Julie Zeilinger is “a Big F’ing Deal”: The Young Feminist Leader’s Inspirational Route to the Top

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Abstract
This article is not a biography on Julie Zeilinger. It is, however, a means of using Julie’s leadership trajectory to consider and question the onslaught of ideas about women’s leadership today. Therefore, it focuses on what it means to be a woman leader, and the challenges and barriers women face in the quest for high-power roles. By examining how Julie has paved her own route to leadership, the paper analyzes both the significance of Julie’s role and the techniques she utilized. This essay was written about a young feminist and by a young feminist. Therefore, “our generation” is used to refer to the upcoming, “younger” generation. Ultimately, Zeilinger’s model suggests that there is no single definition of leadership; rather, it is the combination of qualities, ideas, and actions that make a person a noteworthy leader.

Author’s Note
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1. Introduction
As I browse through my brain for information I already know about women’s leadership, I realize there is not much on the topic. While I can easily list inspiring women, some of whom are household names, what does that tell me about my future? Excitement about the end result is great, but I also realize it is important for me to understand the path to leadership. I want to understand not only women’s contributions, but also the barriers women face in attaining leadership positions and earning recognition for their work as leaders. To begin exploring this broad topic, what exactly is women’s leadership?

2. What Are We Talking About? Defining the Terms:
I decided to ask Julie Zeilinger—a teenage feminist and founder of The FBomb—about how she personally defines leadership. For those who have not already visited Julie’s site, The FBomb is “a feminist blog and community for teens and young adults who care about their rights and want to be
heard” (JulieZeilinger.com). Starting this blog and community forum has positioned Julie as a recognized young leader within both the feminism and blogging worlds.

Unlike most of the accomplished women accompanying Julie at conferences, in the news, and on the bookshelf, I felt Julie would be relatable. We are close in age, both in our early twenties. We go to the same school, the women’s leadership haven that is Barnard College. We even have a mutual friend. There is something refreshing about admiring someone who is within your reach—it makes the exact quality that you admire feel attainable. Julie was nice enough to chat with me, and, after our conversation, I certainly did not regret my choice of interviewee. She offered a unique answer to my core question about leadership: “Maybe we shouldn’t define what leadership is.” Though not the answer I had expected, this answer was fresh and satisfying, because, as I thought more about it, I realized perhaps I was taking the wrong approach. What could be more free and adaptable than refusing to define the term? So, if leadership is this adaptable term, what makes a leader? Julie, herself, demonstrates a combination of components denoting her as an inspiring woman leader; thus Julie’s story, thoughts, and actions make for a compelling leadership example, especially within the larger context of the new generation of feminist leaders.


In many ways Julie’s route to leadership exemplifies what makes her a good leader. Here, “leadership” means the ability to obtain and maintain a following as part of a larger schema. As Julie explains, she did not set out to create such a role for herself. Instead, she started The FBomb to create an online community for teenage feminists to express their ideas and converse with their peers. Julie often says that The FBomb was the means she needed to organize her negative thoughts on her own body image. Ultimately, articulating these sentiments in witty blog posts served as a therapeutic healing process (Zeilinger 2011). Though she claims that having only three readers would have been satisfying, over 356,000 people in 208 countries and territories visit the FBomb today (Crump 2010: 1; Rossini 2011; Zeilinger 2011).

Blogging is a unique means through which to obtain leadership because it bypasses the traditional barriers to women’s leadership. For example, Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Carolyn Buck Luce warn in “Off-Ramps and On-Ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success” (2005) about prominent obstacles to women’s leadership. These include “pull factors,” such as family life, and “push factors,” like the lack of opportunity for advancement in an under-stimulating environment. Hewlett and Luce also acknowledge that the problem is twofold: “off-ramping” or leaving the work force is one problem, while increased barriers to entry only add to the problem (Hewlett and Luce 2005: 44-46). Julie’s path to recognition is interesting to study in coordination with these barriers to leadership that are found in a traditional or corporate workplace. Though mainstream organizations including ForbesWoman, The Times of London, and The Huffington Post are recognizing Julie today, she paved her own path to recognized leadership (Zeilinger, “Press”). Though not an easy journey, one benefit of using the internet as a platform for leadership is that
On Our Terms

affirmation is done through consensus, as there is very little established hierarchy. Thus, the internet creates a space in which new leaders emerge:

The explosion of the Internet, with so many voices (many of them ideological), has also radically changed and democratized where people go for news and whom they view as an authority. (Abramson 2)

Julie has benefitted from this phenomenon. Why would one go to a major news provider to learn about the issues teenage women face, when they could hear directly from the source? However, with so many voices, the challenge is to get recognized. It is an extremely representative process, because bloggers are limited in their tactics obtain readership and recognition; it is ultimately up to those who agree with or enjoy what someone is doing to ensure that voice, cause, or community gains support.

4. Encouraging Other Voices:

While Julie clearly has a knack for writing, The FBomb does not “belong” to her. Not only does Julie use The FBomb to foster a community, she also offers it as a platform for likeminded teenage feminists to voice their opinions and to discuss issues that are relevant to their lives. The topics range from pop-culture and feminism to creative writing and awareness. Thus, in the process of her peers elevating her as a leader, Julie has given them an equal opportunity to be heard. That is why she is the site’s editor, rather than its sole author. While Julie does post her own contributions, The FBomb welcomes and depends upon commentary in the form of “rants, raves, editorial writing, haikus, whatever” from others to foster the desired dialogue and community (Zeilinger, “About”).

What motivates people to bequest their insights, opinions, and thoughts to others for publication? Julie’s method is leading by example. Willingly voicing her inner dialogue was an important step to becoming a leader, because Julie broke the barrier of fear, which often underlies keeping women from expressing themselves. (Lorde 1984b: 44). More importantly, Julie obliterated the fear factor by creating a safe space for others to do the same. In “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” (1984b: 40, 44), Audre Lorde speaks of this barrier:

I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood…We have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us.

Thanks to Julie, our generation of feminists will not be choking anytime soon. Whether one contributes to The FBomb in the form of a submission or a comment, the outcome is both comforting and empowering. It is comforting in the sense that there is a supportive community with whom to engage in dialogue “about anything feminist or teen related” (Zeilinger 2010). It is also empowering, because reading articles reminds young women that others feel similarly and
reveals the power in taking a stand in whatever way(s) we choose—be it blogging or through actions and conversations in daily life.

5. Public Speaking: Addressing the Young Woman’s Struggle:

Keeping our generation’s feminist spirit vibrant is not enough for Julie. Just as Lorde does not accept language as the solution to her silence, neither does Julie. Action is definitely a high-priority term on both of their to-do lists, and it is another component of being an inspirational leader. Action to Julie involves speaking on feminism in various public forums to take her battle to the people. In doing so, she overcomes her main concern about the internet’s influence on feminism and leadership in our generation: the internet makes it so easy to communicate that the power of actual meetings and actions is at risk of being forgotten (Zeilinger 2012c).

In fact, Julie is carrying on the essential battles for equality, while she is also rallying troops in the face of our generation’s low self-confidence and negative body image resulting from the current media climate. In May 2011, Julie represented the younger generation on the Intergenerational Panel at the Endangered Species Summit in New York. Needless to say, she delivered a beautifully written speech (you can watch it here) in which she explained:

[Today’s] opportunities [for girls] come [with] immense pressure and competition, enforced internally, by our own high standards, as well as externally by equally competitive parents. And if this pressure weren’t enough, we’re barraged with images of unattainable bodies. (Zeilinger 2011)

Julie’s insightful words were more than well-received—one audience member blogged that the speech gave her goose bumps (The Illusionists). Delivering this message in such a rational and open manner shed light on the subtle, yet full-fledged battle that wages on in the heads of today’s young women.

Julie’s dedicated effort to publicly vocalize her opinions, while contextualizing the issues our generation faces, shows that the need for feminism has adapted to a different era, but has not ceased to exist. *The Daily Beast’s* Allison Yarrow (2012: 1) explains, “Feminism for my generation is a much more subtle fight than it once was…We still deal with issues that are sexist in nature, but they don’t always have a blinking arrow pointed at them.” This perspective is crucially important, because Julie is a member of a generation that is reaping the benefits of past feminist victories. In many ways, the margins of inequality have narrowed, which speaks to Julie’s point about the less obvious issues that remain present. Her recognition of these issues and her passion for them prove that the battle is nowhere near won, thereby countering the sentiments of “the first and second waves of feminism—[which] assumed that when women infiltrated patriarchal institutions, then our work was done” (Zeilinger 2011).

6. Print Publications: Popular Language
Though Julie is a young feminist, who happens to speak eloquently on issues pertinent to teenagers, it is slightly ironic that she is often asked to represent the teenage perspective, since, as she puts it, “I’ve never felt like a normal teenager” (Zeilinger 2012c). Normal teenager or not, I, for one, am proud to have Julie representing the feminist interests of our generation. It is worth noting that she aims to rally support not only for our generation, but from our generation as well. Her current tactic to engage our generation comes in the form of her first book, which was released in May 2012. The book’s title—*A Little F’ed Up: Why Feminism is Not a Dirty Word*—says it all. Just as she used the “f word” implication in naming the FBomb, Julie is once again capitalizing on contemporary slang to address a broader issue: the word feminism. These titles are not only memorable, they are relevant, since Julie uses them to poke “fun at the idea that the term ‘feminist’ is so stigmatized—[it’s] our way of proudly reclaiming the word” (Zeilinger, “About”). Julie’s mission to spread acceptance and use of the “f-word” within our generation is a noble cause given the current hesitancy to identify with the term’s radical connotations.

Julie’s efforts to make feminism accessible to a new generation have been well received. With a 4.3 star rating on Amazon and 3.72 stars on Good Reads, Julie is reaching her audience. Many of the reviews mention the book’s readability, style and funny anecdotes:

All in all this book is an excellent introduction to feminism for any age or gender or sexuality. Very accessible language and writing, breaks it all down piece by piece then ties it all back together in a manner that is clear and concise, and definitely has made me reevaluate how I perceive ‘feminism’ and how I myself have been a feminist… (feministsailor 2012).

I wonder whether developing comfort with the term is a necessary step to achieving greater equality and choice. After all, the feminism has long been a controversial word—this is not a particularly new phenomenon. In today’s society, the word holds ambivalence as it can connote bra burning among other stereotypical imagery. Thus, people are wary of identifying with the term. In her recent speech to Barnard College seniors, President Debora Spar spoke to this point. She explained that she had wanted to title her upcoming book *Confessions of a Reluctant Feminist*, but the publishers discouraged her from using the controversial f-word in the title. While disappointed, President Spar maintained that it was more important to get the feminist ideals into the conversation than to remain tied to the actual f-word (Spar 2013).

7. Promoting Awareness to History

Asked about the term “feminism,” Julie explained that she does not think we necessarily need the label, but it is ideal to embrace the word as a means of respect and acknowledgement of the movement’s history (Zeilinger 2012c).

In “The Badasses Who Came Before Us,” Part One of Julie’s book, she argues that understanding the history of the feminist movement is important because “our generation desperately needs some perspective” (Restauri 2012: 1). Audre Lorde (1984a: 4) makes a similar appeal for increased attention to the history of feminism:
By ignoring the past, we are encouraged to repeat its mistakes. The ‘generation gap’ is an important social tool for any repressive society... [it] gives rise to a historical amnesia that keeps us working to invent the wheel...who would have believed that once again our daughters are allowing their bodies to be hampered and purgatoried by girdles and high heels and hobble skirts?

Part of looking at earlier feminists involves understanding and appreciating the evolution of women's power and the techniques that were utilized to obtain such results.

These historical fights are a model for change. They also offer another type of model: role models. Jill Abramson, The New York Times' first female managing editor, identifies the challenge of the younger generation finding hard-hitting role models. She reflects, “I know that acquiring authority as a woman is tough enough; using and projecting it is even more complicated. There are plenty of pitfalls and few good role models” (Abramson 2011: 1). Abramson's words can be interpreted to show that the lack of women at “the top” of their fields and the attrition of those in power positions have left a void in role models. In some ways, Julie shares Abramson's depressing take on the availability of role models. For Julie, positive role models, like positive body image, are increasing rarities for our generation. In spite of this gap, Julie found an empowering vision:

I want to look up to somebody who is real and who has accomplished real things. My solution is to be my own role model. Of course, I draw from the masters: Gloria Steinem, Betty Freidan, Jessica Valenti, Courtney Martin. But it’s come to the point where the only reliable person I can depend on is myself, which is a feminist idea in and of itself. (Zeilinger 2009: 2)

This statement resonates with me, because it serves as an example for our generation. Looking within and among ourselves for role models is a powerful suggestion for our generation of feminists, but, as Julie mentions, the answers will not be there unless we have made the effort to understand those who brought us to this point (Zeilinger 2009: 2).

Plus, understanding the history of feminism and embracing the term holds us accountable to our beliefs. Identifying with the term plays a role in the thoughts you express and in the actions you take. It forces you not to sit back any longer (Zeilinger 2012c). Therefore, by encouraging identification with the term feminism, Julie is leading our generation to uphold feminist values in our individual lives through acting on our thoughts in and beyond the blogosphere. For some members of the FBomb community, this is easier said than done:

[For example] a young Jordanian girl...wrote for FBomb about hijabs and honor killings. Fearing for her...safety, the girl wrote under a pseudonym to disguise her liberated feminist writings from her insular community. Zeilinger says publishing
these writings is the most rewarding moment of her work with *FBomb* to date.  
(Yarrow 2012: 1)

Publishing such works is part of the reason that “The FBomb represents the promise of the next wave of feminism. One that’s more inclusive in terms of race, class and gender” (Courtney 2011: 1).

### 8. Safety and Accountability

As an internet-based community, *The FBomb* is able to capitalize on the boundary between ownership and anonymity, making it an inclusive and safe space. An anecdote from Julie best explains my meaning. Someone once asked her why there was not more diversity among the authors writing for *The FBomb*. Julie replied that this was a problematic question because it failed to acknowledge the degree of anonymity that *The FBomb* entails. Since it is run over the internet, both Julie and the person who posed the question are clueless about the diversity of contributors. To counter the point, Julie questioned “Can you only be a lesbian if that is what you write about?” Of course not. The anonymity of the internet is also harnessed for beneficial purposes in the way authors’ names are listed—Julie uses the first name and last initial format. She feels this is effective because it allows for some anonymity—which is important for more personal submissions—but it also encourages a sense of ownership over the work. This “anonymous ownership”—as I have taken to calling it—may finally manage to counter Audre Lorde’s 1980s critique of feminism. In “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” Lorde (1984a: 4) wrote:

> By and large within the women’s movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist.

While the pretense of sisterhood’s homogeneity does not exist, *The FBomb*’s anonymous ownership welcomes engagement with feminist issues from either a wide or narrow perspective. Thus, *The FBomb*’s platform provides a flexible space to address differences in experience.

### 9. The Future

Now that Julie is clearly established within the feminist community, her main upcoming challenge will involve developing and asserting her position as an authority with a female voice in order to negotiate her place as a generational leader. The manner of asserting female authority remains a current issue. As Jill Abramson (2011: 1) describes, “Even as women wield increasing power, they—and we—still struggle with how that voice of authority should look and sound.” For Julie, this problem manifests itself in the gender stereotype-based dichotomy of expected behavior and treatment.

Though Julie acknowledges that she has not experienced serious gender related discrimination, she discusses her personal impressions on the topic.
It always seemed…boys were taken more seriously than girls. Toughness came easily to them; it was expected of them. As a girl, I had to choose between being seen as sweet and funny or smart and driven. It felt like an either/or situation, despite my identification with aspects of both. (Zeilinger 2012b: 1)

These societal norms must be debunked in order to overcome gender-biased perceptions that result from leadership actions. This requires sliding the accepted balance of authority in the “female voice” to a more serious and less subjective end of the scale. Abramson (2011: 2) details that:

Any woman giving orders and making tough calls needs to be deeply knowledgeable, even as she displays humor and shows her human side. Getting the right calibration, though, isn’t easy. And qualities admired in men are still… seen differently when exhibited by a woman. A man can be decisive and aggressive; with similar traits, a woman may be deemed a control freak.

Julie confronts this problem in her actions and she further addresses it when she writes about her observations. She explains, “I knowingly chose to try to achieve my goals, academic and otherwise, which, in my opinion, left me appearing ‘serious’ and ‘unfeminine’” (Zeilinger 2012b: 1).

Choosing to pursue her interests wholeheartedly is another attribute of Julie’s leadership. She is a fresh and inspiring leader, because she is clearly knowledgeable about the issues and demonstrates sincere devotion to confronting them, while incorporating the teenage perspective. Establishing herself as a leader has served as a new beginning: now when she writes for The FBomb and other websites, her continuing efforts to express her opinions, discuss her actions, and call upon others to do the same have even more impact.

As the message spreads and Julie’s presence in our generation’s dialogue becomes even stronger, I suspect her route to leadership will repeat itself outside of the feminist circle. This time, it will be on a larger scale with an increased range, as she begins engaging with our generation as a whole: those who embrace “the fword,” those who have yet to discover it, and even those who disagree. Success in navigating this cycle once again may lead to Julie’s most powerful voice of authority thus far. With five years of experience under her belt, we are already beginning to see the extended reach of this leader’s future. Julie is appearing on all kinds of lists, from The Daily Beast’s “150 Women Who Shake the World” to Cleveland Magazine’s “Most Interesting People in 2011” (Zeilinger, “Press”). This supportive publicity, coupled with the May 2012 release of her first book, will jumpstart the expansion of Julie’s presence outside of this feminist circle. Julie will emerge not as a teenage feminist, but as a generational leader—who happens to be a young, impassioned feminist.
What gives me such confidence that Julie will “pull off” this transformation? Though this essay began by bucking the trend of defining leadership, after exploring Julie’s work in the feminist field, it is clear that a distinctive combination of qualities makes this remarkable young woman a leader. The fact that you are reading about Julie as we speak is a testament to her impact. So, what is her recipe? Julie uses her large dose of feminist knowledge, which she mixes with well-articulated and thought-provoking opinions. She creates a space where others can execute this as well. There is no one formula to leadership; it’s about the qualities of the individual and the opportunities she creates for herself. Together, these leadership aspects—when blended with the secret ingredients of, in this case, sass, charm and an unbelievable work ethic—form the intriguing, inspiring and unique leader that is Julie Zeilinger.
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