

Trending #RepealThe8th: an Exploration of the Opportunities and Limitations of Digital Feminist Activism

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Abstract

This thesis explores the potential and pitfalls of digital feminism through the lens of the recently successful Irish campaign, #Repealthe8th. As social movements intersect with digital technologies, there is a theoretical and practical imperative to address the implications digital activism has on mobilising actors and the wider feminist movement. Grounded within paradigms of feminist approaches to knowledge-production, this qualitative study employs feminist standpoint theory to explore the perspectives of four prominent figures within the campaign, as a means to understand the emergent field of digital feminism. The findings demonstrate how Irish feminists successfully purposed digital tools to mobilise transnational networks, to promulgate a counter-hegemonic narrative surrounding abortion, to mainstream a feminist consciousness and to manage the gendered experience of online harassment. The findings also raise concerns about the all-consuming nature of digital labour, the online manifestation of power dynamics, the unequal distribution of access and visibility within social networks and questions the sustainability of platforms governed by patriarchal capitalist logic. Finally, this thesis complicates our understanding of practicing digital feminism and suggests that more research is needed to investigate how the heterogeneous architecture of social-networking-sites can shape digital advocacy. This research broadens our understanding of abortion activism and digital feminism in general by tracking the critical interplay and co-evolution of feminism and digital space, and analyses the changing dynamics of feminist politics in contemporary society. By conceptualising digital feminism as both ally and enemy, it highlights the urgent need to expand our repertoire and understanding of online mobilisation resources in order to leverage the power of socio-technical practices while mitigating the risks and challenges of engaging with such technologies. In this way, this research could guide the digital strategies of other feminist agendas or pro-choice movements in the bid to achieve reproductive justice.

Key words: digital feminism, abortion activism, social media, social movements.

Trending #RepealThe8th: an Exploration of the Opportunities and Limitations of Digital Feminist Activism

In recent years, digital technologies and new media platforms have been leveraged to mobilise transnational socio-political movements of resistance (Hill, 2013). The Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, Slut Walk, MeToo, The Spanish Indignados and Black Lives Matter demonstrate how social media can empower civic engagement and mediate collective action. The feminist movement has also shifted online, as feminists harness the speed and scale of hashtags and networks to form communities and drive positive social change (Chen and Pain, 2018). Some recent examples are #MeToo, #TimesUp, #BeenRapedNeverReported, #WhyIDidntReport, #ImWithHer along with initiatives such as Hollaback! And The Everyday Sexism Project. However, rather than embracing these unprecedented tools as utopic mediums, scholarship has highlighted the need for a deeper understanding of the limitations and challenges of engaging with such technologies (Mendes et al., 2018).

Shifting our attention locally, on the 25th of May 2018, the Irish citizenry voted in favour of repealing the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution by an overwhelming majority¹, which was a momentous victory for feminists worldwide. While the pro-choice movement has a well-established history, the Repeal the Eighth campaign², was bolstered by its strategic, creative and dynamic digital presence. This research is orientated around the following questions; how were social networking sites [SNS] utilised as a tactic by feminist actors during the campaign? And what opportunities and limitations emerged as inherent to digital feminism [DF] during the campaign? Drawing on feminist standpoint theory, the perspectives of four prominent actors within the movement are employed as a means to discern the peaks and troughs of DF during Repeal. It is perhaps incumbent on me to disclose my personal position in relation to this campaign. I was living abroad at the time and while I couldn't be physically home to advocate in something I believed in, I was a curious observer of the movement's unfolding digital presence and felt inspired to study this landmark moment.

This research responds to the theoretical and practical agenda to 'document digital feminist activism' and the growing recognition that digital space is contradictory for feminism (UK Research

¹ 66.4% voted in favour of repealing the Eighth Amendment, this restrictive abortion legislation had recognized the equal right to life of the pregnant woman and the unborn.

² The terms 'campaign' and 'Repeal' are used interchangeably as umbrella terms to broadly encompass the diversity of respective campaigning groups, tactics and messages etc., involved within the campaign to repeal the Eighth Amendment from the constitution. In some instances, the term makes reference to a specific campaign, in which it will explicitly state eg., 'the TfY campaign'

and Innovation, 2018:np; Mendes et al., 2018). Much of extant literature is Ameri-centric and focuses on how online dialogue constructs narrative and reframes discourse. Thus, this research is original in scope as it critically explores the changing dynamics, risks and opportunities of contemporary feminism within a digitalised society from an Irish perspective. The findings may be utilised for other outcome-focused feminist and political agendas.

Literature Review

As women's concerns and subjectivities reconfigure online, feminist activism assumes creative and unprecedented forms. While some determine this shift as demarcating a fourth wave of feminism, it is synchronous with the proliferation of engaging in 'digital activism' within the wider activist field (Munro, 2013). Digital activism [DA] refers to an all-encompassing framework for socio-political practices which utilise digital tools (e.g. mobile phones) and digital network infrastructure (e.g. SNS on Web 2.0) as channels for action (Joyce, 2010). Boyd (2008) suggests that the key qualities of persistence, visibility, spreadability and searchability distinguish DA from past participatory practices. In an evolving discourse, scholarship contests its value, whether it is transformative, disseminates a different dynamic or a reductive version of 'slacktivism' (Juris, 2012). What, then, what are the strengths and weaknesses of digital tools? And what opportunities and threats does this landscape pose for feminism and feminist actors? We bear these questions in mind as we trace the contemporary concepts of DF.

Organisation

Through decentralization and 'networked horizontalism', grassroots collective action can be sustained online (Hill, 2013: 24). SNS facilitate the free, immediate and widespread coordination of DF, a potential illustrated by hashtag feminism and the virality of #MeToo (Keller et al., 2018). While a mere post does not mobilize a movement, it enables constituencies to engage in a global network without being directly associated with those who founded it (Delanty, 2003). However, the fluid decentralised nature of the network can jeopardise the discursive framing of the message, risking its dilution, de-contextualisation and misappropriation (Cuboniks, 2015; Matich, 2018).

Access and Exclusion

DF could have democratic and participatory power. Marginalised identities have unparalleled opportunities to participate in the public sphere and challenge monopolies of speech (Salter, 2013). The dialogical arena enables intra-movement critique in a way not possible within linear 'old' media which could further feminist solidarity (Ott, 2018). However, the imperfect realities of offline cultures

permeate online. Access is determined by an individual's skill, knowledge and resources. Munro (2013: 24) notes how the 'dizzying new terminology online' (e.g. Cis, WoC, TERF) and the online practice of "privilege-checking" demonstrates how DF is hegemonized by the straight, white and affluent. Theorists have also critiqued campaigns for prioritising Westernized and Euro-centric narratives of feminism, which reproduce racialised and classist dynamics (Gill, 2015). In *Social Media and Feminist Values - Ethics Aligned or Maligned?* Ott (2018: 104) suggests that inequality is embedded within digital infrastructure, as algorithmic filter bubbles are deliberately engineered to 'promote homophily and aggregate out diversity.'

Call-out Culture

As Hooks (1989) noted, speaking can be a radical act of liberation (cited by Munro, 2013). Feminists can engage in 'calling-out' whereby they speak truth to power unmediated. Previously, #AskThicke³ and #NotFunnyFacebook⁴ demonstrated how feminists could hold celebrities and corporations directly accountable (Turley and Fischer, 2018). Call-out culture also enables actors to challenge wider systemic inequities. Sites such as EverydaySexism, Hollaback! and #MeToo #BeenRapedNeverReported took isolated experiences of harassment and situated these within a societal issue of rape culture, with consequential outcomes. This resurgence of the personal echoes second-wave sentiment, 'the personal is political'. Interestingly, the instantaneous nature of online complicates the traditional chronological narrative of progress and resistance, enabling simultaneous activism and backlash (Chamberlain, 2016).

Bleak Realities

DF has been challenged for its risky invisible labour. Engagement with sensitive weighty topics is emotionally taxing (Keller et al., 2018). Disseminating feminist perspectives online evidently incites harassment, ranging from trolling to extreme collective forms like 'meninism' (Mendes et al., 2018). Penny (2013: 347) equates speaking as a female online as the 'short-skirt of the internet' – the woman is 'asking for threats of sexual violence and bodily harm.' However, feminists establish proactive coping strategies through 'digilante' tactics such as muting, blocking and reporting. Characteristic of

³ #AskThicke was originally intended for fans to interact with singer Robin Thicke about his song *Blurred Lines*. Instead feminists appropriated the hashtag to problematise the victim blaming and rape culture the song endorses in lyrics such as "I hate these blurred lines/ I know you want it" (Lynskey, 2013).

⁴ #NotFunnyFacebook was employed by users to lobby Facebook to remove fan pages based on rape jokes.

women's work, DF has been conceptualised as the 'third shift,' which operates within a 'psychology of deprivation' (Martin and Valenti, 2012: 23). Their unpaid labour is further exploited and commodified online as SNS promotes the pro-sumptions of content as 'collaboration' and 'sharing' in what Taylor (2014) coins 'digital feudalism.' Such bleak realities threaten the overall viability of DF.

Pedagogy

The literature highlights how DF can be an instrumental consciousness-raising tactic and pedagogical tool which can further mobilize feminism (Mendes et al, 2018). Keller et al., (2018) recognised the feminist blogosphere was formative for people – particularly adolescents – in developing a feminist consciousness. SNS create safe exploratory spaces which expose teens to 'unspeakable things' neglected in everyday life and schooling curriculums. Furthermore, popular internet culture and 'trending' features can be a gateway for mainstream audiences to organically discover feminism and for feminist critique to penetrate public discourse (Wajcman, 2009).

The literature gives reason to be both excited and sceptical. The speed, scope and dialectical aspects of these technologies could cultivate a more democratic and expansive movement, where individual actors are empowered to speak out and form communities. Counter to this, it can exacerbate pre-existing inequalities and divisions within feminism, and pose significant threats for the wellbeing of mobilising actors, which raises concerns for the sustainability of the movement. We look to Ireland and the strong online presence of Repeal to further investigate the potentials and pitfalls of the practice. The next section provides a background of the development of the movement in Ireland.

⁵ Pro-sumption refers to the production and consumption of content.

Contextualising the Repeal Campaign

The Repeal the Eighth campaign was another facet of a rich and long-established movement. As Taoiseach Varadkar (2018:np) put it, the historic referendum result on the 25 May 2018 was the ‘culmination of a quiet revolution’ occurring in Ireland over decades.

Abortion was originally prohibited and criminalised through the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act (Connolly and O’ Toole, 2005). The governmentality of women’s bodies was intrinsic to Ireland’s social imaginary and thus the importance of achieving bodily autonomy cannot be underestimated. Fletcher (2005: 382) notes that the ‘association between Catholicism, Irish nationalism, and “pro-life” politics [...] produced a situation in which abortion [was] perceived as antithetical to Irishness’. As Ireland had transitioned from a colonial to sovereign state, upholding women’s ‘purity, chastity and virtue’ became symbolic of Irish nationhood and key distinguishers from British identity (Fischer, 2016: 822).

Abortion politics ebbed and flowed throughout the decades, namely manifesting in the efforts of The Women’s Right to Choose Group, Anti-Amendment Campaign, and The Women’s Informational Network. The “X Case” (1992), further referendums in 1992 and 2002, the A, B, C v Ireland (2010), and the death of Savita Halappanavar (2012) were all considered pivotal milestones, although only representative of a fraction of the ‘unprecedented social, psychic, and moral battering’ women endured because of the Eighth (Smyth, 1988: 341). These cases revitalised pro-choice activism, pushing the topic of abortion into public discourse and onto the political agenda (Taylor, 1998). Thus in 2018, the landslide decision to repeal the constitutional ban on abortion passed by 66.4%, the fourth highest turnout among referenda in Ireland.

The deceptively simple ‘Yes’ vote was the result of a transformation of cultural outlook, in what sociologist Pauline Jackson (1986, cited by Taylor 1998: 678) described as ‘two steps forward, one step back’. The overall liberalisation of attitudes was evident in the political activism which preceded the referendum; anti-austerity protests, the Occupy movement, the legalisation of same-sex marriage and scandals surrounding the Church.

The civil society campaign mobilised Irish people to advocate and vote for progressive social change in their masses. The ethos of the pro-choice movement was ‘non-traditional, non-hierarchical, women-led’ (Field, 2018:624). The strategies and stories employed by the official Together for Yes [TfY] campaign and ad-hoc grassroots activism were multi-faceted, relying on on-the-ground canvassing, traditional and new media (Bardon and Carswell, 2018). Repeal’s digital tactics ranged from hashtags, designated accounts and websites, consciousness-raising campaigns, crowdfunding, user-generated content, and the coordination of national protests. Previous activist efforts were not mobilised within digital contexts which probes the question, how was DF employed in this wave of Irish abortion politics and did DF influence this feminist victory?

Methodology

Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical framework which guides my thesis is feminist standpoint theory, grounded within the broad paradigm of feminist approaches to knowledge-production (Stewart, 1994). This lens prioritises ‘women’s lived experiences as the starting point for building knowledge’ and is pertinent as I frame the unique perspective of women and their contextual knowledge as a foundational means to discern the trials and tribulations of doing DA (Hesse-Biber, 2007:11). Influenced by Marx and Engels, standpoint perspective is concerned with validating the voices of the oppressed. Irish women were repressed by the Constitution and society through denial of their reproductive rights. This research creates a space in which their subjectivity and their journey towards achieving bodily autonomy is represented and legitimised. My research broadens our understanding of abortion activism by analysing the changing dynamics of feminist politics in contemporary globalised society, attempting to track the critical interplay and co-evolution of feminism and digital space (Creswell, 2013).

Methodological Approach & Data Collection Process

Qualitative methodology was employed as I was interested in garnering rich, descriptive and anecdotal insights of feminist’s experiences online. Qualitative approaches orient a feminist sensitivity to the research praxis as it prioritises the female voice and is appropriate when all participants have a prior grasp of relevant phenomenon (Bryman, 2000; Mies, 1993). Semi-structured interviews were used to facilitate an engaging and exploratory data collection process (Ayles, 2008). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, which enabled me to be observant and present during the interview process. Field-notes were taken to document non-verbal sentiments such as change in tone of voice or expression. My role as interviewer was to encourage depth and breadth of reflection through open-ended and reflective inquiry. However, I needed to be conscious of the ‘micropolitics’ of the interviewer-interviewee dynamic and reflexive in how the positionality of both participants and myself would impact this study. Participants ultimately represented ‘desired’ femininity and had access to the political sphere. As knowledge is necessarily co-constructed, I needed to be conscious of how ‘sharing privileges’ may reinforce power asymmetries (Lundstrom, 2010:84).

Participants

The researcher conducted purposive sampling to recruit participants. By researching the campaign’s digital presence, I identified prospective interviewees based on the following stratifying criteria; 1) Identified themselves as feminists or part of the feminist movement; 2) Maintained an online presence and demonstrated engagement in online advocacy for Repeal the Eighth campaign; 3) (A) a member of an organisation under the TfY Campaign/ a separate organisation which actively supported the Repeal campaign online or (B) an individual who practised repeal-related activism on any SNS or

site. The rationale for representing both institutional and grassroots activist work was an attempt to capture the internal heterogeneity within DF.

I contacted fifteen activists via their online account or email. Four agreed to participate. An information and consent form detailing the study's purpose was provided prior to interviews. Participants had the option to withdraw from the study up to two weeks after participation. Confidentiality and anonymity was offered but participants granted permission for identification. The sample ultimately included feminist and academic Ailbhe Smyth, who was the co-director of the umbrella campaign, Together For Yes (TfY), and convenor of Coalition to Repeal the Eighth Amendment; Becci Jeffers, a lecturer who campaigned through her personal account; Jennifer Goff who was head of communications at Scottish Irish Abortion Rights Campaign (ARC) on a voluntary basis; and Cliona Loughnane who works as the Women's Health Coordinator in the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCi). Before our interview, she spoke to the NWCi Communication Officer and Head of Social Media for TfY. While two participants represented intersectional identities, all were white, Irish, middle-class and highly educated. The homogeneity of the sample significantly limits the generalisability of the study.

Data Analysis

The interviews generated approximately 7 hours of data. I employed thematic analysis to organise the textual data into overarching patterns and theoretical constructs (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Lapadat, 2010). Mindmaps, tables and Stirling's (2001) framework of 'global, organising and basic' themes were helpful practical aids for yielding contextually grounded thematic networks. For example, I defined opportunities of DF as a global theme, accessibility of platforms as the organising theme, and as a basic theme any action which exemplifies this point, guided overall by a deductive approach to reasoning. The initial typology applied to the data in the literature review provided a framework to categorise and analyse the findings. However, these boundaries evolved during analysis. A more reflexive and inductive approach ensured new concepts could emerge iteratively throughout the analytical process. For coherence, the following section corresponds to the predetermined thematic framework but responds to new findings, which is reflected in the themes and sub-themes dealt with below, for example 'Call-out Culture' becomes 'Call-out Culture Shapes Culture.'

Findings and Discussion

While, I intended to focus solely on participants' reflections on their involvement in the campaign, the interviews evolved to encompass more broadly their relationship with DF in their everyday lives. We interrogate their standpoints below.

Mobilising Transnational Networks

Repeal successfully leveraged 'networked horizontalism' whilst retaining centralised leadership and strategic organisation (Hill, 2013). TfY's official digital content, branding, press releases and merchandise design circulated to official/grassroots and local/global groups, ensuring uniformity in communications. In particular, engagement on Facebook facilitated international organisation of local participation. For example, *Repeal Global* coordinated Irish diasporic communities in 30 cities worldwide to join March4Choice and #HomeToVote. In contrast to Matich (2018), the lack of control over how the message would be expressed was perceived as a powerful mobilising force:

There's a constant balance between making the digital campaign look coherent and enabling creativity. Some of the best ideas came from a single individual who invented a hashtag, like #KnowYourRepealers. (Cliona)

The (Un)democracy of Digital Feminism

Similar to scholars (Ott, 2018), activists shared a nuanced perspective on the role of power and access in digital spaces which suggested a tension between feminist agency and structural inequality. Activists could adapt to their circumstance, transcending precarious working arrangements, care duties, and socio-cultural differences ("we'd have a social at the pub, it was very stereotypically Irish" - Jennifer) (Chamberlain, 2016). However, this assumes the individual has sufficient resources and knowledge to navigate algorithmic control, filter bubbles and digital social cultures. Participants' privilege and digital literacy ensured they "knew their algorithms" and felt comfortable articulating their views amidst Twitter's "elitist and politically engaged" (Ailbhe). This finding highlights the unequal distribution of informed access to social networks.

Generally, participants valued how DF enabled subjugated identities to form collectives and challenge longstanding social structures. Becci, who identified as a bi-sexual radical feminist, found her "tribe" online and valued how women "who would have been historically ignored" could reclaim representation and "question dominant views of what deserves of a follower". These findings suggest

⁶ #KnowYourRepealers was coined by a Tipperary activist Emma Burns, who tweeted "42yo mother of 2 (one with additional needs) from Tipp, non-party, disability rights advocate, researcher #KnowYourRepealers". The hashtag began trending.

that, through the exchange of social capital manifested in ‘liking’, ‘sharing’, ‘following’ and ‘influencing’, communities may organically subvert marginal forms of value into legitimate cultural capital, which could diversify the insularity of hegemonic feminism (Bourdieu, 1973).

In the context of Repeal, the structural inequalities of reproductive injustice were reinforced rather than challenged. White Irish voices dominated online discourse despite the Eighth’s disproportionate impact on intersectional identities. Participants recognised the advocacy of MERJ (Migrant and Ethnic Minorities for Repeal) who highlighted these hierarchies of discrimination, but could only cite one organically popular account which represented a woman-of-colour, @Repealist. Evoking Gill’s (2016) notion of Western palatability, one may draw parallels between @Repealist’s access to the political sphere and her positionality as a privileged minority. Both @Repealist and Savita (whose image became a signifier for reproductive rights and a site of grief) were medical professionals who accumulated enough cultural capital to be constructed as the ‘deserving’, ‘good’, ‘relatable’ Other, and therefore authorised to contribute within the Repeal eco-system. Meanwhile, women with a disability, migrants, asylum-seekers, ethnic minorities, disadvantaged, with little-to-no income were excluded from online discourse. Rather than being a more penetrable space, Repeal demonstrated how social and economic barriers limit DF to a privileged practice.

Call-out Culture Shapes Culture

Unfolding power dynamics between ‘lay’ people and the gatekeepers of influence manifested during the campaign. Becci reflected that instigating dialogue between “public institutions, figures and decision-makers within public settings” revolutionised traditional approaches to politics. Participants contradicted Martin and Valenti’s (2012) belief that DF enabled a more liberated version of activism unhindered by convention or formality. They perceived DF as a potential career risk and strove to align their offline and online selves. Interestingly, participants were more likely to engage in call-out culture through collaborative features (e.g. sharing) and on pages which spoke truth to power by representing a collectivised and anonymised narrative. For example, Facebook pages *Everyday Stories*, *In Her Shoes - Women of the Eighth* and the Twitter page @TwoWomenTravel were commended for providing a platform for women to call-out the Eighth and the regressive culture it represented.

As the discursive potential of DF translated the travesty of the Eighth through the female gaze, Ireland’s institutionalised culture of oppression of female sexuality and reproductive rights was challenged by a feminist-oriented counter-hegemonic narrative. Echoing scholarship (Mendes et al, 2018; Keller et al, 2018) findings on DF’s ability to form communities through documenting and uniting individual experiences, these platforms shared common abortion stories and reasons, the pain, expense and difficulty in making that decision and accessing healthcare abroad. This humanised the subject of abortion through a reframed narrative of care and understanding, which Ailbhe noted was further fostered in TfY’s ethos. Participants reflected that it became a national exercise in “empathy-building” which legitimised female emotion and stories historically perceived as trivial ‘domestic’ ‘women’s

issues' into mobilising political forces (Fischer, 2016). As invisible traumatic realities were publicised, Jennifer noted how "people felt like their personal experience could impact politics in a way they couldn't see before," confirming the resurgence of second-wave feminist sentiment. Furthermore, 'speaking unspeakable things' together online provided a sense of solidarity and support for those living in shame and isolation (Keller et al., 2018: 23). Yet, the success of call-out culture relies on scope and momentum, "there's power in numbers. That tips the balance" (Jennifer).

The Dark Side of Digital Feminism

Participants found the practice risky, expressing expectation or acceptance of feeling targeted and unsafe thereby highlighting the patriarchal control of public space and the reflexive backlash to practicing feminism online (Mendes et al., 2018). Harassment ranged from general insults which used denigrating language about feminism to "personalised violence and sexualised threats" which was often contextualised to the campaign, for example, "horrific" pictures of late-term fetuses (Jennifer). Becci recognised that Repeal's significant presence made spaces intensely more toxic, mirroring the correspondence between feminist campaigns 'energy and vibrancy' to ensuing 'vitriol and animosity' (Gill's, 2016: 617). This phenomenon was exacerbated for intersectional identities, as anti-feminist rhetoric was threaded with homophobia, transphobia and fatphobia (Keller et al., 2018; Gill and Orgad, 2018). While participants noted these behaviours are common to any public-sphere, they found digital expressions to be more prevalent and violent, which was perhaps due to the notion of "key-board warriors". Concerns were raised surrounding the protection of those more vulnerable, reflecting that DF left an "emotional scar" when they were younger. Nonetheless, participants demonstrated their digital autonomy by developing risk management strategies (Mendes et al., 2018). They routinely muted, blocked and safeguarded their identity. Interestingly, these tactics varied depending on the perceived threat associated with each platform. Facebook was deemed safest due to user's control of access. Jennifer would employ protective "euphemisms" in the Twitter-scape (e.g. name in Irish, minimum personal information). Designated pages and tools were praised for providing structural boundaries – *In Her Shoes*'s participation rules emphasised "a contract of compassion" and The Repeal Shield⁷ provided relief and space to engage in more constructive debate. However, Becci thought blocking threatened democracy, asserting it was her civic responsibility to respond to oppositional voices and resist the "echo-chamber". Nonetheless, this collective weary and shared vulnerability was

⁷ The Repeal Shield was a volunteer-run service which blocked trolls, bots and fake accounts spreading fake news, misinformation and misogynistic hate about the campaign. Their blocklist was automatically blocked on subscribers accounts.

somewhat valued as it provided a “a sense of solidarity and purpose in your emancipatory politics”, reflective of the ‘dogged optimism’ which sustains feminism (Becci; Hemmings, 2011).

An Unsustainable Practice – Personal costs, Digital Labour and Platforms

Although the specificity of DF in Repeal isn’t immediately transferable to all contexts, the findings raised concerns about the long-term sustainability of the practice. Jennifer (volunteer) evoked the notion of the ‘third shift’; “It was a full-time job on top of a full-time job!” in contrast to Cliona (paid) who contained her activism within formal work hours (Martin and Valenti, 2012). Meanwhile, ‘lay’ activist Becci suffered from a ‘psychology of deprivation’; “I’d feel like I was shouting into the void!”, juxtaposed by Ailbhe who found the spotlight and publicity exhausting. Regardless of payment or profile, there was a shared sense of relief when the campaign finished. Activists needed a “digital detox to recover” (Ailbhe). The participants regularly reached “saturation point” from an “overbearing” sense of self-investment and the emotional toll characteristic of women’s work, which echoed Keller et al.’s (2018) findings (Becci). Those who declined participation in this research confirmed the ubiquity of burn-outs. Participants were conflicted about their social media usage in general, Becci reflected; “I wonder when I will come off [SNS] altogether, the only true freedom in the 21st century is being offline.” There was also a deeper concern about the incompatibility of feminism and digital space. They questioned if any form of grassroots activism could be sustained within a system based on surveillance and capitalism. Can feminist ethics condone the unequal divide between feminist’s unpaid labour and the capitalist logic of exploitation, data-extraction and the commodification of virtual acts? The insights suggest factors specific to online contexts i.e. (in)visibility and SNS business model, jeopardise the sustainability of feminism in digital contexts.

Mainstreaming a Feminist Consciousness in Ireland

Participants found the campaign provided a safe space for people to self-identify and initially practise their feminism which challenged stereotypes. Jennifer reflected, “Repeal softened the burning-bra, I hate men connotations and was a great way for people to ‘come out’ as feminist.” Participants regularly assumed the role of citizen journalists and would mediate news articles which circulated feminist critique. Echoing the literature, participants found the democratization of knowledge “formative” in developing their feminist consciousness as it “gave life and materiality” to key concepts like intersectionality (Cliona) (Keller et al., 2018; Mendes et al., 2018). Ailbhe, who belongs to a pre-

⁸ An administrator of a well-known repeal social media account declined participation in the research due to burn-out; “the campaign took a heavy toll on me, I need to take some time off” (quote obtained from private email).

digital era, did not emphasise DF's role in the evolution of her personal feminism. However, as participants actively curated feminist networks, these findings cannot be extended to all users.

Repeal demonstrated that successfully educating and mobilising the Irish electorate had to be strategic and subtle. Ailbhe noted that the TfY campaign couched contested issues within “acceptable” narratives of empathy and vulnerability, avoiding radicalised discourse of “rights”, “justice”, and hashtags such as #ProChoice, #Feminism so as not to disengage middle Ireland. Similarly, participants praised *Everyday Stories* for tapping into Ireland's heritage of story-telling and *The Hunreal Issues* for politically engaging a younger demographic by removing academic jargon, employing colloquialism and humour. #HomeToVote was also anchored in culturally symbolic themes of emigration and a sense of civic duty, “it played on something about you as an Irish person abroad, it's actually given me chills talking about it” said Jennifer. The online “trending” feature assumed the ultimate consciousness-raising tactic as it enabled digital campaigns to garner global traffic and influence news. Participants did evoke the critique of ‘slacktivism’ as they questioned if the spectacle of DA fostered a culture of consumptive politics, and pacified public engagement to a like or retweet (Kensinger, 2003). However, such concerns were arguably negated by the referendum's turnout. This suggests the critical importance of designing pedagogical campaigns which are tactical, accessible and contextually relevant. It also raises the question of whether the process of making a message palatable for mainstream consumption dilutes its substance and vigour.

The Platform is the Message

Participants negotiated each SNS which reflects how feminist practice is mediated and shaped by platform's digital architecture. Facebook facilitated the most constructive meaningful discussion with friends and family due to its discursive potential, privacy features and symmetrical social model⁹. Facebook's customisable event and page entities proved most effective for organising on-the-ground campaigning and for establishing a collectivised narrative. Twitter, structured by an asymmetric social model and attention inequality¹⁰, provided unprecedented pedagogical and networking opportunities. Yet, it was unanimously perceived as the most risky platform. Activists felt most vulnerable because of its public deregulated structure and regularly felt disconcerted from “information overload” on their feeds (Becci). Participants perceived the 280-character-limit as reductive and a significant inhibitor to campaigning, as tweets were easily sabotaged by opposition. In contrast, visual-centric Instagram

⁹ Facebook's symmetrical social model parallels reciprocal personal relationships, Facebook “friends” is a two-way relationship, creating a 1-1 dynamic. This enables two types of relationships: friends/ not friends

¹⁰ Twitter's asymmetrical social model of “following” enables four types of relationships within the Twitter network: following each other/ neither following/ people who don't follow you-you follow them/ vice versa. This creates an attention inequality as a user can give more attention than they receive and vice versa.

safeguarded the communication and interpretation of the message. Target audiences also differed on each platform. Instagram was “where the real supporters were” due to its younger, more progressive user-base, all generations and beliefs assembled on Facebook while Twitter engaged those political and influential (Cliona; Ailbhe). The findings suggest how platform’s network structure and functionality influences user’s online engagement, interaction and experiences of burn-out and harassment. SNS also partly determines the approach, the discursive framing of the message, media used, network reach and the risk of misappropriation of feminist campaigns. These findings complicate our understanding of practicing feminism online, and highlight the need to focus on the effects of platform design.

Much of the findings contribute to existing knowledge on the contradictory nature of participation in DF, while others elicited interesting insights and potential areas for future research. The ambiguity of these findings accurately represents the heterogeneity of feminist standpoints. Ailbhe, demonstrated more scepticism about DF while Jennifer, abroad and absent from the physical campaign, reaped the most value from the digital campaign. Products of generation and geography, these differing perspectives highlight the demographic digital divide and DF’s contested nature. On the one hand, DF proved a powerful tool for mobilising community formation, sustaining global networks, galvanising a new generation of feminists who are increasingly socialised online, and changing socio-cultural attitudes surrounding feminist issues. However, despite this apparent shift in the locus of power towards activists, individual and infrastructural barriers perpetuate hierarchies and legitimise some feminist voices over others. Access and visibility in social networks not only relies on an individual’s knowledge (i.e. literacy) and resources (i.e. phone) but also their social status, their ability to effectively digitise their social capital and their proficiency in resisting algorithms and filter-bubbles to create a diverse space. The gendered experience of online abuse and DF’s workload presents tangible threats to actors’ wellbeing. A neo-marxist critique would suggest the monetization of digital labour and the provision of ‘free’ culture (via user-generated content) raises concerns surrounding the sustainability of DF on platforms driven by the capitalist logic of exploitation (Dijk, 2009). Furthermore, by employing a McLuhanism (1964) analysis, the landscapes of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram produce distinct online experiences, enabling and constraining certain user behaviour, which has significant implications for actors and campaign efforts. A paradoxical tension between empowerment and exploitation, autonomy and governance emerges. As DA secures a fundamental role across the field of activism, there is an urgent need to develop strategies for navigating each SNS, optimising opportunities and mitigating risks.

Conclusion

This thesis has sought to further explore the opportunities and advantages, threats and limitations inherent to the practice of DF through the lens of #Repealthe8th. The findings are paradoxical and twofold, which reinforces much of the literature and confirms the complexity of DF. Although the study was contextually grounded to Ireland/Irish-ness and specific to advocacy efforts pre-referendum, by considering how contemporary abortion politics coalesce within a digital landscape, the findings may be leveraged for other feminist contexts.

Avenues for future research are suggested by the limitations of this study. A more holistic account of the campaign would triangulate the data with a netnographic analysis of digital communication contexts. This research failed to account for marginal voices by focusing on those privileged to access the political spheres. How did those excluded from hegemonic feminism experience participation? Furthermore, none of my participants had lived-experience of abortions. Research could be done on what Jennifer recognised as a “globally traumatising conversation” for the women whose personal lives had been politicised and picked apart within the public realm. More in-depth comparative research could consider how variables like remuneration, recognition and working/leisure hours in voluntary versus paid roles influence feminist engagement. While the study was cross-generational, it would be interesting to examine DF from the perspectives of older generation feminists such as Ailbhe who have more contextual experience of activism pre-and-post-technology. Finally, it failed to attempt to measure the value of digital politics or the success of digital campaigns. If the future of activism is increasingly digitised, how are social movements transformed? These findings merely scratch the surface on a range of multi-faceted issues.

By means of conclusion, Irish feminists successfully deployed SNS organisational, creative, discursive and networking tools. Repeal coordinated and mobilised a global Irish diaspora. It called out the Eighth, deconstructed the oppressive culture of silence and shame and propagated a counter-hegemonic narrative of compassion and solidarity. The diverse organisational and ad-hoc online initiatives highlighted the importance of curating safe spaces and employing nuanced messaging to ignite national conversation and permeate public consciousness. Although DF is fundamentally restricted and governed by the design of social networks, actors were cognizant and negotiated these barriers. While participants struggled with the consuming nature of digital labour, they effectively managed the continuum of harassment, even pioneering The Repeal Shield as a risk-containment mechanism.

This thesis highlights the need to expand our repertoire, digital literacy and understanding of online mobilisation processes. It points to the significant potential in strategic and explicit repurposing of socio-technical practices for accomplishing feminist causes, along with the need to confront the

limitations and challenges of engaging with such technology. More research is warranted in understanding the role of platform providers in shaping the agency and experience of users, communities and movements. The unstable dynamic nature of these platforms suggests that these lay hypotheses will shift and transition. There is an imperative to continually revise social scientific research on contemporary activist dynamics as these mediums evolve. At present, we may conceptualise digital feminism as a double-edged sword, a feminist ally and enemy. Its blade can serve to segregate and exploit or unite and empower. Irish feminists succeeded in yielding the latter potential, thus framing the #Repealthe8th campaign as, on balance, a successful case-study for exploring digital feminism.

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