

The Revolution Might Be Tweeted: Digital Social Media, Contentious Politics and the Wendy  
Davis Filibuster

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## **Abstract**

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This thesis explores how digital tools and practices affect social and political contestations in the social media age. Through the use of an extended case study, I incorporate geographical and feminist understandings of space, activism, and relationships between technology and society to demonstrate how social media practices have the potential for social and political change, and open up channels of interplay between informal and formal political practices. Specifically, I examine digital practices surrounding the filibuster of the restrictive abortion bill SB 5 by Texas State Senator Wendy Davis. I argue that digital participants create and share inventive forms of contestations that produce counter-discourses and potentially re-frame contentious issues. These practices help cohere communities of resistance through a shared visual and textual language, which offers participants a way to share their opinions and protests. These communities raise awareness of issues, increasing visibility and holding formal political actors accountable. Examples of the social and political contestations produced by activist communities, specifically regarding gender discourses, are discussed, as well as how Davis became a symbol around which participants could rally.

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**Davis Filibuster**

Lila Garcia

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Geography

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## Preamble

A longtime lurker in comment threads on my favorite blogs, I read the discussions, giving mental high fives to the commenters who left funny or insightful posts. Many wrote eloquent and meaningful responses that resonated with how I felt about a particular contentious issue. Others left me seething –“trolls” leaving negative, offensive, or aggressive comments seeking to bait other users into engaging. The sites I follow tend to be political or offer social commentary on contentious issues. Many examine the ways social factors (race, gender, sexuality) are depicted and unequally represented in popular culture.

When I finally began leaving tentative, cautious comments on blog posts, I eagerly watched for notifications that signaled another user recommended or replied to my comments. By this point, I recognized other users’ screen names, and I began to feel actively a part of a community that I had observed for far longer. Even now I hesitate to leave controversial comments, acutely aware that women especially can face violent and aggressive vitriol in online spaces. However, in the communities that I feel a part of, there is a sense of common protection and camaraderie.

These musings on my own digital practices are peppered with neologisms that arose around digital technologies. A lurker is someone who passively consumes content and online discussions without contributing. A troll is a user that leaves intentionally argumentative or inflammatory posts. In addition to affecting the methods of communication in highly industrialized societies, digital practices and tools alter the way we operate socially, culturally, and politically. My digital habits led to my learning about Texas State Senator Wendy Davis, who filibustered a restrictive abortion bill for 10 hours. I watched as her actions exploded online over several days in June and July of 2013. This explosion of digital activity sparked the research

that follows. I explore the ways that digital practices affect social and political contestations; discuss the formation of digital communities and how these communities use digital tools to create alternate discourses; explore how gender is treated discursively, using as a case study Wendy Davis and her filibuster of State Bill 5 (SB 5).

# Chapter 1

## 1. The power of attention

In our age of ubiquitous computing, Internet access, and social media, various issues, events, and people can captivate the public for brief spurts of time, fueled by digital media tools and practices. Events that begin as localized issues can jump to the national consciousness, often extending their popularity far beyond what was possible before the instantaneous sharing platforms of Twitter, Facebook, and online blogs. Memes, tweets, and hashtags spring up to celebrate, protest, or critique events, appearing to unite several corners of digital space, only to eventually lose followers and decline in popularity. Online fame comes in spurts and waves.

In the course of writing this thesis, countless such episodes dominated attention, only to fade as the next big moment took over. Some events seemed to unite digital participants together positively, building a sense of belonging. The explosion of memes about soccer goalkeeper Tim Howard after a series of impressive saves during the World Cup suggested a sense of a shared American pride. Other events demonstrate how digital media replace traditional forms of information dissemination and news reporting. The shooting of unarmed teenager Michael Brown dominated digital space for a time. The local police clashed with protesters, blocking mainstream media access. People turned to Twitter, Facebook, and live streaming blogs to report on, and learn about, the events taking place in Ferguson, Missouri. Blogger Rebecca Rose commented on how information spreads through social media,

“The astounding realization that the FPD [Ferguson Police Department] trying to kick out the media has resulted in this massive barrage of photos, videos, tweets, posts, stories, etc. is so amazing to me. What are you thinking, FPD? The only thing I could think is that these are a bunch of old, clueless people who don't really understand the power of new media. Citizen journalism at its finest tonight. The city is a no-fly zone for pete's sake, and we STILL have more info coming out of there than we can keep up with. This is amazing to me” (Rose 2014).

As Rose observes, with the help of these tools, and arguably as a result of these tools, the issue jumped to the national scale, prompting the governor and then the President to speak about the issue, and opening a conversation about policing in America.

During the same time period in summer 2014, celebrities and “normals” took to Facebook and YouTube to post videos of themselves taking the “ALS” challenge: being dunked in ice water and donating money for research for Lou Gerig’s disease. This “fad altruism” received its share of criticism, yet the ice bucket challenge raised \$100 million for the ALS Association. During the same period in 2013, the organization raised \$2.8 million (Diamond 2014). It was a brilliant social media move.

Yet, the fleetingness of these “moments” prompts questions over the effectiveness or long-term consequences of digital media tools. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, various scholars and writers began the work of teasing apart how these technologies impacted (or not) the ways societies communicate, protest, come together, or break apart. Communications and political science scholars wondered at the changes in social and political practice (Fenton and Barassi 2011; della Porta and Diani 1999; Baym 2010; Papacharissi 2010; Pini, Brown, and Previte 2004; Vitak et al. 2011). Geographers began examining the implications of digital tools on conceptualizations of space and new cybergeographies (Crutcher and Zook 2009; Dodge 2001; Graham 2011). Conceptualizations about digital technology’s effects oscillated between dystopian and utopian, although recent scholarship breaks down and largely rejects these dualities (Baym 2010; Papacharissi 2010).

Research has pointed to unequal access to various technologies, and how different users will experience them differently, if they do at all (Gilbert and Masucci 2006). Women and minorities have largely been underrepresented in technology formation, and as they begin to

enter into technological roles, these groups often face intense harassment and discrimination (Wajcman 2007; McLafferty 2005)

Despite previous scholarship, the new practices of creating, sharing, and producing meaning out of digital content and online interactions are still ripe for exploration, particularly in geography. Approaching this from a geographical perspective allows for a complex investigation that breaks from dualistic approaches and benefits from geographical interpretations of space.

While some of the online events or viral campaigns can be brushed off as frivolous or fun, they still serve important community functions. Community, camaraderie, and belonging can all grow from participation and consumption of such media. But as I will demonstrate, digital practices can also be political, spreading the popularity of contentious events, raising awareness, and sometimes spurring or increasing action.

### **1.1 Wendy Davis**

On June 25<sup>th</sup> 2013, working from home, I began to see increasing numbers of posts spring up on Facebook and blogs about Texas Senator Wendy Davis. In the days prior to this, I noticed her name pop up on social media and news sites. On June 25<sup>th</sup>, the hashtag, #standwithwendy began to trend. Twitter publishes lists of hashtags that are “trending,” or most popular at that given moment. Fuzzy on the particulars, I knew that Davis was connected to women’s rights, Texas, and the ongoing abortion debate in the US. The proliferation of her name provoked me to click a story that provided background on the issues, and I learned that Davis intended to filibuster a highly restrictive abortion bill (SB 5) in the Texas State Senate. 2013 saw many high profile gaffes and missteps by Republicans in regards to women’s health, as well as legislation that pointed to a regressive stance on women’s reproductive freedoms and bodily

autonomy. Personally interested and invested in these issues, my roommate and I had the filibuster live streaming on TV by that evening.

No major news outlets were covering it, so while the proceedings played out slowly, we simultaneously checked our phones for updates on social media, reading and sharing posts and tweets that relayed information from physically present activists, as well as posts of encouragement and solidarity. When senator Leticia Van de Putte stated, “At what point does a female senator have to raise her hand or her voice to be heard over her male colleagues?” we loudly cheered her on, along with the hundreds of people in the capital building – cheering loud and long enough to prevent a vote on SB 5. The next day, the social media spike in popularity succeeded in pushing the issue to national media outlets, and Davis and the fight over reproductive freedom dominated the next few news cycles.

Sitting in my living room in Seattle, Washington, watching a live stream from Texas, while on my phone reading posts and tweets from around the US, chatting to my friend next me, I was struck by the ways digital technologies allow a transcendence of space, yet all the while grounded in the social, political, and economic circumstances of material realities.

## **1.2 Digital practices and the Wendy Davis filibuster as case study**

Scholars across many disciplines continue to tackle researching the societal effects of living in a digitally mediated age. Technology moves rapidly, shifting the ways we interact, work, and play. Much work in geography focuses on the rapid rise of geospatial technologies, volunteered geographic information, and the ways digital media affect us spatially (Crutcher and Zook 2009; Dodge 2001; Graham 2011; Zook 2006; Elwood 2008; Elwood and Leszczynski 2013; Kwan 2002; Sui and Goodchild 2011). In this thesis, I focus on the ways digital media are involved in social and political contestations, and may represent a shift in how politics and

activism are practiced in our digitally mediated lives. The contestations in question revolve around reproductive rights, which are bound up with cultural notions of gender. Reproductive rights activists and those who struggle for feminist causes have a diffuse target—societal norms, gendered discourses, and patriarchal notions of family, gender roles, and women’s rights. Digital tools and social media may make the work of these activists more successful, in a way that traditional activist organizations could not accomplish alone.

In order to tease apart the ways digital media are bound up in activist practices, the societal and political contestations that circulate, and social norms that may be (re)produced in such practices, I selected a case study of a contentious political issue that included a digital media component. As outlined above, in the summer of 2013, Texas Senator Wendy Davis filibustered a restrictive abortion bill that garnered much social media attention. Following, I provide an overview of the filibuster and the bill that prompted Davis to act. The research methods and design follow this to conclude Chapter 1.

Chapter 2 provides theoretical frames from relevant literature to understand where this study fits in to existing research. Chapter 3 explores the new forms and practices employed by participants to engage in cultural and political contestations, which I argue are symptomatic of shifts in how digital technologies are shifting the way we live and engage. Chapter 4 explores the ways digital media create imagined spaces of community—publics where participants can engage in political contestations and enact political and media pressure about particular causes. Chapter 5 shifts gears to the ways embedded social norms might be contested or (re)produced through these practices, specifically looking at how gender and gendered discourses are deployed, and how digital media work to give voice to underrepresented political participants.

### 1.3 Wendy Davis and SB 5

Republican Senator Glenn Hegar wrote Texas State Bill 5, although it was co-authored by seven other Republican senators and one conservative Democrat. Republican legislators Jodie Laundenberg and Harvey Hilderbran co-sponsored the bill (Texas State Legislature 2013). The bill intended to restrict abortion at 20 weeks, and create stricter standards for abortion facilities. The bill defines “pregnant” as “the female reproductive condition of having an unborn child in a woman’s uterus.” An unborn child is defined as “offspring of human beings *from conception* until birth” [emphasis added] (Hegar 2013). The language of the bill posits the contested idea that life begins at conception, infusing a political bill with an ideological belief.

The bill based the 20-week limit on abortions on “substantial medical evidence” that a fetus is capable of experiencing pain after 20 weeks. The bill specifically prohibits abortions after 20 weeks of gestation, with two exceptions. The first to, “avert the woman’s death or a serious risk of substantial and irreversible physical impairment of a major bodily function, other than a psychological condition” (Hegar 2013). A physician is not allowed to perform an abortion, “if the risk of death or a substantial and irreversible physical impairment of a major bodily function arises from a claim or diagnosis that the woman will engage in conduct that may result in her death” or injury (Hegar 2013). This effectively removes the option of abortion for psychological reasons at 20 weeks. The second exception is if the fetus has “severe, irreversible brain impairment.” The bill suggests that its requirements do not “impose an undue burden or substantial obstacle on a woman’s ability to have an abortion” and cites that 20 weeks is adequate time to decide whether to terminate a pregnancy, and abortions can still be performed if the mother’s life is at risk (Hegar 2013).

Davis and other opponents of the bill cited the increased requirements of abortion facilities as the restriction that most raises the burden to Texas women seeking a legal abortion (McAuley 2013). The bill requires that a physician performing an abortion have “active admitting privileges at a hospital” located within 30 miles of the abortion clinic and provides obstetrical or gynecological services. The bill requires that on and after September 1, 2014, “the minimum standards for an abortion facility must be equivalent to the minimum standards...for ambulatory surgical centers” (Hegar 2013). This would shutter most of the clinics in Texas. The vast size of the state of Texas means that women in rural areas would effectively lose access to safe, legal abortion without the undue burden of extensive travel.

As of Autumn 2014, the bill was being fought in court. The US Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit previously let stand the provision for abortion clinics meeting ambulatory surgical regulations. However, the Supreme Court on October 14, 2014 blocked that requirement statewide, as well as the admitting-privileges requirement for clinics in McAllen and El Paso. This allowed more than a dozen clinics to re-open in the state. Had the bill stood, all but eight of the state’s abortion clinics would have shut down, requiring women in some parts of the state to travel more than 150 miles to the nearest abortion center (Liptak 2014).

Senator Wendy Davis had filibustered a contentious state bill before. Prior to SB 5, Davis successfully stalled the vote on a bill that would have resulted in major cuts to education funding. In 2011, Davis spoke for 77 minutes against SB 1811, preventing a vote on a bill that would have cut \$4 billion to public schools (Mann 2011).

A Democratic state senator from Fort Worth, in Tarrant County, Davis was a teenage mother who began her education at community college and finished with Harvard law school (The Senate of Texas 2013). The details of her biography would (and continue) to color news

about her political career. Critiques or praise of her as a mother often overshadow coverage of her political actions—attention that rarely gets thrown on to male politicians who are also fathers, highlighting the gendered way politicians are represented in the US. This gendering of Davis and the discourse around the filibuster is addressed further in Chapter 5.

Texas Governor Rick Perry added SB 5 to the agenda of a 30-day special session on June 11, 2013. Delay tactics employed by Democrats and the use of parliamentary rules delayed a vote on the bill until the last day of the House session. House legislators voting along party lines passed the bill, advancing it to the Senate (Tomlinson 2013; Aguilar et al. 2013). Shortly afterward, Davis voiced (and tweeted) her intention to filibuster the bill. If successful, it would be a historical filibuster both for its duration, and because a woman had not attempted such a lengthy filibuster. To be successful, Davis would need to speak continuously until the midnight deadline of the special session, not yielding the floor for 13 hours.

Many local media sources tracked the events of the filibuster, providing live blogs and video about events as they unfolded, such as the live streaming provided by *The Texas Tribune* which I used to stream the filibuster in my home in Seattle. According to *The Texas Tribune* blog, activists began arriving about an hour before the senate gallery opened at 9:30am on June 25, 2013. Activists in opposition to SB 5 wore orange, outnumbering supporters of SB 5 who wore blue (Aguilar et al. 2013).

Wendy Davis began her filibuster at 11:18am. Texas legislative rules stipulate that you cannot eat, drink, sit down, or veer off topic during a filibuster. If a senator violates the rules of the filibuster, a point of order can be called. After three such orders, the filibuster ends.

Lieutenant Governor David Dewhurst (Republican) served as the presiding officer during the filibuster. Davis began speaking about the bill, reading testimonials from Texas women over the

course of several hours. Many of these testimonials were solicited through email and social media, and Davis encouraged the sharing of stories, intending to give voice to women who would be affected by this bill (Aguilar et al. 2013; Fernandez 2013).

Sometime after 6pm, Davis sustained her first point of order, when Dewhurst ruled that a discussion of Planned Parenthood's budget was not germane to the bill. Senator Tommy Williams halted the filibuster again around 6:30pm, calling a point of order when Davis received assistance putting on a back brace from Senator Rodney Ellis. The senate voted 17 to 11 to sustain the point of order for receiving this assistance (Aguilar et al. 2013; Fernandez 2013).

The third violation came at 10pm, for straying off topic. Davis was discussing a 2011 abortion sonogram law in Texas, when Senator Donna Campbell called a point of order, claiming it was not germane to SB 5. Davis countered that she was discussing how the new restrictions of SB 5 would be coupled with the sonogram requirements, increasing the total burden on women seeking a legal abortion. Dewhurst, however, ruled that it was her third violation (Aguilar et al. 2013; Fernandez 2013).

The activist crowd, present in the gallery throughout the day with the occasional disruption, was estimated at 1,500 at around 10pm (Aguilar et al. 2013). After Dewhurst called the third point of order, effectively ending the filibuster, the crowd in the gallery began chanting, "let her speak," and Dewhurst struggled to bring the chamber to order. Senator Kirk Watson (Democrat) moved to appeal the ruling on the third point of order (Aguilar et al. 2013).



**Figure 1: Activists in the Capitol Building, chanting “hell no we won’t go” (Buzzfeed News)**

With roughly two hours left to go, Senate Democrats began asking a series of parliamentary inquiries to stall the proceedings. The situation became chaotic, with senators speaking over one another. As the midnight deadline approached, Senator Leticia Van de Putte (Democrat), absent earlier in the day to attend the funeral of her father, asked to be recognized in order to receive clarification on the earlier points of order. Struggling to gain the floor, she said, “At what point does a female senator have to raise her hand or her voice to be heard over her male colleagues?” (Aguilar et al. 2013; Fernandez 2013; Texas Legislature Online, 2013). At this, the crowd erupted in cheers and shouts, which proved loud and disruptive enough to prevent the chamber being called to order. The cheers continued beyond midnight, while Dewhurst attempted to call the vote on SB 5, claiming afterwards that the vote occurred before the midnight deadline. However, the noise and chaos ultimately prevented the completion of the vote before the deadline. Legislative records initially showed the vote completed before the deadline, but were later altered to show the vote occurring after midnight, past the deadline for the end of

the special session. Throughout all these proceedings, activists, observers, and online users across the county actively engaged digital tools and social media, demonstrating the new ways social and political contestations are created and shared.

#### **1.4 Research method and design**

Guided by a feminist approach to the study of technology and digital practices, and driven by an inductive set of research questions, I follow a research design that allows for deep, interpretative analysis. In order to investigate what cultural and political contestations are produced in digital spaces, the forms that such contestations take, and how gendered norms and discourses are reproduced or disrupted, I explore a range of multimodal digital and social media, using as evidence a single inductive case study. An extended case study allows for an interpretative investigation of this event through its strong off- and on-line activity, and examination of intertwining social and digital practices. This involved ethnographic observation of digital participants, their digital practices, and the content they produced and shared. The extended case method is a way of developing theoretical claims in an area where there is not yet a large body of knowledge (Burawoy 1998).

The Wendy Davis filibuster as a case study ties together elements of digital practice, activism, gender, and simultaneous practices of formal and informal politics. It provides an opportunity to explore how our digitally mediated lives are altering contentious politics and our sense of community and belonging. The formal political actors and digital participants in this case often came from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds, and digital practices provided an opportunity to state opinions and contestations. Gender is implicated in a multilayered and complex way, as gender identity plays a role in digital use and practice, as well as a fundamental role in the discourse surrounding abortion rights and reproductive freedom.

However, it is important to acknowledge the nature of online research. In this case, I was unable to meet or communicate with the anonymous digital participants whose content I gathered and analyzed. This raises many methodological and ethical questions. Without knowing the context and background of participants' comments and content, my interpretations are necessarily based on the textual and visual evidence alone, without the ability to fully contextualize and consider their embodied and embedded circumstances.

To help account for some of these limitations, I collected data from a variety of online digital sources, including tweets, blog posts, comment threads, memes, and video, taking note when possible of self-identifying statements or usernames. Beginning with news aggregator sites (such as *Buzzfeed*) that posted information about the Wendy Davis case in the days following the filibuster, I followed the links and searched for original locations of where this content was posted. Online news reporting tends to include mash-ups of social media that made it easy to follow threads and links to other sites of evidence, such as popular tweets and visual memes. Some of these tweets came from people in high positions of power, such as President Obama and Nancy Pelosi. Celebrities, comedians, and social and political commentators with large numbers of Twitter followers also entered into the digital fray.

In all, I collected roughly three dozen news articles and blog postings. From these postings and articles, I gathered dozens of screen shots of tweets, memes, gif images, and other visual content that were shared in the body of the article. Additionally, for sites that incorporated a space for comments and comment threads, I captured many of these exchanges for content analysis. My pieces of evidence therefore include articles and blog postings; the often lay-person created content shared in the body of these articles and posts, such as tweets and memes; and comments and conversations that occurred in response to the posts.

As a “lurker” (someone who reads comments, but does not post), I explored comment threads and discussion forums that followed news reports of the filibuster. I did not announce my position as a researcher, as most of the material was already several months old and not an unfolding conversation. The content and comments on public blogs and forums are generally left under pseudonyms, and I use the same pseudonyms in my examples.

Some news sites and blogs are local and place based, such as the *The Texas Tribune*, based out of Austin. Others are national online news aggregators, such as *Buzzfeed* and *Gawker*. They have different intended audiences, such as *Jezebel’s* focus on feminist issues and feminist news analysis. The iterative process of following the trail of links led to unexpected sites of evidence, such as Amazon product reviews, meme wikis, and some personal blogs.

I entered the data into a qualitative data analysis software (TAMS) for easy coding and organization. I examined each piece of data content, using visual and/or textual qualitative content analysis. Using an iterative and interpretative process, I identified emergent themes, using my research questions as a conceptual framework. What message did each comment, meme, or tweet convey? What purpose did it serve? Did it support or oppose Davis? While intent could not always be determined without face-to-face contact, I strived to allow the participants’ insights to speak for themselves.

Once several themes emerged, I organized them around my key questions. Some themes were unexpected, such as the common feeling of participants that they were witnessing history and suggesting social media replaced mainstream media. Other themes matched my initial guesses about what I would find, such as a common use of humor and satire in making political points.

Hailing from a social justice oriented and feminist standpoint, I focused primarily on content and contestations that challenged restrictions to reproductive freedom when choosing evidence. As such, the political, social, and economic perspectives that came to the fore ultimately represent one side – one set of discourses – of this contentious political and social issue. However, this focus allows me to uncover in these digital contestations the voices of those who are often underrepresented, and who are working to upset traditional power relations and gender norms. There exist gender-based exclusions in formal political spaces, and this extends to digital spaces. The power relations in this case are multi-layered, in both the substance of the debate (abortion rights) and the actions taken in this event.

## **Chapter 2: Space, Politics, and Gender**

In what follows, I provide background on theoretical considerations about technology and society, specifically how ubiquitous digital and social media may be altering social, cultural, and political interactions and practices. To understand the Davis filibuster, and the public participation and contestations that surrounded it, I explore how contentious politics have been framed in the past, and how digital technologies may shift political practices. I consider how space is understood and/or defined, as this can affect understandings of the relationship between technology and society, as well as how this shapes practice. Finally, I examine feminist geographical perspectives on technology and contentious politics.

I argue that scholarship investigating technology and society must break out of dualistic thinking, including relegating digital technology and practices to a separate “space” of action. How space itself is defined is vital for how digital practices are understood. I argue that geographers hold a critical role in studies of digital tools and practices, as the study of both are underpinned by theories of space and spatial relations. Geographers have begun moving past purely geospatial technologies, and my work provides another entry point into how social media and digital practices are uniquely understood through a geographical and feminist perspective.

In addition to bringing geography into studies often dominated by political science or communication scholars, I examine how social media can work at the intersection of formal, big “P” Politics and informal politics expressed through social and political contestations. I look at the ways social practices intertwine with contentious issues, and how this can affect formal big “P” political processes and actors.

### **2.1 Conceptualizations of the digital**

Studies of technology, including so-called “cyberspace,” have often focused either on the

technologies themselves (hardware, software, location of servers, etc) or the social, economic, political, and cultural impacts of their use. For geographers, the rise in popularity of the Internet and social media altered traditional understandings of space and place. Place specifically can be redefined as relational, moments in a network of social relations and not necessarily bounded by physical space. Distance between actors can be overcome in virtual space, yet an actor is still understood as embodied in a particular social, economic, and political context (Zook 2006; McLafferty 2005; Parr 2002). This leads to geographical conceptualizations of so-called hybrid spaces which blend the virtual and the physical (Zook 2006). Graham (2011) suggests this hybrid conceptualization helps to break down the notion that cyberspace has a fixed, yet infinite, ontology. Crutcher and Zook (2009) conceptualize cyberspace like they would material place, as a multilayered, heterogeneous, and constantly changing space. In what they term “cyberscapes,” virtual spaces bring with them the same relationships and divisions that exist in the material world (Crutcher and Zook 2009). According to these authors, to understand the effects digital spaces and social media tools have in social and political processes, it is important to conceptualize the relationship between the virtual and the physical as mutually constitutive, as opposed to a binary understanding that holds each in a separate sphere.

Yet, even viewing digital space as a “space” over-simplifies the complex ways that digital *tools* affect our daily lives, and the interconnectedness of the so called virtual and material. In fact, rather than think of two spheres of “space,” perhaps it is better to think about this as Dodge suggests. Dodge (2001) argues that the Internet “should be treated as an extension of the geographic realm, not as some disembodied, parallel universe. Nevertheless, cyberspace is changing geography; it is warping space, shrinking distance, and modifying our sense of place” (1). Changing geography, absolutely. Yet rather than digital space versus material space, perhaps

is better to conceive of it as all one space. Our worlds have gotten bigger. Like a [TARDIS](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_nO8LSqTsY), ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4\\_nO8LSqTsY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_nO8LSqTsY)) our little devices are so much bigger on the inside, allowing access to vast resources, knowledge repositories, and practices of sharing and connection that we are only beginning to grasp.

Online digital spaces are changing the ways geographers conceptualize space, place, and social network interactions. Online spaces are not disconnected from physical space, but are intertwined with our physical lives and capable of producing material effects. Similarly, material circumstances effect a person's engagement with online spaces and digital technologies. As Zook (2006) suggests, "[material] space is a fundamental facet of human experience...but the electronic spaces of the Internet have expanded the realm of human interaction" (61). Nancy Baym, a communications scholar, also suggests that offline and online are not "separate realms," and that the boundary between them is blurred (2010, 152). Conceptualizing digital spaces in this way helps break down a binary understanding of the digital as separate from the physical. As Baym (2010) and Papacharissi (2010) have expressed in their work, there is a danger in holding the digital as somehow disconnected from the physical. Doing so enables a second binary construction, that of viewing the digital through a dystopic lens, or inversely as a panacea that will lead to some sort of social utopia. Critical scholars exploring the social effects and/or potentials of communication technologies often begin by breaking apart these utopian/dystopian discourses about the societal impacts of such technologies, and advance a perspective that conceptualizes the society/technology relationship as more complex than such dichotomies suggest (Baym 2010; Papacharissi 2010). When looking at how digital tools are used, and how they are linked to social practices, the situation is obviously more complex than can be captured through such dualisms.

Within geography, work on new digital technologies often focuses on emerging spatial technologies, geospatial data, volunteered geographic information, and GIS (Pavlovskaya and Martin 2007; Kwan 2008; Sui and Goodchild 2011). However, studies of specifically geospatial technologies still hint at the far-reaching effects of technology more broadly. Elwood and Leszczynski (2013) point out that new spatial media hold the potential for activist, grassroots, and other organizations to advance new knowledge politics and affect social change. They refer to knowledge politics as the use of particular content, forms of representation, and methods of manipulating this information to legitimize knowledge claims (Elwood and Leszczynski 2013). Similarly, McLafferty (2005) discusses women and their utilization of GIS to affect policy decisions. Additionally, many feminist scholars bring a critical perspective to technology as it is used in research, such as GIS, by taking apart assumptions of objectivity and rationality and introducing non-positivist practices of knowledge production that consider hierarchies of power and difference (Pavlovskaya and Martin 2007). Feminist scholars demonstrate how technologies like GIS can be utilized to research women's issues and to expose systems of domination (Pavlovskaya and Martin 2007; Kwan 2002). Much work in critical GIS has focused on understanding the relationship between spatial data and representation and what this knowledge might mean for systems of power and sociospatial relations (Elwood 2008).

These feminist arguments about spatial technologies can be extended to digital technologies and social media, and used to explore how these tools can work for more equitable political participation and representation. Geographers are indeed increasingly examining digital technology outside of the geospatial. Parr's (2002) work on health and medical information on the Internet is one example. Her work emphasizes the co-constitutive connections between the virtual and material, specifically in regards to the body, noting how "virtual space both enables a

sense of technological disembodiment and yet simultaneously reconstitutes and reinforces the physical body” (Parr 2002, 75). Many of McLafferty’s (2005) examples of the co-constitutive nature of technology and society are drawn from outside GIS or geospatial technologies, and she suggests that the Internet can be used as a new space of communication and interaction. She posits that, “cyber-social networks are an increasingly important source of social capital that connects in complex ways with more traditional place-based social networks” (McLafferty 2005, 41). She also suggests “women activists can use the Internet to seek information, build public support, and network with activists in different places who are concerned about the same issue” (McLafferty 2005, 43). Indeed, rather than understanding digital space vis a vis physical space, the idea of expanded networks, extensions to the physical geographical realm, and digital tools as augmentations to how we interact seem more appropriate than ideas of two interacting spheres of “space.”

While feminist and critical engagements with GIS and geospatial technologies remain invaluable to geography, there still exists a need for research that moves beyond geospatial technologies and examines digital tools and the effects they have on our social and political processes, many of which work to overcome distance and unite broad swaths of the public when dealing with contentious social and political issues.

## **2.2 Contentious politics**

My project brings a geographical understanding to digital tools and practices beyond those specific to geospatial technologies, and the potential activist/political impact of such practices. Research about contentious politics undertaken outside the discipline suggests new technologies might create new forms of activism (Vesnic-Alujevic 2012; Tolbert and McNeal 2003; Vitak, et al. 2011; Warner, McGowen, Hawthorn 2012). These authors suggest digital

practices affect social networks and provide another (virtual) arena for social interaction—interactions which have the potential to alter physical places and material realities. This implication of a “virtual arena” that can affect the physical world remains problematic, as will be discussed in section 2.3.

Recent scholars of collective action and contentious politics observed a shift towards activism that involves less formal channels (such as political parties), hierarchal organization, and broad instrumental goals, and towards issue-specific goals that incorporate meaning and identity: from Politics to politics. Digital tools are well suited in these less formal channels of activism and political participation, and much of the literature points to this use. In 1999, technological developments prompted della Porta and Diani to question whether “organizations still have a role in grassroots mobilization, whether dense face-to-face community networks are still necessary to support collective action, whether identity bonds still need some kind of shared direct experience and/or “real” interaction to develop” (132). Other political theorists argue a shift has already occurred, involving highly personalized politics and an “individualized culture of participation” in which people organize around selective issues (Bennett 2012; della Porta and Mattoni 2013, 175). Bennett (2012) questions whether highly personalized politics change how activism and protest occur, suggesting, “there are open questions about where and how new norms guiding participation will emerge from the profusion of self-actualizing, digitally mediated DIY [do it yourself] politics” (31). Della Porta and Mattoni (2013), following Barassi and Fenton (2010), question how social media, such as Facebook, “seem to enhance a strong politics of the self in which a culture of political participation based on ‘mutual individualism’ prevails” (175). For my study, a main point of this literature is that digital tools are changing how we DO politics -- and changing fast.

Some recent work looks at how social media in particular might be harnessed for political mobilization. Buhle (2013) notes how activist women utilized Facebook, Twitter, and blogs to help organize when Republican leaders in the US began introducing policies that would limit women's reproductive rights and cut funding to women's health centers. Warner, McGowen, and Hawthorne (2012) engage in an empirical study that seeks to understand what motivated some social media users to respond to Rush Limbaugh's highly controversial remarks about student Sandra Fluke. The authors question whether Twitter and Facebook represent new spaces of political action. In the case of Rush Limbaugh's remarks, they find that social media "became the agent for the spread of information, the discussion of this information, and action (activism) related to the controversy" (Warner, McGowen, and Hawthorne 2012, 261).

Social theorists have explored how social media and digital technologies are altering the nature of social movements and political participatory practices. New media and digital technologies create new forms and tools that alter the practice of contentious politics, as well new forms of creative cultural contestations that serve to challenge dominant political discourses. This opens up an opportunity for geographers to investigate how our expanded social spaces and spatial imaginaries, augmented by the digital, may be employed in ways that might disrupt unequal relations of power and social norms.

This is not to imply that a consensus on the *power* or effectiveness of digital media and practices as tools of politics has been reached; rather, this is still often debated. While some have hailed digital technologies as a panacea for bringing a political voice to those who lacked one, and created a means by which to organize (Arab Spring, Occupy), others have dismissed such practices as only fostering "weak ties" and low impact actions (Gladwell 2010; Satell 2014). However, this thesis suggests that digital technologies and the practices they engender do not fit

neatly into one side or the other, and that such a binary construction is unhelpful – the role of such tools and practices is far more complex. The new practices afforded by digital technologies are both creating new forms of contestation that arguably do have an impact for broader social change, and are also being adopted by more traditional/formal/structured activist organizations. This is the age of organized social groups creating “tweetstorms,” and real-time news reporting on social media; of viral political conflict with the potential to rocket local events onto the national consciousness (Dewey 2013). Yet, these moments flare up quickly, and often burn out just as fast, replaced by the next big cause, protest, or digital celebration.

### **2.3 How we define space matters**

Scholarship from communications and political science suggests that the interactive nature of new media and the Internet create a new “discursive space” that might encourage political participation, such as increased campaign contributions, or contribute to changes in voter behavior (Vesnic-Alujevic 2012; Tolbert and McNeal 2003; Vitak, et al. 2011). This view of a new “virtual arena” of deliberation suggests that it is the affordances and constraints of technologies that shape practices. The idea of technologies creating “spaces” implies that digital tools and the Internet create a ready-made “sphere” in which participants may find themselves, and this in turn shapes political (and social) practices. This suggestion of space as a ready-made container ignores the reciprocal relationship between digital tools and those who create and use them, as well as the mutability and adaptability of digital technologies. Geographical and feminist approaches provide a way out of this mode of reasoning, and I use these approaches in my treatment of digital tools and practices.

How we theorize digital technologies, and the “spaces” that they create affects how we conceptualize the resulting effects on political practice. Nancy Baym (2010) suggests that, “taken

as a whole, mediated communication is not a space, it is an additional tool people use to connect, one which can only be understood as deeply embedded in and influenced by the daily realities of embodied life” (152). She elaborates, “There are no doors where we can check our personal, social, cultural, and historical identities and world views before entering” (Baym 2010, 153). This is the viewpoint I find most convincing, and parallels a critique of Habermas’s public sphere of deliberation.

The Internet has been offered as a possible realization of Habermas’s public sphere, but it has been critiqued for various reasons (Papacharissi 2009). Baym’s mention of the impossibility of “checking” our embodied identities at the door parallels Nancy Fraser’s (1990) critique of Habermas’s assumption that inequalities can be “bracketed”, and that the sphere itself exists external to the broader social/economic/cultural world, much like the idea that the “virtual” can somehow exist outside of the material. Public (or virtual) spheres bring with them the same social, cultural, and political issues that exist outside such “spheres,” and are affected by unequal access to media and its production. Digital spaces therefore should not be considered ready-made, Habermasian public spheres, as one cannot “enter” a digital space with equal access to deliberation. Rather, participants may *create* spaces (communities) online, bringing along their social, economic, and political circumstances.

Fraser (1990) suggests that there can never really exist empirically the universal, singular public sphere of deliberation as suggested by Habermas. Rather, she proposes that a plurality of counter and competing publics have always existed, and that such a multiplicity is necessary for democratic practice (Fraser 1990). This seems to fit with the idea that we are in a moment of individualized, “issue” based politics, although keeping in mind that some participants are better equipped to use digital tools to forward their individual politics or causes better than others.

Additionally, the multiplicity of “publics” are fashioned *by* digital participants, creating nebulous communities that make use of technological affordances, but the publics themselves are not created, ready-made, by technology.

Another way geography helps to get out of “space as container” is through spatial imaginaries. Spatial imaginaries have a history in geographical research: the ways in which we imagine space and place, and the effects such imaginaries have on our actions and practices. As Wolford (2004) suggests, “place and space constitute more than the physical world in which we live, and, as Doreen Massey (1994) has argued more generally, we need to go beyond the ‘social construction of space’ to better incorporate the spatial construction of the social. A geography of resistance needs to examine the ways in which the physical environment is internalized, embodied, imagined, and remembered” (410). This suggests that space is already conceptualized as *more than* the physical—it is embodied and imagined. Following Lefebvre, Wolford (2004) continues by suggesting that spatial imaginaries are “cognitive frameworks, both collective and individual, constituted through the lived experiences, perceptions, and conceptions of space itself” (410). It is the idea of space as also imagined (individually and collectively) and embodied that I carry forward to understand how we conceptualize the digital, and the ways in which our lived experiences in a digitally mediated society produce imagined spaces that enable and/or constrain our digital practices. Space is created, in a multitude of ways. It is not solely a product of technology.

Using a feminist and geographical viewpoint, and following Massey and Fraser, I argue that this multiplicity of online “publics” is constantly being created, held together for a time, then eroded as new communities form around individualized interests. In the process, users adapt tools and practices, sometimes in unexpected ways, and sometimes limited by the affordances

and constraints of technology, an individual's complex background, and their own unique spatial imaginary of what possibilities exist through digital practice. This plurality of online publics can create spaces for a multiplicity of voices to engage in discursive relations, but which also allow overlap and engender communication *between* publics.

## **2.4 Feminist studies of technology and society**

As noted above, feminist scholars bring a critical perspective to understanding the relationship between technology and society. Technological artifacts have a gendered history, and gender remains an important factor when considering technological use or expertise, with women still largely underrepresented as creators of digital technologies (Wajcman 2007; Light 1995). How technologies are created affects the practices they afford. Feminist engagements with technology are also attuned to how existing power relations may limit access, skill, or the ability to engage with new media in a way that disrupts these existing relations (Gilbert and Masucci 2006). Women will experience new digital technologies in diverse ways, and as Wajcman (2007) states, “there is enormous variability in gendering by place, nationality, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and generation” (294). Research that examines engagements with technology for political purposes should be attentive to the co-constitution of relationships, such as that between gender, identity, and technology.

Geographers and feminist scholars question the ways technological use shapes identities and affects sociospatial relations. Wajcman (2007) calls attention to the need to “investigate the ways in which women's identities, needs and priorities are being reconfigured together with digital technologies” (295). When looking at technology and gender, the focus need not be restricted to web-based technologies: for example, Halford, Lotherington, Dyb, and Obstfelder (2010) investigate the ways the introduction of a new technology in a traditionally gendered

work environment both reproduces normative gender performances, *and* works to unsettle them. They suggest that technology functions in the performative co-constitution of gender (Halford, Lotherington, Dyb, and Obsfelder 2010). With the increased popularity of web-based digital technologies, there is growing empirical evidence of this mutually constitutive relationship, with women often engaging these technologies to create community and as a space in which to forge and/or take control of their self-identities (Brock, Kvasny, Hales 2010; Chan 2008; Pini, Brown, Previte 2004).

As new information and communication technologies alter social networks, “personal boundaries in space and time, so crucial to the formation of identities, are becoming more fluid and dynamic” (McLafferty 2005, 41). These changes in social relations and spatial interactions can affect the formation of identities, and this includes gender, racial, or ethnic identities as some of the examples below illustrate. Brock, Kvasny, and Hales (2010) provide an example of how women might utilize digital media to resist hegemonic, gendered, and racist discourses and participate in the construction of their identities. They explore how African-American women use online blogs to create self-valuations and self-definitions online. The authors suggest that digital media allow Black women a space to articulate their own discourses about what Black womanhood means (Brock, Kvasny, and Hales 2010). Chan (2008) provides another example of how digital media can be harnessed in the performance of identity, in this case of working mothers in Hong Kong. She outlines how motherhood and the predominance of women as primary caregivers is a historically important aspect of Hong Kong culture, and she suggests digital practices allow for the performance of this gendered role and identity. She examines how some Hong Kong mothers are able to use a virtual community, in this case a chat room, to perform their identities as mothers while working jobs that remove them from the home (Chan

2008). Pini, Brown, and Previte (2004) examine how rural women who work in agriculture, “have engaged the technology [email] to constitute new identities for themselves far removed from traditional construction of women on farms” (168). Email and the Internet allow farming women to connect virtually when they are unable to do so in physical space.

These examples begin to test the theoretical connections between the use of technology and the influence such use can have on identity, gender, and formation of digital communities. People marginalized not only by gender, but by other social constructions such as race and ethnicity, might find in digital tools and practices the means to voice their own self-conceptualizations and push back against dominant discourses. Yet more work is needed in order to investigate not only the mutually constitutive relationship between technology and identity, but also the activist and political potential of digital practices.

The literature on digital technologies and social media often hinge on dualisms: digital space versus material space; technology as a utopia versus dystopia; an effective means of resistance versus superficial armchair activism. Such dualisms inhibit a more complex understanding of how digital practices intertwine with social relations and political practices. Digital tools extend our social and geographical imaginaries, bringing to hand new contacts, information, and ways of making our voices and opinions heard. This is vital to the new practices of contentious politics; politics that flow through informal channels, but can still converge with enough force to impact formal political processes. These tools and practices can be harnessed by underserved and underrepresented groups and used to forward counter discourses. Black youth can start [tumblr](#) and Twitter campaigns to push back against the media that often portray them as delinquents or criminals (<http://iftheygunnedmedown.tumblr.com/>). Memories of a beloved comedian and his tragic death can spur digital conversation about the need for comprehensive

mental illness education (<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/about/director/2014/robin-williams.shtml>).

And women can work to raise awareness of the shared experiences of sexual violence

(<https://Twitter.com/hashtag/yesallwomen>) in aftermath of a crime motivated by misogyny.

Digital participants harness digital tools to creatively crack open new discursive possibilities, and through such practices, begin the necessary work needed for social change.

## Chapter 3: Media forms and digital practices

### 3.1 The digital

What makes digital movements possible? Or more specifically, what is it about the digital that enables the practices that result in digital movements? What are the creative, unintended utilizations of media forms? Sharing, liking, tweeting, commenting, posting, linking – all the ways that content can be passed along through the vast spaces of the Internet would not be possible but for the particular aspects of digital technology and social media. However, the ways digital tools are adopted, adapted, and mobilized by users – the interaction of tool and user – creates new forms and practices of social and political contestation.

The practices that arise are affected partly from the form and mediums of modern technologies, as well as from societal circumstances that affect how participants choose to engage. As Nancy Baym (2010) writes, “we need to consider how societal circumstances give rise to technologies, what specific possibilities and constraints technologies offer, and actual practices of use as those possibilities and constraints are taken up, rejected, and reworked in everyday life” (45). The set of practices that develop from digital technology use is affected by the affordances and constraints of each set of hardware/software. Creative adoption and alteration of digital and social media are themselves a practice.

As Manovich (2002) discusses in his book on new media, the unique properties of the digital, and how they affect new media creation, impact the “cultural layer” of media. The underlying structure of computers and software algorithms cannot but impact the media that form through such tools and the social practices that follow— something geographers Kitchin and Dodge (2011) also realize in their work on how software shapes the social. The properties of the digital allow users to search for content or create new visual or textual content; adapt it,

highlighting the mutability of such content; and then share it across a variety of digital platforms. The underlying technology affects what can be done, but users determine creative ways to the push boundaries of technology for their own ends.

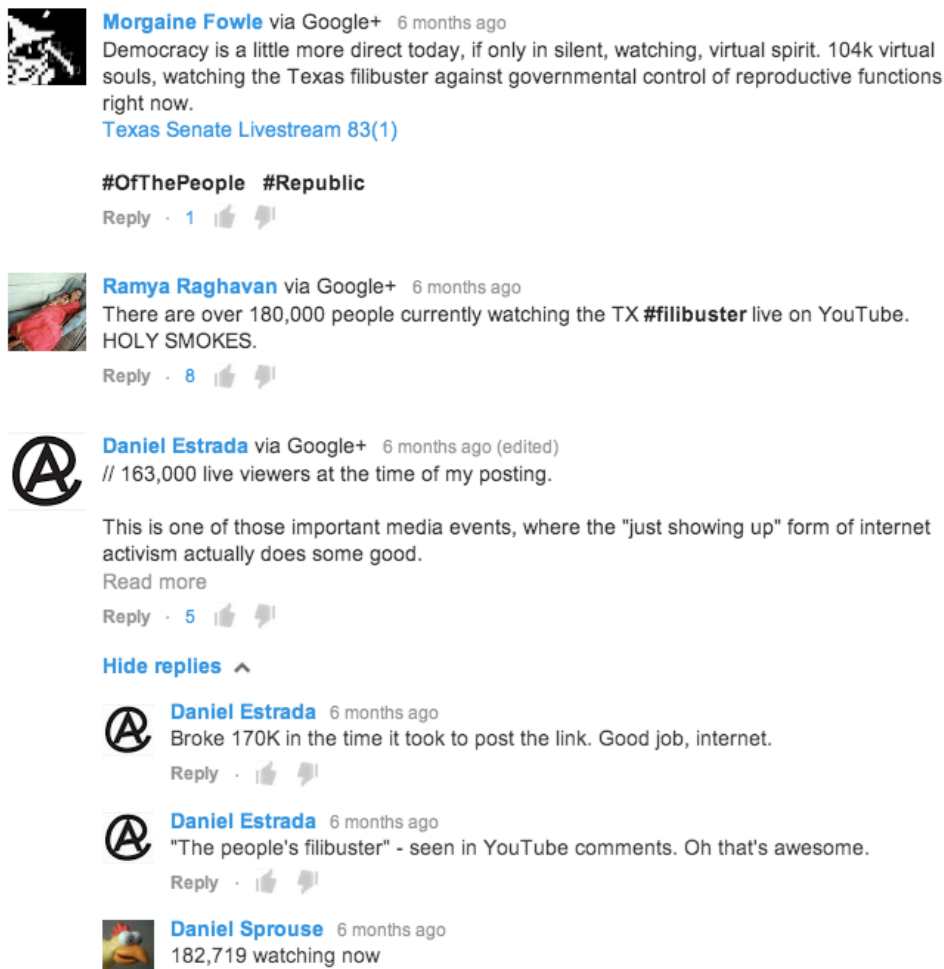
Most critical social researchers of technology and society adhere to a social shaping or social constructionist approach to the relationship between technology and society, with a mutually constitutive relationship between the two. The ways social groups use, reject, or adapt technologies affect technological production, while at the same time the capabilities of technologies can enable or constrain how they are used. Broader social conditions such gender, class, race, and economic backgrounds all play a role in an individual's technological access and efficacy.

As mentioned above, the media I chose for this project were largely obtained from sources where users could post comments, tweet, or share visual memes. This active sharing and commenting requires access to basic computing technologies, Internet connections, and the skill to navigate the user interfaces of Facebook, Twitter, and blog comment spaces. This includes a willingness to accept infringements on privacy, for even anonymous posting often requires personal information to participate.

In order to produce visual memes or gifs, a person needs skill with Photoshop and other image alteration software, or advanced skill with software APIs. Perhaps just as importantly, the person must have the desire to practice sharing in this way. Not everyone connects with others in digital places, and there are likely certain demographic groups that use certain media far more than others. Beyond those who actively participate are the unknown and likely much larger number of passive spectators (lurkers) who read the comments, see and share the memes, yet do not necessarily produce new content or post opinions. Traffic to certain sites and re-tweets give

some indication of how popular an event is, and provide some quantitative evidence of numbers for those media that go “viral.”

Digital technology allows for the tracking of data and analytics on how many users viewed, shared, or spread content related to the Davis filibuster. *The Daily Dot*, an online site that purports to “tell the stories of the Internet’s communities,” provides a play-by-play of Internet happenings throughout the filibuster – possible through the statistics gathering capabilities of online data (Romano 2013). Near the end of the 13-hour filibuster, over 180,000 people were watching *The Texas Tribune* live stream on YouTube. Commenters posted excitedly as they watched the viewer numbers climb up and up:



**Morgaine Fowle** via Google+ · 6 months ago  
Democracy is a little more direct today, if only in silent, watching, virtual spirit. 104k virtual souls, watching the Texas filibuster against governmental control of reproductive functions right now.  
[Texas Senate Livestream 83\(1\)](#)

**#OfThePeople #Republic**  
Reply · 1

**Ramya Raghavan** via Google+ · 6 months ago  
There are over 180,000 people currently watching the TX **#filibuster** live on YouTube. HOLY SMOKES.  
Reply · 8

**Daniel Estrada** via Google+ · 6 months ago (edited)  
// 163,000 live viewers at the time of my posting.  
This is one of those important media events, where the "just showing up" form of internet activism actually does some good.  
Read more  
Reply · 5

**Hide replies**

**Daniel Estrada** · 6 months ago  
Broke 170K in the time it took to post the link. Good job, internet.  
Reply

**Daniel Estrada** · 6 months ago  
"The people's filibuster" - seen in YouTube comments. Oh that's awesome.  
Reply

**Daniel Sprouse** · 6 months ago  
182,719 watching now

Figure 2: Tracking YouTube viewers (The Texas Tribune 2013)

Geographers who run Floating Sheep got in on the analytics action, mapping how tweets about Wendy Davis were spread geographically and temporally (Zook 2013). Zook (2013) notes the spike in Twitter activity around midnight and into the 26<sup>th</sup> of June, as well as observing that while tweets were concentrated in Texas, there was activity all across the US. Wendy Davis was a trending topic on Twitter, as seen through the hashtag #standwithwendy:



Figure 3: #standwithwendy trending on Twitter (@texasleftist on Twitter)

What societal circumstances gave rise to social media in the way it is used, for example in the above comments and Twitter activity? Many technologies are now embedded in everyday life, across the social and economic spectrum of the United States, changing the practices of

knowledge production and dissemination. According to Pew Research, 90% of Americans own a cell phone, with 58% owning smartphones capable of accessing the Internet. As of May 2013, 63% of adult cellphone owners use their phone to go online. For adults aged 18-29, 83% report owning a smartphone, a higher percentage than any other age group (Mobile Technology Fact Sheet). This age group also holds the highest percentages of social networking habits. While 71% of online adults used Facebook, only 19% used Twitter, and 46% of adult Internet users posted original content (creators), and 41% shared content (curators) (Social Networking Fact Sheet). This suggests that younger demographic groups, the so-called digital natives, are the majority social media users.

Even for those who do not live tethered to a smartphone, news and information reporting now incorporate social media. Major news networks display and discuss tweets and viral videos and images as part of their daily reporting. Businesses, television and online shows, and media personalities request “likes” and “shares,” and prompt viewers to follow them on social media. References to the neologisms and tools brought on by digital innovations are inescapable to most Americans, regardless of whether viewers are also media creators or curators. As seen in the statistics above, creators and curators remain the minority, with an even smaller proportion of technology producers that have the capacity to change, adapt, and produce the backend frameworks that form the backbone of most media platforms. While this remains a barrier to equitable participation in digital practice, users without such capabilities can still show social support through “likes” or sharing of content produced by others, creating complex webs of information that continually crisscross digital space. Furthermore, this content provides talking points among social groups that keep discourses alive and going. “Did you see that

meme/gif/video/etc?” can provide anchor points in personal, face-to-face discussions about events, issues, or news items, and form or strengthen ties with others along these digital habits.

Digital technologies, particularly the Internet and social media, allow for the sharing of information, in real time. The quality or veracity of this information varies greatly, but the Internet provides a vast space of content. The web allows for multimedia; videos, images, and text blend together, and the lines between information and entertainment often blur. Of course, this information does not exist a separate sphere with firm boundaries that separates it from material spaces, but is accessed by subjects who work and live in diverse physical spaces, often consuming digital content while simultaneously practicing daily routines. These material realities serve to constrain who can do more than consume media, such as produce or alter media. Additionally, most media sites and social media tools are owned and operated by large corporations, embedded in neoliberal capitalist structures where profit remains the end goal, rather than utopic equal participation. The Internet and social media offer the possibility of information, creativity, and a “voice,” but not equally.

In addition to the ways the properties of the digital enable and constrain, there are also particularities to the content that is created and shared. Much of the content is infused with new idioms of an Internet language. Of course, different corners of the web are steeped in different tones. In much of the media I examined, what came through was a shared reliance on humor and satire to forward social and political contestations in contentious issues. There was a sense of being in an imagined community online that was “in on the joke.”

This is possible for several reasons. The Internet allows for multimedia content, and the vast trove of stock images and meme or gif generators makes creating quick memes or pointed, poignant images fairly accessible. In the example below that poked fun at the legislative rule of

“remaining germane to the topic,” digital users needed only to perform an image search on Google of Jermaine Jackson to post a quick quip on the rule removed Davis from speaking. The Twitter user’s support for Davis is clear with the [#standwithWendy hashtag](#).



**Figure 4: Jermainess (Burton 2013)**

The anonymity of the Internet also makes it easy to post jokes without being tied to your “real life” persona. Digital forums where content is shared might take many forms, but certain forms lend themselves to satire. Memes, quick visual images with a bit of text, are perfect for one-liners, wordplay, puns, and pop culture mash-ups that highlight an absurdity, hypocrisy, or other element that can be twisted for witty humor. Some specific examples of how users have found ways to work within digital tools for satirical or playful purposes follow.



Figure 5: Davis as Batman (@kolchak on Twitter)

Here, Davis is photo-shopped into the superhero *Batman*, protector not of Gotham, but reproductive rights.



Figure 6: Legitimate Filibuster Tweet (@dianagram on Twitter)

In this short tweet, the user mocks Todd Aiken’s remarks about “legitimate rape” by borrowing his language, while also critiquing a man (likely Dewhurst) for shutting down the filibuster.

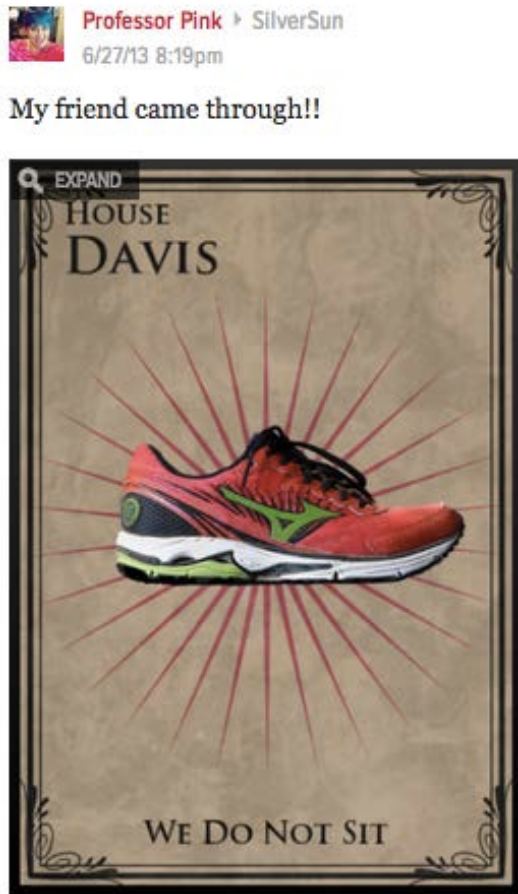


Figure 7: House Davis with Mizumo (Ryan 2013)

Participant Professor Pink shared this image on the comment thread of a *Jezebel* post, created in Photoshop by the participant’s friend. It incorporates a *Game of Thrones* TV show reference, as well as the shoes Davis wore during the filibuster, with the playful note that in House Davis, “we do not sit,” a reference to the parliamentary rule barring Davis from sitting.



**Figure 8: Confusion for Republicans (@ggreeneva on Twitter)**

This last tweet also pokes fun of Republicans, the “clocks” reference pointing to the altered time stamp for the vote on SB 5. Many of the examples include the #standwithwendy hashtag, marking them as supporters.

Aside from the memes and tweets that spread along various Internet forums, another form that social and political contestations take online is a playful engagement that disrupts the intended use of various digital spaces for different ends. Examples of this disruption include: alteration of crowd-sourced knowledge sites; a colonization of commercial online retail space; and the cooption of a Twitter handle meant to challenge the pro-Davis #standwithwendy.

### **3.2 Crowd-sourced “knowledge” sites**

Wikipedia has become one of the most frequented sites of information (<http://stats.wikimedia.org/>). Events that garner widespread Internet attention, especially involving an individual, often come with some tongue-in-cheek edits to their Wikipedia pages. For example, after Tim Howard’s impressive 16 saves in the World Cup, the page for the US Secretary of Defense was briefly changed from Chuck Hagel to Howard. The Wikipedia pages for Wendy Davis and Robert Duncan received edits shortly after the filibuster. Wendy Davis was given the “Occupation” of “The LeBron James of filibustering,” suggesting Davis is the political equivalent of the extremely successful basketball player:

Born	May 16, 1963 (age 50) Fort Worth, Texas
Nationality	American
Political party	Democratic
Children	Amber, Dru
Residence	Fort Worth
Alma mater	Texas Christian University, Harvard Law School
Occupation	The LeBron James of fillibustering
Committees	Education, Transportation and Homeland Security, Veterans' Affairs and Military Installations, International Relations and Trade, Open Government (Vice-Chair)
Website	<a href="#">Official website</a> 



**Figure 9: Davis Wikipedia Edit (Screengrab Mazhar 2013)**

Much of the Internet chatter around the Davis filibuster revolved around the time change made to the Texas State legislature’s website. The vote on SB 5 was initially listed as occurring before the midnight deadline of the special session, but was later changed to reflect that it occurred *after* the deadline, invalidating the vote. This “watchdog” power of the Internet will be discussed further in Chapter 4. For now, I focus on the disruptive, creative, iterative, and multipurpose use of digital tools and practices for satirical critique or expression. Republican Senator Robert Duncan’s profession was altered to read, “Attorney, Warping Space-Time,” a dig suggesting Duncan had the power to alter time itself during the vote on SB 5.



**Figure 10: Duncan Wikipedia Edit (Screengrab Burton 2013)**

These playful edits are usually quickly reversed, but not before amplifying a point or critique, as well as adding weight to the overall collective media content that arises after an issue dominates social media. Screenshots of these edits far outlive the actual wiki page, and are passed around new sites, blogs, and Twitter as a creative dig or commentary on an event.

### **3.3 Colonization of commercial space**

Another increasingly common repurposing of a digital tool or space is the takeover of a commercial retail space for social/political commentary or satire. Perhaps nowhere is this seen as powerfully as in Amazon product reviews. This cooption of commercial spaces for political commentary on Amazon is not new, but other products implicated in contentious social or political issues receive the same treatment. After cops pepper sprayed peacefully protesting students in California during the Occupy movement, satirical reviews for pepper spray abounded (in addition to a fantastic series of [pepper spraying cop memes](#)). This was sparked partly by a Fox news contributor's attempts to downplay the act by suggesting pepper spray is basically a "food" product. Reviews noted that pepper spray was great on salads, meats, and so on, humorously riffing on Fox News anchor Megyn Kelly's contributions to the dialog (Moore 2011; Amazon Reviews). Similarly, after former presidential nominee Mitt Romney suggested that he had "binders full of women," reviews for binders on Amazon took on a hilarious angle (Cardona 2012; Amazon Reviews). In the Davis case, the reviews in question came in for the Mizuno shoes Davis wore during the filibuster. Some of the reviews repurpose gaffes from Republican

politicians, such as reviews suggesting women have a way of shutting down SB 5, a reference to Todd Akin's suggestion that women's bodies can "shut the whole thing down," (referring to pregnancy resulting from rape) (Moore 2012). Others transform the shoes into a feminist symbol, suggesting the shoes are highly effective in outrunning patriarchy. The content of the reviews is further examined in Chapter 5. Here, I emphasize the use of such spaces and the creation of "anchor points": symbols of commercial products (pepper spray, binders, shoes), around which satirical contestations are built.

### **3.4 #sitdownwendy**

Finally, hashtags have become important and powerful markers of contentious social and political practice, signaling where one stands in the debate. A way to curate and tie content together, hashtags provide clear notation identifying what issue the content is connected to. The main hashtag that supporters of Wendy Davis and her filibuster used was #standwithwendy. A nod to the rules about standing for the duration of the filibuster, the tag has the double meaning of "standing with," in solidarity with Davis. This became a trending tag on Twitter, getting high profile endorsements, including a tweet from President Obama, sent on the evening of the filibuster, which was re-tweeted some 9,000 times (Burton 2013). Many digital participants disagreed with Davis, both along ideological lines about the right to abortions, and about the very act of filibustering a legislative bill. A rival hashtag, #sitdownwendy, was created by opposing digital participants. However, the tag was quickly co-opted and overrun by pro-Davis supporters and pro-reproductive rights activists.

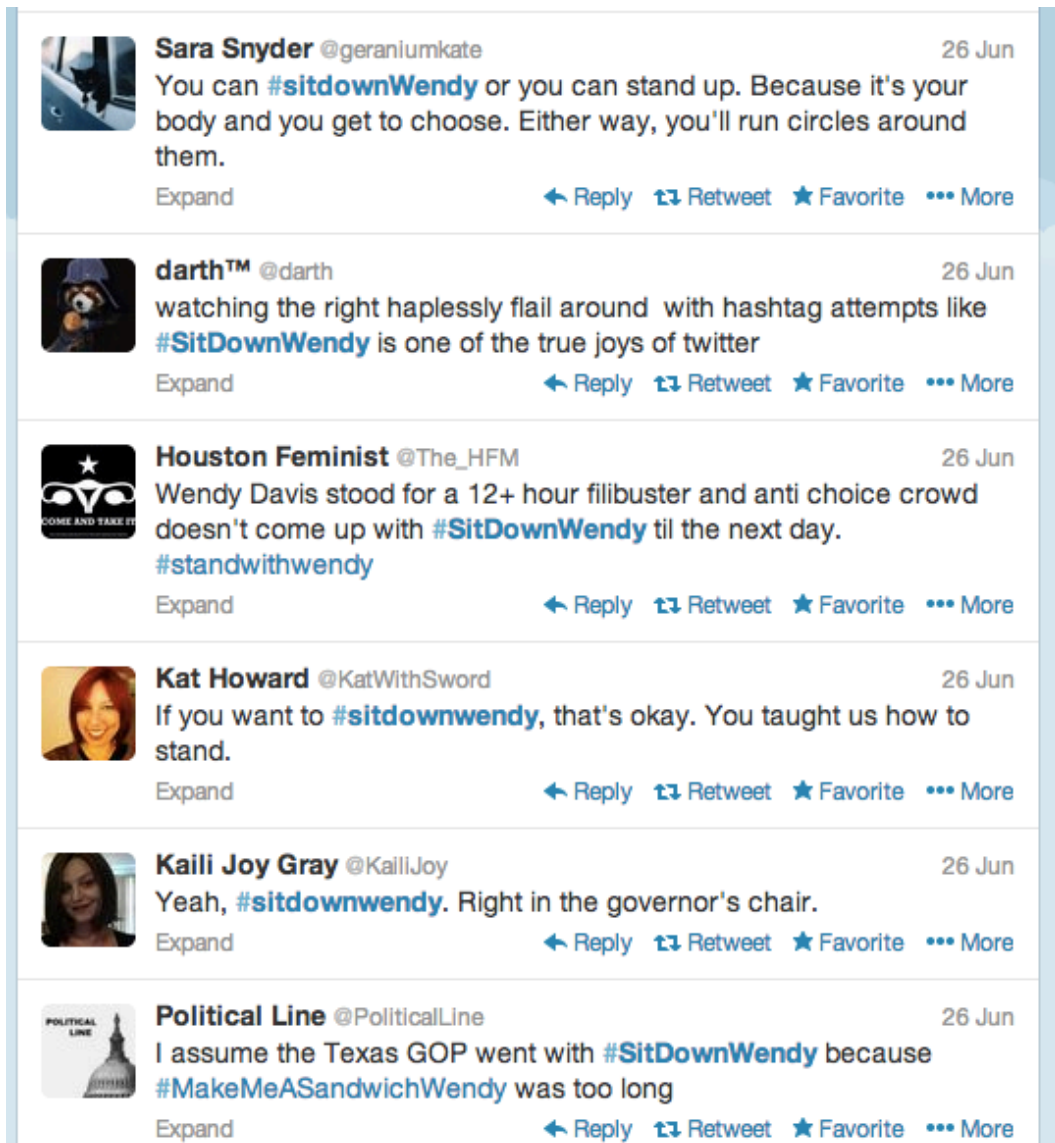


Figure 11: #sitdownwendy tweets

**Mike Monteiro** @monteiro 26 Jun  
Texas GOP's response hashtag is **#SitDownWendy**. Fill it with powerful messages of love and admiration towards Wendy Davis. Love beats hate.  
Expand Reply Retweet Favorite More

**Top Conservative Cat** @TeaPartyCat 26 Jun  
Rick Perry: " **#SitDownWendy** ! The men are busy deciding y'all's rights. We don't need you ladies butting in."  
Expand Reply Retweet Favorite More

**Mandy Brown** @aworkinglibrary 26 Jun  
I cannot imagine a more telling response from the Texas GOP than **#SitDownWendy**.  
Expand Reply Retweet Favorite More

**Joel Ingersoll** @FlyoverJoel 26 Jun  
The GOP is using **#SitDownWendy** to respond to the Wendy Davis filibuster because **#Sitdowninthebackofthebuswiththeblacks** is too long.  
Expand Reply Retweet Favorite More

**Lindsay Smith** @gravetexan 26 Jun  
To the **#sitdownwendy** crowd,since you care so much,why aren't you pushing for better education and programs for children in foster care?  
Expand Reply Retweet Favorite More

**Lindsay Smith** @gravetexan 26 Jun  
The fact that the response to the **#standwithwendy** hashtag is **#sitdownwendy** speaks volumes.  
Expand Reply Retweet Favorite More

Figure 12: #sitdownwendy tweets cont. (#sitdownwendy Twitter)

In the examples shown above, users express disgust that the hashtag seemingly suggests that Davis, as a woman, should sit down and be quiet. Others provide tongue-in-cheek agreements, that yes, Davis should sit down; she'd earned that rest by battling oppressive forces. Many suggest the hashtag is another conservative social media misfire that demonstrates the

political right's lack of skill with social media technologies and practices. In the end, it provides another example of how digital users find creative ways to disrupt, challenge, and joke, and the ability to do so with political intent.

However, not all online spaces and forums invite peaceful deliberation. As mentioned above, trolls and trolling have become major issues on comment threads and discussion forums. For a brief time, feminist blog *Jezebel* was targeted with animated gifs depicting rape and violence in a “cyber-attack” that worked to disrupt and alienate the other posters on the blog (Jezebel Staff 2014). Less insidious and malicious reproductions of social practices can be visible in online spaces, as I discuss in Chapter 4.

While digital practices are bound to material practices, the unique properties of digital technologies provide an inventive and malleable set of tools for participants to create and spread social and political contestations. The act of sharing alone can cause global viewing trends, forcing major news networks to pick up a story. Digital participants can quickly take or adapt content, creatively make use of digital spaces, and push forward critiques and counter narratives. These counter narratives have power, and it is to the community formation and power of these contestations that I now turn.

## Chapter 4: Imagined Communities

As discussed in Chapter 3, digital technologies hold creative possibilities for social and political interactions and contestations. But what shapes do these interactions take, and to what ends? I argue that interactive media are used to create a shared visual and textual language that binds social and political communities together. Digital tools allow for digital communities to coalesce around particular issues, defining who belongs and the norms of interaction. These communities have the capacity to (re)frame an issue, make claims to history and push issues viral, and in doing so potentially rework social and political discourses around contentious issues.

Before the rise of online technologies, advances in communication and mass media allowed for people across vast distances to consume similar information and create or maintain connections to others. However, the speed and ubiquity of online and digital applications have led to unprecedented changes in interactions across space. Digital participants can now go online, seek like-minded individuals and through comment spaces, forums, Twitter and Facebook, connect with others around particular interests or issues.

To better unpack the idea that online and digital technologies enable the formation of political and social communities, I borrow from Benedict Anderson (1991) the idea of “imagined communities.” He suggests that nations are imagined political communities, “imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (1991, 49). I carry forward the idea that people, even though they may never meet, can feel tied together into a community, bound together by common language, practices, and interests. Our digitally mediated society allows for these connections like never before, with participants inhabiting

online spaces while simultaneously going about their everyday lives. The online and the material do not exist in separate realms, but are intimately connected, and inequalities and connections in the former tend to mirror those in the latter. The digital is an extension of the physical: a pathway to spaces and connections that would not be possible (or at least, far less possible) without such tools and practices. Users of digital tools themselves make note of this technological affordance – the ability to “feel a part of something” through social media, as Twitter user Maggie Waters (and Davis supporter) notes below:

*It is so incredible that social media allows us to be so intimately a part of this. We live in a really cool time. [#standwithwendy](#) [#SB 5](#)*

*Maggie Waters (@Maggie\_Watersr\_) [June 26, 2013](#) (Twitter)*

In addition to the practices of creating and sharing digital contestations, the language of messages works to tie communities together.

#### **4.1 Textual and visual language and modes of expression**

In what ways do we form online communities and connections? While for many people, online contacts remain those that we have “in real life” (IRL), for others connections or a sense of belonging can form with people who we may never meet. Perhaps the strongest evidence for these shared ties is the visual and textual language, and practices of communication that underlie online communities. Online and digital technologies enable different ways of communicating.

Anderson (1991) suggests that the rise of vernacular print media created a medium that began to link people across an “imagined” nation. The printing press allowed for the dissemination of printed knowledge. Telegraphs, newspapers, and postal delivery services, newsreels and television followed. Digital media and the rise of advanced information and communication technologies are the newest iteration of technologies linking individuals across

space *and* spatial imaginaries. People connect across the physical spaces of cities, regions, or countries, or through imagined spaces that exist only online. Common textual and visual vernaculars work to bind these communities together, often incorporating or manipulating popular cultural or political reference points.

Some technologies come with built-in limitations that sculpt how language evolved, and forced the creative alteration of how we communicate. Having a limit of 140 characters on Twitter, or for texting efficiency, led to the truncation of words, phrases, and forms of expression. Emoticons, and expressions such as “lol” (laugh out loud), “nsfw” (not safe for work), “IRL” (in real life), “lmfao” (laugh my fucking ass off) are but a few examples. Access to videos, pictures, memes, and animated gifs opens up the possibility to communicate through rich multimedia. The language of online and digital tools is not merely textual—it is visual, animated, and dynamic. Online spaces lack the social cues we have in physical interactions. Yet, digital participants found creative ways to express emotions online. When communicating online, gifs of an emotion, a meme, or a common online phrase paired with an image, allow for more expressive, rich communication than text only exchanges.

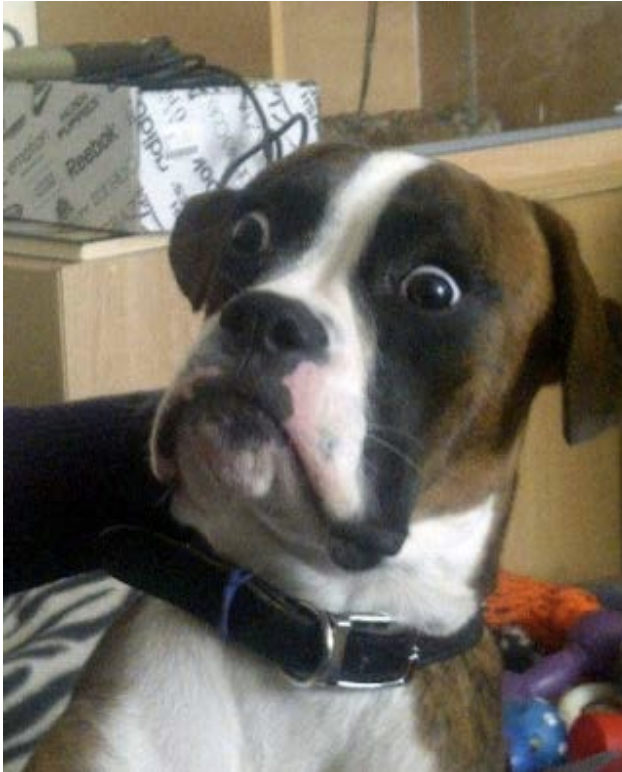
The popularity of animated gifs, often used as a form of emotional expression, are evident throughout Internet comment spaces and blogs. This is a common practice that rejects the idea that communication online cannot be rich, varied, and deep. Using gifs of popular culture, emotions, and actions, participants provide a clear visual way to express how one feels about a particular topic. Frustration, anger, hopelessness, and joy can all be expressed in visual memes and gifs. The communication of feeling, as well as the ability to “get” the reference, helps to bind participants together into a shared mode of communication that allows for complex expression, and can increase a sense of solidarity when rallying around a particular issue.

Searching gif or meme libraries, or creating your own through an online gif or meme generator, one can easily find content to adapt and share to express a point. They provide handy, visual ways of expressing oneself, and often reveal something about the participant. For example, a “face palm” of exasperation, courtesy of Jean-Luc Picard from *Star Trek*:



**Figure 13: Picard Facepalm (Jezebel 2014)**

A Jean-Luc Picard image connects with wider “geek” culture online, while relaying a frustrated emotional response. Animals are also common content exchanged in online spaces, as the dog below was used to express shock at a particularly vitriolic post:



**Figure 14: Shocked Dog (Jezebel 2014)**

Some memes completely take on lives of their own, for example, the “Thanks Obama” meme. These began as a political joke, where gifs, taken largely from infomercials that depicted a person’s lack of competence in household tasks (such as struggles with hoses, Tupperware, cling wrap, etc) are “blamed” on President Obama. This tied the blame of someone else’s incompetence to Obama. This meme grew to include any common annoyance as the fault of Obama, satirizing how Obama is often a scapegoat for problems. The phrase has been re-cast on dozens of different images and gifs, providing a quick way to show disdain for something, while

also taking a cheeky jab at those who would blame Obama for all their problems. This can be seen below in a user's disappointment over the casting of actor Ben Affleck as Batman.

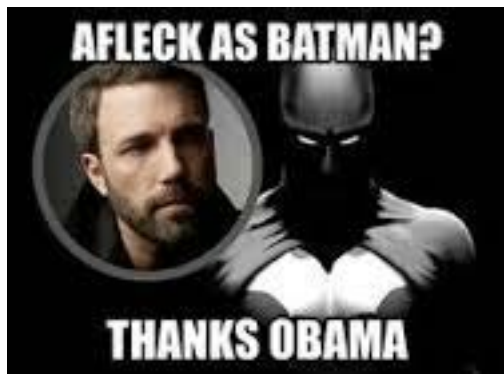


Figure 15: Thanks Obama (Imgur 2014)

The communities that build around shared visual and textual languages of the Internet also provide a common set of discursive points to take back to “real” life. Friends, coworkers, and fellow participants can discuss issues and share opinions through content shared online. They provide launching points of discussion, breakdowns of contentious issues to be further discussed and shared. Passing along *Daily Show* clips, memes, blog posts, and so on provides a set of commonly consumed media to further conversations.

Digital participants can use online social practices to produce political contestations. Participants incorporate the language and practices of the online community, using it to voice their opposition or solidarity. Many of the contestations that circulated around Wendy Davis were satirical or political re-workings of popular cultural tropes, expressed through memes, photos, and textual commentary that challenged anti-abortion stances. These contestations serve to mobilize others, and challenge contentious, often dominant narratives. Communications scholar Nancy Baym (2010), when examining connections in a digital age, suggests, “playful conventions and in-jokes may create insider symbols that help groups to cohere,” (62). The in-jokes are evident in the examples of social and political expression and contestations from the

Wendy Davis filibuster. The visual and textual language helps form a sense of community belonging, and the use of in-jokes, shared references, and satire draw distinctions between who is in and who is out of certain space.

Participants themselves may call out outsiders, or give legitimacy and acceptance to those considered “in.” These practices may be most evident in comment spaces and forums. Calling out “trolls” (commenters leaving inflammatory posts) or cautioning other posters not to “feed the troll” (responding to trolls) is a way to dismiss another poster’s comments as not belonging in that space. “Liking” or “staring” another’s post, inversely, is a way to show that you agree with that comment, and often works to push that comment up in visibility, depending on the underlying platform or application of the community space.

Throughout the content produced are references to the language of Internet culture as a whole. As mentioned above, those who are “outsiders” to a particular comment thread are deemed “trolls.”



Figure 16: Obvious Troll (Jezebel 2014)

Responding with the above meme to a troll's comment is a warning to others not to "feed" it, or to respond to their baiting post. Internet memes are commonly used across a variety of issues, to express all manner of feelings or opinions. There are nuances of speech that pepper communication, and colloquialisms that have formed in online communication.

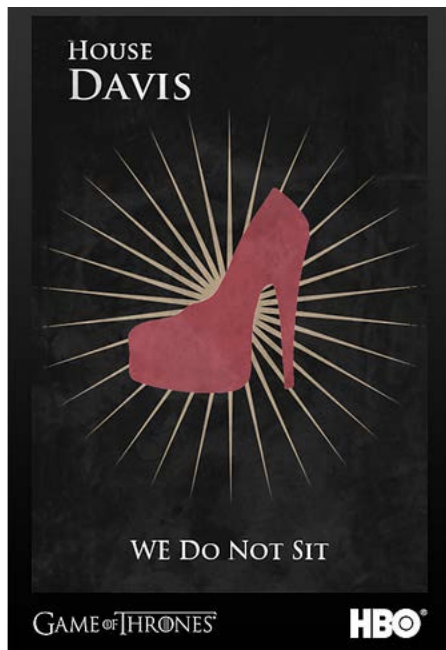
To participate in these practices, or even to understand the content that is being produced, a participant must have the ability to navigate through digital spaces; be able to work with digital and social tools; and understand digital media and artifacts. Not all participants produce images and content, and there are many social, economic, and cultural differences in who has access and skill to engage with various technologies. Yet, even for those who passively consume content, who browse comments, share memes, and "like" posts, a participant must have some level of literacy in the language and practices in order to understand and experience a sense of belonging to these groups.

Participants have taken technologies and adapted them to create tools for all manner of daily practices, including complex communication and expression. Rather than completely "detaching" people from physical social interaction, online spaces and digital communication tools allow for augmented interactions that supplement the ways we continue to engage materially.

#### **4.2 Mash-ups and multiple frames of reference**

Visual and textual references to popular culture are adapted to create mash-ups that produce satirical commentary about the filibuster. Some are visual memes, for example numerous images referencing the popular fantasy TV drama *Game of Thrones*. These cast Davis as the female hero, with text such as, "House Davis: We do not sit", or "No one will take our rights," references to a character on the show who proclaims that no one will take her dragons.

The image below is another take on a previous example, although instead of the Mizuno sneakers, uses a more traditionally feminine high heel:



**Figure 17: House Davis Pink Heel (Mazhar 2013)**

Some memes are linked to other political actors or issues. For example, a meme of Hillary Clinton that went viral is repackaged to include a message to Wendy Davis, linking the two Democratic politicians together. This suggests a “scaling out” in the political imaginary of the issue, from one localized in the state of Texas to the national political scene.



**Figure 18: Hillary Clinton (Mazhar 2013)**

Highly publicized Republican gaffes about women’s rights, abortion, and sexual violence are often referenced, which also connect this Texas state issue with the larger national political framework. Digital participants, through online contestations, are able to tie local contentious issues to national conversations. This ability to bring an issue to the national scale, both in attention and through a linking together of issues in real-time, demonstrates the capacity of digital technologies to bridge geographical space and unite participants who are located in distant areas. Communities, composed of participants united together through a spatial imaginary, create and share content that can upscale an issue. Participants are able to make connections between the local and national themselves, rather than leave the making of these links to mainstream media or formal political actors. Below, Davis is compared to US Senator Marco Rubio, who gave the Republican response to President Obama’s State of the Union address on February 12,

2013, and visibly struggled to speak continually without water. This serves as both a dig at Republicans, and a way to elevate Davis and her filibuster of a state bill to the national level.



Figure 19: Marco Rubio (Mazhar 2013)

#### 4.3 Reproduction of social space

Conceptualizations of space and the relationship between technology and society affect how we understand social and political practices. It may be tempting to view digital practices as wholly emancipatory – as providing a flat, open plane for deliberation where everyone has their say, approximating the Habermasian ideal. However, the relationships that form in online spaces are more complex.

Digital tools and practices can enable the formation of imagined communities; yet social practices of exclusion and inequality are also reproduced digitally, and are often evident in

comment threads. All commenters are not treated equally, and the backend software structure of the comment space partly accounts for how posts are organized. Some come equipped with “democratic” processes for starring or liking a post, increasing the post’s popularity. If the author of a blog post or news story replies to a commenter, this may also highlight the post, add it to a “recommends” section, or otherwise increase its visibility.

In reading comment threads a hierarchy often becomes evident. Some frequent posters may be granted some level of authority or gatekeeping, and the power to make other comments more visible. They become familiar to other commenters, and a community becomes distinguishable. These create a sort of digital friendship, and even though I am generally a lurker, I recognize users, begin to understand their humor and perspectives, and trust others on their insights. Conversely, those who are seen as inflammatory or outside the principles and values of the community can be dismissed or flagged, called out as trolls with a “wall” of opposition forming against them. This reproduction of social processes strengthens the idea that digital tools and practices are not a utopian sphere of equal deliberation, nor separate from the material, but are new augmentations of social life as it is, bringing with it many of the same practices and exclusions.

The form of exclusion depends on the intended (or unintended) audience of the site. Commenters who are deemed misogynist are alienated on sites like *Jezebel*, creating a space where feminists are the majority and top of the hierarchy. Of course, there are countless other sites where the hierarchy of commenters is vastly different. Self-identified women would be unwelcome on some threads on *Achan* (an online comment space/bulletin board), as some are viewed as rife with misogyny. *Reddit* threads provide outlets for all manner of social identities, from cat enthusiasts to science discussions. The point is not that online spaces are universally

emancipatory, but that they provide public voice for many who are traditionally socially underrepresented. Further, those adept at online practices may be able to tilt the scales to viral levels, pushing those voices, occasionally, to a level where they are difficult to ignore.

In this way, participants actively and continuously shape comment spaces and discussion forums. They reproduce the practices of exclusion and hierarchy, but may do so in unexpected ways, and often through ostensibly democratic processes.

#### **4.4 Power to do what?**

The evidence suggests that a shared visual and textual language helps bind together imagined communities. These communities reproduce social practices that occur in material situations and the unique affordances of the digital impact these digital practices. Some of the content produced and consumed by digital communities are political in nature, or form around a politicized event, such as the Davis filibuster. But what power does this content have, and are they effective social and political contestations? Going further, is this how contestations in general are now shared, popularized, and acted upon?

Some observers argue that social media tools are ineffective ways of mobilizing. Malcolm Gladwell (2010), a commentator on social media and activism, argues that social media produces a weak form of activism. In “The revolution will not be tweeted,” he argues that digital media activism is composed of weak ties; that it is an act of minimal effort and does not produce the “strong ties” needed for “high-risk” activism that produces real social change. He suggests social media activism does not “confront socially entrenched norms and practices” (2010). Gladwell’s arguments presuppose a binary between strong and weak ties, between the material and the digital without considering how the two are mutually constitutive of each other. He believes “true” activism should fit into an older model of collective action, using the civil rights

movement of the 1960s as his counter example to contemporary social media use. To illustrate the viral power of social media, he uses another researcher's example of a woman who had her cellphone stolen by a teenaged girl, and who turned to social media to retrieve it (Gladwell 2010). It highlights how social media users can band together for a common goal and with material outcomes, but he chooses a non-political example – even though he is discussing political activism.

Yet there are countless examples of social media pushing a contentious issue “viral” that has greater political force and longer term repercussions. The protests that erupted in Ferguson, Missouri after the shooting of unarmed teenager Michael Brown were publicized through citizen media. Protesters using camera phones snapped pictures, recorded video, and blasted the evidence of the heavy-handed militarized police response to the protests onto the national consciousness (Rose 2014). When traditional news media were blocked – citizens took over. To say that social media did not provide a powerful tool and extension of physical collective action is to ignore a fundamental way that news and information spreads in highly developed societies.

The Wendy Davis case is another example of a localized event that was thrust onto the national consciousness through the use of social media and digital tools. The repercussions are far reaching. Would Davis's bid for governor of Texas be possible without her propulsion into the national spotlight? Aided so clearly by social media “viral-ility”? While the “ephemeral” nature of how long something stays popular in the digital landscape should be taken into consideration (and is open to analysis and critique), it does not negate the fact that some political issues are pushed onto the nation's consciousness by social media activism, and that in turn influences what Gladwell terms “strong tie” activism. Nor should the use of social media by on-the-ground activist groups be discounted.

Digital participants can re-frame events in ways that help take back the narrative on contentious issues, such as Davis's supporters re-working the discourse to be about the larger attempts to strip women of reproductive choices. The use of social media by large numbers of users can force an issue to "trend" and go viral, attracting increased attention that can result in increased action. This attention can result in increased scrutiny, providing more public accountability. All of these practices work to make events more known and long-lasting, bringing to the public contentious issues that citizens deem important.

One activist practice that can be seen in the use of digital and social media is through the "re-framing" of an issue. The social and political contestations produced can re-frame an issue with a particular discourse, a counter-discourse to the one perpetuated by mainstream media or dominant social or political actors. In the wake of the shooting of Michael Brown, the viral image/Twitter campaign, #iftheygunnedmedown served as a powerful example of re-framing. A critique of the way mainstream media characterizes black victims in America, it poses the question, "If I were gunned down, which images would the media use to portray me?" The high school graduation or family photo, or a photo with a drink, cigarette, or "street clothes"? This campaign sharply criticized the negative framing of black victims, working to pull back the curtain on how media has the power to frame how an issue or person is perceived, and the ways digital practices can re-frame that narrative.

Scholars such as Deborah Martin (2003) argue that framings of particular places can serve as unification points around which activists can rally around (since they can identify with places, and place meanings can be a part of identity). I argue that online tools create imagined places and communities that provide similar unification or rallying points for digital activists. These rallying points can work to create "collective action frames" that "denote how social

movements articulate issues, values, and concerns in ways that foster collective identity and activism” (Martin 2003, 733). Digital tools and spaces enable the formation of imaginary communities that can unite participants based on common social identities or shared activist goals. Knowledge and fluency in the shared visual and textual language allow for identification of those who are “in.” Participants themselves discursively frame the Internet as a legitimate place of community, where debate, discussion, and mobilization can occur.

The power to frame a contentious issue is the power to create a counter-discourse. Digital participants operating outside the formal political sphere in the Davis case used online textual and visual language to construct contestations against the perceived infringement on (women’s) reproductive freedom. This creates a counter-discourse, and perhaps even a “counter-public.” In a critique of Habermas’s ideal of the public sphere, Nancy Fraser suggests that there are many publics. She suggests that the “proliferation of subaltern counter-publics means a widening of discursive contestation” (1990, 67). Digital tools offer platforms for the expression of counter-discourses from counter-publics, whether they are protesters against police shootings of unarmed black men, or pro-choice activists using online spaces to counter the anti-choice movement.

Social media and digital tools are used to re-frame an issue and create a counter-discourse. Discursive “tokens” or symbols that stand in for an issue – a meme, a video clip, a picture or tweet – can be shared with ease. These symbols often encapsulate an opinion, protest, or critique on any given issue, and can be spread far enough around digital social networks that the issue they represent goes viral. A tipping point may be reached that temporarily seizes the power of attention, potentially escalating an issue, mobilizing participants and/or galvanizing activists. A viral symbol may cause a local issue to jump scales, such as Davis’s filibuster

reaching nationwide attention, and help perpetuate it in the popular consciousness for longer than it might have otherwise.

Videos and memes going “viral” are now a common phenomenon, and while these are often non-political, the occasional political moment captures enough digital attention to become a trending media and social topic. While these viral moments are generally short lived, forgotten as the next issue leaps out from the depths of online space to capture attention (spread by participants), the effects of that viral life often outlast the initial moment or event. Digital and social media can follow events in real time, and embedded in these tools is the ability to track how many do so.

The challenge for activists or digital participants in using digital media is to gain the attention necessary to mobilize others about an issue. In the Davis case, activists demonstrated awareness of the capacity of social media to mobilize supporters, and the transformative power that can result from an issue gaining enough digital attention to go viral. Blogger Julie Gillis (2013) urged supporters to create a “tweetstorm” to publicize Davis’s filibuster. *Jezebel* blogger Rebecca Rose (2013) posted, “Get on Twitter And Support Wendy Davis’ Filibuster of SB#5 In Texas Now,” leaving helpful links and calling on her followers to take action (Rose 2013). There was a clear awareness from pro-choice activists that tweeting, posting, and sharing could result in real consequences on the ground. Social media allowed for the rapid dissemination of information, and the organization of activists to descend on the capitol building; those same activists caused enough protest “noise” to prevent the vote of SB 5 before the deadline, effectively taking over after Davis was silenced.

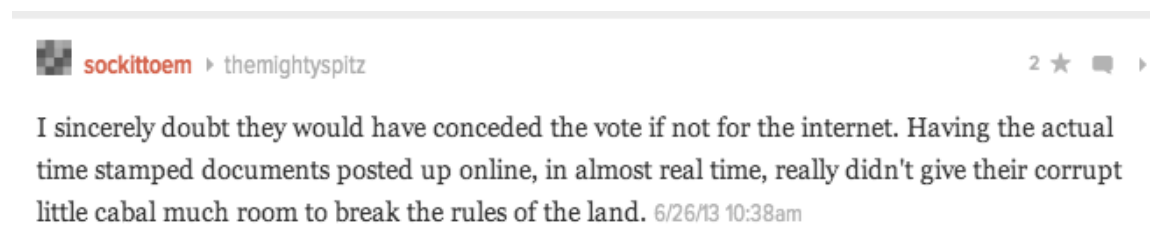
For those not present in Austin, social media kept interested participants informed, and provided a channel for them to share their support and solidarity with activists who were there.

Activists in Austin used social media to gain information from the “outside”; from social media users who could access multiple forms of media at once. As *The Texas Tribune* notes, people attending the filibuster “looked anxiously at their phones for tweets and texts with the latest news” (Aguilar et al. 2013). As Davis herself recounts in an article in *The Guardian*, when her staff worried mid-filibuster that she would not have enough material to keep her talking for 13 hours, they put out a call on social media for personal accounts that objected to SB 5 – 16,000 stories came back (Davis 2014). Digital communication tools allowed for a switchback between those participating digitally and those participating through more traditional activist activities at the capitol building.

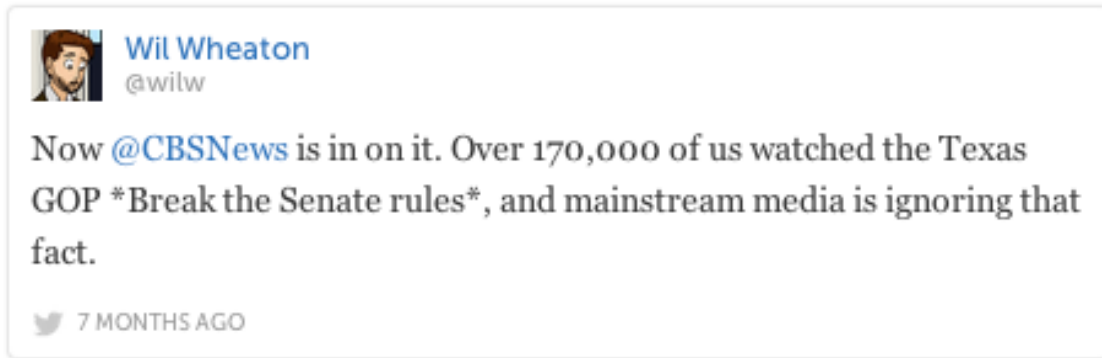
Digital tools and practices also enabled rapid and public accountability that may not have been possible otherwise. The vote to pass SB 5 occurred after the midnight deadline, but the Texas state senate leadership initially claimed it passed before, logging the date of the vote as the 25<sup>th</sup> of June. Twitter users and other Internet participants quickly called attention to this error, posting screenshots of the time-stamp on the legislature’s website, and questioning how it was possible the vote occurred on the 25<sup>th</sup> when the filibuster was streaming live into thousands of American homes. In fact, this seems to be a common slip between how politics and contested social situations *used* to play out, and how they occur now. It is almost as though those behaving illegally, or even just *badly*, forget citizen media exists. The senate leadership attempted to pass a vote that occurred after the deadline, as though their actions were hidden (as they formally may have been). This slip on the part of those who forget, or do not understand, the ease with which ordinary citizens can record and share information often benefits those who are oppressed. As Kitchin and Dodge wrote in 2007, digital technologies bring with them incredible advances in surveillance, as well as “sousveillance” (a term coined by academic Steven Mann to mean the

surveillance of oneself or one's surroundings) through pervasive computing. While Kitchin and Dodge (2007) express concern over this pervasive life recording, and suggest the need to incorporate the power to forget into technology, what is increasingly seen is the power of technology to *remember*. The durability of digital data, while bringing with it ethical concerns over having so much of life recorded, also allows for practices which hold the powerful accountable. Digital participants, shocked over the senate's attempts to fudge the time stamp, could easily access footage of the failed vote, and spread evidence of the changes made to the time stamp.

This citizen, or "lay," digital accountability undoubtedly put pressure on the leadership to change the time-stamp of the vote. This alteration was spread and shared --displaying clearly that the leadership first logged the vote incorrectly, only to change it to match the truth. Are we in an era of "digital policing?" Digital tools provide the capacity to hold those in power accountable through real-time information dissemination and online public sharing. Digital practitioners are aware of this effect, reinforcing faith in these practices, as the two comments below illustrate:



**Figure 20: Corrupt Cabal (Ryan 2013)**



**Figure 21: Observing mainstream media (@wilw on Twitter)**

Digital users can hold those in power accountable. They can expose illegal actions, bigotry, and injustice, and allow these acts to be shared, spread, and passed along until they tip viral, forcing the acknowledgement of their occurrence. To claim that social media tools are only good for retrieving one's stolen cell phone, and creating "weak ties" among participants, is to willfully ignore what citizen media allows – the empowerment of those who otherwise have little recourse.

*Never underestimate the power of one, and especially never underestimate the power of citizens using social media. [#SB 5](#) [#standwithwendy](#)*

— Phyllis Bernard (@Rastaprof) [June 26, 2013](#) (@Rastaprof on Twitter)

Digital tools and practices allow for laypersons to hold the powerful accountable. Not in every situation of course, but it opens the door for transparency where it might not otherwise exist. This is not the only affordance of digital tools. It allows for the creation of media *by* participants, enabled by Web 2.0 interactivity. Della Porta and Mattoni (2013) suggest that activist media “create spaces that oppose the dominant cultures in a direct manner, and, hence, challenge mainstream and mass media power that have the monopoly over the naming of realities” (176). Users of social media and digital tools are able to create an alternative channel

of information dissemination, cultural and political re-workings, and thus an alternative way of “naming realities.” They can call out bullshit, and spread an issue *they* deem important to the viral level, pushing it to national mass media channels and inserting it into the speeches and sound bites of powerful and influential national politicians. Digital participants work to tie little p (informal politics) to big P politics. Of course, the reciprocal nature of technology and society is not lost here. Would as many people have tuned in to the filibuster if President Obama had not tweeted about it in the first place? In turn, would the national media have picked up on the story without #standwithwendy trending on Twitter? Here we witness the complex interplay between material and digital practices, between everyday digital participants and powerful elites, and the digital tools that enable them to speak to and influence each other.

#### **4.5 Conclusion: Making (digital) history**

Anderson (1991) argued that vernacular print media, which began taking hold in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, was a way for laypeople (in the original sense of non-Church officials) to communicate across physical distance. In digital tools we find a contemporary parallel. Digital media allow laypeople to engage in political issues, make claims to history (to name a reality) and determine what is important enough to constitute “history” by calling attention to issues they deem important. By calling it history and spreading the message digitally, this action often *makes* it historical by using the networks of an imagined community to push the issue beyond the local scale, and beyond the initial moment of its occurrence.

In the case of the Wendy Davis filibuster, participants were able to call something history *and then made it historical*. Participants following the filibuster frequently suggest that “history is being made” by Davis’ filibuster. Davis attempted a 13-hour filibuster, which had not been accomplished by a woman in the Texas legislature. The bill itself was one of the most restrictive

abortion bills proposed by a state legislature, and would result in dozens of clinic closures.

Participants called for others to watch this “historic” or special event, highlighting that it that deserves attention. Many celebrities and others with a high number of Twitter followers joined in this call for more attention and the importance of witnessing.



**Figure 22: Something special (@BarackObama on Twitter)**

While claiming the filibuster’s historical significance, participants played a role in making this claim a material reality. By posting, tweeting, sharing, creating, and commenting, participants drew attention to a state legislative issue and propelled SB 5 and Wendy Davis onto the national scene.

While major news networks were not covering the filibuster, it was trending on Twitter. In fact, CNN was lampooned on social media for airing a segment about the caloric content of blueberry muffins, *at the same time* that Davis’s filibuster was going viral on various social media channels.



**Figure 23: CNN and Blueberry Muffins (@feministabulous on Twitter)**

A real-time critique of mass media occurred on the same networks and platforms that were pushing the filibuster nationwide. This critique of mass media's utter failure to report on issues of importance in real-time is heard time and time again (such as in the Ferguson protests). News and information dissemination itself is changing, if not already completely transformed. In order to keep up with current affairs and knowledge about political issues, one must arguably be literate in new digital languages, tools, and practices. In the Davis case, participants commonly critiqued traditional news outlets for their lack of coverage. Those interested in this issue sought out news and reporting from social and citizen media, and digital applications like YouTube and Twitter. Traditional media were late to the game, after social media users set the rules, and perhaps, the narrative.

In the days following the filibuster, mass media relied on social media produced content for their own reporting. Online news reporting is presented in a mix of textual and visual forms to tell a story or event. While some publications are still predominantly text based, many other popular news platforms frame stories through already produced (layperson) memes, tweets, and quick visual snippets, making news in some cases a collaborative process between professional reporters and bloggers and layperson content creators. This also speaks to broader shifts in how digital participants receive news and information. News aggregators like *Buzzfeed*, blogs, and “lists” circulate and spread information in easily digestible bits, often incorporating and rehashing lay-produced material. In the highly developed media and technology landscape of the US, news is often presented and digested in short-form.

Digital tools and practices create online communities that share a visual and textual language and reproduce social practices. These communities create and share social and political contestations. These contestations, often tied to visual or symbolic anchor points, have power. They can re-frame narratives, spread information and propel issues nationally, hold the powerful accountable, and make issues important by making them difficult to ignore. As *Cybergata* observes below in a post after the filibuster, “This is the internet folks, and it looks mighty wonderful.”



**Cybergata**

6 months ago

This is such an Internet happening. People all over the world followed what was happening on line. Every social media outlet was buzzing about Wendy Davis’s filibuster. A call was made for people on the Net to send in their stories so Wendy could use them in her filibuster. This is the Internet folks, and it looks mighty wonderful.

+5   | [Reply](#)

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Figure 24: Internet happening (Xeno 2013)



## **Chapter 5: Contestations in action: Gender and the filibuster against SB 5**

Digital technologies and the practices spawned around them produce imagined communities that have the potential to create and spread counter-discourses through cultural, social, and political commentary and contestations. The filibuster against SB 5 by Senator Davis was controversial, as the right to safe and legal abortion remains one of the most hotly contested and politicized issues in the US. It is an inherently gendered issue: woven into every discourse around abortion and reproductive freedom are women's identity politics (as mothers or incubators); the right to female bodily autonomy; and whose rights trump whose (those of women versus those of a fetus).

Women are underrepresented in formal political processes. At the time of the filibuster, the Texas State Legislature had 37 women in the House and Senate combined, out of a total of 180 – fewer than 21% of the total (Murphy 2013). The perennial underrepresentation of female political actors is a topic of concern for feminist political geographers. Staeheli (2004) notes the “importance of creating spaces of activism for women, in which women can lead, give voice to their concerns, and participate in the shaping of political agendas” (361). Staeheli calls out the need for political spaces where women can voice their concerns. During the Wendy Davis filibuster, users carved out many “spaces” for voicing their concerns, intertwining formal political processes (Politics) with informal political practices (politics) through digital tools. Senator Davis and other legislators claimed to speak for women in the formal Political space of the Texas state capitol during a legislative session. Simultaneously, women and their allies (on either side of the debate) voiced their opinions in the gallery of the building, and in the vast spaces of the Internet; commenting, shouting, sharing, discussing, cheering, tweeting, and

carrying out informal political practices. These Political and political practices were not isolated, but existed in constant interconnection.

Here, I explore how gendered identity norms are simultaneously reproduced and disrupted; both rejected and embraced by activists in order to push forward an either pro- or anti-choice argument. This is done through the formation of symbolic anchor points – flexible objects that are often gendered; used, transformed, and deployed as activists and participants work to frame the issue to suit their needs. Davis’s position and gender are emphasized or deemphasized, while she also took on a symbolic role. Digital tools and practices gave women a space to speak after being silenced in formal political spaces, and Davis used her own formal political platform to speak for women, using gender to legitimize “speaking for” others.

### **5.1 Digital as alternative to formal political spaces**

Women, underrepresented in formal political processes, must seek out alternative spaces of action and debate. Staeheli (1996) suggests that women’s limited access to the public sphere is “held to constrain their capacity as political agents” (602). If the public sphere were assumed to be the public formal political sphere, then it follows that women are limited in their capacity as formal Political agents. Digital tools and practices open up alternative sphere(s) for political engagement and space for voicing concerns. Wendy Davis, as a formal political actor, both called upon women to digitally share their stories, and acted as a surrogate Political voice, legitimizing this role through a shared gender identity.

While Davis sought to speak for women who opposed this legislation, many turned to digital tools to express support, critique, and to voice opinions on the issue. During a House committee hearing on June 20, 2013 for testimony about SB 5, hundreds of women were denied a chance to speak in the formal political space of the legislative chamber after Republican

Representative Byron Cook curtailed testimony, citing it as “repetitive” (Tuma 2013). For those women who did not have access to this formal sphere, digital media provided outlets for expression. As digital participant Aimee McEnerney commented, “I didn’t tweet up a storm because I was asked to. I did it because the actual Texas Legislature wasn’t listening to us and I wanted everyone to know” (Dewey 2013). This participant was one of many who were denied a chance to testify against SB 5. This comment demonstrates both how women activists felt excluded from having a voice in dealing with issues that affected them, as well as how participants turned to social media as a space which enabled them to voice their concerns after being turned away from formal political spaces of debate.

Activists and those excluded from formal political processes and positions of power have recourse in digital tools and practices. The women who used Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and comment spaces to speak against SB 5 are but one example of disempowered persons who seek out digital means to voice their opinions. This does not mean they are always heard, but it may provide some level of solace in situations that otherwise may feel hopeless. Users can find like-minded participants and form online political communities, sharing information, frustrations, and provide support and encouragement – as well as a sense of belonging. Moreover, using digital spaces to speak out against a bill that was felt to strip women of their agency and freedom also worked to bring more attention to Davis’s filibuster than might otherwise have been achieved. This attention can thrust an issue into the national consciousness and open up different conversations that might push against dominant narratives. For example, claims by proponents of the bill that it “protects women” can be challenged for emptiness and hypocrisy, as women are more likely to be hurt by a lack of access to safe and legal abortion.

Having enough protestors, of all gender identities, rally online against the bill, forming for a brief moment an amorphous community, worked to call attention to the matter and domino support (and derision) across the US. Good or bad, the publicity made it harder to ignore, and harder for conservative politicians across the US to pass similar measures without some level of protest.

A common consequence of using digital tools and practices for protest is calling attention to an issue and allowing space for more voices and counter-discourses. After the Palo Alto killings by a disturbed misogynist male led to the #yesallwomen hashtag, thousands of women turned to Twitter to share their experiences of gendered violence and abuse, forcing a difficult conversation about misogyny and rape culture in the US. The social media push by Ferguson protesters forced open a conversation about white police violence against unarmed black citizens. Hard conversations can grow out of enough social media activity. Even if all that comes of such activity is a national conversation, they are conversations that need to happen, and the first step in creating a dialogue that may lead to actual, even if glacial, change. The social media activity for Davis helped spike the conversation about the erosion of abortion rights in conservative states, while launching the political career of Wendy Davis.

## **5.2 Davis “speaking for” and gendered legitimizing**

As one of the few female Senators in the Texas legislature, Davis used her position as a woman (identifying as a cis-woman) to legitimize her filibuster and speak on behalf of Texas women. Abortion can and has been framed as an issue that affects different groups of people. Those in opposition may frame it as an issue that concerns society as a whole, suggesting abortion is a social ill that kills helpless unborn children. Others who fight for safe and legal abortion also frame it as a social issue, reasoning that women (and to some extent the father)

should have the basic human and social right to protect the life of the mother, or save her from having an unwanted pregnancy that results from rape or incest. Abortion can be framed as a fight over whose rights trump whose, the unborn fetus or the woman's? (Smyth 2002). Others promote the idea that abortion is an individual choice, and that women should be allowed to choose their own fate (and consult freely with healthcare providers), and that the state should not be allowed to interfere in a personal and individual decision. Davis, suggesting she is speaking for Texas women, is taking the conversation and shaping it to be about women and their individual autonomy, and the right to make one's own medical choices. A late-term abortion is nearly always done out of medical necessity. Restrictions on it place these women in harm. Closing down abortion clinics in a state as large as Texas forces women to travel hundreds of miles or seek unsafe alternatives.

In a tweet sent on Monday, June 25<sup>th</sup>, Davis said, "The leadership may not want to listen to TX women, but they will have to listen to me. I intend to filibuster this bill. #SB 5 #txlege" (Van Dyke 2013). Davis's reference to the leadership not wanting to listen to Texas women suggests that the men in leadership positions do not want to listen to women in a general sense. It may also refer to the fact that testimony for and against SB 5, when it was up in the Texas House of Representatives, was cut short by the male Republican chair with women still waiting to speak (Tuma 2013). The bill subsequently passed the House, passing it to the Senate where it was filibustered by Davis. In choosing to filibuster, Davis suggests she is giving voice to the women who were denied the right to give their testimony, as well as to others who were unable to speak out due to social, economic, or practical logistical reasons. Davis encouraged women to send her emails and Facebook posts with their stories, so that she could share them while speaking continuously during the filibuster.

As a self-identified woman, Davis is able to use her gender identity to legitimize speaking on behalf of other women. Scholarship by Hilda Kurtz shows how female activists may use gendered performances to their advantage to forward activist causes that are traditionally regarded as “feminine,” either due to their subject or because they are regarded as part of the “private” (domestic) sphere or home (Kurtz 2007). Davis and her supporters tack abortion and reproductive freedom to the “private” sphere, and not something that should be decided by the state. Abortion is framed as a women’s issue/battle, reproducing a gendered identity of women as autonomous individuals who hold rights to reproductive freedom; an identity that is clearly contested by those who hold the rights of the fetus over those of the pregnant woman. Davis legitimizes her decision to perform publicly as a woman speaking for women on the subject of reproductive rights.

Much of the discursive battle over reproductive freedom, especially from pro-choice activists, is about women being able to assert control over their own bodies, and a concern over the perceived attempt by men and/or the state to seize that control. Political practice in the US does much to produce the perception that women are excluded from actions and decisions that affect women’s choices about their own health and lives. In February 2012, a congressional hearing about contraception did not include any women on the panel (Pear 2012). Such almost laughable (were it not infuriating) exclusion from conversations about women’s health, rights, and freedoms, and from formal political deliberative spaces in general, only adds to the perception that women must constantly fight for a place to speak on issues that affect their choices.

In choosing to filibuster SB 5, and “speak” for women, Davis’s gender was continuously a point of discussion, as is often the case when women take on positions of power. While

identifying as a woman was one way for Davis to legitimize her actions, gender also becomes an easy way to target Davis, and some of her anti-choice opponents used gendered language in attempts to discredit her. Rather than call out Davis on any substantive points, in the days after the filibuster Fox contributor Erick Erickson called her “abortion Barbie,” while Republican Greg Abbott, a gubernatorial candidate for Texas, thanked a supporter on Twitter who called Davis “retard Barbie” (Berrier 2013; Thompson 2013). These social media actions quickly spread around online, forcing Abbot to backtrack and recant his support of the comment; social media makes it difficult to get away with supporting such blatantly misogynist and ablest derogatory remarks.

The feminist blog *Jezebel* reported on Abbott’s social media misstep, and the comments to the article include discussion about how female politicians are often attacked in social media. Also noted was a critique of conservative social media users who often post or share without considering the consequences of the far and permanent reach of their comments (screenshots, anyone?). As one commenter asked, “How, exactly, do assholes Twitter so effectively? Do they poop with such velocity and accuracy on the iPad screen that the splatters form words? Ideas, not so much” (Ryan 2013). Social media is utilized by all sides of a debate, reproducing social tensions that exist offline. Participants may use digital tools to promote social justice, while being called out derisively as “social justice warriors” by other users who passionately disagree with them.

Davis is also targeted as a “mother.” Limiting gender roles to those of motherhood, these critiques seek to frame Davis as an irresponsible mother and power-hungry individual who does not conform to a traditional gender role. While men can be both fathers and politicians, women are critiqued when their formal political ambitions might be seen to get in the way of their

“primary” role as mothers. Her fight for abortion rights also allows opponents to cast her as going against her “natural” female role as a mother. Her own history was microscopically analyzed, and critics seized upon her children being cared for by their father as evidence that she was a “bad” mother (Slater 2014). The news article cited here suggests that Davis being viewed as a bad mother is “potentially most damaging among female voters” (Slater 2014). This further reproduces the idea that for women, what matters most to our identity, and valuation of each other, is the role of motherhood. This distillation of female identity to motherhood has the frightening possibility to reduce women to nothing other than hosts or incubators, which Virginia Senator Steve Martin did when he referenced women as “a child’s host (some may refer to them as mothers)” (Beusman 2014). The online reactions to this sentiment did not disappoint:



Dinosaurs and Nachos, girlfriend! ▶ Callie Beusman

2/24/14 8:02pm

Well, let's just starting calling Senator Martin a kidney host.

I'm sure that someone, somewhere is in need of a kidney and Senator Martin is a match for that person. And I'm really REALLY sure that he won't mind being forced to endure medical procedures that permanently alter his body in order to PROTECT a LIFE.

Because that would be pretty hypocritical of Kidney Host Martin. Now wouldn't it?

108 ★ | Reply

---

Figure 25: Kidney Host (Beusman 2014)



Celia ▸ Callie Beusman

2/24/14 7:11pm

I'm sure his host is so proud!

95 ★ | Reply



HungryHeart ▸ Celia

2/24/14 7:15pm

I was thinking, Next dinner at his mom's house is gonna be awkwaaaard.

19 ★ | Reply



hypatia351 ▸ Celia

2/24/14 9:21pm

By his own terminology, he is admitting he is a parasite.

14 ★ | Reply

Figure 26: Parasite (Beusman 2014)

In these examples, the “host” language is extended, with the first comment suggesting that Martin should consider himself a “Kidney Host,” hosting usable kidneys for those who may need them. The second exchange also extends Martin’s reasoning to highlight its absurdity, suggesting he is reducing his mother to a “host” and himself to a parasite. Of course, visual images were also incorporated:

 **Turd-Polisher** ▸ Callie Beusman  
2/24/14 7:07pm



41 ★ | Reply

 **The\_Green\_Smile** ▸ Callie Beusman  
2/24/14 7:10pm



**Figure 27: Aliens (Beusman 2014)**

These images shared in the comment threads show how participants can creatively and humorously push back against discourses that frame women so negatively. In showing outrage (WHAT?!) or playing with the idea of women as “hosts” of alien parasites via an image from the sci-fi movie, *Aliens*, women can take an offensive statement and twist it to show its absurdity.

Even with the negative attention that befell Davis because of her gender or perceived failings as a mother (or host), she was, and is, able to use her gender identity as a woman to help justify her position as a woman speaking for women. Much was made about the pink hued sneakers she wore on the day of the filibuster. Such shoes were practical when standing for

several hours, but the decision to wear a traditionally feminine color may have been a conscious choice to retain femininity while practicing a formal political practice: a symbolic choice to highlight her femininity and identity as a woman (woman as strong autonomous individual, rather than mother), granting her legitimacy to speak for women against a perceived masculine threat to reproductive freedom and bodily autonomy. But the shoes became a symbol, as did Davis; these symbolic anchor points were shared as visual images online to rally support and display solidarity with Davis and her physically taxing formal protest against SB 5.

### **5.3 (Re)production and contestations of gender norms**

Digital participants quickly harnessed the power of social media and the ease of sharing visual and textual content to spread memes that could serve as rallying points and badges of solidarity with Davis as she conducted her filibuster. The communities that came together around the Davis filibuster produced images that turned Davis into a symbol in the immediate aftermath of the event. Most reproduce the trope of a strong female “warrior,” battling for women’s reproductive autonomy. Davis is recast as the strong or tough female character from various elements of pop culture.

A common meme cast Davis as a heroine from the wildly popular television show *Game of Thrones*. The show, based on a series of adult fantasy novels by author George R.R. Martin, is often criticized for its depiction of sexual violence. Many of the female characters face male subjugation and powerlessness, only to gain control over their lives, and their (mostly male) adversaries, making these attractive characters to tie to Davis. The most common visual meme tied Davis to the character Daenerys, who overcomes an abusive brother and forced marriage to a position as the head of an army and “savior” of subjected peoples. Interestingly, she is also called

the “mother of dragons” and assumes a role of “mother” to those she has freed, evidence perhaps of our culture’s inability to remove women from their roles as mothers.



**Figure 28: Davis as Daenerys (Mazhar 2013)**

Another visual meme put Davis in the role of Uma Thurman’s character in *Kill Bill*, a female warrior who seeks revenge against those who wronged her. Here again, her other mission becomes finding her lost daughter, suggesting again that motherhood drives her actions. It is perhaps a commentary on how popular culture frames strong women, that so often “strong” women must be still motivated by their “mother” roles.



**Figure 29: Kill Bill (Romano 2013)**

Davis herself speaks to the challenges of motherhood, and in a new biography recounts how her views on abortion came from difficult abortion decisions that were made for medical reasons, perhaps still bound by the need to be seen a responsible mother, even when it means terminating the life of a child who would have suffered greatly (Davis 2014). In a way, Davis, as strong female “warrior” for women’s rights, is still bound by the traditional gender role that frames women as mothers first. Davis’s life, her actions as a mother, her background, even her appearance all face intense scrutiny as a public, female figure. Supporters use the focus on her overcoming hardship while opponents try to suggest that Davis has been untruthful about her challenges (Slater 2014).

Through digital visual memes, Davis became a symbol of the fight for reproductive freedom. She gained both positive and negative attention that pointed at aspects of her identity as

a woman with power, and as her position as a mother. This attention also concentrated on her appearance on July 25<sup>th</sup> — specifically, her footwear.

#### **5.4 Counter-discourses advanced through Amazon Reviews**

Digital practices enable the re-use, re-purposing, and circulation of a wide range of digital artifacts, many of which incorporate playful takes on politically contentious issues. As the previous chapter suggests, the digital enables a new visual and textual language that work to cohere communities. In the Wendy Davis case, these communities circulated a range of symbols that served as works of satire, critique, and resistance. The pink Mizamo sneakers Davis wore became a handy visual symbol and an easily identifiable rallying point.

In the conversations that sprung up in online spaces, many participants began to hail the shoes as “feminist symbols.” The comments below from the feminist blog, *Jezebel* highlights some of the discussion:

**Commenter 1:** *“So those sneakers became a material representation of a hard-won victory. She is a lady, and dressed like a lady. But when it’s time to fight? She straps on the sneakers, and she fights.”*

**Commenter 2:** *“So here’s the thing: if she were a man, she wouldn’t have had to change to noticeably different shoes. It points out that her expected wardrobe would have included something you CAN’T comfortably stand in for so long. So the fact that she changed to sneakers, not common Senate floor apparel in general, is a testament to how committed she was to this filibuster succeeding. BUT she kept them pink because that’s what she likes, unapologetically. You can be feminine and strong and ass-kicking...”*

(Ryan 2013).

The participants engage in a discussion that touches on the complex gender tropes that surrounded this event. Davis is a strong female warrior type, but retains femininity in her pink shoes. They also express the expectation that Davis, as a woman, would wear uncomfortable “lady” footwear that needed to be switched out for some “ass-kicking.” This is one of many such exchanges where Davis and her shoes served as launching points of discussion, allowing participants to express their ideas and opinions, while showing their support for Davis’s actions.

The Mizumo sneakers became a sensation online, and supporters began leaving Amazon reviews, hijacking the space to leave satirical commentary and support for Wendy Davis. The shoes became a powerful metaphor for the larger debate on abortion rights in the US, and by extension, women’s rights, patriarchy, and misogyny. I use Amazon reviews to draw out some of the social and political contestations around the Davis filibuster, which came together precisely because the shoes became a symbolic anchor point.

There are several themes that emerged in these social and political contestations. Critiques of conservative Republicans abound, with titles such as, “Fits perfectly up a republican’s rear end.” Participant Yalda uses the shoes as a metaphor for sexual violence, choice, and a critique of how some Republicans perpetuate a rape culture that puts the blame on women. Kate McIntyre calls out Rick Perry specifically, suggesting that without his “never-ending misogyny and chauvinism” she would have never learned about Davis or the Mizuno shoes; wearing the shoes serves as a sign that she is “dead serious” about controlling her body and her reproductive choices.

★★★★★ **Thanks, Rick Perry!**, June 27, 2013

By [Kate McIntyre](#) (Toluca Lake, CA United States) - [See all my reviews](#)

Amazon Verified Purchase (What's this?)

This review is from: **Mizuno Women's Wave Rider 16 Running Shoe (Apparel)**

Ah, Governor Rick Perry... without your never-ending misogyny and chauvinism, I never would have learned about the Mizuno Women's Wave Rider 16 Running Shoe - modeled so very stunningly and effectively by Texas State Senator Wendy Davis during her epic 11 hour filibuster! I'm hoping that when I lace these babies up and step out, every male troglodyte who sees my feet will recognize these red shoes and know that I am dead serious about controlling my own body and making my own reproductive choices - and that I'm also standing up for every woman so she can do the same.

I'm standing with Wendy, so get the heck out of my body and my bedroom, or I'll put these red shoes to another good use - and kick your behinds into the next century.

Thanks, gov - couldn't have done it without you!

### Figure 30: Thanks, Rick Perry! (Amazon Reviews)

In a show of support, many contestations come from reviewers who identify as male. Jonathan, for example, suggests that woman's health should be between her and her doctor, and not "aged religious fundamentalists." Another is titled, "As a man I can't wear these shoes but I sure can support Wendy Davis" and the review states that women's rights should be a given, not up for debate. The review voted as the "most helpful" negative (one star) review sharply criticizes how Republicans are perceived to treat women: as simple, and in need of guidance and instruction when it comes to their reproductive choices:

1,390 of 1,485 people found the following review helpful

★☆☆☆☆ **Men, do not try these on!**, June 27, 2013

By [Joshua Jones](#) - [See all my reviews](#)

REAL NAME

This review is from: **Mizuno Women's Wave Rider 16 Running Shoe (Apparel)**

I tried on a pair at the local mall and suddenly Texas Republicans started telling me what to do with my genitals. They started explaining reproduction to me like I was a seventh grader. Unfortunately, being male, I had no way to shut the whole thing down. I'm so confused...

### Figure 31: Mizuno shoes not for men (Amazon Reviews)

Here, the reference to "shut the whole thing down" refers to remarks by Todd Aiken, when he suggested that women's bodies can shut down pregnancy if they are raped, implying that anyone who is "really" raped could not possibly get pregnant.

Other male-identified reviewers play with the idea of the shoes as feminist tokens or symbols, suggesting the shoes could empower the women around them. One reviewer states he bought them for his daughters to fight misogynist males. Reviewer Gregory also forwards the shoes as a feminist symbol, and applauds Davis for standing up for women’s rights, while advising his fellow men to “sit down” and be quiet.”

Many participants use the shoes to bring in a discussion of choice, paralleling the consumerist choices on a site like Amazon. As Christine notes a review, “I’m not sure I could ever bring myself to buy or wear shoes like this. But you know, I’m so glad I have the option. #standwithwendy”. This theme of choice is repeated often, and re-frames the discourse around abortion as one of freedom to have reproductive choices through the metaphor of the shoes. As use EB notes, “If a woman suddenly finds herself with a pair of shoes she doesn’t want, or were forced upon her, and knows she won’t have the emotional or physical resources to treat the shoes with care and love and a bright future, well, then, she doesn’t deserve those shoes. So, having choices is important.” Shoshana below echoes the sentiment, suggesting how ludicrous it would be for a legislator to determine what kind of shoes to buy:

★★★★★ **So Glad To Have a Choice!**, June 27, 2013  
By [Shoshana](#) - [See all my reviews](#)  
**This review is from: Mizuno Women's Wave Rider 16 Running Shoe (Apparel)**  
I am so glad that I have a choice about what shoes to buy! Imagine if some legislator tried to tell me what type of shoes worked best for me or what type of shoes were available to me... that is so UnAmerican! When I found out that Wendy chose these as well during her marathon filibuster, I knew right then I had to buy them and have not been disappointed. They are good for standing all day long. Thank you Wendy and all the people who showed up to support her.

**Figure 32: So Glad to Have a Choice! (Amazon Reviews)**

The shoes become a symbol of empowerment, useful for combatting the perceived threats to female autonomy. Davis is often referenced specifically as a combatant in this struggle.

As AmazonianInLove states below, they are great shoes for staying firmly in place without yielding to oppression.

★★★★★ **Shoes that never Yield to the Floor**, June 27, 2013

By [AmazonianInLove](#) - [See all my reviews](#)

This review is from: **Mizuno Women's Wave Rider 16 Running Shoe (Apparel)**

If you are looking for a shoe that will never yield to the floor, pressure or good ol' fashioned boy's club bullying this is the shoe for you. It has been tested for hours, opportunities to yield to oppression were presented yet this shoe stayed firmly in place holding up half the sky for 13 hours.

### Figure 33: Shoes don't yield the floor (Amazon Reviews)

Some reviews speak to the issues of identity mentioned above, such as women being more than just incubators, but “whole and equal” people. As JT in VA states, “These [shoes] provide great support for the grueling hours of uninterrupted standing necessary to explain to her male colleagues the subtle connection between being a whole and equal person, and not being forced by the government to gestate a fetus against her will.” The shoes are touted as accessories in the fight for reproductive freedom, against those who would devalue women by removing from them control over their bodily autonomy and reproductive choices.

These examples demonstrate how digital participants create online spaces and discursive opportunities for circulating contestations. The “reviews” (contestations) were not left in a digital “space” already-made for equitable deliberation; rather, the discursive space was formed by participants taking over the commercial space. The creators of Amazon and the functionality of reviews were never intended to be spaces of critique and social commentary – the technology was developed for product reviews of consumer goods. Part of digital practice is viewing technology not as an immutable tool handed down by its developer, but as something to be taken, modified, and shaped to suite one’s purpose. This re-purposing of reviews on a commercial website toward emancipatory gender politics shows a politics of possibility that exceeds the limits of capitalism (Gibson-Graham 2006). It refuses to be limited to what the digital

commercial space is for (markets and consumption), and in so doing, opens space for new political possibility.

In the Wendy Davis filibuster against SB 5, and the accompanying discourses and contestations, gender was implicated in diverse ways. The bill directly affects women in the state of Texas, and sets a regressive precedent for other states considering such measures. Wendy Davis, as a cis-gender identifying woman and formal political entity, became the primary and visible opponent against the bill, although fellow legislators such as Kirk Watson and Leticia Van de Putte, who stalled the proceedings after Davis was forced to yield the floor, joined in the formal political opposition. For those outside the formal political sphere, digital practices allowed women and their allies to voice their opinions and increase the visibility of the filibuster, drawing attention to the ways it would harm reproductive choices. Davis used gender as a way to legitimize speaking for women outside of the formal political sphere. In doing so, she (and her shoes), became symbolic rallying points digital participants could employ to make social and political contestations, turning the shoes into metaphors for choice, and Davis into the (motherly) warrior defending women's rights.

The bill and the filibuster resulted in the creation of social and political contestations. Shaped partly by technological affordances and constraints, these online contestations took many forms, highlighting the creative ways digital practitioners harness and adapt technology for their own ends. These creative practices spread, continually transforming technology *and* society. The creation of subversive spaces for contestations occurs in unintended and inventive ways. Supporters of Davis, who opposed a restrictive abortion bill, took to Twitter, Facebook, blogs, comment spaces, and Mizumo shoe reviews to voice their social and political contestations.



## 6. Conclusion

I argue that new media and digital practices create new forms of creative cultural contestations that serve to challenge dominant political discourses and social norms and relations. Digital tools extend our social and geographical imaginaries, bringing new contacts, information, and ways of making our voices and opinions heard. This is vital to new practices of contentious politics; politics that flow through informal channels, but can expand across geographic space to reach national formal political processes.

The case of the Wendy Davis filibuster of SB 5 shows some of these contestations in action, with memes, tweets, Amazon reviews, and blog posts re-framing Davis as a feminist symbol who challenged formal political leadership and fought to keep abortion safe and legal in the state of Texas. This content spun a larger narrative that claimed women should have choices over their reproductive lives and full bodily autonomy. Raising awareness of the restrictive bill helped to rally supporters of reproductive freedom, many of whom took to the capital and through their voices, shut down the vote after the leadership silenced Davis (Dewey 2013; Rose 2013). My evidence suggests that supporters were able to take to online spaces and use digital practices to voice their opinions and share their solidarity with Davis and women's reproductive freedom. In doing so, they joined an imagined community with like-minded participants, with whom they could share memes and discuss the issues. The collective power of these voices forced the issue nationwide, propelling Davis into the national spotlight, and bringing fresh scrutiny to the ways conservatives attempt to curtail reproductive choices for women (Tumulty 2013).

Prior scholarship on digital technologies and social media often hinges on dualisms, such as the virtual versus the material, or technology as utopia versus dystopia. These often come with

an underlying framework that conceptualizes space as a ready-made container, rather than something socially produced (Vesnic-Alujevic 2012; Tolbert and McNeal 2003; Vitak, et al. 2011). This leads to understandings of digital space as something given – a technologically determinant view. My work contributes a feminist and geographical understanding of digital practices (Baym 2010; Fraser 1990; Dodge 2001; Crutcher and Zook 2009). Instead of theorizing the Internet as a separate space that is ready-made, where all users have equal access and an opportunity for deliberation, I theorize digital spaces as dynamically tied to material practices; they exist in a mutually constitutive relationship. While still subject to the affordances and constraints of technology, users nonetheless proactively engage with technology and create spaces of discussion and contestation. My evidence suggests supporters of Davis carved out spaces of contestation in areas as unlikely as product reviews. They created pop culture mash-ups with political twists that were shared on various platforms, creating discussion threads where participants could engage in debate, share stories, and find support.

My project illustrates how digital practices take many forms, and I show how users transform technological tools to fit their needs, incorporating creativity, satire, and playfulness. Users find ways to show solidarity, feeling, and critique through digitally produced content. They can seek out and create spaces to share their content, such as Wikipedia, Amazon, and through social media platforms like Twitter. Yet, the forms of online practice are not separate from the practices of material life, but intimately connected, reproducing many of the same inequalities, hierarchies, and tensions. As in material social space, where hierarchies can form among groups or individuals that give some a stronger voice, some commenters on discussion threads can gain more gatekeeping powers and increased visibility, or be chased out as trolls. The case of the Wendy Davis filibuster showed how heated and impassioned debates could arise

between pro-choice and anti-choice participants, reproducing the divides that exist in material life (Tuttle 2013).

Digital practices create connections among users. I suggest that the use of a shared visual and textual language works to unite participants along shared interests. This language and use of “in jokes” marks those who belong and those who are outside. Using memes, gifs, comment threads, and other digital practices, users can coalesce around a contentious issue, forming an imagined community in “digital space”. I argue that these communities and their practices are productive and can shape events – sometimes through sheer numbers, as when a particular event gains enough online attention to become viral. Picked up by mainstream media, political contestations gain widespread attention, linking informal political actions to formal political actors.

My evidence suggests that these communities can provide digital accountability, with citizen media and real-time information dissemination challenging mainstream media reporting, and putting public pressure on dominant political or social authorities. Communities online are able to voice alternative concerns, shape or re-frame narratives, and call attention to issues *they* deem important. These practices are not a panacea for solving unequal social and political participation in the US, but they work to crack open spaces in dominant discourses, and draw attention to issues that otherwise may stay strictly local or hidden.

In the case of Wendy Davis’s filibuster against SB 5, the online digital record captured these digital practices playing out. Users tweeted, blogged, and commented, lampooning mainstream media and tipping the issue to the national consciousness. In the days following the filibuster, digital spaces were filled with visual and textual commentary about Davis, abortion rights, and the conservatives fighting to restrict reproductive freedom. Memes, comments,

reviews, and all manner of contestations were created and circulated. Gender identities of motherhood were often reproduced in these contestations, as even the female “warrior” tropes deployed had underlying motives tied to motherhood. Yet, women were also able to contest narratives that framed women as *only* mothers – and not as autonomous human beings with rights to control over their own bodies. Women, who are so affected by these potential restrictive bills, are also often denied formal political outlets (Staeheli 1996; 2004). The case of SB 5 shows how the Internet provided adaptable tools for women to voice their opinions and solidarity with Davis.

However, it is not only the underrepresented who can use online practices to make their grievances heard. As the recent #gamergate controversy shows, online communities can form around the hatred of women. This Twitter movement, ostensibly about ethics in gaming journalist, resulted in numerous death and rape threats against women who dared to speak out against sexism in the gaming industry (Wingfield 2014). While this is further evidence of the nebulous communities that form online, some communities fight for the status quo and maintenance of privilege, not its dismantling (Hathaway 2014). But even in such cases, online practices and digital users find spaces to offer counter opinions and support for those targeted with digital violence (Hathaway 2014).

Social media and digital practices are not the panacea to problems of representation and lack of access to formal political structures. However, I suggest they represent a way for digitally literate citizens to access knowledge, form imagined communities with shared interests that operate in a shared visual and textual language, and use the digital record to keep issues alive and popular. They can create social and political contestations rapidly, spread them through digital networks, and make an otherwise unknown event difficult to ignore. I argue these contestations

can re-frame narratives, and forward counter-discourses. Davis's supporters pushed for women to be considered autonomous human beings against narratives that framed them merely as "hosts." These contestations rallied supporters, and increased visibility that helped organize on-the-ground protests.

In the days after Davis filibustered SB 5, headlines such as, "How the Internet and abortion rights won in Texas," and "Wendy Davis and Her Sneakers Are Basically Running Everything Now" abounded across the web (Ryan 2013; Romano 2013). The social media attention on Davis and abortion rights, and how this attention worked to make a state filibuster a national issue, added fuel to the ongoing conversation about the effects of social media in contested issues – a conversation that is still in progress. It is obvious that digital practices have material effects (Satell 2014). While the power and extent of these material effects varies, that they exist can no longer be denied. Not everyone has the means or access to participate in this growing social and political culture of digital contestations, and access will never be universal. However, the case of the Wendy Davis filibuster shows that as ubiquitous, "pervasive" practices of computing continue to alter social, cultural, and political practices, chances are shifts in society, culture, and political practices may very well begin with tweets. The revolution may not be tweeted, but digital practices light the fires that begin to fuel social changes.



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