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POLITICIZATION
OF MUMSNET**

Sarah Pedersen



THE POLITICIZATION OF MUMSNET

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SARAH PEDERSEN

Robert Gordon University, UK



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For the wise, witty and wonderful women of Mumsnet

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Pedersen is Professor of Communication and Media at Robert Gordon University. She also acts as Gender Equality Champion for the university.

Her research focuses on women's engagement with the media, using both historical and contemporary source material, including Twitter, blogs and of course Mumsnet. Her book *The Scottish Suffragettes and the Press* was published in 2017 by Palgrave Macmillan. The same year she was awarded funding by the Heritage Lottery Fund to produce an edition of the correspondence of Aberdeen suffragette and journalist Caroline Phillips. This work led to a plaque to Caroline Phillips being unveiled on Union Street in Aberdeen. Her work on the Scottish suffrage campaign has been praised in a motion to the Scottish Parliament and was highly commended by the judges of the British Records Association's annual Harley Prize. She was the Director of the Rise Up Quines! festival in Aberdeen in 2018, a festival celebrating the centenary of the (partial) achievement of the vote for women.

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INTRODUCTION

Contrary to popular opinion amongst some sections of Twitter, women do not lose the ability to think once they have had a baby. In fact, faced with the pure physical reality of precisely how much the world has been built to suit men, pregnancy and maternity is often the time when women become radicalised. With girls outperforming boys at school and university, and running neck and neck with them in the early stages of careers, many young women would be forgiven for assuming that gender equality has arrived and that there is no longer any need for feminism or women-focused political action. And then they have a baby.

Despite major advances since the 50s, motherhood means finding out about the cost of childcare – which in the UK is among some of the highest in Europe – and discovering that you will be judged for returning to work after the baby, and equally judged for not returning to work. You will be judged for not breastfeeding but also judged for breastfeeding for too long. You will be judged if your child is too active in public places (not enough discipline) and judged if your child is too passive (what is he afraid of?). Celebrity mothers' bodies 'snap

back into shape' hours after giving birth, so you will be judged if yours does not do the same, despite a lack of access to personal trainers and dieticians. As the saying goes, 'A mother's place is in the wrong'.

On a more sobering note, becoming a mother is still a dangerous enterprise. The World Health Organization tells us that, every day in 2017, 810 women died from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. The major complications that account for 75% of these deaths are severe bleeding, infection, high blood pressure, delivery complications and unsafe abortion.

Then there are the assumptions that will be made about you, particularly about your interests in anything outside your baby's nursery. 'You'll feel differently when you have kids' you are told, with the assumption being that the maternal instinct will drive all other concerns from your body, or at least make you realise the futility of doing anything other than nurture. Politicians appear to assume that there is a monolithic group called 'mothers' who all feel exactly the same about some things – health care, schools, maternity leave – and don't really have opinions on topics such as finance, international relations or defence. All the assumptions that have always been made about women's lack of interest in public affairs are increased four-fold when they become mothers.

And in many ways this is true – women often do think about things differently once they become mothers. Becoming a mother is a major life event, which is accompanied by significant changes: in the way that we and others perceive our bodies and our role in society and in our social connections. But mothers don't stop thinking. Much is made of women's ability to 'multi-task' – for mothers this is assumed to mean the ability to empty a washing machine at the same time as refereeing a fight between two toddlers. However, this ability

to think and do at the same time means that women are perfectly able to be parents and want to discuss affairs of state. This book is about one of the places where women talk about politics, and where politicians seek to talk to them.

It is about the phenomenon known as Mumsnet – a website aimed at parents (although its name betrays the fact that the vast majority of users are women, if not mothers). Established in 2000 by a sports journalist and TV producer who met at antenatal classes, the stated aim of the site is ‘To make parents’ lives easier by pooling knowledge and experience’. It is now the largest parenting website in the United Kingdom and claims around 10 million unique visitors per month, clocking up around 100 million page views. It has a network of over 10,000 influencers and its Mumsnet Jobs site, focused on flexible working opportunities, has nearly 30k monthly users. In November 2019, its talk boards reached 1 billion page views and Justine Roberts’ Boxing Day roundup email to site subscribers revealed that 43,556,451 words are written on the talk boards each month. The site has been described as an ‘internet phenomenon’ (*The Daily Telegraph*), ‘a virtual shoulder to lean on’ (*The Observer*) and – with an interesting use of gendered language – the ‘daddy’ of all parenting sites (*The Times*).

As a business, Mumsnet is a private limited company funded mainly by advertising. The site states that its overarching aim is not the pursuit of profits, and that it tries to conduct business in an ethical manner. For that reason, it does not accept advertising from a number of companies, including Nestlé, because of what Mumsnet calls its aggressive marketing of formula milk in breach of international standards, and for a number of products such as cosmetic surgery and gambling. In 2018, the site had a revenue of £8.6 million. Of the two original founders, Carrie Longton stepped down as a Director in 2018 while Justine Roberts is now Chief

Executive. Roberts is married to journalist Ian Katz, previously deputy editor of *The Guardian* and editor of *Newsnight*, who became Director of Programmes at Channel 4 in 2018. Mumsnet headquarters – referred to on the site as Mumsnet HQ – is in Kentish Town, London. The site employs over 100 members of staff, including paid moderators who monitor what is said on the site. However, these are post-moderators, which means that comments are not pre-vetted. Instead they are investigated and potentially removed when they are reported to HQ. Mumsnet relies on its users to report posts that break its guidelines. A sister site for older women, Gransnet, was established in 2011.

There is nothing new about researching Mumsnet – there is a plethora of academic books and articles available that use Mumsnet, and other parenting sites, as a source of data to explore a great number of different aspects of digital parenting. The majority of these, however, focus on the conceptualisation and performance of modern motherhood on the site, with Mumsnet positioned as a supportive (or less than supportive) online community that, wittingly or unwittingly, supports the construction of a neoliberal and consumerist motherhood. Researchers point to the site's predominantly middle-class nature and its high proportion of university educated and economically privileged mothers. For example, the neoliberal nature of Mumsnet is identified by Gambles (2010). She describes the site as both a popular cultural representation of parenting and an invitation to participate in public parenting in a society in which parents are held to be more responsible than ever before for their children's economic, social and educational success. For such middle-class mothers, the upbringing of their children is approached as a serious project. Both she and Jensen (2013) argue that, on Mumsnet, the focus is on an individual approach to problems rather than any wider social or political contexts and that,

while the site is a place where women can vent about the impossible demands of contemporary intensive parenting, this is often done in ways that collude with neoliberal parenting culture. McRobbie (2013) describes Mumsnet as embodying professional middle-class maternity and having achieved the status of a mothers' lobby. In her excellent discussion of the symbiotic relationship between neoliberalism and liberal feminism, she argues that contemporary feminine mass media, which she identifies as including BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour*, the *Femail* section of the *Daily Mail*, the lifestyle pages of broadsheets such as *The Times* and *The Guardian*, television programmes such as *Loose Women*, women's magazines, plus websites such as Mumsnet, are places where this 'weak version of feminism' is allowed to flourish and where the professional middle-class mother is exalted as the ideal. She argues that, within such media, and also in centrist Conservative and 'New Labour' politics, 'leaning in' professional middle-class mothers are exhorted to act as the managers of their own families' journeys through a widely disseminated discourse that celebrates choice, for example, to be a stay-at-home mother, and the privatisation of childcare, rather than the old-school feminist socialist goals of improving welfare support for working-class mothers and pre-school nursery provision for all.

Many of the accusations thrown at Mumsnet by McRobbie and others continue to be true today. Mumsnet is dominated by middle-class mothers; there is a focus on consumerism on its talk boards, whether that is the purchase of the right pram or the right outfit for the beach; and many of the discussions relating to women's place in the world focus on issues that impact professional middle-class women rather than their working-class sisters. The raising of children is certainly seen as a project at which parents, but especially mothers, and most especially stay-at-home mothers, must be seen as succeeding.

However, certain other things have changed since 2013, and there are definitely sections of Mumsnet that now reject some aspects of liberal feminism and engage in a more radical approach to both politics and feminism. This is particularly true in relation to the debate around the UK and Scottish governments' proposed reforms of the Gender Recognition Act 2004 and related questions around the growing number of children, especially girls, who are being referred to gender identity services, and the inclusion of trans people, mostly trans women, in women's sports. While Mumsnet continues to be accused of being the 'smug Mumsnet mafia' by some sections of the media (Janet Street-Porter, *Daily Mail*, 15 February 2010), other accusations are also frequently thrown at the site, in particular that it is a 'a breeding ground for transphobic voices' (Hannah Woodhead, Huckmag.com, 30 April 2018). For some, Mumsnet is now the home of out-of-touch older women who are 'on the wrong side of history' and who are desperately fighting the achievement of equality for trans people for out-dated, right-wing and outright transphobic motives. For others, Mumsnet is one of the last bastions of free speech online, offering a place where those who wish to fight for women's rights can regroup and support the activities of offline radical feminist campaigners and politicians. At the same time, Mumsnet continues to be seen as an important site that can facilitate the engagement of politicians of all parties with key floating voters – women.

There is nothing new about mothers wanting a space to discuss politics and current affairs. In 1960, journalist Betty Jerman wrote a piece for *The Guardian's* women's page in which she shared her boredom at living in the suburbs with her family. While her husband commuted into the city, Jerman found herself 'bored witless' – particularly with the lack of stimulating conversation. She blamed the women around her: 'Home and childminding can have a blunting effect on a

woman's mind' (*The Guardian*, 27 February 2020). Letters poured in from women responding to the piece. One respondent, Maureen Nicol, suggested that housebound wives with liberal interests and a desire to remain individuals could form a national register. She was bombarded with letters from women wishing to join and so set up the Housebound Wives' Register, which soon had 2,000 members. In 1966 the Register changed its name to the National Housewives' Register and the National Women's Register in 1987. Women started to meet in local groups and the organisation became a home for educated, mostly liberal women, who wanted to meet up to discuss things that were not related to their children or housework. It was a forerunner of Mumsnet.

Full disclosure – I am a Mumsnetter. I have been a Mumsnetter since 2002 when, pregnant with my second child, I was recommended the site by a colleague at work. I was urged to sign up to Mumsnet to access emails that would update me on the development of my foetus on a weekly basis. It was not long, however, before I discovered the site's discussion boards, and from then on I was an addict.

I would describe myself as more of a lurker than a poster, although over the course of nearly two decades have probably posted more than I think. Mumsnet has become a source of wisdom on various points in my house – sometimes even called on as the final arbiter, for example, on the vexed question of teenagers and pocket money (Mumsnet ruled in the teenager's favour, much to my chagrin). One of my posts even appears in one of the *Mumsnet on...* books that have been published over the years on a variety of subjects from babies to teens – a mild claim to fame.

I am also a researcher on the subject of women and the media and have published extensively on Mumsnet. The great thing about studying and teaching the media is that you can claim all sorts of activities as 'research' – *The Great British*

Bake Off, the purchase of *Closer* and the ability to quote large chunks of *When Harry Met Sally*. Similarly, when my head of department kept finding me on Mumsnet, it was simpler to explain that I was writing a conference paper than admit to using it to discover a sure-fire way to make a toddler stay in his cot. Over the last two decades I have written about why women use Mumsnet, the discussion of sex on Mumsnet, men on Mumsnet, gendered communication styles on Mumsnet and the Mumsnet opinion of Trump. I have talked about Mumsnet on panels and at conferences and even managed to parley my interest in the website into a visiting fellowship at an Australian university. The plan was to compare the UK Mumsnet to its Australian counterpart until I found that Mumsnet is unique. There is no Australian or American equivalent of a website that is ostensibly about parenting but actually is about so much more than that, and used by women of all ages, not just those with young children. That's why Mumsnet attracts users from all over the world (and some men).

My interest in (obsession with?) Mumsnet has accompanied me on holidays and at Christmas, which every true Mumsnetter knows should be spent in your Christmas pyjamas and without your in-laws. I once sat inside on a holiday in the south of France, desperately clinging on to a dodgy internet connection, refreshing the screen on an old lap top in order to keep up with the scandal that was Gina Ford's libel action against Mumsnet over comments made about her on the site (<https://www.mumsnet.com/archive/gina-ford/gina-settlement-press>). In response to Ford's action, Mumsnet took the desperate decision to ban all mention of Ford's name, leading users to come up with the Harry Potter inspired 'She Who Must Not Be Named'.

Outside Mumsnet, I research and publish on press coverage of the women's suffrage campaign, particularly in Scotland,