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I would like to talk about the concept of the “bourgeois public sphere” in reference to the debate about women’s sex-based rights.

The term ‘Bourgeois public sphere’ was coined by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas in 1962. He used it to describe a virtual or imaginary community where individuals came together to discuss societal problems and, through that discussion, influence political action. Thus ordered and respectful public opinion became political action through participatory democracy. Such public debate, he argued, initially took place in coffee houses and the nascent mass media. These days, much of it takes place online.

Habermas’ depiction of the public sphere was that of an idyllic, inclusive place where all citizens spoke equally, whatever their class or social status. All members of the public who participated in the public sphere could expect to have their voices heard and their arguments debated. Well, when I say “all members of the public”, what I really mean is men – and in particular white, middle-class men.

In the 1990s feminist scholars, in particular Nancy Fraser, problematized Habermas’ concept of the public sphere, suggesting that it was not equally open to all, but was instead dominated by powerful middle-class white men. Women, people of colour, those of lower social status, were frequently excluded. Fraser suggested that women who were excluded

from the wider public sphere instead formed what she termed 'subaltern counter-publics' which functioned as both a space of withdrawal and a training ground for agitational activities directed towards the wider publics. She identified the consciousness-raising groups of 1970s feminists as one type of subaltern counter-public. Women labored to make the personal – issues relating to childcare, domestic violence, equal pay – political or public through such devices.

Fraser's criticisms of the idea of a public sphere open to all coincided with a growing disillusion of feminists with the supposed utopia of the Internet. It was becoming clear that all were not equal online and that prejudices formed in the offline world were being continued, indeed amplified, online.

What does all this mean in terms of where we are today?

It is clear that the public sphere is still not an equal opportunity space. Social media such as Twitter may appear to have the potential to act as a public sphere, where we can hold government to account and encourage diverse voices. However, certainly in terms of the debate about women's sex-based rights, social media has not acted as a space for public debate from all sides of the question but has instead moved to close down the voices of gender-critical women. Either by denying them a platform whatsoever – by deleting Facebook pages or suspending Twitter accounts – or by encouraging self-censorship amongst women, concerned about the implications of what they say online on their lives and careers in the real world.

I would argue that such women have responded to the increasing exclusivity of the public sphere by forming new subaltern counter-publics. Much of my research over the past ten years has focused on the parenting forum Mumsnet. For those who do not know Mumsnet,

it was established in 2000 and is now the largest parenting website in the UK. It bills itself as a 'site for grown ups' with limited moderation and a commitment to free speech, and its discussion topics expand beyond traditional 'mothering' subjects to include topical news, politics and feminism. The site has a particularly active community of users and has initiated and is involved in a number of campaigns on topics such as legal aid, rape myths, better miscarriage care, the removal of sales reps from maternity wards, and the sexualisation of young girls. So far, so appropriate.

However, Mumsnet has also become 'notorious' or 'celebrated' for allowing the discussion of gender-critical feminist ideas on its feminism and women's rights boards. The boards attract activists and others who have been banned from other social-media forums such as Twitter. Despite attempts to close down these discussions, Mumsnet continues to carefully offer a public sphere – a subaltern, counter-public, sphere? – for such discussion.

In April 2018 the founder of Mumsnet, Justine Roberts, told *The Times* that "thought police" were pressuring advertisers to withdraw from the website with threats of a boycott of their products. Roberts stated that Mumsnet worked hard to keep discussions civil but was determined to let them continue, and that the site was "prepared to take any potential advertising hit". Roberts also stated, "What's worrying to me is the thought-police action around speech and the shutting down of the right to be able to disagree and immediately labelling it as transphobic."

One reason why Mumsnet may be keen to continue this discussion is that it is both popular with Mumsnetters and attracts new users to the site. In July 2018 Mumsnet shared the information that there had been a twelve-fold increase in the number of people entering

the site directly via the Feminist Chat topic. In September 2018 Mumsnet itself started a thread in 'Site Stuff' entitled 'Tell Mumsnet HQ why you use Mumsnet'. The thread received 897 responses, 574 of which directly referenced the Feminism Chat threads as the reason users continued to return to the site. As one user put it 'I came for the babies, stayed for the feminism'.

It therefore makes good business sense for Mumsnet to offer a place for gender-critical feminist discussion. (And it should be noted that other media have also realized that there is a market for giving gender-critical voices space to be heard, for example *The Spectator*, *The Times*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Herald*.) It has become Mumsnet's USP, which, so far, means that such debate is valuable to Mumsnet, keeping users on the site and attracting new ones. It also demonstrates the fact that women will find places to discuss issues that impact them and their children, either in their own homes, in village halls or in protected spaces online.

But the women of Mumsnet do not just debate women's sex-based rights online. They have also initiated and become involved in real-life campaigns such as 'Man Friday', where women declare themselves to be male for the day in order to gain access to men-only spaces. Fraser suggested that women who were excluded from the wider public sphere instead formed 'subaltern counter-publics' which functioned as both a space of withdrawal and a training ground for agitational activities directed towards the wider publics. I would suggest that Mumsnet acts as such a space.

Let me add a final remark: I have spent the last two years travelling around Scotland giving talks about the Scottish suffragettes and their suffragist sisters. I am often asked at these

talks whether I would have been a militant suffragette or a constitutional suffragist. I have always answered that I saw myself very much as a suffragist, quietly writing letters and signing petitions, only dipping a toe in the public sphere of the day, and probably rather disapproving of the militant actions of the suffragettes. However, by coming here today and speaking so publicly, I think I am beginning to embrace my inner suffragette.