Female Performers on a Male Stage

There is no way you are going to build a radical movement without some deep intensive thought and without a real community too, but you can’t have either of those online. I hate the thing. Sometimes I think our only hope is when the internet goes down. Then we can have a real movement again. I don’t know what else to hope for at this point […] it’s just overwhelming. All I can do is encourage people to still think, and still be together, and still care about each other in some way. But it’s a real fall-back position because everybody is addicted.
—Lierre Keith WLM, USA

It’s very energy sucking, it’s just a never-ending hole […] it’s just a constant reaction to men rather than [a focus] on us, and any attempt to build an alternative reality, basically, which should happen when we meet in real life.
—Anne Billows DN, UK

The title of this concluding chapter is taken from a paper delivered at a WLM conference held in London in 1980. The author of the paper, Elizabeth Sarah (1982), argued that the first wave of feminism failed because it was based around achieving equality with men in their world, rather than fighting to liberate women from male control. Throughout this book, I
have attempted to demonstrate that while WLM activists understood that bringing about a feminist revolution required autonomous organising and a complete break with male culture, women today are once again organising alongside men, in a male space, on a male stage. I have argued that social media and the politics of women’s liberation are incompatible. Relying on social media for organising produces an impoverished form of feminist politics that ultimately preserves the status quo. My argument is not only that social media is an impediment to reviving the WLM, but also that the use of male-controlled digital platforms for feminist organising is politically dangerous for women. To this end, I have not discussed alternative technological platforms that could be more women-friendly, or that might offer feminist activists more personal security in digital space. Such a focus would constitute reformism by endeavouring to alter the technological landscape in specific ways, rather than recognising social media as a political institution upholding male dominance that feminists should reject.

There is an inherent fallacy in the idea that a male-owned digital platform could provide an auspicious organising space for advancing women’s liberation. As Audre Lorde ([1979] 2007, 112) famously stated, ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’. In the much less frequently quoted sentences that follow the citation above, Lorde goes on to say that:

[The master’s tools] may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master’s house as their only source of support (emphasis added).

Lorde’s claim is illuminating because it accurately captures the limitations of the celebratory zeitgeist that many feminist thinkers have been caught up in following the rise of social media. Her argument also reinforces the claim that I have made throughout this book: it remains politically crucial for feminists to become women-identified and to move away from a reliance on male culture and male structures. Without a feminist press and autonomous points of distribution, it is difficult to see how women can do much more today than write on male platforms whilst remaining
visible and accessible to a male audience. Many women depend on social media as ‘their only source of support’ in the contemporary neoliberal context, but I have argued that revolution is dependent upon women rejecting male structures and moving towards each other in physical space.

The radical and lesbian feminist theoretical framework I adopt in this book is distinct from other recent critical investigations of social media and feminism. Here, I foreground the existence of male supremacy, and I also explicitly theorise women's oppression. As several scholars have now identified, the alliance between social media and the values of neoliberal capitalism is certainly an uncomfortable one for feminism (Banet-Weiser 2018; Jarrett 2016; Yeatman 2014). Nonetheless, it is also crucial that scholars and activists remain committed to analysing how feminist success in digital space is dependent on male approval, and to take seriously how social media perpetuates patriarchy.

I have demonstrated how male power intersects with social media and how an omnipotent male presence in digital space is limiting women’s ability to revive the WLM. Activists in the WLM had already embarked on the process of consciousness-raising before they engaged in print-based media production. In other words, there was an already existing groundswell of WLM activists who had come together to participate in consciousness-raising prior to movement women engaging with anti-feminists or non-politicised women in the wider public sphere. Via the small group process, many activists had also already developed strong relationships that transcended the boundaries of male-approved female bonding. The digitally mediated context that activists are working in today, however, is markedly different: instead of collectively creating media from a movement, women have been presented with men's digital communication tools, from which they are trying to grow a movement. What this means is that women who have never participated in a face-to-face feminist group or bonded with other women in a political organising context are now trying to raise their consciousness, build feminist theory and engage in activism in digital spaces initially designed for young men to share and rate photos of their female classmates. In the pages that follow, I will provide a brief overview of the argument that has been advanced thus far, before offering some concluding remarks.
Chapter 3 drew attention to the significance of place and space to the political project of women’s liberation. Proceeding from the standpoint that space is relevant to the question of social and political change, I argued that the WLM was revolutionary because it materially shifted men’s patterns of access to women. For WLM activists, occupying places for feminism and making them women-only spaces involved an element of saying no, of denying men access (Frye [1977] 1988). This organising praxis was revolutionary because women moved; they created an infrastructure through which they could begin to move away from men and towards other women in their day-to-day lives. The face-to-face and print-based communication infrastructure of the WLM also facilitated women’s ability to live their whole lives in the movement, and this promoted the development of both a visionary politics and an oppositional women’s culture that presented a tangible challenge to male supremacy. WLM activists prefigured in their personal lives revolutionary ways of living. It was by separating from men that they set up the material conditions through which they could begin to explore—and also enact—their potential to be fully human outside of male control.

In Chap. 4, I argued that social media cannot provide a politically similar infrastructure for women because male omnipresence in digital space functions as a serious impediment to women’s ability to think outside of male political frameworks. I also argued that feminists need to be alert to male surveillance of digital feminism as a form of political intervention. Women bear witness to the abuse of other feminists online. This serves as a warning to all women about what ideas constitute acceptable feminist speech and it discourages them from pursuing revolutionary actions. So far, feminist social movement scholars have often uncritically accepted the architecture of social media as politically neutral, rather than a landscape created by, and for, male interests. Such an approach is both naïve and politically dangerous. Feminist geographers such as Leslie Kanes Weisman (1992, 10) have done considerable work charting how male-dominated societies produce ‘social, physical and metaphysical space[s]’ that reflect and perpetuate ‘male experience, male consciousness and male control’. In both platform policies and architectural design, social media companies advance a male worldview, are imbued with male values and, ‘being the beneficiaries of the current political system’ (Hilla
Kerner DN, CA), are also thoroughly implicated in global systems of imperialist, capitalist and racist exploitation.

Significant scholarly attention has now been dedicated to investigating how women are organising online, but, as Anne Billows (DN, UK) pointed out in her interview, feminist academics and activists still know very little about MRAs and the strategies they use. Robustly investigating the digital manifestations of male dominance is a pertinent avenue of research for feminist scholars. Billows expressed this well when she said that women should ‘stop leaving our whole souls and minds and bodies on the internet’ and find answers to questions such as ‘who are [MRAs], what companies do they own, what concrete power do they have, and how does that play with the rest of patriarchal society?’ In this book, I could only give a modest indication of the scope of men’s digital organising against feminists, and the diverse tactics they use to perpetuate male control of women. There is much work still to do in this area.

In Chap. 4, I also demonstrated how digital activists try to survive men’s hostility by adopting anonymous profiles, moderating content and retreating to closed and secret Facebook groups. Both retreating and attempting to render oneself anonymous or invisible are tactics that have long been used by women to try to circumvent male violence. According to Weisman (1992, 70), ‘it stands to reason that if women perceive public space as unmanageable and threatening, they will avoid it and restrict their mobility within it’. A retreat to closed digital groups, however, is not ideologically aligned with the separatist tradition, and, as I have argued, it does not produce the same emancipatory political effects. The popularity of closed/private Facebook groups amongst feminists is evidence of women attempting to carve out potentially safer enclaves within male institutions. Separatism, conversely, is based not only on a rejection of, and a withdrawal from, male institutions; it is also a political process which attempts to create new social and political forms based upon feminist principles. I will expand on this point further below.

Like spatial autonomy, temporal autonomy is a feminist resource. Scholars such as Robert Hassan (2012, 195) have argued that, in the contemporary context, ‘the individual struggles to achieve any sort of temporal autonomy’. This is because our time ‘is “owned” by [an] information network that continually makes demands on it and distracts it
into countless different, yet increasingly homogenous commercial and commodified spaces’. In Chap. 5, I contested the idea that social media has saved feminists time in politically meaningful ways. In doing so, I argued that the WLM ‘feedback loop’ (Beins 2017) between consciousness-raising, theory-building and action should not be short-circuited. I demonstrated how the speed at which digital content is created fragments feminist ideas, obliterating a sense of the past and impeding women’s ability to develop a structural analysis of male supremacy. As Charlotte Bunch (1978, 219) has argued, ‘if the written word is important, then where, why and how we do it matters also’.

Social media is not a space conducive to strategic political organising; it keeps women’s attention focussed on a perpetual present moment circumscribed by male concerns. Platforms encourage personal expression, personal feelings trump political analysis and theory development is only permitted within tightly controlled parameters that are acceptable to men. In Chap. 5, I also discussed how social media is underwritten by the ideology of therapisms (Raymond 1986), where the goal is to make women feel temporarily better, rather than enabling them to challenge structural conditions. I suggested that connection in digital space does not encapsulate, and cannot transmit, the life of the revolution. While WLM newsletters were not responsible for sparking the creativity and passion which underwrote women’s interactions in women-only physical space, they could, at that particular historical moment, provide a space for women to advertise events and spread feminist ideas without fear of surveillance or intervention.

It is now becoming increasingly recognised that digital interactions are preformatted (van Dijck and Poell 2015, 2), and that individuals have little control over how they construct their social media spaces. In Chap. 6, I argued that social media has hampered, rather than facilitated, the development of a feminist ethic. Activists are currently attempting to grow a feminist movement whilst firmly embedded within the dominant woman-hating culture, using a platform architecture that encourages combative, instead of feminist, forms of engagement. I critically analysed how social media logic has infiltrated contemporary feminist praxis, posing new barriers to women’s ability to develop the skills of organising, envision alternative cultural forms and become gyn/affective (Raymond
Women cannot create their own ways of communicating in digital space. Because social media destroys the bridge between practice and theory that was so integral to the success of the WLM, there is also very little opportunity for women to develop gyn/affection. While activists might individually benefit from digital camaraderie and the sense of support they derive from social media interactions, digital participation is an individual coping mechanism for the present moment which does not facilitate collective resistance to male cultural norms in the same way that is possible in women-only physical space. Women can discuss prefigurative forms online but they cannot put ideas into action until they physically come together. Experimentation is also precluded, and, insidiously, conformity to the dominant culture is encouraged and rewarded via promotion in the network. In Chap. 6, I suggested that women are picking up male tactics of political engagement based around the logic of surveillance, combative behaviour and hero worship.

I also discussed how scholars often forget that attention remains a finite resource in digital space (Lovink and Rossiter 2018, 40; Tufekci 2013). It is still only a select number of users that are widely followed, shared and heard (Dean 2019). Within the social media economy, people and ideas are rewarded with approval (likes, follows, shares), or are rejected by being ignored, which means that some women’s contributions remain invisible to the network at large (Baym and boyd 2012, 322). Social media architecture makes it very difficult for activists to determine whether they have read every contribution to a discussion: preferences algorithmically shape what activists are exposed to, content is evanescent and past contributions are difficult to retrieve. Older interviewees highlighted how physical participation in the WLM, by contrast, gave them access to ‘an ongoing ferment of ideas’ and a diversity of perspectives which helped to ensure that feminist theory remained attuned to the diverse realities of women’s lives:

[The ideas] were all happening at once, and they were all affecting each other […] we would have working class women say one thing, and Maori women would say another thing, and lesbians would say another thing, […] and mothers would say another thing. And so, we heard a wide range of views about each particular issue, you know? It wasn’t restricted to what
you would get on the end of a blog about a particular shade of feminism. (Jenny Rankine WLM, NZ)

According to Rankine, the ‘ferment of ideas’ that she experienced in the face-to-face context of the WLM is very difficult to achieve in social media spaces: ‘I don’t see it’s possible to have it online’. Linda Bellos (WLM, UK) made a similar point in relation to the ethos of equality enacted in WLM consciousness-raising groups, where every woman present was given the opportunity to speak:

In a two-hour session [we were able to understand] each other, and we can develop arguments […] we don’t all have to agree, I’m not talking about hegemony, I’m talking about equality. Everybody having a right to have their say, and [if] I don’t agree with some of the things you say, you’ll be aware of that. You don’t have to change; you merely need to know that I’m not agreeing with everything you say […]. I think there is something good about that, there is something free.

Digital self-publishing makes space for marginalised voices in the sense that it has removed traditional publishing gatekeepers, but nonetheless, there is little political use in every woman being able to speak if only certain women are listened to and promoted via sharing and liking functionalities. Social media might enable women of colour to immediately call out and speak back to racism within feminist networks (Daniels 2016, 54; Okolosie 2014, 90), but my interviewees drew attention to how a feminist praxis of anti-racism will not implicitly come to be because of the self-publishing properties of platforms. They also contested the idea that social media offers a more equal communicative space than face-to-face discussions or print-based media, because they traced getting rid of relations of dominance to the intentions of activists, rather than to technological architecture: ‘people can say [social media] is horizontal, but our biases are always going to be there’ (Alicen Grey DN, USA). From this vantage point, the claim that social media facilitates intersectionality, or that digital organising is more inclusive than earlier forms of feminism (Hurwitz 2017), denotes a form of technological determinism
that pays insufficient attention to how ‘getting rid of immanent hierarchies requires politics’ (Dean 2019, 329).

Just Another Communication Tool?

The point of view advanced in this book is a partial one, as there are undoubtedly many manifestations of both WLM and contemporary radical feminist organising that I have not been able to consider. What has been presented thus far is my analysis of the political efficacy of historical and digital radical feminist organising tactics. This analysis was informed by radical and lesbian feminist theory; the archival and digital data I collected; the perspectives, experiences and insights of my interviewees; and my own experiences of feminist organising and activism. I have argued that the idea that feminism is a broad umbrella movement containing diverse and competing political perspectives is politically dangerous because it creates space for anti-feminist viewpoints to masquerade as feminist and makes feminism vulnerable to attack from within (Thompson 2001). This is not to suggest that the feminist movement is static and does not morph alongside the evolution of political ideas, but it is to suggest that feminism can be defined, and that its meaning should be debated (Raymond [1993] 1995, 93). I hope that the ideas presented here can contribute to sparking both scholarly and activist debate about the most efficacious ways forward for radical feminists in the digitally oriented social and political context of the twenty-first century.

In this book, I have attempted to systematically lay out how social media creates barriers to consciousness-raising, theory-building and the development of politically informed feminist praxis. I have suggested that social media does not provide the spatial or temporal conditions for theorising and activism to easily co-exist, and that the emancipatory potential of digital space has now been reduced to encouraging women to pursue a male ethic of engagement. Today, it is becoming increasingly understood that social media corporations perpetuate misogyny and racism (Daniels 2009; Megarry 2018; Noble 2018), are responsible for large and distressing abuses of corporate power (Cadwalladr 2017; Zuboff 2019), have enabled mass social surveillance (Dubrofsky and Magnet 2015; Fuchs
and are advancing a new kind of imperialism (Greenfield 2018, 278; Grossman 2015; Lafrance 2016). Still, many radical feminists continue to use social media because they find it personally valuable. In their book Changing Our Minds, Celia Kitzinger and Rachel Perkins (1993, 6) began their treatise on the dangers of psychology for lesbian feminism by stating that they have ‘heard enough lesbians say it “saved my life” to feel almost guilty about challenging psychology’. Throughout the years in which I have been working on this project, I, too, have commonly encountered the viewpoint that women both enjoy and would be lost without their international digital connections. Like Kitzinger and Perkins, I have also at times been self-conscious about politically challenging an institution that has provided a lifeline to so many women. Nonetheless, I remain convinced that feminists’ use of social media should be challenged.

**Overarching Interviewee Perspectives**

All 26 women interviewed for this project, to varying degrees, advanced the view that social media is an impediment to the political project of women’s liberation. Of the two principal viewpoints that are discernible within the data set, the first is a complete rejection of the idea that social media facilitates feminist organising or feminist movement-building. For these women, social media communication is something else entirely. Hilla Kerner (DN, CA), for example, said that social media ‘is very limited, it’s just another way to get to women, it’s not organising […] some women think more of it [but] I would not call [digital] conversation actual political organising’. Sheila Jeffreys (WLM, UK) also advanced this line of argument. She said: ‘I’m not sure [social media] helps to create a movement because the groups don’t exist, and the campaigns don’t really exist either. […] I don’t think social media facilitates organising’.

The second commonly articulated perspective was that, while women held severe misgivings about the political efficacy of using social media as a tool for feminism, they also did not want to be completely negative about it. These interviewees pointed to communicative speed and the
breaking down of geographical barriers between women as potentially beneficial to feminism:

Having access to a second by second, hour by hour reminder that you are not alone can be such an amazing thing that [women] wouldn’t have had before the internet. Women going through their day-to-day lives having their phone go “ding! ding! ding!” as a reminder that they are not alone. (Tiger Drummond DN, UK)

The States are so big that a lot of American feminists think they are the only one in their town […] so for them, the ability to connect and talk with women online who are like-minded is really important to learn that they’re not alone. (Meghan Murphy DN, CA)

These quotes highlight how networked technologies enable women to feel better—what social movement scholars often term the affective benefits of digital participation (see Mendes et al. 2019)—or cope more easily with their daily reality in a hostile cultural and political climate. Still, the potential advantages of communicative speed and international connections were not generally perceived by interviewees to make up for what feminism has lost in the shift away from face-to-face organising. For example, Lierre Keith (WLM, USA) said that ‘there are women who have good experiences’ and social media ‘can provide an entry into radical feminism’ but, ultimately, she felt that digital space provides an inhospitable climate for feminist movement-building: ‘compared to the richness of what I experienced [in the WLM], it just makes me feel very sad for [activists today] because [social media is] not a life. We had a life together’. Younger activists such as Cristabel Gekas (DN, AU) also made this point. Gekas explained how she did not ‘come away from [social media] feeling better or rewarded, if anything quite the opposite’. Conversely, Gekas said she ‘felt really good [when] leaving from a conference or a [face-to-face] group’.
Political Lesbianism and Digital Space

I know women who have become lesbians [in recent years] but a handful of them, really a handful. (Julia Long DN, UK)

Reinstating lesbian feminism as a central pillar of the WLM was another important aim of this book. I have argued that moving away from men and choosing to live as lesbians offered women space to enact new social and political forms based upon feminist principles. While lesbians were crucial drivers of feminism during the WLM, several interviewees expressed concern that rejecting heterosexuality is not understood as a viable and positive choice for feminists today. Some traced this directly to digital organising. Tiger Drummond (DN, UK), for example, said that because lesbianism remains intangible for women in digital space, the reality of women loving women cannot be rendered material; it remains an idea, rather than a reality. For Drummond, interacting in women-only physical space is crucial if women are to reject heterosexuality. As she said, coming together physically ‘deletes hours of [digital] arguments’ because women can witness ‘the reality’ of women loving women for themselves.

Other interviewees pointed to the dominant cultural influence of queer politics to explain the decline in women choosing to live as lesbians today. Queer politics creates problems for feminism, not least because it holds two oppositional perspectives in tandem: it claims that sexuality is biologically innate instead of socially constructed, and it also positions normative sexuality as flexible and fluid, which suggests that women should be open to diverse sexual encounters (Megarry et al. 2018). Both of these ideas perpetuate male dominance. Suggesting that lesbianism is biologically innate is a politically conservative move that positions heterosexuality as natural and inevitable, thus foreclosing resistance (Kitzinger 1989). Some interviewees, such as Lynne Harne (WLM, UK), reported that they were ‘shocked to see the belief in biological determinism’ in digital feminist spaces. Harne felt that the notion that homosexual people are ‘born this way’ has a policing effect, and she explained how ‘women get loads of abuse from people’ online for suggesting that it is
possible to leave heterosexuality and choose to live as a lesbian. The idea that women should be open to various sexual encounters also perpetuates male dominance because it buys into the patriarchal notion that all men should have access to women, even when they have declared themselves to be lesbians. Interviewees were particularly concerned with the impact transgender ideology has had upon women’s ability to delineate their own sexual boundaries. As I explained in Chap. 2, transgender ideology obscures women’s structural oppression because it understands cisgender women as having power over men who wish to perform femininity. In this way, transgenderism casts transgender-identified men as more oppressed than women and vilifies the idea of lesbianism on the basis that it is an exclusive sexuality which does not conform to compulsory queer fluidity (Megarry et al. 2018). Although they were cognisant that the Leftist political climate of ‘let’s not exclude anybody’ predates the rise of social media (Jenny Rankine WLM, NZ), some interviewees felt that it is more difficult in the digital era for women to draw their own boundaries.

In stark contrast to the ideology of the WLM, lesbianism is not commonly viewed as a revolutionary political choice for feminists today. Queer culture positions lesbian identity as anachronistic, exclusionary and out of date (Bendix 2019), and, in line with this sensibility, many women now prefer the term ‘queer’ instead of ‘lesbian’ to describe themselves (Jeffreys 2018; Megarry et al. 2018; Miller et al. 2016). Sheila Jeffreys (2018, 189) has also recently written about anti-feminist developments within digital lesbian communities, highlighting how the boundaries of who can call themselves a lesbian are now being viciously policed by bloggers who insist that sexuality is biologically determined, and that women cannot choose to live as lesbians. According to this line of argument, a woman can only call herself a lesbian if she has only ever felt sexual desire for women and has never had sexual contact with men (Jeffreys 2018, 189). Interviewees also flagged a rising anti-political lesbianism sentiment in digital feminist discussions. Tiger Drummond (DN, UK) and Alicen Grey (DN, USA) both traced its emergence to the blogging site Tumblr. Grey said: ‘I’d say Tumblr is heavily responsible. It sounds silly to blame Tumblr, but really though!’ Drummond offered further expansion on this claim. She said that political lesbianism ‘is a swear word on Tumblr’: ‘I’ve had several friends who have left that site or
have been sent abusive messages because they’ve entertained it as a possible thing […] it’s just such a vicious environment’.¹ That lesbianism is being positioned as an elite club in digital spaces, one in which women who have never had sexual relationships with men and who have only ever felt sexual desire for women are worthy of joining, creates a significant problem for women’s liberation. As Jeffreys (2018, 189) has explained, this idea is ‘harmful to the possibility of creating lesbian feminist community and politics, which cannot develop when the idea of essential lesbianism is wielded to prevent women imagining that they could choose to love women’.

Alongside the dominance of queer politics, the shift away from face-to-face organising and the feminist embrace of a social media ethic of antagonism may have also influenced the rise of anti-political lesbianism sentiment in social media spaces. Jeffreys (2018, 189) has called the online boundary wars over lesbianism a type of ‘jockeying for position, and for authenticity, for the status of “real ones”’. This kind of behaviour is congruent with social media logic, where feminists must fight for visibility and attention, and success is measured according to adherence to male cultural norms. Social media spaces encourage lesbians to show off their wives and girlfriends and publicly display their relationships to receive cultural traction via likes and retweets. This strand of digital culture creates severe impediments to the revival of the WLM, because both the boundary wars over who is an authentic lesbian, as well as the behaviour of vying for visibility in alignment with the norms of celebrity culture, significantly impede the development of a feminist ethics of sexual practice. Engaging solely in digital space and surrounded by male cultural norms, it is difficult to contest the celebration of inequality in interpersonal relationships, such as the manifestation of heterosexual power dynamics in lesbian couples. As I explained in Chap. 5, personal experience is equated with truth in digital space, but there is no in-built mechanism that prompts a shift to critical analysis or collective theorising. Tiger Drummond (DN, UK) said that some activists feel they cannot critically

¹The revival of claims that sexuality is biologically innate is perhaps unsurprising as this view is congruent with the Tumblr culture of playing ‘the most enticing victim’ (Bell 2013, 36; see also Nagle 2017). According to this logic, lesbians on Tumblr gain traction for their blogs by politically positioning themselves as authentic victims of their innate sexual desires.
contest other women’s ideas about lesbianism, which become ‘untouchable online’ when personal expression is privileged over critical analysis and debate: ‘when [women] are told that these are the rules of radical feminism they go, “oh, okay”. And they go, “let’s not question that, or let’s not offend, let’s not be critical of the butch/femme dichotomy, or let’s not be critical of lesbian relationships”’.

**A More Difficult Cultural and Political Moment**

It is important to acknowledge that feminists today are trying to organise in a more difficult cultural and political moment than that which was faced by early WLM activists. Living under conditions of advanced neoliberal capitalism, in an era which is ‘dedicated to the undoing of public collectivism as it centres on the authority of the state’ (Yeatman 2014, 90), women are now bound by structural constraints that WLM activists did not have to contend with. For example, without access to state welfare, sustained participation in feminist organising is financially untenable for many women today. Several WLM respondents explained how receiving benefits enabled them to dedicate their life to feminist activist work. Jenny Rankine (WLM, NZ), for example, got a job in Auckland’s Rape Crisis centre because the organisation received state funding to cover one unemployed worker: ‘I got paid the dole, basically, to work there on women’s work, which I thought was wonderful’.

Interviewee accounts also reveal that the type of political action that activists engage in is related to the social context in which they are working. Finn Mackay (DN, UK) explained how ‘the level of scrutiny that we live under today’ means that political action is more constrained:

That sort of direct action doesn’t really happen now and I think a lot of the younger women are organising within the law, getting permission for protests, getting formal funding, getting formal sponsorship which comes with strings which means you can’t do that kind of thing […] I totally understand why people organise the way that they do because of the parameters that are on activists nowadays.
The beginnings of state surveillance in the 1980s also prompted some WLM activists to forgo participation in direct actions such as marches and vandalism and begin to work within legal channels to campaign for change. Lynne Harne (WLM, UK), for example, started working with the Left-leaning Greater London Council in the 1980s to reform sex education in schools and also to raise awareness about lesbian women losing custody of their children after divorce. For Harne, this type of campaigning is conceptually distinct from activism, because she understands activism to be an illegal activity. Prior to the introduction of CCTV, Harne conceived of herself as a ‘direct action’ feminist:

We used to do loads of spray painting and things [like] putting glue in the locks of sex shops, spray painting huge posters on motorways and trying to get cinemas closed down by putting concrete down the toilets […] we were actually trying to harm the pornographers, we were trying to harm their businesses.

Feminists today are even more bound by the constraints of competitive neoliberalism than women like Harne were, and this shapes the type of organising they pursue. For example, a police record could now significantly impede a woman’s future employment possibilities. As Finn Mackay (DN, UK) said, ‘students are not as free as they used to be, if you are unemployed there are all these requirements and checks on you’.

The structural conditions of the present moment also make it very difficult for women to find a place to meet. Whereas ‘most [WLM] meetings were held in someone’s living room or in some other free meeting space’ (Hanisch 2010, n.p.), many British women today can no longer afford to keep a lounge room in their private home, where political meetings could be hosted. The introduction of the ‘bedroom tax’ in April 2013 imposed increasing conditionality on recipients of UK housing benefits by ‘introducing financial penalties for anyone of working age living in rented social housing who was in receipt of Housing Benefit and deemed to be “over-occupying”’ (Dabrowski 2017, 163). What this

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2 I am indebted to Jess Kathryn, a member of the London-based Lesbian History Group, for this observation.
means is that individuals who receive housing benefits have their stipends reduced if they have a spare room. According to Vicki Dabrowski (2017, 164–165), such a policy makes ‘an enormous difference to some young women’s standard of living’ and has ‘made already unstable positions worse’. This neoliberal climate of gendered austerity is not unique to Britain; it is a reality across developed Western liberal democracies (Bray 2013, 93–116). The process of gentrification that Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter (2018, 28–29) have called the ‘financialization of urban space’ has profoundly affected women’s ability to autonomously organise. Across the USA, the UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, it is largely no longer possible to ‘hangout on the fringes of festivals, make happenings in the underground cafes, build art spaces and studios, maintain theatre and performance spaces [and] run off zines on your own printing press or server’ (Lovink and Rossiter 2018, 28–29).

Not only is it more difficult for women to access autonomous spaces today, but they also struggle to find the time to participate regularly in groups. Increased flexibilisation and casualisation of labour (Springer et al. 2016) means that feminist meetings must now be organised around women’s ever-changing work rosters. Women can be ‘called into work erratically and unexpectedly’, and this makes regular participation in a movement almost impossible (Sitka 2017, 74). Organising consciousness-raising groups in the twenty-first century is no easy task: ‘everyone is busier’ and ‘work and family demand much more of our time’ (Hanisch 2010, n.p.).

Digital feminist praxis is perhaps fitting for a time in which revolutionary social change feels completely beyond reach. My interview data suggests that women’s reliance on social media is related to changes in structural conditions. Some interviewees wanted to meet other women more regularly face-to-face, but they felt constrained in their ability to do so:

I’d love to meet more than we do […] every now and then and then there is an event, it’s typically something like a radical feminist conference, and it’s so good. Things like that are really just kind of energising, because you have a weekend or whatever with your sisters, and you’re talking, and you feel like “yeah, it’s not just me”, and [you feel] solidarity […] I love stuff like that!
Social media provides a form of escapism for women; it is a place where they can try to transcend their material reality. The use of social media for feminism is also suited to the context of advanced neoliberal capitalism, where feminist participation, like the casualisation of labour, has become fragmented. Women can get involved from anywhere, at any time, via smartphones, but this form of feminist engagement is questionable as a means for reviving the WLM: it contributes to fuelling, rather than challenging, the status quo. Women’s use of social media directly results in increased profits for globally dominant male-owned corporations (Jarrett 2016), and digital space is also totally surveilled. The internet cannot provide an effective space for women’s political growth because it is not an autonomous space. Rather, it is a commercial space that men have created to fulfil their own political agenda. If women are lacking in imagination today in comparison to WLM activists, then perhaps this is because they currently have very little free space in which they could dream.

Feminists today are also organising in a context that is more hostile to the pursuit of a genderless world. Older interviewees explained how coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s meant that women were socialised into a culture dominated by a hippie aesthetic and the values of the countercultural Left. According to Lierre Keith (WLM, USA), this framework lent itself more easily to a rejection of patriarchal beauty standards and normative femininity. She pointed to how socialist critiques of consumerist capitalism were quickly taken up by WLM activists and further subjected to feminist analysis:

It was all about natural [and] that’s not a bad value system because it’s about saying we want to like our bodies [and] we are tired of these rules that say we are supposed to hate ourselves. Women took [these values] and ran with [them] in particularly feminist ways.
In contrast to the backdrop of Leftist social movements which provided a culture conducive to the emergence of the WLM, Keith suggested that it is more difficult for women to reject femininity and consumer culture today because they have been socialised into a hypersexual world: ‘I know it’s harder and harder for the young ones, I see that they are up against way more than I was ever up against. [The culture is] so increasingly pornified, so it’s harder for women to get out’. As well as discussing how transgender ideology perpetuates gendered stereotypes, younger interviewees also highlighted porn culture (see Dines 2010) as posing an additional barrier to women’s ability to reject patriarchal social norms and formulate an oppositional feminist consciousness. Tiger Drummond (DN, UK), for example, said: ‘the way that […] young girls [are] being exposed to pornography at such a young age [means that] things like [wanting to be sexually attractive to men] are really, really ingrained in women’.

By encouraging women to utilise digital space and then celebrating them for their efforts, popular culture and mainstream political messaging function to implicitly discourage the building of face-to-face feminist connections. If women’s liberation is dependent upon women and girls having time to explore their humanity away from male cultural norms, then the move to digital life is having profound consequences for a generation of young women whose every interaction is now being surveilled. Chris Sitka (WLM, AU) expressed this idea in her interview:

In order to be a small group of people standing up to the whole world around you, you have to build your own strength, and you do it by having your own culture, your own family, your own tribe. And this is why, when I see how young women now are all split off from each other, separated, not meeting, not even sharing houses together or whatever, I can’t see how they can be strong enough to stand up against that pressure to conform to what we’re told is correct.

Digital networking does not allow women to really see each other outside of male parameters, thus social media perpetuates their social and political atomisation. One recent British survey found ‘a sharp decline in the happiness of young women and girls’ (Weale 2018). Explaining how
girls’ lives ‘have contracted as their world moves online’, the researchers reported that only 21% of girls ‘met friends at each others’ houses’ in 2018, compared to 69% in 2009 (Weale 2018; see also Rogan and Budgeon 2018, 9).

At the time of this book going to press, the COVID-19 pandemic, its associated nation-wide lockdown policies, as well as the unprecedented push to digitally mediated engagement for all social, economic, political and educational activities will still be unfolding. Of particular relevance to this book is the likelihood that the pandemic will enable further surveillance opportunities and extend the power and reach of social media companies. Naomi Klein has recently argued that we are currently ‘observing the seamless integration of government with a handful of Silicon Valley giants’ (Klein 2020, n.p.). Klein (2020, n.p.) has called this a ‘coherent pandemic shock doctrine’, drawing attention to how ‘the future that is being rushed into being as the bodies still pile up treats our past weeks of physical isolation not as a painful necessity to save lives, but as a living laboratory for a permanent—and highly profitable—no-touch future’. It remains to be seen whether Big Tech scepticism and resistance will flourish post-pandemic, or whether public and academic opinion will be largely supportive of frenzied tech development as our only possible avenue out.

While it is too early for me to comment at length here about the widespread implications of COVID-19 for women’s liberation, early developments are troubling. Feminists know that in times of crisis the hard-won rights of women can be easily rolled back, or else forsaken entirely in the design of response measures (European Network of Migrant Women 2020, 7). Early reports indicate that both private and public spaces have become more dangerous for women, with rates of domestic violence, street harassment and indecent exposure spiking globally in the wake of ‘stay at home’ orders. In lockdown situations, women have few avenues to seek help from male violence, and digital space is far from a saviour. Privacy issues with video conferencing platforms such as Zoom have already been widely reported, with men hacking into meetings to share pornography alongside racist and misogynistic content. Also concerning is that Pornhub, ‘the largest online depository of recorded sexual abuse of women’, chose to respond to the crisis by offering men a free upgrade to
its premium service (European Network of Migrant Women 2020, 5). The consumption of online pornography has surged as a result, which equates to the increased dissemination of sexually violent content into private homes, where women and girls are currently trapped alongside their male abusers (Quek and Tyler 2020). Much work will need to be done by feminists to document and analyse various government responses to COVID-19, associated technological development and the implications for women globally.

**Rejecting Social Media**

We do need to resist [social media], reject it actually, not really resist but reject it. And build something [of our own]. (Linda Bellos WLM, UK)

It has now been over ten years since the emergence of social media, and despite sustained efforts from feminist activists, evidence of tangible social and political outcomes for women remain unclear. Amy Richards (DN, USA)—the one activist I interviewed who did not describe herself as a radical feminist—evocatively characterised this situation:

Feminists have had a very robust presence on social media for 10 years. Have the numbers of sexual assault gone down? No. Have the number of women tenured professors gone up? No. Has the pay disparity shrunk? No. In terms of social media being the turning point for change, I’m not so sure.

Some interviewees suggested that feminists are now developing more critical awareness around the limitations of social media and felt that a moment of change is afoot:

I think that with experience, a lot of women are [now] seeing the limitations of 100% blogging and have [taken] to real life organising much more than they used to. They learnt the lesson basically. [Social media] had its use, and now I think more and more women are learning to use the internet in more healthy ways. (Anne Billows DN, UK)
Refusing social media is not an easy task, especially when many scholars foreclose this as a practical possibility. Laura Portwood-Stacer (2014, 299), for example, has argued that feminist media scholars should challenge women’s participation in media systems as ‘an intrinsic good’, but nonetheless she also posits that ‘non-participation is largely untenable—we have little choice but to participate’. The internet is now so much a part of our daily lives that we can barely imagine a future which is not intrinsically bound to the digital. According to technology critic Adam Greenfield (2018, 8), discursive foreclosures of alternatives impede our ability to collectively resist or ‘think meaningfully about the future’, because ‘any conversation about the reality we want to live in [is now reframed] as a choice between varying shades of technical development’. This is similar to how feminist utopian imaginings have historically been shut down in the public sphere, presented as dangerous and impractical in order to preserve the status quo. Heterosexuality, for example, was commonly understood as natural and inevitable before the WLM (Miriam 1998, 13). Feminism threatens male institutions, and it is fear of feminist revolution that ‘lurks behind the claim that radical feminism is utopian and therefore impossible’ (Miriam 1998, 13).

At this point of advanced neoliberal capitalism, resistance to social media can seem largely futile, especially considering that platforms are commercial enterprises ‘whose size and concentrated technical competence now span much of the terrain of ordinary experience’ (Greenfield 2018, 275). In the face of this onslaught, much feminist activism has understandably become oriented towards taking back the tech: getting women into positions in technology firms or trying to occupy space for feminism on digital platforms. This drive is only likely to increase in the post-COVID-19 world. Over the last few years, when I have presented some of the ideas contained in this book in activist and academic settings, many women have quickly accepted my argument that feminists should move away from social media giants. The focus of debate then usually turns to a consideration of the relative merits of alternative digital spaces for feminism, such as Spinster, and how alternative platforms can best be kept secure from male surveillance and infiltrators. Following Twitter’s decision to implement policies that effectively banned radical feminist speech in 2018, Spinster was created in 2019 on the Fediverse network to
provide women with an alternative, women-centric space for digital discussion. It was so popular when it launched that its servers initially failed. While there is clearly a strong appetite amongst women to move away from the digital giants, Spinster is hardly free from their reach, or indeed from hostile men within the wider Fediverse network. Questions of safety persist for Spinster users: some groups in the Fediverse network blocked the site or have tried to shut it down, and Google has also banned its android app, which significantly impedes usability for some women (Fain 2019). I remain unconvinced that any digital space, even those which women can more easily shape and control, are politically useful for feminist movement-building. The activist focus on creating digital platforms more suited to feminism continues to play into the idea that women’s liberation can be achieved via digital transcendence.

Another common response to my argument that feminists should abandon social media is to suggest that women should technologically upskill themselves as hackers, forum designers and moderators. This suggestion is premised on the notion that if women were as technologically skilled as men, then they would be better equipped to control their digital domains. While it is crucially important that activists do develop the material skills of organising, if women continue down a digitally oriented path, then their activist energies will remain focussed on developing tech skills based around how to succeed on social media. Many feminists now attend training days to learn ‘the praxis of media-skills’ including how to ‘participate in tech cultures’, and how to best avoid online sexual harassment (Hurwitz 2017, 476). Such a trajectory binds women more closely to the digital world, and to a technological future. Throughout this book, I have questioned whether such a future is suited to the political and ethical project of women’s liberation.

Advocating that women become better hackers ignores that hacking evokes a male ethic of engagement based upon deception, sexual violence—that is, the penetration of targets—colonisation and surveillance (see Tanczer 2015). The battle for control of digital space can be seen as a

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3 The Fediverse is a ‘decentralised’ form of social media that is comprised of ‘over 4,500 unique servers which all speak to each other’. Spinster’s moderators have not banned men from participating, according to the FAQ section of the website this is because ‘there is no reasonable way to check anyone’s sex’ when they register. See: [https://spinster.xyz/about](https://spinster.xyz/about)
type of modern warfare (Lovink and Rossiter 2018; Pötzsch 2015), and although academic debates often recast what I would see as a dangerous competition for manhood as boyish mischief (see Cohn 2013, 138)—that is, trolling—this does not diminish the danger for women. An embrace of social media for political organising makes feminism complicit in what Anna Yeatman (2014, 85) has called ‘a distinctively modern fantasy of control’ that promotes individualisation and fails to politically contend with the embodied experiences of everyday life. For this reason, Yeatman (2014, 86) has called for feminists to ‘interrogate [their] complicity with modern technology in a way that responds to the distinctive concerns of feminism’.

Recent scholarly suggestions for where to from here also fall radically short for women. Disillusionment with social media and the decision-making mechanisms of unstructured crowds has prompted some academics to call for a return to the political party (Dean 2016, 2019). For feminists, however, new visions of the political party, complete with membership fees, are hardly suited to a political project that aims for nothing less than a complete overthrow of the patriarchal state system. Another proposition is set out in Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter’s (2018) Organisation After Social Media. In their book, Lovink and Rossiter (2018, 6) suggest that ‘offline romanticism’ is the ‘nostalgia option’ for activists because a rejection of digital space is unsuited to the present moment. They argue that what activists need is for organised digital networks to replace virtual communities (Lovink and Rossiter 2018, 35). According to Lovink and Rossiter (2018, 13), digital networks have become too big, and activists need to shift their focus away from the logic of watching and following to getting things done. Their suggestion for where to now builds on an idea of small group organising that is coordinated through local, regional and national efforts. This is reminiscent of the WLM’s organising structure, only transposed into the virtual realm. Within Lovink and Rossiter’s (2018, 5) framework, the autonomous, small, face-to-face group of the WLM is reimagined as a digital secret cell where communication is encrypted as a protection mechanism from outside dangers. Lovink and Rossiter (2018, 18) conceptualise their vision for the future of social movement organising as a praxis of ‘organised networks’, or ‘orgnets’. They suggest that orgnets could draw on
'intelligent [male-designed] software’ to remind people of when a network has lost focus and got too big, and assist them with ‘dissolv[ing] connections, clos[ing] conversations, and delet[ing] groups once their task was over’ (Lovink and Rossiter 2018, 2).

Lovink and Rossiter’s treatise does not consider the needs of women to move towards each other, formulate a class consciousness and begin to recognise each other outside of male control. Instead, their use of cutting-edge cyber metaphors reveals a masculine focus on hacking, encryption, transcendence and domination of the digital realm. Reminiscent of Donna Haraway’s cyberfeminist dreaming, it is very difficult to know what to actually do to ‘rewire, recode and redefine’ the core values of the network society to create ‘contradictory platforms that break through the unconscious numbness of smooth surfaces’, ‘hack the attention economy’ and ‘smash the online self’ (Lovink and Rossiter 2018, 4, 163). Even Lovink and Rossiter’s (2018, 134) tangible suggestions, such as the idea that movements should take inspiration from hate groups and paedophiles who create firewalls and use encryption technology to protect themselves against digital surveillance, also fall radically short for women. Continually retreating into increasingly more tightly secured digital spaces does not solve the initial problem I have identified with closed/private Facebook groups: women’s attention remains continually focussed on men and outside threat, rather than collective-based movement-building with other women. It is also difficult to understand how the tactics that have spurned the rise of politically conservative groups and paved the way for the expansion of male sexual violence in digital space can be in any way useful for prefiguring a feminist world.

A feminist culture of social media refusal requires that women not only recognise the dangers of using the technology for feminist organising, but also that they begin to abandon it. For women isolated in their hometowns without access to other feminists locally, there are many reasons why this may be difficult. For younger women who have only ever participated in feminism in digital space, shifting focus and beginning to seek face-to-face connections might also be daunting. Social media companies actively encourage users to spend more and more time on platforms, with the aim of making them feel indispensable to modern everyday life. Lierre Keith (WLM, USA) was one interviewee who
explained how she had shut down her Facebook account for a time, but having now reinstated it, finds that she keeps getting ‘snowballed in’. Refusal, however, is crucial. Continuing down the current path will likely produce a generation of feminist activists who only know how to interact, debate and organise within the confines of platforms. The more feminists that step away from social media and begin to organise locally face-to-face, the easier it will become for others to find them and act to revive a collective-based movement. I am hesitant to suggest that it is politically efficacious for women to still use social media in conjunction with their face-to-face efforts. This is because, when I meet other activists in physical space, one of their first questions is often ‘are you on Facebook?’ This question reveals the extent of our contemporary digital orientation: this woman does not need to begin the process of getting to know me, or to organise anything concrete here-and-now, because such work can be carried out later in digital space. While a staged shift from dependence on social media towards a face-to-face movement could potentially take place without the need to immediately abandon social media, this would need to be based upon women’s concomitant pledge to creating face-to-face organising structures.

**Space to Dream: Separatism as Creation**

Male-dominated societies continually deny women access to stable ground upon which they can base their activism, and developing strong female friendships is one way in which women can resist. According to Janice Raymond (1986, 152), the development of gyn/affective friendship is fundamental to movement-building because it provides activists with an anchor from which they can launch political projects:

> The sharing of common views, attractions, and energies gives women a connection to the world so they do not lose their bearing. Thus a sharing of personal life is at the same time a grounding for social and political existence.
Social media provides no such anchor for feminists today, and nor does it provide an infrastructure through which they can begin to move towards other women. Instead, social media reproduces the values of male institutions within feminist organising structures. Women need to separate from male systems to access the free space crucial to fostering revolutionary feminist ideas. This vision of separatism is aligned with the work of lesbian feminist scholars who have highlighted the creative possibilities that emerge when women withdraw from male-dominated institutions and male-dominated culture. It is not a vision of separatism as inaction, or a retreat to women licking their wounds in private. Rather, it is a vision of separatism as a generative force (Hoagland and Penelope 1988). For some women, giving up social media might feel like an enormous sacrifice. Yet, if we understand separation from men and male institutions as a positive act that enables feminist creation (Hoagland 1992, 197–198), then we can begin to ascribe new feminist value to our choices.

Recently, there have been some signs of a return to face-to-face organising based around specific feminist campaigns. In the UK, for example, women managed to hold regular public meetings to protest the suggested changes to the Gender Recognition Act that would allow men to change their legal status from men to women based only on the criteria that they self-identify as women (Turner 2018). New feminist hosting organisations such as Woman’s Place UK, We Need to Talk and Let a Woman Speak were formed to mobilise women across the country to fight the proposed reforms. Several of the events hosted by the above-named organisations have been subjected to considerable protest and intimidation by transgender rights activists (Hinsliff 2018). Despite this considerable pressure, women managed to hold a meeting in the House of Commons on 14 March 2018 (Maynard 2018). The momentum sparked by these face-to-face gatherings has been tangible, but it is yet to be determined whether this revival of face-to-face campaigning will translate into grassroots mobilising around other issues, or a revival of consciousness-raising groups. Academics and activists have also recently pointed to the continuing importance of consciousness-raising for the development of feminism, complete with calls for feminists to return to small group face-to-face organising (Firth and Robinson 2016; Hanisch 2010; Megarry
as well as providing educational workshops on how to do so.\(^4\) Revivals of face-to-face international radical feminist gatherings in Europe provide another sign of hope. These events, however, also clearly expose how the lack of face-to-face organising in local communities today means that many women now travel enormous distances to access women-only space and intergenerational feminist community.

At this point in history, it is important that feminists begin to conceptualise social media as the technological institutionalisation of male access to individual women, their political consciousness and the political project of women’s liberation. I am arguing for a feminist paradigm shift away from the digital. Social media provides an instant means of communication that transcends geographical boundaries, but digital space is not suited to the feminist political project. While both traditional print-based and digital media provide a mechanism for raising awareness of feminism and feminist issues amongst women, the existence of tangible and physically locatable feminist groups is crucial to women’s political development and the growth of a revolutionary movement for social change. According to Janice Raymond (1986, 18), ‘men’s ultimate fear is the threat posed by all dimensions, degrees and manifestations of women’s personal and political movement towards and for each other’. A feminist movement grown entirely on social media would lose the basic components that made participating in the WLM life-changing and revolutionary. If feminism (and lesbianism) is to transform women’s lives, then it needs to be a face-to-face activity.

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\(^4\)In 2019, for example, British WLM activist Lynn Alderson ran a booked out workshop, ‘Introduction to Consciousness-Raising’, for attendees of the annual FILIA conference (https://filia.org.uk/new-blog/2019/9/17/lynn-alderson).
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