



## The Everyday Politics of Parenting: A Case Study of MamaBake

Pia Rowe

### ABSTRACT

The narratives about the decline in political participation are as frequent as they are familiar. The great irony of these narratives, however, is that they occur at a time when citizens have more avenues to voice their opinions than ever before. This article uses a coding framework to analyze political talk occurring on the Facebook page of an Australian community group, MamaBake. It highlights two important but often overlooked trends: political talk can take place in various forums, which do not necessarily have any links to the formal political sphere; and these discussions enrich the everyday politics of the private sphere. However, these new forms of enacting politics usually go unrecognized, reinforcing the dominant narrative of passive, disinterested citizens. Overall, it argues that contemporary research should be sensitive to alternative understanding of politics, to construct a more accurate picture of how politics is enacted in both online and off-line spheres.

### KEYWORDS

Australia; everyday politics; MamaBake; political talk; process politics

The political participation of women has certainly been in focus in recent years. Women, according to many, are neither politically active, nor engaging in feminist activism. The gender gaps in political participation have been widely investigated over the past decades, with women often characterized as being less politically engaged than men, even though women are now better represented in many national parliaments, and hold more executive positions (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010, p. 318). These supposed lower levels of participation have been explained by reference to attributes such as work status (full time vs part time) (Scholzman, Burns, & Verba, 1994, 1999), lower access to socioeconomic resources (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010), lower levels of political information, interest, and efficacy (Verba, Burns, & Scholzman, 1997) and different gender socialization processes, leading to passive and private women and outgoing, public-sphere-oriented men (Burns, 2007; Fox & Lawless, 2004). At the same time, many have suggested that women don't participate less than men, or less than they used to, but rather are finding alternative ways to participate (Dalton, 2006; Harrison & Munn, 2007; Stolle & Micheletti, 2006), and in general participate more in community activities and grassroots movements (de Zuniga and

Valenzuela 2011). In the context of the wider depoliticization literature, this distinction is very significant, because it challenges many of the narratives of depoliticization, which, as Dean (2014) notes, are now widely taken for granted and accepted as true, even without supporting evidence. The problem here is not that women aren't participating, but the fact that the form their activism often takes is not considered as an "authentic" moment of politics by those who lament the increasing decline in political activism (Dean, 2014).

Of course, this is not just a gender issue, but rather reflects a dominant mode of thinking that privileges and gives credence to formal and institutional politics, such as voting and campaigning, and downplays the many forms of citizen-initiated activism and mass mobilization that are taking place all over the world, thus contributing to the development of a conceptual blind spot. As such, Marsh, O'Toole, and Jones (2007, p. 20) note that the mainstream literature on political participation has usually utilized a narrow, arena definition of "political" (on the distinction between arena and process definitions see Leftwich, 2004) and there is no doubt that some of these more traditional forms—such as voting and party membership—have declined (Dalton, 2006; Putnam, 2000; Stoker, 2006).

**CONTACT** Pia Rowe ✉ [pia.rowe@canberra.edu.au](mailto:pia.rowe@canberra.edu.au) 📧 Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis, University of Canberra, University Drive South, Building 24, Canberra, ACT 2601, Australia.

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Dr Pia Rowe is a Research Associate at the 50/50 by 2030 Foundation, Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis, University of Canberra.

The issue of authenticity becomes even more problematic when the collective action has no direct links to the political arena, and is not trying to influence policy, but rather attempts to change society at the grassroots level—as with the case study, the Australian women’s support group MamaBake. While a number of authors (Akram, Marsh, & McCaffrey, 2014; Bang, 2009; Hay, 2007; Marsh et al., 2007; Norris, 2002) argue for a broader conceptualization of politics, suggesting that many activities which occur in the social sphere have political resonance,<sup>1</sup> more work is still needed in order to capture and describe the instances in which politics can occur outside the formal sphere. This is necessary for two reasons. First, while ordinary citizens now have more avenues than ever before for voicing their opinions, in particular given Web 2.0, their voices aren’t necessarily being heard. This is partly because the forums they utilize aren’t acknowledged as legitimate, with the former Australian Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, going as far as describing social media as “electronic graffiti” (*The Age*, 2015), and partly because of the persistent, gendered public/private dichotomies. Second, the shift to “life politics” necessitates a new approach to identifying political conversations, “political talk” online: that is, we have to reconsider both where to look, but also what to look for (Graham, 2008, p. 18). As Ekström (2016) notes, we still need more empirical knowledge about the preconditions necessary for everyday political talk to occur. In this context, this article examines the Facebook feed of MamaBake, an Australian big batch cooking group for mothers, to illustrate how “talk” in a social networking group can become politicized in particular moments. This in turn offers insights into the character of contemporary forms of political participation because, particularly in a world where social media is increasingly important, political talk, as well as having a role in itself, is also a first step toward political action.

First, the putative decline in political activity in Australia will be briefly considered, before establishing why we need to reframe our understanding of “the political,” and the role of political talk in this, as well as addressing the crucial problem of where the political ends if we move toward a

process definition. The final section discusses the MamaBake case to illustrate the issues raised.

### Political activity in Australia: In decline?

The two main narratives of the decline focus mainly on citizens’ lack of civic engagement and the risks it presents to a healthy democracy (e.g., Arendt, 1958; Bauman, 2007; Dunn, 2000; Putnam, 2000); and on the “diminishing social movement radicalism and a narrowing of possibilities for egalitarian, radical democratic alternatives to existing structures of inequality and domination” (Dean, 2014, p. 3; for examples see Blühdorn, 2006; Boggs, 2000; Chandler, 2009; Jacoby, 1999). However, there is also a growing body of literature that challenges the claim that citizens are increasingly apolitical, rather suggesting that, instead of withdrawing from politics, they are now finding new ways to participate, with their activism outside formal political institutions (see, e.g., Bang, 2009; Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003; Hay, 2007; Norris, 2002). Dean uses the term “apoliticality” to “emphasise the performative, narrative and ideational aspects instead of the more commonly used term ‘depoliticisation,’” which “typically indexes particular kinds of empirical sociological phenomena” (Dean, 2014, p. 453).

Norris (2002, 2007) identifies new agencies, repertoires, and targets available to people through new social movements and the Internet. As such, she, like many others (Akram et al., 2014; Bang, 2009), questions the idea of increased apathy, arguing that people are engaged less in traditional forms, but more in new forms of political participation. However, Akram et al. (2014) argue that Norris’s focus is still too narrow, because she fails to acknowledge the utility of a process definition. Similarly, other attempts to widen the scope have tended to focus on the citizens’ ability to influence political outcomes (Brady, 1999, p. 737), thus ignoring a wide range of activities that do not directly engage with the political sphere.

In its “traditional” sense, politics is seen as a noun, “synonymous with the government, and defined in terms of the site, locus or *arena* within which it occurs” (Hay, 2007, p. 63). The literature has focused extensively on conventional repertoires for civic engagement, “voting, campaign activism, community

organizing and particularized contacting activity” (Norris, 2002, p. 190), a typology originally established by the works of Almond and Verba (1963) and Nie and Kim (1978). Using this frame, the figures on political participation in Australia paint a grim picture, with lower turnout rates in local government elections (ABS, 2010b), dropping memberships in the two major Australian political parties (Crikey, 2013), and a decrease in other forms of civic participation (ABS, 2010a).

In contrast, Hay (2007, p. 77) recognizes the importance of the process dimension, suggesting that politics is: “the capacity for agency and deliberation in situations of genuine collective or social choice.” According to Hay, issues are politicized “when they become the subject of deliberation, decision making and human agency, where previously they were not.” He then notes that issues become “further politicised” when they move from the private sphere of deliberation to the public sphere, as is the case with many issues subject to feminist awareness-raising. In other words, the context is crucial in determining whether an action is political or nonpolitical. A decision taken in isolation that impacts no one else is, according to Hay, and perhaps rather self-evidently, neither social nor political. Decisions and actions arising from collective choice, or likely to have collective consequences, on the other hand, are political. However, in moving toward a process definition there is a boundary problem, as it is important not to see all issues as political (Berger, 2009; van Deth, 2001).

Consequently, the next section addresses two questions: why do we need to view issues traditionally seen as nonpolitical as having political significance and how do we deal with the boundary problem when adopting a process definition?

### **A rose by any other name: The importance of reframing the political**

One more thing: I think we must listen to what so-called apolitical women have to say—not so we can do a better job of organizing them but because together we are a mass movement. I think we who work full-time in the movement tend to become very narrow. What is happening now is that when nonmovement women disagree with us, we assume

it’s because they are “apolitical,” not because there might be something wrong with our thinking. (Hanisch, 1970 online).

More than four decades after Hanisch wrote those words in her now classic piece “Personal is Political,” her words still resonate. Many forms of modern activism are either not included in the accounts of declining political activity, or dismissed due to the lack of potential to create any real change. Dean (2014) believes that this is because “many contemporary moments of radical politics (and particularly those concerned with race, gender, and sexuality) are seen to fail to ‘count’ as authentic moments of radical politics” and that radical opposition to capitalism is seen as “the radical political movement par excellence”. Here, I will briefly focus on the concept of gender and its role in the public/private debate given its significance to the case study of MamaBake.

The gender dimension has been the focus of much research over the decades, and provides significant insights for the study of everyday politics. Discussing the concept of inclusive citizenship, Lister (2007) highlights how citizenship has been drawn according to quintessentially male templates, and functioned to exclude women at two levels—traditionally by sustaining the active male participation in the society by women doing the labor in the private sphere, and more recently by the gendered nature of domestic labor, with women who enter the public sphere of politics often still responsible for a disproportionate amount of the private sphere labor. At its core, it is based on essentialist categorization of men and women’s qualities, and rooted in the public–private dichotomy (Lister, 2008). Smith (1987) similarly argues that women are excluded from the “ruling apparatus” of culture, which is manufactured by those in the position of power (most often men), thus leading to overrepresentation of the perspectives and concerns of one sex. To overcome this, she emphasizes the importance of focusing on the lived experience of women. The essentialist approach to gender as a fixed biological trait has been challenged widely, most notably by Butler (1990), who argues that gender is a socially and culturally constructed performance, dictated by the discourses determining socially acceptable

behavior for each gender, thus naturalizing it in the process. The Australian government has made some progress in this area recently, with the *Australian Government Guidelines on the Recognition of Sex and Gender* noting that where gender information is collected, option X should be provided to those identifying as a nonbinary gender, but in practice the traditional binary gender division still marks much of the discourse of public/domestic labor.

The gendered nature of politics becomes increasingly obvious when we observe the way in which women's bodies are still considered a novelty in the political space, and not as an authentic site for politics (Trimble, Wagner, Sampert, Raphael, & Gerrits, 2013). The media have been shown to play a significant role here, as political reporting "privileges the practice of politics as an essentially male pursuit" by marginalizing the feminine (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Ross, 1996, p. 112, cited in Trimble et al., 2013). In terms of political candidates and politicians, women are constrained by a gender double-bind, in that, in order to be successful, they are expected to embody masculine leadership qualities, without losing their feminine qualities (Wright & Holland, 2014, p. 455). The gendered nature of political actors also means that the message they convey takes on a different meaning depending on the gender of the speaker, with the topics relating to the domestic and private sphere matters seen as humanizing when voiced by men, but, in contrast, undermining the political authority of women when voiced by them (Trimble et al., 2013).

Of course, in order to address the public/private debate, we also need to define what we mean by the "public sphere." Much of the feminist scholarship has challenged the public/private dichotomy, and the narrow definitions of the "political," arguing for the rearticulation of the relationship between the two within a broad conception of the political (Lister, 2008). The deliberative democracy framework also challenges the binary approach to politics, though the underlying premise is different. As Kim and Kim (2008) note, the public sphere as discussed by Habermas (1989, 2006), rather than being conceptually opposed to the "private sphere," is a social space produced by

communicative action, located somewhere between the public, political system, and the private, lifeworld realms. The deliberative democracy framework in particular acknowledges that deliberation in democracy extends beyond instrumental deliberation (that is, public deliberation as a tool of using public reasons and collective decision-making), also including dialogic deliberation (a process of producing public reasons and reaching mutual understandings) within the more informal communicative spaces (Graham & Hajru, 2011; Kim & Kim, 2008). Habermas (2005) similarly identifies two forms of political deliberation, where one takes place among citizens in the informal public sphere, and another is more focused on politicians in the formal settings. Though conceptually different approaches, both the feminist and the deliberative framework highlight the same issue: the need for a more inclusive approach to the political.

In this context, MamaBake offers an interesting case study. It is neither directly linked to formal political institutions, nor does it attempt to change policy, allowing us to explore a site normally excluded from understandings of the political. As the name of the movement implies, MamaBake is by default gendered, targeting mothers in particular. Having received a lot of attention from the Australian media, as well as some international publications,<sup>2</sup> it on one hand demonstrates the invisibility and inauthenticity of a gendered women's movement as a legitimate site for politics, in that it has certainly not been invisible from the media audiences of these publications and channels. On the other hand, it allows us to challenge the persistent decline thesis and create alternative narratives of current political activity by showing that politics can occur in a wide range of spaces that may not have any connection to the sites traditionally thought of as "political."

### **Why should the concept of "The political" be expanded?**

Why does it matter if a group outside the formal political sphere is not seen as political, if their utility in promoting the greater good and increased social capital in society is recognized as such? After all, as Hay (2007, p. 65) suggests, there is little comfort in



finding particular concerns being elevated to the status of “political,” if they remain marginal to the agenda of government. As evidenced by Dean (2014), there is now plenty of theoretical and empirical material to challenge the decline thesis and, yet, the narratives have proven so persistent that they now constitute common knowledge.

According to Polletta (2009, p. 140), canonical storylines and institutionalized ways of knowing diminish the impact and influence of the challengers’ stories. Thus, rather than advancing our knowledge of citizen engagement, the narratives of decline have turned into self-fulfilling prophecies, robbing the alternative forms of engagement of their legitimacy and furthering the disconnect between ordinary people and politics. In other words, as long as the issues are considered nonpolitical, they will also remain marginal to the agenda of the government. To bridge the gap, we need to look at the concept of citizen engagement in terms of its two interrelated features: voice and validity.

Traditionally, voting has been perceived as the primary way for citizens to have their voices heard and contribute in the political system (Ekman & Amnå, 2012, p. 285). However, with regard to the formal political arenas more broadly, Kim and Kim (2008) note that the instrumental view of deliberation is based on optimistic yet unrealistic assumptions regarding citizens’ ability to freely participate in the decision-making process, with little regard for personal attributes such as lack of confidence to speak up in public meetings for the fear of negative reactions from others. Li and Marsh (2008, p. 248) emphasize that citizens are increasingly “alienated from a political system which doesn’t allow them a ‘real,’ that is effective, voice.” This point is echoed by Rosanvallon and Goldhammer (2008, p. 13), who argue that, while contemporary democracies provide ample opportunities for citizens to express themselves, their voices aren’t valued in the wider political processes. Fiorina and Skocpol (2004, pp. 2–3) have raised similar concerns, but for different reasons. They argue that ordinary citizens have decreasing involvement in shaping common affairs and dwindling leverage over leaders and institutions. Their main focus, however, is on the small number of people who are active, thus leading to narrow

causes being promoted over issues relevant to the wider population, subsequently causing ordinary people to further withdraw from politics.

In today’s society, contemporary politics is increasingly mediated, with the Internet and computer networks further blurring the boundaries between the public and the private, and the political and the popular culture (Papacharissi, 2010), and introducing the public world to living rooms, or what Kim and Kim (2008, p. 64) term the “domestication of the public sphere.” Xenos, Vromen, and Loader (2014) argue that social networking platforms have the potential to provide a new space for mobilizing groups otherwise excluded from traditional politics (see also Graham, Jackson, & Wright, 2015; Oser, Hooghe, & Marien, 2013). Online political activism can take several forms, from simple acts such as changing profile pictures on Facebook (Chapman & Coffé, 2016), to traditional organizing of political activity such as protests, and the variety of (often illegal) acts such as large-scale (D)DoS<sup>3</sup> attacks against Web sites and organizations, most notably by the hacktivist group Anonymous (Coleman, 2014). Naturally, due to its very nature where much of the interaction is still based on verbal communication, the Internet has the ability to provide a space for deliberation, and its ability to cultivate a public sphere where “free, equal and open communication, deliberation and exchange of information among citizens can flourish” has been the object of much debate (Gil De Zúñiga, Veenstra, Vraga, & Shah, 2010; Graham & Hajru, 2011, pp. 18–19).

It is rather ironic that the disconnection between citizens and politicians has increased in an era when public voices are more prolific than ever before, due to the availability of new technologies. In part, this reflects changes at an institutional level. As Skocpol (2003, p. 210) notes, civic organizations no longer need to organize branches and recruit members at the local level in order to be effective. Traditionally, these organizations brought people together and provided them with an avenue for connecting with the political elite, and a wide range of concerns have been raised regarding this social erosion (Putnam, 2000; Skocpol & Fiorina, 1999). In the words of Stolle and Hooghe (2004, p. 154): “In the absence of

mass-based interest mediation organizations, how can we ensure that governments and political systems are accessible to citizen influence?”

In this context, Couldry (2010, p. 140) distinguishes five new possibilities enabled by recent software innovations: new voices, increased mutual awareness of these voices, new scales of organization, new spaces required for political organization, and new intensities of listening. He notes that governments can't any longer say that they don't hear the citizens' voices, but also that, while technologies enable new voices, they don't guarantee the interactive dimension that is crucial for democracy (Couldry, 2010, p. 142). Indeed, as illustrated by Abbott's reference to “electronic graffiti,” the disconnect is sometimes a direct result of the choices of governments. The next section explores the role of political talk more specifically, and in particular the discussions that take place outside formal political forums.

### ***The role of political talk***

In recent years, the research into the role of political talk, and in particular everyday political talk occurring in a variety of online spaces, has started to diversify (see, e.g., Ekström, 2016; Graham et al., 2015; Vromen, Xenos, & Loader, 2015; Wright, 2012). Ekström (2016) argues that everyday political talk, that is, informal and spontaneous conversations about public concerns taking place in private, semi-public, and public settings, is a significant form of democratic engagement, and indeed, previous research has shown communication about public affairs to be an important predictor of political participation (Gil De Zúñiga et al., 2010; Graham et al., 2015, 2016). Interestingly enough, even accidental exposure to political content has been found to be positively and significantly correlated with online political participation, with the correlation stronger among the less interested than the highly interested (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2015). Yet at the same time, the fear of offending others and jeopardizing harmonious relationships can make citizens apprehensive to engage in political discussions, with people more likely to express political disagreement with those close to them (strong ties), than with looser acquaintances (Ekström, 2016).

In this context, social media's ability to generate spaces for political talk has gained a lot of interest

from researchers, though much of the focus thus far has been on young people. Studying young people's everyday use of social media for political engagement, Vromen et al. (2015) found that for many participants, social media is a political space that facilitates broader political discussion. In addition, the social media debate also had the capacity to replicate reasoned political debate, with some participants noting that they felt more comfortable expressing their views and disagreeing with others online rather than in person (Vromen et al., 2015). On the other hand, Ekström (2016) found that young people mainly associated political comments on Facebook and Twitter as public statements, and thus perceived social media as a risky setting for political talk due to factors such as potential unknown and unfriendly audiences, and the potential scale of a political act online. Halpern and Gibbs's (2013) analysis of Facebook and YouTube channels managed by the White House showed that although Facebook users were in general more polite than the more anonymous YouTube users, most comments did not debate rationally or deeply, with only 8% using arguments based on external sources. Gil de Zúñiga et al.'s (2010) research on blog readers' found that online political talk has significant effects on their online expressive participation, and remains a viable pathway to off-line participation. Going beyond purely verbal forms of activism, Chapman and Coffé (2016) investigated people's prevalence to change their Facebook profile pictures as part of political campaigns, and found that online and off-line political engagement were related, with those active in political parties having fewer reservations about the appropriateness of expressing political views on Facebook.

Noting the increase in life politics, Graham (2008, p. 18, 2012, p. 32) argues that, if we focus only on politically oriented discussion forums, we run the risk of painting a distorted view of which people discuss politics online, and how. He poses the question of how to identify political talk, which is “less about conventional politics and rooted more in lifestyles—personal life considerations of health, body, sexuality, work, and so forth” and provides a methodological approach to identifying, describing, and assessing political talk in nonpolitical discussion forums, which is used in this case

study (2008, p. 19). Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) similarly advocate looking beyond formal political forums, as their research found that the potential for deliberation online occurs primarily in groups where politics comes up incidentally, but is not the central purpose of the discussion space, with the former often used for mobilizing political activists rather than facilitating cross-cutting deliberation. Wright (2012) also argues that there has been a disproportionate focus on political institutions and practices, often using narrow definitions of politics and normative underpinnings, which may not be relevant in the context of new media, and not best placed to exploit the potential. Graham et al. (2015) studied everyday political talk in nonpolitical, online spaces, and found that political discussions were just as likely to emerge from nonpolitical discussions, as those that began as “political,” with over half of the discussions leading to at least one political action.

### **Process definitions: The boundary problem**

There is clearly a problem if we move beyond an arena definition of politics toward a process definition, or more specifically, from political forums to nonpolitical, lifestyle-based forums, as there may be a tendency to see all action as political. Indeed, Berger (2009, pp. 335–337) argues that the term “civic engagement” has become all-encompassing, and thus meaningless. He distinguishes between social, moral, and civic engagement and argues that we need to restrict the use of the term “political” to cover only actions, which involve citizens’ interaction with political organizations and institutions. For him, personal and private aspects of life only become political when they influence, or are influenced by, political processes and organizations. In this vein, Berger (2009, p. 340) notes that, while the meaning of the word “engagement” has multiple definitions, most theorists see the “other” of civic engagement as: “narrow individualism, isolationism, or an exclusive focus on oneself or one’s intimates.” Similarly, others have suggested that expanding the definition of the “political” has turned it into “the study of everything” (van Deth, 2001, p. 4), rendering the term meaningless. In response, such authors want to limit the “political sphere” to the formal

political arena and, most often to action, rather than talk.

In contrast, like Hay (2007; see also Alder and Goggin 2005; Ekman and Amnå 2012), this article emphasizes the importance of adopting a process definition of politics, which recognizes that “politics” occurs outside the political arena, and can involve talk as well as action, although at the same time recognizing that not all everyday activities should be viewed as political. As such, three points are emphasized: First, it demonstrates how arena and the process definitions function as a duality. For this reason, it distinguishes between a social realm, a proto-political realm, and an overtly political realm. Second, it argues that given the increased importance of social media, we need to focus on talk, as well as action, partly because this talk is important in its own right, but also because in the proto-political realm there are both talk and actions which are normally considered nonpolitical, but under certain circumstances may become politicized. For example, talking about personal breastfeeding experiences online is most often nonpolitical, but using social media to mobilize breastfeeding flash mobs for nurse-ins in public places shifts the social talk toward political action in the formal arena. Third, it shifts away from the traditional “effects” model, which measures the changes in citizens’ issue positions and preferences, and instead posits that the impact of everyday talk is also found with the quality of opinions (Kim & Kim, 2008).

This argument echoes Evans and Stoker’s (2016) finding that citizens with low levels of participation in formal politics remain in a “standby” mode, and have the potential to engage when the situation so warrants. The crucial point here is that, while this conceptualization expands our understanding of the political, it does acknowledge, following Hay and others, that there is a nonpolitical, “social” sphere, while also recognizing that we need to focus on the circumstances under which proto-political talk or action can move into the political arena. A first step here, and the focus of this article, is to investigate how we can distinguish “political talk” in the nonpolitical forums.

## About the MamaBake group

MamaBake is a community group founded in early 2010 by Michelle Shearer in NSW, Australia. After becoming a mother, Shearer recognized the need for local support networks for mothers and developed the idea that local mothers could get together to cook big batch meals, which could then be shared among the participants, with everyone going home with several home-cooked meals. Shearer argues that MamaBake's mission is "to enable mothers to reclaim their own time and access nurturing support for one another through group, big batch dinner cooking." Using Bennett and Segerberg's (2013, p. 37) terms, they use personal and inclusive action frames to connect with a wide range of mothers and describe themselves as a "revolutionary, grassroots movement of progressive thinking Mamas who take a collaborative approach to Motherhood through group, big batch baking" (MamaBake Facebook, Facebook, accessed July 2013).

MamaBake uses the social networking sites Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, and Twitter as its main tools for connecting with its audience.<sup>4</sup> The content on their social networking sites has either been generated, or selected for circulation, by the group's administrators, and it links loosely to several other online sites. As such, it follows the connective action logic for organizationally enabled networks as identified by Bennett and Segerberg (2013, p. 47).<sup>5</sup>

MamaBake is thus a gendered support group, located outside the formal political arena. Consequently, it is a good example of the kind of social engagement that is often overlooked, partly because the clear gender dimension affects interpretations of their role, and MamaBake immediately evokes the widely held dualism between the public and the private spheres. The group is also relatively small, though not insignificant. The Facebook page had gained over 5,000 "likes" by May 2012, and by February 2015 the number had reached over 23,000. It is impossible to provide an accurate account of how many MamaBake groups there are in Australia: "I've tried to quantify the memberships, it's been such a guerilla concept. I put a call out to see how many there are in Australia, but the groups are so nebulous... .

Groups can register and then stop six months later. And there are a lot of people like that, they don't have much involvement online" (M. Shearer, personal communication, 20 July 2013).

MamaBake also illustrates another central feature of new types of participation. People participating are often not members of a group at all, and, if they are, these groups have no formal membership structures and no easily assessable aims. Consequently, measuring and reporting the group's impact becomes very challenging. It also highlights a very important trend in contemporary political engagement, the importance of connective, as well as collective, action. In a group such as MamaBake, people can find communality with others, without permanently committing to a movement or organization. As such, it is easier for them to retain their individual identity, even within a collective setting.

## Methodology

Initially, a content analysis was conducted of the Facebook posts made by the MamaBake administrators to identify different categories of posts. Five frequently occurring themes were identified, in which the MamaBake administrators: asked the Facebook community questions (most often related to everyday life events, such as housework, parenting, and food preferences); asked the MamaBake community questions on behalf of members; shared links to news articles, blog posts, or food-related information; asked for and shared household, food, or parenting-related tips from the community; and, finally, shared either funny or inspirational pictures and quotes, often related to parenting or relationships. This broad content analysis demonstrated that the same themes occurred several times a week. On this basis, it was determined that a four-month period was sufficient for identifying the occurrence of political talk online. During this four-month period chosen, (11/1/11–2/28/12), MamaBake was gaining visibility in the Australian mainstream media, which increased the number of "likes" on the Facebook page.

The initial sample was 529 posts by the MamaBake administrators, together with 9,092



subsequent comments. This sample was coded by utilizing Graham's (2008, 2012) coding scheme for capturing both "conventional and lifestyle-based political issues that arise during the course of everyday conversation" (Graham, 2012, p. 34). Based on his research on the online discussion forum for the television show "The Wife Swap," Graham (2008, 2012) observed that on many occasions, "political talk" emerged in these social discussions. Political talk, he noted, includes everyday conversations carried out freely between participants, which are often spontaneous and "lack purpose outside of talk for talk's sake" (Graham, 2012, p. 32). Graham's approach marks a shift away from the notion of politics as only involving activities that are trying to influence the formal political sphere, or actively effect change. While the resonance with Hay's understanding of politics is obvious, it also provides means for systematically analyzing the new forms of participation, addressing some of the methodological issues associated with process politics.

The coding had two stages. First, all 529 posts were examined to identify the political ones, in which a connection is made "from a particular experience, interest, or issue to society in general," and which "stimulates reflection and a response by at least one other participant" (Graham (2012, p. 34). In the second stage of the coding, all comments were divided into three different categories: reasoned claims, nonreasoned claims, and nonclaim responses (Graham, 2012, p. 34). The purpose of this stage was to establish whether the discussions were guided by rational thought and critical reflection, a requirement for rational-critical debate (Graham, 2012, p. 35). All reasoned claims were then coded for their evidence type: fact/source, comparison, example, and experience. All responses were also coded for the speech style: humor, emotional comment, or acknowledgment. It should be noted here that this approach differs from Graham's original scheme, which only coded nonclaim responses for expressives. This change in approach was deemed necessary because both emotional comments and humor are utilized regularly by both MamaBake administrators and MamaBakers in their communication in order to enhance their arguments. This distinction is important, given the difficulties women face in the political realm and the often-utilized binaries of emotion and rationality, with the former seen as

belonging to the private sphere. To increase the reliability of the results, a second coder was asked to code 10% of the data at different stages of the coding process, and very high levels of agreement were found both with producing the categories as well as the subsequent coding stages. In the following section, this analysis will be illustrated with a post coded as "political" and its subsequent comments.

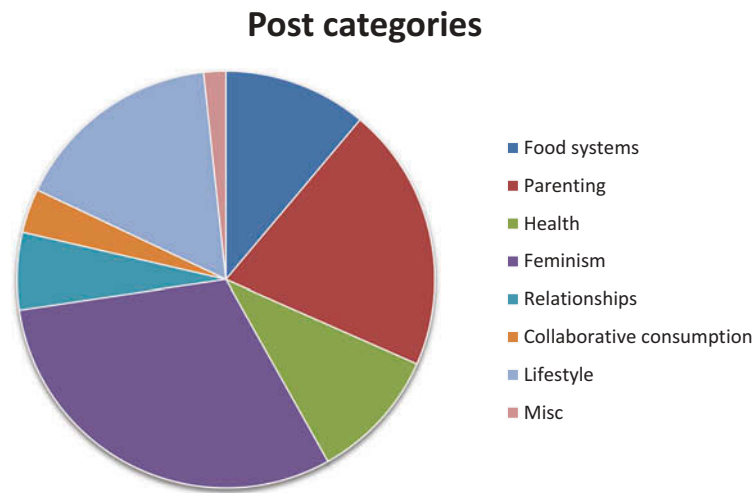
## Results and discussion

Of the 529 initial posts, 117 (22%) were coded as political posts, with 1,954 subsequent comments. The unit of analysis at this stage was the initial post by MamaBake only. The most common topics were related to feminism, parenting, relationships, work, food systems, and health. To qualify as a political post, the initial post had to make a connection to the society in general, for example, a post about tips for doing housework would not be coded as political, but a post about the gendered inequality of unpaid work in Australia would be moved on to the next stage of coding. Similarly, a post about managing children's behavior was coded as political when it was linked to a particular societal structure or practice, such as advertising targeted at children and thus impacting their behavior when out shopping.

Overall, and unsurprisingly, "feminism" and "parenting" were the most common categories, with 36 and 24 topics respectively. Figure 1 demonstrates the division of categories.

For illustrative purposes, the analysis will now focus on one thread to demonstrate how it was carried through the second stage of coding. The thread was chosen because it best demonstrates the interplay of the social and the political, and the moments in which a social topic can move beyond talk and also move toward activism. On February 10, 2012, MamaBake posted the following discussion topic:

Tonight, we talk about Facebook's bizarre and hypocritical stance on breastfeeding images. We want to hear your opinions on it: what you know about it, what people have done about it to protest or do you think they have a point? Have you or your, or one of your fave pages been reprimanded/banned for posting images of breastfeeding? Do you know anyone who has taken their page down in protest? (We have posted the links to some of our fave bloggstressess'



**Figure 1.** Facebook post categories

posts on the matter below.) Tell us what you think. Even if you're not in the mood for commenting, hit like and feel part of our discussion circle anyway. As with ALL MamaBake debatory, please remember our guiding principle of: Curiosity without Judgment.

The post was accompanied by images of a "boobie beanie" (a type of a beanie often used by lactivists,<sup>6</sup> which looks like a breast and a nipple when a baby is facing her mother and feeding), and a picture of a baby wearing one while being breastfed. The post elicited 80 "likes," 40 comments, and 15 "shares." Of the 40 comments, 14 responses were coded as nonreasoned claims, as they were assertions without direct reasoning, such as: "Breast IS Best... I don't care what anyone else says or thinks." Six were coded as nonclaim responses (most often acknowledging other participants' posts) and one was excluded as it appeared to be trolling.

Seventeen comments were coded as reasoned claims (that is, they provided a reasoning to support their argument), such as the following response:

So many mums struggle with breastfeeding and I think if we were braver with breastfeeding images, discussion, and feeding in front of others maybe it would be easier for new mums to get the hang of things... I tried and failed with my first in part because I had no support or information and no idea what resources were available; now I'm feeding my second and have posted photos out of pride. I have seen threads where people have called breastfeeding outrageous and disgusting, I want to know why its [sic] ok for an old school mate to post topless modelling photos but not okay to post breastfeeding photos.

The comment above is particularly illuminating, as it demonstrates the use of a personal anecdote to highlight a perceived issue with the wider societal structures. This practice was observed in many of the comments regarding this topic. Other commenters also discussed the utility of the discussion itself, with #16 voicing her disbelief that such conversation was still taking place, and people needing to "get over it." #18 acknowledged the comment, and noted: "Yes, that the discussion still goes on is pretty disappointing. But while ever there are women feeling pressured to breastfeed in toilets, with modesty blankets or worse still, too afraid to feed in public at all, go on it must." Overall, the importance of information-sharing was acknowledged, with some arguing that it may have the ability to influence breastfeeding rates: "Maybe if there was more discussion about breastfeeding then more women would be able to do it. It's not natural like we are led to believe, it's a learned skill on both the mother and baby's side and it's damn hard when you don't know what you are doing." (#22). Another person also acknowledged the blurred boundaries of the private and the public:

When my first bubba was 6 months old we did a BF photo shoot for a government health agency to help "promote BF" for new mums, beautiful pics, but now every one of my friends who get pregnant come waving the booklet at me to show me how they have now seen pics of my boobs; funniest of all is that many of the pics have been made into posters and plastered all over my workplace!" (#14)

**Table 1.** Individual Topics That Generated the Most Responses.

Post	Simplified content	Category	Comments	Likes
02/11/11	Friday Pow Wow—marriage, did you take your man's name?	Feminism	59	2
17/11/11	Kids' birthday parties—etiquette	Parenting	55	12
01/02/12	Men posing as pregnant women—what caused the furor?	Feminism	50	3
04/11/11	Grande Pow Wow—discipline	Parenting	50	24
04/11/11	McDonald's burger not decaying	Food systems	48	20
13/02/12	Threat to alert DoCS if 7 yo walks to the shops alone	Parenting	42	4
10/02/12	Facebook's breastfeeding policy	Feminism	40	80

The humor from the initial post provided by the images carried through some comments, with people reporting taking action and protesting against the ban: “Well. My profile pic is now a shot of my nipple and my son in a happy partnership” (#1), and “Get your tits out ladies... Boobies rock!!!” (#5). Others also joked about reporting pictures of adults eating (#20). The most common criticism was directed at the perceived hypocritical stance of Facebook, allowing other offensive material to be published: “It makes me angry that breastfeeding pics are removed when there are so many other pictures which are ACTUALLY offensive. Racist, homophobic, pornographic ... they're all still here and yet some healthy lunch for babies is removed” (#6). Few also noted that it was most likely a bot or software, and not people removing the images, before adding: “It's a shame the software can't tell a woman feeding a bub from a 15-year-old with her ankles up by her ears...” (#7). As is customary for most MamaBake discussions, despite the occasional raunchy language, the conversation stayed civil and there were no personal insults among the participants.

Despite the obvious passion in the topic, demonstrated by the presence of emotional comments, the breastfeeding post was characterized by overall unanimity regarding women's right to breastfeed openly, although disagreement manifested in the individual notions of what level of exposure was appropriate. The one thing to note in particular, however, is the use of personal anecdotes and emotional comments throughout the conversation, and in conjunction with rational debates, challenging the often-evoked binary of rational/emotional. Overall, the presence of emotion depended largely on the topic. Discussions about such issues as when it is acceptable to leave children alone at home (2/13/12) were mainly characterized by reasoned claims with few expressives, whereas a discussion on the health

aspects of take-away burgers (11/4/11) elicited vivid emotional responses.

As such, adding to the previous studies, this case study focuses on political talk found in forums and pages normally regarded as nonpolitical. Although much research has been done focusing on youth in particular, the gendered nature of the MamaBake group adds another dimension to this body of work. For decades, feminists have advocated for a broader conceptualization on politics, noting in particular the fluidity of concepts such as gender and the public and private spheres. Although only 22% of the MamaBake posts were identified as political, the ensuing conversations were rational and respectful toward the other participants. Some discussions certainly appeared to be just “talk for talk's sake,” but others had a bigger purpose, as noted by the breastfeeding topic commenters. The fact that the discussion took place in a forum mostly targeted at mothers may have contributed to the overall openness and frankness of the comments by creating a safe space for self-expression. As such, the gender dimension in this instance was one of the strengths, fostering the political discussion in the first place, rather than a hindrance to “real” and “legitimate” politics. Yet essentialist notions of gender, which tend to associate women with domestic work, and subsequently domestic work with the private sphere, have proven particularly persistent over time.

Here, given the varying results in the previous research (Ekström, 2016; Vromen et al., 2015), it is also interesting to examine the question of weak vs strong ties, and how they relate to the online discussions on the MamaBake's Facebook page. Although it is of course impossible to draw definite conclusions on the participants' motives given that the data comes from Facebook, a few points are clear: First of all, the important thing to note here is that

MamaBake is not an identity group, but rather the commenters are a group of similarly situated actors. They are united under the broad banner of motherhood, but their individual motives for taking part are unique and varied, and their individuality is explicitly celebrated through MamaBake's often-utilized slogan: "Curiosity without Judgment," which also functions to stop trolling and personal insults. Consequently, the way in which people responded varied a lot, from expressing opinions and sharing personal experiences to engaging in concrete protests such as changing their own profile pictures.

The use of images and humor to make a point further emphasizes the fact that the forum is inclusive of various styles of making claims. Contrasted with Halpern and Gibbs's (2013) findings about the more directly formal political content from the White House's Facebook feed, where only a small number of people were engaging in a "deep" or "rational" debate, it is clear that the MamaBake forum fosters an environment in which people feel comfortable to comment in detail on a wide range of often personal topics, often in a casual tone. Some of this can be directly attributed to the active moderation assumed by the MamaBake administrators, which stops people from attacking each other for differing opinions, and as such reduces the likelihood of negative consequences to the commenter. It is also possible that the perceived "scale of the political act" (Ekström, 2016) is much bigger when it comes to directly political forums such as that of the White House, where people may subconsciously assume a more formal style of commenting, even when it is located in the social media environment. As such, social forums may even surpass formal political forums in terms of richness of debate with more varied voices participating in it, and the quality of opinions shared increased when the commenters were not self-moderating their opinions for the fear of having their opinions attacked by others.

The second point regards the online participants' relationships. Given the group's number of followers online, those who participate in the online discussions are unlikely to be friends (whether Facebook or real life) with most of the other commenters on Facebook, and close friendships are more likely to be found among the small,

real-life MamaBaking sessions. Yet the in-depth use of personal anecdotes and even the occasional strong language would attest to the fact that the commenters were indeed comfortable making strong statements in a public forum, even when posting under their (supposedly) own names. In further research, and one of the limitations of this case study, it would be interesting to explore whether the commenters actually perceive the forum as public, and how this impacts their willingness to participate. It is possible that although the posts on the MamaBake page are public, and possibly even broadcast to the commenters' Facebook friends, the comments are not viewed as personal political statements the same way they would be if the commenters were to make a status update on their own page. As such, the fear of alienating others for differing opinions would not be as strong.

The four features of politics identified by Hay (2007) are clearly present in MamaBake Facebook discussions: a situation of choice, a capacity for agency, deliberation, and social interaction. The participants recognize that they have some capacity, albeit limited, to influence the current situation, and they have the means to do so by both taking deliberate action and by engaging in rational debate in a public forum. However, while the results highlight the need for a more inclusive conceptualization of politics in order to capture these moments, there is no denying the fact that for many mainstream audiences, such discussions continue to lack any public or political significance. In this context, we need to keep unveiling the previously marginalized groups' stories, not just to challenge the mainstream narratives of political decline, but also to emphasize the authenticity of these voices so that they find their place in the political debate without first having to justify their existence through various mechanisms. As Polletta (2006, p. 140) notes, with the right narrative tools, groups such as MamaBake can highlight cultural norms and social bases of inequality; in doing so, their activity is clearly political using a process definition. In this way, the MamaBake group is telling a "political" story about the current work and family conditions of women; a story that is too easy to dismiss against



the backdrop of the more familiar story about the distinction between public and private work, and the gendered dimension of the movement itself.

The key point here, however, is to recognize the utility of the debate itself instead of focusing on its potential to influence policy, given that groups such as MamaBake can act as enablers of political expression, sites of “political talk” rather than being political in and of themselves. Much of the literature emphasizes the ways in which women are not participating, although there has been some recognition of the different forms that their participation takes. With the noted increase in life politics, the social and the private inherently link to the public sphere, and are often utilized to enhance the debate, as was the case with the breastfeeding discussion. As such, it is crucial that we start looking beyond the traditional arenas and forums, and develop new narratives of the actual practices that do take place, if we are to truly acknowledge the legitimacy of these currently often-marginalized voices, and incorporate them into democratic practices.

## Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this case study suggest that the everyday lived experiences of mothers can shift between the social and the private, and the public and the political spheres at any given time, and a few clear conclusions emerge from this case. Although previous research into political talk in social spaces has started to diversify, and has shown that social media in particular can foster rational debate in nonpolitical forums, groups such as MamaBake face significant constraints when it comes to political authenticity: their clearly gendered dimension, and their prevalent focus on parenting issues, evokes the traditional gender binaries and the public/private dichotomy. The MamaBake posts are, by definition, mostly about talk, not action, but that doesn't make them nonpolitical, or inauthentic. As Graham emphasizes, talk can be political, and as we have seen, a significant portion of the discussion on the MamaBake site is political and sometimes a precursor to political action. Organizations such as MamaBake are becoming

more important, first because involvement in such organizations is increasing at the same time that memberships in many traditional interest groups is declining. As such, we need to recognize the new form of “politics” and political participation, where most citizens don't see the need to be members of parties or organizations that are directly and consistently involved in the political arena. Second, to not do so would be to categorically keep denying certain marginalized groups—in this instance mothers—full and equal access to the public sphere, and simultaneously maintain the artificial separation between the public and the private spheres. Yet, as we have seen with this case study, the MamaBakers weave in and out of the public sphere, demonstrating how the private sphere is firmly embedded in the public. From the personal, lived experiences of the MamaBakers, connections are constantly formed to issues of collective nature.

Here, however, we also need to be careful and not make any essential statements about the nature of the MamaBakers. Although they are a group of mothers participating under the broad banner of motherhood, their participation is underpinned by their own unique experiences, rather than some fixed essence of womanhood and mothering. Their caring duties are impacted both by structural constraints as well as by varying degrees of personal choice, which in turn impact the way in which they participate in the public sphere.

That social media can foster discussion and debate is widely accepted. However, what is more contested is the value of such debate, with many still arguing for a distinction between the formal arena of politics and lifestyle-related issues. This case study demonstrates that such distinctions need to be reevaluated, given the fact that arena and process definitions of politics are inherently linked to each other. Social media enables groups such as MamaBake to draw attention to issues they find important. These issues may link to the formal arena, but they may also just be creating opportunities for public deliberation regarding issues of collective interest, and facilitating “talk for talk's sake.” As such, the talk itself carries the meaning, and

not its intended consequence, necessitating a broader approach to politics, one that doesn't view the impact on policy as the only valid outcome. The biggest issue in this context, and the one that must be addressed explicitly, is the risk of rendering concepts obsolete. As such, through the use of Graham's coding framework, this case study demonstrates a way of identifying the moments in which a social forum moves toward political talk. More broadly, the implications of such an analysis are significant because they demonstrate the importance of taking everyday talk into account when exploring citizens' levels of political engagement.

## Notes

1. Indeed Marsh et al. (2007) go so far as to argue that class and gender are themselves political "lived experiences," rather than variables to be used to explain engagement or nonengagement in arena politics.
2. For a selected list of media appearances, see <http://mamabake.com/media/>
3. (Distributed) Denial of Service.
4. The movement also has a Web site ([www.mamabake.com](http://www.mamabake.com)), but because the discussions take place on the Facebook page, the Web site has not been included in the analysis.
5. For Bennett and Segerberg, collective action is based upon centralized coordination, community organizing, and campaigning in the traditional media. In contrast, connective action relies on shared voluntary self-expression expressed in and developed through the formation of large social networks.
6. Lactation/breastfeeding activist.

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