Chapter 3

Consciousness-raising and Networked Anti-Rape Counter-publics

Introduction

On October 15 2017, the #MeToo movement erupted onto social media propelling sexual harassment and assault back onto the public agenda, and reigniting a level of consciousness raising that had arguably not seen since second wave feminism. However, as I noted in the introduction, the #MeToo movement was not the first time digital communication technologies have been used to engender a societal consciousness about rape and sexual violence. The *HollaBack!* blog, which began in 2005, is considered one of the first collective efforts to use digital media to speak out about street harassment and abuse by activists, with individuals sharing stories, supporting survivors and speaking back to rape culture in an attempt to challenge the acceptance and frequency of these spatial and bodily intrusions (Fileborn, 2014).

Since at least 2005, there have been multiple efforts enabled by the affordances of digital platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, YouTube and blogs, to engage in activism to speak out about experiences of rape and other forms of sexual violence and to challenge rape culture (see Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2020). Given the extent to which these spaces seek to challenge popular public discourse, scholars have described them as subaltern counter-publics. Some of these digital counter-publics seeking to challenge rape culture have gained substantial traction, such as *SlutWalk* (est. 2011; see Mendes, 2015), and the hashtag campaigns #YesAllWomen (est. 2014) and #BeenRapeNeverReported (est. 2014). Although they did not have the same level of engagement at the #MeToo movement, #YesAllWomen had 1.5 million uses within the first 24 hours (Thrift, 2014), and #BeenRapedNeverReported was used 8 million times within the same time period (Gallant, 2014). In this sense, digital platforms have been

Online Anti-Rape Activism: Exploring the Politics of the Personal in the Age of Digital Media, 33–60

doi:10.1108/978-1-83867-439-720201005

remarkably successful in helping to promulgate counter-public ideas into the public sphere. However, while popular hashtags, such as #MeToo and #BeenRapedNeverReported, may 'excite crowds' and stimulate short-term interest in long-standing feminist ideas, the grinding work of social and legal change is carried out in those networks that exist *in between* moments of mass mobilisation. It is these in-between networks seeking to sustain online anti-rape activism that is the focus of this chapter. These networks exist along a spectrum of 'publicness' in their counter-public claims, ranging from publicly funded campaigns, to grassroots activism backed by volunteers, to smaller 'tiny publics' such as blogs.

The use of digital media to facilitate change has faced polarising critiques, with both optimism and caution expressed about its' potential for feminist activism to generate meaningful engagement and social change. Historically, information communication technologies (ICTs) were heralded as democratic forms of communication that could connect women and feminist activists across time, space and place (Spender, 1995). Yet increasingly digital media and technologies are being used to facilitate violence against women (Dodge, Henry & Powell, 2016), and feminists or women who speak out about violence online are regularly targeted by 'trolls' and men's rights activists, subsequently subjecting them to further forms of violence and abuse (Jane, 2016; Lewis, Rowe, & Wiper, 2016). Digital activism more broadly has been criticised for fostering 'slacktivism' or 'clicktivism', in which social movement actors are accused of failing to critically engage with social justice issues by only 'liking' or 'sharing' posts on social media (Budish, 2012). Further complicating these challenges is the increasing spread of 'neoliberal' feminism, which too often divorces the personal from the political and subsequently has the potential to undermine collective efforts to keep feminist politics on the public agenda (Baer, 2016).

These competing perspectives reveal the nuanced, fluid, manipulable, complex and situated nature of ICTs (Wajcman, 2009), and the claims about the use of digital technologies to harass and perpetuate violence against women presents a significant affront to the emancipatory potential of online spaces. However, in this chapter I avoid positioning the case studies in this project in relation to the aforementioned readings of ICTs, nor do I reflect on them in terms of success or failure. As Papacharissi (2015, p. 8) notes, online activity should not be confused with impact/success – or lack thereof. Rather, this chapter explores the complexities involved in creating and sustaining the online anti-rape activist spaces. I show that online platforms are useful tools for reinvigorating consciousness-raising and networking, and demonstrate how online spaces provide new opportunities to debate issues pertaining to 'rape culture'. I also highlight the ways the ideas put forward in these networks are contested and the effort involved in sustaining collective engagement, specifically the emotional labour and effort required of managers and creators of these campaigns. I conclude the chapter by problematising critiques of 'slacktivism', illustrating the role low-impact elements of these activist projects play in helping these digital spaces to 'go viral'.

Cyberfeminism

Feminist scholars have had a contentious relationship with 'techno-science', ranging from negative, pessimistic attitudes, to enthusiastic calls for embracing the possibilities enabled by digital communications technologies. Some early science and technology scholars argue that Western culture has historically privileged masculinity over femininity through the perpetuation of binaries such as culture and nature, reason and emotion (Harding, 1986). Science and technology, as products of 'reason' or 'rationality' in (Western) culture, are thus coded masculine, resulting in the taken-for-granted gendering of machines, to which the internet and digital communications technologies are intrinsically linked. Technology was thus an extension of patriarchy and a tool to enforce women's subordination (see Harding, 1986).

However, the development of feminist cyber studies in the mid- to late 1990s ushered in a new era of optimism. Drawing on Donna Haraway's 'Manifesto for Cyborgs', which envisioned the possibilities techno-science might offer for transforming the material effects of gender, feminist cyber theorist Sadie Plant (1997) hoped that cyberspace would become a tool through which women could subvert their patriarchal realities. Cyberspace, Plant claimed, would free women from the subordination they faced in their everyday, offline worlds, as it provided them with the possibility of more fluid social and political identities; in effect, blurring the boundaries that defined embodied difference, which, she argues, forms the basis of women's systematic subordination. Others, such as Spender (1995), viewed cyber technologies as instrumental in connecting women for the purposes of sharing their experiences in ways that transcend time, place and space (see also Hawthorne & Klein, 1999; Kirkup, 2000). Women creating their own networks were significant for Spender, because she noted that men's voices dominated mainstream online discussion forums. For these cyber-feminist scholars, the internet was a tool for liberation and emancipation from the patriarchal gaze via new communication, interaction and political deliberation; channels through which social change can occur rather than the dissolution or transcendence of gender. While this optimism was present and justified at times within the case studies involved in this project, the capacity for these networked counter-publics to engender change through consciousness-raising, as I discuss below, is challenging and faces multiple obstacles to reach any emancipatory potential.

Consciousness-raising and Anti-Rape Networks

The transition to Web 2.0 in the late 2000s brought about a shift in the way online content was generated and shared. Under Web 1.0, content was characterised primarily by static websites, chat rooms and forums. However, the development Web 2.0 brought about a shift towards user-driven content and is often collaborative thanks to the platform vernaculars and affordances of social media (Gibbs et al., 2015). The explosion of different digital media platforms, including blogs and social media, has been instrumental in revitalising feminist political discussions (Taylor, 2011), particularly through the ways it has facilitated new opportunities to engage in consciousness-raising. Digital spaces have been

described as 'Consciousness-raising 2.0' through the ways in which they help to foster a 'commons', creating semi-closed spaces to discuss experiences and protect the information shared online (Wood, 2008). Blogging in particular as a form of 'consciousness-raising' is widely accepted among techno-feminist scholars, with a number of studies identifying motherhood (or 'Mommy blogs') as being the most popular topics of discussion among women online (Anderson & Grace, 2015; Lopez, 2009; Morrison, 2014). In the same way that consciousness-raising in the 1970s captured a broad spectrum of women's experiences, these motherhood blogs also canvas a series of topics not just about parenting but also about women's experiences of sex, relationships and violence, providing them with the space to test out ideas and engage in discussions about a variety of common concerns. Whether these concerns are raised under the banner of 'feminism' is another question, yet they nonetheless provide individuals with the capacity to engage with, respond to and address issues in their private lives – and that consciousness-raising in these digital spaces may, in fact, bring people to feminist ideas and provide them with a political interpretation of their personal experiences (Mendes et al., 2018; Mendes, Ringrose, et al., 2019).

The #MeToo movement, along with earlier forms of hashtag activism mentioned in the introduction of this book, provided a significant platform for the public to engage in discussion about sexism, patriarchy and other forms of gender-based violence (Mendes et al., 2018). The interview participants in this study also viewed the online space as vital for consciousness-raising about rape. Some had even used 'Mommy blogs' as a starting point for developing rape-consciousness. Hypatia, for example, had begun posting on *Mumsnet*[1] and noticed that a common thread raised by women was unwanted or negative sexual experiences with their husbands. Hypatia said:

> Constantly on *Mumsnet* you get people coming on talking about their husbands and [saying]: 'I'm really unhappy with my husband because this is what he did last night and they're describing rape, you know, and it's like "your husband raped you"'.

As such, Hypatia began using *Mumsnet* as a place to test out her thoughts about rape and rape culture before deciding that she needed more space to explore the issues in detail. Specifically, she said:

> I'd been ranting on *Mumsnet* for a few years and I realised that I wanted to write a little bit more than you can write in a post on a social media and [that] I needed the space to do that and to work out my thoughts.

Hypatia asserted that her blog, and blogging in general, was a form of consciousness-raising, and that the internet's ability to transcend time, space and place means that women do not have to meet 'face-to-face' but can come together online

[1]https://www.mumsnet.com/

from across the world to discuss their experiences and debate ideas. Moreover, as the quote below demonstrates, Hypatia believes that the multiple geographic locations from which women speak about their experiences of rape is further indicative of the systematic failure to respond to sexual violence. Speaking more broadly about online feminist activism, as well as anti-rape activism, Hypatia stated:

> I think actually a lot of [women-specific] online space is consciousness-raising. The *Mumsnet* feminist section has definitely acted as a consciousness-raising vehicle for masses of women … When you read people's blogs that is like a form of consciousness-raising isn't it? But the difference is that you're doing it online … The opportunity for radicalisation is enormous. Because when you speak to women in Australia and in New Zealand and India and in America and it's [rape] happening bloody everywhere, it becomes very clear that this is one great big bloody problem system. This isn't just a little problem that you have in Britain, it's cultural. It's like everywhere, it's happening everywhere. And it does give women a chance to kind of consciousness-raise across the planet, across continents.

In addition, Hypatia also notes that consciousness-raising occurs across multiple networks, not just in one specific space online. Hypatia actively engages with discussions happening on other anti-rape campaigns and her work is shaped in turn by those spaces she is actively involved with:

> I talk to people like 'Everyday Sexism' and 'Everyday Victim-blaming' and some of the radical sites out there … I know they link to me, to stuff, and I'm up on some of the radical sites … People share me on their Facebook pages and stuff like that.

Survey data too indicated that they are involved in multiple anti-rape campaigns and networks or follow a variety of different Twitter accounts. Table 2 provides an overview of the different activist groups or Twitter accounts survey participants stated they were involved in.

Table 2 highlights that Rape Crisis Scotland, other rape crisis groups and Scottish-related advocacy campaigns were the most common network survey participants indicated they were involved in. These campaigns are overrepresented largely because Rape Crisis Scotland shared my survey on their Facebook and Twitter pages and they have a large following online. However, overall, Table 2 indicates that survey participants were very active in a variety of different anti-rape and anti-violence-against-women scenes online. Some of these respondents were tapped into longstanding digital campaigns, such as *HollaBack!* and *SlutWalk*. There is also a spread of geographic location represented in these responses, such as 'Destroy the Joint' (an Australian-based project), 'Don't be That Guy' (a Canadian campaign) and Wellington Rape Crisis (New Zealand) listed among the digital spaces activists were involved in. This diversity demonstrates that local issues are part of broader global patterns of violence experienced by women and

Table 2: Online Anti-Rape Networks.

Survey sites	Other Campaigns Survey Respondents Are Involved With
This Is Not an Invitation to Rape Me	Rape Crisis Scotland, Women4Women Clackmannanshire, Join the Conversation, EWRASAC, Save EWRASAC, Edinburgh Feminist Network, Rape Crisis Scotland, Slutwalk Edinburgh, Reclaim the Night Edinburgh, Take Back The Night foundation, Not Ever, Destroy the Joint, Stop Street Harassment, Everyday Feminism, Rape Crisis Scotland, Stop Porn Culture, Clementine Ford, Rape Prevention Education New Zealand, Wellington Rape Crisis, Hollaback! UK (Glasgow), Rape Crisis Glasgow
Not Ever	Wise women, Rape Crisis Scotland, Object, End Violence Against Women, Zero Tolerance, Everyday Victim-Blaming, Rape Crisis Scotland, GlobeFem, 16 Days Against Gender-Based Violence, Rape Crisis Scotland, *Project Unbreakable*, Draw the Line, Don't be That Guy, Make You Move, SlutWalk, Rape Crisis Scotland, Rape Crisis Scotland, Consent is So Frat, Project Not Asking For It, SCOT-PEP, VAWPP – The Violence Against Women Prevention Program, Glasgow Rape Crisis
Herbs and Hags	OneWoman, After Silence, BroadBlogs, No More, http://www.anditwaswrong.com/, http://www.vday.org/, Left at the Lights, Fugitivus, yesmeansyes, tits and sass, yes, Everyday Victim-blaming, global sisterhood network
Stop Rape in Conflict (SRC)	Amnesty International
General Survey	Joyful Heart Foundation, #domesticviolencechat, @yeswespeak blog, RAINN, Army of She, End Revenge Porn, My Body My Rules, The Unslut Project, Faculty Against Rape, This Is Rape Culture, End Rape Culture, Unforgiven, Destroy the Joint, White Ribbon, Smash the Joint, Luke Batty Foundation, Amnesty International, No More, Joyful Heart Foundation, @EndRapeCulture7, @1in6org, notmysecrets.blogspot.co.uk, ninaburrowes.com, S.H.E. UK, Rape Crisis England and Wales, www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk, @EVB_Now, @WomenandGirlsN, @womensaid, @AVAproject, #ibelieveher, RAINN website, @takedownMRAs, #YesAllWomen

other survivors of sexual violence; however, there is little evidence to suggest that diversity or intersectionality is accounted for in these digital spaces and campaigns (see Chapter 5). Maya referred to these different spaces activists were involved with online as 'anti-rape networks'. These networks not only share information.

raise consciousness and challenge norms associated with rape culture, but they are also sites of support for survivors where they can go to obtain recognition, support and advice. And, as Lynn highlighted, 'the discussions [generated in these networks] can go on for a long time, and in our case it is still going on'.

Conceptualising digital spaces as 'networks' reflects Melucci's (1985) notion of 'submerged networks', which are not only engaged in moments of mass mobilisation but also sustained through consciousness-raising online when big moments, like the #MeToo movement, quieten down. While networks are 'a very old form of social organisation' in which participation and information dissemination was marked by physical proximity, what is significant about the 'submerged networks' online is also their ability to decentralise the flow of information and organisation of society (see Castells, 2000, p. 695). Networks are predicated on people's relationship or connection to a given network, rather than being bounded by (political) territories or physical place. As Castells (2000, p. 695) suggests, the most 'dynamic social movements are connected across the city, the county and the world'. Importantly, online networks have been significant in shifting away from 'old' forms of media of 'one to many', in which news and information is disseminated from a central hub, to 'new' forms of media, which connect 'many to many' (Castells, 2007). In this sense, news as well as political ideas circulate through numerous channels, shared in the 'space of flows' (Castells, 2000, p. 696), rather than being top-down or unidirectional.

Almost channelling Castells (2000), in which he describes social movement networks as series of 'interconnected nodes' (p. 695), Angela described the work of the *Pixel Project* through 'sharing' as being a significant factor in developing anti-rape networks and feminist networks more broadly, online. Specifically, Angela said:

> You share news, you share headlines, and it's sharing information that going from node to node, point to point, rather than us being fed stuff.

For Angela, 'sharing' within and across networks is important in breaking down the centralisation of information dissemination about sexual violence, and the quote included here indicates a resistance to being 'fed' information; instead activists seek out information relevant to their work to either challenge or share particular 'truths' about rape. Maya indicated that the digital media offers new opportunities to spread news and ideas in ways that are different to 'before Twitter came out'. Specifically, Maya said:

> [Twitter] Offers a really easy, quick way to get information out there … I find out about things now that I feel like my friends in the other sort of more mainstream [media] find out like three weeks later … *because* I'm so part of this community on Twitter.

The significance of social media in creating new opportunities for connecting was further reflected in Alana's comments about the Stop Rape in Conflict

campaign, in which she said that social media has been the key for connecting and amplifying calls to action activists who never even had access to *traditional* or old news media:

> Often times folks in Beni [for example] don't necessarily have access to traditional media … so social media really comes in and allows us to share those [activist] messages in new ways. We can get an email sent out from someone in Beni [about what's going on] who's connected with someone else who can send an email out and then use social media to be able to amplify their message in ways that we can't when there aren't many traditional media outlets in that area.

Alana's comment again draws on Castells' claim that new media connects 'many-to-many' and, in fact, points to the ways new media enables networks to by-pass, and subsequently no longer require, traditional forms of media in order for activists to be heard, seen and believed. Alana said she believes social media and other online tools are also instrumental in democratising the processes of decision making within social movement organisations, such as Stop Rape in Conflict, because:

> Our communication is *so* regular, and when you have so many campaign members who are friends on Facebook in our meetings we [can] talk about what so-and-so's up to in Khartoum. I think that's where the divide [around access to media] gets broken down and where those personal relationships between campaign members come into play (Alana's emphasis).

Online anti-rape networks thus help to circulate information and news at a pace much faster than mainstream media and can help activists keep up with changes in policy or respond quickly to perspectives that are sympathetic to 'rape culture' or victim-blaming. On the flipside though, Maya also pointed out some of the problems with information saturation and the immediacy of news that comes with online networking:

> I think it offers some challenges because there's so much information so readily available. I know I struggle with finding, sifting through all of it and really finding out o.k., who are my allies, and who do I agree with, and what reflects my understanding or my beliefs about this?

In addition to potential misinformation circulated in 'submerged networks' online, for some, the term 'consciousness-raising', or even describing their online presence as 'activist' in nature, was contentious. Katie in her interview said:

> I wouldn't want to elevate myself to some kind of status of 'Katie, the online activist!' But I do hope that I'm starting to change minds, you know?

As I outlined in Chapter 2, consciousness-raising sessions in the 1970s were not just about women coming together to share their experiences but providing a political interpretation of those experiences and subsequently mobilising to engender change (Echols, 1989). As such, in hoping to 'change people's minds', Katie's blog is still a form of consciousness-raising. However, Katie's comment also points to some limitations in reflecting on these spaces as truly engaged in consciousness-raising, given that in some of these online spaces the conversation may seem unidirectional if there is no identifiable audience 'listening' and responding to posts on digital media platforms. I return to this point later in the chapter.

Similarly Kelly, who did speak of her presence online as a form of consciousness-raising, however highlighted some of the challenges involved in connecting with the 'right' people and reaching the 'right' audience in order to shift people's consciousness:

> I definitely would call it that [consciousness-raising] … [but] there's no way to know how much, how true that is but you kind of have to be ok with that. Especially in the beginning when you haven't connected with a ton of people, you may not get a ton of responses, you may not get a ton of retweets or 'likes' on Facebook and it's really hard to be like 'oh no one's paying attention' but you don't know who you've reached and that's what I keep telling myself.

What this quote from Kelly is pointing to is the difficulties involved in generating and sustaining consciousness-raising online, as well as one's impact or success. While Angela noted in her interview, 'the whole thing about people liking or sharing your stuff is that it's an indication that someone acknowledges what you've posted'; without this kind of feedback, an activist may feel as if they are just shouting into the abyss (Fileborn, 2014). Yet 'likes', 'retweets' and 'reposts' may not necessarily constitute 'impact' or 'success' from a more traditional understanding of social movements – and given the criticisms levelled at anti-rape activism more broadly for 'failing' to achieve the goal of 'abolishing rape', likes and retweets are not sufficient ways of achieving this goal. This approach may be more reflective of contemporary social movements that seem to be lacking in formal structure and leadership, as well as having unstated – or at least unclear – goals in their efforts to address complex social justice issues. In other words, they are just forms of 'slacktivism' – a point I return to shortly in this chapter. Certainly, the #MeToo movement has been criticised for failing to articulate its goals and objectives to the extent that some have suggested it cannot be considered a 'true' social movement (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019). However, #MeToo and other digital campaigns such as #WhatIwasWearing, #BeenRapedNeverReported and *SlutWalk* mentioned in the introduction of this book, have all generated opportunities to push back against or speak back to the logics of rape culture, and institutional actors and other individuals who have attempted to silence survivors and activists speaking out. In this sense, although the managers of these online spaces might have felt unclear or ambivalent about their capacity for engendering change through consciousness-raising, the

discussion boards and comments sections reveal that much of their power lies in their capacity to disrupt rape myths, victim-blaming and rape culture. What is significant about consciousness-raising in these online spaces is that it goes beyond traditional forms of consciousness-raising that connected women with other women and engages with a broader networked public. This naturally brings with it a series of challenges in relation to the possibilities of transforming and transcending attitudes inherent within rape culture and dismantling rape myths.

Dismantling Rape Culture and Rape Myths?

While the discourse of rape can incite outrage, and impassioned responses to violent stranger rape in particular, it is also regularly trivialised and normalised. Sexual harassment, for example, should be seen as a compliment rather than an unwanted/uninvited intrusion into one's movement through public space or workplace. The proliferation and popularity of violent pornography consumed by men has positioned 'rough' sex as something that women actually desire. And the depiction of women in popular culture capitalises on rape as a narrative device in ways that reinforce problematic assumptions about agency, violence and vulnerability – for example, the rape of Sansa Stark in HBO's Game of Thrones (Ferredey, 2015). The upshot has been an ethos of denial regarding the actual prevalence of sexual violence further compounded via the production of rape myths and victim-blaming (see Chapter 2). The persistence of rape culture, supported by the circulation and acceptance of rape myths and victim-blaming, creates an environment in which survivors experience what Linda Alcoff 'epistemic injustice' (2018, p. 52), in which their claims are routinely dismissed or disbelieved. This process has been witnessed throughout history whereby women's claims to truth about rape have led to questions about credibility and subsequently the 'truthfulness' of their story (see Alcoff, 2018, pp. 52–54).

The pervasive nature of 'epistemic injustice' extends to feminist claims about the political causes of rape, illustrating that there is a significant and continued resistance accepting the existence of 'rape culture'. Many sectors of the community continue to believe that rape is still uncommon and perpetrated by a small number of people, despite decades of activism seeking to challenge this position (Henry, Flynn, & Powell, 2015). Opposition to acknowledging the existence of rape culture as an underlying cause of sexual violence also divides some rape crisis support services. The North American anti-sexual violence organisation Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN), for instance, are hesitant to endorse 'rape culture' as the cause of sexual violence. Instead, RAINN claim on their public website: 'rape is not caused by cultural factors but by the conscious decisions of a small percentage of the community to commit a violent crime' (cited in Henry et al., 2015, p. 2). This resistance to the existence of rape culture, even at the level of support services, undermines feminist attempts to challenge the causes of sexual violence as a social and cultural problem, reframing it as one caused by a small number of opportunistic men and women or victim-survivors who fail to protect themselves from sexual harm. This is not to suggest that the support services blame victim-survivors; however, it remains

the routine public response to victim-survivors in general, fuelling the perpetuation of rape myths and victim-blaming (Mendes, 2015).

The case studies in this book, however, are deeply resistant to these individualising narratives surrounding the causes of rape and the responsibility placed on survivors to prevent or resist sexual violence. Through consciousness-raising, they demonstrated a commitment to revealing the political, cultural and structural causes of sexual violence and, as I discuss in Chapter 4, offer support for victim-survivors speaking out about their experiences in diverse ways. The Rape Crisis Scotland campaigns – *This Is Not an Invitation to Rape Me* and *Not Ever* – provide rich insights into how digital spaces seek to raise consciousness about and disrupt rape culture and victim-blaming discourses. In particular, the campaigns tackle the rape myths and victim-blaming attitudes mentioned in Chapter 2, such as the consumption of alcohol and the way a victim-survivor is dressed as 'asking for it', the assumption that victim-survivors can't be raped by their partners/husbands – or that survivors are to blame for giving 'mixed signals' to perpetrator. In doing so, the campaigns help erode assumptions about 'real' rape, rape myths and the prevalence of victim-blaming with the digital space helping to transcend geographic boundaries fostering discussion and debate about rape culture in ways that are not restricted by time or place. As Lynn said:

> The website has facilitated a great deal of discussion, and also it's not time-limited so there's nothing on there that really makes the thing obsolete. It [*This is Not an Invitation to Rape Me*] still is as relevant today as it was when we launched it in 2008 … It continues now to be seen as quite groundbreaking in its approach and that has been a big success.

Lynn noted the capacity of the website, *This Is Not an Invitation to Rape Me*, to provoke discussion and challenge perceptions of 'real' rape was evident from the very first comment they received:

> The first one [comment] we saw under the wedding picture was something like some guy saying 'this is all the encouragement I need to take my wife and family away from this country' … That was obviously something that provoked quite a lot of people to respond to him.

The large number of individuals who have commented on aspects of the Rape Crisis Scotland campaigns that challenge assumptions about dress, alcohol consumption or a victim-survivors' relationship to the perpetrator is further evidence of the campaign's capacity to facilitate discussion – both negative and positive. For example, the 'Have your say'[2] section on *This Is Not an Invitation to Rape Me* showcases the website's capability to generate discussion and debate,

[2]http://www.thisisnotaninvitationtorapeme.co.uk/have-your-say/#.WVHAMk0Um71

although some elements of the discussion seemed to be misinterpreted or dismissed by those engaged in the discussion broad. Taking the 'dress' section as a case example whereby Rape Crisis Scotland is seeking to challenge the logic of the victim-blaming narrative that survivors are 'asking for it' because of how they are dressed, there were a few people criticising the campaign, with some throwaway comments such as 'what a spectacular waste of money'. However, there were also numerous comments that incite the sexual safekeeping rhetoric of neoliberalism inherent in rape apologist-style attitudes, as I discussed in Chapter 2 (Gotell, 2008; Stringer, 2013). A comment from 'Andrew'[3] on the discussion board, for example, sparked a debate about the importance of women having to protect themselves from being raped, rather than perpetrators (or men, more specifically) having to modify their behaviour:

> This campaign does not place enough emphasis on a woman's responsibility to protect herself from her assailant. Please consider not only trying to inform men about when it is/is not appropriate to have sex with a woman, but also help the woman to know how to give clear signals when she does not want to have sex as well as how to protect herself when things go awry (Andrew – my emphasis).

However, as Lynn mentioned in her interview:

> If you get somebody pitching in with a really negative reaction, you generally get other people giving it right back to them and explaining exactly what it's trying to do, putting them straight about what the situation is – that women are not inviting sexual activities by the clothes they wear or because they're drunk, and this kind of thing.

However victim-blaming comments, like those made by Andrew, were not rejected outright. 'Clare', for example, said:

> I agree with Andrew that more should be done to educate women on how to communicate what she wants clearly and how to avoid getting into trouble in the first place.

In order to distance herself from being seen as a 'rape apologist' (see Chapter 2), Clare claimed that this was not 'to suggest that rape victims are responsible for what has happened to them' but as an attempt to prevent the potential for victim-blaming and provide women with additional tools to keep themselves safe. Nonetheless, her comment reinforces the sexual safekeeping discourses of neoliberalism that assert women are responsible not only for preventing rape but are also required to demonstrate their capacity to resist being raped. Clare's comments about sexual safekeeping also seem to reflect problematic assumptions

[3]Pseudonym assigned.

about safety and perpetrators of rape by suggesting: 'perpetrators of sexual violence are emotionally and psychologically damaged people'. Clare's comment highlights that despite the fact that the campaign *This Is Not an Invitation to Rape Me* attempts to demonstrate (along with decades of activism and scholarship) that rape is more likely to be perpetrated by someone known to the victim, many people still believe that only certain 'damaged' people, or recalcitrant criminals, are responsible for committing rape. This position taken by Clare is echoed in the forum by 'Alex', who acknowledged: 'Nobody can deny the importance of campaigns such as this'. However, he also suggested that:

> *You have to accept that there are people out there who can/will do you harm* … When I see young girls wandering around town centres late at night, drunk and on their own, they are putting themselves in danger … *You didn't ask for it but you didn't do anything to prevent it* … You can't live in this society and expect everyone to play by the rules, you need to anticipate the ill-desires of others and act to protect yourself. (My emphasis)

Like Clare, Alex is also suggesting that women, particularly young women, need to engage in sexual safekeeping to avoid being preyed upon opportunistic 'perpetrators-in-waiting'. Many thus reject the messages of the campaign surrounding rape culture or seek a compromise that still places the responsibility to prevent rape on women rather than the potential perpetrator.

While the comments on the 'Dress' section of the 'Have Your Say' page on the campaign *This Is Not an Invitation to Rape Me* gets bogged down in victim-blaming and rape apologist rhetoric rather than productive discussion through consciousness-raising, the 'Drinking'[4] section reveals more in terms of the campaign's capacity to alter people's attitudes and perceptions. This particular discussion page on the website also reveals the gaps in knowledge or at least assumptions about consent, and the law's application and understanding of consent – particularly when alcohol has been consumed by the victim-survivor. This is important because in addition to raising consciousness about rape myths and rape culture, Lynn said that the campaigns were designed to 'reach potential jurors, because we were very much aware of the impact that the attitudes of jurors could have on rape trials'. However, the following conversation demonstrates how thorny attitudes towards the discourse of consent in particular can be. The conversation also highlights assumptions about the over-extended influence of feminism on the legal system and taps into some of the backlash rhetoric that women 'cry rape' when they regret having sex. 'A Devil's Advocate' posted the following comment at the top of the Drinking section:

> If a woman and a man meet in a bar, both very drunk, neither is capable of making a rational decision, and both wake up in bed together, having had sex. What if the man is charged with rape?

[4]http://www.thisisnotaninvitationtorapeme.co.uk/have-your-say/#drinking_tab

> If she decides that she didn't want to have sex, then the law holds him accountable regardless of whether she consented at the time. (In addition, no jury would ever convict her of rape if he charges her) [*sic*.].

A Devil's Advocate's comment that the law *will* hold the rapist accountable regardless of whether the victim consented or not connotes an exaggeration or misrepresentation of the impact of feminist law reform projects on increasing conviction and lower attrition rates. Specifically, this comment implies that the law automatically sides with the victim and regularly convicts men accused of rape, when in reality this not the case (Millstead & McDonald, 2017). However, responses from 'BREEZE' and 'Reality' are 'giving it right back' to A Devil's Advocate, putting him 'straight' about the *reality* of the situation. BREEZE responds by arguing 'cases wherein both rapist and victim are drunk are rare' and suggests 'rapists deliberately ply a woman with alcohol in order to reduce her level of resistance'. BREEZE goes on to claim: 'rapists are opportunists [who] deliberately seek out women they perceive as "easy to conquer". *Rape is both about male sexual access and male power over women*' (my emphasis). Reality commented on A Devil's Advocate's intimation that false rape allegations are made regularly and even drew on statistics from Rape Crisis Scotland to support their claim, saying:

> They [false reports] sit at around 3% – the same as for any other crime … and the fact that the conviction rate for rape in this county [Scotland] stands at 2.9%, I think you need not lose any sleep about your fictional man [being accused of rape].

Two other commenters, however, agreed with what A Devil's Advocate had to say about how alcohol can impede one's ability to know if they have raped someone or to ascertain consent. 'Max' said, in their best rape apologist voice, that although 'there is no excuse for rape', he suggested that perhaps '"Devils Advocates" point is being missed'. Max cited his own experience of having had a night out and waking up with a girl the next morning with no real memory of whether consent was given – evidently he is unsure of the boundary between 'sex' and 'rape', which is concerning. He was 'worried about how this (equally drunk girl) was going to react' – that she might accuse him of rape. It appears she did not, yet it is unclear to what extent this experience caused Max to reflect upon his behaviour in an ethical way and rethink the boundaries of future sexual relations.

The assumption that the law sides with victim-survivors was further echoed in a comment posted by 'A survivor', who said:

> I also agree with 'Devil's Advocate' … If he accused her of rape, it would be laughed at long and hard, whilst she is expecting the full force of law to come down on him if she accuses him … If a person (male or female) is so drunk they can't remember what

> happened then there is no way of knowing if consent was given at the time, and an 'oh sh*t [*sic*.], I shouldn't have done that – he raped me' response later, when sober, isn't good enough.

The above discussion reveals the confusing nature of the law, its failure to effectively communicate its own standards of consent and the gap between community and legal understandings of consent (Larcombe, Fileborn, Powell, Hanley, & Henry, 2016). In most Western criminal codes, 'reasonable belief in consent' is suggested as the benchmark for the defence to establish, and many Western jurisdictions have moved towards a communicative model of consent in order to capture the broad spectrum of behaviours or situations in which consent is not, or cannot be, freely given (Larcombe et al., 2016). This includes the consumption of alcohol and other drugs as inhibiting one's capacity to give informed consent – although this is not necessarily understood or applied in a consistent manner (Burgin, 2019). What this discussion in the forum highlights is the complexities and common misunderstandings surrounding the provision of consent in the context of rape – clearly a matter of public interest – which the campaigns run by Rape Crisis Scotland are attempting to bridge in order to address the justice gap and potentially help increase conviction rates.

In her groundbreaking book '*Against Our Wills*', Susan Brownmiller (1975) claimed that attending the consciousness-raising sessions with the group 'West Village I' changed her mind about rape. Although the discussion so far has suggested that these online anti-rape campaigns polarise opinions about rape culture and rape myths, some posts in the discussion forum do demonstrate people changing their minds about 'rape culture' and assumptions about rape, and that engaging with the campaign *This Is Not an Invitation to Rape Me* helps to solidify those shifts in consciousness – even if only on a personal level. For example, one commenter, 'Rachael', admitted to 'being guilty of victim-blaming in the past', especially when alcohol was involved, and believing that false rape accusations were common. However, her post demonstrates an attitudinal shift; specifically, in her understanding of the ways broader sociocultural patterns and practices, such as drinking culture, prop up 'rape myths':

> I've noticed that western culture seems to be heavily involved with drunk sex. I often see jokes about women needing a few drinks to be ready for sex. The fact of the matter is, if a woman has been drinking, and her partner has not been drinking, and she's begging him for sex, and he agrees, he is taking advantage of her impaired judgement …When there is any question of ability to make a sound judgement, one of the parties is guilty of rape. It's that simple. I think this myth [about alcohol], although the hardest to debunk, is also the most essential.

Rachael's post ended with the statement 'this was hard to write, and I'm not sure if everything I said made sense. But I hope it did'. This statement therefore highlights how participants in these online spaces tease out their ideas and render

their arguments comprehensible, as well as changing their minds about rape culture and victim-blaming. These online spaces reflect what Katie (interview participant) described as a 'crucible for ideas', in that they helped individuals to develop confidence in formulating an argument and sharing their ideas online as well as offline. Katie said:

> In the past six months just blogging about it [rape] and reading what other people are writing has given me an opportunity to develop my own skills to be able to talk more clearly about it with people. A year ago, if somebody had challenged me over like the definition of rape or something, I probably would have just been a jabbering wreck. Whereas now I would be able to very clearly get my point across, and I think that's come about through talking about it online.

Katie's perspective was echoed by Maya (interview participant), who said '[Twitter is] a really good way to practice how to put your opinion out there and how to support it'. Consciousness-raising networks in online spaces subsequently have the capacity to support activists rehearse their political claims making, although as I now turn to discuss, sustaining this performance and these networks is challenging and multifaceted – but not impossible.

Sustaining Consciousness-raising

As I outlined in Chapter 2, a continuing critique of consciousness-raising is its inability to move beyond that itself and engender social and political transformation. In some ways, this is due to the inability of consciousness-raising to account for the differing sociopolitical and cultural locations from which women spoke about their experiences. The #MeToo movement has been criticised for being suck in the phase of consciousness-raising, unable to extend further than the moment of mass confessionals (Rosewarne, 2019). Indeed, there has been very little discussion about some of the political and cultural elements, such as rape culture, that create the conditions for sexual assault and harassment to occur within the #MeToo movement. Much of the discussion in terms of the causes of sexual assault and harassment has been directed at individual, powerful men rather than a thorough examination and critique of the structural conditions that enabled the abuse to take place in the first instance (Loney-Howes, 2019). Nonetheless, the #MeToo movement *moved* activists and survivors emotionally into action to initiate conversations about social change and what this might look like (Mendes & Ringrose, 2019). The capacity for digital media to move people into action beyond moments of mass mobilisation and maintain submerged networks was also felt by Maya, who runs a Twitter community called 'Healing Courage'. She stated that social media provided the anti-rape movement with a 'community … for people to come and meet virtually and, with that, a place for you to find like-minded people and feel part of a movement'.

However, there are significant pressures associated with sustaining momentum and connections in the online sphere beyond moments of mass mobilisation

and maintaining digital networks. In terms of engendering support across different digital networks, there was some concern among survey respondents about the extent to which these online anti-rape spaces were capable of fostering co-membership and mobilising a collective response. Despite survey participants indicating that they were involved with or followed a number of online communities and networks engaged with raising consciousness about rape and other forms of sexual violence, they also expressed that they felt these spaces seemed to be operating in digital silos or echo chambers. Some responses to the question 'what more do you think needs to be done by these online campaigns to bring about social change' indicated that these spaces should aim to foster solidarity *between* networks, not just within them. For instance, one respondent to the general survey said, 'they should all join forces together if they really want to make a huge impact. United we stand!' In this sense, while the individual campaigns in this study might have been good at generating networks of support and sharing information *within* their networks, the survey data suggests that they are not particularly successful at mobilising *across* networks, as well as attracting new members or establishing who their target audience is.

Discrepancies thus exist within these consciousness-raising networks over how best to set an agenda, generate solidarity and mobilise a collective identity (see Dianni, 2000; 2003). Another respondent, who said online anti-rape activist campaigns need to, further queried this position: 'Better engage people who have not experienced sexual violence', indicating a greater need to bring non-survivors into consciousness-raising to help them understand the realities of rape and sexual assault. In other words, consciousness-raising networks – according to participants in this study – need to think careful about who their target audience is and how they 'sell' their ideas beyond networks of survivors (see Chapter 4) in order to generate a more impactful response. Some of the case studies in the project were created with no specific market or audience in mind, while others were deliberately set up for survivors, like Kelly's blog. Kelly created her blog as 'a place where I really wanted to reach out and connect with other survivors, and have them feel like they could tell their story in a safe, environment'. However, being oriented towards survivors, with the prerogative of providing a safe place for them to share their stories, also requires a certain level of privacy in order to maintain control over who has access to this network. This also means that it might be difficult for victim-survivors to know about the project and thus requires a significant amount of work to simultaneously attract, engage and protect those who participate within these networks. Moreover, as indicated above, closing off spaces to survivors only may mean that many people are not exposed to the realities of sexual violence and unable to engage in consciousness-raising.

Further pressures associated with sustaining online networks are associated with time and resources. Katie said that she '[does not] have the time to be constantly updating. I'd rather just post occasional – hopefully good quality – stuff, rather than an endless stream of drivel'. Katie's comment highlights the amount of pressure and labour placed on activists to maintain their spaces and keep producing material in order to maintain consciousness-raising networks. This is especially the case for smaller digital anti-rape networks who blog or post in their spare time outside of working hours; however, larger ones also face similar

financial- and time-related challenges. While some of these online spaces are professional services who receive public funding to produce their campaigns – such as the Rape Crisis Scotland and the Stop Rape in Conflict campaigns – all the others are volunteer-run. Generating good posts, sourcing material to share and even finding ways to pay for having an online presence takes time and effort, which can be stressful for activists and often require a certain entrepreneurial spirit. Angela pointed out that if everyone involved in the *Pixel Project* was paid, the campaign could not run because it does not make enough money to pay even her to oversee the project. The project's motto, according to Angela, is 'raising funds, raising awareness and raising volunteer power for the cause'. This speaks not only to those who help to maintain the social media sites and the website but also to those who contribute to the individual campaigns and help by maintaining the technological elements of the website. Angela stated:

> We're surviving right now because everyone is a volunteer … I set us up so we get people to donate in-kind stuff … We get free server space from Dream Host, our URL is donated to us for 10 years by one of the URL companies … Video editors donate their skills, writers donate their skills. Basically we get everyone to donate their skills and donate whatever products their company already makes.

This quote from Angela reveals not only the increasing reliance on volunteers for engaging in anti-rape activism but also a certain kind of entrepreneurialism in activism, whereby creativity in sourcing volunteers and in-kind donations from a variety of sources may help to set one campaign apart from another. This donation-based approach also helps to maintain a movement or network's presence that might otherwise disappear after a short burst of mobilisation.

Not only does maintaining a blog, a Twitter account or a Facebook page take up a lot of time, a further theme that emerged from the interview data centred around the limitations of using one's own experience to drive activism and sustain consciousness-raising networks. Given that consciousness-raising and speaking out (see Chapter 4) have been long-standing practices seeking to end sexual violence and address rape culture, the capacity of consciousness-raising to facilitate social and political change drawing on personal experience remains contentious and limited. Hypatia said:

> [When] I started it [the blog] I meant to do it every week religiously and then I didn't … Every now and then I look at it and think I haven't blogged for ages I really ought to … I think it's probably run its course the way it is … I've worked through my things about rape … [and] unless something comes up, which might kind of suddenly spark off an idea, I'm not sure I've got anything to add … I might just set up a new blog or something, and then I think 'oh I've got followers on this one now and if you start again, you'll have no one'.

Here, Hypatia speaks to the temporal nature of blogs – even though they may exist in perpetuity online, the rationale behind their creation and maintenance eventually shifts or becomes challenging to sustain. This is especially the case for survivor-activists who might use an opportunity, such as the #MeToo movement, to speak out about their experiences, however, going beyond one's personal experience to explore some of the political elements of sexual violence requires significant effort – and may not necessarily be driving their activism. Hypatia states above that the blog has helped her to work through her experience of rape, which she began in response to the vilification of a women whom Ched Evans[5] was accused of raping – and thus feels she may have nothing more to contribute. However, Hypatia also noted the network and following she has gained from the blog and her posts about 'rape culture' and feels compelled to remain committed to serving the community she has already created. As I discuss in Chapter 4, this community has become a vital space for survivors to speak out about their experiences that do not fit within mainstream perceptions of sexual assault.

Similarly, Katie noted that she too is aware that eventually she will run out of things to say about herself, although she does post other people's stories of rape on her blog. However, Katie noted something precarious about the relationship between the personal and the political with respect to the maintenance of and audience in her network around the types of posts she herself makes. In particular, she notes how people seem to be more interested in the 'grizzly' (i.e. traumatic) things that have happened to her, rather than her views on the politics of gender inequality. She said:

> I will eventually run out of things to say about myself but so much happens in the news about sexual violence that it feels like there's something every day [to write about] you know? … [However] people seem to be keener to read about grizzly things that have happened to me than … my views on Sarah Vine.[6]

In an op-ed in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in March 2016, Kath Kenny suggested that women who write about their traumatic experiences in order to gain public attention generate an 'attention' or a 'sob' economy. Yet as Spargo-Ryan (2016) notes, women have historically been denied the opportunity to speak publicly about trauma – unless it has completely destroyed them. These online consciousness-raising networks therefore provide victim-survivors the opportunity to tell their experiences of rape, as well as trauma, in ways that both resist and reify normative scripts of rape-trauma in both the context of the courtroom and the 'confession', through practices of witnessing (see Chapter 4). Katie's comment about people being more interested in the 'grizzly things' that have happened to

[5]Ched Evans is a Welsh football player who was convicted of rape in 2012 and spent two and half years in prison. His sentence was overturned in 2016 (BBC, 2016).
[6]Sarah Vine is a journalist for the British tabloid newspaper, the *Daily Mail*. She is renowned for her anti-feminist sentiment and controversial views.

her, rather than her thoughts on the politics of sexual violence, indicates perhaps two things. On the one hand, it highlights a cultural fascination with women's experiences of trauma, specifically sexual trauma, which sometimes fails to see the connection between women's personal/private and political subordination. On the other hand, a collective response to an individual's experience may also be a sign of solidarity and ethical witnessing (see Chapter 4); an indication that Katie has been heard, seen and believed.

This focus on individual experiences in digital anti-rape activism returns to one of the central critiques of consciousness-raising raised in Chapter 2; that experience alone cannot necessarily be deployed for political action given the lack of reflexivity from which individuals speak (Brown, 1995). However, Table 3 below suggests that the investment in reading and witnessing the experiences of others provides the groundwork for engendering solidarity, with participants selecting as many options as relevant to them in response to the question 'Why do you participate in these online campaigns?':

'Other' responses included 'for work', 'because rape culture won't smash itself' and 'to ascertain the latest male-created justifications for subjecting women and girls to male sexual violence'. The data in Table 3 clearly indicate that most people participate in these spaces to show solidarity or support for others at 54%, along with promoting social justice (47%) and getting information (46%). In this sense, it is highly probably that most people who read 'grizzly stories' of rape posted in the case studies in this study probably do so to demonstrate support and solidarity with victim-survivors.

Posting 'grizzly stories', however, not only requires a significant amount of time but also a high volume of *emotional* labour from blog and website moderators, as well as their audiences. Being involved in a social movement like the anti-rape movement demands a significant emotional investment and resilience from participants in showing their support, particularly when they are being constantly bombarded with 'grizzly stories'. Katie said she has had friends tell

Table 3. Why Individuals Visit or Participate in These Online Campaigns.

Survey Responses	**Total (%)**
To provide support to people I know who have experienced rape or sexual violence	19
To connect with others who might have similar experiences	24
To share my experience(s)	15
To get emotional support	16
To show solidarity and support for others	*54*
To promote social justice	47
To seek legal advice	7
To get information	46
Other – please describe	12

her they 'always read your blog, and I always like it, but *I don't want to "like" the Facebook posts because I don't like it*'. In terms of engagement, Alana also 'wonder[ed] what type of person would really enjoy reading updates on sexual violence in conflict on a daily basis'. Therefore, she tries to post more about 'the activism and the power of some of these women who are doing incredible work', rather than continuously sharing sad news with the community.

Activists who write about, or collate personal experiences of others, are also required to exercise a significant amount of emotional labour, which can cause additional stress and the reliving of their own trauma. Katie said, 'I don't know how I haven't broken this computer with the amount [of times] I have cried all over it [after reading stories] … it's really hard'. In addition, moderators and curators face decisions over where to best direct their energy and labour in attempting to cultivate an online anti-rape network to facilitate consciousness-raising. Katie noted:

> I could *either* talk about sexual violence in the news, *or* I should talk about me, *or* I should talk about other people and I'm kind of trying to do everything.

Kelly discussed this too, noting not only the difficulties involved in constantly posting about her own experiences but also described the effort required in cultivating consciousness-raising online in the context of deliberations about difficult and emotional topics, such as rape. Kelly said:

> It's time, and it's dedication and it's putting yourself out there consistently, different from just one post on a website … Thinking about what you want to post next and trying to make it a conversation rather than just me posting out to the ether and hoping that someone reads it. I think the other thing too is that this stuff [rape] is just hard and I think that if people are in a place where they're ready to be honest about it, and they want to be honest in a public forum, then that's fantastic.

Kelly's point about 'trying to make it a conversation rather than just me posting out to the ether and hoping someone reads it' reflects the challenges in making the personal political online. While social media helps to *market* these publics, with bloggers Katie and Kelly using Twitter as a way of sharing new posts they have written, this does not necessarily translate into new followers or a wider readership. Both Katie and Kelly noted in their interviews that friends and family comprised most of their readership, and one survey respondent said they found these online spaces useful for demonstrating to friends and their mother the realities of sexual violence. Thus, it is difficult for smaller networks to generate widespread involvement, and some may want to keep them contained because of their emotional content.

What this section reveals is the tension that has always existed in anti-rape activism between the personal and the political. Blogs and other activists projects are seeking to cover the *personal*, specifically, their own experiences of rape

and that of other victim-survivors; as well as accounting for the *political*, such as generating a conversation about the persistence of rape culture and the impact of victim-blaming and rape myths. In addition to this tension, Katie, Kelly and Hypatia, in their most recently documented comments above, are pointing to the difficulties involved in 'going viral' online. This challenge exists despite the increased attention and revival feminism has received in recent years driven largely by affordances of digital communications technologies in bringing a new generation of young people to feminist ideas (Keller, 2012).

Feminism Trending

In recent times, 'feminism' has become overwhelmingly popular (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Far from the peripheral, radical movement it was once characterised as, feminism now occupies a position of cultural significance and power, and digital media has given young women in particular tools to develop a revamped feminist consciousness (Mendes, Ringrose, et al., 2019). In this sense, feminism is 'trending' as a regular point of discussion on social media (Guillard, 2016). However, many of the case studies involved in this project struggled to be seen even by a small number of people, suggesting that only a certain type of feminist anti-rape activism is visible online – primarily that which is driven by high-profile celebrities with significant digital capital, such as Alyssa Milano. Thus, there exists a continuum of counter publics in digital spaces engaged in anti-rape activism, ranging from high profile public campaigns involving millions of followers, to smaller more intimate publics. What connects them is the desire to be seen and responded to; to be witnessed (see Oliver, 2001). Katie said that when she first began blogging, she 'threw a bit of tantrum' on Facebook because she was frustrated by the lack of interest – not only in her blog but also for issues pertaining to sexual violence more generally. In the 'tantrum', Katie suggested that perhaps she 'should get out of the way of your [her friends] very important cat pictures?' While it is easy enough for anyone to start a blog or a social media page, actually acquiring an audience consisting of anyone for consciousness-raising let alone 'trend' online is difficult.

The World Wide Web offers a nuanced approach to consciousness-raising for women, insofar as it can provide them with access to knowledge about their historical struggles; connects those with shared interests; and draws attention to, and enables the representation of, the many and varied forms of gendered harms experienced locally and globally (Everett, 2004). It also provides women with access to the 'public sphere', in which they have been historically denied participation (see Fraser, 1990), and enables them to critically debate their future trajectories through the construction of subaltern counter-publics. These opportunities, however, do not necessarily lead to increased visibility, and scholars remain divided about their capacity to engender change. Some, for instance, suggest that online activism is characterised by ad hoc political loyalties that are often seeking short-term change, or lack a depth of understanding of complex social problems (Fenton, 2008), like sexual violence. While the ephemeral, ad hoc nature of online social movements is also an historic feature of social movements (Diani, 2000),

the 'click to change' approaches of some online social movements is an issue (Budish, 2012), culminating in what some critics refer to as 'slacktivism'. McCafferty (2011) defines 'slacktivism' as the actions of people 'who are happy to click a like button about a cause and [who] may make other nominal, supportive gestures', or 'feel-good back patting', requiring minimal effort and time, and no commitment to mobilisation or demonstrable interest in actually solving sociopolitical problems (cited in Glenn, 2015, p. 82).

However, such a position sidesteps acknowledging the influence 'slacktivism' can have in developing an online community and potentially forging networks across consciousness-raising circles (see also Mendes, Ringrose, et al., 2019). Moreover, rather than being 'low intensity' forms of activism, the highly affective impact of engaging with topics such as sexual violence suggests that participating in digital consciousness-raising networks is anything but easy – or slack – on the part of participants (Mendes & Ringrose, 2019). The outcomes of social activism are always uneven, and online activity, such as 'liking', sharing Facebook posts or accumulating a certain number of followers, 'cannot be confused with impact' or measurable change (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 8). However, it can indicate one's 'affective attunement' to particular causes or ideas (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 25), and an individual's desire to show solidarity and share information with other online networks.

Some of the case studies in this project had thousands of people following them on Twitter or Facebook. At the time of being interviewed, Angela said the *Pixel Project* had 20,000 followers on Twitter and Facebook. The Stop Rape in Conflict campaign had 34,000 followers on Facebook and 8,500 followers on Twitter, and in addition, Alana said that the campaign has 800 organisations associated with it and over 6,000 individuals had 'taken the pledge' and signed up as campaign members. *Project Unbreakable* had over 5,000 submissions in less than five years, and over 3,000 followers on Tumblr at the time the Project concluded. This is juxtaposed against the blog *Herbs and Hags*, which had only 37 followers, and *These Are Not My Secrets* who had even less. In this sense, for the case studies involved in this project, quantifying the numbers remained significant in assessing levels of affective attunement. Angela from the *Pixel Project* was particularly vocal about the positive impact of this form of 'slacktivism', stating, 'we think of "liking" or "retweeting" as the gateway; the first thing you can do'. In addition, Angela felt that 'liking' and sharing were indicative of the effectiveness of the message they were trying to put forward, in essence it is 'free feedback' (Angela). Anna echoed this perspective, viewing the impact, or reach, of *Project Unbreakable* as measurable by how frequently posts are shared online. Specifically, Anna said:

> [The] easiest way to see it [change] is in the numbers – 'likes' on Facebook, followers on Tumblr, etc. It may seem a little silly but social media is very helpful in that way – it allows people to spread the word and keep revisiting [the campaign].

Angela admitted, however, that she felt many online campaigns lacked a clear direction and did not use tools, like social media, to disseminate their messages in

a strong way. This, Angela expressed, was an example of actual slacktivism. The difference between 'slacktivism' and fostering 'affective attunement', according to Angela is:

> The way you approach it and how much effort you put into it … if you just keep randomly posting stuff on your Facebook page, it just doesn't work … A lot of online campaigns aren't very well thought-out, they just figure that, we'll just set up a Facebook page and *dada*! Or we'll just put it on Twitter and *dada!* (Angela's emphasis)

What Angela is eluding to is the assumption (by some activists) that just having an online presence alone is enough to engage in meaningful consciousness-raising; realistically this takes a lot of effort. As such, she highlighted that it is very difficult to go what is colloquially referred to as 'viral' – or to 'trend' online:

> When you talk about the power of online campaigns, a lot of people talk about going viral, and that's a very important part of it, [but] it's not easy to go viral.

While 'going viral' is typically thought of as an online cultural phenomenon, it is not a new thing. For example, the increased availability of television in the 1950s and 1960s enabled the civil rights movement to 'go viral' through the way television brought it into people's homes every night, and helped to mobilise widespread support, spreading the movement to other parts of the world (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). What is significant and new about 'going viral' online is the speed in which images, news and videos can be shared, and the democratisation of *who* can go viral; it takes only a matter of hours or even minutes to go from one view to 40,000 views, and any lay individual can access these tools (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). 'Virality' refers to:

> Information flow process[es] where many people simultaneously forward a specific information item, over a short period of time, within their social networks, and where the message spreads beyond their own [social] networks to different, often distant networks, resulting in sharp acceleration in the number of people exposed to the message. (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013, p. 16)

Getting an issue to go viral on social media requires a 'collaborative agenda setting' between activists and mainstream media (Guha, 2014, p. 156). Guha (2014) contends that in order for feminist issues, such as sexual violence, to 'trend' online beyond counter-public conversations, support is required from mainstream media. This was very clearly in operation for the #MeToo movement, with reputable mainstream newspapers, the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker*, almost simultaneously publishing pieces about the violence and abuse perpetrated by Harvey

Weinstein, which helped to back Alyssa Milano's rallying call. In the context of this project and 'feminism trending' online, *Project Unbreakable* was reasonably successful in 'going viral'. Not only have mainstream media outlets covered the Project, but the Project has also received significant support from celebrities who have actively shared posts from their Tumblr account to their personal websites or social media pages. When I asked Anna to comment on some of the successes of *Project Unbreakable*, her response indicated that the campaign had gone viral via the support of mainstream media and celebrity followers:

> I don't think any of us expected this success so fast, but we're obviously very glad that the word is spreading! Over time, we've […] been featured in media such as TIME, CNN, ABC, etc., and recently *Unbreakable* was spoken about on Ashton Kutcher's[7] website and Facebook (which led to many new supporters)!

While the success of *Project Unbreakable* achieving such levels of publicity is a testament to the popularity and design of the activist project, it should also be noted that 'going viral' also comes with risks that may result in backlash. For example, once *Project Unbreakable* was propelled into the public arena, the founder faced criticism by followers online for not being a survivor of sexual violence and cited this on the website as one of the reasons she decided to close the project down. Although Grace (the founder of *Project Unbreakable*) was providing a platform that enabled survivors to speak out in their own voices, some claimed that because she was not a survivor herself she could never fully understand their experiences and should therefore not be involved in activism. Being a survivor of sexual violence has never been a precondition for being an activist, and not all the activists involved in this book identified as survivors. The backlash received by *Project Unbreakable* nonetheless reveals some of the enduring tensions associated with speaking on behalf of or speaking for victim-survivors, even though *Project Unbreakable* operated in a way that enabled victim-survivors to speak out directly albeit in ways shaped by the platform's vernacular (see Chapter 5).

The case studies in this book, however, indicated that 'going viral' could happen in a variety of creative and different ways given the multidirectional nature of digital media. While *Project Unbreakable* has received a high volume of media attention, Angela indicated that the mainstream press had not taken an interest in the work of the *Pixel Project*. Angela said:

> We don't really court media attention. It would be nice if, you know, the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times* or the *Guardian* did something about us but the media has their own agenda.

However, in addition to the role of mainstream media in helping to bolster campaigning, both the *Pixel Project* and the Stop Rape in Conflict campaign

[7]A popular actor who starred in *That 70s Show*.

viewed celebrity capital as an opportunity to enhance their presence online, and a way to bring the media to their campaigns. Alana said that 'celebrity *gets* media to come [to you], and you can exploit that and use it' (Alana's emphasis). Angela said that celebrities have 'the megaphone of fame and a built-in fan base … [but] you have to be very precise about what you need them to do'. Other major campaigns in this study, such as Rape Crisis Scotland, did not use celebrity capital to market their anti-rape message; however, they did use their position as a leading advocate and support service for victim-survivors of rape to help others generate traffic for smaller activist projects. For example, Hypatia's first blog post 'How I became a rape victim' was published by Rape Crisis Scotland in 2013, and it remains her most popular blog entry, with 173 comments and 3,500 'likes' on Facebook.

In reflecting on the campaign *Not Ever*, Lynn saw the discussion board on their website as instrumental for facilitating discussions about rape and rape culture, as I discussed in earlier in this chapter in relation to their other campaign *This Is Not an Invitation to Rape Me*. However, she also suggested that social media was instrumental in helping to disseminate the message beyond the confines of their website to other digital media networks. YouTube, in particular, was mentioned by Lynn as being influential in helping the *Not Ever* video 'trend':

> I think there is a sort of tipping point. When it's reached quite a fair audience that [it] just keep[s] on rolling, if you know what I mean? I sense that happening with *Not Ever* on YouTube.

Lynn suggested that the commentary and discussion the video has provoked from different parts of the world evident in the discussion section on the YouTube channel, along with over 800,000 views, is indicative of social media's capacity to help broaden the reach of their activism. Moreover, the more negative or critical commentary the campaigns *Not Ever* and *This Is Not an Invitation to Rape Me* have received may also be an indication of their influence or the extent to which the campaigns push back against the hegemonic discourses that maintain 'rape culture' and assumptions about rape. The more they challenge power and privilege, the greater the amount of resistance is expressed by those who support such positions. Additionally, Angela said that 'likes', 'shares', 'views' and re-blogs are a useful way of demonstrating how 'viral your message is'. However, Angela also mentioned that this does not necessarily tell you how much *impact* the message is truly having. Rather, it is through direct informal feedback from individuals about the resonance of the campaigns that Angela felt was a more meaningful way measuring impact. Through sharing information on the *Pixel Project's* social media pages about where people can go to get support, Angela has received messages such as:

> 'This is so useful, I wish you were around when I was going through that' or 'I wish you were around when my mother was going through that' and that indicates that, you know, this is working, *it's not slacktivism*. (Angela's emphasis)

Despite Angela's optimism that the *Pixel Project* was 'not just slacktivism', Kelly raised some concerns about the limitations of online activism and the lack

of long-term commitment, or shallow attempts to comprehend issues, like rape. She said:

> People kind of jump on the bandwagon and think "oh great, I can send this tweet or I can sign [a] pledge and I've done my part' and it's like no! We need to talk about this in a way that's actually going to restructure how we think about this as a society and like within the *law* and everywhere.

While Kelly sees these online spaces, such as blogs and social media, as opportunities to engage in the *political* components of rape through consciousness-raising, the above quote points to the very criticisms that social movement scholars have made of online activism regarding its ephemeral, ad hoc nature (see e.g. Fenton, 2008), but also its narcissistic, individualistic (neoliberal), overly *personalised* elements (Baer, 2016). The lack of commitment to structural or political change is the most difficult element to address or measure in online activism, largely because social movement actors involved in spaces like those in this project are not required to *do* something beyond 'liking', 'following' or 'sharing' a cause – although the #MeToo movement has demonstrated some capacity for digital feminist activism to influence legislative reforms. In Spain, for example, #MeToo was considered instrumental in the drafting of new laws that will define all non-consensual sex as rape (The Guardian, March 4 2020).

It is, of course, impossible to determine the impact of individuals 'liking', 'sharing' and 'retweeting' to disrupt rape culture. While it might be possible to get a particular message or movement to trend online, this is not akin to being able to make conclusions about the impact, or lack thereof, of online anti-rape activism. The effect of which is to reiterate the debate in terms of 'success' or 'failure' rather than paying attention to the contours, strategic decisions and hard work associated with sustaining submerged digital anti-rape networks. Ultimately, what the online spaces in this project have revealed so far is the challenges involved in making the personal political through consciousness-raising. On the one hand, Angela is right to say that these online campaigns are not simply 'slacktivism', given that they are able to support consciousness-raising, sustain anti-rape networks and create space for critical discussions. On the other hand, this comes at a price for some activists, and the labour involved in maintaining an anti-rape public, as well as the tensions involved in setting a collective agenda, means that some of the online campaigns struggle to be seen and sustain their presence online. Celebrities and mainstream media have been instrumental in helping to get some anti-rape messages 'trending' or 'going viral' – in other words, obtaining some form of public recognition – however, most of these anti-rape networks are engaged in ongoing struggles to get their message out into the aether, in the hopes that someone/anyone will witness their struggles in a meaningful way. As such, the politics surrounding the impact of digital consciousness-raising are complex, but as I have discussed throughout this chapter, these online platforms foster 'sites of conversation' (hooks, 1984, p. 8) that bring women and the wider community into contact with feminist ideas that they might not otherwise had access to (Mendes, Ringrose, et al., 2019; Rentschler & Thrift, 2015).

Conclusion

Digital spaces help to facilitate anti-rape consciousness-raising and the development of anti-rape networks that transcend time, space and place. At the heart of these networks is a desire to facilitate critical discussion and debate, and to develop and formulate ideas. Yet, the subject matter of these online campaigns', specifically attitudes inherent in rape culture and the complexities associated with the responses to these claims, highlights the resistance to the messages expressed within. Indeed, this chapter has illustrated how the case studies in this book function as sites of contestation over the causes of rape, namely rape culture, however, there are also difficulties associated with maintaining these online publics – specifically the time and effort required to keep writing or sharing material in order to generate solidarity and support. This chapter has therefore highlighted the tensions associated with broadening the online anti-rape movement beyond consciousness-raising to 'go viral', and the criticisms of online activism as 'slacktivism'. While it not always possible (or desirable) to measure the capacity of online anti-rape activism to bring about change, the data revealed here suggest that conceptualising online activism as simply 'slacktivism' is not clear-cut; doing so overlooks the shifting nature of contemporary social movements and the uneven nature of progress in social movements. Moreover, the emphasis on *impact* and *success* sidesteps the ways in which affective attunement helps the production and maintenance of consciousness-raising and solidarity, all of which is significant for understanding the nature of online anti-rape activism. In the next chapter, I start to unpack some of the deeper complexities at play associated with the themes raised through consciousness-raising efforts within these digital networks, specifically in relation to the ways in which victim-survivors speak out about their experiences and the politics of witnessing.