks lend themselves to this kind of interconnected organising, as individuals can connect with multiple mobilisations simultaneously, in the amount that they wish, and participate to the degree they wish.

Bennett’s work also resonates with Loader’s (2007) work around how younger people use online media to enact political participation in a more consumerist, individualistic, and lifestyle-orientated context. According to Loader (2007), these enactments of deinstitutionalised political participation take on multiple forms and can be transitory and fragmented. This is further reflected in the work of Williams and Delli Carpini (2011), looking specifically at political news media, and how political information gathering contemporarily has become a “multiaxial” (p.147) consumerist form by individuals, something fluid, where different media sources and connections are destabilised as individuals shift between them (and particularly for Williams and Delli Carpini, one where the distinction between what is considered strictly political, and what is entertainment, becomes blurred along more consumerist lines).

This is not just a perspective on US politics, however, as Ward and Gibson (2010) also note that European politics has become more individualised, amongst a context of wider declines in traditional political participation forms, such as political interest, electoral turnout, and trust, not to mention falls in party and trade union membership. As with Bennett (2012) above, Ward and Gibson (2010) note that critics have suggested increasing cultural individualism, freedom of choice, and a consumer society have led to expectations of individual preference fulfilment. However, Ward and Gibson (2010) note that the reality may be more complex than simple decline would suggest. While there has been a fall in party memberships, there has been a concurrent growth in the numbers of political parties (Ward & Gibson, 2010). Further, research has shown the public may now be more willing to support single-issue campaigns, or singular protest activities rather than broad “catch-all” parties (Ward & Gibson, 2010, pp. 26-27). Ward and Gibson (2010) note that contemporary movements such as environmentalism, anti-globalisation, and anti-capitalism are using this model.

Ward and Gibson’s (2010) point that socio-political context matters when it comes to looking at online political participation is a critique that has particularly come to the fore in what I would consider the third period of looking at political participation. Namely, it is one that looks away from a universal experience of online political participation to understanding how different segments of society experience online participation differently. In other words, offline societal factors matter in experiences online. Of mention in this is a long history of work done by Eszter Hargittai (Hargittai & Waljeko, 2008; Hargittai, 2011; Hargittai & Shaw, 2013; Hargittai et al., 2014; Hargittai & Jennrich, 2016) on what has traditionally been referred to as the ‘Digital Divide’ (Norris, 2001; Mossberger & Tolbert, 2010), but Hargittai has expanded this to ‘Digital Inequality’.

Hargittai (2011) critiques the universalism of research into political participation online, looking at the experiences of different groups within a society. She mentions that initially research into this looked at who had access to digital technologies and who did not (the Digital Divide mentioned above), but her research has focused more on the “differential use” between groups of digital technologies (p. 233). Her argument for the use of Digital Inequality is that divides in society are not simply a dichotomous division between having online technology access or not, as it is:

...essential to acknowledge and incorporate into our studies the diverse aspects of inequality – especially differentiated contexts or usage and variation in skills – related

to digital media uses if we are to have a realistic understanding of the many diverse ways in which people are incorporating new media into their lives across population groups (Hargittai, 2011, p. 233).

Merely having access to those technologies is not enough, for a user's social position matters in their relationship to those technologies. An individual's demographic characteristics, including their socio-economic background, influence the technical and social contexts of usage, in addition to the skills the individual possesses.

Why is this important for this research? Hargittai (2011) argues that researchers must be conscious of these divisions if they are to avoid incorrect generalisations of findings across all population segments when looking at online technologies. This means, any patterns of online political participation that my participants display needs to be contextualised in how they also articulate their social location, for one cannot exist without the other. This was also a position mentioned by Papachrissi (2014), in that online technologies need to be understood in the particular social conditions in which they are embedded, and one that I pick up on in section 3.1 around Intersectionality Theory. This is where my research will be located contextually, as well as amongst those critiques of merely attempting to fit online political participation into traditional political participation typologies. This will be done by looking at the characteristics of each behaviour, rather than which behaviours have historically been placed in those classifications, to see if my participants are reconstructing those behaviours of participation.

Online Publics

This section will look at different ways in which online publics have been theorised (using the work of Habermas), the critiques of such, and looking to the work of two theorists of these publics, understanding a more complex notion of how these publics are conceptualised and experienced by those online.

In the 1996 English translation of his 1962 book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (*Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*) Jürgen Habermas defined a concept of a 'bourgeois public sphere' in 18th century Europe as "the sphere of private people coming together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labour" (p. 27).

In other words, his Public Sphere as a concept was at the intersection of the individual and the state, but of the former, not the latter. It was of culture (Barlow, 2008) and is created by the will of social groups, of the public itself, not the state. The problem was, since its emergence in 18th century Europe, with the increased commercialisation of the private sphere, a market-based model of engagement had come to dominate the public sphere and it was “replaced by the pseudo-public or sham-private world of cultural consumption” (Habermas, 1996, p. 16).

In other words, mass-commercialised-communication had become a consumption-orientated proxy for the public sphere, one that slowly constricted it to near irrelevancy throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, according to Habermas. In order for the public sphere to function appropriately, the private sphere (particularly the economic) would have to be kept separate from it. This change was in opposition to the European emergence in the 18th century of the bourgeois public sphere in urban meeting places, such as coffee houses and salons. These spaces for Habermas (1996) played a crucial role in the development of “public reason” (p. 27) that was fundamentally different from the private (economic), and state reason.

Habermas’ work had actually been established in more traditional studies of political participation outside of the English speaking world from its original publication in 1962, but its first English translation, not till the 1990s, coincided with the arrival of the ‘World Wide Web’ and the first analyses of online engagement. As mentioned in the previous section in this chapter, during the 1990s the early discussion of political participation online, that is, the ‘first period’ (primarily one regarding potential) resulted in many of the more optimistic analysts seeing the spaces created for discussion online as a new public sphere, supposedly reclaiming the promise of the 18th century that Habermas focused on.

Part of their embrace of the ideal of the Public Sphere was due to repeated studies showing declines in traditional forms of civic participation across Western societies in the latter part of the 20th century (such as declining political party rolls, voting percentages). Many analysts, both negative and positive on the potential of the internet, were aware that citizen engagement in these forms of politics and civics had decreased. Those more optimistic researchers saw this disconnect as being potentially resisted through the new forms of engagement that online spaces could supposedly provide. Naturally, as discussed in the previous section, there were also those who argued that it would not, and rather would just reflect the same declines that had occurred in the public sphere offline.

Part of the argument of the more optimistic observers was that online a citizen could find all the information on an issue that they could want in order to make political decision. Commentary on political issues and policy could use and link to all the material, evidence, arguments, or link directly to that which they wanted to refute. This was actually a crucial requirement from Habermas (1996) of the Public Sphere, what he termed “Publicity” (p.102), namely that the visibility and accessibility of information and discussion were paramount. He contended that a misuse of publicity, a manipulation of it, where the understandings of concepts were shifted by interference by the spheres of government/state and the private (economic); in other words: propaganda. Given that the interchange and discussion of ideas and information were so crucial, Habermas (1983) in a later work specified the following rules for discussion and debate:

1. Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in the discourse.
- 2a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.
- 2b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.
- 2c. Everyone is allowed to express his attitudes, desires and needs.
3. No speaker must be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (1) and (2) (p. 98).

However, while these are certainly ideal types, and hence should be taken in such a context, they do speak to a particular critique of Habermas’ work here. Namely, that all those within a democracy do not have equal access to these spaces, nor do the above rules take into consideration differentiation in social location. In other words: they do not compensate for power differentials negotiated in those spaces.

Critiques of the public sphere have been varied, but I shall focus here on the work of two theorists, as I feel they are pertinent to how the public sphere was used as a concept for analysing online political discussion, and are indicative of the wider academic debate around the theoretical concept. Jodi Dean (2002) argues for three interrelated critiques; her first is in direct opposition to one argument made around the potential of online political participation: namely, access to information. For her, the ability online to provide as much information as

possible may not be as much of a boon as thought. Dean (2002) argues that, rather than providing the information required to make fully informed rational decisions, the sheer amount of information hinders decision making. One never has the complete information, as there is always more to find, always another perspective to read. One becomes trapped in a constant search for more information and so the choice that one requires that information to make never actually ends up being made. No matter who you turn to, or talk with, discussion and information begin to break down your ability to make choices, and to be able to even argue a position yourself.

A second continuation of this argument for Dean (2002) is that the individual (in searching for information for further perspective and interpretation) actually becomes suspicious of that very information. In the information online there is always a critique, always an argument away from a point, as much as there are arguments for that point. Hence, our individual never trusts what they find, does not have faith in any source, because they know they will always find a position refuting that previous one. This, in turn, drives the need for further information, information that is again never truly trusted.

Further, and thirdly, Dean (2002) contends, the provision of so much of this information by the private/economic sphere, through modern media, means that the supposed restorative force of journalism actually contributes to the trivialisation and sensationalism of politics and political news coverage. Information becomes consumption, reinforcing the status quo, not challenging it. The very practice of being good citizens, finding information, becomes instead an act of consumption of entertainment, reinforcing the power and status of media, rather than challenging the status quo.

Nancy Fraser (1990) critiques the very nature of Habermas's public sphere itself. Beginning with a questioning of how a public sphere can be truly public if matters of social inequality inherently prevent or hinder one's very access to the sphere, Fraser (1990) argues that it is not enough to 'bracket' social inequality (i.e. the private, the economic) from the public sphere (i.e. to merely ignore difference and the inequalities that align along such), but rather one must address those very inequalities before a public sphere can truly be public. Further to this, Dean (1990) argues that rather than the singular public sphere of Habermas's conception, difference requires a multiplicity of spheres (whether in a stratified or egalitarian society) in order for it to function properly.

Moreover, Fraser (1990) argues, Habermas's requirement of the separation of the private and the public spheres was only really possible if one was in a position to not be impacted by the economics of the private sphere. Habermas's bourgeois public sphere was just that: bourgeois, reliant on the privilege of not having to take into consideration the economics of the political situation. In order to be a truly public sphere, the economics of the private would have to be included. Finally, Fraser (1990) contends, Habermas's separation of the public sphere from the sphere of the state leads to discussions in the public sphere that would lead to no real action, as those who did the work of politics and civil life in the state were not a part of such. In order for a public sphere to operate effectively, with actual consequence, those of the state have to be included in the public sphere. A blurring of the state and the public, a hybrid of such, would have to exist.

It is interesting to note that the application of Habermas' Public Sphere to online spaces has occurred alongside considerable debate on the future for online spaces. Namely, whether they are to remain a more anarchist/libertarian space, a space lending itself to science and knowledge (a critique of which would be the technological determinism mentioned earlier), or one that could become increasingly corporatised and capitalised. This was noted by Robins and Webster (1999):

Among the significant issues to be raised by the new information technologies and their relation to social forms of organisation, their centrality to structures of political power, and their role in the cultural logic of consumer capitalism. Sociological analysis is naïve, we believe, when it treats the new telecommunications, space, video and computing technologies as innocent technical conceptions and looks hopefully to a coming, post-industrial Utopia" (p. 107)

In other words, Robins and Waters (1999) are speaking critically to the same forces of the private sphere, economic and political, that Habermas critiqued for destroying the public sphere of the 18th–19th centuries. Contemporarily, this is also something that has been critiqued by the likes of Goodwin (2011) in New Zealand, arguing that any emancipatory or liberating potential for the likes of Facebook, for voices not normally heard, is limited by the fact that it is "a thoroughly branded environment that commodifies social relationships, reinforces the power of global media corporations, and facilitates forms of neoliberal subjectivity" (p. 110).

I shall now return to Fraser's (1990) critique above, that it is not enough to merely claim a space is public, but rather one needs to talk about publics, plural, and how they are interacting with the space. Habermas' Public Sphere was a normative concept; it spoke to what 'should' be done. Contemporary theorists of online publics have rather shifted the focus to investigating what 'is' being done. Particularly in relation to this question of online publics, the work of danah boyd on 'networked publics' is salient. 'Networked Publics', according to boyd (2010a), are "publics that are restructured by networked technologies. As such, they are simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice" (p. 39).

What boyd (2010a) is saying here is that the public that is created (or rather creates itself) in online spaces is one characterised by the intersection of those individuals, who they are as groups, the technologies themselves, and importantly how they interact. New possibilities for interaction are created in this context. Mind you, this is not boyd saying that these new forms for interaction do exist, but rather that they can exist. The possibility exists for such to occur; it does not guarantee such.

So, what constitutes a 'networked public'? According to boyd (2010a) they serve many of the functions of traditional publics, in that they allow people to gather for social, cultural, and civic purposes, and particularly assist them in connecting to social worlds beyond friends and family. However, a networked public includes additional affordances, argues boyd (2010a), that shape how people engage in these online places. Again, that does not mean that the technology dominates what participants' behaviour will be, but rather it does shape how those individuals interact, as the context in which they are in, the network, matters. For boyd (2010a) "understanding the properties, affordances, and dynamics common to networked publics provides a valuable framework for working out the logic of social practices" (p. 40).

What boyd (2010a) does not explicitly mention here is that social networking is explicitly a social activity; it is not merely the act of individuals, but rather relies on the existence of others. Acts in these spaces are hence communal ones. This networked context for boyd thus challenges the characteristics of acts. It does not automatically mean the nature of an act, such as one of political participation, will be different online to offline, but rather that due to the change in context, assumptions about those acts will need to be revisited.

This negotiation of who one perceives one's audience to be is what boyd (2010a) considers to be an "articulation of a public" as these are the people a participant sees as those they are connected to, that they are presenting themselves to, something highly managed, an "imagined – or at least intended – audience" (p. 44). In fact, this imagined audience is something boyd (2010b) is explicit about:

Participants have a sense of audience in every mediated conversation, whether on instant messenger or through blog comments. This audience is often imagined and constructed by an individual in order to present themselves appropriately, based on technological affordances and immediate social context (p. 115).

Furthermore, given Twitter's ephemerality, even precise knowledge of who one's followers are only indicates a potential audience, for boyd (2010b), since not everyone who follows a participant reads all their posts/tweets. Particularly, only very few of any participant's followers actually read all their tweets, but the participants do not know which followers do; they have to imagine who does. As such, for boyd (2010b):

"The network is therefore a collaborator in the identity and content presented by the speaker, and the imagined audience becomes visible when it influences the information Twitter users choose to broadcast" (p. 130).

So how does this understanding of publics contribute to this research? First, it explicitly and theoretically locates acts in social media as inherently social, public acts. They are collaborative in the sense that they rely on a perceived, an imagined, audience that one is interacting with. It requires a conversation to be had, an active engagement with those one is networked with, at the very least in the sense of a perceived conversation. This collaborative production is an important point that will be picked up in my section of narrative analysis in Chapter 4.

Political acts in this context become communal acts, active social acts. However, this does not mean that they automatically fulfil the Public Sphere ideal, mind you, for as I have mentioned above, boyd (2010b) locates such acts within the wider social milieu, not separate from it. Hence, potential acts of political participation need to be contextualised not just in the online space in which they may be articulated, but also within wider social trends that they are embedded in. This is particularly a consequence of boyd's (2010b) construction of a public here, a networked and imagined public, where participants are negotiating their acts within these networks as a feature of those acts.

How these social acts occur is something that Zizi Papacharissi has done considerable research into. Papacharissi (2016) has furthered the networked publics of boyd, arguing that these publics, while connected, are not necessarily collective. Papacharissi (2016) understands this by contending that networked publics are “mobilized and connected, identified, and potentially disconnected through expressions of sentiment” (p. 311). These publics are, she argues ‘affective publics’. By this, Papacharissi (2016) is referring to how social media facilitates feelings of engagement, namely how they “activate and sustain latent ties that may be crucial to the mobilization of networked publics” (p. 310). Online activity may “connect disorganized crowds and enable the formation of networked publics around communities, actual or imagined” (Papacharissi, 2016, 310).

Papacharissi (2016) is explicit in stating that online activity does not guarantee impact, but when it does so, it typically does it in parallel with offline activity, and as such she argues that researchers should not treat social media as separate space from the offline, the everyday social activities that participants have. It is the feelings of belonging and solidarity that can be generated by social media, an ‘in-bond’, that contributes to political mobilisation, and a sense of communality. However, Papacharissi (2016) argues, the affective networked public is one that can generate connective action, that is, acts that are generated through the connected nature of social networks, but not collective. Returning to the work of Bennett (2012) as discussed above on the individualisation of politics, what Papacharissi (2016) is arguing is that, due to the way in which individuals can express interest in a multiplicity of allegiances and issues in social networks without having to engage in a negotiation of personal versus collective politics, the individual political viewpoints expressed belie any necessity for them to be collective. They can be collaborative mobilisations, but not collective – the individual is not required to subsume themselves to the group.

What Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012) argue is that the mechanism for the construction of these publics is that of collaborative storytelling:

Instantaneity on Twitter also creates levels or layers of agency that are networked, complex, and diffused. Storytellers must still make concrete decisions about how events will be presented, but these decisions are collaboratively and organically made through practices of repetition and redaction that do not always produce a coherent narrative. Instead they result in parallel narratives, possessing variable levels of coherence and continuity, yet interconnected through the presence of affect (p. 279).

In other words, when events occur, or issues arise, Twitter participants make decisions on the meanings of these. But they are not meanings that are created just by an individual, rather they are understandings that are collaborative and negotiated, and they may not even be entirely agreed upon, with different versions sitting alongside each other, both intersecting and contradicting each other at different points. But regardless of if they corroborate or challenge each other, these threads of narrative, of storytelling, are connected via affect, the sense of belonging that online activity can engender.

And these affective publics can have real effects, leaving what Papacharissi (2016) refers to as “distinct digital footprints” (p. 312). However, that distinctiveness does not have to be the same for each public: “social media presence does not convey the same impact for all issues, publics, and movements” (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 312). Papacharissi (2016) argues that different digital footprints reflect the nature of movements online. The particularity of their impacts online is not a product of social media, but rather of the movements themselves more widely.

Further, this collaborative storytelling that creates affective publics is afforded by the always-on nature of contemporary social media (Papacharissi, 2016). The ambience of modern social networks lends itself the generation of stories continuously, by constantly providing the streams of storytelling mentioned above, because this is how events and issues are articulated and experienced in social media. For Papacharissi, an engagement, a participation, is encouraged, in narrative construction, one that reinforces these publics. However, the nature of Twitter for storytelling can produce a multiplicity of viewpoints, which can be both empowering in the sense of providing for viewpoints that are not routinely heard, but the competing narratives can also disrupt.

It is interesting to note that these affective publics, rooted in feeling, are a departure from traditional rationality-based ideals of public spheres, something Papacharissi (2016) makes mention of. Papacharissi (2016) argues that, rather than romanticised past civic eras being characterised by an absence of emotion (as the likes of Habermas would have us believe), the presence of emotion in these periods was instead “skimmed over” (p. 320). Rather than contemporary publics being emotive versus historical publics being rational, and hence the civic discourse today being judged in comparison to that historic ideal, both are emotive, affective, spaces. Understanding this allows, according to Papacharissi (2016), for a process of reimagining of how we do society. This is particularly evident in how we critique social media, according to Papacharissi (2016).

The aspects of online publics covered in this section reveal a certain consistency for my research. They show that, not only is a sense of public crucial to online interaction, and particularly the nature of that public (be it communal, collective, collaborative), but that how that public is experienced is dependent on its connection to wider social forces. Both boyd and Papacharissi locate their online publics as wholly connected to offline social locations, to the point of denying a distinction beyond the characteristics that provide affordances in the different contexts. Further, both Fraser's and Dean's critiques of Habermas's Public Sphere as able to be created online, reveal that for online publics an understanding of how the technology is used is crucial. Moreover, a public is a misnomer, for in effect there are a multiplicity of publics (as Papacharissi argues, and Dean also contends). As such, an online public for a researcher is about tracing the lines that thread offline and online for participants, how the particularity of their society location informs this, how they use the technology to negotiate this, and how they do this collaboratively. This reflects similar concerns in the previous section around political participation, in terms of requiring a more complex framework of understanding contemporary articulations of such, and how they are embedded. This similarity continues into Chapter 3 below.

2.2 Women, Politics, and Social Media

There is a growing body of work that shows that Internet use, or at least how that use is experienced, differs according to gender. Various scholars have particularly looked at women's use of the internet for political purposes. For instance, both Morahan-Martin (2000) and Sutton and Pollock (2000), looking at pre-social media internet use, have looked at gender-specific inequalities in internet-based political activism. Morahan-Martin (2000) identified the creation of community and social support as benefits that women have accessed online, also allowing women to cross socio-economic and demographic boundaries amongst themselves to organise. However, she also said that women online run the risk, not just for having a political position, but that women, as opposed to men, are often victims of harassment online because they are women, because of gendered power structures in wider society (Morahan-Martin, 2000).

Sutton and Pollock (2000) looked more specifically at the internet itself, and how democratic ideals were constructed around internet use, pointing out that gendered analysis has not been brought to bear on how this was resourced or structured, and hence political participation online was gendered as a result. Keller (2012), researching blogs and their use by young women, found that through blogs, teenage girls were "actively reframing what it means to participate

in feminist politics” (p. 429) by using the opportunities afforded through that form of social media to “embrace new understandings of community, activism, and even feminism itself (p.429) which echoes Schuster’s work (2013) on young feminists in New Zealand. Further on this creation of alternate spaces for political participation, Harris (2010) argues that contemporary social media operate as spaces “where young women can express both personal and political views and connect with diverse others. They can operate as ‘safe spaces’ from which young women speak out” (p.480).

This section of the literature review will look at some contemporary pieces of research focused on if, and if so how, women’s experience online political experiences are different than men’s, and, further, if this results in the creation of alternate forms of political engagement online. I will do so by initially looking at some studies of women politicians and their experiences online, which echoes the traditional top-down focus that the following section has when looking at New Zealand online political participation. Then I shall look at studies that have focused particularly on individual women and their experiences with social media from a more bottom-up perspective, shifting to specifically look at Twitter.

Women Politicians and Social Media

Astrom and Karlsson’s (2016) research explored the gendered differences in political communication among blogging politicians in Sweden. What they found was substantial differences in how men and women politicians communicate in the blogosphere. Specifically, women politicians use blogging to foster a stronger connection with their readers, as well as enquiries on policy and perspectives. Similarly, McGregor, Lawrence, and Cardona (2016) looked to how women gubernatorial candidates in the US presented themselves on social media. Particularly, they looked to personalisation strategies. Personalisation, or individualisation, in politics has been part of wider shift in society to blurring the public and private (Enil & Skogerbo, 2013), and is characterised by an increased focus on personal traits, identity, and so on, rather than parties and policies (Holtz-Bacha, Langer, & Merkel, 2014; Van Aelst, Sheafer, & Stanyer, 2013). While McGregor, Lawrence, and Cardona state that this shift in politics has been around for some time (TV being one cause), the degree of it differs markedly today. This particularly the case given that social media is specifically designed for the sharing of personal information, they argue.

Evans and Hayes Clark (2016) found that women political candidates on Twitter adopt a different type of communication during campaigns to “both combat stereotypes and to distinguish themselves from male candidates” (p. 329). They argued that this is due to women’s out-group status; in other words, women need to find ways both to differentiate themselves as individuals from the group ‘women’, but also against the individualised norm of men as politicians: “Our findings lend support for the claim that gender has both a direct effect on candidates’ communication style as well as a contextual effect over campaign communication on Twitter” (Evans & Hayes Clark, 2016, p. 327).

What they found was women politicians on Twitter both used stereotypes of women, and combatted them, depending on the gender makeup of the political race they were in. While they did not do interviews with these politicians, and so could not get an answer to why these women were using these, the gendered nature was statistically significant for their tweets. As such, it can be argued that, as needed, women political candidates are establishing alternate ways of being online, in terms of both topic and style, as a negotiation with gendered requirements, both combating and conforming to them.

In the same vein, in Anderson and Sheeler’s 2014 article ‘Texts (and Tweets) from Hillary: Meta-Meming and Postfeminist Political Culture’ the authors looked to the way that the Tumblr/Twitter meme ‘Texts from Hillary’ operated post the 2008 presidential election, as Hillary Clinton was finishing her term as Secretary of State in the first Obama administration. The authors noted that Clinton had, upon creating her own Twitter account at this point, negotiated the existing structures of gender that were operating on political Twitter at the time, which included the ‘Texts from Hillary’ meme. The political culture of social media allows both “citizens and journalists to endorse postfeminist fictional avatars even as they reject feminist candidates and policies” (Anderson & Sheeler, 2014, p. 239). In other words, the particularity of a woman’s experience of politics online is a product of her gendered location, with all the contradictions that that entails. The authors continue:

In the case of ‘Texts from Hillary’/##tweetsfromhillary meta-meme, the plaisir experienced by the political media reporting on it and viewers taking cues from those media was derived from the ability to notice the feminist disruption present in the discourse and then immediately discipline that disruption. Hillary Clinton – as both a

fulfilled wife and mother and imposing secretary-of-state – should be ‘happy’ with her place in U.S. political culture (Anderson & Sheeler, 2014, p. 239).

Women and Political Social Media Use

In terms of bottom-up political engagement by citizens, Leticia Bode (2016) looked at how men and women engage in politics in social media, and whether they do so differently. She was not able to find a large amount of difference, but where she did find it was amongst the most visible political behaviours, suggesting that women may strategically engage in less visible or less likely to offend political behaviours. For instance, Bode (2016) found women are less likely to post about politics directly, but more likely to comment on or ‘like’ the political postings of others. Further, women are more likely to unfriend someone over political postings than men are. Bode (2016) attributes this to the fact that women are more likely to use social media (women are more likely to use social media in general) for relationship maintenance (Muscanell & Guadagno, 2012), and so must balance this with traditional political engagement online.

Similarly, Cunha et al. (2014) researched the discursive strategies of men and women on Twitter, particularly in regard to the use of political Twitter hashtags. Based on established offline research that has determined that men and women use language differently based on their expected social group roles, Cunha et al. (2014) expected to find that this would also be present in online communications. Through analysing tweets in a Brazilian presidential election, they found that men were more likely to use imperative verbal forms in hashtags, while women were more likely to use declarative forms. In other words, “Western men are expected to use linguistic forms that assert their power to a general audience and that Western women are expected to adopt more neutral forms” (Cunha et al., 2014, p. 5).

In their 2015 article Dashti et al. recounted their findings on studying the attitudes towards expressing political opinions on Twitter amongst Kuwaiti women political science students. They presented this against the theoretical framework of the Spiral of Silence, a theory that argues that minority voices will tend to silence themselves from expressing themselves in contrary to what is perceived as the majority view in mass media. The fear of isolation makes people afraid of exchanging views face-to-face, when identifying those people who hold the majority view. What Dashti et al. (2015) found was that the women students they surveyed did feel free to express minority opinions on Twitter, as their fear of isolation was reduced. But

what these women also expressed was that with other women they did not feel restricted from expressing a minority opinion offline either. However, when it came to face-to-face interactions offline with men they did not know, fear of isolation did make them conform to the theory of the spiral of silence and be less likely to express a minority opinion. What this suggests is that these students felt a gendered power imbalance in expressing minority viewpoints in situations with men they did not know offline.

Kitsy Dixon (2014) covers how Twitter and the traditional practices of feminism have combined to produce a new form of feminism online. One that was controversial and debated in whether it even was feminism, which echoes the work of Shuster (2013) in New Zealand, an alternative space for women to articulate political identities. This form of feminism on Twitter Dixon (2014) called ‘Hashtag Feminism’:

Hashtag feminism is one of the most popular conduits of both Twitter and Facebook. Its presence has been felt globally and it has truly redefined the ways we view the active components of feminism in our present society. It is without question that we are facing the new wave of feminism, via hash tagging (p. 34).

Dixon (2014) argues that in theory the concept of hashtag feminism has created a virtual space where those who experience inequality can coexist, one that acknowledges their articulations of their experiences. But that this is managed in a context that includes “online harassment, hate speech, disagreements, and a miscommunication in rhetoric” (Dixon, 2014, p. 34). However, what this feminism does do as political participation is provide space/platform for those who traditionally are not given such by mainstream feminism. For instance, Dixon (2014) references the hashtag ‘#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen’ where feminists of colour could articulate themselves and get seen in a way they would not be in other forms of media.

The organiser behind the hashtag #NotYourAsianSidekick, as another example from Dixon, stated how this form of feminism allowed the pressures Asian-American women face to be brought to the fore:

I think a lot of white people have a visceral reaction to the fact that they belong to a structural whiteness. But I think it shows us something really important, which is that fraction of discomfort is nothing compared to a lifetime of being radicalized and put into a subordinate class of people in the U.S. (as cited in Dixon, 2014, p. 36).

In other words, there is a space created where alternate voices can be articulated, and a politics that otherwise is not foregrounded can be enacted. Further, Dixon (2014) argues, the narrative element of hashtag feminism should not be ignored, particularly given its connection to more traditional forms of feminism. That this is being done on Twitter is a continuation of such. Concluding, Dixon (2014) remarks:

Whether or not hashtag feminism is a point of action or the foundation for social movement is another discussion, but in analysing if hashtag feminism is personal empowerment, one would have to argue that hashtag feminism demonstrates an ability to redefine social realities by combining new ways, and ideas, in forming communities for women who are seeking a place to express their beliefs, globally, with other women who share in their social identity (p. 39).

As the above research shows, the experiences of women online in political engagement differ from those of men, both from a top-down and a bottom-up research perspective, and as such gender potentially must be taken into consideration when looking at how political engagement might be articulated. Differing locations in regard to political power mean that women and men will negotiate discourses around such differently.

2.3 Empirical Research – Online Politics and New Zealand

The following sections in this chapter look to the empirical research on online politics in New Zealand, by initially looking to how online politics in general has been researched, and then examining the example of blogging, which is the form of social media in New Zealand that has received the most attention. The relevancy to this research lies in looking at how political participation has been constructed around the use of online media, both in terms of how it has been used by political parties and politicians (for both social media and online media more widely the research has almost exclusively focused on the periods around elections, and from a top-down perspective), but also how researchers have looked to the characteristics of political participation from those who comment on blogs, which I would argue is the closest allegory to individual Twitter users. The primary contextualisation here is that the particularities of the use of online media by political parties and politicians reveals how political participation is being conceptualised by them more widely, a conceptual context that my participants will most likely need to deal with in their own constructions. I shall finish this section with looking at some of

the few pieces of research that have been done on bottom-up political participation online in New Zealand, and what that research indicates.

Electioneering and Online Political Participation in New Zealand

The academic political science research of online politics in New Zealand has been one primarily, I would argue, one of interaction, or rather the lack thereof. The first characteristic of the study of online media and politics in New Zealand is its paucity. Over the past two decades, only a couple of dozen publications have been released, which almost exclusively have focused on periods of time around elections, and further for the most part focus on top-down political engagement with citizens. This top-down research does shed light on how spaces for online political participation are being constructed, and hence are an important contextualisation for online political engagement in New Zealand.

A consistent theme for online media and politics in New Zealand began has been the use of websites as party political vehicles (Barker, 2004; Roper, 1998). However, what has been noted is that websites are used merely as tools of broadcast, and moreover tools of generalised broadcast, with very little targeting (Roper, 1998). Roper's (1998) study of the 1996 election noted that:

...a lack of knowledge of the potential of the medium has resulted in the content and format of the sites resembling those of more traditional media, with little or no attempt at appealing to any one of variety of publics (p. 77).

Further, and importantly for our purposes here, Roper (1998) also found that "during the election campaign period, *none* of the New Zealand party political web sites *allowed for open, direct interaction with or between users*" (p. 78, emphasis mine).

What this suggests is that interactional spaces online have been seen as something to be kept separate from the traditional political engagement of political parties. Barker's (2004) research into the 2002 election showed the same thing. She found that information online "can be provided through other forms of media including party information leaflets and flyers, through newspapers, radio and television" (Barker, 2004, p. 84). In other words, online media were being treated in the same mass media approach that traditional forms were.

However, a change in this theme was seen in the 2005 general election of New Zealand, where not only was there a change in the degree to which online media were used by political parties, but also the attention paid by researchers increased (Fitzjohn & Salmond, 2007; Hopkins & Matheson, 2005; Pedersen, 2005; 2007). Websites remained the dominant form of online political expression during the period leading up to the election, and while supplemental behind more traditional forms of media (Pedersen, 2007) there were more participatory features being included, such as being able to join the party or donate money. However, interactive features for engagement online were again left off these spaces (Pedersen, 2007). Engagement, remained top-down (Pedersen, 2005).

The only real shifts in this theme of mono-directional political engagement have been via the inclusion of new online technologies as they developed, supplementing websites, such as the first election where blogging had prominence in New Zealand (Fitzjohn & Salmond, 2007; Hopkins & Matheson, 2005) being the 2005 election (interestingly, not far behind the 2004 Presidential election in the US, where we saw a similar rise in blogging prominence, albeit one at a far larger scale). Similarly, in 2008 there were the inclusion of what were at the time referred to as 'Web 2.0' features (Goode, 2010), which did result in a shift away from solely passive information-delivery use (Shaw, 2009), but nonetheless (in keeping with the above theme) it remained bounded. de Ronde (2010) looked at internet use surveys amongst New Zealand households, showing that, while a very high percentage of New Zealanders were using 'the internet' (78%), only 15% of those did so to specifically seek out information about political parties or Members of Parliament (a relatively consistent figure from the 2005 election). This however contrasted with the fact that a third of internet users used online spaces to gather information on government services and almost two-thirds used the internet for news gathering. What this suggests is that online users in 2008 were at the very least not using online political party electioneering spaces for political content, however much they may (or may not) want such. Further, Lips and Gong's (2009) content analysis of party websites in 2008 showed that providing for direct personal interaction on websites was limited (despite the use of Web 2.0 features). Political participation online remained top-down.

de Ronde (2010), however, did note that parties had moved away from merely using sites as analogues of printed campaign material and that more multimedia and linking to other online locations were used (though this remained broadcast focused). Amongst these were the use of the social media site 'YouTube' (Goode, 2010; Salmond, 2010) and the arrival of Facebook as

a tool for political parties (Kean, 2010). However, the use of Facebook by political parties and MPs was inconsistent, nor was it used to its full potential, particularly when it came to interacting with the public directly (Kean, 2010). This was emphasised when contrasted with the considerable Facebook efforts in United States elections at that time. In fact, social media use in the 2008 election tended to reflect the use of traditional websites (Chen, 2009), and as such again political parties failed to use online media to their full potential, particularly around interactive and participatory features (Murchison, 2015a). This theme of a lack of interactive engagement did not change in the 2011 election, despite a maturation of the technologies involved.

The one exception to this, however was an increase in the role of Facebook, something that had been predicted by Kean (2010). However, Murchison and Deos (2012) found that:

...Overall, we were surprised by the extremely small extent of interaction using Facebook in the final 31 days of the election campaign ... in general, New Zealand's parties did not use their Facebook pages predominantly for direct interaction with potential voters (p. 246)

And the content-based analysis that Ross, Fountaine, and Comrie (2015) did on the Facebook pages of MPs was similar: "Most politicians do not invite dialogue with readers of their posts, rarely get involved in comment threads and mostly take a monologic approach, using Facebook as a way of broadcasting information rather than as a medium enabling two-way flow" (p. 251)

Asking how MPs conceptualised their social media use, Ross and Burger (2014) found a disconnect between the rhetoric MPs expressed around citizen engagement, with the fact that they used social media to just distribute information about themselves (mono-directional) in order increase their visibility and make themselves "hip" to the public" (p. 46). Further, there were gender-based differences found between MPs, including a higher volume of posts by women than men, as well as a higher number of personal anecdotes, though men were more likely to use photographs, particularly of themselves (Ross, Fountaine, & Comrie, 2015).

Of pertinence for this research, MPs did see Facebook and Twitter as having considerably different audiences, with Facebook having a more general, diverse, audience, while Twitter was seen as the space for "political 'junkies'" (Ross & Burger, 2014, p. 55). Further, Twitter was also seen as a space for timeliness, breaking news, and instant media, and as such had to be strategic in how they used the medium, differently from their approach to Facebook. This

also fits with Murchison's (2015a) content analysis of Twitter. The primary focus in 2014 across all social media forms was getting users to share content that was generated by the parties, which, while a form of online political participation, did not result in two-way communication (Beveridge, 2015) in any substantial way. In other words, the changes between the 2011 and 2014 elections in terms of social media interaction between politicians and the public were for the most part changes in degree, not in kind.

Thus, the characteristic finding about election practices online in New Zealand is that consistently interaction by political parties and politicians remains mono-directional and prescriptive. Online media, and by extension social media, operate in the same frame as other forms of mass media. Actual interactive political discussion and debate have been kept at a distance, if not entirely absent, from traditional political actors. From the research it is apparent that political participation by political parties and politicians is being funnelled through traditional forms (such as voting, campaign events, what individuals can do to support parties) and furthermore offline traditional forms.

Further, aside from a few (see below), those that are researching online forms of political participation are doing so around the context of electioneering; hence, it is this traditional form of political participation that is being investigated as the expected space for online political engagement. It is not that either of these are precluding alternative forms of political participation, but rather that it is apparent that they are the dominating discourses around online political participation. Nevertheless, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, research investigation into the effects of social media on online and offline political participation in New Zealand remains in its infancy, and as such, it has been noted more research is required:

Social media is cemented in New Zealand's political landscape, but little is yet known about its effects. ... substantially more research needs to be undertaken in this area if we are to understand the impact of this technology on citizen behaviour and its implications for New Zealand democracy (Murchison, 2015b, p. 529).

Political Blogging in New Zealand

The one form of social media that has received some attention in New Zealand political studies research is political blogging, and is also one of the few that has become relatively intertwined with traditional media (Murchison, 2016). Some (notably *Stuff* (at the time part of the Fairfax Media network) and the *New Zealand Herald*) traditional news media in New Zealand have

adopted more of a blog format that encourages the engagement that political blogs are known for (Murchison, 2016), though other traditional news media have not, or have recently stopped doing so (such as Radio New Zealand).

Political blogs in New Zealand follow a traditional left–right divide (Goode, 2010), and operate often largely as articulations from opposing sides the political spectrum (de Ronde, 2010), where many of the bloggers themselves have affiliations with the established political parties (Murchison, 2016). As such, one can see political blogs as a transitory early form of social media between traditional political websites as run by political parties, and contemporary social media forms that we are familiar with today. However, it is questionable whether blogs have general appeal or remain a niche space (Murchison, 2016).

Research into political blogging in New Zealand has been, like the previously outlined research in this chapter, focused on the election periods, with the earliest being Hopkins and Matheson's (2005) research into blogging around the 2005 election. Their findings were mixed on how interaction operated in the context of the campaign, and what participatory impact blogs had on mainstream media in this period. They found little evidence that political blogs set mainstream media agendas (Hopkins & Matheson, 2005). Rather, they found that political blogs were largely reactive rather than proactive on news and investigation. Nonetheless, they did find that blogs were widely read by journalists and politically involved persons. Hopkins and Matheson (2005) saw blogs as reflecting existing tensions and competing agendas around the election campaign and issues therein.

While there was little original reporting done, Hopkins and Matheson (2005) did find that the blogs would provide additional news and depth on issues and reporting that was already in the mainstream media, which was then picked up by those same mainstream media outlets. Nonetheless, they found little evidence for the 'checking' on the dominant mainstream media voices, of truly new points and agendas, that had been seen in the US 'blogosphere'. Hopkins and Matheson (2005) attributed this, at least in part, to the considerably smaller size of the New Zealand 'blogosphere'. Bloggers, for all their political connections to the parties, perceived themselves as marginalised by the mainstream in the media and the political parties, and as such often served as spaces that raised the profile of these individuals, rather than the parties themselves.

It is interesting to note that Hopkins and Matheson (2005) found that when politicians themselves provided blog-style entries on websites, particularly without the ability for online participants to comment on the entries, the impacts were far less influential. These entries were often written by media units and press secretaries and read as press releases. Without the combination of blogging's usual interactive features, as well as the personalisation of the writers' individual perspective, engagement was lost.

Where Hopkins and Matheson (2005) did find potential was the existence of the blog outside of the direct control by PR for the political parties, allowing for debate,

“which operates according to slightly different dynamics from the dominant public forum of the news media ... that must, in our view, be considered healthy” (p. 104).

Hopkins and Matheson (2005) particularly emphasised this ‘healthiness’ in regard to the comments section most blogs provided. They judged that in many of those comments sections informal communities had developed, made up of individuals with a genuine interest in political discourse, and while they expected many of the people there were likely to already be politically active, they also expected many to be voices not otherwise present in political debate. While Hopkins and Matheson (2005) did make this observation, and such bottom-up political engagement was one of their few positive conclusions regarding blogs in New Zealand, this was only mentioned in the last paragraph of their article, and not looked at in any depth within the study itself.

Fitzjohn and Salmond (2007), also looking at early blog development in New Zealand up to the 2005 election, stated that political blogs in New Zealand, as contrasted to those in the US, were relative latecomers, evolving out of ‘newsgroups’ in the Usenet system, and in fact some of the bloggers themselves emerged out of Usenet, though like Hopkins and Matheson (2005), they also note the political party connections of these bloggers. The readers of blogs were identified as having higher levels of education, partisanship, and income levels than the general population. They were constituted by disaffected partisan activists, those who wished to use comments sections for soapboxing, those who wanted an ‘out’ from mainstream media coverage of politics, whether this was because they saw such media as biased, or because they wanted more depth of analysis and debate than such traditional media provided (Fitzjohn and Salmond, 2007). Another prominent group of blog readers was traditional political journalists, who bloggers claimed read the blogs for alternative ideas (Fitzjohn and Salmond, 2007).

Both Hopkins and Matheson (2005) and Fitzjohn and Salmond (2007) found that there was no direct influence on the 2005 election from New Zealand political blogs, and moreover that there had been no major story broken by blogs, unlike blogs in the US. But Fitzjohn and Salmond (2007) did posit the possibility of indirect influence, namely through influencing traditional journalists through ideas or alternate perspectives that are posited on the blogs, or via additional analysis or the timeliness that is in the nature of blogs. What is certain is that mainstream media journalists did cover political blogs, and report on them and the bloggers themselves. One potential indirect engagement effect that Fitzjohn and Salmond (2007) mentioned was the ability of blog readers (the informal community mentioned by Hopkins and Matheson (2005)) to share information found on blogs with family and friends (note this is prior to the now common-place social media ‘sharing’ of posts and articles that we are familiar with today), which may mobilise people into action. While no direct hard evidence of this was present, there was anecdotal evidence that discussion on political blogs had motivated some readers to partisan party activism.

Concluding whether political blogs in New Zealand had a future, Fitzjohn and Salmond (2007) suggested that while such blogs would remain present, their salience in the media landscape would be “usurped by another, newer, interesting, and amusing diversion by the time of the next election” (pp. 267-268), particularly due to their lack of direct influence on the election. Following on from this, in his 2010 article on the use of YouTube in the 2008 election, Salmond (2010) commented on this prior prediction:

We were right and we were wrong. We were right in that new, interesting, and amusing diversions from the same old politics did spring up between 2005 and 2008. One was YouTube. These new diversions changed the way parties (and also bloggers and professional journalists) engaged with the election campaign. But we were wrong in that blogs retained a prominent role in the debate around the election campaign (p. 221)

In other words, merely creating another online space for political interaction and discussion outside of the mainstream did not displace political blogs from also providing such. Online non-traditional spaces for political interaction were not exhausted (Goode, 2010).

Both de Ronde (2010) and Goode (2010) looked at this 2008 election in detail when it came to political blogging, and Hopkins and Matheson (2012) followed up their research on the 2005 election. As with 2005, de Ronde (2010) and Goode (2010) found no evidence in 2008 for

direct influence of the New Zealand election by political blogs. However, de Ronde (2010) concluded that the strength of blogs may not lie in direct impact on elections, but rather in the communities of readers that form around the blogs, though Goode (2010) suggests a more nuanced approach, in suggesting that while blogs are a “rich tool for stimulating and diversifying political discourse” (p. 439) there was little evidence for this discourse reconnecting disaffected voters, particularly given the overrepresentation of individuals with pre-existing political involvement on blogs.

What had changed from the 2005 election to the 2008 election for Hopkins and Matheson (2012) was not the blogs or bloggers themselves, as they retained largely the same characteristics across the elections (and in fact many of the same individual bloggers), but rather they found that the levels of debate in the comments sections had increased markedly. In fact, that was a change they found in the comments section, namely that rather than a space for policy development or activist mobilisation, the comments sections had turned into spaces for public debate. They did mention that while the quality of that debate could be argued, and the fact that it appeared to focus more on strategy rather than issues, nonetheless people were coming to New Zealand political blogs for the opportunity to be part of a “highly energetic exchange of opinions” (Hopkins and Matheson, 2012, pp. 115-116), and that part of the attraction appeared to be due to the debate being more “direct, less mediated, and more intense” (p. 116). However, Hopkins and Matheson (2012) did conclude that, despite this, those who participated were quite resolutely partisan, and the ideals of a multiplicity of perspectives being discussed were “not well realised in the New Zealand political blogosphere” (p. 116).

The 2011 and 2014 General Elections did not result in academic research on political blogs in New Zealand that I could locate, aside from the work after 2014 that I mentioned on the *Dirty Politics* book in Chapter 1.

Any influence from blogs in New Zealand appears to be complex and indirect, involving a circular relationship with the traditional political media, which feeds into blogging, and which then takes material out again (Murchison, 2016), not to mention connections to traditional political parties. Further, political blogs in New Zealand have not aligned with the same niche as political blogs in the United States, that of a viable alternative news source, whether that be a product of size of population or not. All the researchers I have covered here have mentioned that communities have developed around these blogs, though there is debate on whether these communities are bringing in previous uninvolved publics, or rather are made up with those

who are already politically engaged (Kean, 2010; Murchison, 2016). However, as none of the researchers above have specifically focused on the individual commenters themselves, preferring to take a more top-down perspective to this media, we cannot say why these communities have developed, and what their motivation is in terms of this being a form of political participation.

Political Social Media Participants in New Zealand

Using survey data and focus groups, Diesing (2013) looked at how citizens used social media during the 2011 general election and in 2012. The findings were that 18–24 year olds were more likely than those over 35 years old to rate social media as highly important as a source of political news; they were also more likely to use social media for political purposes. These purposes involved such things as clicking links shared by friends, visiting social media pages of politicians or parties, discussing political events online, and sharing political content online. Lower numbers had joined a political group or organised a political event.

The evidence from Diesing's (2013) research did show a correlative relationship between pre-existing political interest and people's use of social media politically, or in other words, if you were already politically engaged, you would be more likely to use social media for political ends. That said, however, youth were more likely to prefer offline, rather than online, political discussion, wanting social media to remain social and being concerned about the image posting political content would convey. Mason (2011) had also found this, where only 19% of respondents to an online survey were friends or fans of Members of Parliament on Facebook, and an even lower percentage commented on MPs' pages.

However, a study by Marrett (2010) based on participatory experiments found that young people who consumed news online only (as opposed to television or newspaper news only) were more likely to also consume political news and more likely to change their voting preference. Similarly, Waitoa (2013) found that many participants in the Mana Party's outreach on Facebook in the 2011 election (mostly to Māori) became more involved in offline political activities (such as hīkoi and protests) because of that outreach. These findings show not only that individuals (and especially youth) are using social media for political discussion, and that it can have offline political engagement effects, but also that that use is complex and embedded in, and are affected by, the networks that these individuals occupy.

This is particularly shown by the work of Schuster (2013), one of the only pieces of qualitative research on bottom-up political social media use in the New Zealand context. Schuster (2013) conducted 40 interviews with women from a range of ages who were involved in women's political activities in New Zealand, and found there appeared to be a "generational divide" (p. 8) between younger women and older women. This divide was one where the online activism of younger feminists was not witnessed by older feminists, who were not online, and so interpreted the lack of political participation in their traditional areas of politics as a lack of feminist political engagement in general by younger women.

Schuster's (2013) findings were that online activism significantly affected intergenerational communication in a way that had negative impacts for feminist political engagement in New Zealand. Her interviews with younger feminists revealed that young feminists would choose a form of political organising that allowed them to network amongst themselves, but also one that avoided the critique of older generations. This choice for an online activism was rooted in a multiplicity of causes, from a familiarity with online spaces, to the ease with which they could connect with other feminist-identified women online (this was both a physical distance and a financial issue that online spaces overcame). They could share feminist political material amongst themselves, and discuss in depth issues and concerns. Further, they could use social media to organise events offline, from one-off events to continuous work for organisations. As such, young women felt that they could create an alternative space online for their feminism, particularly because they felt alienated from traditional offline spaces of feminist organising by older feminists continually saying that they did not exist. Another effect on political engagement was not just that older feminists could not see the work of the younger generations, but that younger feminists often expressed disappointment that they could not work with older feminists. Part of this was due to language difficulties due to different political framings that were not a result of an online focus for political engagement, but part of it was that the older generation of feminists simply were not there.

What the research in this section suggests is that social media use by citizens (as opposed to the more top-down focus of previous research on political parties) as a sphere of political participation does exist in New Zealand. Analysis of social media and politics in New Zealand has not covered this in any sufficient amount, and provides an empirical gap into which my research can have application. It additionally contributes to the wider field in New Zealand as it will provide context for analysis of traditional formal political science foci on 'top-down'

online media use, as well as policy approaches from government and political parties that require an informed approach to what connects with citizen media use.

2.4 Conclusion

As discussed in section 1.1 this research and thesis is primarily located in a gap in political participation literature, and particularly literature on political participation online. The more general gap was identified by the likes of Boulliane (2009; 2015) and Papachrissi (2014) on the need to better understand qualitatively how political participation was done online, so that how online politics affects offline politics (or rather, perhaps, how online politics is constituted and located in the wider enactment of politics, regardless of medium) can be better researched, assessed, and understood. This is particularly so in a historical context that has both homogenised online spaces, and had a tendency to either valorise them or condemn them via polar positions.

One of the primary problems, however (as mentioned above), is that such research has tended to be ‘effect’-focused (i.e. the impact of one sphere on another), rather than looking at how online politics and political participation is embedded in a wider milieu of politics and participation. This is not to say that medium does not matter, but it is to not prioritise one over the other, but to see them as distinct parts of a wider whole, allowing a more nuanced understanding of how each fit together. Further, it allows us to get away from simplistic ‘public sphere’ understandings of online space, while nonetheless looking at the particularities of each space, and particularly how they operate, for instance as collaborative and contested spaces in a construction, or constructions, of politics. Part of this is understanding how different groups are situated differently in terms of not just online politics, but politics in general. This is evident in the experiences of women in both, as either political figures or engaged citizens.

Finally, this research is not just located in a wider international context of research into online politics, but is also located amongst a specific context of academic research into New Zealand online politics. This is a context that has largely focused on a top-down approach to studying online politics, looking at politicians, political parties, and campaigns. While certainly necessary, this does leave a gap of research into how those resident in New Zealand are actually participating in online politics from a bottom-up perspective, something that has only been approached in relatively smaller numbers. This research and thus this thesis are also located within this gap.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Framework

This chapter builds upon the first two sections of the previous chapter on political participation and online publics by providing a theoretical overview of understandings of what politics is, and how it is constructed. As we have previously investigated what constitutes participation in an online context, as well as the public nature of that context, then we must also look to conceptualisations of what is politics. This chapter will first look to traditional understandings of politics as a study, how it is understood more widely, and then move on to more contemporary critiques and theoretical frameworks of it. Particularly, these latter theorisations of politics are rooted in feminist political theory, from the ‘personal is political’ activist conception, to the sociological theory of Intersectionality, as well as the more traditional Social Constructionism. These sections are particularly pertinent for the discussion that is present in section 4.5 of the application of analytical theoretical framework of Narrative Analysis, that builds upon the perspectives and foci brought from Intersectionality Theory and Social Constructionism around political articulation. The chapter continues with a description of the Sociology of Space that is used in the Discussion Chapter (Chapter 9) as a theoretical framework. Why a sociology of space framework is being used here is as so much of the defining of politics is about construction of spaces where politics can be performed; what the boundaries of such are in terms of what is considered inside or outside of such; how permeable they are; and how static such spaces are. What shall be covered in the discussion chapter is that so much of what my participants argue for problematises the traditional hierarchical and discrete constructions of political space outlined below, and this section (3.3) discusses how this works as a framework. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of research around whakawhanaungatanga, and particularly as enacted online. This is being discussed here as it is used in section 9.6 of this thesis, in the Discussion chapter, as an analysis concept for a possible articulation of a uniquely New Zealand construction of being political.

3.1 Defining Politics

Gerry Stoker (2006) applies a very general definition of what politics is:

As an intricate mechanism in our multifaceted and complex societies, politics exists because we do not agree with one another. Politics is about choosing between competing interests and views often demanding incompatible allocations of limited

resources. Crucially, because it is a collective form of decision making, once a choice has been made then that choice has to be imposed on us all (p. 2).

There is, however, a distinction that Stoker (2006) notes that many theorists find important between what he defines as ‘big P’ politics and ‘small p’ politics. What he is referring to here is a distinction between the politics of government conducted at a national (or international) level, and the politics of civil society that takes place in communities and associations.

However, Stoker (2006) finds this problematic, because our institutions of government and participation in them, the ‘big P’ above, do not adequately encompass how many people ‘do’ politics (voting, for instance, is an infrequent activity). What Stoker (2006) calls ‘everyday politics’ occurs at a ‘lower’ level, the ‘small p’ politics, and not always about something that impacts participants directly:

...it can be about a cause that people believe in, or a challenge to the behaviour of power institutions – government agencies or multinational companies. Everyday activism can involve signing petitions, boycotting certain products, or even going on a march to protest a war or in favour of debt relief for developing nations (p. 89).

What Stoker (2006) points out in light of this is that, while there has been considerable concern regarding declines in the traditional formal ‘big P’ forms of politics (something I have mentioned previously in the first section of the previous chapter), the more ‘individualistic’ forms of political participation, in small, everyday forms, that involve a more light touch, have increased (what Stoker (2006) refers to as “micro-participations” (p. 92) that include actions designed to influence indirect agents of the state in the day to day). It is not that these more informal forms of politics are replacing the traditional formal ones, but rather that wider patterns of change from a collectivist framework of politics to a more individualistic one is occurring.

However, this is not the only shift that is occurring in this frame change. According to Stoker (2006), increasing recognition is being given to the fact that there has been an increase in disenfranchisement due, at least in part, to inequality, and experiences of alienation and confusion, but there are also those who argue that citizens are becoming more critical and challenging of politics. These two aspects may seem contradictory, but Stoker’s (2006) point here is that politics contemporarily is about more than simplistic singular cause and effect, and

when you introduce such things as forces like globalisation and an increasing multiplicity of political ideologies, the operation of politics is going to be rarely straightforward.

But how is politics then conceptualised? Adrian Leftwich (1984b) argues that ‘people’ commonly identify it with the “more or less exclusive ‘public’ realm of generally unpleasant squabbles and struggles for office and power” (p. 63). Conventionally, he contends, this is associated with the activities of political parties, pressure groups, professional activists, elections, parliaments, civil governments, and so on. Further, the mass media tends to encourage this view, with the added effects of trivialising and distancing those spaces from the general public. This is not helped when politics as an academic discipline, according to Leftwich (1984b) “tends to focus on the narrowly ‘political’ institutions of government in a manner that may be more analytical” in such a way that it “leaves out most collective human activities within modern states as well as in historical and contemporary non-state societies” (p. 62).

In other words, it is not just that a colloquial understanding of ‘politics’ exists amongst the general public as not just the institutions of state, but as institutions that are somehow separate from them. Further, this view is reinforced not only by media, but also by academics. That this has been a traditional academic understanding of politics is an argument shared by Graeme Moodie (1984); politics was centred on the state, and no further discussion was required. It was divided into two areas: political theory, which was normative (concerned with the ‘should’ of politics), and political institutions, which was empirical (which is interesting considering the focus found above in the Literature Review on the studying of online politics through the almost exclusive lens of use by political parties). According to Moodie (1984), this has resulted in exclusions from what is considered politics, but also in efforts to redefine or widen what is considered politics – though Moodie still defines politics as being about two things: government and conflict (which is not too far from Stoker’s (2006) definition above either).

Andrew Chadwick (2006), in his wider look at Internet Politics, continues this theme from Stoker (2006) and Moodie (1984) in stating that “when stripped down to its essentials, the study of politics is about the study of power”, drawing our attention to “the complex, often decentralized mixture of public and private actors, state-civil society relations, and competing values” (p. 31) and further that “Making sense of this complexity is even more challenging today, as state and non-state political actors are enmeshed in a multiplicity of different ways

and at different levels, from the local to the national, the supranational to the international” (p. 31).

What Chadwick (2006) is doing here is effectively challenging the division that Stoker (2006) mentioned above between ‘big P’ politics and ‘small p’ politics due to the complexity of how actors in a political sense interact contemporarily. However, I would also argue that due to his rooting of politics, and its study, in conversations of power, what Chadwick (2006) is also doing is drawing attention to inequalities of politics, the ways in which these different actors access power in this sense. If competing values are part of this complexity, then arguments of politics, definitions of politics, are also about what gets valued, and what does not.

Dahlgren (2013) in looking at the ‘political web’, discusses an ‘alternative politics’ that has existed since before the arrival of online spaces, one that operates outside of traditional party structures. He locates this phenomenon historically via unions and social transformation in mass movements, as opposed to an original design to politics that had political parties as the spaces for collective identities and political will. This was framed within a model of parties in government versus parties in opposition, but one, Dahlgren (2013) argues, that revealed large inadequacies, and ultimately resulted in an explosion of state, public, and civic bodies and institutions operating alongside and around political parties. This also involves those outside of the bounds of the state institutions such as “single-issue organisations and loose collectivities, temporary issue publics, lobbying outfits, NGOs, social movements, protest activists, citizen networks, and other formations, active at local, regional, nation, and global levels” (Dahlgren, 2013, p. 14). Amongst these are also those citizens who are exploring “‘life-’, ‘identity-’, and ‘cultural’ politics along with – or instead of – traditional politics” (Dahlgren, 2013, p. 14).

I would argue that what Dahlgren (2013) is discussing here under a singular frame of ‘alternative politics’ is actually two things, namely ‘how’ you do politics (the mechanics, the institutions, of politics), but also a ‘what’ of politics: namely what is considered to be a political issue, the purview of politics, what politics is supposed to be concerned with and what it brings attention to – the subject matter of politics. Why this latter aspect is of particular interest in this context is that this definitional concern is not just about what is included in, or excluded from, politics, but also ‘who’ is included or excluded. But one of such exclusions (and I would contend, both of who, participate as well as being a subject matter), argues Leftwich (1984a), are women,

“because women have in general remained outside, or been excluded from, the public arena, their role and treatment in society has not been conceived of or studied as a political question” (p. 15).

Leftwich wrote this in 1984, and I would argue as to the pertinence of it remaining contemporarily, but there was already a reframing of politics happening prior to this.

Specifically, I am referring here to the rallying ‘slogan’ of second-wave feminism from the late 1960s onwards: ‘the personal is political’. Otherwise known as ‘the private is political’, it was popularised in an essay by Carol Hanisch (1969), though she denies authorship of the phrase, as do other feminist writers credited with it, such as Shulamith Firestone. Particularly, it was featured in the work of non-white feminists, such as Audre Lorde, and Gloria E. Anzaldúa. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) described the phrase as the “process of recognizing as social and systemic what was formerly perceived as isolated and individual has also characterised the identity politics of African Americans, other people of color, and gays and lesbians, among others” (pp. 1241-1242).

In her seminal essay, Hanisch (1969) sought to refute the idea that sex, appearance, abortion, childcare, and the division of household labour were just personal issues divorced from political import. In other words, it was a reaction against the exclusion of women, and the experiences of women, from the field of politics. It was not just a claim to include women in politics, but it was also a reframing of politics to widen it, to include the experiences of women in politics. As Heidi Hartmann (1979) stated, “women’s discontent, radical feminists argued, is not the neurotic lament of the maladjusted, but a response to a social structure in which women are systematically dominated, exploited, and oppressed” (p. 10). As such, ‘the personal is political’ was both an opening of these ‘personal’ or ‘private’ experiences to political analysis, as well as a theoretical framework for understanding how social structure operates politically to oppress. It also spoke to political activists to make personal choices that were political, and to articulate this politics in their everyday lives and articulations.

However, there was a critique of this orientation, and it came from feminist theorists themselves. This critique of the earlier ‘personal is political’ political frame was that it assumed universal experiences for women, and this came particularly from non-white feminists, who recognised how the universalism of experience reflected power structures, and hence that universalism came from perspective of white women (this can be placed within a historical

replication of such within politics, as the previous universal understanding of the characteristics of the political citizen was one that tended to be male, as Leftwich suggests above). This critique forms part of what has become 'Intersectionality Theory'.

The theory was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. It described overlapping or intersecting social locations/identities, with a focus on systems of oppression, domination, and/or discrimination (in other words, concerned with the production and use of power, again echoing the work of Leftwich). Intersectionality was the idea that there is a multiplicity of identities that intersect to create a whole that is distinct from each component. The sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2015) sees these as shifting, contextually dependent intersections, that are not unitary, or exist separate from each other; rather they are constitutive of each other, constructing one another. In other words, one cannot understand women without understanding race, sexuality, nationality, disability, religion, class, and so on. It destabilises the idea of a gendered subject that is then impacted by race, for how is there a gendered experience without one that is also already racialised? And vice-versa.

It was the work of Hill Collins in the 1990s that made the theory rise in prominence, and to locate it as one that was particularly about political analysis. As much as Intersectionality Theory was about identity, it was also about how structures in society, patterns of oppression, were not just interrelated, but also bound together by intersectional systems in society, like race, like gender, like class. Tracing intersectional oppressions was about looking to the social location and context of individuals. Conceptualising politics in this sense is relational; power is relational. As a researcher, and particularly as a sociologist, this framework asks for placing participants' articulations in context, for seeing how they construct their social locations rather as intersections of aspects of self. How are they pulling in their everyday experiences as selves into how they are performing politics? How do they, when talking about a political act, a participation, contextualise that act relationally? But also, as Hill Collins articulates, this is a theory of tracing oppressions, and hence is about power; how might these participants understand power and how they relate to it? How might they position themselves in relation to dominant axes of traditional political power and participation? Or even do they?

In this regard, Intersectionality Theory as an ontological stance has implications for political representation, according to Severs et al. (2016). They argue that Intersectionality Theory "demonstrates the epistemological limitations of treating representational inequalities as outcomes of societal power struggles, and reveals the need for considering the ways in which

political representation is implied in broader sequences of social interaction” (Severs et al., 2016, p. 347).

I would refine this to suggest rather that the fault lies in treating representational inequalities merely or solely as outcomes of societal power struggles, and not including the way resistive agency occurs in this space. In other words, what these theorists are arguing here for is an understanding of political involvement that is rooted in individual articulations of experience, of what constitutes politics (and what is representation/participation in a political context), and how it intersects with individual agency and resistances. Particularly, this connects back to the work of Papachrissi, Hargittai, and boyd above, amongst others, and further complicates the simplistic characterisations of online political participation, as either technologically deterministic or merely replicating existing social forces, that I have covered previously.

As a summary, then, in terms of research praxis, Intersectionality Theory allows us to operate with a conceptualisation of politics that involves both an understanding of social location as well as individual agency and complexity. If politics is rooted in the personal, and vice versa, then how individuals negotiate understandings of those politics in their everyday experience, or just what is politics itself, is crucial. For instance, Severs et al. (2016) further suggest that for a research methodology informed by Intersectionality “Interviews or life-narratives that allow scholars to understand the ways in which representatives make sense of their political environments may help balance and complement macro-based explanations” (p. 349). This was a suggestion for further research on online political participation as argued by Boulliane at the beginning of this proposal, and will be further expanded on below as an analytical framework.

This point, on the strength of intersectionality theory to follow the particularities of individual articulations of contextual political participations, positions the theory in juxtaposition to historical understandings of what constitutes politics; one, I would argue, rooted in a concept of a universalised citizen. As the above authors have shown, the academic attention on politics has been of a politics that does not look at that citizen. Rather, as this section has shown, it has traditionally focused on institutions and process, and moreover, those that were narrowly situated in a top-down, authoritative, and nation-state level form of analysis (as I have mentioned above, it is no surprise that such an understanding would result in a focus on online politics as a part of political parties’ electioneering). However, shifting that conceptualisation of politics to one definitionally rooted in experience provides for a far more nuanced and complex analysis. If my participants do make articulations of politics that are informed by

personal experience, this theoretical framework provides a context for those articulations. This is the theoretical strength that intersectionality theory brings to the analysis.

Using intersectionality theory as a working definition of ‘politics’ for this research thus involves viewing my participants as having a conceptualisation of such rooted, as I mentioned above, in experience. Rather than the ‘universal citizen’, the generic individual, the particularities of the individual matter for how politics is articulated here. Politics, in this case, becomes about how these individuals negotiate with dynamic structures of power and representation in society, oppression, and privilege, in ways specific to themselves, but also located in the systems of understanding that position them in those structures. Using the analysis technique in section 4.5, politics (and hence political participation) becomes about tracing the sense-making narratives that my participants may use to negotiate addressing these power and representational issues, inequality and provision, in ways specific to themselves. How might they balance the possibly contradictory needs their shifting social locations demand? This also relates back to the working definition of political participation mentioned at the end of Chapter 2.

An application of intersectionality theory to this research is revealed in the work of Zizi Papacharissi. In her 2016 work *Affective Publics and Structures of Storytelling* Papacharissi refers to the “distinctive digital footprints” (p.312) about the particularity of online political events. Effectively, for Papacharissi, political context matters, what online actors have access to, the social environment they are embedded in, has important implications for the interaction of online and offline forms of political participation. Hence, as theoretical framework, intersectionality theory emphasises the specificity and locatedness of political participation articulations, and as such fulfils this requirement from Papacharissi.

Further to the use of intersectionality theory as a methodological analysis tool, Heather Hillsburg (2013) suggests a methodological orientation that this theoretical perspective requires in order to be used. Namely, Hillsburg (2013) suggests that a researcher using intersectionality theory must methodologically allow for three axioms: not policing the parameters of participants’ intersections, allowing participants’ salient aspects to shift depending on context, and understanding the differential power dynamics and relationships to others. This methodological extension of intersectionality theory as an orientation is one that lends itself to the unstructured interview format that I discuss in the next chapter, as it allows my participants to dictate their own articulations of political participation, but also as it fits

with other contemporary theoretical understandings of political participation negotiation in an online context, such as the work of Bennett (2012) on the shift to a personalisation/individualisation of politics in a networked context. This is a context that moreover lends itself to understandings from intersectionality theory.

3.2 Theoretical Analysis Framework

In this section I intend to cover the theoretical framework that I will be using in my research for the reiterative coding method: Social Constructionism. I will first cover the distinction between Social Constructionism versus Social Constructivism, and why I have chosen the former for studying online communication. I will then go on to look at Narrative Analysis, and why this extension of the focus on language and discourse that is present in Social Constructionism is appropriate for this research.

Social Constructionism versus Social Constructivism

Following on from intersectionality theory above, and its requirements for a methodology that privileges individual articulations and contexts, it is therefore necessary to have a theoretical analytical framework that does not position such articulations against a normative ideal. As such, social constructionism and narrative analysis will be outlined and used as analytical frameworks that do precisely this.

Social constructivism and social constructionism hold similar epistemological roots, namely that ‘reality’ is not something that we discover, but is instead constructed by us. What this entails is that meaning is not something that is external to ourselves, it is not a passive thing, neutral and objective. Rather, meaning, and hence reality, is a result of “active, passionate, subjective, engaged, and (inter)personal process of ongoing inquiry” (Castello, 2016, p. 130). In other words, meaning does not represent reality; rather, it is constructed in it.

Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) seminal work was in arguing that we socially construct reality via our use of shared and agreed meanings, meanings that we communicate through language. That is, these constructions of the world, of reality, are social constructions (Speed, 1991). Thus, according to Castello (2016), “All major constructivist and constructionist authors incorporate the notion that language is not (or not only) a tool for representing reality, but is a means to make sense of reality in a social context” (p. 130).

The major difference between social constructionism and social constructivism is in the emphasis placed on the location of where this construction occurs. For social constructivists, this occurs primarily within the bounds of the individual, in the language an individual uses to express themselves. For social constructionists, however, this occurs between individuals, in social acts of language, as a process between people, and through relationships (Castello, 2015; Speed, 1991).

Moreover, pulling from the work of Narrative Analysis (see section 4.5 in the following chapter), where such narratives are collective meaning-building, social constructionism is thus crucial to maintain a coherent analysis framework for this research. If the construction of reality, as with social constructivism, lies purely with the individual, then the patterns and commonalities of narrative understanding that are employed by my participants do not exist as collectively built systems of understanding. Rather, they become merely transient negotiations of understanding between individuals. However, in social constructionism it is the collective effort to construct shared systems of understanding, narratives that exist across individuals, within social groups, to create more permanent structures of meaning that individuals can then apply to develop common sense-making of the reality around them. The understandings that my participants employ exist a priori to their use by those participants, even as they contribute to those understandings through employing them. This is at the core of the narrative analysis that I am performing as a researcher, identifying these commonly accessed stories/systems of meaning that are used and constructed in common, collectively by my participants. It is this collectivity of structured narrative that situates social constructionism as a core theoretical framework for this research.

Further, social constructivism (as it alluded to in the above quote from Castello (2016)) tends to “see language as symbolic of the external world and regards experience as pre-linguistic” (Hopkinson, 1999, p. 9). However, for social constructionists, language is constructive of the social world. For constructivist researchers looking to language use by participants, it is viewed as an indication of something else that is of more interest for inquiry, while for the social constructionist researcher, language is the focus of the inquiry itself (Hopkinson, 1999). There need be no objective reality behind language, for if meaning is how we perceive the world, we cannot perceive the world without it. Through language the world is given meaning, given reality to us, and it is this focus on constructing discourses that social constructionism distinguishes itself.

It is for the above reasons that I am using social constructionism as a theoretical framework for my research, particularly because of the collaborative nature and focus on discourse, of social constructionism. Twitter, particularly, is a collaborative medium, constructing meaning and patterns of behaviour between individual users through discourse, through language use. This aspect was discussed in depth in Chapter 3 around online publics. As Berger and Luckmann emphasise, the social world has import for the individual in how a social space is constructed, and hence the social group that individual is embedded in shares in this construction.

The idea behind this, according to Berger and Luckmann, is that the

“importance of the social arises within the proposal that vocabularies are shared by a society and therefore the means of understanding experience are shared. Language is thus a shared symbolic system, or is common to the society” (Hopkinson, 1999, p. 6).

In other words, language is a shared amalgam of meanings, made common via the groups that we locate ourselves in, which we employ together in discussion to craft realities through that shared use. It is this commonality in the social that allows us to share meanings, to employ those meanings through language in such a way that we assume those we communicate with will understand it. This is the core of the importance of the social for Berger and Luckmann.

Hence, for Berger and Luckmann, knowledge, including the most basic taken-for-granted knowledge about everyday life, is revealed through social interaction. Moreover, it is through social interaction that knowledge is constructed and given various levels of validity:

Social constructionist commentators see language as placed (precariously) at the intersect of socio-ideological discourses within society and the individual. Each utterance is a meeting place of discourses and the multi-vocal individual occupies subject positions in different discourses. Some discourses are stronger and more privileged than others are, so that some voices have greater claim to warrant than others do (Hopkinson, 1999, pp.7-8)

As such, the individual does not have free rein, so to speak, to construct any reality he or she may want, to construct any knowledge he or she may wish. Not only does such construction have to occur with others, within social interaction, and hence is always negotiation of agreements of meaning with multiple discourses (this is particularly the case as meaning is always contestable and never fully and clearly communicated), but the individual in

contemporary social constructionism is not seen as able to experience their own subjectivity outside these contested discourses either; the individual becomes a subject in discourse. Individuals are then unable to leave discourse, as it is the only way in which the world can be understood, or can be given meaning. Further, this changes the way the self is conceptualised if how you experience the world is independent from the individual and rather exists in discrete systems (Hopkinson, 1999).

Here I turn to the work of Erving Goffman, whose work pulls further on social constructionism, as well as contemporaneously with Berger and Luckmann, and particularly his seminal 1959 piece *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. In this work, Goffman (1959) conceptualises identity as a continual performance, one in which individuals manage aspects of self that are presented to different audiences and contexts (management that involves navigation of ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’ selves, terms that often have Goffman’s theories referred to as being in a ‘dramaturgical’ frame). An important understanding here is that this management of self-presentation is not just the actions of an individual; rather, it is a collaborative construction; individuals work together and negotiate these selves using wider systems of meaning and understanding, social norms, and through contextual power differentials. After all, not all presentations of self are compatible in any given context. This ‘impression management’ is continuous, and can be both conscious and unconscious. But it is particularly its collaborative nature, how individuals understand the symbols each employ in interactions to construct meaning, that places Goffman’s work within a type of social constructionism, namely Symbolic Interactionism. It is this collaborative construction of social reality, within the context of the work discussed in section 3.2 (Online Publics) of this thesis, that makes this theoretical perspective appropriate for this research.

3.3 Sociology of Space

I am using Martina Löw’s (2016) sociology of space as part of the theoretical framework in the discussion chapter (Chapter 9), along with Mutağa Dikeç’s (2005) ‘Space Politics and the Political’, which comes out of geography as a discipline, and supplements, I would argue, Löw’s understanding into a political sphere. I am using them as indicative examples of this area of theoretical analysis. The crux of Löw’s (2016) sociology of space is that space is a relational arrangement, constituted in interactions between people or people and social goods. Note that space in this conception becomes something that is produced through doing; it is contingent and transient, dependent on the actions of the people therein to have existence,

concurrent with those actions. In other words, a space only has particularity and characteristics if individuals 'within' the space are actively performing those particularities and characteristics. The moment that is stopped, the space loses those things. Due to this liminality, space creation is highly reliant on constant reproduction via everyday practice, or rather the reproduction of space takes place repetitively in everyday life, with how much an individual versus a collective action is necessary dependent on the size of the space (both in terms of size or as a concept). However, given the embedding in everyday reproduction, space creation also not only reflects inequalities present in society, but becomes a site of conflict, as well as something itself conflict occurs over.

However, this is not to say that space cannot lose such transience, and have existence beyond contingent continuous reproduction, achieving a measure of solidity and permanence. This is done when space becomes place, and occurs via a mechanism of repetition, of institutionalisation, and of systemisation. This mechanism is called placement, and is often achieved through collective action, where patterns of behaviour become routinised and fixed, both in terms of explicit action and meaning. This does not mean that place is settled space, because place can remain a space of conflict, where various spaces are constructed and fought over, coexisting or competing with each other. Dikeç (2005) mentions this around what he distinguishes between political spaces and place of politics, via institutionalisation:

Space is used to construct locally the place of the universal (that is, equality), that polemical where a wrong can be addressed and equality can be demonstrated. Politics takes place, in other words (p. 181).

And:

We could consider space as a relatively consolidated product – always in the making – of various boundary-making practices, through and/or in relation to which one could identify oneself. The boundaries may be rigid or porous ... Place – again, always in the making – implies more investment (discursive, though practices, and so on) in and inside the boundaries, and suggests a relatively more stable and more clearly defined domain of experience” (p. 183).

In other words, the liminality of space is also present in place, but there is a degree of fixativity, more investment in a more static arrangement, or perhaps more agreement on the performances therein. It is here that Dikeç (2005) locates 'politics', which he sees as the more formal, more

traditional, institutionalised practices that politics scholars have tended to focus on (see section 3.1). The political, however, he locates in the more effusive ‘space’ construction, somewhere more contested, more shifting, and notably, where the borders/boundaries are manifested.

Given the relational nature of the enactment of spaces, the importance of the boundary as an analytical concept is something Löw (2016) also comes to:

The boundary is never only at one place and it is never one space, but always already two. It is itself processual and constitutive of space. What we now see is a debordering, an increasing permeability of territorial boundaries and a reduction of the capacity for sealing off (p. xviii)

Importantly, in relation to space, place, and boundaries Löw (2016) says, “They are not simply a mirror of society, but they can also have effects (p. xviii).

What is also crucial here is that space and place are not necessarily exclusionary to each other; one does not preclude the existence the other. Space can encompass place, so a place can be overlapped by a space, or multiple spaces, and hence becomes a site of multiple contestations. The interesting analytical concept here for us as researchers is looking to the boundary constructions that function along the borders of these spaces and places, to understand where the competing and parallel manifestations of space operate, as Löw (2016) argues above. In constituting politics and political participation as both spaces and places, my participants also have to negotiate relationally (as was emphasised by both Löw and Dikeç) with each other and the social goods produced therein. Where are their tension points in constructing space collectively, and importantly where are the boundaries as they perceive them in these spaces; what work do they perceive themselves as doing to maintain those boundaries?

3.4 Whakawhanaungatanga

There is one area of bottom-up political participation online in New Zealand that has received some attention, and that is e-whakawhanaungatanga. Whanaungatanga is the Te Reo Māori term for “attaining and maintaining relationships” (O’Carroll, 2013a, p. 230). However, whanaungatanga is a lot more complex than this simple definition. Particularly, it is a process “by which people collectively socialize and engage in enhancing their relationships” (O’Carroll, 2013a, p. 231). Traditionally, this has focused on kin-based relationships (known as whakapapa-based whanaungatanga) through face-to-face communication. However, some

scholars have noted a shift in how whanaungatanga operates in the contemporary era online, given both a lack of face-to-face communication and that whanaungatanga has expanded to a wider network than just whakapapa, becoming kaupapa-based (i.e. social relationships based around a common purpose or goal) (O’Carroll, 2013a; Waitoa, 2013; Waitoa, Scheyvans, & Warren, 2015).

Note here that there is import both in attaining relationships as well as maintaining them (here particularly for the researcher’s 18–25 age demographic):

The importance of being connected to friends ensured that friendships were cared for, which was clearly a priority for this age group. Efforts for maintaining friendship relationships extended beyond merely checking profiles and included personal chatting and private messaging between friends. Unique dialogue and discussions assist individuals in getting to know their friends and what they have been up to, providing a feeling of a strong bond and relationship. This same bonding occurs in larger groups of friends on SNSs [Social Networking Services], again offering a chance to maintain and strengthen relationships through online (O’Carroll, 2013a, p.236).

Implicit in this strengthening is for such relationship work to count as whanaungatanga as it being positive (Waitoa, Scheyvans, & Warren, 2015). In other words, relationship building or maintaining that does not result in what are considered meaningful bonds, and hence ones I would argue are of a primary relationship type, something of import in this thesis. As such, we have a situation where we have a particularly New Zealand-based construction of the import of relationship work, along with the research findings in this thesis that aligns with it. Waitoa et al.’s (2015) work on the Mana political party found that political empowerment was “expressed through an increased awareness of political issues and alternative perspectives, increased knowledge of political activities, and increased participation in online and offline political actions” (p. 54) and that:

The nature of social media as a platform for networking and collaboration aligns itself with whanaungatanga aspect of tikanga Māori. Participants noted the importance of being able to connect with other likeminded people and organizations facing similar struggles and the solidarity that it created (p. 53).

O’Carroll’s (2013) model for e-whanaungatanga builds off more general models of whanaungatanga that were developed around more traditional whakapapa arrangements, but

allows for how things have shifted contemporarily with the arrival of social networks. Specifically, it is a model that looks to the different aspects of whanaungatanga and how they work in the online sphere. I shall use this model to contextualise my participants' responses.

Whakapapa

Whakapapa loosely translates to kinship networks (such as hapu, iwi) with a particular connection to place. O'Carroll (2013) argues that these aspects are occurring within social networks, with many Māori using such to whakapapa back to their historic familial and tribal roots. My participants that identified as Māori certainly spoke about such themselves; my pākehā participants, and those of other ethnic identities, did not, naturally. As such, it could not be said as a generalised position that the mediation via primary relationships that my participants all articulated for their political selves is one located in whakapapa.

Take/kaupapa

While certainly the concepts of whakapapa and kaupapa can coexist, and certainly do in many whanaungatanga arrangements, here in this model they are positioned as separate potential organising vehicles for whanaungatanga. For kaupapa the focus is on a common purpose and a sense of collectivity around such, without necessarily being connected via genealogy. O'Carroll (2013) specifies political movements as being the kind of kaupapa that can contribute to generating whanaungatanga. As such, this fits with the sense of connectedness that my participants expressed as not just being achieved through their political participation, but was crucial for them to feel fulfilled in such.

Wairuatanga

This was a bit more difficult for O'Carroll (2013), as it is mentioned in his research that he did not find explicit mention of wairuatanga amongst his research participants (where wairuatanga often refers to the spiritual connections that can be felt and made – though note, this is not associated with religion in the way Western constructions may see it). However, what he did mention was that there was a sense of connection to whānau and friends that enabled an expression of emotions and bond, one that belied the lack of physical co-presence usually associated with traditional concepts of whanaungatanga. This fits quite strongly with the level of connection my participants expressed as meaningful to them in their political behaviour,

namely, the centrality of primary relationships (and as such the emotionality that generates) in determining import.

Manaakitanga

This aspect of whanaungatanga emphasises the positivity and respect in the interactions that are constitutive of the above relationships. A principal feature here, according to O'Carroll (2013), is that relationships are maintained and nurtured, and that they are done so with respect (particularly in reference to elders). Constituting safe and comfortable spaces for interaction to occur is a part of this. This is confirmed by the findings from my participants, as their discussion around the negativity of their online political experiences showed, first, that they considered disrespect and negativity to be degrading to both their political discussion and their sense of connection, and that, second, mere disagreement was not enough to be considered negative, so long as this was done with respect. The manner of the interaction mattered to my participants.

Kotahitanga

O'Carroll (2013), in his own research, found that getting to know each other, hanging out, and socialising were referenced by his participants when talking about their relationships and how they maintained them. He also mentions that “notions and experiences of unity and solidarity were extensively discussed by kaupapa-based whānau as being indicative of whanaungatanga was practiced” (O'Carroll, 2013, p. 240). This also applies to my participants, who felt that they created and maintained a sense of community, that they were discussing things with friends, that they were collaborating ‘together’. There were often references to being part of ‘NZ Twitter’ or ‘#NZPol’ as a group identity, where being political as an end was also part of socialising and maintaining rounded relationships.

Aroha

Building on from manaakitanga is the notion of aroha, where the manner of communicating itself matters, not just that people are treated with respect, but “if interactions are not enacted in a positive, kind and compassionate way, relationships will not endure” (O'Carroll, 2013, p. 240). In other words, how you interact with people matters. Again, this is something that my participants expressed, as how they were interacted with, and importantly, how they themselves interacted with others, mattered. Some of my participants spoke on how seeing how others were communicated with or treated (talking about Twitter ‘pile-ons’ and the like) told them

things about the kind of person that was at the other end of an account, and whether they were worth interacting with personally. However, I will also say (and this similarly connects back to the concept of manaakitanga) that participants also spoke of positive communication in terms of not merely interacting directly with others, but also in things like standing up for those with less power, which may involve rudeness and assertiveness towards those who are seen as disrespecting disempowered groups. Such people were seen as worthwhile to get to know and develop relationships with, though of course this varied between participants and the exact degree of assertiveness and rudeness that might be used.

Ngā kare ā-roto

This final aspect of whanaungatanga that O'Carroll (2013) uses is one that is the expression of emotions through the practice of whanaungatanga. In effect, it is whakawhanaungatanga induced emotions. O'Carroll (2013) states that there is an overlap of this with the spiritual aspects of Wairuatanga in that such are part of the practice of whanaungatanga that generates such emotionality. What O'Carroll (2013) found in this own research was that via interaction, his participants experienced a level of emotion that engaged the participants in lieu of face-to-face interaction. In other words, the emotionality generated online was sufficient enough to generate whanaungatanga without the previously assuming necessity of physical co-presence. This connects with Zizi Papacharissi's (2012; 2014; 2016) work around affect in online communication and its centrality. It also aligns with what many of my participants spoke about in terms of their feelings of connection to one another, the primary relationship constructions they felt they were able to make, and often discussions around frustration at being discounted due to emotional reactions to political issues.

Rangatiratanga

There was additional aspect to whanaungatanga that O'Carroll (2013) mentioned had been present in previous models, but was not present in his findings, and that was rangatiratanga (which relates to such things as mana, authority, status). The lack of structure of many online spaces actively works to deconstruct a lot of traditional authority arrangements. While this can be seen as a strength for such a space (such as removing gatekeeping of minority and disenfranchised voices), for tikanga Māori and whanaungatanga, traditional inter-generational relationships and protocols, especially around kaumātua, are considered quite central and important, showing respect for customary practices. O'Carroll (2013) locates this firmly within

the more traditional whakapapa-based constructions of whanuangatanga, rather than the kaupapa-based one he frames his online research and model around. Further, he also sees a decentring of rangatiratanga as providing for possibly alternative Māori leadership options to emerge. However, with that said, he does acknowledge that without these traditional forms of authority, there are considerable negative implications for whanuangatanga, given the subsequent vulnerabilities that destabilisation of such traditional structures can result in.

Chapter 4

Methodology

Cyberspace alters the temporal, spatial, and sensory components of human interaction, thereby challenging traditional ethical definitions and calling into question some basic assumptions about identity and one's right to keep aspects of it confidential (Suler, 2000).

In the above quote Suler argues that as an environment for social research the Internet challenges traditional ethical definitions when it comes to research methodologies. Other online researchers have also noted that the online "is a social arena where conventional modes of interaction are turned on their head" (Rule, 1999) and that interaction therein "transforms the way people relate to one another" (Fernback, 1998). While hyperbolic, it does reveal that attention to context in methodology matters, and that the online context may complicate matters

Hence, since a research methodology derives out of both a research question as well as the context of the research, I would contend that a focus on the online could affect how the research is conducted, as Suler contends. However, the particularities of online research do not lie in any construction of it as a 'new' research environment. One needs to "treat Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces ... that they may transform but they cannot escape into a self-enclosed cyberian apartness" (Miller & Slater, 2000). To argue otherwise would be to create a false dichotomy between the offline and online worlds, a dichotomy that, if placed in such a crucial space as within the methodological assumptions, could lead to it being repeated in the researcher's conceptualisations of the worlds of their participants. My participants are present both offline and online, and my ethics and methodology must take this into consideration. This chapter will include this attention to the online context throughout.

Contextualising the research conducted, as has been covered in the prior chapters, research into online political participation has traditionally and principally been quantitative, with measures that have been derived from conventional understandings of offline politics. Or, specifically in regard to Twitter, the method would often involve the collection of large numbers of tweets, concentrated around hashtags, that would be analysed on a large scale for specific word use, or instances of retweets and likes for network analysis. Further, in those instances when a more qualitative research methodology has been undertaken, such as case studies of electioneering, the focus has been on the traditional understandings of the political sphere (see section 2.2 for

a discussion of this), such as on political parties and politicians. This research then is a divergence from these, both in methodology and in focus, in that it takes a bottom-up citizen-focused approach to what counts as political participation, in that the definition of such comes from the participants themselves. Further, the research methodology required to do this is one of interviews and qualitative analysis thereof, as analysis solely of what is presented and/or performed online would miss the conceptual constructions of political participation around this context.

This chapter will initially look to the general research design and scope for this proposal. It will then turn to cover how the interviews have been conducted, how participants were garnered, and the analytical method taken to the interviews, with an in-depth of discussion of narrative analysis, the framework I used in this analysis. Finally, I shall conclude by looking at the contributions intended for this research, what the limitations are, and a discussion of the ethics involved in this research.

4.1 General Research Design

The research here deals with participant conceptualisations and aims to develop additions to understandings in this field, both internationally and in New Zealand. The main purpose of this study is to investigate the constructions of political participation made by women in New Zealand, particularly on the social media platform of Twitter. The research question here thus involves primarily ‘how’ and ‘why’ aspects, and further did not presume what the theoretical scope of responses that my participants provided could be. As such, a qualitative research approach with an interview focus was used for this study.

4.2 Scope

The participants, and target population, for this research had the following characteristics/sampling-constraints:

- Identify as women
- Reside in New Zealand
- Use Twitter

Please note that it is not the intent of this research to have the participants be a representative sample of women residing in New Zealand who use Twitter. Rather, these are the characteristics

of those I interviewed. The reasoning behind these characteristics were that (as from section 2.3) women experience political involvement online in ways that are quite different from that of men, and that I restricted this research to a New Zealand context (particularly to address the empirical gap in this research area, as identified in Chapter 2), and restricted to Twitter as an online space (reasoning for the restriction is that, while not technologically deterministic, as per sections 2.1 and 2.2 the specificities of an online platform do interact with the wider social forces that a user may be imbedded in). Furthermore, Twitter was used as a space from which to garner participants. If we are to include conceptions of political participation done in both online and offline contexts in this research, then including those who do have an online presence is crucial. Please also note that by “identify as women” above, the intent was “self-identified” women (i.e. women that identify themselves as women, as was mentioned in section 1.4).

It was my expectation in this research that the participants would include women from a range of ethnicities, as well as locations, and this was achieved through a selective snowball sample, as discussed later in this chapter. Also, while established research has shown social media users do tend to skew younger and more affluent (Baltar & Brunet, 2012), I also included a range of ages and socio-economic backgrounds.

I excluded both politicians and political journalists from this research, as the political constructions that they perform skew to the requirements of their professions, not to their personal constructions. I had initially considered the position of civil/public servants and concluded at the time that such people would tend to self-select out of political discussion in social media due to potential conflicts of interest with their positions. However, as particularly so with the likes of NGO representatives, they do exist in a ‘grey’ zone, where the traditionally understood division between their politics as professional versus their politics as personal are more blurred. As discussed in the findings and discussions chapters, it turned out that interviews by public servants did occur, and they provided fruitful material on constructing and negotiating boundaries between different political spaces.

4.3 Fieldwork and Interviews

As both an academic researcher and in a personal role I have had considerable experience in online communities, particularly those with a more political bent. I began being involved in online communities in 1994 (email mailing lists and newsgroups), beginning my research

career in this area in 1999 as part of my Honours research, which evolved into my Master's, using an ethnographic approach to an online community, combining online interviews, participant observation, and qualitative surveys. On a personal level I was involved in political blogging in the US in the 2000s, which shifted to Twitter as I returned to New Zealand in 2010. I have maintained a considerable presence in 'New Zealand Political Twitter' (a reference to those circles within Twitter that focus both on New Zealand and politics, often, though not exclusively, referred to with the hashtag #nzpol) over this period. As such I was confident my contacts/followers within these circles would allow me to identify, negotiate with, and collect sufficient participants to provide me with the interview data required. This was borne out.

I undertook 25 long-form in-depth interviews (sometimes referred to as 'narrative interviews' (Chase, 2005), or unstructured interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2005)) where the interview questions are more 'prompt' type questions, that were more aimed at getting my participants started in talking about an area of focus (such as participation, politics, themselves as women and/or New Zealanders on Twitter, amongst others for instance) rather than having an expectation of a specific answer to that question. The goal behind this technique is to be able to guide participants in talking about experiences, of having them explain their understandings, and particularly of 'storytelling' (Chase, 2005) – why this is pertinent is covered in section 4.5 below. In this interview technique, the 'what' of an interview answer matters less than the 'how' of an interview answer (Chase, 2005). It also meant I was able leave my investigation open to the discovery of reasoning and prioritisations that I may have not positioned theoretically prior to conducting the interviews. This was repeatedly borne out through the identification of such things as primary relationships, whakawhanaungatanga, and the construction of social media 'echo chambers'.

The interviews themselves were conducted in a two-stage process. An initial couple of pilot interviews (within a context of a total interview count of 25 interviews) were conducted with the first set of prompt questions to determine the success of such things as the questions themselves, the interview length, how follow-up questions could be revised and used, the use of technology, and just a general sense of what was working and what was not. This review was performed in conjunction with my supervisor, after which the second, and primary, stage began after calibration considering the findings from the first pilot stage. Largely, the experience from the first few interviews was positive, and what was added was follow-up

prompt questions based on interesting lines of inquiry that were beginning to be identified from the earlier interviews.

Participant recruitment was conducted through a selective or purposeful snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961) technique, though when applied to online social networks it tends to be called ‘virtual snowball sampling’ (Baltar & Brunet, 2012). The advantage of this technique here is that such sampling is useful for hidden populations that can otherwise be difficult to access. Traditionally hidden populations have been those that also involved a degree of social stigma, such as drug users or sex workers, but it can also provide access to those populations that can be difficult to access outside of the networks they inhabit, like Twitter users. It is also a research method that can be used to access professional networks. Nevertheless, the key criterion is that it works in research situations where participants are likely to know others who share in the characteristics that make them eligible for inclusion in the research in the first place. I did, thanks to my knowledge of NZ Political Twitter, and consistent with a snowball sampling methodology, approach certain key participants within NZ Political Twitter, asking them to participate, but also to recommend a list of others who they thought would be useful to interview. A select number from such lists were then interviewed and also asked to recommend a list of others. Through this approach I gathered a sufficient number and range of participants.

However, one of the critiques of snowball sampling is that it can be subject to biases, and that it can easily lead to non-representative samples. The latter concern, while valid for the technique, is not problematic for this study. My intention in this research was not to provide a representative sample, but rather to look to what my participants themselves do, what do these women do, not to make generalisations to the wider population, but nonetheless do so with a diverse sample. The contributions I have developed from this research can then be tested more widely as required later. The former concern, though, does require a measure of addressing. The biases in snowball sampling arise from the core mechanism it employs; namely, the use of people’s networks (either social or else what), which are known to have high degrees of homogeneity; that is, the people a person knows tend to be the same as them. While this is a strength of the technique (as above, it does make it considerably easier as a researcher to access those participants with the characteristics one requires), it can also be a weakness, as it can introduce thematic patterns that may be more a product of an in-group than anything possibly indicative. To combat this possibility, I applied a purposeful/selective lens to the snowballing

from my participants. Again, this was not to attempt to achieve representativeness of a sample, but rather to increase the range, or breadth, of experiences in my sample.

To this end, I paid attention to the demographic characteristics of my participants; for instance, how Pākehā is my sample, what is their economic situation, where are they located. I considered at the time, that if social location was as important as the theorists contend (see sections 2.1, 2.2, and Chapter 3) then having a range of participants would be important. This was strongly borne out in my research. Furthermore, the list allowed me to maintain a certain degree of anonymity between previous interviewees and those they recommended. For while interviewees would know who they recommended as a list, they would not know who of that list I did end up selecting. Furthermore, for a similar reason, I have also decided not to declare the demographic information about each individual participant, for given the small size of New Zealand this can result in my participants being identified (for much the same reasons as discussed in Chapters 8 and 9). My participants included Māori, Pacifica, Pākehā, and Asian. They were from a range of locations around New Zealand, though they did predominate in the main centres: Auckland, Christchurch, Dunedin, and of course Wellington. Their ages ranged from their 20s to their 50s, and their socio-economic backgrounds varied from those who identified as working class and those on a benefit, through to those in much higher income bands. There were 10 from Wellington, four from Auckland, four from Dunedin, four from Christchurch, and the rest were spread across regional areas. There were two who identified as Pacifica, six who identified as Māori, three who identified as Asian, and the remainder identified as either Pākehā or considered themselves from other minority ethnicities. A majority of those who were from Wellington made it known that they either were public servants or had been public servants at some time in the past. Given the nature of online demographics, the majority of my participants came from more affluent backgrounds, but most identified as middle class, and a minority identified as working class. Education levels tended to be higher, with a small majority having post-graduate degrees.

In the course of the research I decided not to retrieve individual tweets from my participants as part of my research. In part because my research was into the narrative constructions of politics implicit in the interviews, the explicit acontextual language in tweets was less contributive. I also concluded that the material I was getting from the interviews did not require tweets to further the discussion conducted. But also, the particularity of public online spaces makes informed consent a problematic issue. Offline, the recording of publicly assessable material is

considered unproblematic, providing the source is cited. However, online this is not always the case. Being ‘publicly assessable’ is a matter of degree online, and is not, I would argue, a useful ethical measure. For example, a public Twitter post can be seen as within the public domain, in the same way that a newspaper archive is offline. However, more often than not, this perception is not what is actually intended (Reid, 1996). There is a degree of ‘Perceived Privacy’ (King, 1996) about postings there, or in other words, a sense that the conversation being had, however technically public, is intended for the perceived audience (something discussed in section 1 of Chapter 2) that a participant feels they are interacting with. Regardless of actual publicness, taking such tweets without permission can be perceived by the participant as harmful to themselves.

The ‘perceived privacy’ of a forum, is, for this reason, a better ethical measure than the forum’s degree of public accessibility, because what occurs as perceived privacy increases is that devaluation of disclosure arises (Reid, 1996). This is the feeling that disclosing personal information about oneself is less of an issue in a particular setting, and hence one can post extremely personal disclosures without intentionally placing it for all the (virtual) world to see (and research). Therefore, as researcher, one must determine the intention behind a post, and ask permission to use a quote. This, I feel, is the only practical way to cover your ethical ‘bases’ online. Given that it was determined that collecting tweets would not contribute to my research, and the above ethical concerns, the decision was made to not collect such.

4.4 Analysing Interview Data

The interviews were transcribed by a third-party private transcribing company in order to save time and effort, so that more of such could be applied to the analysis. The interviews were coded with a reiterative thematic coding method using NVIVO software. Adapting King and Horrocks’s (2010) method of multi-stage coding, an initial stage involved reading and re-reading the transcripts, creating initial descriptive coding themes, as well as themes that were noted during the interviews themselves. This began with the first interviews, and continued throughout the interview timetable, where later interviews provided additional coding themes that required me to revisit earlier transcripts (please note that the coding themes pulled from the analytical understanding were provided by Narrative Analysis, as covered in section 4.5, below). The second stage involved continuing this pattern identification between codes, but also the beginnings of grouping these codes to identify overarching themes across the codes, via ‘childing’ the codes to those overarching ‘parent’ codes. The third stage then involved

taking those coding groups and solidifying those overarching themes in order to develop a framework for this thesis, but also then relating them back to the theoretical orientations outlined in sections 2.1, 2.2 and Chapter 3, as well as the previous empirical work outlined in the rest of Chapter 2, to place it in context theoretically and empirically, providing the basis for the discussion chapter, Chapter 8.

Please note that this latter contextualisation did involve additional theoretical areas that emerged from the interviews but were not covered in the original research proposal. This then required location of these additional themes within the literature for that theoretical area. Presentation of the emergent patterns and the potential theoretical framework in this thesis involved their description as well as the use of direct quotes from interviews, to better elucidate the identified minor and major themes above with examples/evidence. One of the major requirements of this method of reiterative thematic coding is that the researcher goes beyond the surface level meanings of interview data, to explore the deeper systems of meaning that participants are evoking with their language. This is discussed in the following section (4.5) on the theoretical analysis framework that I used.

The four findings chapters (5-8), as outlined in section 1.5 of this thesis, are the four major themes that were derived from this research. They were identified through the above reiterative coding techniques, but also through grounding those codes in negotiation with the existing literature. The first findings chapter is rooted in what the central salience-giving narrative is for my participants when it comes to constructing what counts for them as political participation, and why. It is situated as the key organising concept around which the other themes and sub-themes flow for my participants, as well as feeding into the current literature around political participation forms (and, particularly, the historical change of such) via determining what drives such. The second findings chapter builds upon that initial chapter, by then looking to the political participation behaviours that result from the above key organising concept, and what the narratives are that connect between them and the above. Given so much of the literature around political participation is on the forms of that participation, comparing such to how my participants constructed it was necessary, not in the least because of the predominance of behaviour construction in their interviews. As stated in section 1.5, narrowing the focus from general political participation behaviours to specifically online forms of such was readily apparent due to the centrality of such in my research question, the focus on such in my literature review as a result of that research question, and also how much what my participants did online

politically was talked about in their interviews. This was a readily apparent narrative grouping, not least because of it addressing the question of impact that was raised by the work of Boullaine. Finally, again given both the research question and resulting literature review, how my participants constructed New Zealand as a space of political participation, both offline and online is examined. This was particularly the case due to the gap in the literature addressing this from a bottom-up approach to political participation.

4.5 Narrative Analysis

In terms of a theoretical framework for the above analysis, I am using one of narrative analysis, which looks to the social construction of meaning through the building of narrative systems of understanding. This section outlines this as a framework for analysis. Contemporary theoretical approaches to the work of Berger and Luckmann and Goffman have refined and developed social constructionism (as discussed above) to go into the detail of how individuals do this construction, how they negotiate power differentials, and how researchers might use this. In this section I will go over one such approach, which I would argue is well suited to analysing online spaces, and how individuals might conceptualise political engagement therein: narrative analysis. I will cover the way in which narrative is understood in this theoretical framework, and how one can use this to understand the mechanics of how reality is constructed in listening to how one's participants use and negotiate these narratives. Finally, I shall look at how this theoretical framework particularly works around contemporary understandings of political participation online, in terms of the personalisation/individualisation of politics, and networked organising.

As Berger and Luckmann contend, meanings are our interpretations of the worlds we inhabit. However, they are never fixed but emerge out of “a ceaselessly changing stream of interaction between producers [of stories] and readers [of stories] in shifting contexts” (Plummer, 1995, p. 22). However, there are only certain accepted, or legitimate, ways for our interpretations to fit together. These ways are public narratives, or the socially legitimated and intelligible stories. Our specific stories about particular everyday experiences must in some core respects coincide with these narratives, because these generic narratives are the tools we use to make sense of things. Even stories about new experiences and identities usually have some relationship to these narratives:

An innovative structure – or a deviant definition – lives a double life, for it has grown out of a struggle with a dominant structure which continues to shape it, even cannibalise it. Counter-discourse does not arise as a pre autonomous radical language embodying the purity of a new politics. Rather it arises from within the dominant discourse and learns to inhabit it from the inside out (Treichler, 1990, p. 132).

Thus, we come to the Internet – a supposedly new environment, one where new discourses are said to exist, new ways of being are possible, new worlds are constructed. Or so the hype tells us (Dietrich, 1997). What are in fact created are worlds online that are remarkably similar to our own worlds offline, but offer possibilities. Like offline worlds, online worlds require stories to make sense of it all, and the stories we use are the ones with which we are familiar. Much more than offline worlds, however, online worlds are worlds where “the only world available is what members have chosen to describe” (Kolko, 1995, p. 107), places where “words fashion the sum total of the world that exists” (p. 108).

As they do in offline worlds, people construct systems of meaning for themselves in online worlds through the stories they communicate in these spaces. This is why studying the stories that are used and played with online is so important; stories are online worlds. The interaction that takes place online is done through stories, or rather the wider cultural narratives that surround gender, race, and so on, including politics. While this at first does not appear to differ from the use of narrative offline, the social worlds constructed in online textually constructed worlds consist entirely of these narratives; the written word openly rules here in a way it could never do offline. This is not to say that the contemporary online political world is not one that involves images, sound, video, and so on, but rather it is to acknowledge that text, particularly in a space like Twitter, dominates over all other forms of communication. In order for the online world to be intelligible, the understood, taken-for-granted, narrative reality of the offline is extended online. This, in essence, is the reason why tracing and identifying narratives is such an important technique when researching online social worlds. Papacharissi (2016) particularly makes mention of the centrality of storytelling to online spaces in references to her work on the production of affect in online politics, as well as boyd’s work on networked publics:

“the storytelling structures of feeling supported and sustained by spreadable technologies afford texture, tonality, discursivity, and narrative modality to networked and affective publics” (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 320).

But how does one trace these narratives? What tools does one apply? Some sociologists advocate attention to construction through discourse and hence focus on “the social role of stories” (Plummer, 1995, p. 19). They argue that “language creates us but is also created by us” (Griffiths, 1995, p. 13), and suggest that “people construct identities ... by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories” (Somers & Gibson, 1994, p. 38). In other words, how an individual conceptualises what they do online is interdependent on how they talk about themselves in that conceptualisation. Margaret Somers, in particular, attends to this ontological focus rather than representational ‘narrativity’ in her discussions.

Somers (1992) defines ontological narratives as the stories that social actors use to make sense of their lives in order to guide action. However, we use these narratives to define who we are, not just to know what to do. It is very useful to conceive of a narrative as an ontological performance that in itself constitutes the online actor. To do otherwise would to a certain extent deny the ‘realities’ that actors construct online, which is important in researching the conceptualisations of political participation online that may be different from traditional offline political engagement forms; in other words, these individuals having agency. This also fits above with the work of Bennett (2012) on networked political enactments contemporarily, where individuals online move between different political organisations/expressions intentionally, picking and choosing amongst those that features as aspects of self.

Somers (1992) locates ontological narrativity as conceptually foundational to agency and argues that:

...if we want to explain – that is, to know, to make sense of, to account for, perhaps even to predict anything about the practices of social and historical actors, their collective actions, their modes and meanings of institution-building, and their apparent incoherencies – we must first recognize the place of ontological narratives in social life (p. 603).

Actors will, of course, adjust stories to fit themselves and hence alter ‘reality’ to fit their stories; they are not simply passive receptors for the narrative. One must not, however, ignore the wider webs of narrative in which they are located. Wider webs of stories are what Somers (1992) refers to as ‘public narratives’. They are those narratives attached to ‘publics’, or those structural formations larger than the individual, no matter how local or global, micro or macro. Public narratives are diverse; they range from the narratives of family to those of the workplace,

church, government, and nation. However, to see them as separate from ontological narratives is to ignore the networked nature of such narratives. While it could be said that ontological narratives deal primarily with the identity work of individuals, the placement of oneself within wider public narratives also impacts on one's identity.

There are questions, of course, regarding narratives, such as how does a narrative come into being? How do certain stories come to be articulated, and others neglected? If narratives are constructed out of the shifting particularities of patterns of interaction and setting, then what facilitates the development of new narratives? Is it simply a matter of a realignment of previously possible configurations, or do the possibilities for a new narrative occur when a change in another alignment allows for its creation? What happens when a completely new conceptualisation occurs, not allowed for by the current configuration? These questions are particularly pertinent when asking how, or even if, individuals are creating new or alternative forms of political engagement online.

Plummer (1995) explores a set of issues related to the contexts in which certain stories can be told and asks:

Which kinds of narratives work to empower people and which degrade, control and dominate? ... What strategies enable stories to be told, how are spaces created for them, and how are voices silenced? How do stories feed into the wider networks of routine power? (p. 29).

Plummer (1995) argues that for a story to get heard there needs to be a community to listen to the story. The impact of the story will also depend on the power that community has in society. He argues that:

For narratives to flourish, there must be a community to hear, that for communities to hear, there must be stories which weave together their history, their identity, their politics" (p. 87).

In fact, there is a circular dialectic between stories and social networks, where the social network provides both the understandings and the stories that individuals draw upon to explain their world. These stories are then articulated by people in the social network, which reinforces the stories and strengthens the social network. This allows others to gain access to those stories. However, according to Plummer (1995), these stories are articulated only within pre-existing

social worlds, so those that fit within these have more credence. These are tales concerned with establishing a sense of who one ‘really’ is – a consistent, integrated sense of self.

Davies and Harre (1990) address the question of how an ‘actor’ locates themselves, or is located, within a narrative. They introduce the concept of ‘positioning’ (Davies & Harre, 1990) as a tool to determine the process of this locating and describe it as:

...The discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines. There can be interactive positioning in which what one person says positions another. And there can be reflexive positioning in which one positions oneself. However, it would be a mistake to assume that, in either case, positioning is necessarily intentional. One lives one’s life in terms of one’s ongoing produced self, whoever might be responsible for its production” (p. 48).

According to this conceptualisation, the narratives of conversants do not have to be complementary in order to position themselves or be positioned. In order to maintain a continuous and coherent narrative, ‘actors’ may position each other to sustain that narrative, and this process involves shifting the interacting narratives to fit each other, because we are knowledgeable about available story lines even though we may not use them to construct ourselves in a particular interaction. This again introduces power differentials into the equation, something core to intersectionality theory. Conversely, a conversation can be univocal, but only if the actors adopt complementary subject positions that are organised around a shared interpretation of the relevant narrative locations. Conformity, or lack thereof, is entirely dependent on the understandings that are employed, and the power relations within which that the interactants are located. The understandings of political engagement that my participants articulate may very be ones that they have had to negotiate and argue for, carving out niches that are very tightly related to who they are.

Hence, from the above, I would argue that narrative analysis is an effective fit for tracing the conceptualisations of political participation online that my participants articulate, without using a priori assumptions on what those might be, while still fitting the context in which they are being articulated. It does this both through acknowledging the storied, negotiated, and communal nature of online spaces, as well as aligning with contemporary understandings of how politics is being organised online through the networked nature of individual identities:

the personalisation of politics. If political engagement in a social media informed world is done through shifting (and hence temporary) alignments of individual identification, then tracing the construction of those identifications necessitates a theoretical framework that follows how those identifications may be contested negotiations of both new and traditional conceptualisations of political engagement, and the wider understandings that are pulled in with them. Further, narrative analysis fits with intersectionality theory as a framework for understanding networked political articulations, because it allows for individual contextualisations of the links between political participations of differing saliences. If intersectionality theory requires this tracing of individual political importances and negotiations, then narrative analysis provides such a framework for analysis because it not only allows for individual crafting of stories, but of the wider contextualisations of those stories, and how those stories interact. Further, this collaborative construction of meaning and political structures fits in with a sociology of space construction of how politics and political behaviour can be conceptualised as an act in itself.

4.6 Ethical Implications

The quote this chapter begins with suggests a re-evaluation of research methods in the light of the research milieu online, and I would argue this also pertains to the ethics of one's research. This is not to say that other research environments do not require researchers to re-evaluate the ethics of research strategies, nor does it mean that the Internet is a wholly new environment. Certainly, the ethical awareness required of all social researchers must continue to be applied online. But, while offline research techniques and ethical concerns are certainly applicable online, researchers must be aware that online research may have different consequences, ethically and practically, from offline research.

For instance, it is not sufficient to solicit and receive informed consent from an individual and then report the results in such a way that it provides sufficient contextual information to identify the individual (King, 1996). This is something I have considered above in terms of divulging demographic information particular to my individual participants. One must not only remove any references to the identity of the author, but one must also decide whether the use of a post could potentially cause harm to the participant. Devaluation of disclosure may cause a participant to reply with minimising language to your search for consent; that is, not fully appreciating the depth and consequences of their disclosure. This is not to say that one, as a

researcher, must take a paternalistic attitude to one's participants, but rather that one must keep this devaluation in mind when conducting social research online.

As such, in addition to the standard requirement that formal ethical approval was obtained from the Human Ethics Committee (HEC) prior to any fieldwork being conducted, pseudonyms were used for all my participants, namely a number (from #1 through #25) so the contributions from particular participants can be tracked throughout the thesis, and narrative themes can be shown to be derived from the contributions of multiple participants. Ethical research online involves not just a commitment to the participants in one's research, but also to the network in which they are involved. Harm to that network in an online space can also result in secondary effects, harming others in that network.

Further, all information regarding my participants was stored confidentially, interviews and tweets were stored in encrypted cloud drives, and no information was revealed on which recommended participants were chosen from an interviewee to end up becoming participants, or in reverse back to the recommending individual. A transcribing confidentiality agreement was signed by all contributing transcribers. Moreover, all information obtained during this research was accessed only by myself and my supervisors, being used solely for academic purposes.

Finally, given that some of my participants did identify as Māori, and with consideration to the Treaty of Waitangi, it is important to touch on the ethical framework of tikanga Māori and its underpinning in mātauranga Māori. Without delving too deeply into tikanga, the four primary references of such in a research ethics context involve whakapapa (relationships), tika (research design), manaakitanga (cultural and social responsibility), and mana (justice and equity) (Pūtaiora Writing Group, 2010). Ethically, I address these through the previously mentioned inclusion of concern for the social network my participants are embedded in and through a research design that centres the articulations of their experiences.

Chapter 5

Primary Relationships: Findings 1

The four findings chapters (5-8) that follow here are grouped by four major themes, which I am terming ‘Primary Relationships’, ‘Everyday Politics’, ‘Being Online’, and ‘New Zealand’. As mentioned previously in Chapter 1 of this thesis, these chapters are written as progressive constructions of meaning around these four central themes of political participation construction, with the narrative meaning-building creating a framework of understanding. The four chapters cover the four major emergent themes from this research, respectively the major orientating conceptual narrative for my participants as to what resonates for their political participation; what their political behaviour actually manifests as; how politics and being political manifests online; and concluding with how my participants constructed what might be a New Zealand form of politics. Each findings chapter is organised with progressive sub-themes to each major theme, and each sub-theme builds upon the previous one to provide a framework construction for that major theme. This is why Narrative Analysis and Social Constructionism feature so centrally throughout this thesis as theoretical frameworks; these findings chapters, as noted above, provide a constructed ‘story’ of meaning, explaining how the different interdependent parts of each theme connect together to provide a system of understanding that results in a framework for behaviour. The findings chapters are laid out as an initial layer of analysis to trace these narrative constructions. Note that the quoting of interview snippets throughout these four chapters is verbatim and does include coarse language as well as repeated words and pauses, save where marked.

This chapter, describing the theme of Primary Relationships, starts out with how my participants constructed their interactions with political figures, then moves on to how other individuals are conceptualised politically at the personal level in terms of interactions, political positions, and so on. The next section looks to the centrality of values in forming primary relationships in a political sense, moving on to how such primary relationship centrality includes a large amount of emotionality, and how this is located in the everyday and social location. Finally, it goes on to the ramifications of this for what counts as engagement.

5.1 Political Figures and Political Fulfilment

My participants repeated more often than not the narrative construction that unless there was emotive fulfilment for them in how they behaved politically, then they would not find themselves fully engaged in what they were doing, or were less likely to return to it, or see it

as something substantive and contributive. Part of this was how they interacted with other political individuals (whether that be politicians, activists, other citizens, and so on – this lack of distinction between such is something I shall touch on later), and particularly the relationship they had with these individuals. Namely, the relationship type was one of being a ‘Primary’ relationship, rather than the more traditional ‘Secondary’ relationship.

These are ideal types, a concept from Sociology, that differentiate between the nature of a relationship (particularly as it pertains to interaction) between two members of a society. A ‘Secondary Relationship’ is one where the individuals interact with each other on the basis of the roles they occupy in society, that is, ‘what’ they are. Often this occurs around occupational types, such as a coffee barista and a customer, but can involve other such things as status and authoritative position within a society or subgroup. ‘Primary relationships’ however, focus on ‘who’ the individual is, their particularities, their emotionality, the meaning those two individuals have for one another.

Political engagements gained import for my participants through interactions that involved ‘knowing’ people. They got involved in people’s lives, got to know them, and political discussions were had because of understanding the person behind the words, the meaning that they had for each other. Primary relationships were the vehicle through which import was determined, context was delivered, and salience was able to be contextualised. Not knowing who a person is meant to my participants that the context of what was being said was lost. They could not orientate the person to determine why or how they might be making the argument they were, or why they were involved in what they were, or from what they were drawing statements of experience.

Primary Relationships allowed for far more meaning and fulfilment to be derived by my participants, and they would comment when they felt this was being lost or had not been sufficiently gained. Notably, this also applied to politicians, where my participants considered political engagements with them more meaningful in an online situation if a) the politician themselves was responding rather than an assistant, b) there was a genuine sense that two-way disclosure was occurring, and c) the online platform was being used as more than a broadcast medium. In other words, what my participants were searching for with politicians was interactions with them as individuals, not as politicians per se. They wanted to know who politicians were, what they were like to interact with, what their personal values and backgrounds were, and how that then informed what they were advocating for. It actually

contributed to better conversations, according to some participants, as they would find you more accessible via social media than in formal structured spaces where secondary relationships were seen as more salient, and constraining, such as this from participant #01:

If you are in a senior position, for example in Government, it is actually much easier to have a conversation with you and access you via social media than in the physical structures of a policy setting.

Though, this is not just a matter of a more positive sense of connection, my participants also mentioned that even when it was someone they opposed politically, or saw as distasteful, being able to know who that politician was personally was seen as valuable.

We are in this amazing position where even the people who are not in any way near where I stand politically ... so Judith freaking Collins – bah! A terrifying woman. Strong as hell and you have to kind of admire that, but a terrifying woman. I can see her engaging, as far as I can tell, with no filter. Like she might be thinking about it politically and she might be getting advice, she might even have someone doing the typing for her, but it feels like a much more personal engagement.

So, for participant #03 above, even if they are not personally engaging themselves with an individual politician, the fact that that they are witnessing personal engagement was seen as beneficial. She (the participant) described such as “an amazing position” to be in. This concept of listening to politics as being contributive to politics being valuable is something I shall come back to later. However, that is not to say that my participants do not also value actual reciprocal engagement, as again from participant #03:

But if I say to Chloe Swarbrick ‘Thank you very much for such an impressive and eloquent speech ...’ it is actually probable that she will come back and say ‘Thank you for your support, that is really nice to hear’. And I will go ‘Holy crap! ... I have access to these people that I think are amazing So, I can actually go around and I can go ‘Hey, here is a thing I think and they might actually go ‘thank you’. That is really, really cool to see.

Getting to a deeper level, in addition to a sense of enjoyment, my participants felt they could not connect to politics if it were not coming from the personal level, especially if that involved a politician:

Unless I'm interacting with [politicians] on a personal level, I just don't really interact with their politics, cause, I don't know, it just opens you up to so much stuff, and because even, I don't know, I just don't know if it's worth it.

What this participant (#05) went on to talk about was, given the emotionality and embeddedness of politics, without the personal relationship to a politician (that is, knowing them at an individual level), the emotional labour required was not seen as worth the trade-off for a political participation gain. Having the primary relationship, however, meant that the engagement was seen as worthwhile, as able to be entered into, in ways that, without such, the politics of the situation would be avoided, or at the least more taxing to them.

Moreover, the sense of personal connection mattered. More so than two-way engagement, participants talked about that if they had a sense that the politician was actually aware of who they were themselves as individuals, if the politicians recognised their particularity, that mattered considerably. In other words, what my participants felt was that at one level they wanted to know the politician as an individual, but when they were aware that the politician might also see them as such too, rather than occupying a secondary relationship role as 'citizen' or 'voter' or 'constituent', this was seen as political fulfilment at a much higher level.

Why this was important was that they saw their relationship to a politician as being about representation of their own values, about the things they cared about, and so having a primary relationship with a politician was seen as a vehicle towards achieving this. It was something a secondary relationship could not achieve for them, such as this from participant #07:

When someone is like the mayor and I have never talked to them, I don't feel like they represent me as part of their community. I still vote for people, but it is not ... I need more tangible things than that.

For my participants, this was not merely about having two-way engagement with politicians, nor was it about positive reinforcement from those politicians they liked. Rather, it was being seen as individuals by those with political power, and further seeing others being also similarly positioned by those same people. It is the latter that particularly stands out as indicative of the context being constructed for enacting politics with politicians here by my participants. Namely, that politics was seen as meaningful when it was not merely their own political need for engagement was being satisfied, but rather they could see that the wider environment was one where this was occurring for others too.

Further, as in the quote immediately above, getting to know politicians as individuals also provided a sense of context where political representation was seen to be better enacted for them. To this point from participant #07:

I would definitely look for their issues obviously and that is the closest thing. Of course, always when you are voting for somebody – a Prime Minister or whatever – you want to make sure that they represent things that you care about, but it is also ability. As tacky as that is, it is like would I trust that person if I knew them to watch my dog or whatever, would they be someone that I would trust with responsibilities?

In other words, it is not the more colloquial ‘someone I would have a beer with’ test that is often bandied around as a phrase, but rather it is about trust and this sense of representation. Moreover, what is not directly referenced here but underlies the quote, is the sense of the political institutions as valued, as worthy of this level of consideration. If this participant did not care about political institutions like Parliament, then the comparison to the value of a pet would not make sense, for all that my participant described such a comparison as ‘tacky’.

This is continued in other participants’ words. While they all acknowledged that policies and parties mattered, the nature of the people that constituted such were crucial too, that is, their values, something I shall mention more in the section below:

I think that’s an important thing to remember about the parties that you’re voting for, they’re made up of people and the people are a really important part of what’s going to happen in the government.

This example from participant #09 of an emphasis on organisational members as individuals is again focusing away from social or professional roles in society to the particularity of them as individuals. Furthermore, how these politicians (as individuals) behaved online was seen as a part of such; as echoed by participant #11:

I can tweet to an MP and expect a response which is kind of amazingly bizarre. I think definitely how they behave, how our politicians behave on Twitter has an impact outside of Twitter and I would imagine that all of them are using Twitter as a way of gaining social insight.

This sense of behaviour online having impacts outside of merely the online, particularly as it pertains to not just what is being discussed, but rather how they discuss matters, reflects this point of this sense of politicians as individuals. Or, as discussed earlier in this section, it is the fact that a primary relationship exists (whether that be in the direct sense, or rather in a wider contextual sense of knowledge of them as individuals).

This sense of political figures as individuals is articulated through a lens of ‘realness’, or the sense that the political figure is presenting a self without artifice (or at least not too much artifice):

I think if they actually listened to people they would find that people would rather have an actually opinionated Prime Minister rather than have someone who can just say something that means nothing. Listen to people asking to you to be genuine. So, first and foremost listen, but also these people want you to be genuine (participant #11).

So, not only do you have a call for being ‘real’ or ‘genuine’, but also part of such is listening to people, or at least a sense by this participant that the political figure is listening. This, according to my participants, is part of the strength of online spaces, in that it forces a degree of authenticity, as claimed by participant #18:

I think the biggest thing that people misunderstand about Twitter is that you could, you can trick it you know that you can be something you’re not and it’s really obvious. I don’t know why that is it might be the, you know, the short format or the ... I don’t know, but yeah it’s really clear when someone’s being inauthentic.

There was quite a bit of criticism for politicians who used their online profiles in a manner that was seen as inauthentic or less genuine, particularly if it was as a one-way broadcast, or if they had someone else typing their posts:

I think you know, like even if the tweets are managed by someone else, then I think just being authentic about it and saying ‘hey, like you know tweets managed by blah, blah, blah’ (participant #21).

This perception of a politician not being relatable if they did not at least write some of their social media posts themselves, or, worse yet, did not engage in two-way conversation, was a thread that wove through all my participants’ interviews. Being broadcast to, rather than being

engaged with, was a consistent narrative throughout the interviews as something my participants found unfulfilling, which, given the priority that primary relationships had in constructing a political context that was meaningful for them, is also a coherent part of such. Given this import, this needs to be carefully considered in the policy around political engagement.

5.2 Personal Interaction

This focus on primary relationships also applied to interactions with other individuals online, that is, those who did not occupy traditionally identifiable political roles (often described as ‘normal people’ by participants). Being able to ‘locate’ or contextualise an individual was seen as important. This involved such things as an individual’s articulation of a political issue having more weight if their background is known. This does not have to involve just what expertise or knowledge of an issue an individual might have, but also in understanding the social location of an individual, and how that then positions such an articulation in a social context:

I’ve seen this so often, people do a bad, thing, and get pushback on it, and ignore the pushback until the right person explains it to them. Very often this is gendered, a guy says something stupid, women say this is why it’s stupid, and the guys go no it’s fine, until a guy comes along and goes dude what you said was stupid, and then it’s like oh you’re right, how did I not think about it.

In other words, what is being described here from participant #02 is contextualising information through the use of a primary relationship. Note that this was not always seen as necessarily a positive process, given it could be mediated through existing systems of inequality, such as the gendered nature of the above quote. What the participant is describing is how political discussion and information is parsed through the relational nature of social location, and not necessarily in a conscious fashion. Or, at least, this is how my participant is perceiving the interaction. However, this could occur consciously too, as other participants did articulate, but it was not necessary, for all that my participant here was interpreting it so. I would also note the emotive nature of the description in this quote, as this affect will be something I will touch on later in this chapter.

This knowledge of who an individual was, was seen as crucial, because of the centrality of experience:

Talking about the personal, and the personal being relevant and not just being 'anecdotal', but I think that's a change you're starting to see more because social media gives you immediate insight into people's experiences.

Experience here from participant #02 thus became a vehicle for contextualisation of politics, of policy, in a way that removed abstraction and made it more concrete. This participant is aware of the way, however, that such articulations of politics have been seen previously, namely, not being taken seriously. But, for this participant, there was a wish to argue the opposite, that it was a strength (and a growing one at that) of contemporary political discussion. Participant #03 went further:

Like, I would like to know about your experiences because I want to understand who you are more and what you have been through and where you are trying to get and I would like you to tell me that. And then I am needing to be careful with my responses and my reactions and I don't want to upset you or hurt you and I want to understand but I have to ask you questions and my phrasing has to be careful and that is much more complicated than sitting quietly with social media and saying 'ok that person has experiences and I'm going to go read them'.

What this participant is comparing is the interactional nature of experience with simply listening/reading. This is not to say that there was no value seen in listening/reading (on the contrary, many of my participants stated this as a central political behaviour), but rather that there is additional value that the interactional nature of social media allowed for (note also the sharing nature, and again emotive nature, of the interaction as described in the quote, both taken as given) and that this was valued. Further, one can also note that the participant is arguing that this is not an inherent quality of social media (as both this more interactional sharing and reading are acknowledged as occurring in the media) but rather driven by a conscious desire for such.

Another participant (#06) spoke of this interactional nature of primary relationships:

You know, I work at home by myself, I deep dive, I write for six hours, and then I take a tea break, and instead of going and finding colleagues to have a chat with, I go and like put the kettle on and pull out my phone and open up Twitter. And it's a sort of place to have, you know, to talk about the issues of the day.

This interactional focus is not merely about personal support, it is also about understanding how those ‘issues of the day’ interact relationally with differing positions in society, which can lead to some uncomfortable and unresolved political articulations:

I also felt bad because I thought my friends are never going to be able to afford a house and I can afford a house, and should I buy [a] house? Probably not. I don't want to be that one person who could afford a house and is a dick and got money from their parents and all that stuff. I am that person. ... I have all this, and it is such a privilege, but instead of enjoying it most of the time, I am just worried about how to legitimise it. Yeah, I feel like I have to legitimise it to people, and I have to be like: yeah, I have this thing but I am actually trying to be good with it.

What this participant (#07) is describing is an understanding of political issues channelled through both her own experiences, as well as also knowing how her experiences and the experiences of others interact. A political issue, for her, is not merely about a piece of policy, but rather is embodied in the lived realities of herself and those she cares about. Further, understanding that political issue and its ramifications is also negotiated between experiences, and how power and privilege mediates those experiences. Responsibility towards the impact (particularly here where there is an imbalance of social privilege) of personal experiences of political issues is thus being understood relationally, via primary relationships, and (again) emotionally.

This understanding of the positions of others in relation to politics and self was recounted by other participants too:

I guess it is always back to stories, right? If you can relate to it and understand why it is important, then I want to share it with those people to get it over the line so that it ends up at corporate governance gates and stuff like that, people know why and it is actually that they have already got informal approvals before it even gets there and then it doesn't end up a surprise.

This participant (#08) is making an explicit connection between stories as a political articulation and more traditional forms of political behaviour. This participant does not see a disconnect between these, or even a hierarchy; more she sees personal articulation of political experience as a requirement for traditional political enactment. Further, and this is something I touch on elsewhere in this thesis, is the mediation and importance of stories. Politics divorced

from individual contextualisation reoccurs in the interviews as a theme. For instance, from participant #11:

I don't need to force myself into their lives, I just need to learn by seeing what they say and seeing how they live and sharing that with other people who aren't on Twitter. It gives me access to a diversity that I would otherwise never encounter because [small NZ city] is super white and super middle class.

This idea of seeing diversity of experience, and learning from that diversity, is a theme that has cropped up throughout the interviews, and I will cover that more in depth later. However, for the purposes of this chapter, the realisation that articulations of experience different from her own are required is something this participant wanted to stress, as lived experience of an issue was seen as that important in order to not just understand, but also in order to further political goals.

Part of this construction is that the personal is not disconnected from the political for my participants:

I mean, you know, of course, there's always a space for politics in ... everything, I believe, is political. ... I just talked about my personal situation and being an over-sharer since forever, found other people who wanted to talk about it because they wanted to talk to me. And so, I guess in the first instance my political stuff was really maternal stuff. And the politics of being a stay-at-home parent and how that affects your self-esteem.

This participant (#19) goes on to discuss different aspects of the politics of parenting, and children, around work, education, resourcing, and so on. The participant shifted seamlessly between articulations of personal experience with issues around parenting, to the political ramifications of such, and back out again. In the narrative that was constructed by this participant, there was no distinction. An articulation of the personal did not exist outside of what was understood to be its political context, and vice versa.

This connection to the personal was seen as key by my participants:

It's really just authentic engagement, and being your own, you know, being your own person and not spouting lines, and that you're having discussions with people, and if you know and if people point out that you've done something wrong or could do better, then you know, you acknowledge and, acknowledge that rather than, definitely not getting into arguments, you know.

Note here from participant #24, the emphasis on acknowledgement and change; that is, evidence of listening, as an example of actual authentic engagement. Rather than 'getting into arguments' the assumption of the more engaged response is assessed by someone being seen to constructively respond to criticism, to take such on-board, if you will. The ability to be political online here in discussion, in interaction, as authentically as possible, was assessed then on the basis of response, not argument, not 'spouting lines'. From participant #09:

I think where Twitter is used as a marketing platform it's not necessarily going to have the same human impact as a real person using Twitter.

Again, the contrast made here is the distinction between merely putting out a statement versus something more (defined as being 'a real person'), the implication of which is that this 'more' involves sufficient enactment to be defined as a 'real person', something previous participants have defined as fulfilling engagement, that is, to the point of primary relationship formation.

5.3 Values Alignment

Part of this primary relationship formation included the identification of 'values':

For me it is much more about values than it is about politics. It is much more than that ... I value equity and it has an extremely high value to me. Compassion, which means essentially understanding having empathy for where people are at, and where they are coming from and then being able to take useful action from that (participant #01).

This emphasis on not just having values, but being able to identify what they are, cropped up quite frequently, and particularly so around empathy:

Even though it's like 'Oh, politics are all just their opinions'. It's like no, you can actually be super wrong for thinking that, like gay people don't deserve to have marriage rights. You can be totally wrong if you think abortion should be criminal. It's like, I don't know, have some empathy. Have some critical thinking as to why someone else might want this even if you don't.

The crucial point to note here from participant #13 is the use of empathy to denote politics from the basis of perspective. As this participant cycled through issues she felt were important, the assessment she brought to bear on them was not the specifics of the argument, though that was important to her, but rather how others saw and perceived that issue impacting them. This was particularly the case for situations where she could not see an impact for herself, or by extension, when she saw others making arguments on something where she felt they were not directly affected. Listening and engaging with the voices of those for whom the political issues were directly impacting was seen as crucial to her politics, and that empathetic approach would then guide her perspectives on issues. Rather than empathy being separate from politics, it was seen as intrinsic to them.

Participant #07 said this more explicitly:

I just really value human physical interactions and so practical things really, I mean of course I care about larger social justice issues that don't apply to me and it is not all about me, but it is about caring about the things that I care about which are the things that are sometimes about other people; I care about other people.

There are two narrative constructions that I think are important here. First is the imperative within the quote that the perspectives of others are taken into consideration as a part of politics; the empathetic imperative, one could say. This reflects the previous quotes as not just being about caring about other people, but being able to shift perspective from one's own viewpoint to that of others. The second construction, however, lies in the first sentence, namely 'human physical interactions and so practical things really'. What this participant appears to be making a distinction between is a politics located at the individual level and politics with wider, more abstract goals. That she is making this distinction is notable, not just because she sees both as important, but because she feels she needs to. The politics she cares about is the politics that impacts her, but she acknowledges that politics also impacts others. For her, the immediacy of impact is the driver, but she notes that she has to also think about others too in that: empathy.

Another participant linked conditionality for involvement in political issues, and particularly with political organisations, back to this basis of values, when asked about what drives donating time to politics:

I guess obviously it's to do with how closely my values are aligned. Basically, the bang for my buck I guess, not in terms of I've made a donation so therefore x, y, and z, but more in terms of could I offer them my platform, could I offer them my opinion or my experience?

This conscious connection of values to politics from participant #11 provides a system of meaning that allows for an assessment of whether or not involvement in political behaviour is of worth to this participant. While I shall touch on the issue-based nature of contemporary political involvement later in this thesis, the quote above on whether to be involved again reflects what the other participants use as a meaning-giving model: values, not abstract policy or politics. Furthermore, after this assessment is made, the above participant also then assesses what she can provide to the political issue; here she contrasts the more traditional form of political behaviour of monetary donation with what she feels is her more valued contribution: experience. This specific example is thus a return to earlier in this chapter with the nature of experience, the mediation of politics through individual personal stories becoming central, via primary relationship building. Given the centrality of experience operating as a lens for the salience of political issues, that this participant would thus see her most productive contribution as being one of expressing her experience flows coherently from this as a construction.

Returning to a specifically online articulation of this, another participant (#15) saw those values as being displayed through how one interacts with others:

I think it also is a culture thing. The way that we interact with people online is very indicative of how we view and interact with people in our real lives. And I'm not just talking about people that we know and love and trust and care about, it's those people that don't matter to us in the immediate sense.

This particular point is also something that shall be included when discussing the findings around what are colloquially known as 'social media' bubbles. But, namely here, an important aspect that cropped up frequently in the interviews was how you treat others, or in a wider sense, how you think about others and respect them. In other words, your interactional manner with other people was seen to represent the value system you embodied. How you positioned

others in relation to yourself spoke for the type of person you were, and the values and politics you had. Note that this does not have to mean that you were nice to everyone, but rather that you thought about where they were coming from:

I guess what I try, and I'm perfect you know, what I try to do is, just always like entertain the possibility that actually maybe that person just had a really terrible day, or made a mistake, or you know is a human being on the other end, and just always have that as maybe they're not Satan, maybe they're not actually Satan, even though that thing that they said sounds quite bad.

It is important to realise that for this participant (#25) she is not advocating not calling out the thing 'that sounds quite bad' but rather, again as per the narrative theme in this chapter, to position oneself in the shoes of another, to relate to that person as individual, not merely a role that they are occupying: the primary relationship model. This is not an oppositional politics model, but one that is seen as more relational, more empathetic.

5.4 Emotionality

A consequence of this 'empathetic imperative' is that being political is also seen as emotionally draining:

A lot of this stuff where I see it's in an injustice, it's more wrapped up in my own injustices that I've faced, and so, often I'm just like 'Why, why do I have to keep doing this?' Like why is it my responsibility to put in the emotional labour to educate other people on why what they're saying is discriminatory, or is racist, or is prejudiced, or you know anyway, like it's just, you know, kind of, yeah, I just don't wanna feel that burden anymore (Participant #05).

Participants often spoke about the exhausting nature of politics (often colloquially referred to as whether or not you 'have enough spoons'), particularly so in regard to the emotional nature of what they felt were the issues. This particular narrative construction should not be surprising, however, given the empathetic and primary-relationship-based nature of this thread of political behaviour construction, as well as how the politics, as mediated through experience, were seen very concretely in the everyday: the politics of the personal. Part of this connects back to issue-based politics, and the need to be conscious of political involvement choices:

You have to kind of pick your battles, because if you don't you will end up with this massive fatigue, where you'll just kind of like 'I genuinely can't, I can't do this, I can't speak out every time' you know? (Participant #16).

And for instance, in regard to politicians:

Unless I'm interacting with them on a personal level, I just don't really interact with their politics, cause, I don't know, it just opens you up to so much stuff, and because even, I don't know, I just don't think it's worth it, because it's often.

As, again for this particular participant (#05):

I think for many people like me, or who are from any minority group of people, the challenges that we face every day are in your face all the time. There's no reprieve from them, they're kind of ongoing and a lot of the effects of those things are enduring.

Further from the same participant:

Every day waking up, one, is political participation. But I think, participating in democracy it includes all of those things, like we all have a social responsibility to other people, to understand, or walk alongside those who are less fortunate than ourselves ... because I think it is an everyday thing, you wake up and you're living in the political, just existing.

The above three quotes from participant #05 directly link the emotionality of political issues to the everyday nature of politics, not to mention the consistent empathetic imperative. There is no sense of politics as somehow removed from their everyday lives, as separate from it. Throughout these interviews, while there was a sense of the more formal politics of Wellington, for them when they spoke of 'political participation' the first thing that was spoken of, like this participant above, was the embedding in the everyday, embedding in experience. Or, as participant #15 noted, in their work:

It's so hard to separate when you work in fields to do with people. My personal political views are really deeply intertwined with the work that I was doing, so I feel like was used as a platform to make things happen in a sense, but also that those were the things that I really deeply believed and held really close to me.

While this this degree was certainly not the case for all participants, many of them did speak about this negotiation of finding a balance between a career and self in terms of politics. Those who worked in the public sector experienced this particularly, for they constructed a tension between their personal politics, their need for such to be reflected in their work (they often spoke of this as their driver for picking where they would work), but also the realisation that as a public sector employee they needed to remain politically neutral, both in reality and appearance, not to mention working contrary to their personal political beliefs (depending on who was in government). This tension for public servants is something I shall discuss further in Chapter 9, the discussion chapter, but for the purposes of this chapter, the acknowledgement of politics as a part of work as well as the rest of the everyday had considerable cogency amongst my participants. As mentioned above, there often was no distinction between the everyday and politics; politics was personal for my participants, and that often included their work. As both the above participants who were quoted construct, this was seen not just as emotionally taxing, but also about being connected to the needs of other people, for the first participant to ‘walk alongside’ and for the second ‘fields to do with people’.

5.5 Politics as the Everyday

Note, however, there was no wish that this was a different arrangement, for just as with the everyday as with work, the nature of politics was one where it was just understood by my participants that there could be no other way. For instance, from participant #16 who saw herself as particularly political:

I think that honestly, I think if you're going to be in the activist space, particularly if you're a woman, particularly if you are active in areas that have to do with your own lived experience, like some of the stuff around #MeToo stuff, is not just a theoretical kind of exercise for most women, it's actually practical. Like an actual thing that has affected our lives. And we are, and so activism in that respect is incredibly tiring to do. It can be emotionally very draining.

This emphasises the personal nature of politics as distinct from the traditional concept of political discussion in its ideal form being rational and disconnected from emotionality or specificity (see the literature review for this outline). For my participants, as has been reiterated throughout this chapter, the reverse is the goal. You have more credibility, more standing, if

your politics is rooted in your experience, and ever more so in empathy and understanding of the location of others.

The recognition of the taxing nature of this leads to my participants also speaking up for other women and minorities when they spoke about experience and politics:

I think there is something intensely political about women supporting women actually in terms of their ... just kind of ... what's the word I am looking for? Just validating their lived experience. There is something uniquely political in the way that women do. I kind of think that the everyday is political and I see a lot of validation of other women's kinds of experiences of just being a woman frankly, which I think is quite political actually (Participant #11).

In other words, the empathetic imperative (i.e. feeling the requirement to see political issues through the personal experiences of others) involves not just seeing the world from the perspectives of others, but in supporting those others when they are articulating those experiences, and seeing that support as being political behaviour in and of itself: networked support as a political act.

These kind of networks of support were also seen as a way of building trusted sources, as sources of not just experience, but also just general news:

I guess it's almost like getting news from a trusted source if that makes any sense?

And, further, from the same participant (#15):

You sort of know in your heart of hearts that they're a right-on person that you, like, there almost doesn't need to be that much interaction ... if it was someone who was espousing something that was particularly hateful, it's almost the only way I can engage with at that moment is to retweet someone's takedown of that if that makes any sense, and it's almost like you add impact to what that takedown is saying by retweeting and by liking it.

Boosting the views of others is, hence, seen as a political act, even if it being felt as the least they can do at that moment, it is nonetheless seen as something they should do. Online acts of supporting each other would be seen not just by those who were vocal in their articulation of a political position, but by others that would be looking for such: online politics as a collective

action. However, that is not to say that this support always occurred in visible spaces. Participant #15 also spoke about ‘Little Twitter’ as a specific example of trust scenarios:

The existence of Little Twitter means that you can quote tweet someone and say ‘Oh this fucking dumb person’ and send that way and not have that direct confrontation with a person because you know them.

Little Twitter is a colloquial name for networks of locked Twitter accounts, where the content within an account (the tweets that they post) can only be seen by those they approve to follow them. These protected and private sub-networks of ‘alt-accounts’ (i.e. alternative accounts, where you have a ‘Big Twitter’ public account, but then a separate, alternative, private account on Little Twitter) are seen as safe spaces where individuals can be more vulnerable and support one another than in the wider, more exposed ‘public’ Twitter.

Note that these private sub-networks are not a use-case that was created by Twitter; while the ability to lock an account to make it individually private was created by the social media platform, the private sub-network effect was entirely user-discovered and enacted. You can see these sub-networks as a method of managing political and emotional exposure and vulnerability in much the same way as picking which issues to be involved with, which battles to choose. Support for one’s politics, as a political act, thus is not just a matter for public visibility, but also privately amongst trusted individuals. This, of course, has a potential downside, in terms of what is colloquially known as ‘social media bubbles’, that I shall discuss in Chapter 9 of this thesis. But for this chapter, the connection to primary relationships, where this level of trust can form, is crucial.

5.6 The Politics of Social Location

An example of how primary relationships were privileged by my participants was how an understanding of how the people they interacted with were also located in social, economic, racial, sexuality, gendered, and so on, groups. Depths of understanding were varied, but participants consistently talked about how they were socially located in relation to other political individuals, whether offline or online, how that was patterned, and how that then evidenced itself in interactions and experience. For instance, for participant #02:

I've seen so often people do a bad thing, and get pushback on it, and ignore the pushback until the 'right' person explains it to them. Very often this is gendered; a guy says something stupid, women say this is why it's stupid, the guy goes no it's fine, until a guy comes along and goes dude what you said was stupid, and then it's like of course you're right, how did I not think about that.

This participant goes on to note how this also occurs for people of colour and other minority groups vis-à-vis dominant groups. However, this is not merely something that is noted in discussion, but also in their own relation to the voices of others in different social locations. For instance, from participant #03:

We need loud voices in support, people being present support of people who are minorities or are marginalised or have historically suffered as a result of a particularly homogenised kind of society. So, it is really nice to hear those voices and I am hearing them.

In other words, this participant understands her voice relationally, and the voices of others, and how they are positioned politically, not in an oppositional sense but rather in an intersectional network sense, and again understanding this through a lens of experience, as participant #10 articulates about the online political world:

I want to follow people who make me think who are provocative but not people who are just repeating the same old dominant views that I hear all the time ... I'll follow them because it just, it's been really enlightening and I've gotten a lot out of that. It's not necessarily changed by views but given me a lot more understanding, as much as I can as a hetero, cis, very feminine coded, person.

What this participant is doing is positioning herself relationally and politically to minority political viewpoints as something that she consciously realises she is not exposed to in mainstream political articulations. She also recognises that she is not of these groups, and how politics impacts them, and hence values hearing their experiences. The reverse is also the case from participant #05 who identifies as being amongst one of those minority groups:

I guess, a lot of my friends are Pākehā, so they haven't experienced some of the systemic stuff that I've, like discrimination, that I've faced, not being Pākehā.

And further, as the same participant follows up:

And learning about those things, if you're someone that comes from a place of privilege, then, it's about meaning and trying to understand ... well, it's never gonna understand, but learning about those adversities and working alongside those people, and being an ally to those people in your communities.

Returning to the concept of the empathetic imperative in relation to the words of this participant, we can see how politically orientating yourself to listen to the words of others in different social locations fits with this. Moreover, to the construction of an empathetic imperative, participants are constructing shifting their political behaviour in relation to those positions as a political act, so that those voices that traditionally have less power in many contexts are instead promoted. I shall discuss how this is considered a form of political behaviour in and of itself elsewhere in this thesis, but the relational nature of the primary relationships that also include an understanding of the political ramifications of those individuals' social locations is crucial element to highlight here. This is particularly so, given that understanding such drives what political behaviour is considered important.

Understanding where something is appropriate political behaviour, and something is not, is a divergence from the traditional western notion of the generic political subject/citizen that pre-exists social categorisation (see the work of Walters (2018) around identity politics where she contends that the unmarked nature of the political subject works to hide its actual group, and hence relational, alignment). This intrinsic connection of the political self in relation to other political selves as contextual and contingent was something that my participants repeatedly brought up:

There is still tikanga around what happens on the marae and I think ... yeah, I think where it becomes intersectional is a lot around kind of feminism and where that comes on board. But I also note that there are a lot of white women who want to challenge that and it is not really for white women to challenge. It is for Māori women to step up and challenge that, if they believe that is the thing to do. But it is also creating a safe space for them to be able to have those discussions and challenge it.

Note here this participant (#08) is delineating between appropriate contexts for Pākehā and Māori women in terms of the marae, and how that is then driving what is considered the best political behaviour to be performed. Note here she is not saying to do nothing, but rather to

consider in what form political behaviour would take to best achieve not just a political end, a goal, but also a political process. The last sentence where she speaks about creating a ‘safe space’ acknowledges a possible role for Pākehā women in support of Māori women around what they may, or may not, want to do on the marae. But also it plays into a narrative construction that positions that space as oppositional to the wider political world, or at least different or resistive, in that the wider space does not provide the ‘safety’ necessary for conversations amongst groups with less privilege (in this case Māori women) to occur, from whence decisions around political action can be made. Here, the participant is locating the appropriate space for Pākehā women feminists to provide for that space to be created, and that is where their contribution ends.

However, the construction being made here is not one of separation; rather, participants maintained they still have a sense of collective political action:

The internet and social media in general has made me more confident about being a political thing. And those things that I thought – I think I believe this or I think that is wrong or I think that is right and we should do more of it – I am finding myself in an increasing group of people who are like minded and we can have those conversations and it boosts my confidence and it helps me learn (Participant #03).

Participant #08 also said:

Sometimes I really fucking hate Twitter and some aspects of it but it has brought me amazing friends and amazing connections, so with the lows comes the highs.

This sense of support through primary relationship connections was mentioned repeatedly amongst my participants. As was the fact that those primary relationship support networks would allow further political action to be taken or built therefrom. One particular participant (#18) noted a connection of this import of relationship building before political action as something she has seen in certain groups, as well as online:

I work for a Māori public health organisation and one of the harder things for us about engaging with non-Māori organisation is that you have to do that bit, that relationship building bit, for quite a while before anything productive happens because there's something about knowing each other and trusting each other that needs to happen before you can do any work together. And so that is totally true with Twitter cause anyone that I've had that kind of relationship with you've immediately got that to start with.

It is interesting to note this initial point about Māori organisations and non-Maori organisations, for this is contrary to the traditional western ideal of Weberian bureaucracy whereby an individual occupying a role within a true bureaucracy should have no particularity of individuality in order to fulfil that role (Weber, 1978). In other words, if a bureaucracy is operating in its ideal form, then such should be done thoroughly through secondary relationships. However, this participant is saying that the reverse is true, that primary relationships have to be forged a priori to any work being done. It is the formation of the primary relationships that allows the work, the politics, to occur. Further, she is also stating that it is then that primary relationship formation on Twitter that similarly allows her to begin with that basis already in place. The relationships built there provide the basis for the politics to occur more constructively.

That this occurs on social media is not something that the above participant (#18) noted alone:

I think, yeah, social media's more reciprocal, yeah. I think it's more about dialogue and building a community of people that actually give a crap about what you have to say. Or, whether that's because they agree with you, or whether that's because they think you have an opinion that maybe they don't, and it's something, and it's good to be challenged for whatever reason. I think that yeah, a lot of it is about building that community of, that you're gonna be getting consistent feedback from.

This was in response to a question about whether social media had any impact politically. The emphasis on community building by this participant, something which is predicated on primary relationship formation in social theory (Calhoun, 1992) fits with the construction of political behaviour throughout this chapter. Further, as seen from this quote, this does not have to mean agreement, as the emphasis on 'dialogue', 'challenge', and 'feedback' suggest. What is required, according to this participant, is a sense that those you are developing those

relationships with ‘give a crap’. Moreover, I would contend, in reciprocation (given the participant’s use of the word), in that the others in that built political community, and have a sense that you value their contributions too.

5.7 Being Engaged

One of the consequences of the primary relationship constructions that my participants consistently mentioned, was that the development of such (whether online or offline) encouraged them to get involved politically in other ways. Note this did not have to involve becoming a political activist or the like, or even joining a political party or organisation (which would be a measure of a more traditional concept of increases in political participation), but again, as with the other forms of political participation construction that I have discussed elsewhere in this thesis, the increases occurred in other more ‘everyday’ political expressions and actions.

I had always just kind of coasted along. Not particularly active in these things and it takes me a really long time to make kind of big decision ... And then finding that I was engaging – so this was before the election and I had actually been engaging much more with Twitter and I am reading the members’ comments and what they stand for and reading what they are actually putting out there into the public arena and saying ‘this is what we stand for, this is what we want to do, and this is how we want to get there’. And I got really excited and it actually inflamed me and I was like ‘holy crap, this is exciting, this is great, these people are right’.

Notice how this participant (#03) is not merely talking about members of a party merely broadcasting positions, but a) engaging with her, and b) allowing her to get to know them. This personal level of connection, and the location of the political within experience, as mentioned throughout this chapter, are not just what my participants want to see in order to feel they have become more informed, but also what they say motivates them. For instance:

I used to feel really bad about blocking people. I’ll feel bad about it now if they are someone that we have engaged on stuff and we might have followed each other for a while, but then they do something that I really disagree with. And I found what actually upsets people a lot of the time is not being blocked, it’s the fact that they don’t know why (Participant #11).

Similarly, from participant #03:

There was less commitment on Facebook. You could just go 'La, la, la, I like cheese' and people would go 'Hurrah!'. Whereas on Twitter you go 'La, la, la, I like cheese'. And they say 'And?' and I am like 'Nothing, that's it. Oh shit'.

While one of these two quotes is humorous and the other is more serious, what they share in common is that the more meaningful thing for them (and as in the first quote) is this higher level of engagement they get. For the second participant the lower level of 'commitment', as she puts it, elsewhere only hits her when she is confronted with it not being sufficient in a different medium, and she goes on to speak about how this expectation of there being more depth and meaning to engagement really challenges her and pushes her politically. Returning to the comments of the previous quote from the first participant, is her arrival at the conclusion that what resonates for people is frustration with not being seen as individuals; the statement 'don't know why' as the point of tension says that it is not necessarily the form of discussion that is occurring, as a 'block' on Twitter is a structural device, but the meanings behind the form. What upsets people here is they cannot understand, cannot contextualise, that action that was taken. They want to know the 'why' of the action taken to them as individuals. This 'why' query requests meaning and engagement, even if that engagement is such as to justify why no more engagement would take place.

This is similar to the words of participant #21:

I tend to engage with it much more you know, particularly like even if they did have really opposing views; if they made an effort to engage, and if they made an effort to do that in a respectful [way] ... then I would probably be more inclined to participate with them, than even someone who has the views, or similar views, to me.

Again, here we have the focus on what counts as sufficient levels of engagement, to the point where, even if disagreement occurs, the individuals involved are seen as holding more worth, more time. It is the engagement that matters, not necessarily the agreement on particular political views. Another participant states:

Being able to participate in a two-way discussion, with the people that represent me or us, I suppose, and voting. Of course, voting ... but you know, but in a way, you know in a way, yeah I mean it's not the most important ... I mean, without voting you don't get to do the other stuff in a way I support is one way of putting it, but yeah.

In other words, for this participant (#24), while she sees the importance of voting in terms of its institutional provision and what it provides for society, the narrative construction she is making almost above this, as a basis, is that participation in two-way discussion (i.e. engagement) is the first thing that comes to mind to her. This response came from a question about what counts as political participation, and the first understanding that she called to mind was engaged discussion. She actually goes on to talk about the importance of authentic engagement and discussion that reflects that, in being central to how she does politics, so it is not surprising that she, as with the other participants here, value engagement more highly than traditional forms of politics like voting.

One of the consistent narratives around engagement for my participants was this pre-eminence of discussion, to the point of it being an explicitly mentioned item by participant #02 when asked what she thought of when political participation is referred to:

I do make a conscious effort to follow people who aren't like me, but at the same time anyone can find my tweets and engage me in conversation. And sometimes they can just be trollish dickheads, and sometimes it can lead to a very interesting conversation, where I end up.

In another section of this thesis I do discuss the tension around social media bubbles, but the important part of this quote is not just how central conversation appears, but understanding what constitutes good conversation and the impact it can have, for instance again from participant #02:

I mean, we could all write letters to the editor, and they wouldn't get published or they might get published but published in a newspaper which no one reads anymore. Whereas responding even to a broadcast-only kind of channel, at least means that other people who then see that tweet can see the replies, and they can see the conversation, it still becomes a platform for conversation.

This is where both the political construction narrative and the narrative of engagement intersect with the discussion/conversation reference. There is an explicit acknowledgment of strategic goals for a conversation (i.e. not necessarily about changing the mind of the original person tweeting – in this case a broadcast account – but rather about creating a visibility of conversation that even those who are not participating directly in such can see; a narrative context, if you will.

Less explicit, but still present, is understanding the difference between a ‘broadcast’ account and an account where engagement could be more likely to occur. Many of my participants spoke of engaging with journalists directly online, and how valuable they found such. As such, you have two narratives of conversational political engagement here: one, direct engagement with journalists, where discussion and reciprocation is expected, and, two, a conversational narrative context, where direct interaction with the account is neither expected nor really the goal. This is not to say that the narrative context is not also important with the first form of conversational political engagement, but that it is not the primary intent. Where this construction is important for this chapter is the contextualising node for the engagement; namely, again primary relationships. A broadcast account versus a personal account differs in political goal around discussion because the latter affords such; the former does not, by its very nature.

This narrative context was seen as something that others felt was so crucial they judged their own contribution to such as wanting:

It just feels like the start of a more complex conversation. And a conversation rather than just screaming and not caring.

Again, the narrative here from participant #03 is about the recognition of both responsibility and reciprocity of conversation, as well as, I would argue, the importance of discussion/conversation to a political goal, not to mention, how having a space for such is also important:

For me Twitter sort of became a place where people who ... it sort became a space where we could have a dialogue, about things with it being, I suppose, critiqued by other places online, and also other places in reality.

Please note that for this participant (#04), conversations on Twitter were not the goal; rather, the goal was the value of the conversations in general as political contributions, and, further, having a space where those conversations could be had. Twitter was merely a means that they had to provide such, as evidence in why she said Twitter was being used. Also, the ‘them’ rocking the boat that she is referring to as something to avoid is not the conversations being had, but rather the imposition from ‘other places online’. Thus, what she is also doing here is recognising how speech as an act can be disrupted, and the import of curating a space where that disruption is minimised.

Why would this be so important to my participants, however? I would argue that at least in part it is because of the centrality of primary relationships in enactment of politics:

I think just getting it back down to the human interactions and actually yes, I am listening and thanks for that (Participant #08).

And from participant #10:

I just think it's not just what's the public or performative side of Twitter, it's also the genuine connection and the quiet conversations that you can have as well.

Note the connection between such things as ‘human interaction’, ‘acknowledging people’, and ‘genuine connection’ here, which speaks to my participants constructing, again, a level of relationship beyond the secondary-type and then seeing conversation/discussion around politics that is valuable as central to such. Listening, learning, and understanding are seen as crucial to this endeavour:

I think that's social media and the connectedness and the education and the, sort of, soft in your home learning opportunities that it allows people, is responsible for that.

Here from participant #14 there is an explicit connection between the bonds between people and the political goal of education. Other participants went even a step further, and made listening itself a political act:

Bearing witness is important. They are putting stuff out there for a reason and then bearing witness to that and being part of the collective consciousness of that is ... one of the ways people get depoliticised is because they get silenced. So, I guess the opposite of being silenced is listening. So they've got a better listening and they might not be someone that I either need to engage with, because I don't need to force myself into their lives, I just need to learn by seeing what they say and seeing how they live and then sharing that with other people who aren't on Twitter.

This participant (#11) is acknowledging the way different people have access to speech in a political context, and how important simply being able to speak without anyone 'forcing themselves' into the conversation is. Moreover, she sees taking what is learnt by herself in 'bearing witness' and signal boosting that outside of Twitter, as a political participation behaviour. Again, as above, my participants are seeing social media merely as a useful tool that fits their ends; in other words, it is the political goals that are valued, and sites like Twitter are merely a useful vehicle for such (with varying degrees of assessment of how useful such is). Participant #09 puts such conversations and listening/reading as:

I think sometimes Twitter gives people a better understanding of the reasons behind certain policies when people are talking about it on Twitter. I don't even know how to explain it but it's easier for them to understand when they see it explained on a platform rather than Parliament TV or reading about it in the newspaper or whatever.

Note the juxtaposition here between 'explaining' on social media and what is presented on more traditional media forms. It is the goal of understanding that is seen as crucial, not merely the presentation of information. Again, it is the engagement that is seen as the motivation to be political behind that understanding: the connection.

5.8 Conclusion

This chapter, describing the theme of Primary Relationships, started out with how my participants constructed their interactions with political figures as it leads to feeling politically fulfilled, then moved on to how other individuals are conceptualised politically at the personal level in terms of interactions, political positions, and so on. The following sub-theme looked to the centrality of political values in forming these primary relationships, moving on to how such primary relationship centrality includes a large amount of emotionality, how this impacts my participants, and how this is located in the everyday and social location. Finally, it concludes

in looking to the ramifications of this chapter's narrative construction for what counts as political engagement. The overarching theme of this chapter has been to look at how my participants orientated themselves politically, and identifying what the narrative was to give meaning, salience, and import; in other words, what was the motivating concept for my participants in terms of being political. I shall discuss this more in depth in terms of ramifications for looking at politics in Chapter 9. The following chapter, though, the second findings chapter, builds upon this chapter to look at what behaviours my participants manifested this primary relationship orientation through.

Chapter 6

Everyday Politics: Findings 2

My participants emphasised repeatedly the embedding of politics in everyday life. This ranged from explicit references to activist slogans such as ‘the personal is political’ or more implicit narrative constructions such as understanding the connection between personal experiences of motherhood, for instance, and the way in which parenting and motherhood are political issues. This chapter looks to how political behaviour was framed narratively; that is, the *how* of how my participants were political, what they did, both offline and online. What counted as being behaving politically for them?

Particularly in terms of narrative construction, experience for my participants was intertwined with politics. This occurred of course in response to me asking them directly how they defined politics, but also in general discussions around the topic of politics. Emphatically, for my participants, politics and being political were not spheres separate from everyday life, but rather embedded therein. As such this chapter looks to how the theme of everyday politics is narratively constructed initially through the sub-theme of how personal experience and small acts of their lives were seen as intrinsically political; everything was political, so they interpreted their lives and their behaviours thus. The next sub-theme is around engagement and what my participants were engaged by in order to be political: what motivated them. The following sub-theme is what the primary political behaviour was for my participants: discussion and debate, reading and listening, a very discursive construction of political behaviour. Further to this sub-theme, the chapter then goes on to look at being informed as a political behaviour, both from traditional media sources, but also from the personal articulations of others. However, this is not being informed as a passive activity; my participants see such as a critical endeavour, something they engage with. Finally, the last sub-theme is the organising narrative around which all political behaviour was structured for my participants: political issues. Rather than being organisation-focused, my participants saw issues that were salient to their selves as the crucial focus for political participation, and oriented how and how much they participated accordingly.

6.1 The Personal as Political

One way in which this evidenced itself was through discussions, such as this from participant #04:

Actually, it's much more than government, interest groups, institutions, it's actually about our everyday lives and about social justice.

And participant #09:

Political participation, lots of things can be involved in that – voting is really important, participating in conversations in real life, using social media to talk about politics and following politics, reading the news, having an understanding of what's going on in the world, that sort of thing.

And participant #11:

The old me, pre-sick me, would have been like 'voting, pretty much voting is the only way of political participation and if you don't vote then you don't get to have a say about anything' type thing. Whereas the me now feels like it's very difficult to do anything that doesn't have political, not repercussions exactly, but [implications], because I feel like anything I do, just my very interest as a sick beneficiary queer woman my very existence is political.

In other words, what these three participants are articulating is constructing traditionally understood forms of political behaviour (see the literature review chapter (2) as just a base line of behaviour if one is to be considered political. Their operating frameworks for what counts as political behaviour are only considered developed if one goes beyond these basics. A considerable number of participants, when discussing what they considered political participation, simply did not even mention the traditional political forms such as voting, joining a political party, going to see politicians, and attending local forums. For these participants, political behaviour was much more interactional, such as involving conversations and debate, as well as being engaged in changing something in society, and, particularly, involving understanding your social location in relation to others and the implications for such.

For instance, participant #20:

Everything we do is political. Well, it's going to sound weird but you know when you're not part of, when you're not a member of the status quo, your existence in many ways refutes the promise, and the status quo, and if you choose to, you know, consciously do things different or challenge aspects of the status quo then your life is political, you know?

What this participant is articulating was reflected in many of the words of my other participants, namely an understanding (at various levels) that being political involved, as mentioned above, not merely participating as a citizen but working to change society (as above, 'challenge aspects of the status quo'). Further, however, there is an understanding that this is experienced differently for different members of society, and how their very everyday lives are both spaces of oppression and resistances to traditional political arrangements in society, a very Foucauldian understanding of power relationships in a society (Foucault, 1991; 1998).

Another participant, #04:

For me it's every day waking up but it's also participating in communities. Engaging in the issues that are faced by communities, by your neighbours and by people. And learning about those things, if you're not someone that comes from a place of privilege, then, it's about meaning and trying to understand ... well, it's never gonna understand, but learning about those adversities and working alongside those people, and being an ally to those people in your communities.

Again, being political here is in part through challenging status quo power differentials (note the construction around places of privilege). However, connecting back to the prior chapter on the way in which an empathetic imperative operates in how one interacts with others, here this participant is connecting the ability to position oneself in the perspective of another (or multiple others) as much as possible as crucial to being effective politically. Rephrased, the challenge to the status quo political power arrangements is argued here as occurring through an empathetic understanding of experience, and then working alongside them for their ends.

And here, with participant #15:

Everything you do is political. What you eat. What you dress. The way you live in the world. The way that you choose to view a white man on the street. That's political. It's all political.

This overt connection between individual location (note here the explicit reference to both race and gender), everyday experience, and the political implications of individual acts ran through multiple participants interviews, for instance, with participant #08:

In terms of my own journey and learning about whakapapa and reconnecting back to my Māori history and then acknowledging the outright poverty that some of my extended family actually lived through and watching videos of homeless people in Christchurch and realising that your aunty is one of those homeless people who got up and spoke. That kind of forces you to start thinking about how you can effect change and do things differently.

As with the prior section in regard to political articulations mediated through primary relationships, this participant is connecting personal social location, and the locations of others relative to her own, as central to how she does political participation, through the imperative for change. Again, this is a narrative construction of politics that is positioned overtly as antithetical to politics as status quo. In such a construction, voting becomes not so much a political behaviour, but rather a political tool, one amongst many, to achieve a political end: namely, change. As such, this contextualises the decentred nature of traditional political forms.

Again, the everyday embedding of change as a core part of political participation, this time from participant #25:

If I think about in the last few years, thing[s] that have like lit a fire under me, I think things to do with racism and Māori culture in New Zealand, and Te Reo Māori, is stuff that I'm pretty keen to get sorted out, and that's largely due to the fact that I have a four year old now, and he's part Māori, and if we could just all get this sorted before he becomes aware of it.

As with the prior chapter on primary relationship mediation of political experience, the articulation of the motivation for political change here occurs through this woman's construction of her son not just as a locus for change, or a reason for political change, but what gives change meaning (and hence political participation as change). Further to this, from participant #04:

I think it's anything. I mean, it's from waking up in the morning, I think that is also because of my own lived experience. That actually everything is political. I filled out some application for something the other day ... I literally said 'I am Samoan Māori, I'm a Samoan Māori woman, do I need to say more?'

And she goes on to say:

I think for many people like me, or who are from any minority group of people, the challenges that we face every day are in your face all the time. There's no reprieve from them, they're kind of ongoing and a lot of the effects are of those are enduring.

What is being constructed here is not just a location and awareness of self as a locus of political forces, but also an intersectional construction of multiple identities determining not just the experiences you have, but also how power operates across them, and determines different outcomes of people, not just as individuals, but also as groups. This is the construction of a political context as everyday reality, and which thus recasts political participation as not merely something you do as a form of participation in society, because that occurs a priori as these participants state, but rather as something that addresses what are seen as problems to be changed or solved.

But how is this everyday enactment of politics performed? If 'being political' is something that is at least in part done through everyday existence, then what political behaviours might be observed? Part of such can be seen by this from participant #02:

I think it's the kind of typical Millennial multitasking, I generally just have [Twitter] open in the background, I might click over to see what's happening, it's certainly how I know when breaking news is happening, because I don't tend to be looking at news websites ... so that's kind of how I tend to know what's going on and be linked to stories, and see what conversations are happening, so I just keep an eye on it.

This way of engaging with material, and discussions, as not a clearly delineated activity separate from everyday life, but rather intertwined with it, was something that cropped up repeatedly in the interviews I had with participants. They would dip in and out of being politically informed as they had time throughout their days. Participants who were mothers talked not just about interpreting the experience of motherhood through a political lens, but also how they could maintain political engagement while parenting. A number of my

participants mentioned being up throughout the night with children, and being able to access social media, or articles, on tablets and smartphones alongside catering to the needs of their children. What they describe is dipping in and out of political issues as they needed to, as they had the time. Hence, not only are ‘everyday’ experiences seen through political lenses, but political behaviours are not within periods distinct from the everyday as practices; rather they are interwoven. I will touch on this further in this chapter around the centrality of an ‘issue-based’ approach to political participation; however, for the purposes of this chapter the pattern here is one not of separate spheres but a more nuanced and complex perspective that is critically engaged, empathetic, and tactical.

6.2 Being Engaged

This emphasis on a more nuanced approach to what counted as political behaviour came through when participants talked about how they saw being engaged. For instance, with participant #06:

I just think voting is the result of being engaged, right? People who are engaged in political conversations, people who see the connection between policy issues and their daily lives, people who feel like they can see how policies change, and political parties change, vote. That's the votes.

In other words, voting for this participant is not so much a form of political participation, as it is a symptom of such. For her, engagement is the more important metric of participation, or involvement in politics, and that it is what motivates people. Note also that she articulates a relational approach to engagement, where things such as conversations, connections between policy and self, and witnessing causal change relationships in parties and policy generates motivation to do things like vote. The same participant also says:

This generation of young people have low[er] membership of local parties, than previous generations of young people ... I think there was a time when joining political parties, at university, was sort of a part of the political action, of young people. And I think these days you're probably more likely to [join] Peace Action Aotearoa, or, you know, Action Against Poverty Aotearoa, or you know, something like that, or even, Greenpeace, or Amnesty, or Action Station for that matter, or 350doc.org or Generation Zero, I mean it's sensitive issue-based movement.

What she is arguing here is, in combination with her previous statement, that engagement occurs directly with the issues, and not via an intermediary of a political party. The organisations she references are for the most part single issue, or tightly focused, political groups, focusing on a lot of direct action and engagement.

But it is particularly this dipping in and out, and relational engagement, that my participants focused on as political behaviours. Participant #01 said the following:

It is a way for me to practice my communication skills; can I turn a complex idea into a simple one and if I can explain it in a thread on Twitter – a complex thing like social investment or whatever – then that is a good thing for communication. Also, I do it. Why else do I thread? To simplify complex ideas and to practise ... you know, just to get my ideas out there as well. And sometimes they will get picked up on and I get a lot of conversation around it.

Note again the focus on conversation and communication. Being able to engage with an issue to the level necessary to summarise it online on a forum ('threading' on Twitter is a technique of replying to one's own tweets so that the limit on characters can be circumvented, but also then remain within a linear narrative), is seen not just as 'practice' but also as something that is done more regularly. The end point of this is situated as a conversation around that thread. Placing ideas 'out there' in communication features quite solidly in virtually all my participants' interviews, where engagement continued to be defined relationally. From participant #02:

I would say it makes me feel, I mean especially now that I have quite a few followers, and I know my tweets get shared and retweeted, it certainly feels like I'm able to contribute in a way to, to political and to society, and to how we think about politics, which is very different from the people who are doing kind of on the ground organising, but I see them as being very much tied together.

Note here how the participant connects thinking and talking about politics with what she terms 'on the ground organising' in differentiating, but not valuing each differently. She does not go on to say if one is more worthy or compare such, but rather seeing a multiplicity of efforts counting as participating politically. So, what she is constructing here is a far more complex arrangement than merely a ranked arrangement of political behaviours. In fact, as with the issue-based approach to political behaviour in terms of having the ability to dip in and out of

politics depending on an issue's salience, we also can see such occurring along multiple axes of different behaviours, not merely returning exclusively to one behaviour. Notice also the connection between 'on the ground' and the work she sees herself doing, both being interactional with other people. This is the relational aspect of engagement that I mentioned above. Continuing in this vein, the same participant said this about how political participation tends to get talked about:

A very old school model of organisation, it is about geographical branches, it's about attending the monthly meeting, passing minutes of the last meeting, doing the finances, what are we going to plan for the bake sale next month, and I mean I've been a [party] member; in [electorate] and it was just, that's not what interests me about politics, is not doing the bureaucracy of are we going to go to the school fair. It's never felt like an avenue where I could push policy change the way I can push policy change online.

Again, there is a focus on political engagement being associated with change. More than that though, the construction being made here is around a juxtaposition of participation in a political organisation vis-à-vis what she feels is meaningful political participation, namely influencing change, influencing policy. Further, because of that juxtaposition, she is defining those traditional party practices she listed as not being about change, as being disconnected from the politics that is meaningful for her. Given that such a list is often part of traditional metrics of political participation (see section 3.1), approaches to encourage increases in such may be lacking.

This emphasis on expression as engagement continued across my participants, such as this from participant #03:

I remember when you got the news from the radio or the telly instead of anywhere in the world where you can immediately read it – that is amazing.

She continues:

The things that I am reading on Twitter that people are putting up that I wouldn't necessarily other have seen it, or it is giving me more information, I am more inclined to have conversations with my family about stuff because all they are hearing is the morning report, but I am hearing things from 20 different news outlets and following it up and finding first person accounts of things.

Again, note the import given to connecting information learnt to what is done with it; namely here changing the minds of, or at least gifting more information to, those perceived as having less of such. This participant sees gathering information, from multiple sources, and, importantly, being able to disseminate such to others, as how she does political participation. As with the previous chapter, and others in this chapter, not only is personal experience valued as a lens through which political information is processed, but their primary outlet for being political is through connecting to others (in this case, the family members for the participant, though other participants also talked about speaking to co-workers or neighbours based on perspectives and voices they had read/heard online).

It should not be surprising then that a particularly New Zealand construction of political participation was the use of Te Reo online, and how many participants mentioned this. As an example of the interactional nature of how political participation is constructed by my participants, and the direct impact nature of what they define as meaningful, it is particularly salient to mention this, from participant #03:

Another thing that is so exciting is seeing Te Reo on Twitter and being used and maybe we will end up with this strange blended language which is beautiful and that is exciting because it doesn't happen in my generation verbally ... And I think that is really healthy for NZ and I think that the more we have Māori spoken on the radio and the more that people are using it in emails and the more that people are incorporating it into their use of social media, the more we will become a truly multi-lingual country.

And from participant #08:

So there is a lot of stuff there in marae and Māori and Iwi and Hapū that they don't want to discuss online, but part of my conversation that I am trying to talk to this about is actually that we need enough online to be able to connect back to what we refer to as our 'lost children' – our lost tamariki. Because everyone has gone urban and we have these people who are Māori who don't believe they are Māori or don't deserve to be Māori and they really want to get back in touch with their marae, and they just have no idea of how.

And participant #07:

That whole identity crisis for Māori, especially when you can pass as Pākehā, is very ... in Māori environments we tend to not speak up and I think from a Twitter perspective that has been huge, because connecting with other Māori who feel like they are passing-privilege and have been able to go 'you are valid as you are and you have a right to your own Māori heritage'.

What these three participants (and others who also brought up similar understandings around Te Reo and te ao Māori issues) have in common in these quotes is not merely the connection of Māori to politics, but, as mentioned above, the direct connection of change to what they consider political behaviour. Further, however, note the relational focus in both these quotes as the core engagement activity for political participation; getting others to be educated through the necessity of discussion (something I will touch on later), and then changing behaviour towards ultimately systemic goals. In addition, a connection between everyday actions (whether this be the use of Te Reo words online, or location of residence for urban Māori, or passing-privilege) and the political ramifications of such must be noted in that it is being articulated through the experiences of Māori (as multiple participants mentioned this) and their intersection with New Zealand as a nation.

6.3 Discussion and Debate

This centrality of discussion and debate to political behaviour is not surprising, given that the participants for this research were solicited from a medium like Twitter, which is a primarily discursive medium. However, even given that, my participants consistently centred discussion, and to a lesser extent debate, as central to their conception of political participation.

The internet and social media in general has made me much more confident about being a political thing. And those things that I thought – I think I believe this or I think that is wrong or I think that is right and we should do more of it – I am finding myself in an increasing group of people who are like minded and we can have those conversations and it boosts my confidence and it helps me learn.

According to participant #03 above, having 'conversations' online has actually increased her confidence in being political. This kind of construction was quite common amongst my participants, whereby they saw their ability to articulate political arguments, and understand/learn political topics as crucial to their ability to participate in politics. From participant #12:

Without those spaces like where, you know, I could start my own blog and then ‘oh ok it’s been shared in the thousands, oh now the tens of thousands’ maybe what I’m saying isn’t insane and I’ve got a point. You know what I mean? Without the confidence building that that gave me there’s no way I could be as pushy or bolshy, or demand a platform.

This direct connection between confidence and discussion, being able to have their own voice, to listen and speak, occurred repeatedly throughout my participants’ interviews. For instance, from participant #09:

I think that political discussion in general, not necessarily with the political parties but about different ideas is really important, and I think it has to be ongoing just between normal people. So, I’m not sure if anyone can make it easier, it’s just something that has to happen or everyone’s ideas can be stagnant.

This concept of not just how crucial discussion is, but also the injection of new ideas and voices, which this participant references, is something I will touch on next in Chapter 7. Learning from voices they felt they did not hear as much from elsewhere, was something that was mentioned again and again:

It’s created this, you know, opportunity for a diverse range of voices, who never really have been given platforms, in the traditional owned media model, and whether those are people of colour; indigenous people, or women, gender queer people, you know a while range of people with a disability. So, there’s a wider range of voices who can just say ‘do you know what? Fuck you if you won’t give me a monthly column, I’m gonna write.

Again, following on from the previous chapter around the empathetic imperative, participant’s (#06) perspective is coherent with such in that they are centring the inclusion of the voices of others as crucial for political participation, and seeing a multiplicity of such as a positive for politics. I shall address this in Chapter 7 around the construction of ‘bubbles/echo chambers’ (i.e. where a high degree of homogeneity politically exists within one’s social/political networks) and how different perspectives are seen.

However, while discussion and debate are seen as crucial for political participation amongst my participants, there was considerable recognition that not all discussion was considered constructive:

I don't have to look for trolls; there they are. I don't have to look for things to be offended by; they're right bloody there. What I have to do is filter out all the stuff, all the trolls, all the big egregious bullshit that's going on, or otherwise I'd never get anything done.

And upon query of whether or not this was the same offline or online, this participant (#23) replied:

In a way I can't do offline I mean. But then again, you know there's egregious sexist, racist, bullshit whatever going on offline all the time. The sexism I tend to let slide, as much as I don't like doing it, but you know some battles are worth fighting. Racism, however, I will call out every damn time, you know, because that's privilege talking.

What this participant is talking about is a negotiation of speech. There is both a recognition of axes of oppression, as well as the necessity to remove oneself from such in order to participate in meaningful ('otherwise I'd never get anything done') discussion. Further, there is also a recognition of the negativity of debate and discussion occurring across mediums, even given that the negotiation of such is different in each. Particularly, as this participant continued on in the interview, there was a tendency to paint the online negotiation as something they felt they had more control over than offline. Other participants also spoke on the trade-offs they had to make online (#12):

I mean, you know, some people say dumb shit and what not, but I think it can be a space. I mean, obviously there are pile-ons and it can get toxic, but I do think it is like a space that you can actually have some pretty good discussions and find like connections worldwide.

And (#10):

We will say to people 'you don't owe anybody your attention, you don't have to educate that person, you don't have to ...' but if they're coming up to you and they're hostile, saying 'well show me, prove it to me, tell me' you know. They actually don't want to prove it they just want to argue and make you feel like shit, so block them. You don't own them attention, you don't owe them space on your timeline. And that's really powerful and it's not something that we're generally taught as women.

What both participants #10 and #12 have in common is articulating both the same importance of political discussion to being political as has been the theme above, but also the way this is quite conscious in being a necessary negotiation of online negativity. It is apparent that these women consider the trade-off of the negotiation worth it for what they gain politically (otherwise they would not advocate for these strategies to deal with the negativity), but they nonetheless see such negativity as a given, and virtually all my participants mentioned its existence too.

6.4 Being Informed

While discussion was seen as central, there was also considerable talk amongst my participants about the importance of being informed, so much so that it was amongst their top statements when it came to being asked about political behaviour. For my participants, being informed about issues was not just something they considered crucial to being able to articulate and make decisions politically, but also something they were conscious of how they had to manage such:

Keeping up, you know, what are the issues, what's coming up, you know like it's a newsfeed, very much that's how I've curated it, you know people who will keep, people who are keeping me up to date on, and you know Radio New Zealand, you know the various groups that will say, that will link to news items and Al Jazeera and Agence France-Presse I follow, and so I mean I know that's external, but occasionally it's New Zealand news, and the Guardian you know, so it's keeping up to date, with issues of the moment.

Note here from participant #24 that the first reference point for being informed is the sharing done by other people, so she specifically ensures she follows those people. Again, as with the previous chapter, this is political behaviour mediated through primary relationships; she looks for those people she knows will provide good information to her. That is not to say that she does not look elsewhere however (as she mentions specific direct news sources that she has

selected herself), and other participants mentioned following specific journalists they trusted as a kind of intermediate option between the two (from participant #06):

Over time [I] sort of immersed myself more in working in political and social issues and human rights issues in New Zealand again. I started following a lot more New Zealand journalists and commentators, and community leader[s], and you know representatives of groups or organisations doing interesting work.

The overall narrative here, alongside the centrality of being properly informed (quite a number of participants spoke up about their reticence towards speaking up or getting involved when they felt they did not know enough about a topic, or when they felt they were not sufficiently personally located within an issue), was this conscious curating to ensure they stayed politically informed.

However, there was recognition that this curating could have negative effects, such as this from participant #21:

I think it's important to, yeah, not be in a bubble and to make sure that your opinions are as informed as possible.

And from participant #25:

Honestly I think Twitter is probably my main news source, so the kinds of stories and headlines that I am exposed to is probably partly, well a lot, dependent on the kinds of people that I'm following, and there is definitely the Twitter bubble.

Further, from the same participant:

It's probably my primary means of, you know, news. Having said that it's not ideal, but I'm lazy I guess ... so it's not an ideal system, and with any sort of curated timeline, you know it is heavily skewed towards, you know, my view of the world, based on the people that I'm following.

As such, you can see how my participants both saw the power in a curated timeline of news sharing, but also the drawbacks. Many participants thus spoke about ensuring a diversity of voices in their feeds, but it was a measured and considered approach rather than a wholesale openness. I shall go into this in more detail in the following chapters when I specifically look

at how these bubbles are managed and constructed, but here the salient narrative is one of balancing the value of information with an understanding that curating can easily become narrow (participant #20):

I mean politics has always been about information, it's just that the means for getting the information has changed. And that has positive and negative effects.

And from participant #15:

I mean, it sounds dumb but it's almost like just having that discourse, having that knowledge, does change things. I'm not saying awareness is everything, but even knowing what people's issues and problems are around a certain thing.

So, you have a combination of the centrality of information as a part of being political, and this is considered so regardless of being offline or online, with an acknowledgement that there are consequences to information and the need for those to be managed. However, that management is not merely one of having all opinions or perspectives being considered equal, rather there was assessment done of if a new voice or perspective was contributive:

If there's something coming out that's related to health, I'm like, okay cool, that's something I can engage with, that's something where I do feel like I'm you know, well informed. And I feel like my participation is going to, yeah, contribute in a positive way, rather than derailing the conversation, or rather than just like taking up space that actually other communities should need.

This assessment is done (as with this from participant #21) with an interactive eye of both contributing themselves politically to the informing of others, but also assessing both whether they can contribute, or even should contribute, through acknowledgment of the power imbalances of those communities and voices that have less representation. As such, being informed was not merely seen as a passive receptive political activity; it was something to be engaged with, curated, assessed, and managed. It was also contributive, with participants feeling the information that was available should also be something that they should contribute to.

6.5 Reading and Listening

Following on from the previous section, the centrality of reading/listening to the participants in this research (which given the nature of my participants should not be a surprise) is a logical extension. Why this warrants particular mention here is that in traditional political science understandings of hierarchies of political participation behaviour (such as those discussed in Chapter 2) such as reading and consuming ‘news’ (or the like) are seen as of lower status than more conventional conceptions of political behaviour, such as voting, and organisational involvement. However, for my participants, reading/listening (given the online nature of much of this behaviour, the two were effectively conflated, and sometimes my participants overtly used ‘listening’ in place of ‘reading’ for written material) was given considerable import, more so than its position on the traditional ranking of political behaviours would warrant (for more on this see Chapters 2 and 9). Further, as has been mentioned previously in this chapter, the forms of political participation that were traditionally ranked higher, such as voting, were given by my participants more of the status of a base level of political participation, the start of political participation if you will. They were more of an ‘of course’ than an overt example of being political. Rather, above such, things like reading and listening took precedence, as more active forms of political participation:

Often what is in the news, I will just pick up on what people are currently talking about. That is the best way to get traction on an issue – if there is current[ly] a conversation around a policy then I will just start talking about that policy and what I think is good or bad about that policy.

Note the emphasis from participant #01 above on the active engagement with news, and its connection to gaining political ends (‘get traction’). This further connects back to the previous point that what carries salience for my participants in terms of political efficacy are things that directly connect back to a goal. But what might this actually look like as an example? Participant #08 gives us such:

I really appreciate the people who can just read policy and board documents and dissect it and ‘that means this and in this scenario you would not be able to this, or this is against human rights here’. Then you can put it into those arms and that personal story, then people can understand it and say ‘that’s not right’. Whereas it is very confusing before then.

So, a big part of reading as political behaviour for this participant is then doing something with what you have consumed. In this particularly it is using your skill to take apart policy (note also the implicit connection between being political and policy; they are not constructed here as separate things). Further, as with previous sections above, note the use of the empathetic imperative, with the use of the personal story as a translation vehicle for understanding. Reading and political behaviour thus becomes a collaborative endeavour, where political behaviour is not articulated as a single individual's action. Participant #15 says something similar:

There are certain people who just reading what they tweet, and what their views on current affairs are, helps refine your thinking around it.

Again, this shows the collaborative nature to reading. This then goes to what participant #04 is saying here:

I mean for me I'm a headline reader. I'm not a, I don't ... you've got to try really hard for me to read a think piece, but for me I don't watch TV so I don't see the news, I don't read newspapers. So for me if it's not on Twitter I didn't know about it in terms of news.

For this person, their reading is very tightly (more so than my other participants I would say) restricted to what they see on Twitter, in terms of headlines that are shared and what is said on the social medium about those articles. Hence, for this person, their political activity around reading is very much mediated by the collaborative aspects that my participants above mentioned.

One of the constructions made was listening to what people wanted, what resonated with those one interacted with, for instance from participant #01:

The designing of the policy can be completely separated from the lived complex through the experience of being a person and that has changed a lot. I started very much as somebody who probably had a real dogma about evidence and quality evidence and good science. And the good science aspect of what I do hasn't gone, but the dogma has gone and what has been placed on top of that is how important it is to centre people and their experiences as opposed to centring the evidence or the science.

Here we have a number of narratives being intertwined, particularly the empathetic imperative I have mentioned with the shift of what is considered the more traditional ‘evidence-based’ approach to policy to one centred around experience and people’s lived understandings. Moreover, you can trace what she is seeing as a positive progression of her approach to politics and policy by listening to what her audience was feeding back to her as helpful. Further, she says, this is not just about listening to argument, it is also about listening to emotion (see Chapter 9 for a deeper discussion of this):

There are a lot of angry people on Twitter, and I think that has validity as well. I think for my personally, I know that in my work, anger doesn’t work to change people’s minds. However, in areas where there is social injustice, for example, and people have lived experience of essentially being subjected to massive social injustice over a long period of time – and even over generations – anger is both useful for them personally, but I think it is also a useful tool in civil society. How that anger is expressed will define how useful it is and how much change it gets, so anger can be expressed in different ways I think. So that is a valid tool.

Again, as above, the connection of validity in terms of something being political participation is its link to change, and how it can be a tool towards change. This quote from this participant uses that as a measure for what is valid, but also recasting anger as a valid expression of political reaction, given this participant’s direct connection of lived experience of a political issue (social injustice) to emotion as both useful on a personal level and useful on a political level. This participant is casting personal change, personal capacity to deal with the impact of a political issue, as also a valid outcome here. Further, she is constructing herself listening to such as a development in her political life.

Others also reflected on emotion and how it not being listened to had political ramifications, from participant #22 on discounting emotion:

I think it almost exacerbates your mistake in a way. It makes you, you know, like it would stop you learning and makes you look dismissive, and if you dismiss social media, you’re kind of, you know ... huge swathes of the population take it very seriously. Social media is really important part of their lives, and to dismiss it I think is, yeah, you’re kind of saying ‘Oh their judgement’s wrong’ aren’t you, you know?

Similarly, from participant #23:

It's not just millennials being mean to that poor Sean Plunket. I'm probably about of an age within a few years. But I honestly think the way that he, and a couple of others, go around provoking a reaction, leads to a lot of people to discount the value of Twitter as a political tool or voice, and honestly; dude, you have an opinion, you have the right to express your opinion, go right ahead. I also have the right to tell you how I feel about your expressing of your opinion.

Continuing on from the quotes above from participant #01 on the importance of listening to how others experience political issues, these participants see the importance of such not just in themselves listening, but also others they see in positions of power (such as within traditional media) also taking the time to listen, and not dismiss because of where the voices come from, or because of the emotion in the reactions. Further, from participant #23 particularly, she speaks of how some intentionally create an emotive reaction in order to be able to dismiss something substantive in that emotion. The act of listening as political behaviour here includes the way in which voices are denied.

This particular point, namely which voices are heard, was something that cropped up time and again in my participants' interviews. It is something that I will mention in more detail in the next chapter, but some of my participants saw this as a very political action they could take, not just in terms of listening to what underrepresented voices had to say, but also in insuring they were heard by others who might not have heard them, from participant #02 for instance:

I also see a use for not just for my own content, but for being a signal booster, for being part of the audience, knowing that even if most people who follow me will already know my views on drug reform, they won't need me to tell them what the Drug Foundation thinks, but if the Drug Foundation is then going to media and saying 'here is a story we'd like to place', they can use it as a kind of indication of 'people support this' or 'people are interested in this and here's why you should run this kind of thing' so it's still all very very tactical.

The use of 'signal boosting' here is seen as a political tool to construct awareness so that a certain perspective is seen where it might not otherwise be seen, or have the same impact. Again, as above, there is a direct connection between political participation and change or impact as an assessment of value for that participant, and how getting others to listen to a particular narrative is a goal in that regard. Understanding which voices are being emphasised,

and which are not, is an overt narrative here. This is reflected from other participants as overt political goals, not just in terms of individuals, but also for groups, like for participant #19:

I kind of wish there was less male commentary on New Zealand politics and a bit more new women commentary, female commentary.

Further from participant #20:

I guess in the last few years I've stepped back from [always having an opinion] you know, and that's become, you know, as I've developed my own knowledge and understanding of my place in the world and you know, and I choose to amplify other's words now rather than ... you know, unless something actually really directly affects me, I will, whereupon I'll comment on it.

Both these participants are overtly connect their understanding of their social location (see Chapter 3 and the discussion around intersectionality) and its intersection with political issues, and whether or not their voices, or the voices of others, get heard, and further what could be done to ensure the appropriate voices for an issue are the ones that are foregrounded: 'Whose perspectives are being heard around political issues? Should it be my own? Whose am I hearing?' Connecting the anger mentioned above to be recast as valid reaction to a political issue to this understanding of whose voices are being listened to, as groups, is something participant #08 emphasised:

What I have basically been told is that a lot of Māori people are grieving and there are various stages of grieving and anger is actually one part of that. So, what we were kind of taught as kids was that 'those angry Māoris'. Well, actually, they have every right to be angry and that is to listen to them and hearing them out because usually what they have to say is valid. So, it is like deconstructing everything that I have learnt as a child really just through normal society, decolonising my brain as much as possible, which is very hard.

Here we have a connection between the silencing mentioned above, the dismissal of voice through anger and emotion, with an understanding of social location, how that intersects with political issues, and what a political outcome for herself might be (the decolonisation of her own understandings), and the act of listening. Pulling from this, another of my participants

(#11) overtly said the very act of bearing witness, ensuring someone was heard and listened to, was a political act:

Bearing witness is important. [Other groups] are putting stuff out there for a reason and then bearing witness to that, and being part of the collective consciousness of that is ... one of the ways that people get depoliticised is because they get silenced. So, I guess, the opposite of being silenced is listening. So, they've got a better listening and they might not be someone that I either need to engage with because I don't need to force myself into their lives.

In other words, this participant is advocating being silent herself and hearing what others, particularly those who can be depoliticised, have to say, as a push back towards the volume more traditional voices (i.e. such as her own) have. This, she says, as 'bearing witness', like the signal boosting the previous participant performed, is seen as political behaviour.

Finally, my participants also overtly wanted politicians to listen. This was not just in terms of whose voices were being signal boosted, but having politicians being overt in displaying listening to groups as part of politics:

So, I think the thing that I do like about this government is they do seem to be listening, and I think actually a really good example of that is how James Shaw is with farmers. He's really listening and hard that they feel defensive and attacked, and so instead of going in there and attacking them, as much as we might want to, he's congratulating them on the work that they've actually managed to achieve. And he's encouraging them from there to like, to raise their game. But in celebrating what they've done; god doesn't that feel better than being attacked?

So, in this example that this participant (#19) is giving as overt advice to politicians (she framed this part of the interview as what advice she would give to politicians), she suggests using a strategy of having groups feel like they have been heard as a political strategy to get behavioural change, to achieve a certain political ends (i.e. 'to raise their game'). She also juxtaposed the wish to attack another group (the motivation towards which she nonetheless saw as valid, which plays again on the narrative of understanding anger and emotion) with getting that group, instead, to do what you would want for a political end. Listening becomes a political tool.

6.6 Issue Driven

One of the largest themes amongst the women I interviewed was how they decided what to be political about. Traditionally (Bennett, 2012) political behaviour tended to be mediated through political organisations and parties, but, as has been noted by many scholars and researchers, membership in such has been falling internationally. As such, there has been discussion on whether or not this is a result of increases in political apathy, or if new forms of political participation were being taken up. One of my participants (#06) also noted this:

There is research ... that young people are sort of, decreasingly interested in political parties, and decreasingly engaged with political parties, but still politically active, but politically active through issue-based movements, organisations, and campaigns.

An approach to understanding this new method of political participation has been under the moniker of ‘consumerist participation’ (see Chapters 2 and 9), where instead of using the vehicle of a political organisation or party to be politically involved, individuals see issues that are pertinent to them as what they would orientate themselves towards, dipping in and out of political involvement dependent on what issue was salient at any one time. My participants were no different in this political participation orientation, doing what I would term ‘nodal shifting’, where you could see nodal arrangements of political issues, where multiple and temporary alliances could be made depending on what an issue was and how they personally felt connected to such (either themselves specifically, or through the empathetic imperative via the experiences of others). It is this combination of connection to personal identity and self, along with the ability to pick and choose involvement, that particularly characterises this form of political participation. Amongst my participants it is the dominant way political participation is negotiated. Speaking of the traditional form, participant #02 said:

[It's] a very old school model of organisation, it is about geographical branches, it's about attending the monthly meetings, passing minutes of the last meeting, doing the finances, what are we going to plan for the bake sale next month.

And participant #24 on the new form:

I just very much have to dip in and out ... it's really just dipping in and out, and just making a small affirmation or a small suggestion, or a no ... you know, that would be really what I'd see.

And participant #07 on what matters to her on getting politically involved:

I would definitely look for their issues obviously, and that is [the] closest thing.

And participant #11 on the same motivation:

I guess obviously it's to do with how closely my values are aligned. Basically bang for my buck I guess?

Similarly, participant #22:

I think there's just key subject areas, you might say. That I would, you know, like this clearly there's going to be an abortion, some kind of law change ... and also, to do with, against white supremacists ... I can remember going, you know, like for, for student fees protests and what not, in the late 80s. And I felt like I was, I was turning up to them as a very self-interested individual and maybe that's ok, I don't know, but I felt slightly like I was, that was the only thing I was protesting. Yes, I would say it's definitely issue based.

Particularly, participant #22 above talked about the tension between getting involved in issues that were personally salient, but then also the narrative here where she is talking about the imperative to care about more than self-interest. So, what we have is a consumer approach to political participation, but one that conflicts with the requirement all my participants felt to experience politics and political issues through the experiences and perspectives of others. Participant #16 also spoke of this:

They touch my own life, now that's a function of privilege, being able to pick and choose. I know that. And all I can really do is to say, well, given that I have this privilege, and given that there are some things that are really important to me. I can signal boost people who are active in other spaces, right? And work on my own things that touch my life.

Participant #16 is also recognising her ability to dip in out of issues is due to the privilege her social location gives her, something by extrapolation she is suggesting others (with less privilege) cannot do. In other words, even though she is acknowledging the self-interest in her issue choices, she is also saying she can see such in her own actions because she can see others that cannot do so: an empathetic understanding. Further, participant #15 noticed another

tension between being issue focused and the empathetic imperative, but she found it difficult to determine the political allegiances of those she associated with, due to each individual being a unique node of political issues dependent on their own personal affiliations of political issues:

I've attempted making lists of people who have a similar theme to them I guess, and you can read that little list and say 'Yeah, that's the information I need'. But it is actually impossible to thread all the right people together or theme the right people together because people are very multi-issue and just because I'm a person that cares about domestic violence and ethnic women, it doesn't mean I'm not also a person that care[s] about environmental issues or cares about parenting, cares about domestic labour. It's very hard to carve out a space that safe and just for you and your gang.

This also touches on the 'bubbling' effect that social media is supposedly inherent in, but this participant is saying that in aligning herself with people, the nodal arrangement of individuals as intersections of issues means there is no grouping of people along lines of commonality that do not cross issues. She feels she has trouble constructing a safe space and/or a common in-group that is bounded, because someone will always have an issue that is pertinent to them alone with the group.

The motivation for this is often articulated as one of having to negotiate a number of things in a participant's life, that they have limited time, or energy, or that it is draining to care about everything they feel like they have to care about, and so are selective on what they can and cannot care about, or can or cannot get involved in, and also in what forms. For instance, from participant #16:

I supposed because of the situation I'm in, where I don't have ... I can't spend my free time going to meetings and stuff like that – and marches, I do a little bit – but I supposed, well, online organising and finding out, you know, forming networks, and so on, as a way of facilitating offline action, is really important. And I do get involved in that ... the argument along these lines, is that, you've got a certain amount of political energy.

And further:

You have to kind of pick your battles, because if you don't you will end up with this massive fatigue, where you'll just kind of like 'I genuinely, I can't, I can't do this, I can't speak out every time' you know?

This idea that you can only care about a certain number of things, or do a certain number of things, was not just something that was articulated as being a choice between political issues, but because there were other, non-political demands on your time. For instance, from participant #21:

I have quite a bit going on, like if I'm studying and I'm working a couple different jobs. And then I have a bunch of voluntary commitments as we, so I don't really have a huge amount of time.

Similarly, from participant #25:

There's lots that's wrong with the world, and you know I'm busy and tired, and I can't get involved in everything, even though I'm kind of vaguely aware that yeah, that's not great.

These participants are aware of multiple issues and concerns in the world, but they are making conscious choices to balance and negotiate these different competing demands based on how much energy they have, what their priorities are in their lives, and how much issues impact their lives. This is not, of course, to say that they do not care about issues that impact others, but, given the constraints they feel that they are under, they want an approach to being political that gives them flexibility, and being able to dip in and out, dependent on what else they have in their lives at any one moment, but also what they feel they can devote of themselves (not to mention, as mentioned in a previous section above, what the direct chance/likelihood for political change is as a result of involvement), is crucial.

But how do they see parties? Speaking as an activist, participant #06 said:

So, it's not that we won't engage with the parties, we are. We will engage with them. We'll engage with them on issues that matter to our members, and on the policies that we think they should be adopting.

So, even when engaging with a political party it is temporary arrangements aligned with particular issues. However, this is not merely a matter of activists doing so; individuals also see themselves similarly negotiating with political parties, for instance, participant #08:

I also try to stick more to the causes because I don't want to get in an us-versus-them conversation because that also drives me bananas ... how do I put it? I don't always agree 100% with the political party, so I have always found being red or blue or green very ... I will fight for what I believe is the right thing to do. Which is where it comes back to the causes, right?

What she is describing here in negative terms is what she perceives as a tribalism between parties that she feels detracts from the issues, the causes, she feels are central. Another participant (#10) spoke of an anecdote where this tension between party politics and issue politics emerged quite concretely for her:

I met a guy at the airport, I think is it [politician's name] who is like [position within party] and he goes to me 'You know what, I used to think that you were [a political party] supporter, and then I thought you were [another political party] supporter' and he goes 'Well, I've just realised you're just a woman supporter'. I was like '100% mate' I said '100%'. I don't support any particular political party. I am quite sceptical about all of their columns, but I'll defend women having the right to articulate a perspective even if I disagree with their views ... I'll defend that, so I am not party political but I'm highly policy political and values kaupapa driven.

Note the emphasis on policy and values, positioned as oppositional to party concerns, something that participant #08 also juxtaposed. Other participants echoed this distinction, for instance participant #11:

I'm not a militant Green or militant Labour supporter, I'm interested in the issues and if I can be of use or if I can be of influence, I'm not really interested in brands and I'm not really interested in picking a hill to die on.

And participant #25:

I've never been much of a joiner, just for the sake of it, it's more, you know, there's got to be a specific purpose.

And, again, participant #18:

I'm not really party political, so I don't have an affiliation with a party ... But I'm not interested in being confined to that because I don't think anyone has a monopoly on good ideas ... I feel like that's more democratic in some ways opportunity for people to advance social change without having to align with a party ... the fact that we have MMP now gives, affords, me that kind of lovely nice medium where I can kind of address, I can vote Labour for a Labour candidate and I can also vote Green on my party vote.

This last participant also spoke about how she was more concerned about particular issues that were salient to her, and the goals that she would like to achieve, and if she got those, she was not really too concerned about which party provided the vehicle to do so. Specifically, she spoke of Māori concerns, and feelings of betrayal from parties she had felt previously aligned with, to arriving at a political position where she was more tightly aligned with particular issues. Given how participants #11, #16, and #25 also saw a conflict between party loyalty and achieving political goals (again, something my participants saw as crucial in determining the worth of political involvement, or, as participant #25 said, 'purpose'), my participants were nothing if not conscious of this consumerist approach to political involvement.

In fact, one participant (#21) made an inadvertent comparison in this regard, harkening back to the section where I discussed the tendency in my participants to construct the everyday as political:

I guess that consumption is political, and definitely when I'm buying things, that is a huge, like a huge thing, that I think through ... Like I will always try to buy the choice that I feel is most ethical and most sustainable. And so, politically, you know, like I feel that is a political act, equally I feel like, you know, I have lots of yarns about politics all the time with my friends, and that kind of thing.

Here, this participant is making a direct comparison between choices she makes as an economic consumer, and how that is a political act, but also how this then immediately compares this to making political choices in political conversations. Other participants spoke similarly about how they intertwined choices about what to consume, when, and how (participant #02):

I think it's the kind of typical millennial multitasking, I generally just have [social media] open in the background, I might click over to see what is happening, it's certainly how I know when breaking news is happening ... be linked to stories, and see what conversations are happening, so I just keep an eye on it and, I know it's not meant to be good for your attention span, but I will tend to just click over every couple of minutes, just to check, you know anything interesting ... and yeah, that's probably, I just incorporate it in my everyday.

And from participant #03:

So it is just kind of ... it is like fast food. I will go to this place and there is X that I can get, and I will get it, and it will keep me occupied in the few minutes that I have got before I go back to writing this draft. So, I will do that generally as part of a micro-break mechanism at work.

In other words, in addition to issues themselves being something my participants felt they could dip in and out of as they wished, and organisations similarly, that very political behaviour itself was also a part of dipping in and out during their day. For them, being political was intertwined with their everyday in the sense that there was not a period of time they were 'being political' and a period of time they were not, but that they flowed between each as part of their lives. They chose when to participate and when not to, and the more flexible in terms of issues and how such fit into all the other demands of their lives, the better.

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter looked to how participating politically is narratively constructed, initially through the sub-theme of how personal experience and small acts were seen as intrinsically political; everything was political, so they interpreted their lives and their behaviours through the lens of such things as an empathetic imperative. The next sub-theme is around engagement and what my participants were engaged by in order to be political: what motivated them, again including an empathetic imperative. The following sub-theme was what the primary political behaviour was for my participants: discussion and debate, reading and listening, a very discursive construction of political behaviour. Further to this sub-theme, the chapter then goes on to look at being informed as a political behaviour, both from traditional media sources, but also from the personal articulations of others. However, this is not being informed as a passive activity; my participants see such as a critical endeavour, something they engage with, and, furthermore,

one again done through the lens of the empathetic imperative. Finally, the last sub-theme is the organising narrative around which all political behaviour was structured for my participants: political issues. Rather than being organisation-focused, my participants saw issues that were salient to their selves, and the selves of others, as the crucial focus for political participation, and oriented how and how much they participated accordingly.

Chapter 7

Being Online: Findings 3

While my participants talked about their conceptualisations and behaviours of political participation as things that spanned both offline and online spaces, and, while for many of them there was no effective distinction, they did have things to say about the online specifically too. They were quite aware of the nature of it, as well as the positive and negative aspects of it. They did not consider themselves passive consumers of the medium (or rather, media, as discussed later in this chapter), but rather thought of themselves as actively aware, balancing, and managing the different pros and cons of being online. This chapter looks to what my participants constructed as salient in terms of defining the impact of being political online, covers how different social media platforms are used in different ways rather than uniformly, how social media ‘bubbles’ or ‘echo chambers’, and how they negotiated the twin tensions of a diversity of voices with online negativity when it comes to being political online.

7.1 Being Impactful

One of the ways in which my participants determined effectiveness of political participation was via assessing how much impact the online spaces they inhabit had in offline spaces. There was certainly a sense that the possibility existed that online politics would not translate to offline action, and that for all the energy they expended there would be no substantive outcome. Given the goal-centric focus for the motivation for being political that so many of my participants expressed in the previous chapters, this offline impact for online political behaviour can be seen as crucial. What constitutes such an impact, however, does vary between participants.

One participant (#02) talked about impact being seen through organising around political topics that may not have had much attention paid via traditional offline political expression. Specifically, this participant mentioned the rally ‘Stand Up For Women’ that was organised online to oppose a leader of the ‘Return of Kings’ online group who was hosting a number of events worldwide. This rally was organised in Wellington through social media as a medium (this participant was involved in such), and the resulting demonstration both got a substantive turn-out and resulted in the ‘pick up artist’ event being cancelled. The participant suggested that this organising would not have been as easy to conduct if meeting in a common physical space. She also spoke about how the very term ‘rape culture’ has migrated from use online to more common use offline, and similarly how the column Bob Jones had in the *National*

Business Review (NBR) was revoked due to backlash primarily started on Twitter. Her argument in regard to the latter was that in the era before the likes of Twitter, there may have been some letters to the editor, but the volume of such would probably have not resulted in a removal of the column, while today:

There are still plenty of other hateful people writing awful stuff for the NBR, but it simultaneously showed the power of Twitter and reinforced the power of Twitter, because now it becomes if Twitter yells at you, you better think about what you published, or who you're publishing.

This claim may or may not be true, but it was nonetheless how she understood and articulated what she considered worthwhile and impactful political behaviour. It must be noted that none of these things above are particularly new, nor exclusively online. However, given my participants intertwine offline and online so much, this is not surprising. Rather, the important point is the centrality of impact in making a choice on what to get involved in, whether that be online or offline or both. Further, the things this participant is listing as political impacts are things that can be conceptualised as outside more party-based political efforts (reflecting the issue-based centrality of contemporary political behaviour discussed in the previous chapter). Another participant (#04) also mentioned this:

I would say it does have like a very tangible influence on politicians and people involved in politics, and the people doing things, but yeah I wouldn't say that social media actually influences an election, no, but some of the sort of more personal stuff, yeah sure.

This participant perceives the impact of online political behaviour as more indirect, rather than direct:

I mean if you spot ... generally what's on Twitter in a couple of years will be policy I suppose. I would say that I don't think it has an effect at the time that you want it to have an effect, but I don't know, I don't buy into the whole social media winning elections kind of thing.

And from the same participant:

I suppose a lot of the things that people on Twitter were disparaged for, are slowly, yeah, becoming the discourse ... like before that Tumblr, and before that Reddit like it's a thing right, yeah, and I think particularly in New Zealand politics you can trace a lot of the sort of initial groundswell to Twitter.

What this participant is describing is online discussion as part of a political milieu having effects in totality on how/what issues are talked and thought about. She contrasts this with what she sees as the flipside of direct impact, which would be a direct connection to elections, and suggests that it does not have this effect. This is interesting, given the place of such things as the 'Arab Spring' contemporarily as an oft-cited moment of both direct effect and/or lack of direct effect of social media on politics, depending on the argument being made. What this participant is doing is effectively taking that discussion off the table as how to assess the impact from online politics and repositioning the area of assessment to indirect impact.

Why this is interesting is in the context of the previous chapters' focus on a direct connection between political participation and a political goal being so crucial to my participants. That is not to say that my participants did not wish for a more direct connection, such as this from participant #05:

Well, I guess I hope that it would turn into direct effect because I mean, in my ideal world, I would, people would be taking offline action from seeing, and I definitely think that happens elsewhere ... so yeah, I think, I mean it is possible [references the Bernie Sander's campaign], I just, I don't think that it's quite translating here yet, but maybe it will, I don't know.

In other words, this participant sees the potential in online political participation (and specifically spends some time citing the Bernie Sanders campaign and techniques used therein) to have direct effects, but thinks New Zealand does not have such. Participant #12 described the indirect effect thus:

I think it's more so the way people talk about things just because more people hear about it, being connected on the internet, more people hear about it so it spreads more. And so it's more just changing the way people look at stuff rather than actively there are more protests or something like that.

What this participant is doing that differs from the others above is not merely distinguishing between direct and indirect effects, and locating online political behaviour as being associated with the latter, but by also questioning the privileging of the former over that latter. She is positioning contributing to a political context of narratives as being sufficient to more traditional political participation behaviours such as protesting.

Participant #14 went further, to talk about how those who have been excluded or alienated from traditional forms of political participation, and how:

You know, to be frank, if you're worried about poverty in your community, and you've seen generations of different right and left governments do fucking nothing about it, then it is a really hard ask to say, let's get involved in your democratic institutions, you know?

She goes on to say:

As opposed to, you know: please talk about this on social media with your friends. Please share our articles, you know? Please help out your neighbours, which is stuff that's already organically happening, and feels a lot more tangibly active, you know, than joining your local branch of the Labour party for sitting with people who are, you know, probably three time[s] your age.

Again, we have the juxtaposition of the historically ranked forms of political behaviour (as discussed in Chapters 2 and 9) with contemporary online politics, but this time with the addition of a recognition of a differential accessibility to those traditional political forms, and what might be done instead. Further, the examples this participant mentions for alienated political participants speak to forms of political participation that have traditionally been seen at lower ranked positions than, for instance, joining a political party, which fits narratively with the previous chapters' articulation of what is being valued as political participation also disrupting this hierarchy.

Continuing with this vein, many of my participants spoke of how traditional political avenues for behaviour were closed to them for a variety of reasons, some temporary, some permanent, and how if they did not have an online political space, they would simply give up on being political. For instance, from participant #09:

I think I'd probably actually be less politically engaged if I didn't have Twitter, as well despite the fact that it uses a lot of energy it also stimulates ideas and discussion that you might want to bring into real life ... I think without Twitter and that sort of form I don't think I'd be as politically engaged offline either.

And then another participant (#11) who had a chronic illness:

Some other people have some privileges that I don't in terms of their ability to access and be a part of political life, physically and financially, and maybe for some people Twitter is an add-on to their political identity ... for me it's both an output and an input and I think it's uniquely that for me because of my circumstances. Other people can go and have a conversation in a pub and that's an input for them and an outlet for them that I don't have. Or they can be an active member of a political party and go on protests or go to meetings or whatever it might be, where these are all things that I can't do.

Both these participants are saying, rather than online politics supplanting offline politics, it provides a space for them where to be politically when their lives would otherwise preclude such for them. In other words, if there were no online political expression, the overall level of political participation would drop, because there would be no political behaviour from these women at all, such as from participant #23:

I wish I could do more offline but there's this whole thing about, dealing with mental illness and ADHD, and only so much peopling I can do in a day or, and sometimes I can go out and do it, and I'll go to a protest, or I'll go to a meeting or whatever, but sometimes doing the Twitter thing is what I can do, so that's what.

This was something that cropped up quite frequently from my participants; arguing that online political discussion and organising allowed them to be political when they could not otherwise be. This ranged from participants who were parenting, and so spoke about having no energy and/or no time to devote to political behaviour as they had previously, to participants whose work commitments precluded a higher level of involvement in political participation, through to participants who for a variety of reasons (such as prolonged illness or psychological conditions) cannot be permanently involved in traditional offline political forms. As such, the online provided either a temporary way to maintain being political while they could not, or simply did not have the energy when they did have the time, or a permanent provision of

political involvement when they otherwise would never be able to be political. However, another participant offered a different perspective:

But you know, like I think that if you, if all your energy is going into working numerous shifts so that you can pay rent, and look after your kids, and be warm at night time, then you don't give a fuck what's gone viral on Facebook, you know.

This participant (#14) is articulating that it is not all those alienated from traditional forms of political participation who can, or will, turn to online political content. So, the possibilities for online political participation to allow those who might not otherwise be involved are tempered by the realities of lives.

Another participant (#16) suggested, however, that her motivation to be political would still exist, and probably manifest in other forms:

I think I probably still would be, but I'd be finding other outlets for it, I think. It would be different, I would probably be writing about it, in print media, you know, that kind of thing I guess.

This participant also says:

Interestingly enough, I mean in some of the work that I've done around campaigning, the thing that seems, I mean the online component allows people to meet and stay in touch and plan, but the face-to-face is still the important part, it's still the thing that makes the difference. Because it just does, that's what you know. I think in that respect online activism is often a really empowering, easy thing to do. It's in some situations, it's incredibly effective, but it also needs to be, I don't think there are many situations in which it's your whole answer. It needs to have an offline component to it as well, to be truly effective.

What this participant is arguing in these two quotes then is constructing online and offline as two parts of a whole. Again, as with previous chapters and elsewhere in this chapter, the crucial element for her is achieving a goal, having a direct political outcome, as an assessment of political worth for an activity, but here with an added intertwining of both offline and online. The participant is not so much prioritising one medium over another, so much as saying that a more holistic approach to political impact should be assessed, as well as a potential for impact.

Given that the political impact of online organising is often assessed solely from the offline, in political participation literature (as can be implicitly seen in the work of Boullaine (2009; 2015) in the Introduction and Literature Review), this is an important point of difference. So many of my participants spoke about online media as merely a tool, something as that was used only insofar as it was useful towards an end, a goal. It was not seen as disconnected from the offline as a separate sphere, but rather intertwined with such, as part of a repertoire of options for political participation and impact.

Further to this point of the interconnectedness of the online and the offline, my participants often felt the need to state during their interviews that they did not feel that their online and offline selves were that different. Participant #11:

The idea of [the] digital divide and where people are online and where people are offline is just becoming less and less of an issue. There isn't a difference for me between online and offline.

This concept that the online was just a part of their lives, just like any other outlet (offline or otherwise), was something quite common; for instance, participant #15:

The way that we interact with people online is very indicative of how we view and interact with people in our real lives. And I'm not just talking about people that we know and love and trust and care about, it's those people that don't matter to us in the immediate sense.

Again, this participant is seeing no distinction between online and offline selves. Note they are not saying that there cannot be a distinction, but rather that how it is practised is such that there is not. It is interesting thus that this participant also goes on to argue a position similar to participant #16 above, whereby she says that it is not sufficient to just practise politics online, but rather as much as possible there needs to be both online and offline effort put in. She does note that this is not to say that solely online political participation cannot have an impact, and in fact does give some examples, including how a narrative around an issue may change and impact the awareness of politicians as a result of online discourse, but that to have significant impact, there needs to be interconnectedness.

However, such a construction of a lack of distinction between the offline and the online in terms of politics is often seemingly contradicted by participants' statements elsewhere. There was

considerable management time spent by participants negotiating how they present on different social media platforms in different ways depending on who they saw as the audience on each, or managing impact from online political discussions on employment (such as with public servants in the following chapter), or negotiating what to speak up on, and what not, depending on negative reaction. These can be seen as managed distinctions between offline and online political selves, which is contrary to what participants argue elsewhere here. Nonetheless, a possible narrative explanation exists here that has a coherency with previous approaches from my participants. Namely that, as with the general motivation to be politically involved via dipping in and out based on political issue salience, my participants are also dipping in and out of various mediums (regardless of offline or online) in various ways, depending on salience to self and general life negotiation. It is not that there is a singular offline self that they then present online, or do not present, as. Rather, their entire political articulation regardless of medium is one of contingency and specificity, and it is this coherency of political behaviour that is performed both offline and online.

7.2 Distinguishing Social Mediums

One of the practices that cropped up quite frequently as a behaviour was the differentiation of different social media platforms, or in other words that my participants used different social media for different purposes. Why this is crucial to note is that many commentaries of online political participants seem to almost construct social media as a homogenous group. One of my participants (#06) mentioned this explicitly:

I hear people talking about social media as if it's monolithic; it's really not. They're all so different, and they work in such different ways. In a private Facebook group can be a great space for organising and it's completely different to, you know, a public Twitter conversation. I mean, there are just so many different ways that you would use these tools, as part of different communication, engagement, organising, dissemination, broadcasting.

One of the things this participant is getting to in this quote is that the different social media platforms work best for different things, when reflecting on them as political tools. For her, the differentiation is about their end goals and use, which fits well with the direct connection between political involvement and goals that has been a theme present throughout this thesis. However, that is not the only differentiation that my participants articulated for social media.

Another large differentiation was who was on each platform, in terms of audience (but more specifically, who that audience was in relation to my participants), with again participant #06 saying:

So, Instagram for me is totally personal. I actually got really sort of; it's not a locked account, and maybe it should be, because I use it in a very personal way, to document things that give me a joy, in my life, things that are beautiful, and I follow all my friends, and I like to see photos of their babies, and their dogs, you know. Like that's ... Instagram for me is like very personal.

This distinction between the personal and the political crops up frequently in the interviews. While initially it appears to be in conflict with the location in personal experience of politics that has been present in previous chapters, the 'personal' construction here has more to do with a distinction based on 'pleasure' versus the more 'work' focus that politics may require. Given the way in which effort and energy were emphasised in the previous section in this chapter, as things people had to take into consideration regarding political accessibility, what participants such as the above are saying here is a distinction between things that are escapist versus things that are rooted in impact and reality. Why this is important for understanding the impact of political participation online is that if you are designing policy around such, then you have to take into consideration which platform people will be most receptive to such. It is interesting to note that, to varying degrees, Facebook, and particularly so Instagram, are defined as places for 'personal' use, but not Twitter:

I used to use Facebook a lot more and that was where a lot of my personal interactions go on; on Facebook. So, if I use Facebook, I don't use Facebook for professional purposes, I use it for personal. So, I have made quite a conscious decision of what social media is for what, I don't want it to cross over.

Here Facebook is defined as a space for 'personal' use (as juxtaposed with 'professional'), and this participant (#01) is emphatic about keeping different social media distinct for those uses. This is similar to participant #10:

Twitter is for politics and opinions, Facebook is for family catch ups and tribals news, so not news generally.

And participant #09:

I think I take a more tactical approach in other social media.

This last participant was comparing her use of Twitter with how she used other social media platforms, and how she felt she had to be conscious about the use of those other platforms. In other words, the distinctiveness and particularity of these platforms is considered ‘a feature, not a bug’ for my participants, and it is something they wish to maintain. This is of particular interest because a lot of the research around the impact of politics in social media has implicitly treated social media in a homogeneous manner, as you can see as a trend in Chapter 2.

However, in addition to which platform is best for which political activity use, and which platform might be best along a personal versus professional use distinction, my participants also distinguished between different platforms on the basis of audience. For instance, participant #02:

Twitter is where you get influencers and political nerds, it's where you find the journalists, it's where you find the gallery, it's where you find the young activists ... and you get the messaging, you get shows like The Nation have their Twitter Panel every week, so they just have two people who are just tweeting on their hashtag while the show's going on. Because the kind of nerds who watch The Nation are on Twitter. They're not going to be on The Nation's Facebook page commenting as the show goes on.

My participants would often talk about the audience for Facebook as being about family, and as such would talk about who the people were that they would interact with, and thus how this would change what they did on each platform. Participant #16 mentioned this further:

I remember there being that statement that if New Zealand were 10 people, one would have a Twitter account, two would have an Instagram, four would be on Facebook, and seven would have used TradeMe at least once, something like that.

So, there is an understanding that not only are the different social media platforms functionally separated and by audience, but the proportions across society are also different. Not that this participant then thought that any one platform had more meaning than the others due to the size differential, as she went on to say how she constructs the relevance for each for herself through the meaning given. This is similarly to how participant #12 also framed import:

I think definitely in the last two years I really built up a sense of community on there, like on this road trip for example I've stayed at many people's houses that follow me on Twitter.

This participant then went on to distinguish this from Facebook, where she said she had a different level of interaction and personal knowledge of people on Twitter, so for her the latter had more import for her because of such. How this connects back, however, is that essential for that kind of community development in sociological theory is the construction of primary relationships, which, as we have determined in the previous chapters, are central for my participants in having political participation that is meaningful.

Moreover, though, what participant #02 is getting to above is an expansion of the concept of different audiences to understanding how this functions across communities, as she continues:

Facebook is where you find ordinary frontline people ... Facebook is how you reach Māori and Pacifica communities if you're online. Because much more than Pākehā they tend to have very tight, but very broad, familial networks, and I found ... we'd put up a photo from one of our sites, and if it was a predominantly Pākehā site like aircraft engineers, it would be, you know, a couple of them give a thumbs up ... and if it was one of the factories or cleaning companies, it was predominantly Māori or Pacifica women, the comments would explode because it was people tagging in their cousins and being 'Oh look here's our Aunty at work'.

As such, we need to understand not only how politics interacts with different social media platforms, but also the intersectional nature of those interactions. This point is something I shall discuss further in the discussion chapter (9) of this thesis, but for the purposes of this chapter the distinctiveness of social media platforms is defined by political use, social use, audience, primary relationships, and intersectional cultural distinctiveness.

7.3 Social Media 'Bubbles'

One of the consistent topics that my participants brought up when discussing political behaviour online was the existence of political 'bubbles' online, otherwise known as 'echo chambers'. This is not really surprising given that there has been something of a wider colloquial concern outside of academia about this occurring, particularly around social media post 2016. However, what was clear from my participants was that this was a lot more complex

than a simplistic homogeneous network concept would suggest. This is not to say that bubbles were not present, for they were indeed something participants almost uniformly stated as being the case, but rather that how they manifested was something a lot more nuanced than the wider colloquial discussion has suggested.

One of the ways in which discussion around bubbles occurred for my participants was in contrast with their offline lives, which they almost consistently defined as being more ‘bubbled’ or homogeneous in contrast to their online lives, such as participant #02:

So living in the northern suburbs, fairly white neighbourhood, couple of religious pockets, but working in the Wellington CBD, it is very easy for me to fall into the trap of just talking to other white people who went to Victoria University on a day-to-day basis. And it would take a lot of effort for me to find the voices of people outside that bubble.

However, while this was a sentiment shared by quite a number of my participants, it was not considered quite this simple, as participant #01 reflected:

For me I noticed my bubbles offline in the physical world were very much social education and ethnicity bubbles. So, I live in a relatively diverse neighbourhood and my children go to a school which is quite diverse, but yet my workplace wasn't particularly diverse and my education, friendship, and social group wasn't particularly diverse; not really anyway. So there were definitely bubbles within my everyday life that I was very aware of that I made a purposeful effort to break down.

Both these participants are positioning their offline lives as things they are aware are quite homogeneous, and want to do something about (moreover, using online spaces to do so). However, the second participant is arguing that this is more complex, in that the different spaces (and one would surmise, the shifting salience of relevant sections of their identity) had different levels of homogeneity in her offline life, and this was something she had to manage. Note also here the construction of homogeneity of ‘whiteness’ being constructed as a point of negativity about an offline ‘bubble’, as this was something that other participants also commented on; however, the same was not said amongst those participants whose ‘bubbles’ involved homogeneity of more marginalised groups.

Furthermore, my participants did not identify demographic concerns as the only thing they were concerned about in terms of homogeneity; there was indeed awareness of simple political homogeneity too. Participant #14 argued, for instance, for a multiplicity of axes along which one can bubble, offline or online, but particularly around perspective:

Different in bubbles in different ways. I think offline is a lot less bubbled in terms of political leanings and party support. I think ... online is less bubbled in terms of life experience. And willingness to share life experience.

This multiplicity of bubbles, across different contexts and mediums, and their intersections, is something participant #15 also articulated:

I think maybe people who think Twitter is so bubbled don't understand that there's actually a plurality of voices within marginalised communities ... I can tell you what I think, this is my experience, but I can't tell you what the Māori view about something is, or the Pacifica view on something is. And I think when you say that Twitter is a bubble, you are too easily homogenising a group of people or a group of experiences ... I think that's why I find that view that you live in a bubble if you surround yourself in people of colour, you surround yourself in queer people, that you just think that they all think or feel the same way about something, which they don't.

What these participants are beginning to articulate is framework of overlapping bubbles, a multiplicity based on different demographics, identities, inequalities, and so on. Part of this is due, according to some of my participants, to the very nature of the likes of Twitter, like from participant #02:

Even though people can self select their bubbles, unless you've got a locked down account, anyone can find your tweet, and people frequently do find my tweets, sometimes I specifically try to draw them in by using '#NZPol' and knowing that there are people who will be following that hashtag ... so I think it's really interesting in that yes, who I choose to see on Twitter can be very limited, I try not to limit it too much.

What this participant is describing is an understanding of these bubbles as porous as well as their overlapping nature that was described previously, that in effect these bubbles are open to some extent; they are not entirely closed. Participant #25 makes a similar point:

Like it's not exclusively the sort of bubble ... there's this kind of, it sort of goes out on the corners and stuff, because one thing that I found, is that you might have like pretty much exactly the same political views as someone, might be very closely aligned, but actually find them to be awful people. And the reverse is also true; somebody might have quite different politics from you, you get along really well because you know they're respectful in the way that they express their difference of opinion, so I try for that.

In other words, it is not per se political perspective that this participant is 'bubbling' herself around (although, later in the interview she does indeed describe her bubble as 'liberal and left-leaning'), but rather behaviour; she is creating an interaction sphere that is populated by those who treat each other in a manner she deems appropriate, or at least tolerable. This was a common refrain from quite a number of my participants: that what they looked for in terms of who they followed and interacted with online was not based on political viewpoint necessarily, it was how they treated others, how they respected other people. Now, it can certainly be argued that how one orientates oneself towards other people, and participants' value systems in relation to this, certainly can proxy to political perspective (Feldman, 2003), but it was not what my participants claimed that motivated them.

Furthermore, my participants were quite overt about their intentionality when it came to ensuring they had exposure to a wide variety of viewpoints in their feeds (though, they all admitted that this had limits for them, as the above suggests). Participant #02:

I do make a conscious effort to follow people who aren't like me, but at the same time anyone can find my tweets, and engage me in conversation. And sometimes they can just be trollish dickheads, and sometimes it can lead to a very interesting conversation.

And participant #10:

Twitter is a place where I can curate my own space and people are like 'Oh it's an echo chamber' and I'm like 'Well, I guess that depends on whether you live in society where your view is the dominant view'. I don't live in that society so I choose to follow people who have similar opinions to me, who make me think, and who debate and discuss things. I don't follow people who I think are dickheads.

Both of these participants speak of deliberately choosing people to follow, to interact with, who hold positions other than their own (participant #10 speaks of both following people who are like her and also those who are not), but also drawing the line behaviourally (specifically, for both, ‘dickheads’). The latter participant particularly relates her curation of her bubble to power inequalities in society, where she as part of a minority group has out-group viewpoints (i.e. here those of dominant groups) as a constant presence in her life. Hence, the intentionality of her act of curation is to balance those in her life. Participant #09 says something similar in terms of how easy offline bubbling can be, and so the intentionality of online bubbling can be a resistance:

Unfortunately, without social media probably you wouldn't get the opportunity to have a dialogue with different people who have a different perspective. That's just how it goes in New Zealand. So, I think despite the fact that you have to be aware of the echo chamber effect and stuff like that, social media is a really good way of meeting people who you wouldn't normally meet.

It is interesting to note that this participant is referencing New Zealand itself as something that lends itself to a homogeneity in social grouping. She also argues that while you can create an echo chamber should you wish (in fact, she frames this as a risk of social media), she also sees potential to resist bubbling that might also be present offline. On New Zealand specifically, participant #13, however, argues that it is more difficult to bubble here:

I think when people say 'Oh there's a Twitter bubble' and stuff, that's certainly applicable to places like America, and maybe I don't think ... New Zealand doesn't have that kind of bubbles because in that same of New Zealand conservatives, I've seen that on a different scale. So, for me, this all feels like very mixed, approachable mixed, communicative, in a way that if I were back in Alaska tweeting about politics there I wouldn't be able to connect with somebody across the country in that same way.

This participant was someone who had lived in the United States and New Zealand, and had experience social media politics in both contexts. She constructed the New Zealand context as being too small to generate effective bubbling online. This scale factor (or rather, the lack of such for New Zealand) was something that all my participants noted when they talked about the particularity of the New Zealand context for politics, whether online or offline. However,

when speaking about the 2014 General Election in New Zealand, participant #14 referenced the opposite opinion:

Not the last election, but the election before, I was really scared for New Zealand. I was so surprised by the results, that I realised that I absolutely have a bubble. Because, you know, when you feel like you have quite large networks and when everyone that you are engaging with personally, and professionally, and sort of on an acquaintance level, on Twitter is voting for the Green or whatever. And they take a massive hit, it's like, actually clearly I don't know what's going on in New Zealand and I don't have my finger on the pulse. And so ... I do think bubbles can be dangerous.

This exchange was actually interesting because at the time in the more traditional mainstream media sources, the Greens were also generally expected to increase their percentage share of parliament in that election, but did not. This participant also went on to talk about that, despite her realisation that she had bubbled her political view on social media, she also said that if there were a way to expose herself to mainstream, or right-wing, perspectives that felt safe, or in a way that would leave her wanting to be online, then she would do so. But she said that there was not, not to the degree that she wanted. So, for this participant, the very act of media consumption is something she puts through a political lens, and her negotiation with such similarly is viewed through such, with an understanding of systems of power and safety.

This idea of the use of a 'bubble' to provide support or safety, as a positive feature of social media, was something that cropped up quite frequently amongst my participants. They saw the more mainstream media voices and perspectives as being more reflective of hegemonies, and providing themselves with a milieu of resistances to such as being part of their political behaviour. From participant #14:

I totally refute some criticism of creating a deliberately curated online space. I think that, echo chambers on social media, as long as you are not just following the people that you went to high school with, is it's not really real ... You know, you might have the same broadly progressive politics, but everyone has different experiences and different takes on stuff and I don't think that there's anything wrong with curating a space where you know that nobody is going to make a racist joke for, you know, your own mental health, and for your safety.

So, this participant is arguing that, for her, bubbles are not just a method of ensuring safety (also note she is also intentionally bubbling by behaviour), but provides a kind of diversity of opinion that is curated to exclude what is considered negative (i.e. that which is racist, for instance). Furthermore, she is contrasting the diversity of content she has online with the offline homogeneity she perceives in the discursive milieu that she sees others as having. Participant #07 also made a point similar to others above:

There never really were bubbles, there were just little places you'd get away from the horrors occasionally. I mean, yeah, no one can really bubble away society.

What this participant is doing is reframing the discussion around the bubbling online as being more of a political act, as acts of resistances to hegemony ('society' in this context). Again, here, as above, the narrative from this participant is that the voices of more mainstream media are something to be managed and engaged with as part of being politically aware. The central point she is making additionally, however, is that she is introducing a concept of power, and that those with less power have less of an ability to 'bubble' (here as a verb) away from the mainstream. The reverse of what she is arguing is, of course, that those who align more closely to the mainstream find it easier to do so.

This balance of resistance and challenge is something that participant #04 sees as crucial:

I think for me it's more, sort of, an affirmation you know it. But also it's challenging in the right ways, so you know, it's an affirmation when you need it, but also challenging and thought provoking from perspectives that don't necessarily always seep into your everyday life.

The central point here from my participants is that the nature of the bubbles (what they are in terms of content) matters. The substantive specificity of bubbles, of what are often referred to as 'echo chambers', in terms of how the bubbles are put together, who are included and excluded, and how they are positioned in terms of systems of power and hegemony, as resistances to (or extensions beyond) perceived limitations to offline bubbles, is crucial to my participants. It is not that bubbles exist per se here that is of import to my participants; it is rather how they are constructed, their intentionality, as artifices of political behaviour, that is central.

7.4 A Diversity of Voices

Continuing with this theme from bubbles, one of the most consistently mentioned aspects of being online that my participants mentioned, was the ability to hear voices and perspectives that they felt were missing elsewhere in both their circles and in other forms of media. Moreover, the ways in which my participants described this was particularly in the context of this political behaviour, and how they constructed their politics. Specifically, they would bring an analysis of power and representation into how they talked about what they were exposed to: whose voices were being heard, whose were not, and thus how their own voices were positioned in such an analysis. For instance, from participant #01:

What Twitter has enabled me to do is to make a really diverse set of connections and that is not just the proof of being on Twitter, but it is through the way that I behave on Twitter. So, it has been a very mindful process of what does observing and listening to other people's experiences feel like and then how I can reflect that back to them.

What this participant is doing is not just speaking to hearing a different range of voices, and then connecting such to how she herself speaks, but also very explicitly looking at behaviour in and how they and they treat each other. Given the connection of bubbling above around what is considered the appropriate way to behave (not necessarily 'civility' but more how you treat others' social locations and identities), this is a crucial intersection of speaking/listening with an understanding of politics and identity. Further, from participant #10:

I want to follow people who are smarter than me and I want to follow people who make me think, who are provocative but not people who are just repeating the same old dominant views that I hear all the time.

Also:

Yeah so you know I have no problems in muting men in particular, blocking them, and telling them to just piss off. And it's like ... I'm not like that in real life. I think people think I must be like that, but I'm not, but on Twitter I'm like 'No, fuck, I don't owe anybody my attention'.

This participant goes on to talk about different minorities she has learnt from, and taken what she has heard/read from them and absorbed that into how she views the world, given how she

also acknowledges that her background is very much as someone that align with hegemonic dominant identity categories. But, above, she is linking a conscious and intentional effort to be exposed to diverse minority viewpoints to the flip side, namely excluding dominant (or at least, what she deems dominant) viewpoints. Rather than framing her actions here as limiting, she is crafting it as resistive. This is also a concept of speech that is wider than mere utterance, and rather is being more interactional. Note how she quotes herself as ‘I don’t owe anybody my attention’, so as such positions attention-giving as a political choice. Part of her political behaviour is in making an informed (or, at least, she perceives it as informed) decision to craft an interactional discursive milieu of political perspectives around power and inequality.

Continuing this understanding of a discursive milieu from not just what voices my participants privilege over others, there is also a conception of where their own voices fit in such; that is, participant #13 in contrasting previous behaviour online with where she is at now:

I was really vocal about those things because I think during those times I was like ‘yeah, my opinion definitely matters’ and ‘people definitely need to hear this’. Whereas now I’m like there are other people out there who are more experienced and who have voices who need to be amplified. Not to be self-deprecating, but just rather than some white chick with an opinion that’s held by many other people I should spend my energy on amplifying other voices.

And further:

So that’s made me kind of scale back on vocalising those things, because I just think as a privileged white girl it matters less what I think and more of how I can help raise other voices. So, I’ve scaled back. I think, maybe just as maturity has come on or more critical thinking has come on.

Nearly all my participants articulated an understanding of why they wanted a diverse range of non-privileged voices, and how important they found such (i.e. not simply a range of perspectives, but understanding the location of those voices in terms of power to be heard). However, in addition to merely differentiating between the sources of what they were hearing, they were also putting their own voices into this context, and seeing themselves in terms of the same power dynamics of speech and social location in terms of identity. Political identity and political speech thus became relational and intersectional depending on the identity categories involved.

Furthermore, the concept of ‘amplifying’ was mentioned not only by the above participant, but by others too, such as participant #20:

I guess in the last few years I’ve stepped back from the you know, and that’s become, you know as I’ve developed my own knowledge and understanding of my place in the world, and you know, I choose to amplify others words now rather than, you know, unless something actually really direct affects me, whereupon I’ll comment on it.

Here not only do we have an understanding of the kinds of speech, and whose speech, are not heard, and how their own speech fits with such, but there is also an act in regard to speech here to privilege the speech of others over their own: to ‘amplify’. This was particularly phrased in this way when my participants would position themselves as relationally privileged in social location in regard to shifting between different identity categories, or particularly, as this participant speaks about, having direct experience. This fits with an intersectional understanding of power and social locations, as outlined in Chapter 2. This latter aspect is of salience in regard to the previous chapter’s material around primary relationships and the import given to personal first-hand experience rather than more abstract policy or politics. Given the prior statements giving more value to politics or policy when it is articulated through a lens of personal impact, seeing the ‘flip-side’ of such being acknowledged as the need to be quiet and listen is itself a political act; we get a conception of politics where understanding(s), and the ability to articulate that understanding(s), is core.

For instance, from participant #06, speaking about traditional media versus online media:

Many others around the world have been about to use these platforms, to have a kind of semi, let’s say an organic not a viral, but an organic scale or reach, that would have been available, to such a small sort of modestly resourced movement at times when you had to get through the gatekeepers of traditional media. So that has enabled all sorts of people to become effectively broadcasters of their own political kind of broadcasts, you know? People on their Facebook page, or on their Twitter feed, are their own party-political broadcasts.

Further:

And so it has created this, you know, this opportunity for a diverse range of voices who never really have been given platforms in the traditionally owned media model.

On first appraisal you can see an optimism here about everyone becoming their own publisher that is not unlike a lot of the language that was seen in the 1990s, opining about the potential for the web to empower all those previously been excluded from media. However, what this participant additionally goes on to state is that this has been used for both good and ill (or, at least, from her perspective) in terms of having negative voices also being provided a platform. Hence, she, and others, place import on understanding how this operates and in effect make themselves their own gatekeepers in negotiating what they consider positive and negative perspectives. Additionally, from participant #12:

You know, the gatekeepers of the writing world, journalism, all of that are nearly all white males. They don't want to let women like me in, or Māori, or like Pacifica, or people that are, you know, women of colour and stuff?

This participant went on to use the example of Roxanne Gay as someone who has quite a large presence on Twitter but has been excluded from a lot of traditional media outlets prior to her rise on social media.

However, participants also spoke about how this can be emotionally taxing, from both the aspect of coming to this position as well as having to gatekeep/curate their feed for what they considered positive or negative perspectives. For instance, participant #11, speaking of her realisation:

Oh crap, I have privilege and I need to examine my own racism, and I don't know anything about trans people, and this is really weird to me, and this is new and different. So, it's not like I was completely 'I won't have anything on my Twitter that didn't challenge me or anything'.

Other participants spoke of this latter point that this participant mentions, that just because they curate their feeds it does not mean the 'bubble' they enact is one that does not challenge them. For instance, similarly from participant #02:

By sharing other people's tweets and content, you can also give people opportunities to meet other people, effectively. So I think it is an interesting thing where people think about social media in terms of bubbles, and what they often mean I think is they're just disparaging the fact that friend groups, who tend to agree together and stick either, and that happens in real life as much as it does online, but there are fewer barriers in terms of the time and energy it takes for me to find other perspectives, with the asterisk that I'm the kind of person who does try to actively find other perspectives.

And from participant #25:

As much as I say it's a bubble, I can just talk to people with completely different life experiences and who are experts in things, and so actually it does broaden my horizons, you know? I have learned so much from talking to a whole bunch of different people, about different stuff and getting different viewpoints, and having a moment and go 'Oh well, that's not really what I thought things were. Oh I have to now try and absorb this into my view of how', ok and you know sometimes you run up against your own prejudices and you have to kind of like go 'Oh whoa, ok' and then you go 'Oh shit those things I've said in the past!'

Again, with both participants here we have a push back against the idea of bubbles being about finding viewpoints that are already held, or do not challenge them, but rather are more nuanced, and involve consciously ensuring that there are different viewpoints present, but are ones that are seen as constructively providing such for them, rather than merely providing different viewpoints for the sake of difference. This is particularly the case as participant #06 states:

The backlash, and the hatred, and the threats, and the ... it's just too much to take from those people. So, you know, you can have one aspect of these platforms almost immediately whipping around to undermine another potential aspect of it.

For her, creating this balance of being challenged on pre-existing understandings, of getting outside of the echo chambers present in other parts of her life, of having experiences articulated to her other than her own, but then ensuring that this is a constructive experience, is more than something she herself experiences. She is arguing that this is something that is experienced by the very nature of the platform as a tension between being open for all viewpoints (and, hence, available to minority perspectives), but yet not replicating existing hegemonic dominances (which is what she, and my other participants, work to ensure their feeds filter out).

At the core of this diversity of voices is the construction of listening as a political act, of intentionality in ensuring that as part of your politics you are being exposed to voices who are perhaps excluded from the discourses that are not present in your other bubbles. Further, my participants explicitly outline the online as a space in which they can do so, such as this from participant #17:

Yeah some people go on Twitter and they tweet something, and go: 'No one replied, I don't get it'. It's because you're not supposed to write, you're supposed to read. They've missed the point, right; it's about finding other experiences and other interpretations.

And participant #20:

Something I've learnt through my interactions on Twitter, I would say that's where I've learnt it, through the discussions and debates I've been witness to; the importance of shutting up and not having an opinion.

This emphasis on listening, amplifying the words of others, of understanding how not just the voices of others are differentially socially located in terms of power and representation, but how your own voice is also similarly located as part of a political articulation is crucial to my participants. Repeatedly and consistently throughout the interviews this emphasis of not merely a diversity of voices, but a differential of voices, and ensuring a particular discursive political milieu is achieved, was central in their discussion of their political behaviour. At the core of this was a concept of speech that was not just about utterance, but was also about listening.

7.5 Negotiating Negativity

However, this is not to say that my participants were not aware of the more negative aspects of online political existence; in fact, they spoke often about how they managed such. They spoke about such online practices as clap-backs, bandwagoning/pile-ons, gaslighting, intimidation, doxing, stalking, 'man-splaining', and trolling amongst other things as activities they had to develop strategies against, or simply run the risk of, in order to be political online. Many participants spoke of how this resulted in self-policing behaviour (i.e. consciously managing their actions), limiting how they interacted online, for instance participant #23:

I have to tell you the whole GamerGate thing a few years ago was chilling. Absolutely chilling. And so there are people and groups I just won't engage, and there are subjects that I'm actually quite reluctant to talk about.

And participant #19:

I mean, you know, I see people. Like I remember when [political journalist] just got absolutely smashed and then she was; wasn't she doxed as well, I don't know? And you know, and feeling personally unsafe, I don't have the beans for that at all, I don't. You know, I've gotta be really careful with my own mental health, and so yeah, I can't put myself in those situations.

What these participants are speaking about is not just the fear of experiencing negative side-effects themselves of being political online, but witnessing others experience those effects directly. These things make them feel they have to restrict what issues they get involved with, and just in general how they get involved. Following on from this is participant #07:

I find myself just scrolling and reading stuff that is soft punches, you know what I mean? And they just add up over the course of the day and at the end of the day I am just like 'ahhhh!'. And so I probably have removed myself from more discourse as a result of trying to filter.

What this participant is referencing is both negative behaviour she is witnessing, but also the toll she feels in seeing negative news pieces, and how that impacts her (she also mentions how these negative news pieces involve both things she considers bad happening, but also bad journalism of issues she finds important). This adding up of small cuts picks up on a point that my participants have mentioned previously; namely, that they feel like they have only a certain amount of energy to devote to being political. Previously, I have mentioned this in the context of other parts of their lives taking energy that they have to balance with their political efforts, but here they also mention this balance in terms of being drained by the negativity in politics, and specifically here the negativity in online politics, that detracts from the positivity they want to contribute to:

It's probably worth it, but it's whether or not I actually have the time and energy to give to that, but in a sustained way, because I don't wanna just start fights on Twitter that I can't finish (participant #05).

Participant #22 on the nature of online politics:

You are coming into people's lives. You're right there. People know there's a live person behind it. I think that's why people go so hurt and upset and even possibly angry ... it's just emotionally intense.

And participant #06 talks about such as a privilege she has that others may not:

I can stay around in a lot of spaces other people won't stay around in. But I get fatigued by the outrage and the alarm and the fear, and I get worn out by it, with all the tools that I have to process and filter it, with all of the power I have to feel like I can still act in the world, despite it. I think it's probably having to a much more detrimental effect on disengagement by people who don't have those tools or resources.

All three participants talk about the energy drain that being political has on them and others, in making decisions about what to engage with, in whether to step up into a fight, in the personal nature of such issues, and what resources you need to have on hand to fortify yourself just for engagement. While previous participants have spoken of the targeted overt consequences of being political online, these three participants immediately above also show that even if you are not attacked in such a direct manner as these, the emotional drain of energy is not conducive to an open participant framework for being political to the degree that they wish it could be, given that they bemoan that the above occurs. Furthermore, given the emotionality of personal relationships, and the preference for personal experiential lenses, for politics and policy, it should not be surprising to find that the flip side of those requirements for meaningfulness in political behaviour resulting in negative outcomes is also rooted in similar manifestations of affect. Note that this was not just those participants who had high levels of political participation; this was also those who had lower levels of political participation.

In order to deal with such potentialities, my participants spoke of a range of strategies that they used. Chief amongst such was the use of blocking and muting on Twitter, but these tools had set of behavioural expectations around them that often meant that some of my participants felt hesitant to use them, at least early on in their history of using social media, but as my participants got further on in their online politicism they were more free to use things like the block option, and constructed it as a reasonable defensive approach.

I'd just block anyone who is being, like, abusive, block anyone who is abusive, and then just ignore most of it (participant #25).

And participant #19:

I'm quite quick to, if people are obnoxious, I will just mute them, or block them.

Further, from participant #15:

I think people just feel more comfortable blocking nowadays. Maybe it's because I'm not that engaged with things that are divisive that I'm not feeling the toxicity of Twitter that maybe a lot of other people are feeling.

Particularly participant #15 goes on to speak further about putting effort into curating her feed to ensure what she terms as 'toxicity' (i.e. the negativity mentioned above) is filtered out of it. This goes back to the point earlier in this chapter around bubble creation in intentionality and around behaviour rather than belief. However, that still goes back to the immediate point about the energy that needs to be expended by my participants to manage and negotiate a political self online in a way that they feel is safe and productive. For instance, from participant #17 in response to a question I asked:

Interviewer: You mentioned earlier about avoiding more toxic interactions online, so how do you do that?

Participant: Settings. So, I actually have replies set that I only see replies from people who either follow me or I follow them ... I don't get the drive-bys anymore, and that's actually been really good. I mean, I'm sure I'm missing things, but you know I'm not missing all that much.

There are multiple facilities across most social media platforms that provide the ability to curate or filter your feed to remove what these participants consider toxic. Interestingly, all of it relies on users actively removing others from what they see, rather than addressing the behaviour itself, which, as noted by my participants shifts the effort to address such from the platforms to the users. A particularly structural example of this is 'Little Twitter' vis-à-vis 'Big Twitter' as described by participant #15 again:

I think it's also really changed because now it seems everyone has a 'Little Twitter': so you have a Big Twitter persona where you kind of can push those updates out and you have Little Twitter where you talk to a select group of people about your thoughts and feelings and gripes.

Specifically, Twitter users are using a feature whereby they can make their profiles 'private' in the sense that in order to follow you other Twitter users must request to do such, and only those you approve can see your posts. As such, when a number of such private accounts are interconnected to one another, a private network is effectively created: a sub-community bubbled for protection (hence 'Little Twitter'). Therein, other participants mentioned feeling more safe to be vulnerable than they would on 'Big Twitter' where the networks formed are much more public and open, and the consequences of being vulnerable were perceived to be greater.

Overall, my participants were quite consciously aware of this dichotomy of the openness and unregulated nature of social media being a 'double-edged sword' as it were. They saw the potential in such to allow voices that they would otherwise not hear, and valued hearing, to be spoken, but also that the potential existed for multiple axes of oppression to be reproduced unchallenged. One participant, #06, mentioned this explicitly:

The flip side of that, there's highly unregulated spaces, in which racist, sexist, xenophobic, homophobic and other kinds of forms of hate, are very poorly regulated and make these highly unsafe spaces, for many of those people who I just named as being able to use them as platforms. So ... you have this sort of incredible potential democratisation of platform, and then these platforms are not safe for many people of colour, people with a disability, women, gender-queer people, etc.

It is this negotiation that is part of what makes the 'bubbles' of social media a far more nuanced context than what more simplistic critiques would construct as being more closed off. These accounts of both bubble or echo-chamber resistance, both offline and online, as well as dealing with negativity, and what precisely is bubbled around, or constructed as negativity itself, make this a far more shifting surface of negotiation for my participants as they behave politically online.

7.6 Conclusion

The sub-themes for this chapter involved what my participants constructed as salient in terms of the impact of being political online, covered how different social media platforms are used in different ways rather than homogeneously, how social media ‘bubbles’ or ‘echo chambers’ are constructed and negotiated, and how they traversed the twin tensions of maintaining a diversity of voices with online negativity when it comes to being political online. This chapter should not be seen, however, as an optimistic framing of being political online. All my participants talked about the work they had to do to balance online negativity with what they considered the benefits of political discussion online. Many participants spoke of often wondering about whether the trade-offs in terms of emotionality and safety were worth it. A number of my participants had moved to less engagement online over time or having to restrict what they would or would not discuss online. Moreover, specifically in regard to the centrality of engaging with different viewpoints via discussion and debate of articles and opinions (in fact, mainstream traditional media was by far the most engaged-with form of media by my participants, whether affirming or critical), such action can be interpreted as more a form of distancing than active engagement, despite its pervasiveness as a manner of participation. Nonetheless, with these caveats, the primary take-aways from this chapter are of the centrality of critical discourse-based political engagement, both with other individuals and of media (whether mainstream or not), and the awareness of how impact of political behaviour online tends to be both indirect but also overt. Further, it shows the import of empathetic imperative as an orientating concept for how one both engages politically online and how one’s politics is framed/assessed as being worthwhile, and finally how complex online ‘bubbles’/echo-chambers were, in terms of managing a diversity of voices with safety and resistances to homogeneity. As I move on to the next chapter, the trend of relationality to others as politics is retained.

Chapter 8

New Zealand: Findings 4

As one might expect, given the requirement I had for my participants to be based in New Zealand, New Zealand itself as topic of discussion within the interviews occurred frequently. My participants were critically aware of the particularities, as well often the similarities, to other nations and cultures around the world that New Zealand had. This chapter looks to the narrative constructions around size and small networks, how the public service was a particular articulation of this, how regional variation manifested, and how they constructed New Zealand political culture, before concluding briefly with a mention of whakawhanaungatanga, and how my participants negotiated the intersection of global and local understandings/narratives of particular issues.

8.1 A Lack of Size

One of the primary commonalities was, unsurprisingly, one of size, or rather the lack thereof. This was seen as having both negative and positive effects, but it was the most common orientating narrative when the topic of New Zealand came up, which, given the context in previous chapters around the primacy of primary relationships, is not unrelated. This was not merely an artefact of New Zealand itself, but also the New Zealand online sphere. For instance, from participant #01:

I think there is a community of Twitter people who are all aware of what is going on, and Twitter in NZ is a small space, so you know – particularly people are aware of that.

This awareness of size was often presented as something that had to be navigated, for positive and negative reasons, the latter being what the participant above is eluding to. But, for instance, participant #13 talked about what she saw as a positive effect of New Zealand's size:

It encourages that kind of communication between two 'average Joes' who like to talk about politics in a way that I think if it were any other country – because I've lived in America and I've lived in Finland – and I don't think you could get this kind of thing in either of those places. I think just because of America: size. You could have that kind of thing in Alaska where people throughout Alaska would be able to communicate on that scale ... I think New Zealand political Twitter allows for you to connect on wider scale with people you normally wouldn't.

In other words, this participant is contrasting the size of a place like the United States with that of New Zealand (or, also, Alaska). Further, she is arguing that the size of New Zealand, and particularly such as evidenced in New Zealand online spaces, means that avoiding different perspectives (i.e. the ‘bubbling’ discussed in the previous chapter) is more difficult than, say, in the United States. Given that smaller size, it means that networked overlaps/intersections are more likely, according to this participant, due to it being more difficult to isolate into homogeneous enclaves than, say, in the US. She goes on to say:

I think when people say ‘Oh, there’s a Twitter bubble’ and stuff, that’s certainly applicable to places like America and maybe I don’t think New Zealand doesn’t have that kind of bubble because in that same vein of New Zealand conservatives, I’ve seen that on a different scale. So, for me this all feels very mixed, approachable mixed, communicative, in a way that I were back in Alaska tweeting about politics there I wouldn’t be able to connect with somebody across the country in that same way.

Again, there is a connection between scale and the ability to have diversity (‘mixed’), according to this participant, as part of your political network. Participant #14 continues on what she considers a benefit of smaller networks: access to politicians:

I would say the one thing that I think New Zealand political Twitter, that’s a bit different, is our size, you know New Zealand is small, and Twitter community is relatively small. Most of our MPs are relatively connected to social media, and so you get, I think, to have more direct access, and more direct conversation with people who are actually making decisions.

This connection between an awareness of the size of New Zealand with access to New Zealand politicians was not just something she noticed; other participants did too, such as participant #18:

I mean, fuck, I was here today walking along the street and I saw fucking David Cunliffe, and I was like, almost went up to him and said ‘oh g’day’. But you know the New Zealand community is ... New Zealand is a small country.

And participant #24:

It is certainly something that's highlighted by a lot of other people; how tiny we are and how incredibly closely connected we are generally. So, I mean, I never forget this, sort of seeing one day, years ago now of course, Jim Bolger was Prime Minister, there he was walking down Lambton Quay at lunchtime with a Farmer's bag. He'd obviously, it looked like he'd gone and bought a pair of socks you know. I thought this is the sort of place we are, and I think that gives us permission.

The narrative construction being made here by this participant is one of small network size and informal relationships being a defining characteristic not just of New Zealand, but of politics in New Zealand. Particularly it is of politics as being horizontal (and via such a construction positions other nations as not). The validity of this perspective may be arguably debatable, but it is nonetheless a comment that a number of my participants made about having access to politicians, both off and online, and one that they valued.

However, while a significant proportion of my participants spoke of the size of New Zealand as a salient point, it was not always seen in such a light, or at the very least both positive and negative effects were mentioned. For instance, participant #02:

I think this is especially New Zealand Twitter; because small population, much more interconnected, people just tend to rehash the same thing, and not move on, or say they've moved on but say the other people haven't moved on, and it's their fault that it's coming up.

Again, we have the statement regarding New Zealand's small size, and again we have a statement about how that translates to tight overlapping networks, but here we also have a statement regarding what can be described as in-group and out-group effects, and the tensions that derive from such. Participant #11 also mentioned the double-edged nature of this:

To think that what happens on Twitter stays on Twitter because [there] could be online friends who were friends IRL [In Real Life], who have said something so horrific on Twitter that I've been like, nah, you're gone, that's it.

Again, we have the connection between small networks (i.e. the likelihood that an online friend would also be an offline friend) with exclusionary practices (this time as practised by the participant herself), and of course the connection to New Zealand Twitter.

8.2 Negotiating Networks – an Example of the Public Service

Moreover, this negative connection of online behaviour to offline ramifications was not just noticed by this participant. Numerous participants spoke of themselves as public servants, or knowing others that were public servants, and the small size of New Zealand meaning that they had to police themselves, what they could say in general, but also what topics they simply could not speak about at all. Participant #03 spoke of this:

I think there are probably thousands of us, thousands and thousands. I mean there are people who have always been unlocked and they are in that situation but they have always self-edited and self-censored much more effectively than I am able to do.

And further:

I mean obviously there is a line ... some of the people I work with had quite big public Twitters, and they were sort of fine with it, they didn't necessarily, usually wouldn't have your surname on there, but it was quite easy, you would be quite easily identifiable.

This participant, and others, talked in the interviews about the sharing of insider knowledge on certain topics as public servants, and having to police themselves on such, given sharing it would identify them fairly directly, given the small networks of who knows whom and what in New Zealand, online political spaces in the country, and the public sector. In other words, as above, the size of New Zealand was a characteristic that my participants who were public servants were consciously and strategically negotiating with. Many of them talked about the passion they felt for the work they did, and their commitment to particular policy areas as driving them. Given that passion, they also talked about how much they wanted to discuss these issues, but they felt that, given the network size of New Zealand, and the commitment of the public sector towards the appearance of political or ideological neutrality, that they had to watch how they got involved, and what they revealed, such as this from participant #04:

I think my online presence has changed a few times, as I got more political so did my online presence, and like most people would have known me via like politics, or you know that was how I was known. But I think, yeah, while I was doing that I was working for the public service, so that was an interesting time. Now I think I'm very careful, you know? I live in a world where I am competing for jobs in a very sort of tight sector, and you know there's politics within the industry that I'm involved in as well, but I think I don't usually go all out unless it's really important, because I just, I can't afford to be seen as that political person anymore.

The interesting thing here is that this participant sees a progressive evolution to a more realistic understanding of how they need to be political online. Their initial drive is to be more expressively political, but given the way in which the industry operates they feel like they need to dial that back in order for their career to continue. Note she is not saying the latter is not necessarily a better way for her to be political, nor the way she wishes to be political, but the shift was something that she felt she must do.

This was all discussed in a context that New Zealand was small enough that not policing such would have negative consequences for them in terms of identifiability, which participant #03 above specifically references. Others noticed this from the outside, such as participant #01 for instance when talking about networking with people in government work:

I am having a conversation with people who work within a policy setting; I would say within government but they can't reveal their identities or whatever.

Note that she is not specifically locating this on Twitter, but that in general political and policy discussions public servants resist revealing their identities in New Zealand, which continues the above.

8.3 The Centrality of Wellington

However, this is not to say that New Zealand was the only level of small network that people discussed. One of the particularities of New Zealand Twitter, for instance, was the dominance of Wellington, disproportionate to the population distribution in the country, online. This was noted by participants quite frequently, and not just around the topic of politics, but across all of Twitter:

I mean I struggle to find people outside of Wellington who are constantly just posting content. You have got your rural farmers and people who are like 'I've got cows, here are some photos' and that is messed up. But it's true. That is pretty much what else is out there and then there are people who have learned, from the regions and from Auckland, who are interacting in the way that Wellington sort of interacts, and have picked up the way that it works. But it is a lot less people.

Note here participant #07 is not just talking about people from Wellington per se, but that there is a particular Wellington culture of online content, a style, that she mentions that people have to adhere to in order to participate. For instance, participant #15, who had moved from Wellington to Christchurch, also mentioned this effect, in the context of engagement online:

I don't know how to describe it. It's a Wellington Twitter thing. I don't have the same leverage trying to get Christchurch people to buy into this stuff strangely ... In Wellington you could always organise your social life on Twitter. Someone would say 'I'm going to Goldings' [a bar in Wellington] and you'd be like 'Yeah I follow this person and we interact enough so I'm going to Goldings too' and then you'd create your friendships like that. I don't get the same sense here and I don't know if it's because that's the way the city's like or that the way the people are like.

What these participants are discussing are unique small-scale networks with characteristics that are not translatable even with the small scale that New Zealand remains in context internationally. Participant #22 also reflected on this:

I would say Wellington, Christchurch, and Dunedin yeah. Yeah, it's interesting, you do notice how Twitter is particularly dominated by Wellington and Dunedin, and the two biggest cities in New Zealand, Christchurch and Auckland are there, but they're not there. I nearly left Christchurch out of the list actually ... Wellington and Dunedin very much so.

Again, as with the awareness of the particularity of New Zealand in terms of size, the way in which online representation, and, given the political nature of my participants' activities online, this also involves their online political behaviour, is disproportionate was of note to my participants. What is emphatic in their responses is that disproportionality exists in how New Zealand Twitter use was spread across the country, and that they were aware of such. However, beyond the realisation that online culture in New Zealand might not be homogeneous across

the entirety of the country, there was no real exploration of the reasons for or the nature of how this might operate.

8.4 A New Zealand Political Culture?

Nonetheless, that is not to say that there was no discussion of the nature of New Zealand political behaviour more generally. For instance, from participant #16:

I think that that reluctance to have these discussions in person is what can make New Zealand Twitter quite strident, because we don't talk about these things face-to-face. That, then people can take on a persona, they can be anonymous, and they can put forward their point of view, and actually in a way because there's like probably this pent-up thinking, and they're not having an outlet for it, they're like, 'I'm gonna have my say'.

What this participant is contending here is that there is a cultural tendency amongst New Zealanders to avoid expressions of conflict and disagreement in person, and further that this tendency is lending itself to a distance that this participant is seeing evidenced in online political discussions (i.e. that distance provided by taking on an online persona). She then sees the online as providing an outlet for political discussions that would not otherwise be occurring due to this cultural tendency offline. She also discusses this more explicitly:

Here in New Zealand we don't talk about politics every day. It's not a, you know, it's not a safe subject. And so it's not to do with the lack of will to enter into an argument, because people will argue themselves blue in the face over stuff like, oh god, I don't know ... whether the 1987 All Blacks would beat the 2017 All Blacks ... if we start having those argument about it, we would very quickly butt up against very uncomfortable things that we'd have to talk about.

In other words, what this participant is arguing for is that New Zealanders are willing to have arguments about things that (in her view) do not really have substance, but will avoid discussions that might require them to challenge their thinking. However, to a certain extent, this participant is stating that the online gives New Zealanders a political 'out' of New Zealand culture in this respect.

Another participant (#21) saw a particular form of politics as being more prevalent in the New Zealand online cultural context than overseas:

I feel like New Zealand Twitter tends to be more political, or politically minded, not necessarily party political.

Why this point is interesting, is that given the focus in prior chapters on being political through the lens of issues, this view of how people articulate and argue for politics in New Zealand online spaces is consistent with such. Again, we have being political separated from party politics (which here, and elsewhere in this particular interview, is couched in slightly negative terms), which is pertinent as a break from traditional avenues of political behaviour (though as mentioned previously, consistent with international trends towards issue-based participation). However participant #23 disagreed with the above from participant #21, at least in the sense that she can see influence to encourage a more polarised approach to politics starting to occur in New Zealand, one that is indeed more tribal:

Up until the last few years there was very much a sense of 'Eh, come on, fair play, fair play' and whether or not we've got this ideal of giving everybody a fair go, and the more that it has come out that people aren't being given a fair go, I think that there is a general sort of intention that making sure that people do ... I find it interesting that there have been various organisations and individuals who have been trying to polarise the politics here, but I honestly don't really think it's taken on as much as it would have in other countries.

In other words, like the previous participant, this participant is casting a negative light on political polarisation, and contrasting that with an approach to politics that is more focused on inequality, or inequity. She sees that concern as being at the centre of New Zealand culture around politics, and she contrasts that with those trying to change or decentre that and introduce a higher degree of polarisation: a tribalistic approach to politics. She goes further, through connecting what she sees as our smaller, more homogeneous population with an ability to feel empathy with others, and empathise with those who have less and want to correct such. Given the previous chapters' approach to bubbles, not to mention the participants in this chapter speaking about their characterisation of New Zealand politics involving small overlapping networks, this could explain why the previous participant was seeing a resistance to such efforts

towards polarisation. Participant #22 also references this, with both negative and positive outcomes:

I might meet someone who is on an interview panel, oh my god. You know like, really, and I think in a very small community, and definitely [NZ city], and just New Zealand more widely, you have multiple interconnections. You know? ... And that's why I just think you have to keep your tone because ... yeah, you're really got to [be] careful.

This is in the context of discussing how her city and New Zealand more generally have small, tight overlapping networks, so much so that she considers it reasonable to think that someone she might interact with might see what she posts, and hence she polices the tone of her posts as a result. This could contribute to the effect participant #21 mentions in terms of resistance to polarisation. However, returning to participant #23, she offers a counterpoint to such:

Yeah, we tend to think of ourselves as a small town and/or as rural people, and we're really not. We're actually massively urbanised, and we've been massively urbanised for more than 100 years, but we still think of ourselves as a small town.

So, it is possible that the perception my participants have of a New Zealand with tightly interconnected networks thanks to its small size might rather be influenced by a wider cultural myth. However, with that said, regardless of how concrete that perception might be, it nonetheless featured in their operationalisation of their conception of politics in New Zealand, and so had quite real effects, as participant #22 mentions above.

Within this context of the possible ramifications of small networks, this comment from participant #03 on the nature of Twitter has salience:

You kind of realise that 1200 people is more insecure. You don't necessarily know how people are going to react ... I don't know, it is all quite abstract.

What she is talking about is the fact that as one's follower count (in this case, on Twitter, but applicable on other social media forms) increases (i.e. the size of your social network/circle), not only does one have less control of it, but it is also a more permeable circle, where one is not aware of who can see what one is posting. Nor can one anticipate how one might construe what one is writing. In other words, this participant is locating previous weightings of the import of primary relationships in both political and online contexts; they are looking for the

certainty (and, as per the previous chapter, meaningfulness) of knowing who those who view their posts are. Note that a large follower count does not necessarily make for an unsafe online political existence, but, given the privileging of primary relationships, it is not surprising that participants would see the lack of such with followers as more uncertain, more insecure.

Participant #08 specifically connected this small circle focus to traditional conceptions of New Zealand culture:

The fact that you can highlight something and someone can come on board and join that cause, and either highlight it or do something about it, and then you can connect with other[s] and they will be like ‘Oh that’s my cousin, let me talk to them’. We are very New Zealand of course; ‘two degrees’.

What this participants is referring to here is the New Zealand cultural artefact/myth of ‘two degrees of separation’ as such operates in opposition to the ‘six degrees of separation’ myth that exists internationally (i.e. that all people are connected to each other everywhere on the planet by just six degrees of separation at most). It is one that constructs the country as more tightly interconnected than other nations (or, at least, is seen internally to be such). Regardless of truth, this should not be surprising to also be reflected in what my participants also consider unique about New Zealand politics, and New Zealand online politics more specifically.

Further, participant #10 directly relates this primary relationship, small circle, connection to the ability to trust and gain meaningful participation politically:

I guess it’s almost like getting news from a trusted source if that makes any sense? You read the report and you can get your take on it and you can read the New Zealand Herald publishing a story about the report being released and you can read the comments in Facebook about people’s views about the report or whatever crime has happened or whatever. But it’s almost like the people that you engage with on Twitter are like your in-real-life friends, and your very close friends. So when they say ‘Hey, this is my view about this thing that’s been released or this thing that’s happened in the news’, it’s almost like you can rely on it to be a good take.

It is salient to note that this participant is connecting not just reading as part of her political activities via primary relationships, but is assessing the validity of those articles as well as commentary via those primary relationships. Given contemporary assessments of the rise of

‘fake news’ it is apparent this participant is using her primary relationship network online to assess reports and articles, as well as what commentary around such might be, for validity and trustworthiness, as well as credence.

8.5 Global and Local Narratives

One negotiation that my participants, given they were New Zealand based, did comment on, was with international political trends and understandings. This operated as not merely a context for their discussions, but also as an actively negotiated-with milieu that any political discussion had to not only engage with, but also be both informed by and inform. Participant #09:

I think overseas politics, in particular American politics, can be very influential on the way people in New Zealand think and act, which is why it's so scary that in America at the moment it's crazy as far as I am concerned ... Just the way some people over here talk about Trump as: 'Well, he's not even that bad'. I'm just like 'What?!'. It brings it back to the fact that New Zealand's not as progressive as we like to think.

It is particularly the US that my participants mentioned the most often as being a part of their negotiation in this regard. Note here this participant uses the US as a general comparison point to discuss New Zealand cultural/political climate, and uses knowledge of the US as way of contextualising what she sees as a problem within New Zealand politics (a supposed lack of progressivism). Other participants talked about comparisons with other nations, such as this from participant #16:

I've always thought that there was a strong kind of conformist streak in New Zealand. That we are much more engaged with the social contract still, in a way that maybe people weren't in like the UK, and like in the 40s and 50s but they aren't anymore.

And further:

The UK, the thing that makes it different there is that there is a far wider gulf between the – first of all, it's the First Past the Post [the straight majoritarian voting system that New Zealand had before MMP] environment which makes it different – there is a bigger gulf between right and left there. You have a much, much, more politicised media ... It's quite mind blowing to me. I mean, the bias here in New Zealand exists for sure, but it's much more subtle, you know?

Here we have the UK instead of the US, but the same use of comparative analysis between political contexts, as well as an understanding of and engagement with the structural differences in political systems (moreover, note the reference to political polarisation that connects back to earlier in this chapter, where New Zealand is characterised as culturally resisting this). Understanding politics in New Zealand, for this participant, is done through understanding in context internationally. However, it also goes beyond this intentional contextualisation, where an understanding of a political issue is influenced by international trends around that issue, something participant #13 thinks has increased in recent years from the US:

I think maybe post-2016, post that presidential election, there's a whole new way of processing and being affected by online political thought.

This is something that participant #01 also sees as increasing, where she frames this in language more reminiscent of the traditionally 'optimistic' framing of the possibilities of online communication, but here with more ominous language:

But the distances are shrinking, people are more accessible to us, we are now more accessible to them.

This is particularly interesting as a moment in time, because the interviews for this research occurred during 2017–2018 period, prior to the 2019 Christchurch terror attack, and the aftermath, when there was considerable focus on New Zealand in that context around gun control in the US, as well as international terrorism and white supremacy discussions. There was an increased focus in the New Zealand media on how online political forces in the US were seeing New Zealand as an extension of domestic debates around these topics, and New Zealand online political discussion increasingly involved international 'participants'. So, while participant #01 above could not of course have seen this occurring, it does however fit with her noticing this as a trend. Given this, participant #13 again also thinks that being political in New

Zealand is (as above) a resistance to these international trends. As someone who moved to New Zealand, she saw her political orientation changing as a result:

I definitely have a political self before Twitter that was more aligned to global views, so I had big opinions on things like the EU and whether or not England was thinking about leaving, etc., or things like the 2016 elections and stuff like that, and it was all focused on the northern hemisphere I guess I would say.

She is also saying that this shift of understanding, or perhaps a broadening to include the New Zealand particularities, occurred via Twitter, and, given the interviews that have been highlighted in the previous chapters here, the discussion-focused nature of such could relate to how she perceives ‘being affected by online political thought’. Being political for this participant is, again, a balance between international and domestic political perspectives.

But, there are also specific political topics that are mentioned as influences, such as this from participant #05:

I think that a lot of the issues that we face locally, and as communities and as groups of people, that be minority groups of people, that while those are local issues, they’re also global issues.

And further:

I mean, colonisation, for example, has an enduring effect on people today, and will do in the future. And that applies to so many groups of people who face adversity, simply for being who they are.

So, for this participant, colonialism is a local issue that is simultaneously a global one.

More widely, however, this participant is locating New Zealand politics as an intersection point between both global and local articulations of issues. Given the centrality of issues for political participation motivation, and the similar position of debate and discussion as forms of such participation, that such issues would have a contested nature is not surprising. However, the particularities of the New Zealand contextual articulations of issues lie in such things as the power imbalance between global narrative understandings of political issues, as well as the specificities of New Zealand itself. I would contend, though, that this a fluid intersection point,

as sometimes the articulations would be contested, but with others the global and local would be more in sync. This is reflected in how participant #16 also saw another specific issue:

The whole thing around #Me-Too and then before that the whole issue around the Roastbusters story, and the massive play in social media that that led to.

#Me-Too as an international political movement was something that cropped up quite frequently in the discussions my participants had, though interestingly none of my participant spoke of it as a ‘non-domestic’ movement. Rather, it was seen as both a domestic and an international movement; there was no differentiation. There were local manifestations of such (such as here with Roastbusters) but #Me-Too was not engaged with as either a distinctly international or domestic movement. Participant #25 also referenced the context of political leaders internationally engaging with our politicians, which, given the previous chapters focus on seeing politicians as individuals, particularly so in the New Zealand context of primary relationships, gives such salience:

Donald Trump can just tweet whatever he likes about whatever country he wants to talk about, and I mean who thought that would be a thing? The President of the United States could just, like, trash talk, any leader of a state or country that he liked.

So, for this participant what the President of the United States says online is part of her political context.

Participant #23, however, spoke of the rise of fascism in this context, as something she actively resisted, positioning New Zealand as separate from international trends:

I’d like to say it irks me a little bit when people say things like ‘Oh well, you know, fascism is on the rise everywhere in New Zealand, in the world’ because no it’s bloody not, because New Zealand is absolutely going the other way, and there are times that I just go ‘Oh for god’s sake’ and move on, and there are times when I go ‘Hey excuse the hell out of you’ and tell them about what’s going on here.

Why this quote in particular is interesting is, again, that this interview occurred before the 2019 Christchurch terror attack, which indeed saw the presence of New Zealand fascism become vivid. Hence, there is resistance to global narratives around fascism here from this participant,

with New Zealand positioned with particularity as an exception to such, but one that was not borne out by time.

Returning to the second findings chapter in this thesis, however, where reading and engaging with news was seen as an important part of being political, global understandings also play a part here, in terms of trusted sources. Participants spoke about where they got their political information from, and the lists of news publications they provided when they talked about such seamlessly moved from New Zealand-based news outlets to international ones:

I think it's really important to find different news sources, not just the ones that they give us on TV, because I find that TV news is mostly human interest stories with maybe 10 minutes of actual news. I don't know, even in New Zealand it's always reasonably biased as well. I just don't find it a good way to actually find out what's happening in New Zealand and the world.

Note here that participant #09 sees being informed about both New Zealand and the world as important, and she positions the domestic TV news as not a good representation of either. And participant #24:

Keeping up, you know; what are the issues, what's coming up? You know, it's like a newsfeed, very much that's how I've curated it. you know; people who are keeping me up to date ... and you know, Radio New Zealand, you know the various groups that will, say, link to news items and Al Jazeera and Agence France-Presse I follow. And so, I mean, I know that's external but occasionally it's New Zealand news, and the Guardian you know. So yeah, it's keeping up to date with the issues of the moment.

Here this participant is openly saying that she gets New Zealand news from international sources sometimes, and how she actively curates to ensure she is getting things from a range of sources, and how crucial she finds not just being informed, but being up to date on the latest issues. International issues for this participant are not just about import of topic, but also temporality.

Finally, a participant (#21) also saw the very behaviour of political Twitter in New Zealand as itself being distinctive, and understanding this distinctiveness in an international context:

I feel like overseas people kind of tend to tweet a bit more like 'Oh here's my day' or just talking, having yarns with friends, and I'll see, you know, you'll kind of stumble across stuff and you'll be like 'Oh this is a like a conversation between two friends' and you definitely get the impression like 'That's not for me to jump into' you know? Whereas I feel like New Zealand Twitter tends to be more political ... I feel like it's almost a bubble in itself, or people who are politically engaged, you know? ... I feel like most of the people on there, who use it regularly are somewhat political engaged or academic.

So, for this participant, New Zealand Twitter is more politically engaged than Twitter is internationally. This was also mentioned by others who had experienced Twitter outside of New Zealand, that it was not as a whole as political as the New Zealand use tended to be of the medium. But again, we have a contextualisation for the particularity of New Zealand given through an international comparison, but one that is not about politics per se, rather about online space usage. New Zealand Twitter itself exists within global narratives of how Twitter is used.

8.6 Whakawhanaungatanga

During one of my interviews (specifically that with participant #17), a concept was mentioned by her, that of 'whakawhanaungatanga' that specifically connects this construction of tight small networks of primary relationships to a particularly New Zealand context, and moreover an online New Zealand context:

New Zealanders do this, and Pākehā do this, and we all, we do this thing where you meet for a coffee (and people won't even hire you until they had a coffee with you), and you'll find new immigrants go 'Why would I have a coffee? I just want a job, you know?' and they don't get it. And we still run that way, and it's all pulled together online now. So I get people DM'ing me, you know, out of nowhere, saying 'Can I have a coffee?' and I get that more than I do ... but that's pretty standard in New Zealand too. I've got mentions right now saying can I come have a drink; alcohol or caffeine basically.

I shall discuss this in more depth in the following chapter, but participant #17 goes on to talk about this concept of whakawhanaungatanga as an outcome where tight networks of kin-like structures are formed and then social processes and activities are mediated through these informal relationships (such as employment possibilities, or assessment of journalism as per the previous section). However, as she also discusses, in addition to being an outcome it is also a process (the 'whaka' suffix in Te Reo 'verbs' the noun thereafter). In other words, the very

act of being political also is an act that generates, or maintains, primary relationships. In this context, political participation is both produced via primary relationships, but also primary relationships are produced via political participation. For instance, she speaks about the difference between Australia and New Zealand business relationships:

In Australia they don't [have whakawhanaungatanga], they do business real quick. Whereas New Zealanders don't do 'business-business' until they know you.

And further:

We do that online; we don't talk about, you know, the same things until you know each other.

She goes on to say:

The whole concept comes from Māori culture, and Pākehā do it without even knowing and it's once they recognise that that's the process we do, and as soon as I had a word for it I could start to recognise it, and then I could start to recognise it, and then I could start to recognise it in those that aren't doing it ... I meet them and they've got an accent, and I go 'Oh, that's why they're not doing whakawhanaungatanga, they're expecting to get straight to business, they haven't worked it out right.

The crucial points here, according to this participant, are the centrality of primary relationships via tight small networks, and the mediation of activities (whether political or otherwise) through those relationships to give them meaning and import, and further the reproduction and maintenance of those primary relationships as a process through those activities being as important and the political participation outcomes: a bidirectional relationship. There appears to be a crucially New Zealand (at least, according to my participants) aspect to the centrality of informal small networks rather than formal ones in this context, to the point of privileging the former over the latter.

8.7 Conclusion

This chapter looked to the narrative constructions around small size, isolation, and the implications of small networks for how my participants saw what might be 'unique' about New Zealand politics. It also looked at how the public service was a particular articulation of this negotiation of small networks within the country, how regional variation manifested itself, and

how they articulated what might be a New Zealand political culture. It then discussed how my participants negotiated the intersection of global and local understandings/narratives of particular issues, both to inform their engagement with issues, but also in resistance to global understandings with contextually specific ones to New Zealand. Finally, there was a brief engagement with whakawhanaungatanga, which could be a possible orientating narrative framework in which to understand bottom-up politics in New Zealand, drawing in these small network approaches to New Zealand political culture with the empathetic imperative mentioned in previous chapters and the centrality of primary relationships. This latter framework is one of the implications I shall explore in more depth in the next chapter.

Chapter 9

Discussion

The overarching thread for this thesis has been one of political participation construction, but one that is particularly done through space creation, border negotiation, and maintenance, via negotiating interaction with others politically, and a central orientating and mobilising lens of primary relationships. Of course, the border creation is centrally a political one, where different enactments of political participation are constructed, and a political milieu is produced through this enactment. This chapter will use the sociology of space and boundary work as an operating framework for analysing the findings of the previous four chapters.

The structure for the chapter will initially to be to look at what findings confirm intentional trends in the literature, then look to what findings may provide as to an extension of international literature, moving on to what might be new contributions, particularly around an approach to New Zealand. The first part will discuss the way in which the primary focus for my participants for their politics is around ‘issues’ and how they interplay with their articulations of their selves; it will look to how such is embedded in the everyday, as well as a brief overview of how gender is constructed. The next part will continue the existing literature around the centrality of discussion and the fundamental locus for political participation for my participants.

This will then lead on to material that extends the literature, particularly my findings around the overarching organising narrative of primary relationships, the empathetic imperative, and the importance of social location. It will then look at the particularities of online political behaviour for my participants, with such things as the lack of homogeneity between social media platforms, the centrality of impact and engagement, and the nuanced nature of ‘social media bubbles’. The chapter will finish with an overview of how New Zealand, particularly, as a space of political participation, gets constructed here, with such things as size, what my participants see as political culture, the dominance of Wellington, and particularly the possibilities of whanaungatanga as a conceptualising framework.

9.1 Issues

Central in aligning with international literature is, unsurprisingly, political issues being the organising principle behind political participation for my participants. Both Bennett (2012) and Ward and Gibson (2010) talk about the shift historically from political participation being done

via the likes of political parties and wider political organising, to a focus on more individual motivations, on picking and choosing issue by issue that in which one gets involved, and devotes energy. This is Micheletti's (2003) 'individualised collective action' frame. My participants spoke of dipping in and out of what issues resonated with them personally, making choices based on such things as personal identity categories, social location, and what they felt their life could fit in at a particular moment. They spoke of how this could shift depending on priorities at any given life stage (such as having children, work, or study).

Specifically, the self-identity resonance is something that Bennett (2012) mentions as a 'consumerist' approach to political participation, where one shops for what one feels connects to different aspects of one's self, and allows one to present a particular construct of self (one can see parts of Giddens's (1956) classic presentation of self-construction occurring here). Both Bennett (2012) and Loader (2007) sees this as resulting in shifting temporary allegiances to movements, and this is largely confirmed by my participants. Though I will say here that this is done not in a fitful sense, with a lack of commitment, but rather with intentionality. My participants would look to what could fit in their lives, what they had energy for. Some of them mentioned issues that they felt particularly strongly about, but as a result of the amount of 'spoons' (the colloquialism often used in reference to how much emotional energy they felt they had) necessary to engage with such, and how much they felt they had spare, they would choose other less taxing issues to devote time to. Particularly in light of Löw's (2016) work around the sociology of space, we can see my participants deconstructing traditional boundary constructions between rationality and emotionality. This is particularly so with regard to political space construction, given historical enlightenment conceptions of the privileging of rationality over emotionality. Noting Dikeç's (2005) distinction between what constitutes political place from political space construction is the rigidity of the former vis-à-vis the liminality of the latter, what we see from my participants via the insertion of emotionality is a deconstruction of political 'place' to make a more fluid space. They are doing this both via decentring rationality, but also by making boundary construction between the political and the non-political more permeable, via the insertion of the everyday.

In particular, extending Bennett's (2012) work around the personalisation of politics online, my participants felt this was something that they could do easier online (which confirms Bennett's (2012) argument that the online lends itself to continuing this historical trend), as the medium allowed simultaneous engagement politically around their everyday lives, something

that more offline political participation forms would preclude or make more difficult. Also, this continues the deconstruction of political ‘place’ above via boundary construction through temporality distinctions, or rather allowing yourself to be in multiple places simultaneously, and not having ‘being political’ your sole focus or activity in a space. However, this connects back to Loader’s (2007) argument that such an articulation of deinstitutionalised political participation results in an incoherent, fragmented, and transitory effort, rather than a more focused and collective political action.

Nonetheless, this rooting in daily life is a narrative that is further constructed by how my participants see political participation as embedded in the everyday, both in terms of everyday individual actions and choices being political themselves, but also in how political participation behaviour is itself not separate from what they are doing in their everyday lives. That is, while political participation can be a discrete activity itself, more often than not what they count as being political involves stepping in and out of the online during the course of their day. In other words, while momentary, such fragmented political involvement was consistent, and continuous. Further, the work of Nabatchi and Leighninger (2015) around thick and thin participation is relevant to this context, with the latter particularly being evidenced in my participants’ actions and how they conceptualise being political. Moreover, I would argue that, while descriptive, to a certain extent Nabatchi and Leighninger’s (2015) conception of thick and thin participation is also normative and boundary constructing. It could be argued here that thin participation lends itself more readily to destabilisation of political place, by deconstructing boundaries between what is more homogeneously political and what is not. Thin participation lends itself to heterogeneity in spaces and boundaries, as my participants show.

My argument here is that, because of the shorter time commitments, and the barriers to depth of political involvement, resistance to emotionally draining political commitments, not to mention often the individualisation of political issues, ‘thin’ participation was the predominant political participation form expressed. Nevertheless, this is not to say that there is no ‘thick’ participation occurring, for my participants also did get involved in issues and events that involved higher levels of intellectual and emotional commitment – if it were judged worthwhile – with very tangible goals (not in the least because of coming out of deep discussion online around political action). Hence, one can see that my participants cycled between thin and thick participation depending on demands on their lives, which fits with the ‘ideal type’ construction Nabatchi and Leighninger (2015) made. Moreover, I would argue, my participants

deconstructed a thick versus thin dichotomy through participating in ‘thin’ behavioural form types that were simultaneously experienced through a lens of ‘thick’ primary relationships.

Furthermore, returning to Bennett’s (2012) work around connecting the identity politics movements from the 1960s to the online individualisation of political understandings contemporarily, the social location understanding that many of my participants rooted their political consciousness narratives around both collectivised their understandings of politics via seeing political issues through the lens of group impact (but these were not the formal groupings that Bennett argued were present historically - such as formal organisations like political parties, unions, churches). Though Bennett does argue that those identity movements of the previous century did involve a collective aspect that a lot of contemporary identity based political behaviours lack. Not to mention, the ramifications of this, such as political organising not being able to rely on a guaranteed base of supporters, were indeed present.

However, while political participation as motivated via social location identifications did get mentioned by my participants (and hence fits with the ramifications of a more isolated individual political effort merely replicated over multiple people, and thus not being true collective action), they also saw the social locations of others, and how those social locations intersected with their own, in terms of a political system. In other words, while we may have a multiplicity of individual identities occurring for my participations, this was often conceptualised as systematic, rather than as isolated individuals. They were often asking themselves how their actions, including their political actions, would impact others, which suggests an awareness of collectiveness that belies arguments like Bennett’s and Loader’s. This is particularly the case, for instance, when it comes to what I call the ‘empathetic imperative’ throughout this thesis. Here, selfhood and identity, via not just an empathetic imperative, but also through a conscious understanding of self in relation to the social locations of others, constructs a politics of the individual, a consumerist participation such as that of Bennett, that is nonetheless simultaneously individual and collective.

This is not to argue that individualistic politics is not occurring, as my participants were motivated by issues that were important for them personally, along the lines of that with which they identified. But rather, their narrative construction here tended to be in relation to others. As such, while the articulation and motivation to be political was an individual one, it existed in a narrative that was more collective in nature, given it was always relational, and intentionally so. We see this evidenced through such things as awareness of differential power

arrangements based on relative social location, as well as the impacts that has on the ability to have one's voice heard. As with the relational requirements of assessing political value systems, primary relationship centrality, and the empathetic imperative. As such, being political here involved a political space that was both collective and individual, deconstructing this binary and resisting political emplacement (i.e. the making of political place from space) through centring relationality as an issue-based motivation to be political. As with the other aspects discussed above, this involves boundary work to construct a political space that is more permeable and shifting than has been theorised previously. If the rigidity of previously collective understandings of political participation constructed a political space, then the relational approach from my participants involves not merely the replacement of one kind of political place (collectivity) with another (individualism) but rather a rejection of such for a more fluid space.

9.2 Discussion, Motivation, and Impactful Political Participation

Returning to the work of Nabatchi and Leighninger (2015) around thick and thin participation, the narrative that consistently was an organising concept behind political behaviour, was the centrality of discussion. Why this is interesting is that in traditional understandings of hierarchies of political participation, these (and relatedly, reading, listening, and so on) are seen as further down than more conventional political behaviours like voting, signing petitions, and mobilising activism (Chadwick, 2006; Leftwich, 1984a; 1984b; Moodie, 1984). Stoker's (2006) critique of this, as mentioned in the literature review chapter (2), was that traditional 'big P' politics (located in conventional institutional politics) did not sufficiently describe the range of 'small p' politics, which was how most people did their political participation. Again, Stoker saw this as part of the wider political shift from collectivist to individualistic political participation, but while many theorists viewed such with concern, he did not.

However, it was not just that as a form of political participation discussion itself featured frequently amongst my participants, but rather that discussion itself was the centralising organising concept for them in being political. This was unsurprising, given Twitter's communicative affordances, which is what motivated people to join the platform. Discussion, for them, involved such things as reading, listening, engaging with others over events and articles on policy and political events, and disagreements. They saw part of being politically engaged was being informed, and using that knowledge to then alter discourse around issues they cared about. Further, they would socially locate the voices of those that they considered

less heard than their own, and ‘signal-boost’ those voices, and see them as being more necessary to be heard, to be read, than their own. This is part of the relationality centrality that is mentioned above, via an empathetic imperative, to politics. It provides a self-based approach to issues that is not individualistic, or, rather, not solely individualistic. Again, it is a construction of a self-based political space that is intersected not just by everyday life and traditionally non-political spaces (such as the domestic sphere: childcare, parenting), but one that is relational to the political selves of others, the boundaries of which are managed depending on temporary alignments with those others. One’s political space here is constructed with others involved.

When you combine this with the approach taken of dipping in and out during the course of the everyday (with a particularity of issues) you see what Stoker (2006) refers to as “micro-participations” (p. 92) as forms of everyday political behaviour. The majority of my participants saw the impact of their online political behaviour, and the online political behaviour of others, as indirect, rather than direct. They saw their political discussions as part of a contributing to a political milieu of understandings that led to defining what was considered political feasible. They saw their conversations as more like influence than direct requests or specificity on topics. This can be seen in the second findings chapter (Chapter 6), whereby my participants, while prioritising seeing impacts from what they did, felt that such impacts would most likely be indirect, such as contributing to a discursive political milieu.

Given Leftwich’s (1984b) contention that ‘politics’ as a conceptualised sphere largely exists in the wider public mindset as one of “unpleasant squabbles” (p. 63) associated with different institutions of the state (parties, interest groups, activists, elections, the chamber, and so on), we can view this discursive political sphere that my participants feel that they are constructing as the both a resistance to such, but also a way of influencing such. Returning to a sociology of space, this is a method of discursive border construction and negotiation. The discursive milieu they saw themselves contributing to was about how potentially a topic or issue might be talked about, how it was framed, what the structural narratives of meaning employed were. By contributing to, or rather reiteratively constructing, this space of discourse, my participants hope to have their understandings, their discursive constructions, become dominant, or perhaps at least be contenders. They saw the influence and the impact through, if not ‘controlling the narrative’, then expanding the boundaries of what might be the potentially viable understandings. In this boundary construction, or deconstruction, my participants were almost

creating a discursive ‘Overton Window’ in terms of what political or policy possibilities might exist. Further, my participants emphasised that including the understandings and voices of those they saw as being under-represented was crucial to this discursive approach to politics, in that they felt compensation was required to ensure those voices and perspectives were heard. Given they saw this discursive space as where what could be possible in a political or policy sense was constructed, it is apparent that due to an empathetic imperative to being political, ensuring these voices and perspectives were included in the discourse was crucial.

It is interesting to note that Leftwich saw the general perception of politics as this institutionalised discursive sphere (albeit a negative one), given my participants operated on an individualistic discursive basis, albeit a relational one, rather than organisation-based. Moodie (1984) noted, however, that this view of politics as being primarily institution based was not merely a view of the general public, but also one in academic research of politics at the time, a perspective that leads to exclusions from what is considered politics. This is not only aligned with the previously discussed literature around the place of women in politics more generally, but also the very explicit efforts my participants were making discursively to recognise and resist conventional political narratives to which they often applied an intersectional lens, but of course also relationally. This is furthered by the fact that they tended to prioritise individual concrete experience and location over traditional, more abstract reporting of politics and policy.

In regard to alternative politics, Chadwick (2006) and Dahlgren (2013) also look to how they can be crafted around inequalities of power, which my participants are certainly negotiating in regards to both crafting alternative understandings of conventional political narratives, as well as including others who were seen as excluded from those conventional political spaces. Particularly on that point with Dahlgren’s work I make an argument in the literature chapter (chapter 2) that he is conflating the ‘how’ of politics – the mechanisms – with the ‘what’ of politics – the issues (which is a crucial distinction with my participants, as they do both), and thus how alternative political space creation works. My participants locate being excluded from traditional politics both via what is considered worthwhile issues (by them vis-à-vis what they saw political parties and organisations doing), but also about considering the way in which they felt not fulfilled (and, hence, not engaged) by those same traditional political forms of involvement. As mentioned in the second findings chapter (Chapter 6), there was often the critique from my participants not just that minority voices were being excluded by traditional

political outlets (whether that be media or political organisations) but also that they wanted obvious and apparent impact from their political efforts. That did not have to be direct impact, but they wanted to see that their efforts were doing something, even if it was as simple as ensuring that the discursive milieu of political understandings included their own, or included those understandings they felt were important. Traditional political organisations, and how you got involved in such, were not seen to provide this. The traditional political place construction, to use Dikeç's (2005) construction, was one that was perceived as having a rigidity of boundaries that intrinsically excluded both how my participants saw politics, but also how they experienced it (via such things as emotionality).

Because of exclusion from, and resistance to, the traditional boundaries of the 'what' of politics, the historical political space, they also resisted the 'how' of politics. This was both in terms of emphasising what is considered their core method of being political (namely the discussion focus, as opposed to be the more traditional organisation focus) but also what issues were being brought to the fore in those discussions. This latter item involved such things as location in the everyday lives and experiences of these women, but also examples about ensuring things like Te Reo, for instance, are more normalised. Resisting exclusion of spoken and written Māori from wider discourse in the country was seen as a political act, both in terms of being indicative of who was included in politics in New Zealand more widely, but also, given the centrality of discourse for making political change (i.e., referring back to obvious and apparent impact), the fact that language use cropped up so frequently as an example from my participants is not surprising. Thus, being political for my participants was not just about 'being' political, but rather reconstructing the very space of what could be defined as a political issue so that when they were being political, the issues that they saw as important were included in that space. We see this in the construction of a discursive Overton Window, for instance.

This centrality of active engagement in discussion (i.e. reading, listening, discussing, arguing, critiquing, and so on) as a political discursive milieu also addresses the gap that the work of Boullaine (2009) identifies. Particularly, she notes that the previous lack of findings (across multiple pieces of research) of significant impacts to political engagement from online political behaviour, were more likely to show a positive effect if online news access was included. In other words, if the concept of what counts as viable political participation is expanded to include discussion and debate, then a more complex understanding of political participation emerges, and not one that fits with traditional understandings of reductions in political

engagement rates. Further, such a consideration brings an interesting lens to the seminal work of Milbrath (1965) around ‘Gladiators’ and ‘Spectators’ in political participation roles in society.

In his classic work Milbrath (1965) hierarchically ranks a ‘repertoire’ of political acts by increasing amounts of commitments of things like time, energy, and money. While there was a range of ranked behaviours of political participation, there were three types of people who existed, according to Milbrath, and those three groups stayed relatively consistent, with few people moving inter-group. These groups were a small number of ‘apathetic’ (who were largely passive and disinterested in terms of political involvement), the large number of ‘spectators’ (who ‘stood in the stands’ and cheered, encouraged, and sometimes voted), and the smaller number of ‘gladiators’ (who battled, though there were some gladiators who were considered more elite, making an even smaller group). Almond and Verba (1963), though, consider the apathetic group to be larger than Milbrath did (looking at voting participation statistics in New Zealand, a more classical understanding could see the apathetic at much more closer numbers to spectators than Milbrath might have originally proposed, though that is a separate discussion).

Why this is pertinent for this research is that Milbrath (1965) considers lower levels of political participation to be such things as exposing oneself to political stimuli, and, further, reading, discussing, debating, and writing of political analysis and experience to be also similarly more lowly ranked in terms of political commitment, and hence were lower forms of political participation. However, for my participants, not only were these forms of participation their primary forms, but they saw themselves as not merely spectators to the gladiatorial events, but highly contributive. They saw themselves not as mere passive receptors of political spectacle, only contributing through bounded forms such as voting and cheering. Rather, they saw themselves as gladiatorial themselves, participatory and committing as much time as they could balance between the different part of their lives, at different points in their lives. It could be argued that in deconstructing both the border between the spectator and the gladiator as well as the positioning of more discursive forms of political participation as lower ranked, they were operating as a fourth category of political actor. However, given that previously in this thesis the kind of political space construction that my participants participated in was not one of replacement of one rigid political emplacement with another, but rather was a deconstruction of the traditional boundaries of political spaces, I would contend something different here.

Namely, rather than Milbrath's (1965) rigidity of distinction between these categories, or the creation of a fourth such category, my participants both deconstructed what counts as being in those categories (such as reconceptualising the discursive as being within a gladiatorial frame), but also how those categories are manifested in use. As described previously in this thesis, my participants dipped in and out 'being political' as a part of their everyday lives, sometimes political, sometimes not, with the boundary of such being highly fluid. As such, my participants were both gladiators and spectators, depending on such things as constraints during particular parts of the day, or where in their lives they were situated, or what they were prioritising. My participants deconstructed both the constitution of the categories themselves, and their exclusivity. Not only were these categories as constitutive spaces sites of resistance, but their boundaries were as well.

For many of my participants, their discursive approach was a) considerably more highly ranked as method of participation and contribution in politics and policy; b) it was engaging and critical, not merely receptive, as they demanded deep interactional involvement with other political actors (whether those were in formal roles as such or not – see the first findings chapter (Chapter 5); c) included introducing affect into the method of assessing commitment to participation alongside such time as time and energy); and d) could be seen as negotiating the boundary of the social with the political, and by this I argue that they were not seeing a distinction between the social world they occupied and the more political world that Milbrath saw (even as they often tried to create artificial barriers for a variety of reasons, as has been noted previously). As such, we could see my participants as a kind of discursive 'critical commentator', operating between spectators and gladiators, with these groups far more porous, with more flexible boundaries of negotiated border spaces. They sometimes have Dikeç's (2005) fixivity to create a more rigid place of politics, and at other times are operating in a more general political space, which fits with how my participants 'dipped' in and out of levels of engagement, and political issues, throughout their days and lives.

It is interesting to note here that, given this centrality of discussion and discourse as a form of political participation, my participants also positioned having overt and apparent impact as a primary motivation in being political involved. They wanted to see a connection between their actions politically and change in politics, policy, and so on. This was contrasted with what they found more opaque in terms of impact: doing things like joining and participating in political parties or the like. This was not to say that they did not see joining a political party as important

and not to be done lightly, for such was often mentioned. Rather, despite the consideration involved in such, that was not seen as having an overt connection to change. As discussed in the findings chapters (5-8), most of my participants did not see their political discussion online having much direct impact, but this did not mean they did not see any impact at all. Instead, they saw indirect impact as something that online political activities could, and did, do.

This is worthy of note, as the work of Boullaine (2009; 2015) picked up on the apparent lack of impact of online politics on the offline world as part of her critique of why further, more in-depth research, was needed into how people did politics online. If online political activities had no impact, then what is the pay-off for keeping people engaged in politics online? My participants suggested a possible answer to this by seeing indirect impact as having credence for their efforts, and, importantly, for their motivation to continue being involved and participating. As mentioned previously, they would construct a sort of discursive milieu, where the way in which issues were discussed, the conceptualisations and understandings that were employed when a topic or issue or subject of legislation (or even such things as discussion around a magazine or newspaper article), were negotiated and constructed. They saw themselves at pushing at what might be possible in how an issue might be talked about; not producing an entirely new narrative around an issue, but rather shifting the edges of how to think about how a problem might be defined and talked about. This is the border space of construction and negotiation that my participants performed to contribute to the discursive ‘Overton Window’ mentioned above.

As such, my participants saw contributing to this milieu as having an overt impact for them, and sufficient of an impact that they saw this as motivating. They never spoke about a political action online immediately producing an offline political impact. However, they did speak about such things as seeing a politician talk about a piece of legislation or a policy concern in the same way as part of a discussion that had happened earlier online, and felt that this was something they contributed to occurring. Similarly, with journalists and pieces of political commentary that were read and discussed, some participants mentioned the fact that Twitter was the place to find politicians, journalists, commentators, activists, and so on, if one was political active online in New Zealand. They were implicitly making a connection between those political actors being present in these spaces, and an indirect impact and change to the way in which an issue was thought about, influencing both where the space was located discursively, but also what the breadth of the boundaries of that space were. In other words,

they were not merely contending what was to be included in that space, but also both increasing its breadth while advocating for what should not be included (boundary construction and resistance).

Why this is particularly important, in addition to this reconceptualisation of the way in which motivating impact can be indirect, is how my participants preferred to interact with these politicians, journalists, commentators, and activists. They wanted to be engaged with them, to have actual two-way conversations, to not merely be broadcast to. This perception of ‘real’ engagement was seen as crucial, and it was expressed through such things as which politicians they felt had the best online presence, as this was always expressed in terms of who they felt interacted the best. Contempt was displayed for those who put press releases out as posts. They saw politicians who engaged citizens online in conversation and discussion in largely positive terms, although that varied depending on the style of engagement. Interactive styles that they saw as more respectful were given more credence than those that were seen as combative or dismissive. In other words, what they wanted was two-way engagement that they felt saw them as distinct individuals valued in their contribution (see the first findings chapter – Chapter 5).

Impact then, was in seeing that contribution as part of the wider political sphere, though not necessarily with direct connection between a specific outcome offline and what they did online. Further, given my participants did not see a particular distinction between online and offline lives or selves (save in situations where they explicitly did so to limit cross-impact between different spheres of life – note this is not about offline versus online, but rather in, for instance, such things as personal politics versus employment), this is not merely a motivation they expressed in purely online terms. Rather, they wanted this engagement regardless of the space they were politically active in; it was just that they felt they could get it particularly online, and hence their motivation for being there.

9.3 Negotiating Gender

Largely, my participants followed international trends around gendered political behaviour online, as outlined in section 2.2, and this section will discuss this, particularly leading to a question around what this means for questions of binary constructions of rationality versus emotionality in both politics and debate. My participants often described the effects of harassment, about not being given space to speak about their interpretation of politics and policy as women. They spoke that they were aware that their experiences of politics online

were different from that of men (often overtly positioning themselves oppositional to men). They would recognise that men could express themselves politically in a different manner to themselves (which, given the propensity for my participants to ‘bubble’ themselves in social media around expectations of behaviour and how you interact with others – for further discussion see later in this chapter – could be seen as a proxy to gendered bubbles), which aligns with the research of Cunha et al. (2014). Given how frequently my participants talked about thinking about the positions of others, the experiences of others, and how others might be impacted by their actions, the findings of Bode (2016) around more indirect political engagement (i.e. one that consciously thought about not offending others) were borne out. Not to mention, of course, how many participants spoke about blocking and muting as a way of policing their political spaces (i.e. as opposed to direct confrontation), as well as relationship maintenance (the work of Muscanell & Guadagno (2012)) via such things as suggesting behaviours and policing other social media members on interactional style using non-confrontational techniques (the oft suggested one was to have a ‘quiet word’ in Direct Messages, a private messaging service in Twitter).

However, in being aware of their social location as women, and particularly contextualising that with their other identity categories (such as race, sexuality, disability) they mentioned that traditional forms of political organising were closed to them, or at least not as easily accessed. Whether this be via structural inequalities in the organisations themselves, or simply because of wider societal inequalities such as poverty or childcare or physical access. So online political spaces provided an alternative political space (which fits with what others such as Dixon (2014) saw in their research on women, and particularly minority women, online). This then reflects the work of Bennett (2012), Loader (2007), and others, in that while they might be critical of the individualising and consumerist tendencies of political organising online, my participants were arguing that they felt more traditional political mobilisation spheres were denied to them, and would not represent their concerns sufficiently. Hence, they felt they were being more rational in placing their political energies elsewhere for their own ends, which fits with the work of Dashti et al. (2015) in arguing that minority voices often found themselves silenced in traditional face-to-face organising, something they experienced less of when expressing themselves politically online.

Furthermore, as in the work of Astrom and Karlsson (2016), Hanish (1969), and Hartmann (1979), where gendered political distinctions occur along the lines of personalisation and

individualisation (in that women do such more), we see the work of women to intertwine the private and the personal. This is manifest in my participants via such things as the emphasis on primary relationship mediation of politics and policy, the centrality of experience in determining import of issues, and the embeddedness of the everyday in political participation (both as the lack of discrete spaces of activity, but also everyday activities viewed through political lenses). This also extends the work of the likes of Holtz-Bacha, Langer, and Merkel (2014), Van Aelst, Sheafer, and Stanyer (2013), and McGregor, Lawrence, and Cardona (2016).

This intertwining of the personal and the political for women, particularly in online politics, occasions the work of Donna Haraway (1991; 1999) here, because of the nature of her work regarding what she refers to as ‘cyborg bodies’. Haraway (1999) is not referring to this concept as the traditional understanding of the cyborg from science fiction, but rather as an intersection of nature and culture, where the binary distinction between these two items has been “a sacred one” (p. 44) in Western society. Why this is interesting for this analysis is that this binary is also reflected in similar Western binaries of emotions versus rationality, and, further (particularly for this section, and something reflected further in Haraway’s work around gender), women versus men.

Traditional Western classical binary thought aligns these binaries, so that nature is associated with emotions and with women (thus, culture, rationality, and men are in opposition to such). Haraway’s work not only destabilises these binaries, but also deconstructs the privilege associated with the right-hand-side (RHS) of the binary (culture, rationality, men, and so on) over the left-hand-side (LHS). Why this is particularly interesting here is that, while politics in Western society has been associated with the RHS, having women present not only destabilises it, but also their inclusion of the personal and the emotional further decentralises rationality as a cornerstone of political thought.

My participants (as will be discussed in the next section) centre personal experience and emotionality (in fact, some of them explicitly rail against how they feel their perspectives are discounted because they feature emotionality) via primary relationships. But they also do so by aligning with these trends internationally regarding gendered political presentations, they are operating in a political border space as per Löw (2016) and Dikeç (2005), negotiating boundary creation as to what counts as political participation. Haraway’s (1999) cyborg thus becomes a gendered reconstruction of political space, where the boundary lies in the deconstruction of the personal with the public, and the political with the emotional. Those

researching or working in the political sphere online need to take into consideration this reconstruction that my participants are contributing to, or else they risk replicating that traditional Western binary construction of the political sphere.

Furthermore, given the relational nature of the political spaces that my participants are constructing, it is interesting and pertinent to note the nature of the gendered construction being made here. As in this section above, and the discussion in Chapter 2, it can be noted that my participants followed international trends for women's expression of political behaviour. However, moving further to the individual behaviour that follows these gendered performances, we also find the wider narrative construction of what counts as politics (i.e. the construction of political space) also shares these characteristics. Politics as relational – as centring affect as well as rationality, of prioritising the experiences of others, of looking at how people treat others as indicators of political value, the interweaving of the personal with the political, the articulation of policy and politics via relationships and personal history – is gender-coded as feminine in our society. In other words, it was not just that my participants performed gendered political behaviour, but that what they conceptualised as being political itself was gendered, and they then fought to reconstitute political space via this gendered framework (though, I would argue, they did not see such as gendered; for them this was merely their prioritisation of politics).

As such, gender becomes a boundary contestation for them in constituting political space. This can be seen quite strongly in such things as reactions to what was called 'mansplaining' and online negativity that was seen as gendered, or the way in which men were often described as dominating more mainstream political spaces. These operate as resistances to more traditional political space constructions, which my participants are thus narratively (though not explicitly) gendering oppositionally (as in the binary constructions above). This should not be a surprising outcome, given the exclusion of women historically from politics. However, the crucial point here is not that my participants are positioning themselves as included in an unchanged political space, but rather that they are both including themselves and also reconstituting what should be considered as political. Further, as in the discussion in Chapter 3 around intersectionality, I would argue that many of my participants displayed a nascent intersectional constitution of political space. While I would not necessarily suggest this was a conscious political construction in terms of identification with a theoretical framework for all of these participants, the emphasis on relational articulations of selves and experiences of society, an understanding

of social location as one determinant of political experience and access, and how they themselves were positioned relative to this, fit tightly in such a political orientation. Being political, for my participants, was seen as not just operating differently and differentially along various axes of marginalisation, including such things as gender and race, but that there was no singular political construction or articulation of those axes. For instance not articulating gender outside of race (as an example, some participants mentioned including pronouns in their Twitter profiles in order to normalise transgender identities, even if they themselves were not). Furthermore, such axes were fluid and contextual as to their salience, depending on the political experience involved. Again, the crucial point here is not that they were fighting for marginalised axes of social location (see section 1.3 on how social location operates here) to be included in existing political space (though they were also doing this), but that they were reconstituting political spaces themselves in order that ‘being political’ itself did not intrinsically exclude marginalised groups, such as via gender. Gender operated as both boundary and site here.

9.4 Primary Relationships and the Empathetic Imperative

As mentioned in the previous section, one of the bouncing off points for this piece of research in general has been the meta research done by Boulliane (2009; 2015) in noting that the quantitative research to assess the political engagement of online political activity was incomplete, needing to be supplemented with qualitative research so that a more complex and nuanced understanding of online politics could be developed for further quantitative research. Importantly, this was also a point echoed by Papacharissi (2014), in arguing that, rather than looking for impact, research should be looking at the nature of the content. Particularly, Papacharissi (2014) argued to look at how the storytelling nature of social media may provide for alternative forms of political expression, something the immediately preceding section aligns with in regard to narrative construction (see section 4.5 around the storytelling nature of narrative) and the centrality of discourse to political involvement. However, Papacharissi also made an argument for a concept of affect (2012; 2014; 2016) as a central organising principle for meaning construction in political expression. It is this concept of affect, via primary relationships, an empathetic imperative, and the centrality of discussion, that this section of this chapter will focus on.

Particularly, Papacharissi (2016) mentioned affect in the context of storytelling, and the production of import and meaning via such. She argues that this centrality of affect is a

counterpoint to traditional rationality-based concepts of political behaviour. “Affective publics,” she contends, are “networked publics mobilized and connected (or disconnected) through expressions of sentiment” (p. 320). Papacharissi mentions that affect has always been present in constructions of political expression, but were subsumed through idealised conceptions of historical rationality in the public sphere. For my participants, this is highly salient, as affect, as mediated via primary relationships, was central. Often my participants spoke of being frustrated by the implication that having an emotional reaction to an issue was portrayed as being less valid than an unemotional reaction, and would connect this to a gendered construction of political behaviour. They would work to break down the more traditional binary of rationality versus emotion as what is considered a more valid way to express engagement with political issues. We can see this in considering the previous section, with the reconstituting of political spaces; namely, it is not the replacement of rationality with emotionality as rigid emplacement boundary construction, but rather including emotionality alongside rationality. The political space construction is more permeable, particularly so in the context of the relationality centrality of an empathetic imperative.

Furthermore, given how issues salient to the personal identities and experiences of my participants were perceived as those to be prioritised, these were understandably issues that they were emotionally invested in, and as these discussions around such were connected through expressions of sentiment. Moreover, as discussed in the findings chapter on primary relationships (Chapter 5), even when the issues, policy pieces, or political context around such for others were discussed (i.e. those political manifestations that impacted people other than themselves more directly), they were mediated through the personal experiences of those others. The import of this, and how they were to conceptualise such, was again dependent on the affective experience of those issues, but this time not their own, but those of others. I have referred to this in the findings chapters (5-8) as the ‘empathetic imperative’; that is, the prioritising of putting oneself ‘in the shoes’ of another, to see the personal impact of an issue on that person.

Moreover, when combined with varying levels of understanding one’s social location relative to other members of society, and how experience differs across axes of inequality, which my participants all mentioned, one finds an affective network that is not just located in personal affect, but in understanding and connecting to the affect of others. In other words, Papacharissi’s ‘affective publics’ that are networked through expressions of sentiment do so

via an empathetic imperative rooted in an understanding of oneself relationally and differentially to others through the construction of primary relationships and the reconstitution of political spaces. It is through these publics, and this imperative, that political issues are interpreted and given meaning. Particularly, the affect of others was often assessed through what values a person was seen as holding. Given the interactional nature of the empathetic imperative, how one treated others, or respected the expression of identities of others, was seen in determining the values that another person held, something done through a deeper level of relationship and interaction. Implicit values, rather than explicit political positions, became the crux of the narrative, whereby assessment was made as to political salience, given the centrality of personal experience of political issues and how that fitted with wider systems of right and wrong, good and bad. Values here are operationalised through observations of how persons treat others or extrapolated from political positions around identity politics. Again, relationality is central. Values are thus not merely about the individual, but rather are manifested in interactions with others (i.e. the focus is on interaction space construction). I shall discuss this more in the following section.

This is the crucial point of how political issues are translated into political participation for my participants, because the motivation to be political, for something to have political salience for them, is rooted in particular issues that resonate with them in terms of their selves. For that to carry weight, to be prioritised in the way that my participants described in the findings chapters (5-8) in terms of which they pick and choose between, it must be worth it to them to put energy into. That was often described in terms of the emotion they were willing to expend (some participants used the online metaphor of having the ‘spoons’ to do so). Furthermore, this is part of why discussion (including debate, reading, listening, critical engagement with media) is so central to my participants. With the empathetic imperative, understanding and relating to the experiences and emotions of others, to be able to conceptualise how something might impact another person on a personal level, is crucial. If they do not have this level of engagement with an issue to explore what it means to them and others at this personal level, they are not going to find themselves motivated towards that issue. Nor will they see such as having import.

We also see this in how they find their most meaningful interactions with politicians: through personal primary relationships. They want to know politicians and political figures as individuals, to have two-way discussions, to get a sense of who they are and what their values are. Even online they want politicians to respond conversationally, and not use the medium in

a broadcast way. Further, they want to see that politicians recognised them and their particularity, and could see that the politicians were wanting to see politics and policy through the experiences of the other people they interacted with (and that such were respected). Again, this fits with the empathetic imperative, because the participants are expecting the politicians to also orientate themselves via affect and the differential impact of social location. They want to see politicians understanding and appreciating themselves and others in terms of their particularities.

Further, we see this in reverse when it comes to negativity and how it was managed (both online and offline) when it comes to being political amongst my participants. Given the importance of placing oneself in the shoes of another, or at the very least being aware that the experiences of others might differ from your own, to the empathetic imperative, the fact that disregarding such things would be considered negative political behaviour is a logical progression. For instance, as mentioned in the third findings chapter (Chapter 7), participants often saw the treatment of others, both in terms of direct behaviour towards others, but also the way in which others were constructed politically, as an indication of political values in others online. The ways in which they saw others being treated or talked about as groups and individuals (which, again, returns to the centrality of discursive construction – discussion, debate, how issues were framed – as being the thing through which politics was participated in) were seen as indicators of positive or negative politics.

In addition, participants spoke of the emotional drain on themselves from witnessing such negative treatment, or what they perceived as negative political framing. When the others they felt they had primary relationships with were the subject of what they perceived negative political attention, the affect of that relationship was something they experienced. As such, given the centrality of affect and primary relationships to political motivation, they would often find political discussions quite draining. There would be coping mechanisms deployed online for such, like blocking or choosing whether or not to participate with individuals, or muting certain keywords, topics, or hashtags. However, again, this was not just done in relation to themselves; they also did so in regard to their actions impacting others. While they may have chosen to get involved in a political discussion, they realised not everyone around them had, so would often post content or trigger warnings on issues that they felt might personally impact people. Again, we have a political motivation filtered through a relational lens, and a political space construction as permeable (i.e. ‘being’ political also impacting others who are not just in

different intersecting spaces, but also have differential impact of affect, depending on which issue is salient for them).

To a certain extent, this is the downside of this permeability of boundary spaces, where both the personal and the political exist, emotionality and rationality, and particularly around political issues that have import and pertinence depending on salience to personal identity. This construction of political space as something my participants were constantly stepping in and out of, and doing so relationally, meant that what they did politically impacted other people as well as themselves. They found it emotionally draining because they were effectively in a constant political space, or negotiating the space that others were constructing around them, on topics rooted in self and experience, and this had impact. This impact was not just relational, but along vectors of primary relationships rather than secondary relationships. As such, all political interaction, all political space construction, involved varying degrees of affect, negotiated and fed into by these networks of primary relationships that they cultivated, and in fact largely constituted by them. Another manifestation of this is the way in which platform differentiation occurred. All my participants spoke of managing and negotiating different social media platforms as siloing them off as different spaces. Contrary to the previously outlined disruption of political space rigidity with the creation of flexible and more fluid political spaces and permeable boundaries, my participants were fairly universal in how they treated different social media platforms. Namely, they created fairly solid boundaries between the different spaces, constituting the various platforms based on such things as use and audience. I shall discuss this more in the following section, but the pertinent point is that these platforms varied by type of primary relationship, not secondary relationship versus primary relationship. Hence, depth of relationship was maintained, but negotiated. The spaces were thus bounded by use and type of relationship.

Further to this, James Katz (2006) questions whether or not the way in which communication technologies allow a prioritisation of primary relationships over secondary might result in both a walled garden of perspectives, as well as reducing the occurrence of chance encounters in offline public space, and potentially the negative results of boundary maintenance. Ling (2004) makes a similar argument of potentiality around cellphone communication, which again can allow a removal of secondary relationships from most of one's interactions, to where one can exclude secondary interactions almost entirely. Ling (2004) argues that the intensity of primary

relationships, combined with the ability to have them anywhere, results in more superficial and transitory interactions and social relations.

Moreover, the likes of Gergen (2003) say that the dominance of primary relationships online can lead to a ‘us against them’ mentality, which is evidenced in the negativity that my participants spoke about. Due to the intertwining of affect with politics and issues, constructed along lines of primary relationships, the in group and out group constructions are also affect based. This was also an argument made by Rivere and Licoppe (2003), in that they saw an increase in incivility in the public sphere (note this is not a statement of online spaces, rather it is one of the offline Habermasian rational public sphere) where people can withdraw into the private from the public, and become less tolerant of non-primary relationship interactions. In this situation, the individual’s desire for the civility of primary relationships (and, hence, perceiving their world as more civil) actually increases incivility because of the limited sphere of people who are allowed to interact, and the occasion of fleeting interactions of secondary relationships, of a diversity of interactions, are excluded.

However, what I would contend these authors are not extending to, is the idea that it is not that primary relationships function here to exclude secondary relationships, but rather that they operate as a vehicle to provide a depth of interactional meaning politically. The centrality of issues as an organising principle for my participants, in how they prioritised their engagement with politics, not to mention issues as they pertained to personal identity, as well as how experience and affect were seen as crucial to such, made personal relationships a vehicle for political behaviour. Rather than excluding secondary relationships (and, hence, the chance encounters of diversity the above authors value) by concentrating solely on primary relationships, my participants are attempting to get a depth of experience by transitioning the political relationships they form to all be primary relationship types, or at least as much as they can.

9.5 Primary Relationships and ‘Echo Chambers’

Furthermore, this is displayed through how my participants do not treat all social media homogeneously, despite much literature (especially New Zealand political science literature, see Chapter 2) implicitly constructing it as such. Though, given that political parties seem to largely not differentiate between the platforms either (via merely using all of them same as a traditional broadcast platform) then research that focuses politically with a top-down lens will

reflect that construction. My participants almost consistently used different social media platforms not just for different purposes, but with different interactional audiences in mind. They conceptualised the relationship types they had in the different social media spaces quite differently, and negotiated to keep them separate (this was particularly the case when it came to their political activities online intersecting with their professional lives, something mentioned by public servants especially).

My participants would keep, for instance, familial members to Facebook, but political relationships to Twitter. The likes of Instagram would be kept to purely social connections, even to the point of being the most likely to have secondary relationships (which, consequently, fits with it also being considered the least political of their social media spaces). As such, the important point to note, is that my participants saw each of these spaces as including primary relationships, but the important point was that they were different kinds of primary relationships. A distinction of merely being a primary relationship was not really a determining factor in which platform a person would be located; rather, it was the particularity of motivation behind the primary relationship that did so (i.e. why was this relationship a primary relationship? Did it have a purpose? What was the context for this primary relationship?). Note, as mentioned in the previous section, my participants worked to keep these spaces separate, but they were not always successful in such.

Specifically, looking at the example of public servants, some participants spoke about unsuccessful boundary maintenance between spaces. The neutral public servant requirement of the role that they occupied, vis-à-vis how they felt as political selves, came into conflict, particularly given the issues they most wanted to work on as public servants were also the issues they felt personally motivated by to get politically involved in. Interestingly, they also spoke of the conflict about knowing they could speak authoritatively and with knowledge on a certain political topic (which is central in a political space where discourse is preeminent) with their role as public servant meaning they should not speak on that topic. However, many of them referenced times that this distinction was not always successful, whether that resulted in employment consequences, or they felt so strongly that they had to say something. But the conflict and tensions between the requirements of role (a secondary relationship position) and who they wished to be as a political person (which, as constructed throughout this thesis, was located in primary relationships) was something they had to negotiate. The context (the purpose) for each space was crucial, even if not always maintained.

This multiple space negotiation was further reflected in the approach my participants took to what is colloquially known as ‘echo chambers’. Not only did they recognise the homogeneity of their offline political lives and spaces, but went looking for alternate political experiences that they realised they were not getting otherwise. Furthermore, and again, they went looking for this variety of experiences via primary relationships. As discussed previously, meaning and priority in terms of politics was determined via personal experience of political and policy issues, as well as affect, and an articulation of such. But this did not have to be one’s own personal experience if a degree of primary relationship status was achieved. Rather, a diversity of voices was effectively vetted through the establishment of primary relationships. As such, it was not merely about having a diversity of opinion and perspective, but about knowing the source of those variety of opinions. In effect, it was a curated diversity, a diversity where who was offering an opinion, an expertise, or a perspective, mattered as much, if not more so, than the perspective itself. The veracity of that diversity was determined through the knowledge of who the person was, the opinions of others, and (as discussed previously) their values. These things could not be determined via secondary relationships, according to my participants, as they almost wanted to determine who was considered a trustworthy source. However, what they were able to do was this vetting via a proxy, as if they could see that someone they trusted valued the thinking and perspectives of another person, then that provided a level of personal knowledge of the other, a vouching, that they could rely on. As such, networks of these primary relationships could be built up and developed, but in such a way that allowed for a sufficient depth of experience.

As such, you can see the operationalising variable for these networks of primary relationships is values: the values that the person holds, in terms of how they treat others, their interactional style, how they conceptualise the identities of other people, what is considered important to them, and so on (we see all these factors in the narrative construction of bubbles in the findings chapters (5-8), as well as what they prioritise in primary relationships). Moreover, determining the values of a person is done via the establishment of primary relationships, or through the primary relationships of those in their network. In regard to the latter, it is thus the development of primary relationships with others that effectively work as vouching for someone else, even though this vouching is passive rather than active. Thus, we can see these political networks of primary relationships built around trust and vouching as to values and mutuality.

A lot of the more colloquial understandings of groupings online narratively use a political echo chamber metaphor as a central meaning construction, as many of my participants spoke of such themselves, either in overtly resisting such a construction, or narratively employing it themselves, even as they spoke to how they themselves did not do so. However, what is being shown here is that the networked associations are much more complex. The central organising principle for these political networks is not apparently political ideology, but rather value systems. My participants were not looking for people with mirrored political positions to their own, but rather were looking to determine values and organise networks around that. This was not just networks of people who occupied similar role positions in society to themselves either; they did this regardless of such. In terms of the construction of a political network, they did this with politicians, activists, the representatives of political non-profits, and so on. For them to see political worth in connecting with people, they had to determine the values of that person, and this was performed via the establishment of primary relationship constructions.

Here I am defining values as related to how my participants talked about managing social media ‘bubbles’ and assessing people to ensure they had a diversity of voices in their feeds. Specifically, and in line with the empathetic imperative that has featured throughout this thesis, they often said that they would look at how those they interacted with treated other people (see references to ‘dickheads’ or ‘assholes’ in the third findings chapter, Chapter 7). My participants talked about determining what kind of person someone was through observing how they treated others, both explicitly through looking at interactions, but also through trying to discern how that person would respect, or not, the identities of others. In other words, both explicitly and implicitly look to what an individual values in how empathetic they are with others.

However, this is not to say that ideological echo chambers could not still be constructed, as value systems often proxy to political position – this is particularly the case in the contemporary construction of political participation, as I have discussed earlier in this chapter. If the modern construction of political participation is one that is centralised around issues pertinent to consumptive self-identity, and what resonates with the self involves affect (as in the work of Papacharissi) via the empathetic imperative I speak about above for political motivation, then a values-based system for political network construction can still be closed, and still display a singularity of political ideology. However, what is quite apparent is that my participants did not speak of their online political networks in this way (even as they did speak of their offline networks as such). In their discussion of the experiences of negativity online around political

issues, they were narratively constructing their networks as quite porous. If these networks were experienced as closed as they could be, then the continuing presence of negative interactions would not occur. Rather, all my participants spoke of this being something they had to develop either strategies or tactics to deal with, though never with entire success.

Moreover, given that my participants also spoke of the intentionality of their efforts in ensuring they are able to hear a multitude of different voices, we can see that in addition to the unintentional porous nature of their political networks, there was an intentional effort to ensure a variety of experience was represented. Again, though, this was done via primary relationships and values assessment, so there remained a bounded nature to the diversity of those they reached out to. Further, as mentioned in the findings chapters (5-8), my participants also spoke of the lack of control they had around who heard their words if they had over a certain number of followers, or if a post of theirs went viral (not to mention how that would then impact them emotionally, or practically via employment). While they certainly spoke of efforts that they could do in this regard (such as the creation of ‘Little Twitter’ or the like) the dominant narrative around this was the management of the porous nature of online political selves, not opening up a bounded-by-default network.

Particularly noting the work of Jodi Dean (2005; 2009), this bubbling, or siloing, of citizens in a polity, is seen by Dean as part of why she considers modern technological political spaces politically ineffective. Dean describes ‘communicative capitalism’ in this context as where a technological fetish of communicative abundance appears to occur, but it is one of circular contributions that are ultimately without impact. The act of political communication in this context for Dean is one where political utterances and acts (such as petition signing) are divorced from reception, and a sense of political contribution is derived more from just contributing them rather than in tracing them to a concrete political end.

This is a viable critique, and certainly fits within my findings, particularly given how Dean sees a fracturing of politics post 1960s/70s into siloed identity categories as part of such. The later development of technological siloing with online political participation divorced from ‘real world’ political efficacy is something Dean sees as exacerbating. For Dean, these prevent a true democratic political solidarity from forming. This is certainly something that could be interpreted from these results, particularly so given my participants mentioned specifically that, while impact mattered to them, direct impact was not something they looked for. Rather, they

saw themselves as contributing to a sort of indirect discursive milieu, something Dean critiques.

However, looking at the findings from my participants, how my participants construct their ‘bubbles’ provides a response to Dean’s critique. While mass movement does of course have import for political mobilisation, the reason for political bubbling is crucial (in other words, not all political bubbling is done for the same reason). As mentioned, my participants performed political bubbling as a resistance to what they perceived as offline political uniformity. Rather than the online being siloed for them, they saw the offline as being more so, and, further, where minority voices were silenced (i.e. their work to prioritise the voices they felt they were not exposed to offline). If Dean’s solidarity is crucial for political effectiveness, it could thus be asked ‘solidarity with whom?’ as Dean critiques the rise of identity-based politics historically. Solidarity aligned with what, is the rather logical next question derived from my participants constructions; what is being left aside for such solidarity?

Dean leaves this question largely unanswered, and as such one must ask if such alignment is merely with already privileged political perspectives, something my participants openly and specifically resisted. Nonetheless, there is Dean’s critique of the circular and non-impactful possibilities of political discourse online, where Dean is strongest, I would argue, something highlighted by my participants’ lack of direct connection to political outcomes. That said, it could be contended that my participants’ political efforts online are *both* contributive *and* non-contributive, in that they exist in both states as potentialities rather than overtly impactful actions. Rather than thinking of themselves as obviously politically relevant, my participants saw themselves as participating in something that could have impact, could change political outcomes. Further, it is possible that the more nostalgic approach of Dean for traditional party politics is itself in reality non-contributive, as my participants specifically stated that they felt ineffective in such participatory forms, or simply unable to participate entirely in politics due to other commitments in their lives, something being online allowed them to manage. Nevertheless, the nature of an indirect political discursive milieu without concrete political impact within (however intentional) political bubbles does leave Dean’s ‘circulating contributions’ critique pertinent here.

This is because online political networks, of course, can still be closed and uniform. It is certainly possible for my participants to close themselves off from divergent views, remaining locked in primary relationship networks of similarity, if that were indeed their goal. However,

my participants did not mention this when they talked about their political communities, either explicitly or implicitly via narrative construction. They indeed spoke of ensuring safety, of not having viewpoints that would impact them affectively too much, of managing emotional load, and of creating networks of values and certain interactional preferences. However, these were things they spoke of as activities that they had to do actively, rather than passively. The open nature of their political networks was something they had to negotiate, rather than the reverse (which many explicitly said their offline lives were). The narrative understanding they were constructing here was one of control in that negotiation, and where they had more, or less, of such. For my participants, this understanding framed the online as allowing more control, but that regards of medium it was a necessity to perform.

As such, what we see here are primary relationships, and particularly networks of primary relationships, being the central organising characteristic of political participation. This is particularly given the interactional nature of discussion and discourse as a fundamental behaviour for that participation, done via values and emotion/affect, through constructions of trust, vouching, and an empathetic imperative. The political space construction centres relationality, making boundaries highly permeable, reversing traditional formalised emplacements of politics. Political spaces become fluid and temporal, being dipped in and out of depending on timing, salience, and energy levels. The space exists less as a location, and more a discursive use of time, participation in a milieu that is contributive rather than directly impactful. Further, given centrality of both relationality and discourse, the result is that one of the central boundary negotiations was around the homogeneity/heterogeneity constitution of the voices in their political spaces. My participants were aware of the homogeneity of the spaces they occupied, and so they actively worked to increase heterogeneity. However, rather than increase such in existing spaces, they would create parallel spaces, new spaces, where they could do so with the affordances provided through social media that they did not have in offline spaces. Further, while they were consciously using these social media affordances to more easily negotiate the boundaries of their political spaces online in order to increase this heterogeneity of voice, it nonetheless was done within narrow parameters around expressed values determined through interactional (relational) norms, which can proxy to make their online political spaces nonetheless homogeneous.

The primary motivating factor was political issues pertinent to the individual's sense of self, rather than political organisations or parties, embedded in everyday practices and experiences.

Although, as discussed previously in this chapter and in section 1.5, this was more about relational social location. The sense-making narrative here is personal experience, and personal engagement, producing an understanding of politics and policy, legislation and political action, rooted in how such impacts the individual, whether that individual be the self, or those one knows of at a personal level via primary relationships (or at least the appearance of primary relationships). Motivation to political participation thus is about managing such engagement on a personal level, ensuring these individuals see themselves understood and valued on a similar primary relationship level by political actors, and generating personal levels of political resonance in feeling that their contribution will be meaningful. Traditional activities of voting, petition signing, and so on, are not sufficient for such and merely focusing on these activities as a way of increasing political participation will not resonate with the political selves my participants have construed here.

9.6 New Zealand

As outlined in this section, from the narrative constructions from my participants, we have the possibility of a nascent articulation of what could be a New Zealand way of doing politics, which begins with negotiating a wider distrust of politics and those who wish to be involved with politics. It involves a cultural propensity to avoid conflict, and some possibilities for regionality, and may foreground primary relationships.

As mentioned in the literature review chapter (Chapter 2), the major consideration when looking at literature around online politics in New Zealand is the paucity, and this is particularly the case when looking at bottom-up research. However, what exists amongst the top-down research emphasises the manner in which political parties, especially, for the most part do not take an engagement approach to online media, preferring to take a broadcast approach, with the implication of wanting to control their message (Barker, 2004; Roper, 1998) with mono-directional information and interactional flows (Beveridge, 2015). Note that this is in complete opposition to the discussion above, where two-way, in-depth engagement that positions them as individuals with particularities has been identified by my participants as being the most motivating for them to get involved with politics. While later elections from 2008 onward did indeed begin to address some of the failings of this approach, a more interactional engagement with citizens was never the norm, though there was acknowledgement from political parties that different social media platforms are considered distinctive in terms of use and audience by users (de Ronde, 2010; Goode, 2010; Lips & Gong, 2009; Salmond, 2010).

However, in none of the literature was there any understanding of regional distinctiveness, but this was present from my participants. A lot of them asked if I was planning to get all my participants from Wellington, and similar numbers of them noted the disproportionate dominance of New Zealand political Twitter from Wellington. The general assumption behind these observations seemed to be one of positioning Wellington as an inherently political city, and, hence, this possibly accounted for that dominance. However, a minority of them also noted, in contradiction to this, that Dunedin was also disproportionately present, and it was not considered a political city. So, while there was no sufficient explanation for why regional variance was in place, there was largely firm agreement that this variance, this disproportionality, was certainly a factor in New Zealand politics. Further, there was particularly a sense that, relative to its size, Auckland was absent in the same way that Wellington was present.

Nor did the literature discuss the place of online politics in the particular context of a New Zealand articulation of 'doing politics'. Most of the literature was descriptive accounts, lacking an analysis relating what might be a particularly New Zealand political construction to that description. My participants, however, did make note of this. Some participants saw New Zealand politics as characterised by tribalism (which aligns with political articulations that stress primary relationships and small-scale networks) but not a particularly party-partisan tribalism. Other participants argued that this may have been the case in the past, and they saw increasing party-partisanship occurring, but that it was not seen as being as bad as they perceived in other nations.

Further, they saw New Zealand politics as characterised by such things as conflict avoidance, and a degree of sanctioning for even expressing an interest in politics. They used phrases like 'not a safe subject' and 'we don't talk about these things face-to-face' and contrasted that to things like discussing or showing passion for sports. They described the online as a space, an outlet, where they could do so and not suffer sanction for such. This is interesting when one contrasts this with the fact that so many of my participants said that there was not really a separation of the offline and the online in terms of their self and lives, but yet there were those who felt that that distinction was present for them. A particular group where this was evidenced were public servants, for instance, where negotiating how overtly and openly political they could be was considered crucial for their continued employability and ethics as public servants in terms of neutrality.

This particularity of citizen, as with particularity of region, and particularity of New Zealand, was for the most part not present in looking at online politics in New Zealand, where an almost assumed genericism predominated. This was also the case for race and gender (though there are exceptions, as is discussed below and in the literature review chapter (Chapter 2), but this was not present in an intersectional manner for the large part). Continuing from this beginning I will now discuss two further narrative concepts for how my participants saw a particular New Zealand politics, particularly pulling from the work of Dikeç (2005) and Löw (2016) and understanding the findings using a theoretical framework of a sociology of space.

Size

One of the consistent points that my participants came back to, in regard to New Zealand, was a sense of size as an organising principle of so much of their online activity in the country. While it was sometimes explicitly mentioned in terms of the size of New Zealand generally, or New Zealand Twitter more specifically, more often than not this narrative flowed through more implicitly, via the constructions that my participants articulated. For instance, in regard to how they framed talking about the homogeneity of their bubbles (as they did in the third findings chapter, chapter 7), the echo chambers they frequented, when contrasting their online and offline bubbles, there existed a boundedness to their discussions. This was as though they constructed such bubbles as being of a finite size of management, that required them to take an active hand in ensuring that a diversity of perspective was present. Specifically, here, rather than increasing their offline bubble size to include a more diverse pool of perspectives, they moved to a different context (the online) to create a parallel bubble. Further, they found this as something easier to do online than offline.

This kind of boundary maintenance was crucial for my participants, for it was something they consciously worked at consistently online, and were quite aware of what they perceived as a lack of such offline. The offline space, they viewed, was something that was akin to place, as a fixity that they wanted to resist, but articulated it in a political sense as something they could not. Hence, they craft a space online as a resistance, in such a way that the space operates as a boundary construction in itself, both a space and a boundary to the perceived homogeneity of the offline. However, despite the permeability of the borders constructed here between the offline and the online (given the lack of distinction between such spaces was something my participants often mentioned), there was still a lot of boundary work occurring via such things as how they managed their different social media platforms as spaces for different activities,

such as politics on Twitter and familial relationships on Facebook. As such, they are constructing siloed spaces across different forms of social media dependent on audience and use (such as being political), separate again from the offline (with the caveat that there was permeability based on political use, but in situations where relationships online were trusted sufficiently to be then continued offline). Thus, what is constructed here is a multiplicity of spaces, where the borders of tension exist along the lines of fixivity, and for political constructions this is particularly audience management.

Continuing this, boundary maintenance was something explicitly invoked in regard to size when participants mentioned the number of followers as a concern in terms of the interactional nature of their political behaviour online (i.e. it changing such in terms of quality). They spoke about the differences of interaction (particularly around political issues) that they felt occurred for them when their followers count size got big, versus how such were for them when their follower counts were smaller. This is also manifested in the Little Twitter phenomenon (an overt and literal boundary construction via protected accounts), where participants actively sought out smaller networks that were considered both more meaningful to them (and specifically sought out this form in order to keep the size of their circle smaller). Therein they could discuss things they felt they could not on Big Twitter (note this included personal and private topics, but also political ones, where personal experiences of political issues could be discussed in a manner my participants felt was more safe, not to mention discussing taking action). Given the centrality of primary relationships to wider Twitter political interactions, the trust implicit in Little Twitter space constructions, and then the familial and close-friend bonds that were often discussed in relation to the likes of Facebook, the boundary construction here is the expectations of types of primary relationship, rather than merely having primary relationships in a space.

While this construction of Little Twitter is certainly not a New Zealand-specific occurrence, where it does take on a particularly New Zealand construction is in light of the boundary work my participants have to do in regard to their vulnerability to consequence from being political, and how that manifests in New Zealand. Specifically, for them this involved such things as the example of public servants negotiating the boundaries of their jobs as politically neutral, which they saw as part of their politics, but also actively discussing topics related to those jobs. But being aware of the size of New Zealand, and the small networks necessitated a higher level of policing to ensure the consequences of being political did not translate easily across the smaller

networks. As such, it was not that Little Twitter was a particularly New Zealand manifestation of online politics, but rather that due to the small size of New Zealand, this was a particularly salient use of online tools to negotiate this tension. Furthermore, given the nature of New Zealand culture to see political discussion or political behaviour as somehow suspect (as discussed above) the boundary maintenance work necessary to shore up space distinctions (such as the use of locked accounts) becomes of particular import in New Zealand. This is noted via the fact that nearly all my participants explicitly mentioned the permeability of New Zealand society.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, size was consistently, and explicitly, the first characteristic that my participants defined as being particular to New Zealand politics, whether offline or online. This concept of small size is also something they spent a considerable amount of time negotiating, both the positive aspects of such (participants often spoke about creating circles of friends they knew and had meaningful interactions with politically, a political space, as per Dikeç (2005)) but also the negative, such as one of their tweets making it quickly to people they do not know of until abusive responses appear, or it impacting their job prospects due to the ‘two degrees of separation’ myth of New Zealand. The specific border tension here for each space is the levels of vulnerability each space held, and their border work involved how much they could manage such in each space, how much they could allow permeability, and how much they could prevent, between the different spaces.

Another more implicit manifestation of size is how my participants negotiate global political narratives, or those understandings of political issues that predominate in such spaces as Twitter (often those political narratives that tend to be dominant are those understandings from the US and the UK). My participants would enact size as a concern when describing how they negotiated with and resisted those narratives. Participants spoke about the difficulties of resisting the contextually incorrect framings due to their power, but also about using them to inform and place local New Zealand political issues in a wider, global context. Hence, here size is malleable and contingent on context, a space where the borders shift depending on the way local and global narratives interact, or are perceived as interacting by my participants. Those engaged in political issues in New Zealand are constantly assessing how local understandings are informed by, or are resisting, global understandings. Further, often both are done, where resistance is made to intentional political decontextualised (or rather, contextualised, but incorrectly contextualised) narratives.

A particular example of this kind of boundary work, that was mentioned by some of my participants, was around racial political debate in New Zealand. They spoke of such things as the dominance of US understandings of systems of race, versus the colonialist context for race analysis in New Zealand, and how the dominance of US constructions/understandings of race was something they had to negotiate with as they articulated a particularly New Zealand model of such. However, they also talked about such things as intersectionality (as discussed in Chapter 3) as useful tools for racial analysis that they felt they could use, which emerged historically from US Black Feminist thought. As such, their negotiation here is not merely a resistance to the global by the local, but rather the local political space is always permeated by the global political context, and power-dominating political understandings are negotiated with along the borders of the spaces. Moreover, it is not a static boundary, but a fluid one.

This is also the case when shifting space scope (i.e. size) again to dealing with political narratives within New Zealand. While we certainly can see the negotiation my participants must do with global political narratives, they also spoke about the permeability of space creation in relation to power within New Zealand when it came to defining political understandings. Particularly this was mentioned amongst my participants who identified as being from ethnic minority communities, specifically around echo chamber understandings of online groupings. A number of them mentioned their inability to resist dominant political narratives around such things as race, or gender, when they are members of underrepresented minorities. They would describe the ability to shut oneself off from voices other than those that mirror one's own is dependent on the power one has in society. In other words, construction of space itself is a function of power, and the permeability of political borders around that space are dependent on your position vis-à-vis domination political narratives. According to these participants, it is those whose political space most closely aligns with dominant political narratives that have the most ease in maintaining a lack of permeability in their borders. To pull from Dikeç (2005), their political spaces become places of politics, because of their proximity to narrative power.

Furthermore, it is also worth emphasising here in light of the above paragraph, that the boundaries of a 'diversity of voices' from my participants are themselves managed boundaries. By this I mean, while it was important to my participants to include the voices of people that did not look like them, identify like them, or could offer broader intersectional perspectives or experiences on topics or issues, the positions on those issues or topics were largely variances

on agreement rather than actual substantive divergence. As such, this can still constitute an echo chamber, because it is not an actual diversity of competing opinions or ideologies, and engagement across such, but rather merely a variety or variances of opinion and thought, new developments, if you will, upon already held political positions. Power, in this context, thus again becomes about your ability to maintain boundaries of thought and perspective, and uniformity of thought, hence Dikeç's (2005) space/place negotiation (where, I would argue, the ability to make political place from space is also an effect of power).

Note, the point here is not that echo chambers do or do not exist, for all my participants did say they existed for them. But rather, it is that how echo chambers, both online and offline (for again, as my participants articulated, such exist regardless of political medium), are manifested and managed is far more complex than simplistic understandings of 'social media bubbles' would suggest, and is dependent on such things as social location. One such example of this in the New Zealand context was my participants speaking of constructions of race within New Zealand, and the resistances to dominant cultural understandings of Pākehā and Māori positionings. Namely, the dominant cultural understanding of such were Pākehā constructions rather than Māori, and the power imbalance therein allowed them to exist as singular, as not the Pākehā construction but rather as simply 'the' understanding. Māori understandings of such, however, had to contend as being negotiations between both. As such, any New Zealand concept of being political has to contend with conceptualising how power works to construct political homogeneity along such particularly New Zealand racial boundaries and political spaces.

Whakawhanaungatanga

As mentioned in the fourth findings chapter, Chapter 6, one of my participants mentioned the term e-whakawhanaungatanga, or with the suffix 'whaka' attached then 'verbing' the noun e-whanaungatanga. I have discussed in Chapter 3 that whanaungatanga is the Te Reo Māori term for "attaining and maintaining relationships" (O'Carroll, 2013a, p. 230), the act of which my participants have articulated throughout this thesis as being crucial to how they construct being political. Further, this negotiation of meaningful bonds, and how they are manifest, is a collective negotiation with the borders of the space in which whanaungatanga might be created. Given the claims made by my participants as to the centrality of respect for individual political self-articulation (i.e. how you treat the identities of others) – and particularly via the 'empathetic imperative' – as a highly salient border construction for the space of their political

selves, this common ‘rule’ was hence a border construction that they wanted to not just maintain, but to preserve. For instance, according to Dikeç (2005):

Forms of political engagement can mobilize from and make use of organizational spaces, spaces of categorization, representations of space, and physical spaces – in short, various forms of boundary-making and maintenance practices – for inaugurating spaces for politics. There is, in other words, a need for relatively stable formations for democratic pronouncements. Space, then, becomes place – if only transiently – where a wrong can be addressed and equality demonstrated (p. 185).

What Dikeç (2005) is arguing for here is that space becomes place in a political sense only if there is a goal, something to be addressed – a kaupapa – at the end of it, and particularly for him this is one of resisting negativities. It is not enough to merely do border work, to do the kind of relational space creation that Löw mentions; it requires not just a goal commitment, the kaupapa, but there is a power imbalance addressed. Indeed, for my participants, commitment to a direct impact connection from their political discussions and participation was crucial, and this was often spoken about in terms of addressing what they saw as inequalities in society.

However, my participants spoke considerably about the negative experiences of being political online, and their resistances to such, even given the kaupapa experienced in their political participations. They were willing to put up with, and develop negotiation strategies to deal with, the negativities of being political online, but that does not deny that those negativities were not agreed upon as present. It is interesting to note that the negativity that my participants mentioned was not just negativity that they personally experienced, that which was targeted towards them specifically; rather, they also mentioned how negativity impacted those others they knew, and/or saw, people they felt they had a common connection with. In other words, it was not merely the presence of negativity that was a disruption to my participants’ feelings of communality, of relationality, but seeing that negativity impacting others was seen as the group as a whole being disrupted; they were experiencing break-downs of border policing of their constructed spaces. Nonetheless, my participants never spoke about a sense of deferment to authority, or traditional structures. That is not to say that they did not speak of authority, for they certainly did around such things as a deferment to expertise, or deferment to lived experience (this was done through such things as looking for individuals to follow who spoke to different perspectives, or speaking of the ways in which women with expertise were

devalued), so these speak to the alternative forms of (not to mention, bound up with concepts of respect, and expressions of respect). This relates to Dikeç (2005).

As such, it could be argued that my participants were expressing feelings of whanaungatanga as space creation, and at least a communal attempt at emplacement. Given the centrality of primary relationships to everything my participants articulated when it came to their political behaviour, we can see the connection to whanaungatanga, particularly via wairuatanga, manaakitanga, aroha, and ngā kare ā-roto, where the depth of such relationships and interconnectedness is expressed in the kotahitanga of whakawhanaungatanga (or the doing of whanaungatanga) – see the discussion of the detail and definition of these concepts in section 3.4. Furthermore, with the decoupling of whanaungatanga from whakapapa and instead being performed through kaupapa (or, in this case, the political participation vehicle of primary relationship formation), and the overt sense of space/place of New Zealand, we can see a particularity to perhaps a New Zealand political participation articulation via whanaungatanga (mind you, this needs to be tested further in such areas as whether this is present outside of New Zealand, or further within New Zealand through whether this primary relationship centrality is also present amongst men's experiences of political participation). But, as such, New Zealand becomes a central border creation in an emplacement as a political space, though not necessarily one stopping at the physical borders of the country, as participants often included in political discussions and engagements those that were part of the New Zealand diaspora online. In other words, whanaungatanga does not stop merely at the limits of the country itself politically. In fact, this was something the likes of O'Carroll (2013), Waitoa (2013), and Waitoa, Scheyvans, and Warren (2015) all mentioned as part of online whanaungatanga, though, for these scholars, importantly, this was for te ao Māori.

To this point, what must be acknowledged is one of the central tenants of much of the work of whanaungatanga scholars, namely, the commitment to kaupapa Māori, and tikanga Māori. While my participants certainly included Māori, and many of them articulated their political behaviours through Māori political history and structure, my participants were women of a range of ethnicities, and as such not all held tikanga Māori as a central organising principle. While some scholars (Rata & Al-Asaad, 2019; Waitoa, 2013; Waitoa, Scheyvans, & Warren, 2015) did place tikanga firmly as a requirement for whanaungatanga to be enacted, O'Carroll (2013) did not do so explicitly. As such, while it could be argued that my participants were enacting whanaungatanga as a mechanism for a New Zealand form of political participation,

the question of the centrality of tikanga Māori makes this something that requires further investigation. Moreover, given that I myself as a researcher here am Pākehā, I must acknowledge my own social location as non-Māori, and the dangers of appropriation in such an act. Nevertheless, this remains an arguable possibility here that could provide fruitful avenues for further research and theorising around a particularly New Zealand political participation form and space creation.

9.7 Conclusion

While the contributions that this thesis makes to knowledge are itemised in the next chapter, the conclusion, I shall here go over what I believe to be the wider contributions that this chapter provides. As mentioned in the introduction, the fundamental provision that this thesis makes is the centrality of primary relationships to political participation construction, and particularly the emphasis on relationality in that. It addresses the gap in the research that Boullaine (2009; 2015) has identified by both looking at what motivates my participants to be political online, and thus proposing a solution to why direct impacts were not being found to political acts online, in that indirect impact was seen as the more probable contribution. Through the above relationality there is an empathetic imperative to political participation, which means that, while an issue-based approach to politics is individualistic, it is also nonetheless collective because of the centrality of others in how issues are approached. There is also a high degree of social location and nascent intersectionality in that relationality, as being political is highly embedded in the everyday, both in terms of the personal being political and there being no discrete ‘being political’ space separate from the everyday. Further, we also see this evidenced in the prioritisation of personal experience over abstract policy (again bringing in primary relationships), and the possibly gendered reconstruction of political spaces through the inclusion of affect, empathy, and understanding in what gives salience to political participation.

Additionally, political participation (both online and offline) is largely done through a prioritisation of discussion (as well as reading, listening, and engagement with mainstream media) over more traditional (and historically more highly ranked) political participation forms, such as voting. This is not to say that such traditional forms are not performed, but rather that they are not what motivates people to be involved politically, nor are they what my participants saw as truly ‘being political’. Online specifically, being political particularly involved being exposed to a wider range of political voices than offline, according to my participants, and a focus on contributive impact and engagement (specifically with political

figures at primary relationship levels). Further, there was a lack of homogeneity between social media platforms in their use, and a more nuanced and complex nature of social media bubbles/echo chambers. Online politics also allowed them to more easily integrate the ‘dipping in and out’ of politics as part of their everyday, as well as negotiate political negativity.

Specifically in a New Zealand context, the contribution of this research, I believe, lies in beginning to address the gap in research into bottom-up political participation behaviour, something particularly present in research into online politics in this country. In other words, it is a possible start towards a concept of a uniquely New Zealand articulation of political participation, and, in this context, an online one. This construction made by participants involves a high degree of salience given to size, or the lack thereof, in New Zealand. This is evidenced through such things as the centrality of size in the construction of New Zealand as a political space, both in terms of physicality (such as size of population, and particularly the small, interconnected nature of social networks), as well as conceptually, in terms of boundary negotiation between local and global narratives of political understandings and debates. My participants see politics in New Zealand as something that is viewed negatively, as something that does not occur homogeneously across the country; rather, it is disproportionate to population distribution.

Finally, from an interview with one of my participants comes the te ao Māori concept of whakawhanaungatanga. This concept pulls many of the threads together from this thesis, such as relationality, primary relationships, a widening of political spaces to include such things as affect, emotionality, a centrality of talk and discussion, purpose and impact, and may provide insights into what might be a specifically New Zealand construction of political participation, and one that particularly might work well online. However, it is one that must be considered carefully, given the crucial nature of te ao Māori herein, and whether an expansion of it to include non-Māori might render it meaningless, as well as potentially having a negative effect for Māori. Any consideration of such has to be done in a partnership model.

Chapter 10

Conclusion

This thesis focuses on how New Zealand women Twitter users construct political participation. The interest lies thus in how their conceptualisations result in particular political participation behaviours, and what this might contribute to international research around why research from now might not have found direct connections between online political behaviour and offline political impacts, by providing qualitative insight into how political participation is done online. Further, given the identified gaps in research into how bottom-up political participation is done online in New Zealand, it aims to provide the beginnings of a framework for how this might be conceptualised for further research. The research was performed via unstructured interviews, analysed using a narrative analysis approach, reiteratively coded, and thematically grouped to provide meaning constructions. In this last chapter, I return to the initial research question, and summarise what the findings were around the four themes that emerged to answer this. The chapter then goes on to look at the three major contributions that this research is providing: to international research, to New Zealand research, and finally to potential policy. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of the limitations of the research and what recommendations for further research might arise here.

10.1 Research Question

The overarching research question for this study has been:

How do women Twitter users in New Zealand construct political participation?

The intention was to investigate this question through determining, via narrative analysis, the meaning-making frameworks that my participants placed on political participation, so that insight could be provided as to what political behaviours might result. The following sections summarise the four findings chapters (5-8), providing an answer to the above.

Primary Relationships

This chapter (Chapter 5), describing the theme of Primary Relationships, started out with how my participants constructed their interactions with political figures as it leads to feeling politically fulfilled, then moved on to how other individuals are conceptualised politically at the personal level in terms of interactions, political positions, and so on. It then looked to the centrality of political values in forming these primary relationships, moving on to how such

primary relationship centrality includes a large amount of emotionality, how this impacts my participants, and how this is located in the everyday and social location. Finally, it concluded in looking to the ramifications of the narrative construction for what counts as political engagement. The overarching theme of the chapter was to look at how my participants orientated themselves politically, and identifying what the narrative was to give meaning, salience, and import to political behaviour.

Everyday Politics

This chapter (Chapter 6) looked to how participating politically is narratively constructed, initially through the sub-theme of how personal experience and small acts were seen as intrinsically political; everything was political, and they interpreted their lives and their behaviours through the lens of such things as an empathetic imperative and relationality. The next sub-theme was engagement and what my participants were engaged by in order to be political: what motivated them. The following sub-theme was what the primary political behaviour was for my participants, discussion and debate, reading and listening, a very discursive construction of political behaviour. Finally, the last sub-theme was the organising narrative around which all political behaviour was structured for my participants: political issues. Rather than being organisation-focused, my participants saw issues that were salient to their selves, and the selves of others, as the crucial focus for political participation, and oriented how and how much they participated accordingly.

Being Online

The sub-themes for this chapter (Chapter 7) involved what my participants constructed as salient in terms of the impact of being political online, and covered how different social media platforms are used in different ways rather than homogeneously, how social media bubbles or echo chambers are constructed and negotiated, and how they traversed the twin tensions of maintaining a diversity of voices with online negativity when it comes to being political online. The chapter focused on the centrality of critical discourse-based political engagement, both with other individuals and of media (whether mainstream or not), and the awareness of how the impact of political behaviour online tends to be both indirect but also overt. Further, the import of empathetic imperative and relationality as orientating concepts for how one both engages politically online and how one's politics is framed/assessed as being worthwhile, and

finally how complex online bubbles/echo-chambers were, in terms of managing a diversity of voices with safety and resistances to homogeneity.

New Zealand

This last findings chapter (Chapter 8) looked to the narrative constructions around small size, isolation, and the implications of small networks for how my participants saw what might be ‘unique’ about New Zealand politics, how the public service was a particular articulation of this negotiation of small networks within the country, how regional variation manifested itself, and how they articulated what might be a New Zealand political culture, before discussing how my participants negotiated the intersection of global and local understandings/narratives of particular issues. Finally, there was brief engagement with Whakawhanaungatanga, which could be a possible orientating narrative framework with which to understand bottom-up politics in New Zealand.

10.2 Contributions

General Contributions

First, the impact of social media on politics, contrary to historical approaches, is indirect rather than direct, so a researcher studying the political effects of social media needs to be aware of this in deciding what to measure. My participants conceptualised it more as contributing to a milieu than to direct political outcomes, though did they want obvious connections between political behaviour and outcomes, even if they were not direct ones.

Second, discourse is the primary political participation form, and so theorising around political behaviour import rankings need to take this into consideration in their prioritisation of what counts as political participation.

Third, a simplistic binary distinction between collective versus individual political participation (i.e. traditional issue-based versus organisation-based conceptions) would be a misleading approach, given the highly relational and intersectional nature of my participants’ construction of politics.

Fourth, political engagement motivation is mediated via primary relationships (not secondary), affect, and an empathetic imperative, which again builds on the relational nature of my participants’ political participation forms.

Fifth, political interactions of intersecting and contingent social locations are not just present, but salient and at the forefront of my participants' understandings, given the emphasis on relationality, as well as how these then operate along power differentials and representation, particularly given the centrality of discourse.

Sixth, to this above relational centrality, there are no real distinctions for my participants between 'being political' and 'everyday life', with the space constructions and boundaries being highly malleable and intertwined, in terms of time devoted to each, and where each are done. Being political is part of everyday life, dipping in and out in the course of each day, and on different things and in different amounts during a lifetime. This also has ramifications for affect in terms of salience of political issues and identity, as boundaries of rationality and emotionality are also broken down.

Seventh, social media platforms are heterogeneous, and as such should not be treated as monolithic and homogeneous. Rather, each different platform is used for a different purpose, a different audience, actioned along both primary relationships and secondary relationships, but particularly different kinds of primary relationship. Looking for political effects from social media thus needs to take particularity of platform into consideration.

Eighth, the phenomenon of political echo chambers or bubbles on social media are more complex than merely along the axes of political ideology. While, certainly, group homogeneity along other axes can proxy to political homogeneity, research needs more nuanced in how this occurs (such as via the empathetic imperative I have identified in this research) and how offline networks can have similar effects.

Ninth, women are not just experiencing politics in a gendered manner, but are also recasting politics itself to be more inclusively gendered through not displacing traditional space constructions of what is considered to be political, but by widening it to additionally include things that are emplaced outside politics such as emotionality and the personal.

Contributions Specific to the New Zealand Context

First, whakawhanaungatanga could be a potential theoretical contribution for how a particularly Aotearoa New Zealand conception of political participation might be organised, due to the centrality of primary relationships to New Zealand, as well as our small size. This could possibly cross boundaries between Māori and Pākehā, as well as other ethnicities as we

step outside of a bicultural model. However, the latter must take into consideration whether the possibility that divorcing whanaungatanga from kaupapa Māori may, or should, not be possible. Further, even if it is possible, we must as researchers must consider the ethical considerations of using such a theoretical understanding in a committed Te Tiriti o Waitangi partnership context.

Second, size, or rather the lack thereof, seems to be an organising principle for a lot of political behaviour in New Zealand. This is evidenced through small network size, the permeability between different groups, the informality inherent in such smaller networks, and how a lot of my participants' political energy was spent in negotiating the boundaries between the different social group spaces. Whether or not the cultural artefact of 'two degrees of separation' is actually true in New Zealand, it nonetheless formed a conceptual construction for my participants in how they experienced being political.

Third, there is certainly a perception amongst my participants that being involved with politics was seen to be a negative personality characteristic by others in New Zealand, and that this was something they had to manage.

Fourth, political issues in New Zealand are located at the intersection of local narratives with global narratives. Understandings of such issues are thus a boundary construction by political actors that involves both resistance to global narratives as well as appropriation of them to inform the local. This is not to say that there are not local conflicts over how issues are to be understood, but rather that these are then also located in wider global debates that often have more power behind them to structure boundaries than the local ones.

Fifth, political participation in New Zealand is not uniformly distributed. My participants all stated that Wellington dominated political Twitter in New Zealand, which was not unexpected despite the sheer size differential of Auckland. However, it was also noted that, amongst the smaller centres, Dunedin was disproportionately present, which sets up some interesting questions for potential future research.

Questions Arising

Should political participation policy rely solely on attention to traditional forms of political participation such as voting? It is apparent from my research that it should not. Techniques to make such traditional forms easier effectively treat the symptoms or manifestations of political

participation motivation, not the causes. None of my participants saw voting or signing petitions or getting involved with political organisations/parties as the primary forms for their political participation; rather, these existed at a secondary tier, and as such were not motivations to be politically involved, whether such could be done with ease or not. Given the centrality of discourse as a primary political participation form, policy approaches encouraging this via the above understandings of primary relationships, affect, relationality, with an understanding of differential access and impact dependent on social location, is crucial.

Can political parties, organisations, and politicians justify merely using social media as a broadcast medium? My research suggests not, and that online political participation motivation occurs best through bi-directional interaction, not merely through broadcast use. While this certainly does mean that political parties and organisations will have to give up a certain degree of control of message, doing so will encourage further engagement that will be present across online and offline contexts. Moreover, approaches to different social media platforms must involve an understanding of how that platform is used. A blanket political ‘social media’ policy is not sufficient and must be tailored individually to each platform.

Further to this question of a broadcast medium, can such continue to be done at a distance from voters? It is apparent from my research that online political participation motivation approaches will work best when individual citizens feel that the particularity of themselves as individuals is being engaged with in this bi-directionality, namely, that their unique selves are seen and understood (i.e. that primary relationship level interactions are occurring).

Is it possible for political figures to keep their personal and public lives separate in this contemporary political space? Given the primary relationship bi-directionality, my participants expected that political figures will also display both the personal and political in constructing themselves via interaction as unique individuals, just as they themselves do. They will be more motivated to engage with political figures if they can see those figures via a primary relationship lens.

Is it possible to address political polarisation with policy? Approaching such via political echo-chambers or bubbles will require attention to be paid to both offline as well as online contexts, but also looking to the manner of, and reason for, such bubbling. Simple exposure to different viewpoints is not sufficient, and a more nuanced approach that takes into consideration such things as power differentials and protection for vulnerable groups is necessary.

Could an approach to policy dissemination, engagement, and consultation that shifts away from traditional abstract framing be attempted? As political issues are interpreted via experience and relationality, policy proposals that centre individual experience, affect, and the ability to empathise will resonate more than rational abstract approaches to description. However, the particularity of such is dependent on the individual understandings of different groups.

Should a focus on encouraging traditional political participation forms that require more time and commitment be continued with? As my participants did not carve out large periods of time to ‘being political’, but rather intertwined their politicism in both their everyday lives and everyday issues of self, a policy approach that assists everyday ‘micro-participations’ that allow citizens to dip in and out, with low barriers to involvement/entry, could be more effective.

10.3 Limitations

Representativeness

As has been stated above, this study did not employ a representative sampling method, preventing it from being generalisable to the wider population, such as beyond Twitter, or beyond women, or beyond New Zealand. This is particularly the case in this research, as the participants are already embedded in political networks, given their participation in New Zealand political Twitter (in other words, my participants are already inclined towards political involvement). Further, snowball sampling itself as a methodology can have the following disadvantages:

- Community bias (i.e. there is no guarantee you can derive patterns from the data as your sample’s responses may be too varied, despite network homogeneity).
- There is no way to determine the details of the population you are studying, such as size, or if your participants are indicative of that exact population.
- Dependency on the networks that your participants are embedded in, and the lack of control that your participants will provide appropriate possibilities for interviews to you (may open up your pool, for instance).

However, under snowball sampling, the best defence is to ensure a range of participants (Morgan, 2008), and my purposeful approach to snowball sampling, as outlined in Chapter 4, is intended to at least partially address these concerns.

Debate?

While there was certainly a centrality of discourse, and a privileging of discussion, reading, listening, and so on, as political participation forms in this research, this does not mean that such an emphasis is in actuality any kind of idealised Habermasian public sphere. Rather, discourse and discussion themselves may become goals in and of themselves, rather than any concrete outcome from that discourse. In other words, debate, discussion, reading, listening, and so on, do not have substantive outputs themselves, nor is having outputs from such a motivating factor for my participants. Circular discussion and affective engagement could themselves be the be-all-and-end-all of motivation here, and the impacts from any kind of discursive milieu or Overton Window, are merely collateral externalities. The presence of discussion says nothing of the constructiveness of that discussion, and any assessment of such is not in this research.

Further to this point, discussion and engagement with different viewpoints via conversations around articles and opinions (whether this be via the traditional media or online media), rather than providing an example of deeper engagement, could itself be a form of distancing from issues and involvement. In other words, it allows my participants to hold political issues at arm's length rather than becoming truly involved with the issues themselves. Such discussion then becomes a thought exercise, or an expression of affect and emotionality, without substantive involvement. While there certainly can be advantages to such distance in terms of mental health, and other aspects, for individuals, as a generalised approach it again becomes a measure of form over substance. Also, again, this is not an assessment this research makes.

Primary versus Secondary Relationships

While my participants certainly privileged primary relationship types over secondary relationship types in terms of their political motivation, there is no assessment in this research of whether primary relationships should replace secondary relationships as a fundamental political interaction form. As mentioned in Chapter 9, there are questions around the nature of thin (versus thick) interaction, and how the former allows for a wider (if shallower) pool of perspectives and viewpoints to be exposed to and gathered, if simply in terms of sheer numbers. Furthermore, there is the question, due to the intensity and depth of primary relationships themselves, of affect and an empathetic imperative, if the 'bandwidth' (so to speak) required for such places constraints on how much political interaction individual citizens can bear. This

is particularly the case given my participants spoke frequently of emotional and political energy drain and of not having enough ‘spoons’ to deal with exposure to politics.

Gender

Although, as outlined in the Methodology and Literature Review chapters (Chapters 2 and 3) sections, there was reason to restrict the sampling to women, given the particularity of political experience due to gender, that in and of itself could be limitation. Namely, that the outcomes of relationality, primary relationship centrality, affect, an empathetic imperative, and so on, as political participation motivations could themselves be limited as gendered constructions, rather than be part of a wider construction of political participation.

10.4 Recommendations for Further Research

To the limitation mentioned immediately above around gender, further research is required to see if the findings here are present in a sample that either involves men or includes all genders. This could involve such things as a replication of this research with men, or all genders, or a wider survey approach to see if the findings here are present across a representative sample of the population in New Zealand, both offline and online, and quantitatively as well as qualitatively. Moreover, this needs to be expanded to include looking at other demographics than just gender, such as ethnicity. However, such research needs to remain ‘bottom-up’ so that the historical tendencies that were identified in the literature review, to focus on organisations, political figures, and campaigns, are not merely replicated, particularly when it comes to online political participation.

References

- Almond, G. A., & Verba, S. (1963). *The civic culture: Political attitudes and democracy in five nations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Anderson, K. V., & Sheeler, K. H. (2014). Texts (and tweets) from Hillary: Meta-meming and postfeminist political culture. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 22(2), 224-243.
- Anduiza, E., Cantijoch, M., & Gallego, A. (2009). Political participation and the internet: A field essay. *Information, Communication & Society*, 12(6), 860-878.
- Anstead, N., & Chadwick, A. (2010). Parties, election campaigning, and the Internet: Toward a comparative institutional approach. In A. Chadwick & P. N. Howard (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics* (pp.56-71). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Åström, J., & Karlsson, M. (2016). The feminine style, the male influence, and the paradox of gendered political blogspace. *Information, Communication & Society*, 19(11), 1636-1652.
- Baltar, F., & Brunet, I. (2012). Social research 2.0: Virtual snowball sampling method using Facebook. *Internet Research*, 22(1), 57-74.
- Barker, L. (2004). Party websites. In J. Hayward & C. Rudd (Eds.), *Political communications in New Zealand* (pp. 74-91). Auckland, New Zealand: Pearson Education New Zealand.
- Barlow, A. (2008). *Blogging America: The new public sphere*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- Bennett, W. L. (2012). The personalization of politics: Political identity, social media, and changing patterns of participation. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 644 (November), 20-39.
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. London, United Kingdom: Penguin Books.
- Beveridge, M. (2015). Social media in the 2014 general election. In J. Johansson & S. Levine (Eds.), *Moments of truth: The New Zealand general election of 2014* (pp. 287-299). Wellington, New Zealand: Victoria University Press.

- Bode, L. (2016). Closing the gap: Gender parity in political engagement on social media. *Information, Communication & Society*, 1-17. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2016.1202302
- Boulianne, S. (2009). Does Internet use affect engagement? A meta-analysis of research. *Political Communication*, 26, 193-211.
- Boulianne, S. (2015). Social media use and participation: A meta-analysis of current research. *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(5), 524-538.
- boyd, d. (2010a). Social network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics, and implications. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), *A networked self: Identity, community, and culture on social network sites* (pp. 39-58). New York, NY: Routledge.
- boyd, d., & Marwick, A. E. (2010b). I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New Media & Society*, 13(1), 114-133.
- Brundige, J., & Rise, R. E. (2008). Do the information rich get richer and the like-minded more similar? In A. Chadwick & P. N. Howard (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of Internet politics* (pp. 144-156). Florence, Italy: Routledge.
- Calhoun, C. (1992). Social theory and the politics of identity. In C. Calhoun (Ed.), *Social theory and the politics of identity* (pp. 9-36). Oxford, United Kingdom; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Castello, B. V. (2016). Bridging constructivism and social constructionism: The journey from narrative to dialogical approaches and towards synchrony. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, 26(2), 129-143.
- Chadwick, A. (2006). *Internet politics: States, citizens, and new communication technologies*. Oxford, United Kingdom; New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Chadwick, A., & Howard, P. N. (2008). Introduction: New directions in Internet politics research. In A. Chadwick & P. N. Howard (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of Internet politics* (pp. 1-9). Florence, Italy: Routledge.
- Chase, S. E. (2005). Narrative Inquiry: Multiple lenses, approaches, voices. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 651-680). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Chen, P. J. (2009). Online media. In C. Rudd, J. Hayward, & G. Craig (Eds.), *Informing voters? Politics, media, and the New Zealand election 2008* (pp. 119-141). Auckland, New Zealand: Pearson.

Collins, P. H. (2015). Intersectionality's definitional dilemmas. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 41, 1-20.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 140, 139-167.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-1299.

Cunha, E., Magno, G., Goncalves, M. A., Cambraia, C., & Almeida, V. (2014). He votes or she votes? Female and male discursive strategies in Twitter political hashtags. *PLoS ONE*, 9(1) 1-8.

Dahlgren, P. (2013). *The political web: Media, participation, and alternative democracy*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dashti, A. A., Al-Abdullah, H. H., & Johar, H. A. (2015). Social media and the spiral of silence: The case of Kuwaiti female students' political discourse on Twitter. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 16(3), 42-53.

Davies, B., & Harre, R. (1990). Positioning: The discursive production of selves. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, 20(1), 43-63.

Davis, R., Baumgartner, J. C., Francia, P. L., & Morris, J. S. (2008). The Internet in U.S. election campaigns. In A. Chadwick & P. N. Howard (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of Internet politics* (pp. 13-24). Florence, Italy: Routledge.

de Ronde, E. (2010). Digital campaigning. In R. Miller (Ed.), *New Zealand government & politics* (5th ed., pp. 312-325). Victoria, Australia: Oxford University Press Australia & New Zealand.

Dean, J. (2002). *Publicity's secret: How technoculture capitalizes on democracy*. Ithaca, NY; London, United Kingdom: Cornell University Press.

- Dean, J. (2005). Communicative capitalism: Circulation and the foreclosure of politics. *Cultural Politics*, 1(1), 51-74.
- Dean, J. (2009) *Democracy and other neoliberal fantasises*. Durham, NC; London, United Kingdom: Duke University Press.
- Delli Carpini, M. X. (2000). Gen.com: Youth, civic engagement, and the new information environment. *Political Communication*, 17, 341-350
- Delli Carpini, M. X., & Keeter, S. (1996). *What Americans know about politics and why it matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Diesing, J. (2013). *Social media: A solution to declining youth engagement in politics?* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.
- Dietrich, D. (1997). (Re)-fashioning the techno-erotic woman: Gender and textuality in the cybercultural matrix. In S. G. Jones (Ed.), *Virtual culture: Identity and communication in cybersociety* (pp. 169-184). London, United Kingdom: Sage Publications.
- Dikeç, M. (2005). Space, politics, and the political. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 23, 171-188.
- Dixon, K. (2014). Feminist online identity: Analyzing the presence of hashtag feminism. *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 3(7), 34-40.
- Edwards, B. (2012). New Zealand. *European Journal of Political Research Political Data Yearbook*, 51, 221-234.
- Enli, G. S., & Skogerbø, E. (2013). Personalized campaigns in party-centered politics: Twitter and Facebook as arenas for political communication. *Information, Communication & Society*, 16(5), 757-774.
- Evans, H. K., & Hayes Clark, J. (2016). "You tweet like a girl!": How female candidates campaign on Twitter. *American Politics Research*, 44(2), 326-352.
- Feldman, S. (2003). Values, ideology, and the structure of political attitudes. In D. O. Sears, L. Huddy, & R. Jervis (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of political psychology* (p. 477-508). Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.

Fernback, J. (1998). There is a there there: Notes toward a definition of cybercommunity. In S. Jones (Ed.), *Doing Internet research: Critical issues for examining the net* (pp. 203-220). London, United Kingdom: Sage Publications.

Fernback, J., & Papacharissi, Z. (2007). Online privacy as legal safeguard: The relationship among consumer, online portal, and privacy policies. *New Media & Society*, 9(5), 715-734.

Fitzjohn, P., & Salmond, R. (2007). The battle of the blog: A phony war? In S. Levine & N. S. Roberts (Eds.), *The baubles of office: The New Zealand general election of 2005* (pp. 249-268). Wellington, New Zealand: Victoria University Press.

Fontana, A., & Frey, J. H. (2005). The interview: From neutral stance to political involvement (3rd Ed). In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 695-728). Thousand Oaks, CA; London, United Kingdom; New Delhi, India: Sage Publications.

Foot, K. A., Xenos, M., Schneider, S. M., Kluver, R., & Jankowski, N. W. (2010). Electoral web production practices in cross-national perspective: The relative influence of national development, political culture, and web genre. In A. Chadwick & P. N. Howard (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of Internet politics*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Foucault, M. (1991). *Discipline and punish: The birth of a prison*. London, United Kingdom, Penguin.

Foucault, M. (1998) *The history of sexuality: The will to knowledge*. London, United Kingdom, Penguin.

Fountaine, S., & Comrie, M. (2016). New Zealand media coverage of women and women politicians. In G. Kemp, B. Bahador, K. McMillan, & C. Rudd (Eds.), *Politics and the media* (2nd ed., pp. 326-340). Auckland, New Zealand: Auckland University Press.

Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, 25/26, 56-80.

Gergen, K. (2003). Self and community and the new floating worlds. In K. Nyri (Ed.), *Mobile democracy: Essays on society, self and politics* (pp. 61-69). Vienna, Austria: Passagen Verlag.

- Gibson, R., & Cantijoch, M. (2013). Conceptualising and measuring participation in the age of the Internet: Is online political engagement really different to offline? *The Journal of Politics*, 75(3), 701-716.
- Gibson, R., Lusoli, W., & Ward, S. (2008). The Australian public and politics on-line: Reinforcing or reinventing representation? *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 43(1), 111-131.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, NJ: Doubleday.
- Goode, L. (2010). New media and democracy. In R. Miller (Ed.), *New Zealand government & politics* (5th ed., pp. 431-443). Victoria, Australia: Oxford University Press Australia & New Zealand.
- Goodman, L. A. (1961). Snowballing sampling. *Annals of Mathematical Statistics*, 32(1), 148-170.
- Goodwin, I. (2011). Power to the people? Web 2.0, Facebook, and DIY cultural citizenship in Aotearoa New Zealand. *New Zealand Journal of Media Studies*, 12(2), 110-134.
- Griffiths, M. (1995). *Feminisms and the self: The web of identity*. London, United Kingdom; New York, NY: Routledge.
- Habermas, J. (1983). *Moral consciousness and communicative action*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Habermas, J. (1996). *Between facts and norms: Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Hager, N. (2014). *Dirty politics: How attack politics is poisoning New Zealand's political environment*. Nelson, New Zealand: Craig Cotton Publishing.
- Hamlin, A., & Jennings, C. (2011). Expressive political behaviour: Foundations, scope and implications. *British Journal of Political Science*, 41(3), 645-670.
- Hanish, C. (1969). *The personal is political*. Retrieved from <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>

Haraway, D. J. (1991). A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist feminism in the late twentieth century. In D. J. Haraway (Ed.), *Simians, cyborgs, and women: The reinvention of nature* (pp. 149-181). New York, NY: Routledge.

Haraway, D. J. (1999). Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. In D. Mackenzie & J. Wajcman (Eds.), *The social shaping of technology* (pp. 41-49). Buckingham, United Kingdom; Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.

Hargittai, E. (2011). Minding the digital gap: Why understanding digital inequality matters. In S. Papathanassopoulos (Ed.), *Media perspectives for the 21st century* (pp. 231-240). London, United Kingdom; New York, NY: Routledge.

Hargittai, E., Connell, S., Klawitter, E. F., & Litt, E. (2014). *Persisting effects of Internet skills on online participation*. Paper presented at the TPRC 42: The 42nd Research Conference on Communication, Information and Internet Policy, Arlington, Virginia.

Hargittai, E., & Jennrich, K. (2016). The online participation divide. In M. I. Lloyd & L. A. Friedlan (Eds.), *The communication crisis in America, and how to fix it* (pp. 199-213). New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan US.

Hargittai, E., & Shaw, A. (2013). Digitally savvy citizenship: The role of Internet skills and engagement in young adults' political participation around the 2008 presidential election. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 57(2), 115-134.

Hargittai, E., & Walejko, G. (2008). The participation divide: Content creation and sharing in the digital age. *Information, Communication & Society*, 11(2), 239-256.

Harris, A. (2010). Mind the gap: Attitudes and emergent feminist politics since the third wave. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 25(66), 475-484.

Hart, J. (2019). Americans are angry at me for giving up my gun after the Christchurch terror attack. Retrieved from <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/christchurch-shooting/111603973/giving-up-gun-sparks-american-ire>

Hartmann, H. (1997). The unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism: Towards a more progressive union. In L. J. Nicholson (Ed.), *The second wave: A Reader in feminist theory* (pp. 100). New York, NY: Routledge.

Hayward, B. (2006). Public participation. In R. Miller (Ed.), *New Zealand government and politics* (4th ed., pp. 514-524). Auckland, New Zealand: Oxford University Press.

Higgs, C. (2015). Bloggers, bottom feeders, and disruption: Technology and the 2014 general election campaign. In J. Johansson & S. Levine (Eds.), *Moments of truth: The New Zealand general election of 2014* (pp. 191-202). Wellington, New Zealand: Victoria University Press.

Hillsburg, H. (2013). Towards a methodology of intersectionality: An axiom-based approach. *Atlantis*, 36(1), 3-11.

Holtz-Bacha, C., Langer, A. I., & Merkle, S. (2014). The personalization of politics in comparative perspective: Campaign coverage in Germany and the United Kingdom. *European Journal of Communication Research*, 29, 153-170.

Hopkins, K., & Matheson, D. (2005). Blogging the New Zealand election: The impact of new media practices on the old game. *Political Science*, 57(2), 93-105.

Hopkins, K., & Matheson, D. (2012). Talking in a crowded room: Political blogging during the 2008 general election. *Media International Australia*, 144, 108-117.

Hopkinson, G. (1999). *Network identities and communication: Social constructivism and social constructionism compared*. Paper presented at the 15th Annual IMP Conference, University College, Dublin.

Howard, P. N. (2001). Can technology enhance democracy? The doubters answer. *Journal of Politics*, 63(6), 949-55.

Jungherr, A. (2014). Twitter in politics: A comprehensive literature review. Retrieved from <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2402443>

Katz, J. E. (2006). Internet society. In B. S. Turner (Ed.), *Cambridge dictionary of sociology*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

Kean, N. (2010). 2008: The campaign in cyberspace. In S. Levine & N. S. Roberts (Eds.), *Key to victory: The New Zealand general election of 2008* (pp. 192-205). Wellington, New Zealand: Victoria University Press.

- Keller, J. M. (2012). Virtual feminisms: Girls' blogging communities, feminist activism, and participatory politics. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(3), 429-447.
- King, N., & Horrocks, C. (2010). *Interviews in qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- King, S. A. (1996). Researching Internet communities: Proposed ethical guidelines for the reporting of the results. *The Information Society*, 12(2), 119-127.
- Kolko, B. E. (1995). Building a world with words: The narrative reality of virtual communities. *Works and Days*, 13(1 & 2), 105-126.
- Krueger, B. S. (2002). Assessing the potential of Internet political participation in the United States. *American Politics Research*, 30(5), 476-498.
- Leftwich, A. (1984a). Introduction: On the politics of Politics. In A. Leftwich (Ed.), *What is politics? The activity and its study* (pp. 1-18). Oxford, United Kingdom: Basil Blackwell Publisher Limited.
- Leftwich, A. (1984b). Politics: People, resources, and power. In A. Leftwich (Ed.), *What is Politics? The activity and its study* (pp. 62-84). Oxford, United Kingdom: Basil Blackwell Publishers Limited.
- Ling, R. (2004). *The mobile connection: The cell phone's impact on society*. San Francisco, CA: Elsevier.
- Lips, M., & Gong, H. (2009). *The use of new media by political parties in the 2008 national election*. Retrieved from https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/sog/researchcentres/egovt/research-projects/research-2007/eCampaigning_NZ_2008.pdf
- Loader, B. D. (2007). Introduction. Young citizens in the digital age: Disaffected or displaced? In B. D. Loader (Ed.), *Young citizens in the digital age: Political engagement, young people, and new media* (pp. 1-17). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Löfgren, K. (2012). Political parties in the information age: Any signs of re-intermediation? In I. T. M. Snellen, M. Thaens, & W. B. H. J. van de Donk (Eds.), *Public administration in the information age*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: IOS Press.

Löw, M. (2016). *The sociology of space: Materiality, social structures, and action*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Margolis, M., & Resnick, D. (2000). *Politics as usual: The cyberspace 'revolution'*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Marrett, A. (2010). *Participating online: The Internet and its role in political participatory behaviour in the context of the New Zealand general election 2008* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand.

Mason, A. (2011). *Perceptions of use: Social networking sites, MPs and citizens* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.

Matheson, D. (2016). The power of online politics. In G. Kemp, B. Bahador, K. McMillan, & C. Rudd (Eds.), *Politics and the media* (2nd ed., pp. 183-197). Auckland, New Zealand: Auckland University Press.

McGregor, S. C., Lawrence, R. G., & Cardona, A. (2016). Personalisation, gender, and social media: Gubernatorial candidates' social media strategies. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(2), 264-283.

Micheletti, M. (2003). *Political virtue and shopping: Individuals, consumerism and collective action*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Milbrath, L. W. (1965). *Political participation: How and why do people get involved in politics?* Chicago, IL: Rand McNally & Company.

Miller, D. and Slater, D. (2000). *The Internet: An ethnographic approach*. Oxford, United Kingdom; New York, NY: Berg.

Moodie, G. C. (1984). Politics is about government. In A. Leftwich (Ed.), *What is politics? The activity and its study* (pp. 19-32). Oxford, United Kingdom: Basil Blackwell Publisher Limited.

Morahan-Martin, J. (2000). Women and the Internet: Promise and perils. *Cyberpsychology & Behavior*, 3(5), 683-691.

Morgan, D. L. (2008). Snowball sampling. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The Sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (pp. 816-817). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- Mossberger, K., & Tolbert, C. (2010). Digital democracy: How politics online is changing electoral participation. In J. E. Leighley (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of American elections and political behavior*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
- Murchison, A. (2015a). Changing communications? Political parties and Web 2.0 in the 2011 New Zealand general election. In G. Lachapelle & P. J. Maarek (Eds.), *Political parties in the digital age* (pp. 93-110). Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter.
- Murchison, A. (2015b). Social media and participation. In J. Hayward (Ed.), *New Zealand government and politics* (6th ed., pp. 523-533). Melbourne, Australia: Oxford University Press.
- Murchison, A. (2016). Online media in New Zealand. In G. Kemp, B. Bahador, K. McMillan, & C. Rudd (Eds.), *Politics and the media* (2nd ed., pp. 292-309). Auckland, New Zealand: Auckland University Press.
- Murchison, A., & Deos, A. (2012). What's on their mind? Political parties and Facebook in the 2011 New Zealand general election. In S. Levine & J. Johansson (Eds.), *Kicking the tyres: The New Zealand General Election and electoral referendum of 2011* (pp. 234-246). Wellington, New Zealand: Victoria University Press.
- Muscanell, N. L., & Guadagno, R. E. (2012). Make new friends or keep the old: Gender and personality differences in social networking use. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28(1), 107-112.
- Nabatchi, T., & Leighninger, M. (2015). *Public participation for 21st century democracy*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Norris, P. (2001). *Digital divide: Civic engagement, information poverty, and the Internet worldwide*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Norris, P. (2003). Preaching to the converted? Pluralism, participation and party websites. *Party Politics*, 9(1), 21-45.
- O'Carroll, A. D. (2013). Virtual Whanaunhatanga: Māori utilizing social networking sites to attain and maintain relationships. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 9(3), 230-245.

Papacharissi, Z. (2002). The virtual sphere: The Internet as a public sphere. *New Media & Society*, 4(1), 9-27.

Papacharissi, Z. (2008). The virtual sphere 2.0: The Internet, the public sphere, and beyond. In A. Chadwick & P. N. Howard (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of Internet politics* (pp. 230-245). New York, NY: Taylor and Francis.

Papacharissi, Z. (2014). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.

Papacharissi, Z. (2015). The unbearable lightness of information and the impossible gravitas of knowledge: Big Data and the makings of a digital orality. *Media, Culture, & Society*, 37(7), 1095-1110.

Papacharissi, Z. (2016). Affective publics and structures of storytelling: Sentiment, events and mediality. *Information, Communication & Society*, 19(3), 307-324.

Papacharissi, Z., & de Fatima Oliveira, M. (2012). Affective news and networked publics: The rhythms of news storytelling on #Egypt. *Journal of Communication*, 62, 266-282.

Pedersen, K. (2005). New Zealand parties in cyberspace. *Political Science*, 57(2), 107-116.

Pedersen, K. (2007). Electioneering in cyberspace. In S. Levine & N. S. Roberts (Eds.), *The baubles of office: The New Zealand general election of 2005* (pp. 236-248). Wellington, New Zealand: Victoria University Press.

Plummer, K. (1995). *Telling sexual stories: Power, change and social worlds*. New York, NY; London, United Kingdom: Routledge.

Pūtaiora Writing Group. (2010). *Te Ara Tika, guidelines for Māori research ethics: A framework for researchers and ethics committee members*. Retrieved from <http://www.hrc.govt.nz/news-and-publications/publications/te-ara-tika-guidelines-māori-research-ethics-framework-researcher>

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

- Rata, A., & Al-Asaad, F. (2019). Whakawhanaungatanga as a Māori approach to Indigenous-settler of colour relationship building. *New Zealand Population Review*, 45, 211-233.
- Reid, E. (1996). Informed consent in the study of on-line communities: A reflection on the effects of computer-mediated social research. *The Information Society*, 12, 169-174.
- Riviere, C., & Licoppe, C. (2003). *From voice to text: Continuity and change in the use of mobile phones in France and Japan*. Paper presented at the Front Stage/Back Stage: Mobile Communication and the Renegotiation of the Social Sphere, Grimstad, Norway.
- Robins, K., & Webster, K. (1999). The long history of the information revolution. In K. Robins (Ed.), *Times of the technoculture: From the information society to the virtual life* (pp. 89-110). London, United Kingdom; New York, NY: Routledge.
- Roper, J. (1998). New Zealand political parties online: The World Wide Web as a tool for democratization or for political marketing? In C. Toulouse & T. W. Luke (Eds.), *The politics of cyberspace: A new political science reader* (pp. 69-83). London, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Ross, K., & Burger, T. (2014). Face to face(book): Social media, political campaigning and the unbearable lightness of being there. *Political Science*, 66(1), 46-62.
- Ross, K., Fountaine, S., & Comrie, M. (2015). Facing up to Facebook: Politicians, publics and the social media(ted) turn in New Zealand. *Media, Culture, & Society*, 37(2), 251-269.
- Rule, J. (1999) Silver Bullets or Land Rushes? Sociologies of Cyberspace, in *Contemporary Sociology*, 28(6), 661-664.
- Salmond, R. (2010). 2008: The YouTube campaign. In S. Levine & N. S. Roberts (Eds.), *Key to victory: The New Zealand general election of 2008* (pp. 206-221). Wellington, New Zealand: Victoria University Press.
- Schuster, J. (2013). Invisible feminists? Social media and young women's political participation. *Political Science*, 65(1), 8-24.
- Severs, E., Celis, K., & Erzeel, S. (2016). Power, privilege and disadvantage: Intersectionality theory and political representation. *Politics*, 36(4), 346-354.

Shaw, R. (2009). Politics and the Internet: The New Zealand research. *Political Science*, 61(2), 5-19.

Somers, M. R. (1992). Narrativity, narrative identity, and social action: Rethinking English working-class formation. *Social Science History*, 16(4), 591-630.

Somers, M. R. (1994). The narrative constitution of identity: A relational and network approach. *Theory and Society*, 23, 605-694.

Somers, M. R., & Gibson, G. D. (1994). Reclaiming the epistemological “other”: Narrative and the social construction of identity. In C. Calhoun (Ed.), *Social theory and the politics of identity* (pp. 37-99). Oxford, United Kingdom; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Speed, B. (1991). Reality exists O.K.? An argument against constructivism and social constructionism. *Family Therapy*, 13, 395-409.

Stoker, G. (2006). *Why politics matters: Making democracy work*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Suler, J. (2000). *Ethics in cyberspace research: Consent, privacy and contribution*. Retrieved from: <http://www.rider.edu/users/suler/psycyber/ethics.html>.

Sutton, J., & Pollock, S. (2000). Online activism for women’s rights. *Cyberpsychology & Behavior*, 3(5), 699-706.

Treichler, P. (1990). Feminism, medicine, and the meaning of childbirth. In M. Jacobus (Ed.), *Body politics: Women and the discourses of science* (pp. 113-138). New York, NY; London, United Kingdom: Routledge.

Trilling, D., & Schoenbach, K. (2013). Skipping current affairs: The non-users of online and offline news. *European Journal of Communication*, 21(1), 35-51.

Vaccari, C. (2013). *Digital politics in western democracies: A comparative study*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Van Aelst, P., Sheafer, T., & Stanyer, J. (2013). The personalization of mediated political communication: A review of concepts, operationalizations and key findings. *Journalism*, 13(2), 203-220.

Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., & Brady, H. (1995). *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Vowles, J. (2012). *Down, down, down: Turnout in New Zealand from 1946 to the 2011 election*. Paper presented at the Annual conference of the New Zealand Political Studies Association, Wellington.

Waitoa, J. (2013). *E-whanaungatanga: The role of social media in Māori political engagement* (Unpublished Master's thesis). Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

Waitoa, J., Scheyvens, R., & Warren, T. R. (2015). E-Whanaungatanga: The role of social media in Māori political empowerment. *Alternative*, 11(1), 45-58.

Walters, S. D. (2018). In defense of identity politics. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 43(2), 473-488.

Ward, S., & Gibson, R. (2010). European political organisations and the Internet: Mobilization, participation, and change. In A. Chadwick & P. N. Howard (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of Internet politics* (pp. 25-39). New York, NY: Routledge.

Ward, S., Nixon, P., & Gibson, R. (2003). Introduction. In R. Gibson, P. Nixon, and S. Ward (Eds.), *Political parties and the Internet: Net Gain?* (pp.1-10). London, United Kingdom: Routledge.

Ward, S., & Vedel, T. (2006). Introduction: The potential of the Internet revisited. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 59(2), 210-225.

Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and society* (G. Roth & C. Wittich, Trans.). Berkley, CA: University of California Press.

Williams, B. A., & Delli Carpini, M. X. (2011). *After broadcast news: Media regimes, democracy, and the new information environment*. Retrieved from <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/vuw/detail.action?docID=807340>.

Appendix

Consent Form
Information Sheet
Transcribing Confidentiality Agreement



Research Project: Women & #NZPol: New Zealand Women Twitter Users & Political Participation Construction
Researcher: Sarah Hendrica Bickerton, PhD Candidate, School of Government, Victoria University of Wellington (VUW).

This consent form outlines my rights as a participant in the above research being conducted by Sarah Hendrica Bickerton for her PhD degree. The VUW Pipitea Ethics Committee has approved this research.

- I have been given and have understood the information sheet about the research project. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that:

- My participation is entirely voluntary and I agree to participate in interviews for the purpose of this research.
- I may choose to decline to answer questions asked in the interviews.
- I may ask for certain information to be treated as 'off the record' and this information will not be used in the research.
- The interview will be audio-recorded and that Sarah Hendrica Bickerton will be making a transcript of it for research purposes only.
- I may ask to receive the interview transcript (by email) and I will be able to provide any clarifications or new information.
- I may withdraw from the research project within two weeks of receiving my interviews' transcript without having to give reasons, and the notes and recordings of my interviews will be destroyed.
- The data I provide will be only accessible to Sarah Hendrica Bickerton and her PhD supervisor, Dr. Karl Lofgren. The audio records will be deleted one year after the final thesis is submitted and the transcripts destroyed after a further four years.
- The information I provide will not be used for any purpose other than those disclosed on the information sheet without my written consent.
- Any quotes of mine, if used, will always be attributed to a pseudonym.

Please check the following should you so wish:

☐ I would like to be provided with an electronic copy of the final dissertation project:

Name:

Email:

Signature:

Date:



Research Project: Women & #NZPol: New Zealand Women Twitter Users & Political Participation Construction

Researcher: Sarah Hendrica Bickerton, PhD Candidate, School of Government, Victoria University of Wellington (VUW).

Hello,

My name is Sarah Hendrica Bickerton and I am a PhD Candidate in the *School of Government* at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW). I am currently doing my PhD research on how New Zealand women on Twitter do political participation. I am contacting you because you were recommended to me as someone that could contribute to this research.

Contemporary research into the effect of online use on offline political participation has identified a gap; the understanding of political participation online itself has not been sufficiently researched. Further, in New Zealand, the research on online politics has focused almost exclusively on a top-down approach, through the lenses of the political parties and electioneering, with there being almost no research into bottom-up citizen-focused political use. This research aims to contribute to filling both of these gaps by analysing how New Zealand women who use Twitter construct political participation, via in-depth interviews.

These are the kind of questions we will cover (please note that this is not an exhaustive list, nor may all such questions be asked, and things may change depending on your responses during the interview):

- a) How do you use Twitter politically?
- b) Is there any distinction between online and offline political activities?
- c) Can you tell me if you participate in different political issues in different ways? How do you manage them?
- d) How do you interact with individuals and/or organisations online?
- e) Do you behave differently on different online platforms?
- f) Are there times you hold back in expressing political thoughts? Why?
- g) How has your political activity changed over time? Online and offline?

The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, but could go longer. While I may be quoting you, quotes will always be attributed to a pseudonym, and any connection between yourself and that pseudonym will be stored in an encrypted location. However, even given such precautions, please note that I cannot guarantee your confidentiality, so do keep this in mind when answering. In any future publications, a similar pseudonym-based approach will be taken. All recordings will be destroyed after five years. Please note that you can withdraw from this project up to two weeks of receiving the transcript of your interview.

Information Sheet

This research has been approved by the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee: Application Number 0000025714.

If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research you may contact the Victoria University HEC Convenor: Associate Professor Susan Corbett. Email susan.corbett@vuw.ac.nz or telephone 04-463-5480.

If you have got any further questions, please contact me at: sarah.bickerton@vuw.ac.nz or 021-808-669, or my PhD Supervisor Karl Lofgren at karl.lofgren@vuw.ac.nz or 04-463-6349.

Thank you for your consideration of participation.

Kind regards
Sarah Hendrica Bickerton



Transcribing Confidentiality Agreement

Project Title: Women & #NZPol: New Zealand Women Twitter Users & Political Participation Construction

Principal Investigator: Sarah Hendrica Bickerton, PhD Candidate, School of Government, Victoria University of Wellington (VUW).

I, _____, agree to ensure that the audio files I transcribe will remain confidential to Sarah Hendrica Bickerton and myself.

I agree to take the following precautions:

1. I will ensure that no person, other than Sarah Hendrica Bickerton hears the recording.
2. I will ensure that no other person has access to my computer/device.
3. I will delete the files from my computer/device once the transcription has been completed.
4. I will not discuss any aspect of the recording with anyone except Sarah Hendrica Bickerton.

Signature:

Date: