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Twitter as a Pedagogical Platform

Creating Feminist Digital Affective Counter-Publics to Challenge Rape Culture

In 2015 at the time of our research Twitter had approximately 305 million users (Wolfe 2017). Before the move to 280 characters, Using the @ symbol and a user name of their choice as the handle, members of the public created short bursts of content (referred to as "tweets"), no longer than 140 characters. Content can be strategically and thematically organized around "hashtags" (#s) that hyperlink tweets to enable conversation between users. Thus, the platform facilitates quick moving, connected content that may be original or retweeted (recirculated or shared) (Jenkins 2012) and include images or hyperlinked content. As use of Twitter has exploded, so has the possibility of using this medium for activism, as is visible in academic titles such as *@ is for Activism* (Hands 2010) and *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism* (Gerbaudo 2012). The study of feminist uses of Twitter has also grown with an emerging body of literature on the platform's potential for mobilizing campaigns to raise awareness about issues such as anti-feminism, misogyny, reproductive rights, and gender and sexual violence (Rentschler 2014). However, despite the growth of research, we still lack information about the *everyday experiences* of users who mobilize Twitter to connect, educate, and visibly engage with a range of feminist issues, including rape culture.

Responding to this gap, in this chapter we explore how self-defined feminist activists use Twitter to *participate* in feminist politics. While the previous chapter focused on high profile feminist campaigns and activist leaders, this chapter tries to capture the everyday practices of everyday users of Twitter and related platforms for performing their feminisms. We use the word "practice" in the sense of *trying out* feminist politics. We develop an argument that Twitter is a "*digital pedagogical platform*" (Retallack, Ringrose and Lawrence 2016; Ringrose 2018) for developing feminist affective counter-publics (McCosker 2015). We explain how women develop complex digital literacies, suggesting Twitter

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affords unprecedented participatory access for feminists to engage in politics in their everyday lives. These assertions complicate and trouble ideas of feminism in postfeminist "retreat" as well as ideas that popularized feminism has been watered down to becoming a cheer word without its political bite (Gill 2016). We explore the highly politicized forms of feminism we encounter as we proceed.

Beyond using a discursive frame for looking at representations of types of feminism, we also examine affective relations of performing and navigating feminism in "the network" (Rentschler and Thrift 2015). Our contribution is to map how digital feminism is *actually experienced* through our empirical research with women, girls, and men. Our methodology allowed us to explore: How do self-defined feminists discover and build upon feminist consciousness through their use of Twitter? How does their experience of doing digital feminism shape their experiences of feminism "in real-life," and vice versa? How do they negotiate resistance to their digital feminism and develop practices to manage abuse and trolling?

Our findings provide rich and complex insights into the perceived benefits and platform affordances (Boyd, 2010; Warfield 2016) of using Twitter although we touch upon other platforms such as Tumblr for practicing digital feminist activism. Participants valued the speed, immediacy, global reach, and visibility of Twitter as a pedagogical platform to learn and educate around feminist issues. We also, however, look at how participants understand safety and respond to conflict on Twitter, discussing emergent digital strategies for coping with technologically mediated aggression, trolling, and misogyny (Jane 2017). Throughout, our analysis blends the digital, material, and affective, considering the intermeshing of digital and "real-life" (Kim and Ringrose 2018) as it manifests in discussions of how feminism is affectively produced and defended by our participants (Khoja-Moolji 2015).

Researching Feminist Activism via Twitter

Where the case studies used in chapters 3 and 4 started with mainstream feminist campaigns and identifying trends, participants, and leaders, here, we used Twitter as a medium to recruit self-defined feminists using a bottom-up approach. Bonnie Stewart (2017, 254) notes Twitter has been identified as a useful platform for conducting qualitative research into "situated knowledge's" since it is "based around curated, cultivated identities (Hogan 2010) and their interactions with other entities." We therefore began by conducting a survey through our own Twitter networks. Initially, using our project Twitter handle, we tweeted a survey link, soliciting no responses—largely because we had few followers. We then asked our Research Assistant, a self-defined Twitter feminist

with over 4,000 followers, to retweet the survey link—an effective strategy that generated 47 responses. One of the responses was removed for being "fake" and constituting trolling[1] leaving us with 46 valid survey responses: 4 adult men, 27 adult women, and 15 teenaged girls. Albeit a small sample, the responses were richly descriptive regarding participants' experiences of using Twitter for feminist activism, and specifically to combat rape culture. The survey was used to get a sense of how various feminists use digital spaces such as Twitter to "do" their feminisms. As such, we asked questions regarding how they practiced feminism online and offline, and whether, or how, they challenged sexism and rape culture online; what benefits and risks they associated with digital feminist activism; and if they had ever had negative experiences or been "trolled."

The survey was anonymous, but it invited participants to share their contact details to participate in semi-structured interviews via Skype, email, or in person (see also Stewart 2017). Through this strategy we recruited 21 further responses including 13 Skype interviews, one in-person interview, and seven in-depth follow-up questionnaire responses via email. Perhaps it is unsurprising given the invitation to participate was issued from a UK Twitter feminist account that our 21 in-depth responses comprised of 62 percent (n=13) from the UK/Ireland, 29 percent (n=6) from the US, and only 1 percent (n=1) each from Saudi Arabia and Nigeria. Here we present key findings from all the survey data (n=46) as well as in-depth email questionnaires and interviews from our adult female and male participants (n=14). We explore the in-depth responses from the teenagers who are 18 and under (n=8) in chapter 7, where we group this data together with the additional research we conducted with teenaged girls. We have chosen to explore all the in-depth data from teen feminists together as these findings reveal specific challenges of negotiating rape culture as a teen digital feminist in and around school.

Transcending Space, Extending Reach, Creating Affective Counter-Publics

One of the questions we asked initially in the survey, and again in our interviews, was around participants' views about the benefits of social media such as Twitter for communicating their feminist views to much wider audiences than their immediate social circles:

> The first place I heard about feminism was on the internet. Feminism saved my life. The internet has the ability to reach so many people, and if it can change my life, it can change theirs. I definitely see internet

> feminism as a form of activism with the potential to change society. (Adult female survey respondent)

Recalling our discussions of networked affect (Hillis, Paasonen, and Petit 2016) in chapter 2, we can see how this response credits internet feminism as changing and thereby "saving" her life, demonstrating the dramatic emotional charge and attachment the participant has to her experiences of digital feminism. The potentially huge reach of social media was likewise discussed by many others as crucial in forging social change:

> Twitter allows a greater number of people to engage in debate, it creates greater awareness, it provides a platform to address many issues relating to feminism and allows us to call people out when they make misogynistic comments. Through exposing them on a public forum, we might encourage one to re-evaluate their views and actions and hopefully encourage change. (Adult female survey respondent)

We can see that the digital affordances create the space both for the misogynistic tweet to exist but also for it to be called out. Moreover, the material space of online interaction crosses over into views and actions in the way the respondent describes an ability to expose and re-evaluate one's views. Participants feel adamantly that digital feminism is creating *real material* changes that are part of a complex enmeshing of participants' online and offline experiences (Kember and Zylinska 2012; Warfield 2016).

Another theme that emerged many times throughout the survey and our interviews was the way digital tools were valued for creating feminist connections *across time and space* enabling:

> [T]he potential to connect with others. I have so many like-minded friends on Twitter now that I sometimes forget not everyone is as sensitive and understanding of issues around feminism, gender and trauma as they are. You can get involved in reaching a huge audience without putting yourself too much as risk too, i.e. retweeting or sharing information. (Adult female survey respondent)

Connecting with "like- minded people" was key for enabling participants to forge new friendships, and the potential of reaching or interacting with a "huge audience" was appealing. Furthermore, connecting with other feminists online was viewed as "less risky" than engaging in other forms of offline activism. Our findings therefore highlight how these digital spaces are viewed as crucial for reaching and sharing with audiences sensitive to "traumatic" feminist issues such

as rape culture. Twitter was particularly praised for its ability to transcend other practicalities such as geographic isolation and mental or physical disabilities that inhibit other forms of political participation:

> Visibility is important and Twitter allows feminists to express opinions and share stories that aren't publicised in the mainstream. I'm a believer that the personal is political and if a person can connect to another's story their political views can be changed. Internet activism is also useful for activists with mental or physical disabilities who may not be able to attend protests and meetings. (Adult female survey respondent)

Here we can see the respondent describing what Papacharissi (2015) via Nancy Fraser has called networked "counter publics" reaching previously excluded populations. It is the digital affordances of global reach, speed, immediacy, dialogue, visibility, engagement, contact, connection, and collectivity (van Djick 2013) that are all noted as important and enabling this counter-public, and for feminists to "express opinions." These statements are not only about practical benefits: they also highlight the affective force of digital feminism to "share stories" as a means of changing views and creating what McCosker (2015) specifically calls "affective counter publics." This feeling of sharing has historically been a key aspect of feminist consciousness-raising. It is affectively experienced here as a *networked* process of sharing in a visible way online, but with direct embodied impacts (Hillis, Paasonen, and Petit 2015; Rentschler and Thrift 2015). For instance, another participant said online feminism "is good for my heart"—a sentiment that speaks to both the physical and mental benefits of such engagement. Others talked about feelings of deep "satisfaction" when their feminist content or posts were shared or supported by others. Some opened up about how the internet provided an outlet to "express feelings otherwise stored away"—so that it may provide the only channel for participating in such discussions.

But it was not only sharing around building consensus that was valued but the enabling of a range of diverse voices participating in creating "counter-publics." Alternatives to dominant norms of exclusion and the capacity for inclusion of marginalized groups on Twitter was voiced repeatedly:

> Historically women have had little to no way to meet up and to discuss and share ideas, which has arguably lead to a narrow and white feminism being dominant, yet now through social media being accessible for many it is so much more easier to share ideas, to discuss and develop feminism, to help others through advice and through petitions, through raising awareness, and through holding others to a higher

> standard and pointing out others inexcusable misogyny. (Adult female survey respondent)

Women's historical exclusion from the public sphere and political debates are explained through reference to accessibility, ability, race, and class privilege through what we might term an "intersectional" lens. This intersectional perspective draws upon important interventions made by feminist women of color since the early 1980s (Crenshaw 1991; hooks 1981; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981). Munro (2013) for example claims that intersectionality is one of the key hallmarks of a digital fourth wave of feminism. Independent of the wave analogy what is significant is the clear reference to the *normalization* of an intersectional critique of "white feminism," judged as too narrow, which is an important discursive trend in some of the responses. This discursive trend is significant not only because it signals participants' investment in an intersectional view of inequality and calls for political change, but also their critique of a postfeminist, celebrity or "popular" feminism that is not inclusive (Loza 2014).

This theme of how social media enabled our participants to connect with other feminists beyond local, regional, or national borders, breaking through community, cultural, or family norms emerged strongly with one of our interview participants. Pauline, 24, is a Canadian-born Filipino woman living in Saudi Arabia. As someone with a very interesting transnational background, she uses blogging and other social media tools to discuss feminism across borders. Pauline believes that digital spaces are particularly important for women in Saudi Arabia, as they offer "a way for people to connect because they can't do so in [real life] public, because the genders are separated, or can't really gather in public together. So people *really, really* connect online." Here it is clear how the online space provides a feminist digital counter-public to the specific political context in question.

In a similar vein, Anwuli, 42, from Nigeria, recalls how:

> A lot of people are ignorant about what feminism stands for especially in the society from which I come. Most Nigerian men and women consider feminism as a western construct and see the movement almost as an affectation especially in women of certain classes. But with social media I have been able to point out the everyday things people do unthinkingly that reinforce the patriarchy and also show people how the patriarchy does not only hurt women.

Because Anwuli's family and friends make her feel she is "crazy" for her feminist views, social media provides an opportunity to connect with like-minded feminists whom she would otherwise be unable to communicate with in her

local context. Digital feminist connection does not only, however, enable those living in more gender-traditional societies to connect with feminist counter-publics. Participants talked about how digital spaces helped feminists bridge national divides. For example, Nura, 19, from the North of England commented on the connective possibilities of Twitter, noting that it allowed her to "Speak to feminists everywhere rather than just in your town and it means you can read about stuff you wouldn't know about." As Monica a 26-year-old disabled activist from the North of England said, "it's often the case that many protests and marches happen in London." Digital tools enable her to participate and support these events online. Contrary to arguments about feminist slacktivism (Guillard 2016) where digital engagement is positioned as less meaningful than physically attending marches or protests, Monica views online participation as a "really important part of being an activist" and Twitter as a particularly important way of connecting to movements, discussions, or events that physical limitations might otherwise have prevented. Thus, we can see strong evidence of a counter-public being created through expanding the boundaries of *digital inclusion* and participation in feminist debate and dialogue opened up to disabled activists and other groups.

A Relatively Safe Space?

For many decades now, feminists have been interested in creating "safe spaces" free from violence, harassment, and judgment through which feminists could speak truths and collectively develop strategies for resistance oppression (Harris 2005; Sarachild 1978). In recent years, scholars are increasingly paying attention to the various strategies feminists are developing for carving out and in some cases "reappropriating social media platforms" (Clark-Parsons 2017, 3). And while some have pointed out the inherently aggressive architecture of the internet (Harvey 2016), others are noting the ways feminists "negotiate" the technological affordances and limitations available on social media platforms to "produce and enforce" notions of safety (Clark-Parsons 2017, 3). Despite research that has noted Twitter is hostile to woman who are subject to disproportionate amounts of trolling and aggression (Jane 2017) our participants said Twitter was actually part of "safe" online spaces in which they could not only "explore new ideas" but meet "like-minded" people and access feminist news, ideas, and communities, which, for a variety of reasons, are not accessible in their day-to-day lives.

Alison, 40, from the Midlands, UK, explained that she used Twitter to share feminist views, rather than platforms such as Facebook, which she saw as better suited for connecting with family and friends:

> Twitter is my main forum for, you know, my feminist activism. . . . I tend to find that Twitter's a really good medium to get a point across. . . . Personally, it's a good way for me to be sort of anonymous. . . . So, I like my Twitter account. You can talk to people, you can have conversations with people and you can block most people who give you grief.

She prefers Twitter because its "platform affordances" (Boyd, 2010; Warfield 2016) enable relative anonymity from her family and friends, which makes her feel she "can speak more about what I believe in and that." Similarly, 19-year-old college student Lena from London is part of what she terms a "global, intersectional feminist group" on Twitter. This group operates a joint account that is comprised of 40 women from around the world. The group uses digital tools such as Twitter, blogs, podcasts, and SoundCloud to spread their feminist news and views. The international women's group has both public and some private sections. Again, she notes the public-facing aspects use podcasts, music mixes, Twitter, and blog posts to make women feel "less isolated" and connected to an alternative public space. The private part involves a group chat of supportive advice. This creates what we could call a form of "mediated intimacy" (Atwood, Hakim, and Winch 2017; Barker, Gill, and Harvey 2018), or perhaps we could call it mediated intersectional feminist consciousness-raising. Here, members talk about their lived problems through platforms such as Twitter, creating a sense of comfort and safety to explore issues around "diversity" where they feel there is common ground and understanding (Ahmed 2017). Lena feels that this way "there's a lot less judgement than if you were to talk to your friends about it [feminism]."

As others have shown, this ability to "speak without judgment" is highly valued among feminists. Despite the ways it has been noted that "no digital space can ever be truly safe for all participants at all times" (Clark-Parsons 2017, 18), our participants value certain spaces that they affectively experience as *more safe* than others. This is not wholly safe, but relatively safe, and they quickly learn to identify spaces that are safer than others. For example, Lucas, a 24-year-old male law student from the Midlands, UK, sees Twitter as his key channel for learning about feminism as a man, where he could follow accounts somewhat anonymously initially, plugging into a counter-public to find information. His initial introduction to the movement came through Twitter after feminist content appeared on his timeline when retweeted by a female friend. The content resonated with him and he began to identify as a feminist shortly after, asking his friend to recommend other feminist Twitter users to follow. He says:

> Twitter is great for engaging with feminism because it helps people find other like-minded individuals. By tweeting, retweeting and following,

> it is an easy way to get your message across and demonstrate allegiance with specific views. It also however, leads to hate and "e-bile" on social media.

Lucas points out that although Twitter enables him to connect with like-minded individuals, it also comes with the risk of encountering mediated abuse. But he also noted that he would be more afraid to voice these opinions in offline spaces, making a critical point that "online is safer, but not safe." Unlike women, however, as we will explore later in this chapter, he also notes that his "male privilege" means that the feminist issues he's exploring online rarely come up in his offline interactions with men.

How Feminists Use Twitter as a Pedagogical Platform

While the previous section provides insight into perceived benefits of using digital tools in their feminist activism connecting to a counter-public, this section addresses how our participants use these tools, and for what purpose. From our interviews and surveys, we discovered that educating themselves, peers, classmates, family, friends, the public, and even anonymous trolls is one of the ways our participants articulated what it means to b*e* a feminist and do feminism in digital spaces. As scholars have noted, educating others is crucial to many feminists' understanding of what it means to be a feminist in a digital age, and to engage with feminist politics (Fotopoulou 2016a). These practices have been well charted, for instance, through affordances of feminist blogging (Keller 2015). We conceive of Twitter as a "pedagogical platform" (Retallack, Ringrose, and Lawrence 2016) for feminism exploring the educative practices as enacting a type of "digital public pedagogy" and mediated connective learning (Trifonas 2012). Twitter as an educational space was discussed at length by our participants. At a basic level Twitter was viewed as key for "opening the idea of feminism to those who don't identify as feminist or didn't know what it was." As one survey respondent wrote, Twitter might enable followers to "MAYBE EVEN become advocates" (Adult female survey respondent, capitalized letters original). Several participants spoke in almost evangelical terms of *converting* non-feminists (nonbelievers) to feminists and showing them the light. Although this practice of converting non-feminists was by no means universal among our participants, several recounted their successes. As one participant stated: "I have successfully 'converted' two of my friends into becoming big feminists and am working on my third!" (Adult female survey respondent). Perhaps, then, there

is a fine line between educating and regulating others, and we can see the pedagogical potential of participatory media, but underlying this are the ideological tensions and the policing of views created in counter-publics.

This also emerged among the 33 percent (n=14) of the survey respondents who were teenagers attending secondary school who argued Twitter provided knowledge and opportunities for learning and dialogue that was simply not available anywhere else:

> [Twitter] is a platform that isn't available in school or in other aspects of my life. It allows me to show knowledge to those unaware as well as learn more myself. (Teen girl survey respondent)
>
> I mostly tweet and retweet about what I find to be misogynistic. What I really think makes the most impact from my account, is that there are people from school I know following me that don't share my beliefs. The fact that they're seeing my opinions, is hopefully making them realize that these things are issues, and we have a responsibility to care about them. (Teen girl survey respondent)

These comments show how these girls feel that they may be able to use social media information gleaned from platforms such as Twitter to educate their peers in and around school (see also Kim and Ringrose 2018; Retallack, Ringrose, and Lawrence 2016). Indeed, in the second quote this is highlighted as a central motivating factor in operating a Twitter account. Another respondent noted:

> I think the biggest benefit of using social media for my feminism is the fact that it helps me feel as if I'm making a difference, and interacting with a community, on a daily basis. In my high school environment, it's easy to forget that there are other people out there with the same progressive beliefs as me; the ability to interact with other feminists reminds me that there's still hope. (Teen girl survey respondent)

The experience of feeling alone in one's feminist beliefs as a teenager at school and finding "hope" through Twitter is a powerful testament to the affective capacity of a counter-public providing a sense of community and support, which we'll explore further in chapter 7.

Educating others through digital media was something mentioned frequently by our higher education students as well. For instance, Monica, a 26-year-old disabled feminist activist who lives in the North of England, is a student and blogger who runs a feminist website hosting contributions of many feminist writers. She also moderates a Facebook group for disabled women that has become a popular support group of about 700 members. When we asked about her

social media practices, Monica explained that she turned to platforms such as Twitter when she has "something to rant about [laugh]," or for retweeting other feminist accounts: "It's an outlet but also I like to think that I'm educating at the same time. Like, it gets my opinion out there and hopefully trying to challenge opinions."

Participants spoke at length about the importance of digital media to improve their own feminist understandings such as "educat[ing] myself about feminism and RT [re-tweeting] intelligent, thought provoking and humorous viewpoints with a hope of spreading awareness" (Adult female survey respondent). Lucas (24, Midlands, UK), who was also a university student spoke extensively about how he used Twitter to educate himself about feminist political issues such as austerity measures, poverty and pay gaps for women, and the need to address gender discrimination in schools globally. While he finds Twitter crucial for self-education, he found Tweeting about feminism himself as a man complicated. For example, he argues that male feminists are treated differently on Twitter, highlighting how: "they are praised for saying the same things as women." Lucas finds this frustrating. He highlights the issue of "mansplaining," identified in chapter 3, "where men speak condescendingly to women and explain simple things in patronising ways that both exert their dominance in the area, and belittle women." Here we can see that being positioned as a male feminist opens different sites of tension around the work of educating oneself and others. The male respondents report a less obvious sense of solidarity with other self-identified feminists online, as we will continue to explore.

These experiences of engaging with and developing feminist consciousness online created a range of clashes in digital feminists' everyday relationships with colleagues, family, and friends. The tension between their online feminist community, where they could share views and opinions and get support, contrasted strongly with experiences of dismissal by significant others in their everyday lives:

> Most of my offline friends wouldn't identify as [feminist]. I have been really surprised and disheartened, when talking to them about feminism, by their reluctance to acknowledge the socially constructed nature of femininity and the influence of culture on behaviours/practices that they consider entirely free choices. I have found this frustrating, and at times upsetting because I have come away from some conversations feeling as though the problem lies with me—as though I'm imagining things, that it's about my personal issues, that I'm over-sensitive and so on. This has encouraged me to get more involved with feminism online, where I have found support and realised that I'm not alone. (Adult female survey respondent)

Again, the issue of "feeling alone" in one's feminist views and feeling upset by cultures of sexism among friends and family as well as at work, school, and university further underscores the importance of Twitter for providing an alternative mediated space and affective solidarity and support (Hemmings 2012).

Several teens described experiencing trouble with hostile peer groups at school when they expressed their feminist views. As one explained, "Most of the negativity I've experienced online has been from people that actually know me from school." Another confirmed "The worst problems are in school. One person related my feminist tweet to fascism. Others made sarcastic remarks. . . . Some would make 'jokes' that they know are sexist/racist." This respondent also noted that she felt persecuted by peers for being Jewish. The teenaged respondents spoke about the Men's Rights Activists (MRA) discourses circulating in peer groups, which they had to contend with. One reported her concern about the "extreme backlash of 'meninism' "—an MRA identity of defending men against feminism. Another had tried to discuss meninism on her Twitter account but said:

> [T]wo girls who actually go to the same school as me made fun of some of my anti-meninist tweets and tweeted rude things about me online. When I called them out for their rude behavior, they threatened to turn me into the school for online bullying/harassment!! I ended up blocking them. (Teen girl survey respondent)

We return to the dynamics of teens encountering anti-feminist hostility in school in chapter 7, but what is important here is how the teens are directly engaging with and experiencing the meninism discourse but also finding ways to navigate it. As another teen girl reported: "Every single day I work towards improving my education and speech enough to be able to come back at anti-feminists, misogynists, racists, etc like fire with my arguments." We can see her passionate attachment to developing her pedagogical message and some of the difficulties of being both feminist and young and defending one's views as we continue to explore in chapter seven (see also Ringrose and Renold 2016a).

Beyond Twitter, several participants had their own YouTube channels or contributed to blogs, which they argued provided more flexible pedagogical strategies for disseminating their feminist views. Anwuli, 42, from Nigeria, is another example of the ways participants often managed several social media platforms, even operating multiple accounts within the same platform. Anwuli has a personal blog that she uses to discuss her activism work, such as her mobile library project bringing books to isolated communities, while also curating a Nigerian feminist blog. Pauline, 24, from Saudi Arabia, explained how she contributes to multiple feminist blogs. In some blog posts,

she recounts experiences of sexism, while in others, she has attempted to make diverse women's experiences more visible. Inspired by the concept of Humans of New York, a photoblog that documents the everyday lives of citizens of New York City, Pauline started documenting women's experiences in the Saudi Arabian context, asking: "how can we go about inserting women back into the national narrative, visual narrative or city narrative, you know, how can we introduce their stories?" She created a photojournalism project on women's shoes in Saudi Arabia, because as she explained "mostly women wore all black whether the Abaya, the Hijab, or the Niqab . . . the only thing that you can see that stands out is their shoes." She took photographs of women's shoes, which she linked to their individual stories, which she articulates as an explicit feminist strategy to get away from constructions of these women as apolitical and having no voice. She then shared these storied images on the internet through her blog, Twitter, and Instagram.

Danny, 30, from New York is a musician who uses Twitter and other social media to promote her music but also to educate others about sexism, which she says is rife in the music industry. In our interview, she explains how she expresses her feminism through her songs and educates others through a song circle empowerment music group for women:

> The last few years I've been really, really, focused on my music as a vehicle to empower women and lift them up. . . . That's like my mission in life right now. . . . It's all about inspiring women.

Calling herself a "social justice bard," in one of her album posts, Danny wrote a song referencing US president Donald Trump, and his treatment of women, which she said contributed to "rape culture," challenging his behavior in her line: "If you grab me I will make you pay!" Danny explained music is her way of raising her voice and concern, and encourages others to do the same, in whatever way they feel safe, but the way she connects and spreads her feminist music and challenges to rape culture is via social media such as Twitter.

Challenging Rape Culture

All but two of our 46 survey respondents stated they used digital technologies to challenge rape culture, drawing on a wide range of strategies and practices. Due to limited space, we have selected a few key examples that demonstrate the plurality of practices, experiences, and strategies used. As Fotopoulou reminds us, "Feminist activism is not only one thing. . . . it is a complex set of identities and

cultures, whose different investments in, and practices with, media technologies mean different organisational structures and even political priorities" (2016, 1). Several participants explained that they engaged in discussions of rape culture by strategically engaging in debates around celebrities, popular culture, and sport:

> I try to take part in ongoing discussion about rape culture, like Taylor Swift being called a "slut" etc from writing about the men she has dated and trying to explain to some people just what exactly rape culture is and how it infects far more than people either realize or want to realize. (Adult female survey participant)

Others challenged rape culture by tweeting "statistics, pictures and graphs, and simply quotes challenging the normalization of rape culture and misogyny in our society" (Adult female survey participant). Our male participants specifically highlighted using Twitter to educate other men about rape culture. Peter, 28, a violence prevention worker from Ohio, explained how he tries to educate men in his Twitter feed and intervene in the sexism he witnesses online, saying:

> I regularly tweet about masculinity and manhood and try to centre my tweets around engaging men . . . on all issues related to rape culture. I also use Facebook to share articles. . . . I try and address tweets about feminism to men who share my identities.

Rob, a 47-year-old professor from Michigan, says he follows feminists on Twitter to help challenge rape culture, which he defines as:

> [T]he barrage of social cues that educate boys and men to feel entitled to the attention and the physical bodies of girls and women, while educating girls and women to please or accommodate other people's needs and to grant access to their bodies for others.

Rob also argued that feminists need to "keep challenging myths and assumptions about 'women lying' or men's inability to control sexual urges, educate people about rape culture and rape myths . . . ideally there would be consent curriculum in primary school." Peter noted similarly:

> Rape culture is an issue men have to tackle because all men benefit from rape culture, when a man rapes a woman the media will paint a sympathetic picture towards men. They will say an "aspiring athlete and an aspiring student" to describe an alleged rapist.

We see how these male participants are working to redefine the responsibility of rape culture away from women and victim blaming logics onto men, putting feminist critiques into motion through their practices.

Women were faced with significantly more difficult negotiations around whether they ought to try to educate others about rape culture through drawing upon personal experiences of sexual violence. Personal disclosure was deemed an important tactic in trying to persuade others about prevalence, or when trying to prevent further harm:

> I spent the first 27 of my 32 years being used and abused. Raped before my periods even started. I share my experiences and my opinions which are based on my experience and what I have read and spoken about with others who want to challenge rape culture. I actually told-off a bunch of women off on Facebook today for being totally awful about someone of their own gender. (Adult female survey respondent)

As another participant shared, "I once discussed my experience with rape on my timeline when one of my followers was trying to slut shame a girl that has just been raped" (Adult female survey respondent). Personal disclosure was viewed as risky and opening oneself up to a range of potential abuse. Some of our participants discussed a complex process of deciding whether to disclose, and if so how to communicate traumatic personal experiences. Despite her involvement with her intersectional women's group, Lena (19, London) viewed Twitter as unsafe for sharing her personal experiences of rape, given its high visibility. She used Tumblr instead, arguing it was a relatively safe and anonymous way of tackling her experience of being raped by her boyfriend the previous year. Through Tumblr, she shared two "rape poems" written in quick succession of one another as seen in Figures 5.1 and 5.2.

Lena turned to Tumblr when her friends and family disbelieved that her boyfriend could have raped her:

> Not everyone is confident enough to speak in person. But online you can and it's much easier . . . like voice things that you might be scared to in person. Like for example writing my poems and talking about rape. I'm talking about things that I've not even yet told my mum, sort of thing.

Lena explained these posts on Tumblr were an important part of the "painful process" of coming to recognize her experience as rape. Lena's experiences of others disbelief relate to Linda Alcoff's (2018) work on victim rhetoric and the epistemic fallacy around rape, which she explains as a cross cultural and

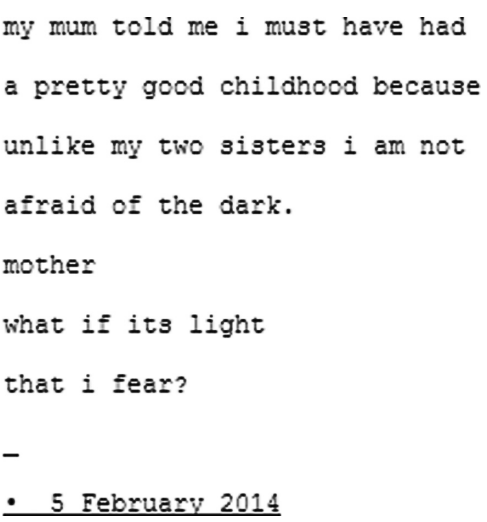

Figure 5.1 Rape Poem 1. Author screenshot.

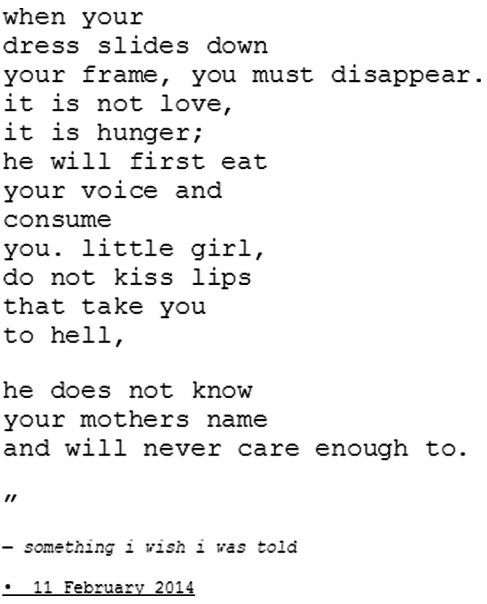

Figure 5.2 Rape Poem 2. Author screenshot.

society-wide tendency to challenge and disbelieve women and girls who position themselves as victims of sexual violence. Tumblr is the online space deemed more safe and anonymous for beginning the painful process of sharing, expressing, and working through her experiences, without fear of mass sharing and therefore of exposure and its risks (Cho 2016; Kanai 2017; Warfield 2016).

Does Fear, Hostility and Trolling Dominate Twitter?

As Lena's fear of Twitter alludes to, and as we've already discussed in chapter 1 of this book, Twitter has been widely critiqued for its hostility, with hate speech increasingly normalized, and women disproportionately targeted by trolls, due to its communicative structures that allow any public user to directly @ one another (Jane 2017; Megarry 2014). Trolling and online abuse were widely experienced by the survey respondents with 72 percent (n= 34) experiencing negativity, hostility, or trolling in response to their feminism and challenges to rape culture online.[2] This online abuse and trolling ranged in nature from being personally attacked around appearance, to sexual orientation and their feminist views and values:

> I have lost followers, been called an "ignorant woman," "man-hater" and "lesbian" in debates with regards to feminist issues. (Adult female survey respondent)
>
> I've had men be aggressively hostile, abusive and trolling—all unprovoked. I rarely enter into a dialogue, yet have had to block men who deliberately searched keywords and were randomly abusive. (Adult female survey respondent)

A significant number of the responses (26 percent) also included violent threats and sexual violence, which they said ranged "From serious rational arguments, to insults directed at me being stupid/ugly/a whore, to actual threats of violence & rape." Another said:

> I get called a bitch and an ugly whore pretty much weekly. I was also told that I deserved to be raped and that that would be the only way I'd ever get laid and that I should be grateful. (Adult female survey respondent)

Scholars have identified how women's experiences of trolling often include sexual degradation and threats of sexual violence and rape (Henry and Powell 2017; Jane 2017). Some of our participants had come to view overt aggression that regressed into sexual threats as "sad" and "predictable," noting the repeated issues of:

> Anti-feminists popping up in response to a RT/comment/discussion and quite aggressively belittling the feminist point of view. Very rarely, if ever, do they respectfully challenge—rather they attempt to bully/dominate by demanding evidence/proof etc, and telling us in no

> uncertain terms that we are wrong. At best it's sarcastic and patronizing, at worst it's offensive—for example making reference to those who object to pornography as ugly/jealous/needing to be f**ked. (Adult female survey respondent)

Danny, 30, from New York City, described being trolled the first time she tweeted a personal experience of being sexually harassed. Danny reported receiving negative comments from men who asked her "what do you expect,?" and that she deserved what she got. This links again to Lena's fear about tweeting about her personal experiences of rape, and Danny says she now expects this kind of abuse in response to her posts, making an important point that such trolling is "*actually a part of rape culture.*" She went on to add how she was also particularly prone to receiving "bad comments" when:

> I'm challenging like patriarchal society and privilege. Like white privilege, male privilege, if I use those words I get a lot of things coming back at me. And on Twitter I was recently using the #ShoutingBack hashtag and a lot of women supporting each other . . . but there were also really horrible men actively searching through that hashtag to find us and individually harass us.

Danny also shared that after multiple bouts of harassment she changed her tactics from trying to positively engage with trolls online to simply blocking them, noting:

> Over the last couple of years, I've gotten into these really dark conversations with people where I'm clearly not educating them. It's just that they're going to keep harassing me and trying to push any button they can. So, I've become a little more willing to just hit the block button and avoid the conversation.

Alison, 43, from the North of England, disclosed a significant and prolonged case of trolling related to the Ched Evans case in England[3] where Twitter played a significant part in revealing the identity of the victim:

> Within hours of him being found guilty, obviously his family and friends had taken to Facebook and had broken the anonymity of his victim. And obviously, that's not something we can tolerate, you know, that's not something that legally is okay. And morally it's wrong as well. And on Twitter, I'm quite an outspoken person, I tend to say my views.

In response, Alison started tweeting her view that Evans "shouldn't be allowed to play football again ever," to which she immediately began to experience repeated trolling from one account continuously tweeting misogynistic and abusive comments and following and reporting women including Alison. As she later discovered, this male troll had a history of getting involved in such situations, and not letting go.

Initially, Alison ignored him, and then despite blocking him, he began creating new accounts to tweet her. Eventually, she contacted the managing director of UK Twitter, whom she worked with to cancel any account he was making. From December 2013 until our interview in July 2015, Alison estimates he has probably made about 200 accounts: "he just gets an account taken down and then he restarts another one." In addition to reporting this troll to Twitter, Alison went to the police after the troll found a photograph of her, an address and her university where she was studying, and created a fake Twitter account in her name. This sustained campaign impacted her mental health, and she describes the whole experience as "a nightmare." Unfortunately, the police were unable to do much, and suggested the best thing was for her to leave Twitter; widespread cases of women leaving Twitter to protect themselves have been shown to be a significant effect of trolling (Jane 2017). In the end, Alison and another Twitter feminist contacted a barrister and solicitor who took up their case pro bono, to work with Interpol to catch him. Eighteen months after the ordeal began, Twitter changed their account policy to make it more difficult for people like him to create new accounts. In our interview, Alison felt that her own communication with the UK Twitter branch had helped make the company realize how serious these situations are. In her own words:

> I think it has made a difference because he's seen it's gotten to a point where I've been so angry at Twitter for allowing this to go on, giving him sort of ideas that we need to stop it from happening, you need to implement things to stop this happening.

Strategies to Manage Trolls

Just as the feminist organizers in chapter 4 developed a range of strategies to manage or avoid trolls, so too did the feminists using Twitter to whom we spoke. As Fotopoulou (2016, 1) notes, feminists navigate between "articulations of opportunity and realisations of impossibility" that they must judge on a case-by-case basis and constantly re-evaluate. Rather than assume women disappear or become silenced, many think carefully about if or when to intervene, and weigh

up the consequences or energy in doing so. Like our respondents in chapter 4, many participants shared that they purposefully chose not to respond because they wished to avoid being attacked. One survey respondent explained that she didn't experience a lot of trolling because:

> I pre-empt it and hold my virtual tongue. I retweet a variety of topics of Twitter but rarely share my own personal opinions or join in discussion with potentially harsh and hostile strangers. Though I have had hostile tweets aimed my way now and again. (Adult female survey respondent)

Others explained that their lack of trolling was because they "have barely any followers . . . too far under the radar." As we will see in chapter 7, many younger feminists in schools have in fact taken to using hidden backchannels to engage with feminism, as these visible public-facing mediums were seen as too hostile, dangerous, and unsafe.

It is also worth noting that some of our participants experienced chronic mental health problems, and while they perhaps *followed* feminists in digital spaces, were reticent to share feminist views themselves. As one participant said: "I know I'm not resilient enough to cope with trolls, so I don't put myself out there much. I have so much respect for women who do" (Adult female survey respondent). These findings complicate celebratory notions that engaging in digital feminist activism is easy or that a digital counter-public is wholly safe, comforting, and inclusive. Instead we have a growing picture of the ways various inequalities beyond simple access or literacy prevent some groups from participating as fully as they would like in online public debate and creating feminist counter-publics, raising age-old questions about the role of women in the public sphere, given the range tactics to dissuade their participation (Salter 2013; 2016). Indeed, as we discuss in chapter 7, our research shows the ways that engaging as a digital feminist activist requires a certain level of resilience, confidence, and "thick skin," which may also relate to degrees of privilege. We see complex strategies of building digital literacies—where women learn to navigate the "risks" of online trolls through trial and error and through their experiences, and make complex judgments and employ highly creative strategies to manage the negative impact of trolls.

Sarah, a 42-year-old school consultant from London is an avid sporting fan of football, cricket, and boxing. Like other participants, Sarah runs two Twitter accounts, a personal one as well as a sporting Twitter account about boxing, through which she has actively challenged rape jokes and "lads." In our interview, she explained how she witnessed and intervened in various forms of trolling, including one Twitter discussion where a group of boys attacked a woman for making a sexually explicit comment. After intervening, the boys then turned

on Sarah saying "I hope you die. I hope you hang yourself." Although many of our participants shared feelings of anxiety, fear, and anger in response to trolling, as Sarah explained, she "kept her cool" and used innovative ways to confront the trolling:

> I had a look on their profiles and stupidly they had their full names and they had the names of their school. So, I did a bit of googling and the most abusive one I messaged him back and I said oh what would Mr. So and So—which is the name of his headteacher think? "Oh, I'm very sorry miss, I'm very sorry." They all deleted their tweets and they scampered.

Here we see Sarah engaging in what Jane (2017) calls "digilante" (digital vigilante) tactics of taking justice into her own hands by threatening the boys with reporting them to their school authority. Despite this example, however, Sarah felt that it was often useless to intervene, as some "lads" are "glorifying in the attention" from even receiving negative responses to content such as rape jokes. As Sarah explained, "a lot of it is just attention seeking and they will say anything, whether its anti-woman or just plain stupid, just to get attention . . . naively, I think it's just some sad creature locked in his bedroom somewhere." While Sarah as an adult felt confident to confront these boys, as we see in chapter 7 it was not as easy for the teens we spoke to deal with threats to "kill yourself."

It is interesting that Sarah, like some of the organizers we spoke with in chapter 4 positions these trolls as "sad" or "lonely" or teenage boys in their mom's basements. As research on MRAs (Ging 2017) and new forms of dominant "geek masculinity" (Salter and Blodgett 2017) demonstrate, many of these men are middle class, have good jobs, families, and are well educated. Thus, we need to dispel these normative assumptions about who may engage in mediated abuse and interrogate how trolling is not an isolated and individualized practice, but instead is a well organized and connected movement spreading misogyny and vitriol in response to feminism (Jane 2017).

Despite some of their stated aims to educate other men through their uses of Twitter and social media, three of the four men participants felt that they had inadequate strategies for addressing or intervening into Twitter trolling. For example, Lucas (24, Midlands, UK) argued passionately that the:

> [O]nus of challenging rape culture falls [on] . . . Male feminists especially straight cis ones need to relentlessly tackle the status quo regarding rape and sexual assault and force upon younger generations that it is a man's duty not to rape not a woman's duty not to be raped.

However, when it came to concretely challenging comments online, Lucas explained that he "wouldn't feel comfortable intervening" unless he personally knew the "girl" being targeted. In contrast to some of the others, he explained he did not want to educate (other men) as he feels "it's not worth it." He fears (rightfully so perhaps) of being subjected to sarcastic comments and banter from his male friends or other men on Twitter, who see this type of "white knighting," where men stand up for women online, as "beta male" activism, as just a ploy to get female attention. Here we can see Lucas explicitly referencing MRA language of beta males, so-called lesser men who cannot compete with alphas (Ging 2017). Lucas discussed having a group of friends from school who mock him and tell him to "shut up" if he calls himself a feminist. As he explained, within his circle of friends, being called a "feminist" is a generic insult for men, and is akin to being called a "dick." Lucas says he feels defeated from male peers' "banter," their views that feminism is "some kind of evil cult," and his friends "refusing to listen," which appears to have immobilized him. Although he has tried to show his male friends how feminism can help them, he is "exhausted from trying," and has given up after reaching a point of no longer being able to continue. He suffers the common state of affective exhaustion or fatigue (Ahmed 2017) from doing "diversity work" such as feminism amidst hostile rejection, belittling, and shaming of his views. These findings are similar to the types of defeat and exhaustion experienced by some of our professional woman activists in chapter 4, but provide specific insight into the emotional labor required to perform as a "male feminist" on Twitter.

Like Lucas, Stan, 23, from the North of England said he had received a "moderate" amount of trolling, but none that is comparable to that directed toward women: "Men's rights activists have harassed me on occasion often if supporting a women friend who is being targeted. Normally they call me a 'beta' or tell me to kill myself." Again, we see reference to key MRA terms such as "beta" (inferior masculinity) to shame male feminists, as well as violent threats, although these are not sexually violent as are those directed at women. Stan says that he blocks trolls and reserves commenting on his friends' use of "casual sexist jokes/behaviors." Similarly, Rob (47, Michigan) also shied away from direct confrontation on Twitter as he was concerned about his academic job as a professor, and the ease of Twitter "for hostile people (trolls) to contact you in social media environments." He worried that "Ideas or opinions have been used to bully or even fire academics," noting that this meant he kept his interventions "more low level challenging of sexist assumptions in myself and others." Evading conflict and blocking, rather than responding or engaging with sexism are the dominant strategies here.

Peter (28, Ohio), a trained violence prevention worker, was our only male participant who tried to purposefully call out other men on their sexism on Twitter:

> I also try and collect trolls in people's mentions and call out sexism when it's on display in responses to news articles. I think it's important for two reasons: 1) for women to see that men care, and 2) that other men know a man will call them on their sexism when it's likely that has never happened before.

Peter, more than any of the other participants had seriously engaged with and explored "masculine privilege" and articulated further how he possessed the ability to challenge males:

> If it's someone who is clearly uneducated and has never thought of feminist issues, I try and engage that person—especially if it's a fellow man. I believe that men's roles within feminism vary, but in large part we are supposed to educate other men, collect men who are trolling women, and educate those men. Even though it's burdensome, it's our burden to bear. One thing about cishet [sic] male privilege is it affords us the ability to respond to misogyny without, generally, being stalked or harassed to the point of going offline. In general, I engage less because I think it's going to change that man's mind, and more because I want women to see there is a man who will show up for them and defend them against these kinds of attacks, and equally important, for men to see that it is possible for a man to challenge another man's sexism and it is necessary. Role modelling anti-sexist behaviors is incredibly important to me. If it's someone clearly trying to get a rise out of me and 'troll, I generally just tell them to fuck off and block them.

Peter's nuanced replies here again underscores that calling out men is "a burden" that takes an "emotional toll." Much like the professional activists in chapter 4, however, he believes that *taking on* this burden is critical for changing consciousness. He went on to argue that challenging "micro-aggressions" and the language men use was the most important thing to "call out," and that men needed to do the "emotional labor of unlearning misogyny and sexism." What we find striking is that he is the only man in our data to be able to articulate this dimension of his masculine privilege (Kimmel 2013). Peter has also worked out a complex strategy to identity those men who are simply trying to get a rise whom he'd block and those who seem educable, returning us to the interesting pedagogical dynamics that evolve on Twitter. Exploring how we can encourage awareness of

these sophisticated techniques to weed through and sort out how to deal with a wide range of discourses comprising mediated misogyny (Vickery and Everbach 2018) and technologically facilitated sexual violence (Powell and Henry 2017, and to confront diverse "hybrid" forms of toxic masculinity (Blodgett and Salter 2017; Ging 2017) is an important thread we return to in the conclusion to this book.

Implications for the Arguments in the Book

In this chapter, we have shown the dramatic and life-changing affordances of Twitter to connect globally diverse feminists across time and space. These findings have important implications that challenge the idea that feminism is being "popularized" in ways that render women's participation as any less politically charged and invested in social struggle than in previous eras (Banet-Weiser 2018; Gill 2017). We saw that the ways feminism was being debated, discussed, and practiced was largely conceived as activism, and the relationship it had to changing manifold relations in our participants' lives were discussed at length. In this way, we think our findings also complicate dystopic theories of "communicative capitalism" (Dean 2009), which suggest that social media is encouraging individualized fantasies of change rather than genuine material transformations of social relations.

We demonstrated how our participants experienced Twitter as extremely positive in generating community, connection, and support for feminist views, arguing we understand them as generating a digital counter-public. Twitter afforded capacities for forging collective understanding and sharing to transcend physical boundaries and extend geographical space. Our findings challenge the notion that while Twitter may give the illusion of collective change, this is an affective feeling *rather than* material effects (Papacharissi 2015). The technological affordances of Twitter were therefore found to be key in connecting with like-minded people one can "identify with" online as part of solidifying affective counter-publics (McCosker 2015).

We outlined the pedagogical dimensions and affordances of Twitter as a platform identified by participants as essential for engaging and educating others around issues such as rape culture. Participating in digital feminist activism on Twitter was not entirely positive of course, since all the participants had knowledge of or had experienced negativity and/or "trolling" (Jane 2017; Shaw 2014). We saw that speaking out about rape culture proved more emotionally draining for women and girls, especially if they referenced their *personal experiences* of sexual victimization, which was viewed as one of the riskiest activities online, something we will explore in much greater depth in

the following chapter. As with chapter 4, we also found significant evidence that continuously engaging with high levels of trolling and conflict was exhausting and defeating as we saw with Alison in relation to the Ched Evans case, and Lucas in relation to combatting anti-feminism, and the shaming of his masculinity from his young adult male peers. Indeed, also significant was the finding that despite their rhetorical claims about wanting to challenge rape culture online, only one of the men, a trained violence prevention worker, felt confident enough to engage and challenge men on online platforms, which raises important questions about what types of strategies can be adopted to fight back against trolls but also how men can learn to engage around issues of sexism and toxic masculinity in everyday life. What we were able to demonstrate was the developing digital literacies and how our participants had tried a range of complex strategies to cope with online conflicts and abuse. Although many activists, policymakers, and movements "increasingly see bystanders as significant social change agents" (Rentschler 2017, 565; Henry and Powell 2017), our research demonstrates that digital intervention is often complex, and not always effective, and may lead to negative consequences for the intervener. Although research is paying more attention to it, this is an under-researched area that scholars should continue to explore, and we touch upon this further in chapter 8.

Overall, despite experiences of conflict and trolling Twitter *was still* viewed by many participants as a safer and easier place for engaging in feminist activism and discussions of gender and sexual violence than offline spaces such as the street, workplaces, schools, and among family and friends. Our findings about feelings of *relative* safety online lends further support to just how important digital platforms are in providing pedagogical spaces to develop feminist consciousness and find and maintain support for feminist views in our contemporary moment; given they provide an affective counter-public for practicing feminist politics. This becomes increasingly evident in the following chapter where we explore the complex affective practices of participating in a Twitter hashtag that is directly challenging rape culture.