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Original Citation

McMahon, Gráinne and Batsleer, Janet (2016) Young women online: political and social participation and activism. In: Youth Matters 2016: Moving from the margins, 8th - 9th June 2016, University of Newcastle. (Unpublished)

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Young women online: political and social participation and activism

There are well-established historical trends that show that new and emerging forms of media are able to disrupt and then transform political and social opinion and discourse and have the capacity to break down social hierarchies in order to challenge dominant socio-cultural and political norms. Social media or “new digital media” are part of this trend and influence a reshape of socio-cultural and political norms, practices and discourses through awareness-raising, activism, and debate. Recent research has found that social media have considerable potential to engage, empower and activate young women in particular. These online spaces are often women-only and explicitly feminist (‘safe spaces’) and central to political and social activism in terms of women’s rights. The question remains, however, about how that effect evolves, and intersects with more traditional forms of activism, and ‘how and under what conditions these new digital platforms relate to citizen activism and protest politics’ (Valenzuela, 2013, p. 921).

Drawing on historic accounts of women-led spaces and public activism as generative of feminist movement, as well as accounts of contemporary online activism drawn from our current research in Manchester and Ireland, this paper explores how 'safe enough spaces' are mobilised for political and social activism and perspectives on the impacts of such spaces on political and social change.