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“Activism is not a one-lane highway”: the digital modalities of Alliance for Choice and abortion decriminalisation

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ABSTRACT

In 2019, abortion was decriminalised in Northern Ireland (NI) after decades of campaigning against the almost-total ban. Abortion activists in NI used multiple tools for change, utilising a feminist law-making strategy that also encompassed ‘cheeky’ witnessing [Fletcher, R. (2020). Cheeky witnessing. *Feminist Review*, 124(1), 124–141. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0141778919896342>] and movement-building alongside mutual-aid approaches to care. This paper outlines the significant contribution of alternative creative modes of dialogue from the insider perspective of core Alliance for Choice activists. The key element of the campaign towards decriminalisation in NI, was inspired and influenced by the global networks of abortion campaigns also utilising digital networks to challenge problematic abortion discourse with an abundance of creative content. It also required daily visual online output that complimented and coalesced the wider campaign, in a digital space that [Butler, J. (2018). *Notes toward a performative theory of assembly*. Harvard University Press] contends is a version of the public street. This paper offers a unique insight into the creative production and careful navigation required for campaigning towards decriminalisation in the NI. It examines the complexity of the digital space and its challenges and opportunities for abortion activists. It offers lessons for other campaigns against abortion restrictions and other social justice movements.

KEYWORDS Abortion; socially engaged; digital activism; Northern Ireland

Introduction

Movement building and change-making require a multiplicity of approaches, strategising and entry points for engagement (Bloomer et al., 2018; Deiana et al., 2022). Alliance for Choice (AfC) were forced to regroup immediately

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after the disappointing actions of the governing Labour Party in 2008 who quashed the attempts by both Emily Thornberry and Diane Abbott to extend the British 1967 Abortion Act to Northern Ireland (NI) (Campbell, 2022a; O'Dowd et al., 2022). From 2010, their adoption of online tools aided an exponential blooming of what has been described as a vital aspect of the 4th wave of feminism (Turley & Fisher, 2018) by broadening constituencies and publicly evidencing the material reality of unachieved equality. This paper's authors both steered social media on behalf of the renewed feminist movement in the North, from 2010 onwards. This period coincided with the growing campaign for abortion to be made 'Free, Safe, Legal and Local' across the Island of Ireland (Deiana et al., 2022). Observers have noted the pivotal role of social media in the success of the Repeal the 8th Amendment campaign, as it offered an alternative arena for public legal discourse (Enright, 2020) that was not controlled by powerful media or regional state interests, as before. Bouvier (2017) uses a case study from Repeal the 8th's Twitter to highlight the evolution of how social justice campaigns are made, where the powerful stories shared online of people's direct experience were subsequently shared by traditional news outlets, subverting traditional information flows. For AfC, online support for pro-choice messaging on mainstream media was often most noticeable on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram (Statham & Ringrow, 2022, p. 542).

Social media is ubiquitous in 2024, but in 2010 it was still experimental for social justice causes beyond friendship or professional networks. Facebook and Twitter became focal points of organising activity, they thrust both authors into steep learning curves around online social spaces, the development of community guidelines and the opportunities and pitfalls that accompany the use of these spaces to build social movements (Mendes, 2021).

The authors will consider the impact of social media on feminist campaigning, from their unique insider perspective, including the accessibility of campaigns (Turley & Fisher, 2018) before discussing work already written on the Repeal the 8th's successful use of new media and the strategies they employed with most success. Particular attention will be paid to Fletcher's *cheeky witnessing* (2020) which addresses the employment of both humour and participation of the art-activist group, *Speaking of Imelda*, Fletcher outlines the ways in which small groups of activists can create 'collective subjectivity' (2020, p. 127) in a manner similar to AfC online.

Social media-aided campaigns and suddenly burgeoning online spaces were essential to the existence of a feminist 'fourth wave' (Munro, 2013, p. 23). Spaces such as the Belfast Feminist Forum Facebook group became our training ground for AfC online engagement on abortion.

Emerging digital feminists will introduce the organisation in the context of both the politics of NI and the rising use of digital activism. AfC grew in influence over the period from 2010 to 2019, despite a tiny core team of

workers. Even at their campaigning height, the output on social media, websites and digital images were overseen by just two of the co-convenors supported by four volunteers, working just a few hours a month. Quantifying effort is an important reminder of the digital labour which can be exploitative whilst offering unprecedented access to political debates and shaping culture (Mendes, 2021). *Visual interruptions* will consider the reliance on visual material and the emerging arts for activism practices that aided the cultural production of a movement. It also frames the integral place of vernacular creativity in social movements. *Utilising online spaces for abortion activism* offers case studies of visual material by AfC for social media and which were often entry points for engagement and movement building (Campbell et al., 2022). Finally, we will summarise the impact of social media on AfC's campaigning as an integrated part of their wide-ranging strategies to move NI to decriminalisation of abortion and honour the stories of abortion seekers by leveraging their empathetic call to legal change.

Emerging digital feminists

AfC are a grassroots feminist organisation who have utilised an array of modalities to effect change on public discourse, access and legal change for abortion in NI (Campbell, 2022a; O'Dowd et al., 2022). They have existed in some form since 1996 (Walker, 2022) and until 2023 were an unconstituted group who were unable to access mainstream funding or charitable status due to the highly criminalised legal framework for abortion in NI.

The campaigning methods spanned civic and political spaces, whilst embracing social media as a complimentary organising tool for social justice in abortion advocacy. Alongside their traditional legal and political activities, AfC defied the law, exemplified in open letters. These contained the declaration that signatories had either taken the abortion pill or provided access to it in NI; and the supply of the same medication to abortion seekers in the Republic of Ireland (Bloomer & Pierson, 2020). Furthermore, the organisation established grassroots provision of abortion access and abortion doulas (Campbell et al., 2021). These actions reverberated through social media, where local supporters, as well as organisations supporting in solidarity across Ireland, Europe and beyond could easily amplify. By merging these methods, AfC expanded the creative potential available to change the discourse across NI. This opened a larger dialogical space to contest previously fixed ideologies around reproductive health and access (Campbell & Clancy, 2018).

The online spaces allowed new activists to learn and grow before diving into a frightening world of loud mainstream voices and polished politicians. People with shared experiences became fast friends and loyal activists, amid what often felt like the rest of the world pitted against them. These spaces

also offered support, including holding safe spaces online to talk about abortion and its many impacts.

Protest can be a form of self-care as well as care for others: a refusal not to matter. Self-care can also be those ordinary ways we look out for each other because the costs of protesting are made so high, just as the costs that lead to protest remain so high. (Ahmed, 2017, p. 240)

Organising protests happen more easily via an online community, having crafted supporters across the island, AfC were able to swiftly react to circumstances in notable numbers, and they helped the law governing abortion in NI be tested several times until 2019.

The 1861 Offences Against the Persons Act (OAPA) is an anachronistic piece of legislation that still governs abortion access elsewhere in the UK (with Scotland having comparable legislation), with exemptions provided by the 1967 Abortion Act (Thomson, 2022). The 1861 Act governed access to abortion in NI until 2019, but unlike the rest of the UK, there were few exemptions apart from one rarely used, if the life of the pregnant person was in grave danger (Aiken & Bloomer, 2019; Pierson, 2022).

Considering the hostile policy context, groups working on abortion tread carefully, walking the tightrope of providing accurate information to abortion seekers whilst ensuring their safety and that of the activists who provided the information or direct support via abortion pills (Campbell, 2023). The maximum sentence of the 'crimes' set out in the 1861 OAPA was 'penal servitude for life' for both the abortion seeker and anyone who helped them. Despite this sentence never being enacted in modern memory, the threat was enough to maintain a veil of secrecy over the issue beyond the stigma that abortion already shoulders. This fear became reality when five prosecutions occurred regarding the use of abortion pills between 2013 and 2019 (Horgan, 2022). In addition to these prosecutions, AfC activists had their homes searched, laptops confiscated and workshops raided (McVicker & Crickard, 2022). In NI, following s.5 of the Criminal Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1967, it is a crime to have knowledge of a serious crime and not report it; this means any medical professionals, activists, or friends who knew someone had self-managed their abortion prior to decriminalisation was committing an offence if they did not report it. This criminalised backdrop stacked on top of the social stigma meant that even the word 'abortion' was one rarely used by activists up until the last decade. The name 'Alliance for Choice' itself was partly created out of a fear of using the word 'abortion' and partly a need to show the inclusion of an umbrella of groups under the same banner (Walker, 2022).

The ability to engage with interested potential activists privately on a social platform became vital. In this manner, like Speaking of Imelda, AfC created the climate for collective subjectivity (Fletcher, 2020) via their

social media interactions, which evidenced, to the interested activists-to-be, that there were similarly-minded feminists seeking comrades offline. Traditionally, AfC had monthly meetings in-person, with attendance varying according to the perceived proximity to change, as demonstrated in the hope then disappointment from the UK Labour Party in 2008 (Lo, 2022; O'Dowd et al., 2022). How then could the organisation, dwindled in membership and reach, communicate their abortion advocacy to new potential supporters and activists?

Not long after the 2008 disappointment, the globe was entering its new wave of feminism. Building on the previous three waves, the fourth is known as the one which wholeheartedly embraced intersectionality, thereby working to reject Trans Exclusionary Feminism and White Feminism, to work towards a liberated and radical platform for all voices and marginalised people to thrive in a better future (Kaba et al., 2016). Importantly, the fourth wave brought digital natives who embraced the new creative and communication tools made possible by social media (Munro, 2013, p. 25. Looft, 2017). Yet even at the advent of social media, the impacts of the backlash in online spaces from bots, trolls, mansplainers and infiltrators (Yannopoulou et al., 2019) could be overwhelming.

Utilising online spaces for abortion activism

Facebook groups in the late 2000s proved popular with feminist organisers. Deiana (2015) described Belfast Feminist Network (BFN) as a 'technological' feminist community rooted in the feminist challenges and broader pockets of civic activism emerging in the specific context of 'post-conflict/post-Agreement' NI', noting that BFN mixed online discussion with real world activities. BFN was part of a 'young and vibrant' contemporary feminist movement 'confident in their social networking skills' (Cockburn, 2013). BFN mixed traditional activism with online discussion: most engagement took place online (Pierson, 2017). BFN described themselves as beginning in 2010 after several discussion groups unearthed a pressing need for open and safe feminist spaces, including online spaces (2014).

Social media and online communications have significantly altered the practices of social movements by shaping political arguments into personal narratives that can be adopted and shared by the public, thereby forming new insight for movement building and connective actions (Hunt, 2019). Political participation in feminist activism using social media provides extensive amounts of information for new activists, in an environment where they can engage anonymously as they build confidence (Schuster, 2013). It is so ubiquitous that social media is a daily constant to modern living, globally, a way to stay virtually connected to friends, family and colleagues even in a different time zone. They also offer users the ability to connect with

communities of interest in vastly various locations and create parasocial relationships via encounters with other community members. Social media tools are now of significant weight when developing a community's relationships. Zavattaro and Brainard have pinpointed that particularly in online, fourth wave feminist organisations, this formation of deep attachments to a group or community of interest through engagement, liking and sharing the group's posts, 'can lead to more trust, knowledge sharing and word-of-mouth recommendations' (2019).

Fletcher's work on cheeky witnessing as a method of feminist knowledge sharing, taboo-busting and linking reproductive labour and invisible domestic labour (2020), reminds us of the power feminists engage when the use of debasement and state abandonment deliver messages via comedic turns. The successful messaging of *Speaking of Imelda* could reach a wider audience through social media, much like they harnessed the setting of the Irish Embassy in London and the hubbub around the Taoiseach's dinner at a Fine Gael fundraiser. Their sharing of the video of the direct action online elicited an excited cross-border conversation that ignited social media (Rossiter & Walsh, 2022; Fletcher, 2020). Thinking about Butler's assessment of how we receive new media and what we do with the latest information, 'We do not only consume, and we are not only paralyzed by the surfeit of images. Sometimes, not always, the images that are imposed on us operate as an ethical solicitation' (Butler, 2018, p. 100). What Butler posits as an ethical solicitation and Fletcher describes as feminist witnessing, formulates theory around a key tool of feminist organising; communications. Embracing and playfully upending those communications were the feminist collectives, activists and artists working towards abortion emancipation (Campbell, 2023).

Visual interruptions

Social media relies on a proliferation of images, still or moving. Photographic images are more ubiquitous than ever since the advent of social media. The public now encounter photographs through screens in their pockets, in addition to billboards, magazines, books, archives, family albums, social media and branding (Hand, 2012). Culture is most often mediated through images via technology in our hands and homes, where an immeasurable quantity is produced around the world for countless purposes.

To understand our social world today means understanding the ubiquity of digital communications and social media, and this media is deeply constituted by the images we make and share. Any contemporary social theory should be, in part, a theory of social photography. (Jurgenson, 2019, p. 10)

This proliferation of photographs and graphic images of everything, including violence, also means viewers are more easily able to experience a huge

influx of second-hand pain and empathy through those depicting discrimination, deprivation and harm. Often these become shorthand in the news and by NGOs, to implore urgent calls to action for causes and humanitarian crises (Sliwinski, 2004). However, it is clear that the intended power of the image to demonstrate where there is suffering, has not prevented the next crisis. Though action may be incited for support, it gives us the imaginative space to empathise what our civic duty to our global siblings might be, 'this painful labour of attending to others' suffering might be the very beginning of responsibility itself' (Sliwinski, 2004, p. 375). In the last century, the visual terrain of the shared photograph has become a popular tool to mould discourse on behaviour and society's understanding of the 'other'. Collective democratic ownership and the self-production of *how* to participate in cultural life through images are now given to people on their mobile phones and computers. It could be argued that this then becomes its own language of social relations and foments even activist and democratic communication styles and practices (Cramerotti, 2014). Democratic hyper-production and further decontextualisation caused alarm amongst cultural commentators almost 50 years before our current digital capabilities. A.D. Coleman was fretting in the pages of *Creative Camera* in 1986,

That so little changes despite all the photographs made, may be proof, it's true, that photography makes nothing happen after all [...] thus assuaging one's guilt without forcing oneself to undertake the more difficult challenge of developing solutions to their victimisation. (Coleman, 1986, p. 32)

Commentators often worry that images lose impact in direct inverse proportion to their abundance (Keenan, 2002). Sontag critiqued documentary photography as a modality of complete ethical failure (Sliwinski, 2004, p. 150). She lamented that photography cannot stop the atrocities it records but can conversely encourage horrors to occur. Azoulay is critical of Sontag's disassociation from the interpersonal and parasocial exchanges made through photography and implores that image-makers and image consumers recognise our responsibilities within a citizenship of photography that has hit an exponential growth in membership (Campbell, 2023). Hand (2012) clarifies that society's capacity to develop critical awareness skills and an understanding of the power, coding and potential of photography can be defined in two realist theories. Firstly, the analogue production of camera images and secondly a more constructivist understanding with the development of digital technologies. This illustrates society's growth in understanding of manipulation and lack of objective visual truths, especially since mobile phones offer the potential for us to be editors now (Hand, 2012). As Martha Rosler says, photography is loaded with its own history and expectation (Rosler, 1992, p. 303) and there is the expectation of social realism and political meaning. Jurgenson tells us that the social photo has the effect of

colouring your lens on the real world, so that an interpretation of the world around us is now filtered through our imagination in the ways we see them filtered on our social media feeds. In seconds we have already marked a moment as, 'significant or meaningful or funny or important or worthy' (Jurgenson, 2019, p. 28).

Understanding the power of the image combined with the emerging expectations and realities created by social media underpins the labour involved in producing, editing and disseminating picture-led content multiple times daily across various platforms. Beyond the labour of production and broadcast, is the emotional labour of responding to messages, monitoring for anti-abortion actors or online 'trolls', who could be posting potentially harmful language, stereotypes or misinformation in the comments under any post.

The hypervisibility of contemporary feminism is down to the countless hours of mostly unpaid labour that feminists across the world do, but also through opportunities opened up by new technologies enabling them to bypass traditional gatekeepers and speak, promote, network, and connect with wider publics. (Mendes, 2021, p. 693)

Whilst understanding digital labour within a traditional Marxist framework, Mendes reminds us that it is also worth noting that unlike service work or factory work, digital labour does not produce a tangible product or meet a physical need, instead it produces a form of community knowledge sharing or a parasocial connection, or 'info-tainment' (2021). There is untold invisible labour associated with digital feminism, Mendes lays out her findings from her research on such activists which dovetail with the experiences of the authors. AfC activists have to create new social content; upload dense information filtered down for their audiences to specific sites in many different formats for each different platform, moderating content to eliminate harmful language, spam or address misinformation, organising volunteers on roster systems to ensure there is material round the clock, writing instruction guides for new volunteers, devising offline training workshops, engaging with mainstream media and researchers, and designing apps/interfaces or websites (Mendes, 2021, p. 697). The authors developed specific guidelines for social media, trained new activists on the guidelines and practicalities of organisational social media, and managed a posting rota as a means of preventing burnout.

Examples of AfC using social media

One gets tired of pounding the asphalt so this is a great way of campaigning from a different angle. Performative activism is important to engage with a younger audience who are on social media. We must use all of the tools that are available to us. We have to use our own bodies as a weapon for change (V & A, 2016, para. 15)

Above, Rossiter, a well-seasoned activist in her seventies, summarises the prevalent attitudes of activists who embraced social media. This section will expand on the specific use AfC made of those networks looking at examples that solicit the empathetic action explored in the section on the power of images and in harnessing first-person narratives. Note that each one of these tools required brand new images or text-as-image for each new post, to facilitate the constant need for images, there was a database built up of images of: protests, air travel, Westminster, activists attending workshops, activists and supporters in merchandise and portraits of activists involved in the campaign. Part of the AfC social media and communications guidelines outlined the need for authentic self-generated images rather than stock images, where possible, to maintain relatability and accessibility for the intended audience of supporters (Alliance for Choice, 2022). Again, this is part of the swathe of invisible labour and production that feminist activists must maintain at the service of content for the main social platforms.

In mid-2015, AfC overhauled their social media, creating new Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and Facebook profiles from scratch, after noticing the need to align all channels with the same messaging, and wrest back control from activists no longer directly involved in the campaigning. This is built on the closed use of social media as an organising tool utilising it as a means of community education, stigma busting and lobbying. With the help of volunteers, they grew their Facebook Page and Twitter profile rapidly. Twitter and latterly, Instagram, enabled abortion movements locally and globally to connect and grow using hashtags (#) which created straightforward ways to thread conversation in the world talking about abortion in the same threads (Fallon, 2019).

AfC made a concerted effort to cross-publish articles on their website and social media regularly as a means of feminist law outreach and education (Enright et al., 2020), to demystify the coming abortion provision and to clarify what was possible under the new law (Enright, 2022) as a space of imagination and of possibility. Both the website and their social media channels saw a huge surge in interest over the summer of the Irish Referendum (Oireachtas Retort, 2018). On all their platforms, they reached a wider demographic than before, expanding to the USA, GB (Great Britain), Canada and beyond. By embracing the most user-friendly platforms available in 2015 and harnessing their combined power for campaigning, AfC exponentially grew their soft power and reputation for evidence-based information around abortion. This was seen in the surge in politicians and journalists contacting AfC to represent abortion seekers and provide evidence for abortion travel, pills use and the human rights framing of the issue (Bloomer & Pierson, 2020; Campbell, 2022b; Enright, 2022; Enright et al., 2020; Gallen, 2022; O'Dowd et al., 2022; Topley, 2022).

From 2016 to decriminalisation in 2019, AfC used social media to campaign for abortion change by ensuring it remained a key issue in the 2016 Assembly election. They harnessed their social media tools to garner further support for reform from NI constituents. They expressed plans to provoke the voting public to make demands of their MLAs, to engage in their evolving campaign slogans, use human rights frameworks for policy rather than unchecked religiosity in law making, and to see availability of abortion as a necessary public service (Gallen, 2022). They also used their emerging expert voice as a trusted abortion organisation, to build capacity within AfC to enable the wider abortion movement to grow.

In 2016, the key messages of the AfC campaign involved moving MLAs closer to a space where supporting abortion choice was politically possible so they could then lobby more successfully for legislative change. The key part of the pre-election campaign featured the phrase 'Trust Women.' As an easy-to-ask but hard to deny question on whether healthcare decisions should be between them and their families and doctors and not politicians (Alliance for Choice, n.d.).

Social but private

AfC already had a long-established, private Facebook group (Alliance for Choice, 2008) which was initially used for organising from August 2008. Membership was by invitation only, so they had narrowed scope for outreach. After security concerns for activists, AfC moved to WhatsApp for group conversations with encryption, and used the apps Signal and Telegram which gave added security for the extra-legal work such as pills or any direct actions we wished to be a surprise or not infiltrated.

A powerful tool for internal communications in 2015, WhatsApp, remained as a fast and semi-secure method for organising events, reacting to media, agreeing next steps and discussing direct actions, 'WhatsApp is more than a messaging app for "hanging out" with like-minded people and has come to constitute a key platform for digital activism' (Milan & Barbosa, 2020, para. 2).

The emergence of WhatsApp was embraced across the world as a fast organising tool across disparate groups (Barberá et al., 2015). There were a number of tech-savvy early adopters in both the Abortion Rights Campaign in Ireland and AfC who embraced any simplified methods for organising, especially if the new ways added extra levels of security to communications. The phenomenon was so widespread so quickly that there was even press discussing the growth in its use for organising around feminism in the north; the range of AfC group chats was described in a press interview (Gil, 2018).

WhatsApp has the unprecedented capacity to firstly reach real, on the ground people in live-time via a mobile phone; secondly, it can send

informative messages out to huge groups of people, who in most cases can respond immediately; and lastly it has created communities of interest on public political matters but include previously unengaged people (Greijdanus et al., 2020). WhatsApp groups are still widespread amongst activists, but internal information sharing has migrated to apps like Slack as they function as private fora and conversations can be organised so people can just stay engaged in the threads relevant to them.

The growth of an online community

AfC's public Facebook Page grew to over 10.2 K at its peak in 2019. However, the maintenance of a Facebook presence was often beset with trolling, as highlighted by Mendes as a personal risk of digital feminism (2021). AfC also faced several account warnings and restrictions due to Facebook monitoring tools erroneously identifying posts with legal information about early medical abortion as criminal activity. This resulted in a situation where posting news about abortion pills, or public health information with images of medication, triggers action from Facebook moderation with no way of appeal.

On Twitter, which was still pre-Elon Musk and therefore more akin to a democratic forum it no longer resembles (Benton et al., 2022), AfC's accounting of people's stories, either through the *Rather Be Home* (2019) account or the *In her Shoes* (Topley, 2022) project saw unprecedented engagement and sharing that site analytics claimed reached tens of thousands of people in just one day. This is no mean feat for a social media team of 3 part-time activists who performed this role as well as multiple campaigning and support activities. As Mendes (2021) notes, the digital labour of feminist activists is made invisible in multiple ways, whilst the large corporations rely on the production skills of activists to keep their pages and threads alight and rich in alluring content. Mendes also points out the added dangers of feminist activism online, where the risk of digital stalking, trolling and verbal abuse is a rampant and regular occurrence. Yet against the backdrop of exaggerated misogyny, AfC harnessed Twitter's 'truth to power' advantages, as every media outlet, journalist and outspoken feminist celebrity once had. Social media made feminist activism more accessible to previously marginalised women, and created a new platform to raise issues of concern to them (Kaba et al., 2016).

Earlier in the campaign it was mainly the place for tweeting into mainstream media such as BBC talk shows and political segments before AfC were eventually platformed as a stakeholder organisation in the abortion question as a matter of course, and directly responding to politicians.

Campaigners noted that before the abortion campaign really grew across the island and became culturally and socially acceptable, the area in which

social media could draw the most online support was via the AfC coverage of and resistance to, the anti-abortion protestors on the streets outside abortion clinics and counselling services. Much of the action around 2012–2017 revolved around the opening of the MSI abortion clinic in Belfast and the furore created around it by anti-abortion organisations. Still in 2024, the response on Twitter to the anti-abortion protestors harassing people outside healthcare facilities generates the biggest online audiences, engagement and interactions, the overwhelming majority of which remains supportive of abortion seekers and their right to privacy accessing healthcare.

The December 2016 protest in support of the woman arrested for acquiring abortion pills online, engaged solidarity from groups across Ireland and beyond, most of this solidarity was forged through Twitter, including the use of the #NotACriminal hashtag (Campbell, 2022a; Horgan, 2022; Vinograd & McNally, 2016). AfC had two occasions where the #trustwomen hashtag was trending in Ireland. During the Stormont Assembly debate on decreasing restrictions to abortion in February 2016, several supportive MLAs used our language about abortion and tweeted using the same message, a first for the organisation. The Green Party leader Steven Agnew used AfC's framing of the issue verbatim both in the chamber and in subsequent social media posts, imploring his supporters to 'Trust Women.' The phrase 'Trust Women' was used by a further 4 MLAs in the debate, The Alliance Party's Lo, Ruane from Sinn Féin and independent Unionists Sugden and McAllister (NI Assembly, 2016).

From 2018, AfC activists, particularly both authors, spent long hours on political pressure via Twitter, a space known as the digital home of politicians, journalists and leading public figures (UK Parliament, 2015). Often one activist would be individually tweeting every MP in the Commons or every Peer in the Lords whilst another might be live tweeting the debate in the chamber. The abortion debates were often pushed late into the evening, especially given that this was also the period of the Brexit crossover (Haman & Školník, 2021). One standout example for the authors is the House of Lords Debate on 30 October 2018, with the debate approaching midnight, AfC used twitter to directly contact Peers urging them to stay in the chamber for the upcoming vote, which was ultimately successful (UK Parliament, 2018). The volume and speed of tweets triggered security checks by Twitter as it suspected an automated 'bot' rather than 2 deftly efficient activists. During the emergency debate called by Stella Creasy on 5th June 2018, mere days after the successful Repeal the 8th referendum, a Labour MP, Jess Phillips read out multiple accounts of cruel and unnecessary abortion travel which had been shared via AfC social media accounts (Culbertson, 2018; UK Parliament, 2018). Likely inspired by the same stories, Conservative MP Heidi Allen, shared her own abortion experience. The occurrence of MPs sharing their personal complex reproductive lives exemplifies the rupturing and connective power that lived experience via the public fora of social media can have as

a tool of direct voice to power. This calls to mind Fletcher's use of Murphy's 'immodest witness' (2020), where the space between phenomena and witness is collapsed: there are no neutral observers, instead there are women utilising their own experiences to produce the knowledge necessary for legal changes (Fletcher, 2020, p. 125). Crucially the 'immodest' sharing of their own experiences by both Phillips and Allen indicates the emotive power and call to action inherent in the constant retelling of abortion seeker's experience. A socially engaged activist practice understands the value of invoking a participatory, active empathy,

we can learn not simply to suppress self-interest through identification with some putatively universal perspective, or through the irresistible compulsion of logical argument, but to literally re-define self: to both know and feel our connectedness with others (Kester, 2005, p. 153)

Social media offers ways of utilising powerful personal testimonies to affect a response that is deeply resonant with listeners, so much so it creates a domino effect of disclosures which can in turn shift age-old paradigms in our social discourse (The Centre for Artistic Activism, 2018)

AfC aimed to capitalise on any newsworthy items whilst remaining sensitive to people involved in the issue directly. With over 81 K reach, their most popular post in 2016 was a gif of an angry uterus, their images poking fun at politicians and using humour appeared to reach large audiences. They often capitalised on opportunities, such as the disrespectful response of DUP councillor John Hussey to engage a constituent (Gallen, 2022), or the continued bizarre reference to badger's sets by Marion Woods of anti-choice Life NI at the Women and Equalities Committee inquiry (Moore, 2019). They also maintained networks of solidarity by connecting with like-minded groups on Facebook, including international organisations, providers, political parties, trade unions, feminist groups and news sites.

Twitter was also useful for 'cheeky witnessing' (Fletcher 2020) through piggybacking on trending topics and events. During the annual Eurovision Song Contest the AfC twitter account shared the abortion law of each country as they performed (taking a break the year Israel hosted). Football competitions like the European Championships and both the men and women's world cups led to versions of 'Abortion Top Trumps' where the law, accessibility and cost of abortion in the countries playing were compared (Alliance for Choice, 2018). Over time these actions were duplicated across Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

The medium is the message

With every new development of each platform came new ways to play the algorithms that meant some content became seen by more people than

others. Brand new developments in 2022 and 2023 have closed many of the organic audiences down but from around 2015 it was a given that the best performing posts on Twitter and Facebook were image or video based.

Once Instagram grew beyond a usership of traditional image-interests (i.e.: photographers and other creatives) it became a fast-growing hub for feminism. By 2019, AfC's Instagram had 17.2 K followers, this is significant when the population size of Belfast of 627 K (Macrotrends, 2023) is considered. During all of 2019, press activity increased dramatically with many press appearances, articles and interviews, resulting in over 75 press articles from local and national press to the Washington Post (Ferguson, 2019). Many of the journalists contacted AfC for interviews via their social media platforms and through relationships built up online over the five-year period of intense campaigning.

In order to maximise the reach of social media abortion campaigns, activist groups first understand their ecology; there are the core activists, then the reliable real-life 'bodies on the street', then the connected or overlapping group support and then there are the peripheral participants, in some cases named (unfairly) 'slacktivists' (Yannopoulou et al., 2019). Whilst the nickname belies the extent of their activities as 'only' online engagement, research indicates that the online support given through this type of engagement is vital to growing the reach of ideas and new community knowledge from the epicentre of a campaign outwards, beyond even the peripheral support (Barberá et al., 2015).

Studies have clearly demonstrated the power of social media to be a stepping stone for people, from becoming engaged in the topic online, and utilising the public education elements shared by activist groups, to becoming a 'real life' activist who attends events, rallies and marches and may even become more directly in the core activities of activist groups (Kristofferson et al., 2013; Yannopoulou et al., 2019). This entry level online action is harnessed regularly by AfC through 'Sunday night sofa activism' posts. Starting sporadically in 2018 these posts have grown to a weekly feature with an action that is easy to do at home relating to abortion activism or aligned causes. These include responding to online consultations following a guide, signing a petition, reading some new information or 'signal boosting' an allied group. These posts aim to give people an easy way to get involved in activism, through educating themselves about abortion provision, contributing to lobbying efforts, or showing solidarity with a range of social justice organisations and campaigns. Once people can engage with a topic in the comfort of their own home, then subsequently being involved in sending an email, sharing Tweets and Instagram stories, then they are more comfortable to go into offline spaces and engage in traditional forms of activism. This bolsters the growth of the movement and enables

organisations who may find it tough to sustain membership to keep recruiting new members and supporters (Barberá et al., 2015).

Around 2015 Instagram as a platform, until that point known for hipster photographs, made a gradual pivot towards the new favourite space for activists, especially young millennials, and Gen Z creators. The new use of the space acknowledges and subverts the aesthetic of Instagram and includes, 'bright pink slideshows promoting gender equality to tribute artwork for victims of police violence to lists of resources and petitions supporting various causes' (Mao, 2021).

This reappraisal and use of Instagram increased AfC's need for visual content. Luckily for them there was also a parallel growth in the use of Canva, a design platform that offers templates and resources for fast graphic creation and even includes presets for various social media platforms, especially useful for the ten images gallery of Instagram's profile grid (Ledford & Salzano, 2022). Suddenly AfC saw an exponential growth in their image production and a surge in followers and engagements on Instagram, which is partly why from this point onwards, most of their images are in a square format. As illustrated by their round up of their work in 2018, using images from the year of their activism, the visual content was lively and included a mixture of portraits, rallies and creative projects (Alliance for Choice, 2018a). Much of the work is inciting followers via their social media to put pressure on various legal levers and legislative mechanisms. From 2014 to 2019, one of the authors had undertaken a long-form photographic project. It aimed to capture the spirit and determination of all the abortion activists who had either been directly involved in campaigning for abortion rights on the island of Ireland, or who were activists in other countries who had shown solidarity with the campaign.

[I] asked them all to send me images of their participation in the movement in any way, or they told me a story about their participation, which I then interpreted through an image and overlaid symmetrically over their faces, to invoke an image that was all at once a passport photo, a pro-choice activist situated in the history of surveyed feminist organisers and a butterfly trying to evade the pinning down of reason over nature. (Campbell, 2023, p. 420)

This project came to be used in multiple ways by the participants themselves as avatars in the run up to decriminalisation, as artworks in various gallery and exhibition settings across Belfast and Dublin (Campbell, 2023), as street art across Belfast on the eve of decriminalisation and then after as a social media campaign urging the commissioning of now-legal abortion services in the face of constant blocks and refusals of the Department of Health and the Executive Office to provide services (Alliance for Choice, 2020).

There were several significant developments for AfC and abortion in NI that relied on the peripheral support of social media interactions and a

wider community support, some key projects were, the *Trust Women* campaign in Stormont (Alliance for Choice, 2015), *I'm a Life* music single and crowd funder, *In Her Shoes NI* (Topley, 2022), the *Women and Equalities Inquiry on Abortion in NI* (Alliance for Choice, 2018b), the *Executive Formation etc. Act* in NI that delivered decriminalisation (Crockett, 2019), the support for the opening of MSI in Belfast (Hughes, 2015) and the ongoing resistance to anti-abortion protestors, the death of Savita and ensuing support for the *Repeal the 8th Campaign* in Ireland (Alliance for Choice, 2018c). However, even describing the detail of any one of these campaigns across the digital space would warrant its own chapter and could not begin to cover the daily creation and curation work necessary to maintain ongoing social media profiles for feminist activist organisers.

Conclusion

Social media has been an integral organising tool and it is how AfC began to gain traction in the public sphere, as a reasonable voice about abortion in NI, one that included people who had been directly affected by the law. It eventually helped their evidence base through submissions sought via social media and evidenced to the Women and Equalities Committee Inquiry into Abortion in NI in 2018, which replicated and strengthened the findings of CEDAW (Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women) and its inquiry began in 2016. Arguably, the public would not have been so keen to offer their experiences to AfC if they had not already proven themselves to be a reliable and evidence-based voice when it comes to abortion access and justice in NI. Building up trust was not only about producing real-life stories and support for providers, clinics and abortion pills, but also about being 'real' and open online, unprepared to put up with stigma-based language whether it was voiced by civilians or politicians. Equally both the public and medical providers came to rely on AfC for accurate, timely information and for them to translate any changes in provision or in the law in a way that members of the public could understand.

There is a new research project underway between AfC and the Open University, supported by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, whose aim is to re-use the audio-visual assets created by AfC during the height of their campaigning, as resources for an online learning hub, with open access. The intention is that resources will be captured for posterity, especially as some social media platforms change, die and new ones emerge.

Given the political temperature of abortion in the USA since the reverse of *Roe vs Wade*, the exploration of the visual arts and social media assets produced during the pre and post decriminalisation lobbying could even enliven a wider conversation about how cultural tools of production are useful and necessary parts of activist movements. It could also widen the

understanding of the possibilities of socially engaged art as a means of social change. Whilst social media alone could hardly deliver such a seismic legal and social change, and is not without drawbacks (Mendes, 2021), it is evident that the maintenance and growth of online engagement and the use of social media to point towards artistic and creative projects made by activists and allies, ensured that abortion remained a core part of the public conversation in NI up until and immediately after decriminalisation (Fallon, 2019). The consistent voice and messaging of AfC ensured a new subjective collectively (Fletcher, 2020) was routinely formulated in the public discourse. This new public then became a key signifier of a thirst for change (Mendes, 2021), which could be evidenced beyond social media fora and in corridors of power. This is in keeping with the global fourth wave pivot to the use of shared online public spaces created using social media. The moments where there is a rupture between worlds and MPs in the Houses of Parliament (2018) share their own and others personal abortion stories, are those most powerful at demonstrating that levers of change are not always manipulated by slick lobbyists and corporate campaigners. The exhausting work of abortion campaigning is often maintained by a dedicated few, who can pivot the relatively new digital spaces to entreating large numbers of ‘slacktivists’ (Kristofferson et al., 2013; Yannopoulou et al., 2019) to get off the sofa and pound the streets instead.

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