Episode 164: Sarah Casey

**KL:** Katie Linder

**SC**: Sarah Casey

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[intro music]

# Segment 1:

**KL:** Welcome to “Research in Action,” a weekly podcast about topics and issues related to research in higher education featuring experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, research director at Oregon State University Ecampus, a national leader in online education. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Visit our website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

**KL:** On this episode, I'm joined by Dr. Sarah Casey who was awarded a PhD in media communication and feminist cultural studies from Griffith University. She lectures in screen media and communication at the University of the Sunshine Coast in Australia. Sarah has published in the areas of media studies, feminism, and celebrity studies, and she is particularly interested in digital feminist activism as well as the role of popular media feminist celebrities in campaigns.

Sarah's currently finishing a monograph entitled #Heroines, and is the co-author of *Media and Society* with Michael O'Shaughnessy and Jane Stadler. Sarah leads the Stories of Country Women Project, the documents the lived experiences of women in drought-affected regions of Outback Australia. She's also the Vice President for the Australian Women's and Gender Studies Association, the peak body for such research in Australia.

Thanks so much for joining me on the show today, Sarah.

**SC:** Ah thank you, Katie. It's lovely to be here.

**KL:** So I'm really excited to dive into some of your research on digital feminist activism, but first for our listeners who may not be familiar with that terminology, what is digital feminist activism?

**SC:** Okay. I think we need to perhaps look at activism more broadly in order to answer that. Activism is not one thing; it's not an event. It's more of a process, an emerging; it’s a continuum not an event, so it's an ongoing process. In terms of digital feminist activism that occurs -it's feminism that occurs in the digital space. That may be through blogging, through Facebook liking or sharing, through using online petitions - such as those with change.org or other large platforms for petitions, podcasting as well can be seen as a form of activism digital activism, and - but activism itself is an increasingly contested term. But while the common feature of a hashtag use is the combining or the classifying ideas, or issues, or groups under a particular hashtag. This doesn't mean unification of ideas usually. So it's really hard to nail it down and say it's one thing, because it's so diverse, but it's the multiple ways that people who identify as feminists, are performing activism in a digital space. Hopefully to have some on offline actions as well.

**KL:** Okay, so I'm always really interested in what gets people into these research areas. What led your interest into this particular area?

**SC:** Okay so, I've always been a feminist for as long as I can recall. I had a very strong feminist mother activist, so therefore activism is not new for me. However with digital media and I guess the ubiquity of - of online media, digital media opened up new spaces for activism for me, and I was really interested in it and I do a lot of activism online. So for me, it started around eight years ago pretty clearly. I'll tell you about a journalist, and a particular campaign that I started - a grassroots digital feminist activist campaign, and it may seem like it's a minor campaign, but I use it in order to historicize what's happened more broadly since then, and now of course, we've got the Me Too Movement. So this journalist’s name was Gavin King, he was an Australian editor-in-chief at a large Murdoch-owned press, and he then decided that he'd run in Queensland, that's a state I live in, state politics, and he authored an article during his time as a journalist saying women should play it safe. and in that particular article, he posed and answered the following question that if a woman drinks to excess and is raped or assaulted, is she partly to blame? As uncomfortable and difficult as this question is, the answer is surely yes. Now I was pretty enraged about that, and that was in 2011, and the local politician - conservative party here, actually endorsed him for a seat. And so leading up to that election I thought, “I'm going to run a campaign - an activist campaign -digital feminist activist campaign on that” because I was really concerned about the potential re-victimization of women who had been assaulted in such circumstances. So that campaign became known as Hashtags that govern. And that occurred at a time, I guess, before digital feminist activism, such as online positioning, had gained significant traction in Australia and more broadly in the West. And I use that campaign, because it offers proximity as well as distance now and through this historicizing of the campaign, I can look at which strategies may be useful and it also highlights some of those ever-present issues that inevitably occur with - occur with such activism such as trolling. So that's - that's what led me to it, and - but I also want to acknowledge it's not - the problem isn't just one person and it's not just one, you know, difficult journalist or future politician holding these sort of retro beliefs that sexual assault is sometimes a woman's fault or even one issue, there will always be those sorts of people. They come and go, but the entrenched attitudes remain, so more broadly I'm starting to look at how we can change attitudes.

**KL:** So I would love to hear about some of your research projects in this area. Can you describe a couple of them for us?

**SC:** Okay, so at the moment, I've nearly finished a book and it's called *Hashtag Heroines: Celebrity Activism Digital Campaigns and Australian Media Feminist*, so it's an Australian focus and I write about what I call the ‘tools of the Zeitgeist’. So they are the tools, and the tactics, and strategies that are popular, common, and easily accessible at particular times. The three areas of my research is concerned with for feminist digital - or feminist activism more broadly, not just digital feminist activism. A celebrity activism, so endorsements and what's known as ‘celanthropy’ or celebrity philanthropy, celebrity feminism and digital activism. I argue that their most beneficial when used together, because they’re often utilized in mass awareness campaigns of other social movements outside of feminism such as movements to end poverty or environmental awareness, but they're not often used in a really organized way in feminist campaigning. So if the deployment of celebrity philanthropy and activism celebrity on media feminists and mainstream and digital media activism - the current tools of the Zeitgeist, I want to look at which tools are best for which campaigns but we know that there's not one single approach. This is merely one sort of approach from a myriad, and I would say that having a range of tools to apply to activism is an important aspect of 21st century feminisms - and I've said feminism a lot but I mean feminisms, because there's not one type of feminism. And we also, I think at the moment - since 2012, around there, there's been a real upsurge of feminist activism throughout the West. It's experiencing renewed energy and prominence in many Western Nature's in particular and - and I'm looking at that particular moment in time and saying, “Okay, what's going on and how can we capitalize on this for larger more organized campaigns?” So that's one of the projects that I'm working on. I'm also looking at - maybe I can talk about that a little later, but I'm looking at something called male feminist capital. So different type of capital that males are using in terms of promoting their brands - so male celebrity feminists in particular. And I'm also looking at women and their experiences of drought in Outback, Australia.

**KL:** Okay, so you have a very full plate. I'm curious with this book project that you're working on -the hashtag heroines and this direction of digital feminist activism, are there particular takeaways that you're hoping people will walk away with as your kind of thinking about the main messages of the book and what you're finding is you're doing research in this area?

**SC:** Okay, I'm taking - well, I think one of the big takeaways is that there's no one right way to do feminism. This is just one part of the conversation, but it's a really exciting time because there's the greater velocity of feminist discourse in the media sphere at the moment than we've ever seen before. We've got new ways to connect and new ways to - to organize as well, but I think that the problem is that we sometimes think that the work is done because it seems visible. We've seen that with the Me Too Movement. It's an ongoing process. Activism, like I said earlier, isn't just one thing. It's not just a beginning and an end. It's ongoing, it's evolving, and we need to look at new ways to organize and to keep that momentum going. I've come up with what I call the ‘unpalatable palatable’ and this is what I - it's my conceptual framework and it consists of three different notions: the palatable, the unpalatable, and the tensions around and within celebrity feminism and digital feminist activism. And what that means is that these particular feminists who are celebrities speaking about feminist issues in the media occupy this space, because they often invoke palatable and neoliberal sympathies to engage with that – that neoliberalism itself finds unpalatable. But no feminist is actually completely palatable or unpalatable, because naming yourself as a feminist will always incur some sort of difficulty with somebody. [*Indiscernible*], for example, on men's rights activist. It's a particularly difficult position or subject position to name yourself within. So I guess that's one of the things that being a feminist is risky, it takes - it takes courage to be to be brave and to out yourself, I guess.

**KL:** Well we are just getting started with this, Sarah. I'm so excited to dive deeper into learning a little bit more about your work. We're going to take a brief break and when we come back, we'll hear a little bit more from Sarah about her work with the real stories of Country Women Project. Back in a moment.

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# Segment 2:

**KL:** Sarah, one of the projects that you've been working on is the Real Stories of Country Women Project, and I would love to learn a little bit more about this. Can you tell us a little bit more about the project?

**SC:** Yes, sure. So the Real Stories of Country Women Project is located in Queensland, Australia, and what we're doing is we've done a series of interviews with women who lives in rural Australia. So in in the bush, in the outback and micro documentaries, we're creating micro documentaries for women to document their own stories about living in drought conditions for long periods of time and to share those messages out there. So it was a really - for us it was desire to help, bridge city bush or city outback understandings of each other, and also to explore how digital media can perhaps assist or is helping these women to create what's known as off-farm income. Also in the mainstream media here in Australia, I'm not sure what it's like in the States, but we often hear the same sorts of stories. There's a really predictable narrative around people who are living in extreme weather conditions, and they're just told as snapshots through a journalistic lens. And our now project, we really wanted to hear women talking about their resilience strategies in their own words in a documentary format. So what we're doing is celebrating the lives of these women in drought affected communities through images, through video interviews. We wanted to know their - their wisdom and their coping strategies, and it’s also the pilot stage of a much broader project that has the overarching aim of documenting, recording, and also to help to share those experiences and strategies for women farmers and also women business owners living in these communities. The documentary will be ready by the middle of the year. We've got a few small interview like -introductory interviews with these women. You can find us at our Facebook page, which is Real Stories of Country Women.

**KL:** Okay. Well, we will definitely link to this in the show notes so that folks can come and find you. I'm curious how this project came to be, and what is your role in the project? It sounds really unique. So, how did you come up with this idea?

**SC:** Okay, so my role in the project – I’m chief investigator in this project. It's a completely industry funded project that we're doing through the University of the Sunshine Coast where I work with two other researchers, Dr. Gail Crimmins and Dr. Jordan McIntyre, but why did I come to it? I grew up on a farm in Queensland, Australia. My parents still run a beef and it was formerly a dairy farm as well, and I knew that the drought had pervasive effects. So when you live in these conditions long-term and you see the effects of what's going on - so I'm very city. I'm a very - very much a city person now, but I know the impacts that it can have and I often would wonder, what keeps people going through this through generations. Why would you keep doing something when it is so reliant on the weather? But we only hear in the media about why about it when it's really extreme, so the drought might have been going on for several years and even then we don't hear enough. It just - it seems almost like people want to help from outside, but they're not quite sure how to do that. Most Australians, at least on the East Coast, lived by the coastline and we don't often venture outside of our - our own little worlds outside of the cities, and oftentimes people in the outback or the bush feel excluded from mainstream media discourses, from society, and - and I really wanted to help to shift some of that narrative from victim stutter status, I guess, and also to - to see if there were digital divides going on. I suspected there were and one of the findings were - were quite significant digital divides in the bush, but also those who didn't have significant problems with access to digital media in particular, were using the internet in really inventive ways to help create income for themselves.So some important things came out there.

**KL:** So I'm really curious if there are certain things that were especially interesting to you that you learn throughout this project. It sounds like you're still kind of in the middle of it, but what are some of the things that are coming out already that you're finding really interesting?

**SC:** Well, we went on - we went on the road which is a lot of driving and I think for me even though I'd grown up in the bush, I hadn't grown up on that particular area [*indiscernible*] much closer to the coastline, but what was really interesting was the landscape itself. The different types – I know it seems really- yeah, just very basic but the different types of dirt on the ground was a big revelation for us -the different colors of the Australian Outback. But I think the big thing that came out was that there was no one particular type of countrywoman. All of the stereotypes about these women standing on their beautiful big homesteads, sweeping their - their decks or the verandas; they were just smashed. The stereotypes were all smashed, but there were quite a few common themes emerging from our interviews - that community is really strong, but it's also - it's not just strong, it's imperative to their survival, and that there's nowhere else that these people would rather be. Every single woman who was there said that there's nowhere else that they'd rather be. They also spoke repeatedly about the importance of self-care and taking out some time for themselves, so that was one of their big resilience strategies. For many of them using digital media, it was critical to keep in touch with their friends and family because of the isolation that they could experience, and it was also critical for running businesses because most of them can’t survive from farming. They can't survive in this world without using the internet to run their businesses or to create internet businesses. They also talked about the gaps between the city and the rural understandings of life and they wanted to share those stories, so other people would be persuaded to come so - for tourism to increase in those areas. So I think that was really important. Also, what I loved was how inventive some women were in terms of businesses and using digital media in unique ways. They had large Facebook followings, they were creating really beautiful products, and they were doing this all from really remote locations.

**KL:** That is incredible. So, I know you're working now on a new women in drought project. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

**SC:** Yes. So given that extreme weather conditions, not just drought but also floods, significantly repeatedly impact people in Australia and communities. It's imperative the people have income streams that are less dependent on agriculture and therefore less dependent on those extreme weather conditions. And so what I've done is create a project that's just been funded to support the perceived digital literacy business communication needs of people living in Outback communities. So what we're doing is we're assessing - we're doing some workshops with 60 people that will be over about a year to - but first of all, we're going to assess their digital literacy and their perceptions of their digital literacy, and then we're going to mentor them, help them create communication plans, use digital media in different ways to help their businesses. So that's one of the projects that I'm doing. The other one that we're going to extend later in the year is a podcast project, so we want to extend the first part of women's story - real stories of country women in a podcast. So one thing that came out is the women were really excited to share their stories, but they also wanted to hear stories about people who are living in areas like theirs - what their strategies were. So there's a real desire to be heard and - and also to hear, so we'll do a podcast project extending on the Real Stories of Country Women Project too.

**KL:** So I'm curious, Sarah, as you're working in these different spaces, what are some of the research methodologies that you've been leaning on most heavily as you engage in these projects?

**SC:** Well, we - the research methodologies, I use textual analysis, I use semi-structured interviews. Sometimes I use content analysis; we're using narrative inquiry as well. So there's a range of methodologies that we use in these different projects. But for example, in *#Heroines* and the Sap Gathering Campaign, I used action research. I was actually within that petition myself, creating the campaign being both the creator as well as - as the observer, I guess - so there's quite a few. They’re - they're quite diverse.

**KL:** It sounds like your research methodologies are very flexible as you're kind of working within these projects and in some ways seeing what's coming out them.

**SC:** Yeah, absolutely!

**KL:** Well, I am excited to dig even deeper with you to hear a little bit more about how you're involved with some organizations in Australia to continue this work. We're going to take another brief break, then we'll come back and hear a little bit more from Sarah. Back in a moment.

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# Segment 3:

**KL:** Sarah, I'm really curious to hear a little bit more about your experience working with the Australian Women Gender Studies Association. We have a version of this, I think, that’s similar to the National Women's Studies Association here in the U.S., but I know that this has been something that's been very integral to your work. Can you share a little bit about your work with this organization?

**SC:** Okay. So the Australian Women's and Gender Studies Association is also known as AWGSA, and what it does is it provides a focal point for all Australian Universities offering women's and gender studies programs at undergraduate and postgraduate level. And what we do is we sponsor a range of feminist events, we have a conference every two years, we promote the teaching the researcher women's and gender studies in Australia, and we act as a national voice on women's and gender studies issues, but we also promote links with other feminist organizations and associations internationally. I'm currently the vice president of AWGSA, and what I found with this organization - I joined as a postgraduate student, and the links, and the networking, and the connections in the support of our other members has been phenomenal. I’m always promoting this organization to other people, because I think within academia and also more broadly in feminism, finding your tribe - your group is critical to keep going, because of the labor that you spend in the in the nature of this type of work. You need that support; you need that more collective focus rather than just being an individual working on your own. You want to reach out rather than just stay in your solo, I guess.

**KL:** So I'm curious, Sarah, if there are particular issues within your work with digital feminist activism where you found this kind of organization to be particularly helpful in terms of having that support?

**SC:** I think just asking for opinions, and for support, and to get your work read, and also to share the other way as well, that's been critical. I know that the labor for instigating activists on campaigns such as the ones that I've done, often falls on the - so the labor often falls on the instigating activist. Having an organization like AWGSA and also other more informal feminist networks, is critical to be able to share the load as well. People are often really willing to help and it a provides a greater security in a way, because while the issues aren't just one single individual that we're calling out and it’s more systemic - the structural issues that we need to address, I think having an organization like AWGSA where you can go to for resources - you can go to - us for help with your work. That's absolutely critical. But also in terms of running campaigns, not the AWGSA runs activist campaigns per say, but having an organization such as AWGSA to give you a hand, or to suggest, or to look at our reading list, to look at what sort of research is coming out of those organizations, that's absolutely critical.

**KL:** I'm wondering Sarah, If you can talk a little bit more about this labor that you're referencing and giving - give us some examples of what does this look like in the midst of a campaign? And especially if you're kind of trying to do this on your own, I would imagine having those support networks is going to be really key.

**SC:** Yeah it is, because there's an intense engendered and specific form of ad hominem attack that occurs against feminists, particularly in the digital space. There's new ways to abuse people, I guess - there's new ways to troll, and it's often delivered online and in social media through what Australian academic, Emma Jane, would call e-bile. And so that's one of the big concerns. There have been changes though. I think there is some slow attitudinal changes starting to happen, but a lot of the time when you're doing activism, he labor does fall on one or two activists. So I'm really loving the fact that Me Too is around, and that we've seen this greater velocity happening and more people willing to help and be involved in that labor. So campaigns are, I would argue becoming more collective now.

**KL:** So when you think about one of these campaigns, can you describe what it would look like? I think some people might not quite know what this means to do a kind of digital campaign. What would be involved in that?

**SC:** Okay. So like I said earlier, it's not just one thing, so it wouldn't just be an event. What you do, or what I would do and what I have done, is create a communication plan, and often times you're not really sure how it's going to play out. You're not really sure if something will go on a particular way, so you might start a petition, you might push that through your - your Facebook friends group, you might go on to Twitter and do a hashtag for the campaign which would group them all together, but you'd add other hashtags in there. You might run hashtag feminist activism, and then other feminists from around the world might get on it. Often times I ask to celebrities to retweet. I ask people who've got larger profiles in myself to retweet a particular petition or a campaign. You might write letters to politicians that group them all under that one particular hashtag and keep it going. Sometimes I'll do things like start a t-shirt shop online or a tote bag shop online with the slogans of the campaign, and then we'll make money and donate that to a rape crisis center, for example. They're the sorts of things that you do. You're doing multiple actions at once that while you may have a communication plan that says, “Okay on this day we're going to do this” often times things happen, and you can't control it. So it's a little bit ad hoc, I guess, that you're going to have to just - just go with it and see what's happening. What's getting the most attention at a particular time? But I think also having petition platforms like Change.org to help you - that can also be really positive because there's a greater security there in the numbers, but they're - that's fraught as well. I won’t go into that today.

**KL:** So Sarah, this is a really good concrete example of the amount of labor that goes into these campaigns. I'm curious where you think, and maybe where you have learned the skills of doing these campaigns, because obviously there are several different skill sets involved with doing a communication plan, thinking about the different kinds of actions that might be the most effective given the context of a particular situation. If there are people listening who are thinking, “This is interesting to me. I think I might want to become more involved in this” how did you kind of pick up these skills and figure out how to run these kinds of digital feminist activism campaigns?

**SC:** So I think I'm - because I'm very passionate around feminism, it's - it's something that I would just do, but I'm also a communication - my research is in communication and media studies. I taught communication plans at a Master's level for several years, so I was practicing doing this within my work as well, but I think a lot of the time it's trial and error. Perhaps you could be mentored by somebody who's done a lot of this. Reach out to a feminist that does it, reach out and say, “Could you help show me?” I have a small group through Facebook, a few hundred people, where young feminists come on board and they share information now. That's called Feministers. And - and also like just helping other people, mentoring other people, but to learn the skills, maybe do a communication degree, that's always really helpful. Social media and communication together, but how do you do that in terms of social justice issue? That's often learned by trial and error.

**KL:** So Sarah…

**SC:** Or people can do a Ph.D. with me if they want.

**KL:** Well, we will definitely link to information in the show notes so people can track you down if they're interested in learning more about working with you. I mean, I think Sarah, the way that you've described your work, it is so kind of inherently political with the activism pieces you're looking at and also the *Real Stories of Country Women* project. I'm curious if there are any challenges to having your research work be so inherently political.

**SC:** Okay. So one of the particular challenges would be with online trolling. Like I said before, there are specific gendered ad hominem attacks that occur to feminists in these spaces, but I think anytime you name yourself as a feminist you will be seen as what Sarah Ahmed calls a ‘feminist killjoy.’ So when you're a feminist killjoy, you don't even have to - she says you don't even have to say anything to be seen as causing the problem. So the cause of the eye roll, I guess. So it's part of you. It's part of you and you know when you're doing this sort of work that it's going to be tricky and it's going to be hard. I guess for me, the point is how do you keep going when there are problems? When you don't even have to be seen as anything. You don't even have to speak to be seen as the problem as a feminist. So how do you keep going? I keep going because I want to see change.

**KL:** Well Sarah, this has been such an inspiring conversation. I want to thank you again so much for coming on the show and taking time to share a little bit more about your work.

**SC:** Thank you so much, Katie! Been lovely to chat to you.

**KL:** Thanks also to our listeners for joining us for this week's episode of “Research in Action”. I'm Katie Linder, and we'll be back next week with a new episode.

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