

## Online whistleblowing is the real stuff of activism

*Elizabeth Cotton* comments on the recent Netroots conference she attended and urges anyone working in mental health to tell their stories online.



### Virtual activism

There's a new website called [www.storiesfromthementalhealthfrontline.wordpress.com](http://www.storiesfromthementalhealthfrontline.wordpress.com). It won't make you thin or rich but it's one of the first whistleblowing sites for people working in mental health. New in that because of the level of fear and victimization of NHS whistleblowers, the site asks people to do the shaming without the naming, offering a completely anonymised place to expose what is actually happening for the people working in mental health services. You know [my feelings about the employment relations at play in mental health and how it might just be time for a therapeutic revolution](#), but does all this virtual activity actually count as activism?

I went to the Netroots conference the other day – an annual conference for progressive people and groups using the internet to change the world. It's been 15 years since I did one of these conferences having surfed the painful wave of cyber-campaigning in unions in the 1990s. It is with much regret that I have to tell you I'm quite old now so I wasn't entirely sure I wanted to spend the day being lectured by teenagers about twitter and found the constant tappedy tap tap frankly rude.

A keynote speaker was the young author of Chavs, Owen Jones. He is cute and charismatic but I started to feel sick in my mouth when he explained to the audience that the battle of Orgreave would not have happened if the miners had had twitter and blogging. His point was credible, but I wanted to cry at how easy it was for this young man to be funny and light, in a way that nobody who had actually lost their job in the 1980s could ever be. Those of us who are on our third recession are old and tired, and have started to look like our dads of a Sunday morning, quite alarming when you're a woman. Working in mental health is complex in this crisis and I struggle to communicate my anger and grief at what is happening to my profession in 140 chuckle-inducing characters.

An hour in, I was openly melancholic at the prospect that these shiny young sparklies were just the beginning of yet another elite of professional activists, sponsored by blue chips with a tagline for human despair upholding the delusional belief that a click on a 'submit' button makes you a contemporary Bobby Sands. On the cusp of calling for a generational jihad, I comforted myself with the thought that it's the nature of things that young people think they invented radicalism, along with sex and self-destruction. They will get over it.

Then everything changed when Sue Marsh, author of the Diary of a Benefit Scrounger blog, responsible for an astounding campaign against Disability Living Allowance and the Spartacus report, walked on stage. Sue will not mind my pointing out, is not in her 20s and has only been blogging for 18 months. This was a world that she had no interest in until it became the only way of fighting for something important. Blogging allowed her to whistleblow without losing her benefits and encourage already scared people to articulate the reality of welfare reforms.

The same is true for mental health. Mental health workers are precarious, vulnerable and silent. Most of us cannot afford to be well known for our radicalism because of the huge personal and professional risks this would entail. Online whistleblowing is the real stuff of activism, because it is the only way that mental health workers can engage with the fight that has just begun about creating a sane mental health service in the context of economic crisis. What is being put on the table now is pure undiluted madness, structurally reliant on therapists working for no or low pay providing poor services for poor people. The only way to challenge this lunacy is for us to speak up about what is really happening in the very real world of work.

Just because it's being done virtually does not mean it's virtual. If you know anyone working in mental health send them this link: [www.storiesfromthementalhealthfrontline.wordpress.com](http://www.storiesfromthementalhealthfrontline.wordpress.com), and ask them to think about telling people their stories from the frontline.

### **Overheard this week**

Tappedy tap tap

The noise of the audience at Netroots.

### **What the gaffers had to say this week**

*Most of us who expose an inconvenient truth know that we will be attacked for it and ridiculed. And every trick in the book of maintaining power will be applied to silence us. It's no big deal. The beauty of it is that, usually, these attempts gives us a chance to see the actual face of power and to understand, with real-time examples, how healthy or unhealthy our democracies have become.*

Icelandic MP Birgitta Jónsdóttir, co-producer of a film released on Wikileaks

### **What the geeks had to say this week**

Robert and Edward Skidelsky's new book [How Much is Enough? The Economics of the Good Life](#).

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