

**Communicating feminist politics? The double-edged sword of using social media in a feminist organisation**

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Published in Feminist Media Studies, April 2019, Online first, doi:  
[10.1080/14680777.2019.1599036](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1599036)

## **Communicating feminist politics? The double-edged sword of using social media in a feminist organisation**

Media coverage of violence against women and girls (VAWG) has increased in recent years, due to high profile investigations such as the 2012 Jimmy Savile case in the UK, and in response to the #MeToo movement in the US. Feminist organisations are likely to be asked for comment by the media as a result, but journalistic interest in case details rather than systemic causes of VAWG means that political messages focused on ending VAWG remain difficult to communicate. In contrast, social media is frequently celebrated as a channel through which the politics of feminist organisations can be promoted more directly, bypassing mainstream media agendas. In this article, we present the results of participatory research that explored the tensions inherent in social media use by one UK feminist organisation, Rape Crisis England & Wales (RCEW). The findings challenge the utopian view of social media as a panacea for news media shortcomings. Rather than being unequivocally positive, integrating social media into a feminist organisation's communication work is a double-edged sword, bringing significant challenges that users must negotiate on a daily basis.

Keywords: Rape Crisis, social media, feminist politics, sexual violence, VAWG

### **Introduction**

Historically, feminist organisations have found it difficult to promote their political agenda in mainstream news. However, recent high profile cases of violence against women and girls (VAWG) – Jimmy Savile in the UK, Harvey Weinstein and Brett Kavanaugh in the US, and regular revelations of sexism in elite institutions – arguably offer opportunities for feminist organisations working to end VAWG to promote their aims by placing stories or commenting on cases. From a normative perspective the opportunity to provide media comment is positive. Increased visibility should equate to a higher profile, greater awareness and credibility for the organisation's work (Kirk Hallahan 2010, Brooke McKeever 2013) and, in the medium term, the possibility of an increase in volunteer and financial support. However, research on media coverage of VAWG shows a persistent pattern of stereotyped victim representations, and a focus on individual cases rather than long-term patterns of violence and systemic causes (Jenny Kitzinger 2004, Karen Lumsden and Heather Morgan 2017). In contrast, social media is

often viewed as a tool through which the importance of ending VAWG can be communicated more directly, without having to accommodate media agendas (Dustin Harp, Josh Grimm and Jaime Loke 2017, Hester Baer, 2016).

In this article, we present findings from a participatory research project, *Communicating Feminism*, conducted with Rape Crisis England & Wales (RCEW), which challenge this utopian view of social media. Research focusing on feminist adoption of social media has tended to emphasise its use by grassroots activists and individuals, rather than organisations with an existing political and institutional hinterland (see, for example, Jessalynn Keller, Kaitlynn Mendes, and Jessica Ringrose 2018, Fredrika Thelandersson 2014, Sherri Williams 2016). We argue that, for established feminist organisations, the use of social media is shaped by the organisation's history, identity and purpose as well as the political, legal and funding context on which survival depends. These factors, combined with social media's capacity for both openness and surveillance, make choices about using digital platforms for communicating political messages more complicated than is often assumed. They compromise the liberatory potential of digital platforms as tools for 'alternative' representations of women, and even have the potential to shut down, rather than facilitate voice. We conclude that, while social media's utility for movements such as #MeToo is clear (for example, as a means of rapidly extending audiences, circulating messages and promoting collective action), for established feminist organisations that face a greater number of institutional constraints, it is a double-edged sword for communicating feminist politics in the public sphere.

We begin by briefly reviewing existing research on media coverage of VAWG, and the potential social media offers to feminist and third sector organisations. We then introduce RCEW, the project and methodology, and the findings. We conclude by considering the complicated and difficult realities of using social media for feminist organisations.

### **Media coverage of VAWG and the promise of social media**

Rape and sexual violence began to receive regular coverage in British newspapers from the 1970s onwards, rising throughout the 1980s (Keith Soothill and Sylvia Walby 1991), when child sexual abuse (CSA) was brought to public attention via a spate of scandals (Kitzinger 2001, Paula Skidmore 1998). The 1980s also saw the sexualisation, sensationalisation and tabloidisation of news under new commercial pressures that resulted in a shift towards an 'infotainment' register (Karen Boyle 2005, Rosalind Gill

2007). These critical feminist analyses of media coverage of sexual violence in Anglophone Western democracies have repeatedly drawn attention to the construction and circulation of falsehoods about the incidence and realities of sexual abuse; the focus on individual, often atypical, cases versus systemic (gendered and intersectional) framings, and, more recently, the sexualisation of coverage. Rape reporting is ‘de-gendered’ as male perpetrators are invisibilised in headlines and official statistics, or blame is apportioned elsewhere (e.g. to date rape drugs) (Boyle 2005, Gill 2007). Studies across other national contexts illustrate the tenacity of rape myths in news coverage, with victims implicated in their attacks, racist stereotypes of perpetrators recurring alongside geopolitical tropes, and coverage trained through a sexualised lens (Zeynep Alat 2006, Meenakshi Gigi Durham 2015, Stephanie Bonnes 2013).

Journalistic structures and practices have contributed to these patterns through a lack of specialist journalists covering CSA stories and the use of ‘official agencies’ - court reports and police - as primary news sources, marginalising feminist campaigners (Skidmore 1998). As a result, misogynist news scripts about sexual violence continue, alongside more subtle post-feminist framings that, to some extent, mainstream feminist messaging (Boyle 2005, 2017, Durham 2015, Lumsden and Morgan 2017, Deb Waterhouse-Watson 2016).

The shortcomings of mainstream media for communicating the politics of VAWG, and the increasing importance of digital channels, have resulted in social media playing an increasingly important role in feminist organisations’ communication campaigns. ICT innovations have long been the focus of feminist imaginings, from Donna Haraway’s 1985 ‘The Cyborg Manifesto’ and forecasts of a rebooted (cyber-)feminism in the 1990s (Sadie Plant 1996), to current discussions of movements kick-started online, such as UK Feminista and the Everyday Sexism Project. Zeisler (2013: 179) notes ‘there is much more of a chance that these [feminist perspectives] will actually have a chance to speak as loudly as the dominant media simply by virtue of being readily accessible.’ Feminist movements have used social media alongside framing tactics and direct relationship-building work with journalists, to contest dominant narratives about VAWG, improve coverage of women’s lives and experiences, and mobilise action across constituencies and geographies (Danica Minic 2014, Barbara Barnett 2005, Henrike Knappe and Sabine Lang 2014, Harp, Grimm and Loke 2017, Baer 2016). Social media platforms also provide places where women can develop feminist ‘counterpublics’, learning about and challenging misogynistic content,

rape myths and other justifications for VAWG (Baer 2016, Sophie Sills et al. 2016, Keller, Mendes, and Ringrose 2018).

More generally, social media's potential has been recognised by organisational communication and public relations scholars. Social media channels outpace the speed and reach of traditional media, are relatively cheap, and can facilitate relationship-building and dialogue with audiences (Michael Kent 2013, Gregory Saxton and Richard Waters 2014). It is now commonplace for organisations, including non-profits, to use social media platforms alongside traditional media in communications strategies (Rowena Briones et al. 2011, Gregory Saxton and Chao Guo 2014, Erich Sommerfeldt 2013, Donald Wright and Michelle Hinson 2012). Social media creates spaces for activist communities to develop, generating networks of like-minded individuals and organisations, facilitating conversations that contribute to a common identity and establishing a networked, counter-public sphere for debates (Cheryll Soriano 2014, Thelandersson 2014, Giselle Auger 2014, Aristeia Fotopoulou 2016, Williams 2016). They offer the possibility for 'activists to enter into news and information flows and overcome journalistic practices that may limit the reporting of their activities to less meaningful frames' (Libby Lester and Brett Hutchins 2012: 848), interrupting the media agenda by increasing the visibility of counter-publics and their narratives (Brian Loader and Dan Mercea 2011). In these 'relational sphere[s] of interaction' (Itai Himelboim et al. 2014: 361), audiences, organisations and other stakeholders create connections that influence the outcomes of communication (Saxton and Guo 2014, Hilary Fussell Sisco and Tina McCorkindale 2013, Himelboim et al. 2014, Richard Hanna, Andrew Rohm, and Victoria Crittenden 2011).

These advantages notwithstanding, social media can be time- and resource-intensive and require technical competence, all of which can be in short supply in non-profit organisations (Sommerfeldt 2013, Andreas Schwarz and Alexander Fritsch 2014). Communicating effectively requires organisations to understand the complexity of the social media landscape, the capabilities of different platforms, their use by audiences and their suitability for communicating different types of information (Saxton and Guo 2014, Saxton and Waters 2014, Sisco and McCorkindale 2013). Content must be engaging and offer something audiences can relate to (Auger 2014). In other words, organisations must engage in ongoing connective labour, the 'largely invisible digital, immaterial, and affective labor' (Megan Boler et al. 2014: 3) that characterises the strategic use of digital media to generate 'affective glue' that can hold a movement

together. However, the demands of such work mean the promise of dialogue and connectedness often go unfulfilled, with social media used mainly for information-sharing instead (Saxton and Waters 2014, Kent 2013).

In summary, research suggests that social media may provide an alternative space for feminist organisations to bypass mainstream media agendas. However, the complexities of running social media may be challenging. While these findings are important, they have been based largely on case studies and quantitative data; the lived experience of using social media in feminist organisations remains under-explored. In a climate of austerity, where such organisations are struggling to survive, collaborative research is increasingly scarce due to time and resource limitations, but is crucial for a fuller understanding of how social media is affecting their work. This article offers a rare snapshot of how feminist organisations may grapple with the communicative opportunities and challenges of social media (see also Andi Zeisler, 2013).

### **RCEW and *Communicating Feminism***

RCEW was established in 2003 as an umbrella organisation for 46 Rape Crisis Centres across England and Wales.<sup>1</sup> Rape Crisis Centres are feminist charities offering support for victims and survivors<sup>2</sup> of sexual violence, including helplines, face-to-face counselling, advocacy services and, in some cases, text services. They also work towards ending VAWG by raising awareness of its prevalence and effects through communication campaigns demythologising rape and contesting ingrained beliefs about perpetrators and survivors. Their funding is a precarious combination of state support, institutional grants and individual donations. They are asked regularly for input on news stories, but struggle to promote their feminist message and have had limited success driving the news agenda, despite increased media attention to sexual abuse cases. In response, RCEW has considered how to increase its use of social media to more proactively communicate its feminist aims.

RCEW launched its first website (<http://rapecrisis.org.uk/>) in 2004 and began to move away from the ‘‘head down and get on with things’ approach [that had] led to [its] unintentionally being a fairly insular movement’ (Westmarland cited in Helen Jones and Kate Cook 2008: x). In recent years, RCEW has worked more actively with the media, developing a Communications Strategy in 2008 and joining Twitter and Facebook in 2011 (some Centres started using social media earlier than this). Most Centres run websites and some use social media. RCEW appointed a part-time salaried Media and

Communications Coordinator in 2013,<sup>3</sup> who facilitated a ‘Media Tree’ – a network of women based in Centres across England and Wales who field media enquiries.

*Communicating Feminism* was a participatory action research project co-designed by the two authors [names omitted] and RCEW’s Media and Communications Coordinator to explore how social media might be used to proactively communicate RCEW’s political agenda. It was conducted from 2014-2016, a period when UK media interest in VAWG remained high and when RCEW was developing its voice online. The primary aim was to develop a proactive online communications strategy for RCEW. Secondly, our academic purpose was to critically engage with claims about the democratising potential of social media for feminist organisations struggling for visibility in the digital age<sup>4</sup>.

The project had three stages. First, in March 2014, a day-long brainstorm was organised with five members of RCEW’s ‘Media Tree’, its Media and Communications Coordinator, and [author names omitted].<sup>5</sup> The first half focused on discussing existing media engagement and social media practices; the second half was dedicated to developing a social media strategy. The brainstorm generated five hours of recorded material in total. Our collaborators were selected by the Media and Communications Coordinator and drawn from established and new Centres in the South of England (2), Yorkshire (2), the North-East (1) and the Midlands (1). They included experienced social media users alongside those just getting to grips with digital media in a feminist charity context, salaried workers and volunteers. One was a Centre Chief Executive, two were in charge of social media, one was charged with setting up a new social media service, and one was a regular volunteer delivering a range of support services. All had expertise in supporting survivors.

It is worth emphasising how difficult it was to bring the six women together for the brainstorm: the current funding climate and drastic under-resourcing means workers and volunteers are severely time-pressured and supporting survivors must take priority. Therefore, working with a larger group of women would have made the project untenable. We had intended to meet again to finalise the co-produced documents, but this proved impossible. Nonetheless, the collaboration we did achieve, which was facilitated by funding that remunerated our collaborators for their time, delivered valuable insights.

The second stage of the project was a quantitative content analysis of media coverage of RCEW. The content analysis was not originally planned, but the brainstorm

revealed a need to understand current media coverage of VAWG and RCEW, verify patterns identified by our collaborators and establish whether things were changing in light of the Jimmy Savile case, in order to better frame the social media strategy. We analysed news items in UK print and broadcast media published between 1 October 2012 and 1 June 2014. Our search terms were tightly focused on identifying the presence of RCEW in coverage. They were: Operation Yewtree (the code name for the Savile investigation) *and* Rape Crisis; Rape Crisis/Rape Crisis England; the name of RCEW's media spokesperson *and* rape/Rape Crisis; and the names of individual perpetrators. Coverage was sourced through searches of *Box of Broadcasts*<sup>6</sup>, *Lexis Nexis*, and RCEW's media archive. The dataset comprised 133 newspaper stories, 6 items of broadcast coverage, 2 pieces of magazine coverage and 9 pieces of online coverage unrelated to existing broadcasters or newspapers. The low number of broadcast items was inevitable because broadcasters do not publicly archive news items over long periods and access is therefore limited.

The final stage of the project was the co-production of three documents based on the brainstorm outcomes: a Social Media strategy and two Social Media Guidance documents, one for RCEW and one for individual Centres<sup>7</sup>. Drafts of the documents were circulated to collaborators for input, re-drafted and shared again before being finalised and made available to RCEW's network. We delivered a training session for Centre staff, based on the Guidance, during RCEW's national conference in November 2016.

In adopting a feminist participatory action research methodology, we wanted to reduce the power relations inherent in research and produce knowledge to address gendered forms of injustice (Ramazanoglu with Holland, 2002). Our collaboration was characterised by openness, reciprocity and a desire to create change (Reinharz, 1992). Our involvement was both personal and professional. [Author 1] has a personal commitment to social justice and to understanding how strategic communication can bring this about; this drives much of her academic work. During the project, she also encountered VAWG in her family context, which added a highly personal dimension to her participation. [Author 2] is a long-time friend of the Media and Communications Coordinator and the Rape Crisis movement; as a queer feminist scholar in a media department during Operation Yewtree, developing an impactful research project in response to the unprecedented events felt politically and personally crucial.

The six women from the Rape Crisis movement were collaborators, rather than participants: their expertise was at the forefront of the brainstorm and we use their real names in this article rather than pseudonyms, as agreed with them and reflecting this collaborative relationship. We provided a general structure but followed their lead for the direction and substance of the conversations. Their insights also led to outputs that were not originally planned (the content analysis and the Guidance documents for the Centres), and their feedback was incorporated into the final documents to ensure they were effective tools. Thus, ‘action’ took precedence over ‘research’ throughout the project (see also Helen Kennedy, Giles Moss, Chris Birchall and Stylianos Moshonas, 2015).

### **Data analysis**

Our approach to data analysis reflected our desire to reduce power differentials in the research process. We recognise and value our collaborators’ expertise and the findings are structured in terms of what they deemed most significant. However, they did not have time to engage with data analysis, so we conducted this work. We both listened to the recordings, identifying sections that spoke to the academic debates we had identified in the literature. We transcribed these sections, re-read them and discussed their implications in an iterative process of reflective engagement with the brainstorm content, the academic literature, and our own experience in the project. As the initial purpose of the brainstorm was to produce the social media strategy, the data reflected this: women who were experienced in running social media for their organisations had more to say, featured more frequently in the relevant sections from the brainstorm, and are cited more often in this article. Areas of agreement did emerge in the discussion and we indicate this by referring to collaborators in the plural. Our participatory approach is reflected through the integration of the voices of our collaborators as experts in their field, alongside and in conversation with the academic literature. We shared the findings and the final article drafts with the Media and Communications Coordinator, and with those collaborators we were able to reach following the conclusion of the project.

For the content analysis, codes were derived from academic literature and the key messages in RCEW’s most recent communications strategy. They included story topic, media type, tone (positive, negative, neutral), actors featured, RCEW commentary, topic of RCEW’s commentary, presentation of RCEW (positive, negative, neutral), and presence of RCEW key messages. The coding was conducted by a research assistant.

## **Reporting Rape: UK coverage of VAWG and RCEW**

Our content analysis showed that feminist organisations such as RCEW were included as sources by the media when covering rape, and that broader discussions about the trends of VAWG as well as survivors' voices were also featured, if only very occasionally. Overall, however, the patterns identified in previous research continued during the period we investigated: only 18% of the articles engaged in a general discussion of VAWG, and only 12% focused on child sexual abuse (CSA), while 50% focused on specific cases. The police and Crown Prosecution Service were the most frequently featured institutions (30% and 14% of coverage respectively). The perpetrator was featured in 24% of news stories, while survivors featured in just 14%. Other relevant institutions, including the Department of Justice and the National Health Service, were largely ignored<sup>8</sup> and there was a general failure to engage with institutions that could implement measures to generate long-term social and behavioural change. The focus on institutional failings and historic CSA meant that a gendered analysis of sexual abuse was sidelined and de-contextualised from the systemic problems that give rise to VAWG, allowing its endemic presence to persist (see also Karen Boyle, 2017).

The media's tendency to ignore personal and political dimensions of VAWG was reflected in patterns of RCEW commentary. While 44% of the coverage included comment on the details of a particular case, and the same proportion included comment on the broad trend of VAWG, analysis of causes and consequences featured much less frequently (10% and 23% of stories respectively). In general, RCEW struggled to communicate its wider political agenda unless they could connect messages to a case. Thus, the issue of non-reporting of rape by survivors was covered (21% of stories), as was the fact that rape is devastating for victims (19%), not a trivial event (30%), and always the perpetrator's fault (20%). However, messaging about institutional causes and longer-term consequences of rape were ignored, the only exception being messages about institutionalised discrimination against female survivors (10%).

Our collaborators recognised the paradox of media coverage: they observed the way it perpetuates false ideas about sexual abuse and VAWG, but also acknowledged its power as a site for survivor recognition, witnessing, and for contesting rape myths (see also Kitzinger 2000). All found working with media outlets demanding, given the pressures of the 24-hour news cycle and news researchers making 'ridiculous requests' (Katie) for responses 'within the hour' and with very specific requirements. Survivors

were understood as ‘case studies’, with testimonies edited to fit story formats or completely dropped in the final edit. As Katie noted:

a proportion [of interview requests] are what I call ‘rent a survivor’. Which is polite because [journalists] call them case studies. [...] they’ll talk to them for four hours and then edit it down to two lines. Or, they go through a process and it is quite empowering, but then it’s used once. [...]

Journalists rarely considered the personal investment survivors made in speaking to reporters, their hopes for coverage, or the conditions of their consent: reuse of their stories without permission was one example of the impact that this lack of consideration could have.

I’ve heard of a survivor switching on the radio two years later, to [...] [be] confronted by herself talking about her experience.

A frustrating outcome of media engagement was the erasure of RCEW’s identity as an agent of support and change, despite its long history: ‘Why do we not spring to mind [as other charities do]? When people develop those empathy feelings, towards survivors, why do they not think of us [but, instead, look to children’s charities]?’ (Katie).

### **The promise of social media?**

In this context, social media potentially allowed RCEW to proactively communicate its feminist agenda and engage more directly with its publics. For organisations working to end VAWG, participating in the counter-publics that social media facilitates is an important way of promoting structural and political change. However, it simultaneously puts the organisation, volunteers and service users in danger of becoming targets for the popular misogyny that has become normalised in response to feminist activism (Sarah Banet-Weiser, 2018). In this section, we consider how our collaborators reflected on the promise of social media as a channel for engaging with others about feminist politics in the context of their work and history. Our discussions identified six sources of tension, where the advantages of dynamic, highly public social media platforms co-exist with significant risks.

Speaking back to power/exposure and surveillance Our collaborators recognised that the networked technology of social media could increase the impact of their efforts to 'speak back' to power. They regarded social media as interconnected with traditional media, but also valued its capacity for public persuasion, amplification and reach, and used this to try and influence journalists. Twitter and Facebook allowed them to respond directly and immediately to news stories perpetuating rape myths and circulate counter-narratives, often in dialogue with mainstream media. For instance, Sarah L. rewrote newspaper headlines, editing them to be consistent with both RCEW's messaging and legal definitions of age of consent. As she explained: 'It's not "child porn", but "child abuse"'; a teenager does not "have sex" with an older man, but "is raped". Hashtags were used for 'guerrilla' tactics - for example, by redeploying others' hashtags on RCEW tweets, so that a challenging or supportive statement became visible on their timeline.

However, speaking back is risky because, unlike campaigning-only organisations, RCEW has to manage political and funder sensibilities. Consequently, social media communication needed to be 'thought-through' (Sarah L.). Those with a vested interest in RCEW communication came from many quarters: survivors (see *Survivors' needs/Survivors' risks*, below), employers, donors, policy makers, and the sector's regulator, the Charity Commission. Twitter's capacity to enable constant surveillance of RCEW and Centres led some collaborators to use alternative, non-institutional addresses/personas for messages that were more politically 'edgy' than an RCEW-owned account allowed. When organisations mask their identities - for example, in cases of greenwashing or front groups - it can be a cause for concern because it disguises the pursuit of hegemonic power. However, in this case using a different identity was dictated by the aggressive and surveillant social media environment that mitigates against feminist organisations' activism. When using alternative addresses, our collaborators did not speak as RCEW, but as feminist activists who wanted to make political points, but could not do so under the constraints of their organisational membership. Nor did they wish to introduce controversy that could be linked to RCEW for fear of endangering its survival. Consequently, alternative addresses offered a route for them to exercise personal political resistance while simultaneously protecting the organisation's future. Their experiences reflect research that reveals online spaces as places where male surveillance of feminist activity is rife, shaping the ways that women

can ‘talk’ online (Jessica Megarry 2017), but also pointed to offline political-economic conditions as important limitations for activism. An angry tweet could invite accusations of libel, while being too political ran the risk of Charity Commission sanctions and funding being withdrawn. As Katie noted: ‘There’s lots of people watching [...] I feel like we could be pounced on. [...] I drool with envy over what [purely] campaigning groups can do’.

### ***Extending reach/controlling outcomes***

Our collaborators used the network capabilities of social media in a range of ways. They connected with activist groups pursuing similar agendas to access networks that would allow RCEW messages to circulate widely; they made the most of their internal network by re-tweeting other Centre’s tweets; and they gathered ideas about responses to topical issues, adopting what they described as a ‘dip test’ approach of monitoring the environment to see how other activist organisations were commenting on stories.

Social media was also useful for sharing knowledge, opinion, and engaging supporters in speaking ‘for’ RCEW - in particular, making politicised comments that would be too sensitive for RCEW to contribute. This allowed different voices to be included in debates about VAWG. Katie noted: ‘I often go to EAW [End Violence Against Women Coalition], bloggers, EVB [Everyday Victim Blaming], refugees and asylum seekers women’s organisations, comedians. Also Camilla Parker Bowles, politicians, MumsNet, Imkaan.’ Reciprocal relationships extended the reach of RCEW’s communication and supported offline alliances with sympathetic journalists as well as supporters from the celebrity and entertainment worlds. Twitter and Facebook were a potential resource for journalists to pick up stories, encouraging requests for comment, raising RCEW’s profile and developing relations with local media (whose coverage was crucial for ensuring Centre messages reached local survivors).

However, while RCEW benefited from messages that moved rapidly and widely across networks, they also ran the risk of quickly losing control of the desired meaning of those messages. Moreover, communication by other actors could be problematic because the consistency of their commentary could not be guaranteed. Katie explained how one high-profile comedian, who had worked on a successful fundraising initiative, subsequently made problematic jokes about VAWG in her show. Moreover, investing time and resources in alliances did not always bring the expected benefits: one popular website was an enthusiastic partner, but raised only very limited funds for RCEW.

### ***Survivors' needs/Survivors' risks***

The organisation's mission to support survivors was keenly felt by all the collaborators (as one participant put it: 'Everything we do is to help survivors') and so the first question to consider for any initiative was 'is this going to discourage a survivor [from asking for help]?' They focused on crafting a positive, supportive 'voice' for communication, given its potential impact on survivors' well-being. Sarah L. noted the importance of maintaining *hopefulness*, commenting: 'We discovered that bleak doesn't work'. The preferred tone was 'about being expert, being credible and being up-to-date. It's very calm. We challenge but only through questioning. So, we don't make any really strong statements, because we're constantly watched by survivors' (Sarah L.). Communication was also guided by the desire to counter misconceptions about survivors. Yvonne explained: '[T]here is this ingrained belief by the general public that in some way it was a woman's fault that it happened. And that's what we need to get rid of.' Two principles were fundamental: believing the victim (in contrast with the judicial system where victimhood may not be recognised until vindicated in court); and facilitating survivors' voices in order to change attitudes.

While these principles meant that social media communication was frequently a positive intervention in discourses about VAWG, its interactive nature presented difficulties in terms of RCEW's commitment to prevent harm. Positive communication encouraged survivors to respond, but this could lead to problems because the apparently intimate, one-to-one nature of a Twitter feed sometimes prompted women to disclose experiences, which put them at risk of trolling. As recent cases have shown, high-profile feminist activists can be subjected to aggressive and threatening behaviour online, offline and in encounters with journalists (Minic 2014) and the rise of 'cybersexism' is well-documented (Laurie Penny 2013, Banet-Weiser 2018). All our collaborators were clear that while dialogue with survivors was desirable, disclosure should be managed by moving conversations offline.

Sometimes, problems arose because angry survivors could appear as trolls, and the format of social media makes it impossible to tell initially whether an attack is genuine, personal, or focused on the movement to end VAWG. Managing such challenges was based on a form of 'embodied understanding' (Mark Johnson, 2015) that engaged both a rational analysis of the situation, and an instinctive 'reading' of communication from both survivors and trolls, built up over years of experience and emotional engagement in the sector. Both were essential in the politicised and conflict-

ridden context of RCEW's work. On the one hand, rationality was reflected in Sarah L's observation: 'It's very easy to misunderstand 140 characters so you need to check you are interpreting correctly, ask for clarification'. On the other hand, experience gave our collaborators a 'sixth sense' about the approach to take. Combining these insights allowed them to identify appropriate options for shutting down trolling, including adopting an evidence-based, expert response using facts and figures, and using 'stock' responses that concluded conversations.

Communicating on social media also presented more general risks to survivors. Some collaborators tried not to engage with trolls at all, for fear of 'gaslighting' - prompting survivors to doubt themselves. As one collaborator put it, 'when that stuff is out there it is dangerous'; refusing to extend the conversation was one way of removing it from view. Others noted that raising the public and media profile of VAWG cases and issues necessarily introduced the possibility of triggering survivors' experiences. Moreover, choosing to feature or comment on one survivor's story inevitably meant excluding others, which could be perceived as an assessment of worth. As Katie noted: 'for every story you choose to include, you don't choose a different story'. Thus, the possibility of being a source of new survivor trauma co-existed with providing hope and recovery.

### ***Facilitating Voice/Perpetuating silence***

As feminist organisations, RCEW and the Centres aim to actively challenge power in order to end VAWG; our collaborators envisioned social media as a powerful tool to help them achieve this, a platform for giving voice to survivors and their stories and removing their dependency on traditional media to tell survivor stories publically: 'I want survivors to tell their story in the way they want to' (Sarah L.). From this perspective, social media was a way of wresting back representational control from journalists, who did not work sensitively with survivors. It was also a route for unmediated communication *between* survivors, 'liberating' them from the silence they often endure, so that they are able to communicate directly with each other (Keller, Mendes, and Ringrose 2018). Sarah L. described the idea/l of removing the role her Centre played in communicating on behalf of survivors:

I'd like to take [the Centre] out of the middle – survivors talking to survivors – [direct] testimony. A lot of women want to tell their story, they really want to tell

their story – have your day in court is a false trope [...there is] really powerful testimony.

In this vision, social media platforms allow for pluralism, for telling many stories that reflect and connect a multitude of differently-situated women and girls. However, facilitating this was not simply a matter of connecting people online or providing access to feminist discussions. As noted, popular feminism has prompted a parallel rise in popular misogyny (Benet-Weiser 2018) and Rape Crisis volunteers had to manage survivors' contributions to ensure anonymity and protect them from trolls and other unwanted attacks. Providing this kind of support costs money, time and expert labour in terms of editing content to remove identifiers, as well as liaising with survivors to ensure their voices are retained in posted stories (Sarah L.). Thus, maintaining the integrity of service provision, manifest in the relationship between Centres and survivors, meant that the feminist politics of making survivors visible and heard had to be tempered by the need to accommodate their vulnerabilities. As Sarah L. explained:

[e]verything that we do on social media is to try and crowbar open [discussion of VAWG].... [but] because we're such a confidential service, we mirror that with silencing, [...] So the confidentiality and safety has to be there but our job is to rip that open.

### *Saving/taking time and resources*

Our collaborators noted significant benefits of social media relating to time and resources: the interconnectedness of platforms and availability of social media management tools certainly offered advantages for the speed, reach and ease of their communication. It allowed them to rapidly scale up debates, respond to news in real time, and free up time for dealing with other media enquiries or campaigning. Platforms were used for different styles of communication in order to better tailor messages to audiences. Facebook, for example, was seen as a more 'local' platform (Katie), more personal and to some extent more intimate. It was slower than Twitter, but could carry more detailed explanations of media stories and cases. Similarly, websites offered more scope for putting up 'meaty', detailed discussions as well as making basic information (opening times, services provided) permanently available.

Nonetheless, our collaborators also encountered problems identified in previous research, including lack of funds and time for digital development in an age of austerity; generational and national differences in digital literacy, competencies and confidence; and the fear of surveillance and governance through networked technologies (Fotopoulou 2016, Helen Thornham and Elke Weissman 2013). For RCEW and the Centres, social media was not always time- or labour-saving; using channels effectively depended on having a dedicated individual, both in the sense that their main task was to manage the social media feeds, and that they were committed to giving up significant time to manage the communication alongside other roles. While one collaborator used a social media management tool, most ran the Twitter accounts manually. For the few people who had both time and an understanding of the technology, but also juggled their own personal pressures, it was a burdensome responsibility. The speed, consistency and reliability of social media communication was always at risk, while slow or inappropriate responses could damage a Centre's reputation. Yvonne noted the need to make the most of media interest in VAWG and ideally, comment on every story that appeared, but these practical limitations made it extremely difficult. As Sarah L. noted, 'I don't want to start any conversations that I can't finish in real time, because it sweeps past so quickly.'

To some extent, these problems were exacerbated by one of social media's normative advantages - its extensive reach. Tweets that reached international audiences potentially compromised the local identity and purpose of Centres; while an international reception for their messages was positive, responding to survivors in different countries took up scarce time and resources required for local women. All collaborators commented on the impossibility of stretching resources far enough to make the most of the opportunities that social media offer.

### ***Controlling voice and identity/facilitating diversity***

Normative organisational communication theory suggests that a singular voice on social media helps develop and support a consistent identity and in the context of activist communication, can frame common causes and risks in a way that constructs 'activist imaginaries' that appeal to audiences (Camilla Reestorff 2014: 7, Brooke McKeever 2013). At the same time, visibility presents an institutional risk: it can reveal the internal debates and contestations that are part of many activist movements (Thelandersson 2014, Katalin Fabian 2002), fragmenting identities and messages, and reducing clarity.

Our discussions reflected this tension. Our collaborators recognised that some consistency across the Rape Crisis network was important because it allowed RCEW to more easily manage its multiple roles as campaigning organisation, umbrella body for service providers and lobbyist for women's rights. Individuals or organisations going 'off-piste' could damage RCEW by making it seem too aggressive, or confused in its objectives.

Yet, multiplicity was built into the history of the network, and so to create a unified voice for RCEW and all its affiliates was impossible. As our collaborators explained, Centres had their own heritage, location and aims, and their communication needed to reflect a consistent voice and persona across both service delivery and online presence (for Karen, for example, it was 'gobby feminist with broader social equality views'). Moreover, as Karen noted, in an organisation supported by volunteers, there is less formal control over what people do; those who worked on social media were trusted more often than trained to stick to the organisation's normative identity and objectives. Training needs themselves were complex, including how to respond to trolls; how to respond to survivors (who might at first sound like trolls); what voice to adopt for a Centre; how to channel anger effectively and the importance of positive messaging. Until the introduction of our Social Media Guidance documents, RCEW was not able to resource such training, so other sources of expertise were often used (for example, material from the Women's Resource Centre), which were less likely to tailor content to RCEW's, or its Centres, identities.

### **Conclusion: The double-edged sword of social media**

Our project confirmed that the opportunities and limitations of social media identified in previous research certainly applied to RCEW and the Centres, but also revealed how their communication activities were characterised by a balancing act determined by the history and identity of the organisations. Communication using social media was an ambiguous strategy. It acted as a double-edged sword, reflected in our collaborators' ongoing 'internal' dialogue (articulated to the group during our discussions) weighing up advantages and disadvantages. The tensions presented above illustrated their anxiety about digital technologies even as they recognised the promise of social media for their future feminist imaginings, and the imperative to adopt social media in the contemporary communications environment.

Their experiences confirm the findings of other research demonstrating how the use of digital technologies for political engagement is 'influenced by a dynamic set of

feelings and experiences: enthusiasm, uncertainty and fear' (Fotopoulou 2016: 997). Their situation also echoes the realities of 'networked feminism' 'characterised by complex connectivity which operates at the intersections of online and offline, and across campaigning activities, feelings and people' (Fotopoulou 2016: 998). While social media has great potential for visibility and voice, it simultaneously increases the vulnerability of those who participate, making the contemporary politics of communicating feminism more complex, rather than easier to manage. Our collaborators illustrate how communication in these contexts cannot rely only on the rational decision-making that predominates in theories of strategic communication and public relations, but is also grounded in embodied understandings of events that incorporate instinctive and emotional readings of communication built up through experience.

Social media also had important practical limitations for RCEW as a campaigning organisation, a service provider and a non-profit institution dependent on external funding, which challenge some of the assumptions underpinning organisational communication and public relations scholarship focused on the advantages of social media as a flexible, fast and far-reaching communications channel. For RCEW, even if social media campaigns were successful from a *communicative* perspective (that is, messages widely shared and circulated, new networks and allies developed), they had only a limited impact on the ongoing struggle for survival. Limited funding, overwhelming demand and inadequate resourcing were not resolved by the speed or reach of social media that enabled greater visibility for RCEW's political messages. Managing social media took time and resource away from service delivery and sometimes confused the landscape in which support was offered. Moreover, our content analysis suggests that while social media offer platforms for counter-narratives and 'speaking-back,' this does not guarantee change in mainstream media agendas where, as a general rule, coverage of VAWG still neglects feminist messaging. As Boyle (2017) has noted, where institutional power is consolidated through a system of news values and norms that ignore feminist perspectives, simply making those perspectives visible in different channels may be insufficient for changing institutional practices. With the exception of individual relationships cultivated with specific journalists or advocates, 'reach' may be limited to an 'echo chamber' of sympathetic allies, and ongoing work to influence traditional media coverage of VAWG will remain necessary (see, for example Zero Tolerance 2010).

*Communicating Feminism* challenges utopian views of social media as a communications channel that returns control to its users and facilitates a lively and diverse online public sphere. This normative perspective, often perpetuated in communications scholarship, runs the risk of oversimplifying the complexities of pursuing feminist politics in a digitally mediated world. For RCEW and its Centres, the advantages of visibility and voice are offset by surveillance and silence; the possibilities of speed and reach are countered by time and resource constraints; and the imperative to communicate runs the risk of removing resources from frontline support. Communicating feminism in contemporary society, even in a context where VAWG is a 'hot' media topic, remains a tension-filled, contested and difficult activity.

### **Acknowledgements**

Huge thanks to our six collaborators from RCEW, who so generously shared their expertise, enthusiasm and experience with us. We are grateful to the Creative and Cultural Industries Exchange at the University of Leeds, whose *Ignite 2014* grant enabled this energising collaboration.

### **Notes**

1. The Rape Crisis Federation (1996–2003) preceded RCEW as the movement's overarching body. Rape Crisis Scotland is RCEW's sister organisation in Scotland.
2. 'Victim' and 'survivor' are contested terms; we have chosen to use 'survivor'.
3. In 2016 the organisation restructured and this role no longer exists.
4. While we did not work directly with RCEW service users, the project's aims are survivor-centric and are directed towards ending VAWG.
5. The Ignite funding covered payment and travel expenses for all RCEW collaborators, which allowed them to participate in the project.
6. Run by British Universities Film & Video Council, Box of Broadcasts is a subscription TV and radio service for education.
7. Following the conclusion of the initial project, we engaged in a pilot of the social media strategy in collaboration with Sarah L., who was conducting separate research into the value of publicising Survivors' Voices. The pilot is not reported here.
8. Operation Yewtree exposed the BBC and NHS hospitals as locations of sexual abuse, and institutional failings were a regular topic in media coverage (Boyle, 2017; Greer and McLaughlin, 2013). However, our dataset only covers stories that featured RCEW during

the specified time, and consequently did not include the full range of institutions implicated in Operation Yewtree.

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