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TECHNOLOGICAL BOUNDARIES: DEFINING THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL IN MILITARY MOTHERS' ONLINE SUPPORT FORMS

WENDY M. CHRISTENSEN

*We do not allow folks to degrade or criticize the military.
We are strictly a support network and we do not allow
political views or advertising in our chat rooms or message boards.*

—A moderator of a Marine Moms
support group describing the rules for participating

Mothers throughout history have grappled with the meaning and practice of supporting the (predominantly male) troops. The U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have brought contemporary, local relevance to this historic concern as the American public struggles to understand what “supporting” the troops in an unpopular war means. This question is even more acute for military families. In recent wars, the military has mobilized Internet technology to foster support for troops among U.S. military families, encouraging family members to form online support groups and often providing server space and technological assistance to them (Christensen 2009). By making it more possible for soldiers to keep in touch with their families in real time, and by allowing soldiers’ families to connect with each other regardless of geographical distance, I argue, the Internet offers new opportunities for channeling support and resistance.

In this essay I examine how technology mediates military mothers’ interactions in online message forums, mobilizing gender to depoliticize the home front experiences of war mothers and to discourage public dissent among this potentially powerful group. I argue that message board participants and moderators use online technologies to enforce gendered boundaries between what is considered “personal” and what is considered “political” in the experience of having a child who is a member of the armed services. The paradoxes of public/private boundaries are especially salient for military mothers, for whom war is both personal/private (they have children who

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are in the military) and public/political (their own experiences of war are shaped by public political processes). I follow the online interactions of the mothers of U.S. service members to show how online technology facilitates mothers' shaping and policing of these boundaries.

I found that participants consider their support to be nonpolitical even when their activities may directly shore up (or challenge) the military, and this position of nonpolitical support is constructed and reinforced by message board moderators; formal rules for joining and posting; and unstated assumptions implicit in discussion headings and, ultimately, posting practices of participants themselves. How these mothers organize around "support" online makes them particularly useful for seeing how the boundaries of what is public (political) and private (personal) are constructed and maintained during wartime, as a key aspect of home front war support. When the moderator quoted above described to me the rules for posting online, she articulated a polarity of politics and support. By mapping out how and when mothers evoke different notions of support and politics in online interactions, I show how the Internet provides new technological means for shoring up gendered relationships to war, and gender inequality more broadly.

The online world is organized via hyperlinking, categorizing, and other text-based technology (Markham 2003; Orgad 2006). Understanding how the online world is organized textually (via links, categories, and so on) brings to the fore the ways in which online space reflects and reproduces relationships of power. I draw on feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith's understanding of how texts coordinate social life (1990, 1999). I take up her unique definition of "texts" as powerful, active, material coordinators of the social world and extend it to the Internet. I argue that focusing on the powerful, usually unseen ways that text-based technology shapes the Internet is necessary for getting at how discursive boundaries are drawn and maintained online.

In particular, this study explores how and when the gendered boundaries of the public and private break down online—when efforts to defend these boundaries fail. While military mothers online attempt to maintain sharp borders around what they consider to be political/public and what they consider to be personal/private, they are not always successful—their complex, diverse experiences of war challenge this oversimplification. When distinctions break down, interactions that do not "fit" within the contours of public/private that have been laid out in online space are challenged, yet the sanctions applied are also mediated through technology. By looking at these

definitions and divisions online, I show how Internet message boards not only help define and reinforce the boundaries of the public/private during war, but also become part of the gendered system of support that makes the public face of war possible.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

My understanding of how military mothers' online interactions are shaped by the technologies they use is grounded in feminist studies of the relationship of mothers to war. I begin this section by looking at how mothers are relied upon to provide a certain kind of gendered home front support. I then turn to how mothers' wartime roles are defined as personal and private during war and how this reinforces the idea that war is a public/political matter. Finally, I discuss the Internet's role in shaping mothers' home front relationship to war, looking at how technology mediates definitions of the public/political and personal/private in practice.

MOTHERS AND WAR

Motherhood is an ideology that has been a powerful tool for organizing women's relationships to war—both their opposition and their support for war efforts. Mothers are often ascribed epistemic privilege and moral authority as pacifists, because the terrible consequences of war for the family, body, and the community appear particularly salient to mothers (Ruddick 1995; Chodorow 1978). However, considering mothers to be inherently peaceful does not account for the diverse roles they have played in relation to war (Forcey 1994). Mothers often participate in combat during home-based liberation wars and, even when refraining from actual combat, have participated in home front war efforts by loading weapons and housing troops (Hammami 1997). Mothers also draw on their maternal identity to take violently “protective” stances and to raise their children around causes such as white supremacy (Blee 1996; Ferber 2004). Mothers of soldiers have always been a key part of home front support (Enloe 2000; Goldstein 2001), as they are often called on to provide support for their children who are soldiers. For example, a 2006–2007 series of military recruitment materials, “Make It a Two-Way Conversation. Get the Facts,” focused exclusively on mothers' personal relationship to war through their child (Christensen 2009). Army recruitment campaigns target mothers of (male) soldiers by advertising, “You made them strong. We make them Army Strong,” in magazines such as *Ladies' Home Journal*, encouraging mothers to provide emotional support for

their children who choose to serve and trust the military as an institution that will take care of their child.

WAR AND THE BOUNDARIES OF THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

Military mothers' personal experiences may appear to enable them to speak publicly about war with "maternal authority," but a public/private divide that places them in the private and war in the public undermines mothers' legitimacy in speaking about the war itself. In this section I review notions of "support" and "politics" and how those definitions structure the relationship of mothers to war along a gendered public/private dichotomy.

The public (the space usually associated with politics, work, and community) and the private (typically associated with the home, care, and family) are defined as exclusive spaces, and this division reifies gender difference and inequalities (Landes 1998). Women, by their association with biological reproduction, are defined within the private domain and thus placed outside and in opposition to the (male) political process (Pateman 1989; Yuval-Davis 1997). This gendered public/private boundary is relational rather than intrinsic; the public and private are actually intertwined in a way that is better described as fractal (Gal and Kligman 2000)—there are public spaces within private spaces and private spaces within public spaces, and these divisions can be infinitely multiplied at ever smaller scales. Military mothers' complex relationships to war serve as an ideal example of this complexity.

When the Department of Defense mobilizes mothers to supply support for their wars, the department typically means "auxiliary support," such as recruitment support, emotional support during deployment, and post-war health support for their children (Elshtain 1987; Enloe 1993). While the military supplies health care for soldiers, families are expected to take over the care of soldiers recovering from medical procedures or suffering long-term mental or physical disabilities (Rosen, Durand, and Martin 2000). These kinds of "auxiliary" support are considered distinctly separate from any political stance or activity; they are expected to take place primarily in the "private" sphere (the home), not in the "public" sphere (the political field).

TECHNOLOGICALLY MEDIATED INTERACTIONS

Online message boards are spaces that are open to multiple, conflicting definitions of what is public and private. Participants often regard their online interactions as private, even though those interactions occur on the very

public and searchable Internet (Markham 1998; Orgad 2006). Individual participants have the power to control their visibility online—to publicly claim their identities as military mothers and as a part of a support network, or to “lurk” as private nonparticipants (Phillips 2006). The publicness of the interactions of the message boards allows wide-ranging debates about the rightness and wrongness of public actions, such as demonstrations or letter-writing campaigns. However, the privateness of the forum also allows list moderators to step in and declare certain topics “out of bounds.” Such tensions and contradictions are part of the negotiation of a boundary between public and private, a boundary that needs to be actively constructed through discursive practices online.

In the past few years, the Internet has become a pivotal part of social movement mobilization (DiMaggio et al. 2001; Haythornthwaite and Wellman 2002) and support group formation (Correll 1995; Orgad 2006). Internet message boards provide users with ways to communicate with large groups that are not contingent on the limitations of time and space and that demand relatively few resources. Internet communities are increasingly integrated into individuals’ everyday lives—becoming what Nakamura calls a “daily technology” (2006, 35), instead of something separate from and “virtual” to participants’ lives. While the power to shape these everyday online interactions is typically assumed to be in the hands of web programmers and designers, message boards make organizational power available to individual web users who have little technical knowledge. Web usage means participating in dynamic content—posting pictures, videos, and links; commenting on, and sharing, information; and otherwise shaping the ways others use the Internet (Beer and Burrows 2007). As a result of this user-driven organization, participants have power to shape online discussions in various ways—by responding to a discussion, ignoring certain discussions, or publicly admonishing discussions that do not conform to the message board’s guidelines.

I treat the Internet as a social space, taking into account not only the way individual participants shape that space but also the physical spaces’ rules and interactions, organization, and how boundaries are defined and reproduced online. A growing number of researchers are considering how the technology of the Internet organizes the content and interactions online (Hine 2000; Wise, Hamman, and Thorson 2006; Ley 2007) and I am particularly interested in how technology organizes online interactions as gendered. As the “co-creation thesis” states, gender and technology co-create each

other—that is, technology is shaped by gender, and technology re-creates ideas about gender (Johnson 2006). This co-creation is especially visible in online message forums, where the technological organization of the discussion space defines how it is used by participants (Hine 2000, 2005). Understanding how the technological space shapes and constrains interactions online is key to getting at how power inequalities are produced online.

Online technology—the sharing, organizing, and linking of information—is text based. Technological texts are what shape and organize online content—they are, as Markham describes, “the points of connection between people whose exchanges comprise the very foundations of these emerging forms of culture” (2003, 1). Drawing on Dorothy Smith’s approach to understanding texts as actively mediating interactions provides a way to focus on this coordination and connectivity online (Smith 1990, 1999). Smith argues that texts coordinate content across multiple sites, or as she puts it, texts act “as a crystal ball which bends light as it passes through—organizing a course of concerted social action” (1990, 121). An example of such Internet texts would be the categories and structure of an individual’s message board profile that coordinate and organize individuals’ information online. These kinds of texts are the threads that weave together social relations to create a cohesive picture of the world (Smith 1999). For Smith, texts are what produce and reproduce power relationships and inequalities online by working behind the “content” of actual interactions online—they are the backstage coordination and shaping of that content.

The text-based technologies that organize the Internet are of primary importance in understanding the organization of power and inequality in online communities such as message forums. The technology behind online interactions that is taken for granted by participants is nonetheless the product of social processes and power relations (Hine 2001, 2005; Lovink 2005). While “typical” indicators of inequality (gender, race, class) are not always visible online, the online world is hardly genderless, raceless, or classless (Nakamura 2002; Wright 2005), and inequality and assumptions about sameness and difference drive the mediation of online information and interactions (Orgad 2006). The technologically mediated power in online interactions supports Smith’s conception that power is imbedded in textual mediation. In this essay I concentrate on the text-based methods with which mothers use message board technology to define support and politics in ways that ultimately reify gender inequality in the practice of war and, more broadly, in the practice of politics.

METHODOLOGY

I sampled online communities aimed primarily at mothers of currently deployed soldiers, which describe themselves as “support” sites (not antiwar sites) and have an active online message board/forum space. I identified thirty-seven message boards that fit these criteria, with memberships ranging from roughly fifty to ten thousand members. From these I strategically selected nine message boards for analysis. Those that I selected are among the most active daily and include some that are open to the public and some open to members only. They represent various branches of the military (two are for all military branches, and seven are for specific branches).

Six of the message boards I analyzed are open, so anyone would be able to read them online, although one would have to become a member to participate. Only three message boards in my study were completely closed (one must be a member to read the messages). I worked with the moderators of each message board to gain permission to observe the boards.¹ For my study, I “lurked” online; I did not participate in discussions, but instead observed interactions, and I privately contacted specific members about interviewing them. I analyzed the content of two years of message board discussions (June 2006–June 2008). In addition, I interviewed ten participants from each message board to get at some of the information that is otherwise invisible online. I selected individuals with the goal of having a representative variety of perspectives and of covering different military backgrounds and degrees of involvement in the message boards. The interviews took place through multiple e-mail exchanges.

There was no deception in my online presence or in my interviews. I provided each participant with a summary of my project goals and myself. As I am not a mother and not a member of the military, and stated this in my introduction, I was initially apprehensive about gaining access to both message boards and individual participants and then about being seen as too much of an “outsider.” I soon found that I was able to harness my lack of motherly and military experience to ask moderators and participants for clarification about conversations and rules online, the worries and emotions involved in being a parent, and the workings of the military institution. I came to see my outsider perspective as an invaluable part of my research, as mothers took it upon themselves to explain as clearly as possible to me what it meant for them to be what I was not—a mother and the mother of a service member.

FINDINGS

Through the technological organization of the online space, military mothers' message boards set boundaries around what is personal and what is political and therefore reinforce the gendered practice of war and gender inequality. These boundaries are set and maintained in three ways. First, mothers construct the online space around a specific definition of a military mother and, in doing so, separate themselves from "others" (civilians and those who are antiwar). Second, the technology of the message board and the rules for interaction are used to set boundaries around what can be discussed in order to create a "safe space" for mothers. This safe space comes at the expense of reinforcing the gendered dichotomy between the public/political and personal/private. Finally, message board moderators and participants actively police discussions online, organizing the mother's home front experiences of war in gendered ways.

These findings remained remarkably consistent across the two-year period, despite the increasingly critical reports of the war effort. The only notable changes in online discussions occur during wartime events that received considerable public attention. Discussions that become directly critical of the war effort tend to occur when participants open topics about, for example, new troop stop-loss orders, the announcement of an investigation into neglect at Walter Reed Army Medical Center (in February 2007), or when milestones are reached in the number of U.S. deaths (three thousand deaths in January 2007).² Message boards also fluctuate in activity when members are going through immediate crises—the coming deployment of a unit or the death of one of the members' children.

MARKING ONLINE BOUNDARIES: SEPARATING MOTHERS FROM "OTHERS"

One of the first ways the online space organizes mothers' relationships to war and to each other is by structuring the boundaries of who counts as a military mother and who is a civilian "other." Although military mothers are not involved in combat, and are considered outside the military institution itself, mothers consider themselves to be noncivilians. This boundary is created and policed through the accessibility of the forum (whether it is open or closed to the public, who can join, what kind of posts are allowed, and so on) and through the physical/technological organization of the discussion space.

Support forums for mothers have varying degrees of accessibility. As mentioned above, out of the nine message boards I analyzed, three were

completely private. To join, mothers needed to fill out a questionnaire detailing their relationship to the military (including where their child was stationed and whether they had parents or significant others who also served) that is then reviewed for approval by the board moderators. In general, these boards tended to have the most controlled, highly moderated discussions in my sample. Four message boards required membership for posting and contributing, but otherwise made their conversations available to the public online. These forums had heavy moderation and rules for participants to follow about what could be discussed and shared online. Finally, two message boards were completely open to the public both for reading and posting. These public boards tended to have the most “controversial” conversations, and members themselves did much of the moderation—by ignoring controversy or reminding wayward participants of the posted message board rules.

Mothers’ personal experience of war initially draws them to participate in online support groups, to find understanding and companionship as they learn their child has enlisted or will soon be deployed. Using the online forums, mothers provide one another with support through their child’s decision to join the military, boot camp, deployment, and homecoming. Mothers’ common bonds are often stressed when new mothers join the online discussions. As one mother describes in her first posting to a support website: “I don’t think anyone can begin to know how it feels to send YOUR OWN CHILD to a war zone until you’ve experienced it.”

Mothers also assert differences between how they experience war personally and how others do not personally experience war. By asserting how personal war is, military mothers draw boundaries, placing themselves and other military families on one side and people who are antiwar and civilian on the other (and often conflating these two categories). For example, in one online discussion about how to deal with confrontations with “nonmilitary” people (who are assumed to be antiwar), a mother asks for advice on confronting a co-worker who repeatedly makes statements against the war at work. As another mother explains during the same conversation, “People that don’t have someone they love with all their hearts in a far away place fighting a war—they will never get it. They are disconnected from this war. And sadly we could talk to them until we are blue in the face and they still wouldn’t understand.” Here, those who are “disconnected” from the personal experiences of war are presented as not able to understand the experiences of war for families, and also as antiwar.

One of the primary functions of mothers' groups is to receive and provide advice, even though it sometimes has the effect of silencing diverse experiences. The advice that mothers provide for each other highlights the personal aspects of war, framing it as the opposite of the public/political aspects. The personal aspect of war serves an important function for mothers online by drawing attention to what they have in common—the experience of having a child in the military—rather than what are seen as controversial and potentially divisive issues such as what they think the government or the military commanders should be doing. Mothers often tell each other to focus attention on their child “instead of” on politics and the news (as if the two were separate). Their assertion of their personal closeness to war as a way to avoid public debates relegates the support work they do for their children and other service members to the personal instead of political realm, when in fact the personal (the home front experiences of war) and the political (war) are far more intertwined.

While the mothers in my study discourage each other from discussing what they consider to be political, they also charge that “others” are not in a position to engage in those discussions. In mother's forums, “others” are anyone who is not in the military or in a military family—including politicians and civilians. Military families and soldiers who closely experience war are seen as being able to speak from an authoritative position about war itself, while “others” have little basis on which to do so. For example, an air force mother adds to a discussion about feeling isolated from others by saying, “I think what you are feeling is very normal for moms. I feel like feeling compounds it like no one around you truly can understand how it feels to send your son off to war, where he could actually die.” In addition to the gateway control of who can participate in the online group, and what can be discussed, the subtopic organization of message boards (1) reinforces mothers' personal connection to war, (2) marks the boundaries around what is personal and what is political, and (3) makes a clear assumption that home front support is not only mothers' work, but women's work as well.

Members reinforce the personal nature of war by creating forum topics in each board that focus on individualized presentations such as “tributes to marines” and “stories, prayers, poems and songs.” In addition to these person-centric topics, six message boards provide separate spaces for controversial, political, and “off topic” discussions. Mothers who come to these message boards must choose which subtopic in which to post. Either

participants will find no space on the board at all for politics or controversial discussions, or their choices will be constrained into what are assumed to be dichotomous camps—that which is called “support” (personal) and “politics” (which is therefore impersonal). As a result, there is no space for variation in how mothers may cope with having a child at war—for mothers who may support the troops while also taking a political position or being active in a political party or campaign.

Assumptions about the gendered practice of war are embedded in the technological organization of message boards. In addition to being geared toward supporting the military and the troops, every message board assumes that all participants are mothers (even when it might formally indicate that it is for “parents” or “family” more broadly). Most discussion forums are organized around women’s identities, with separate spaces for mothers, wives, girlfriends, and so on. This organization obscures how some women have multiple identities in relation to war (they might be both mothers and wives) and pushes men (fathers, husbands, and others) and female soldiers out of the role of “support” providers. Even message boards that have recently adopted more inclusive gender-neutral language by naming their constituency as parents or families continue to assume that those in a supportive position to war are women only. For example, a community for marine families recently changed its title and description from “marine moms” to “marine parents,” but still organizes participants in gendered subtopics whereby the male marine and the supporting mothers are assumed to be the primary participants (for example, there are subspaces for “parents of marines” and “parents of marine daughters”). The technological structure of the message boards provides a strongly gendered foundation for the discussions that take place online.

DEFINING AND DEFENDING THE ONLINE SUPPORT SPACE

Rules, moderators, and participants provide the next level of technological organization for message boards. Moderators define and enforce the rules for interaction online—what can be discussed and what is off limits. Moderators may also sanction posts and discussions that do not follow these rules by shutting down a specific discussion so that no one else can post in that thread or by ejecting participants from the message board. Message board participants also provide some of this moderation more informally. Participants can collectively ignore someone’s posts or discussion threads, thereby admonishing the person as not a legitimate member of the community en-

titled to be heard as part of the interaction. They can also publicly attack (“flame”) someone who is perceived as not following the rules.

Each message board has a specific set of rules for posting and engaging in discussions. These rules (written and posted as part of the access to the site) reinforce the distinction between “support” work and “political” activism. Most groups state explicitly that they are “non-political” and have rules against posting topics that are politically contentious or may be considered inflammatory. In the message boards I studied, politics was most often explicitly defined as electoral party politics (particularly during the 2006 mid-term elections and the 2008 presidential election campaign). The mothers’ posts often associate “politics” with government corruption. These mothers’ groups have mission statements that focus on supporting each other and the troops, and five of the nine groups expressly state that the group is not “political.” For example, this marine mothers’ group slogan is typical: “Marine Moms Online is patriotic. Not political.” Here, “patriotism” is considered to be something quite apart from politics, and the separation means that debating nationalism is not acceptable. Or, as another description of an online message board for mothers reads, “We do NOT get in the political end of it all. Our sons were called up to do what they were trained to do and it’s their job. We support our troops unconditionally.” Unconditional support, therefore, is permitted, as it is not considered political.

Two groups have specific rules against criticizing the president, whom they frame in the role of military commander in chief rather than as a representative of a political party that has power over policy decision or as a civilian national leader whose job is to subordinate military interests to a greater national good. Because mothers, as members of military families, have a strong respect for the military chain of command and often consider themselves noncivilians, their placement of President George W. Bush as a part of the military places him outside the normal contestation that democracies expect a political figure to face. For example, these two groups’ rules include the following statements:

Don’t try to discuss politics with us. We are Americans, and we all bleed the same, regardless of our party affiliation. Our Chain of Command is our Commander-In-Chief (CinC). The President (for those who didn’t know) is our CinC regardless of political party. We have no inside track on what happens inside those big important buildings where all those representatives meet. All we know is that

when those civilian representatives screw up the situation, they call upon the military to go straighten it out.

[This is] a group to support & encourage Army & other military moms, families & friends. We like to have fun when we can, are serious when we need to be. Bad mouthing any President currently serving will not be tolerated. They are our Commander-in-Chief and our soldiers' "boss."

Message board rules against criticizing the commander in chief were reiterated by moderators and participants during the highly contested 2008 U.S. presidential election campaign as members took the election as an opportunity to post criticisms of President Bush and to discuss who would be best suited to be the incoming commander in chief. On four message boards participants posted Internet-based rumors questioning candidate Barack Obama's commitment to the United States and the troops. In nearly every case these discussions were shut down as "too political." However, at the end of October, with most national polls overwhelmingly in Obama's favor, in one such discussion a participant responded by applying the "separate from politics" commander in chief standard to Obama: "No matter if I like Obama or not (I don't). He might just become the next Commander in Chief, and for that reason, we should not criticize him. Whoever becomes our CinC becomes our children's boss and they will need our support."

In addition to stating its own rules, every message board has moderators to enforce those rules by closing discussions that are deemed too "off topic" or too contentious. The boundaries of the public/political and private/personal are strongly maintained by message board moderators, who may "close" threads that become "too controversial." One moderator described the message board rules to me in this way: "No politics, no bashing of personnel, no identifying by last name of recruits or Marines, no links to websites that can't be verified or that can change, (we normally only allow .mil links and a few trusted sites such as [S]nopes[.com]), no spreading of rumors, but we do allow calls to prayer, and patriotism."

This particular moderator described how she exercises much of her moderation power through "PM" (private messaging). When she sees someone who appears to be "picking a fight" with another member, or might be coming across too abrasively, she PMs them to tone it down. For instance, she told me about a member who was posting links to news articles about

the military that some participants perceived to be criticizing the way the military takes care of soldiers and veterans. At the urging of other members, the moderators worked together to rewrite the rules so that external links could not be posted and then contacted the member to explain the new policy. Some message boards, however, do not have private messaging technology, and therefore moderators are left to do their work more publicly by openly stopping discussions that they perceive to be political or violate the rules in other ways.

Despite preemptive attempts to exclude issues defined as political, controversial issues do come up in message board discussions. For example, mothers often ask for advice on how to deal with the antiwar individuals and protesters they encounter. Responses to these queries typically reiterate the constructed separateness of the personal and political by encouraging focus on the personal aspects of war, *instead of* on the political aspects. As one mother explains, “When it comes to the commitment and sacrifice of our troops and their families, politics has no place. I can gain absolutely nothing positive from discussing the politics of our situation.” In the same conversation about how to respond to those who are against the war, another mother says, “I am not good with the witty comebacks either[,] because for me it’s not political, it’s very, very personal.” Here, a “witty comeback” indicates discussing politics, which is set up in opposition to an experience, which is considered only personal.

MARGINALIZING POLITICS: THE PERSONAL IS NOT POLITICAL

Participants themselves also exercise moderation power online. For instance, what is perceived to be too “controversial” or “political” may be publicly sanctioned or ignored altogether by other participants. Another way group members serve moderating functions is by publicly leaving the group. Members of three of the groups in my sample have left groups en masse as a protest to a particular discussion that has become “too political” or “too controversial.” In one group where this happened, a contentious discussion began with a mother’s posting that she would like the troops to return safely *now*, rather than waiting for some kind of “victory.” A few members in the group, particularly those from longtime military families, took issue with criticizing the policy, framing this as something that belonged to the commander in chief and expressing the importance of victory for the country and the troops. Soon, people were taking sides and asking each other for apologies. Some in the group left publicly, posting that they were offended

and they were leaving before signing off. Not everyone felt that strongly, however, and one mother tried to smooth things over: “If you will notice it says on the [group] home page . . . Postings should be informative—not inflammatory, political, secular, or argumentative. And what is happening right now is exactly why that message is there about postings. So NO we cannot discuss anything here. Let us just please respect the rules and BE HAPPY!!! I for one am not offended; just don’t want to hear about politics here.”

Through individual interviews with participants, I learned that some of them have strong antiwar ideas. Antiwar perspectives are nearly always absent from online discussions. When issues that the online group deems as “too political” come up in discussions, many assert that mothers should not be publicly antiwar (even when they might privately question the war). Even though mothers themselves may have antiwar opinions, they keep them out of online discussions, where they are seen as unwelcome. Sharon, an army mother who is against the war told me, “I think most Military moms are afraid to say they are against the war and may feel unpatriotic;” when I asked her if she had encountered mothers who were active against the war. Another mother who expressed private ambivalence about the war said, “I don’t think military parents should be vocal about the war. They’re entitled to their opinions, but they should not voice them publicly. Our sons are putting their lives on the line for this war. Someone speaking out against it is speaking out against your son.” This quote illustrates that when contentious political issues come up in discussions, mothers often assert that criticizing the war is the same thing as criticizing the troops—their children—thus conflating the war and the troops as the same.

For some, taking an overtly antiwar stance is not only considered too political, but also viewed as denigrating the troops. For example, Cindy Sheehan, the antiwar activist and mother of a soldier killed in Iraq, is sometimes the target of criticism from participants in the message forums. Sheehan’s criticism of the war is conflated with criticism of the troops more broadly—that is, with not supporting the troops. As one mother told me, “The moms I know keep their opinions to themselves. I do think Cindy Sheehan should be ashamed of herself.” Just as for Sharon, whose child had just been deployed to Iraq, any criticism of the war (even her own) meant putting her son’s life in jeopardy. This notion of “keeping opinions to themselves” in order to support the troops is especially strong for mothers who have children deployed in the “sandbox” (Iraq and Afghanistan).

The call to remain publicly supportive of the war ends up obscuring

the diverse political views mothers may have about the war by reiterating the ideology of a personal/political dichotomy. As one mother replies in a marine mothers' discussion when someone posts a newspaper article about the troops not making enough money, "Please reserve this group for our usual discussion. Leave politics at the door. Here we are just moms." As this mother articulates so well, politics is regarded as distinctly separate from being a mother. To be political is to back out of what is perceived to be the good, supporting, and silent military mother. A "good" military mother does not criticize anything her son is involved in—even when her silence could be to her and her son's detriment.

Like Sheehan, mothers in online groups who take overtly political stances against the reasons for war are sometimes sanctioned by participants under the rationale that criticizing the war means criticizing their children. During the 2007–8 presidential election primary season, as candidates on all sides discussed how the war was going, these kinds of discussions increased on the less moderated message boards. One discussion forum completely fell apart after Jenny, a particularly outspoken military mother, voiced views against the war. While some defended Jenny's right as a mother to voice her opinion, others were offended, particularly when another mother, who was a longtime member of the group, announced that she believed George W. Bush was a terrorist: "I support our troops, I surely support and love my son . . . but I do NOT support nor do I respect that so called president in office now, that horrible (person) Bush. I will never respect that terrorist." In response to these two antiwar mothers, participants began to argue that these mothers had not only attacked the commander in chief, they had attacked their own children. As one participant stated, "I would never disrespect the Commander of my son's Army." And another mother added, "When you stoop to calling our CIC a 'terrorist' that in effect calls each of our troops a 'terrorist.' You can NOT distinguish between the two."

In the case of this particular discussion, the boundaries of the personal and political became especially salient as mothers struggled over the roles and political positions they could take during wartime. Participants' ability to shut down discussions by publicly leaving the online group makes these boundaries even more visible. The day after the "terrorist" comments were posted, more than a dozen people publicly unsubscribed from the list, often with statements or questions such as "I came here for support, not to see our troops disgraced," and "What happened to the supportive place this was? I don't know what happened, but if we had all ignored the political com-

ments, it would have been OK. They would have gone away.” These public “unsubscribe” posts show how these boards are perceived for mothers—as safe spaces for support (for each other and for the troops) and not spaces for “politics.” As one mother told me when talking about her experiences online, “Every single time when someone posts anything, good or bad in a political nature, this happens, which is WHY NOTHING political should ever be posted. I don’t care how damn passionate a person is, there are always others just as passionate on the other side, and it tears up a group in minutes flat.”

Diverse opinions and experiences can be silenced through this assertion that support is the antithesis to politics. Mothers sometimes challenge making a sharp distinction between military families and civilians who are assumed to be antiwar. One particularly contentious online discussion began with a mother whose co-worker inquired about the pictures of her son (a soldier) in her cubicle; the discussion turned into an opportunity for the message board participants to share their experiences of talking with “others” about war. During the discussion, one mother defended the “others” (“those who disagree”): “Unlike most here, this thread has been a tough one for me. Just who exactly are ‘those who disagree’? Why should anyone have a problem with ‘those who disagree’? ‘Those who disagree’ are not criminals, or traitors, or ignorant, or clueless. Some of the posts in this thread make it sound as if we believe they are.”

Barb also takes issue with the assertion that military families inherently have opposing views to those who may be antiwar. She makes multiple attempts to remind others that all military mothers need support regardless of their political stance. However, the majority of posts in the discussion are ignored and mothers continue to post in the discussion without acknowledging her digital presence. Eventually, only hours after she posts the preceding remarks, the moderator closes the discussion to further comments, maintaining that it has become “too political” and “divisive” for the online group as a whole. Defining politics as “public” and separated from the personal and the private means that mothers’ support work is “personal” and that they must be “apolitical” by definition. Politics, as the message boards reflect, is typically considered irrelevant to mothers’ experiences of war.

CONCLUSION

Within the online context, military mothers consider their work to be supportive rather than political and thus position politics and support in opposition to one another. Features of online technologies, including message

board rules, discussion topics, moderator authority, and participants' messaging practices, are mobilized to marginalize certain mothers' political opinions about war in the name of supporting the troops. This illuminates the process of constructing the gendered boundaries around what is considered public and private, within a space that in and of itself challenges that very dichotomy.

The technology of the online space facilitates the organization of military mothers' discussions around gendered conceptions of the private/personal and the public/political. These message boards have strict "no politics" rules that reveal the boundaries of the gendered practices of war—mothers are supposed to provide support to each other, and to (male) troops, and stay out of public/political decisions about war. When mothers set rules for their conversations in order to keep their message boards supportive "safe spaces," they end up disallowing some discussions and opinions when they do not fit what is deemed acceptable. The unintended consequence of this is that politics is subordinated to mothers' own experiences, and there is little room online for a diversity of mothers' relationships to war.

It is important to note that in this study I focused on the discussions occurring within support forums, and therefore this essay does not capture the true diversity of mothers' views on war that I learned about through individual interviews. While this analysis focuses on the technological ways in which online interactions are structured and bounded around a specific idea of what support is, mothers in interviews expressed ambivalence about the war itself, took political positions that had no place in the online message forums, and struggled with their past positions on peace and war. This shows how the online space is a powerful tool for giving preference to the perspectives of mothers whose notion of military motherhood fits and, as a result, marginalizing some of the variations in mothers' experiences of war. This online power is sometimes enacted publicly, when discussions are shut down by moderators, or admonished and ignored by other participants, and sometimes goes on behind the scenes, when moderators must approve each message or privately remind participants of the rules. Technology facilitates both public and private moderation practices and is a way to draw boundaries around what it means to be a military mother.

Looking at how the practice of "support" during war is gendered, and comes to mean the opposite of taking an antiwar position, is key for understanding the gendered system that makes war possible on the home front. These findings raise questions about the role the Department of Defense

plays in encouraging this kind of support (the department links to the majority of these groups) and how antiwar activist mothers may define the relationship between support and politics differently. Examining the role technology plays in drawing, shaping, and limiting online discussions could also be extended to the analysis of any kind of online community. By showing how technology facilitates the policing of the public and private boundaries of war, I suggest that, going forward, researchers need to take into account the textual aspects of technology that are a part of this process.

NOTES

1. Some message board moderators e-mailed all participants first, and some granted me permission themselves and then provided information about my research to participants. Message board participants were provided with an explanation of my presence and a way to contact me if they did not want their part of the discussions included. Because of a high expectation of privacy in the closed message boards, the moderators created a static page visible to all participants that described my project and provided contact information. For the publicly accessible message boards, there was no way to notify every participant over two years of the study, so I worked with the moderators to provide ongoing information to their participants in a way that made them comfortable with my research. I explained that my observations of the group would do nothing to break the groups' or participants' anonymity.

2. Delivered with a stop-loss order, a service member may not voluntarily leave the armed services when his or her commitment period is over and may not retire until after the current war is over. This order has meant that thousands of troops ready to end their deployments have had to serve longer instead of returning home to their families.

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