

## Online Campaigning on Social Media to Improve the Status of Girls: Some Revelations

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### Abstract

The new media technologies have shown rapid technological advancements over the years, in the creation and exchange of information in different spheres of interpersonal communication. These technologies have become an essential in the lives of a vast majority of people popularizing the new age trends on the internet such as emails, blogs, social networking, e-news, e-commerce and many others. Social media is an application of internet and new media technologies that has brought people closer to one another transgressing geographical and time barriers; transforming the interpersonal communication value-added with features like cost-effectiveness, time-saving, user friendly, faster communication, accessible and far reaching. Social media enables non-profits, civil society organizations and independent activists and campaigners to form communities and networks, bringing in a conducive environment for targeted social communication widely. Non-profits and independent activists and campaigners acknowledge social media for its broad spectral utilities with its affordability and accessibility features making it an enabling medium for effective communication. This paper displays an understanding of the application of social media and its various types, and their potential use by civil society organizations and individuals for bringing about social change to address the existing gender inequalities and discriminatory practices. It examines its effectiveness as a tool for online campaigning, and deliberates on the role of social media to engage in online campaigning towards efforts to change social institutions to improve the status of girls and women.

**Keywords:** *Social media; online campaigning; gender equality*

### Introduction

***An Introduction to social media and online campaigning:*** Technology molds the communication media, shaping the world of communications today and in the future (Cambié & Ooi, 2009). New media technologies have illustrated rapid technological advancements over the years, playing a conspicuous role in the creation and exchange of information. These technologies have progressively established themselves to evidently influence many facets of public and private life including culture, media, entertainment, politics and activism. The internet and the mobile phones are ubiquitous and essential in our modern urban lives (Allison, 2013), leading to the increasing popularity of new age trends on the internet such as emails, blogs, social networking, e-news, e-commerce and many others. Non-profits, civil society organizations and independent activists and campaigners, too, have stated to acknowledge social media as a tool for campaigning. The

online campaigning is also known as digital activism/campaigning.

Internet has been extensively used for disseminating information, knowledge, ideas and messages; transcending geographic, cultural, and social barriers (Allison, 2013). It supports a broad array of opportunities to communicate information ranging from: one-to-one a-synchronic; many-to-many asynchronous; one-to-one or one-to-few synchronous; to one-to-many a-synchronous, providing a platform for online engagement and interpersonal communication enabling its users in huge numbers to create and share thoughts and stories; information and multimedia content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

The term 'social media' refers to the use of web-based and mobile technologies to turn communication into an interactive dialogue in the form of e-magazines, internet forums, blogs and social networking sites; brought people closer to one another transgressing geographical and

time barriers. It is transforming the way groups communicate the many social tools that are available today are very cost-effective compared to traditional approaches such as email and online advertising (Brussee & Hekman, 2009). Social media enables individuals and groups form communities and networks, bringing in a conducive environment for targeted social communication.

A digital activism campaign is "an organized public effort, making collective claims on a target authority, in which civic initiators or supporters use digital media." [1] Research has started to address specifically how activist/advocacy groups in the U.S. [2] and Canada [3] are using social media to achieve digital activism objectives.

**Status of girls in Indian society:** The term 'status' encompasses in itself the notions, rights and obligations of superiority and inferiority in terms of power, authority and grading. In the context of status of girls in India, it implies her position in particular subsystem in society. Her rights, privileges and their determination, her access to power and authority, the state of her position when compared to that of boys, manifests her status of in that particular society.

The status of girls and women is the yardstick for assessing the standard of culture of any age of any nation. One way to judge the state of a nation is to study the status of its girls and women. The term, status has now come to be a synonym for any 'position in the social system'. Girls face discrimination with deep rooted causes and grave consequences. Deeply revered social institutions – societal norms, codes of conduct, laws and tradition – cause gender discrimination. Examples include harmful socio-cultural practices, unequal inheritance rights, obstacles to free movement and early, family-imposed marriages of teenagers.

On comparison to boys' position, Indian girls and women have always occupied a status inferior to them because Indian society has always been dominated by males, placing the girls in subordinate position. She has always been looked down and has been treated as inferior to man in matters of rights and privileges.

Online campaigning involves strong actions in support of or in opposition to an issue of interest to girls and women. It specifically involves

vigorous engagement directed towards bringing about a targeted political, social or economic change in the society from the face-to-face conversations to massive protests, from principled behavior to the unscrupulous, from polite requests to objectionable interference, and from peaceful protests to violent attacks (Svirsky, 2010). In most developing countries like India, cultural practices, traditions, customs and social norms hold the keys to understanding the roots of gender discrimination. The knowledge of the sources and the depth of discrimination is needed to address the inequalities issues.

For activists of women's issues and concerns, social media offers much more than traditional media; is virtually free of cost, has wider reach that allows activists to target more people giving voice to those who otherwise might not have had one. It provides a platform for online sharing of knowledge and information among the different groups of women activists to improve interpersonal communication among heterogeneous groups.

This paper displays an understanding of the application of social media and its various types, and their potential use by civil society organizations and individuals for bringing about social change to address the existing gender inequalities and discriminatory practices. It examines its effectiveness as a tool for online campaigning, and deliberates on the role of social media to engage in online campaigning towards efforts to change social institutions to improve the status of girls and women.

### Methodology

The study, exploratory in nature, looks at the phenomenon of online campaigning using social media; and focuses on its application different forms of social media including social networking websites and blogs for online activism on a issues and concerns related to gender - political, economic and social aspects. The information has been acquired through the document review and analysis of secondary sources of information including websites, government reports and other existing scholarly work done in the area of the study.

The literature review on social media has shown that the social media has six distinct types - collaborative projects, blogs and micro-blogs, content communities, social networking sites,

virtual game worlds, and virtual communities (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). For the purpose of this study, only social networking sites were considered for the study of the above campaigns as these are then most popular online tools with more than 74% online adult users' (Pew Research Center, 2014). The leading social networking websites - Facebook and Twitter have more than 1.32 billion (Facebook Inc., 2014) and 271 million monthly active users worldwide (Twitter Inc., 2014) respectively.

## Findings And Discussions

### I. Understanding of social media in the context of campaigning

We are living in the midst of a social media revolution and it is more than obvious that social media is being used extensively for the purpose of interpersonal and group communication (Nielsen, 2011).

Social media is a relatively recent phenomenon of mass-communication intended for individuals' interaction and conversations (Svirsky, 2010). It is a media for social interaction, a superset beyond social communication; where the term Social refers to the instinctual needs humans to connect with other humans since the beginning of the history. Media on the other hand, is a form of one-to-many communication (Brussee & Hekman 2009), which refers to the technologies used to connect humans; they can be in the form of drums, bells, written words, the telegraph, the telephone, radio, television, the new media technologies such as e-mail, web sites, images, audio, video, mobile phones, or text messaging.

Boyd (2008) described social media as an umbrella term, referring to a set of tools, services, and applications that allowed people to interact with one another using networked technologies encompassing groups, online communities, peer-to-peer and media-sharing, and online gaming along with instant messaging, blogging, micro-blogging, forums, email, virtual worlds, texting, and social network sites that support one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many interactions. These technologies initiate sociological change where the users contribute to blog posts and twitter messages, updating their profiles on Facebook and MySpace, asking and answering questions on online forums (Brussee & Hekman 2009).

**Characteristics of social media:** Mayfield (2007) defined social media as a collection of

new forms of online media, which share most or all of the following characteristics: participation, openness, conversationalist, commonality, and connectedness. The term openness used by Mayfield, referring to social openness, the public nature of social media as a mass medium is observed. Openness, in terms of the economic costs, social media is relatively free of charge for the participants. The high accessibility as a prerequisite for participation is the precise description of the openness of social media.

Social media actively engages with communities or group with a centered ideology affiliation; which could be an outcome of commonness in social attributes such as age, sex region, caste, culture, traditions, and values; or like-mindedness by means of ideas, interests, attitudes, knowledge and practices. The desire to be affiliated to a group is an instinctual characteristics of human beings, and communication inclines at strengthening the adherence to a group, the use of social media for creating and nourishing a community is common occurrence. An important characteristic of social media is that it is a communication medium playing an important role in the existence of conversations. (Boyd, 2008). Its use requires minimal effort by the audience making it a near hassle free and non-technical for users to engage aiding to a favorable inter-personal communication environment. From the point of view of this paper, social media is simply well suited for communication with and within all social groups. A group can be a formally organized number of people or simply people who identify with similar values or who have a common interest or experience.

**Types of social media:** Social media can take many different forms, including internet forums, blogs, podcasts, audio-video content sharing interface and social networking. By applying a set of theories in the field of media research (social presence, media richness) and social processes (self-presentation, self-disclosure) Kaplan and Heinlein (2010) created a classification scheme for different social media types according to which there are six different types of social media as described below under collaborative projects, blogs and micro-blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual communities.

Social media can be classified on the basis of two key elements- social presence / media

richness and self-presentation / self-disclosure (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). Social media tools used these days include blogs, picture-sharing, wall-postings, email, instant messaging, music-sharing, crowd-sourcing, and voice over IP have been integrated via social network aggregation platforms to improve inter-service user activities and enrich user experiences.

## II. Online campaigning through social media

Campaigning through social media, is associated with the application of communication tools, by people. Social media may make the task of communicating information easier, but an important aspect of motivating social change is organizing and convincing people through mass appeal, that their participation is what really makes a difference (Papic & Noonan, 2011). It is much more penetrative compared to any other communication media due to its worldwide reach, enormous popularity and mass-acceptance, innovation and resourcefulness, easy access, user-friendliness and cost effectiveness, encouraging not just the businesses but also non-profits and activist, who have acknowledge the potential of social media to bring about change in the society (Svirsky, 2010). As a result, anything that trends through social media cannot go unnoticed by Internet users. It is these benefits of social media that have encouraged the adoption of social media by not just the business enterprises for profits but also by non-profits and activist who have acknowledge the potential of social media to bring about change in the society (Brussee & Hekman, 2009).

Social media can be used to influence change in a variety of different ways, from shifting individual behavior to increasing an individual's commitment to voting. Studies have shown that activists who use social media for social change can form online group for people to join, keep group members informed about events and news, plan online and off-line meetings; easily, effectively at very low costs compared to conventional methods of recruiting, training and organizing groups (Papic & Noonan, 2011; Svirsky, 2010).

The role of social media in forming online groups and organizing off-line movements by individual activists and civil society organizations has been observed in various social movements all over the world, and the same has been detailed in the study to reflect

how some of the campaigns and movements from around the world have evolved using internet and social media, and what has been the role of online tool and social media in encouraging the activities of these campaigns and movements directed towards a specific outcome of social change.

**Cases of online campaigning on social media for social change:** Social movements and campaigns are not a recent phenomenon and have been happening worldwide much before the penetration of technology specifically internet and mobile phones. When internet diffused into the world, social movements and campaigns began utilizing technology and internet for gathering support and initiating offline activities.

The history of online campaigning can be traced down to late 1990s, during the WTO Ministerial Conference 1999, some NGOs interest groups and individuals organized protests in Seattle against globalization using internet and mobile phones for organizing and coordinating the protest. This was an early incident of how online movements can mobilize people towards the cause and bring about the required change. The *WTO Protests in Seattle* is thus an example of how protests could be organized and coordinated through the use of technologies. As the technological advancements accelerated and social media and social networking emerged out, a lot of campaigners and protesters started utilizing its advantages like speed, wider reach, mass audiences and low cost for organizing campaigns and movements.

Some campaigns and movements that have made use of social media for their movement on a variety of issues are mentioned here. In 2009, an attack on some women outside a pub in Mangalore by group members having different political ideology and calling the women pub goers as loose charactered, the *Pink Chaddi Campaign* took birth. It was organized by a group of women through Facebook; expressing their annoyance to the attack and subsequent threats of marrying off couples caught celebrating Valentine's Day (Cullum, 2010). *Post your bra color* is a breast cancer awareness campaign organized on Facebook by Susan G. Komen Foundation (James, 2010).

*SlutWalk*, an international movement consisting of protest marches and rallies, organized through social networks and groups; called for an end

to rape crime and referring to stop women's dressing and appearance as an excuse to the crime of rape (Carr, 2013). *The One Billion Rising* was a worldwide people's campaign on various social networks highlighting the issue of violence against women, rise for justice and promoting gender equality worldwide (Enslar, 2013). The brutal gang rape of a paramedic student in Delhi on the December 16, 2012 led to a series of mass protests collectively termed as the *Anti-rape Protests*, which were organized both online through social networking websites as well as offline in the form of marches, demonstrations and violent protests by NGOs, interest groups and students in India expressing their anger to the incident. *Ring the Bell* (also called *Bell Bajao!*), a campaign calling out to the boys and men in the society to ring the bell and stop domestic violence (Breakthrough, 2013). *Board the Bus*, a campaign on women safety targeted the issues of harassment and eve teasing faced by women while travelling through public transport (Breakthrough, 2013). Both *Ring the Bell* and *Board the Bus* have been active on the social networking websites and run through a dedicated website of Breakthrough, a non-profit working on the issues of violence against women, women rights and HIV/AIDS.

These campaigns have covered a wide spectrum of violence against women and girls related issues. The campaigns that used Facebook for organizing, coordinating and discussing their focus area resulting in movement have been *Pink Chaddi Campaign 2009*, *Post your bra Color Campaign 2010*, *Arab Spring Revolution 2010*, *One Billion Rising 2011*, *Anti-rape Protests in India 2012*, *Ring the Bell Campaign 2013* and *Board the Bus 2014*. These campaigns have used Facebook to achieve their campaign goals, it has also been observed that Facebook has been a support tool strategically used to reach mass audiences and achieve the desired outcome.

The paper reflects that mobile phones have been an important tool in coordinating the offline activities for the campaigns and movements including protests, marches and demonstrations. The campaigners and protesters communicated with each other during on field activities as observed in the case of *WTO Protests in Seattle 1999*, and *Anti-rape Protests in India 2012*.

Bloggging, an activity which uses social media, was used in some of the movements and online campaigns. *Anti-rape Protests in India 2012*

have been the movements that used blogs more for discussing the issue and the campaigns and not for organizing the movements.

The phenomenon of engaging in campaigning through the use of social media has evolved and has presented itself as a modern means to bring people together to support the activities that could bring in a progressive change in the lives of the people and lobby for issues and causes that people think can affect progress. Social media has evolved over the years to become a well-established world-wide communication media. It can, in aspects that provoke social, cultural, or political changes, bring in the desired change in the society and the world as a whole. The ability to disseminate and share information, knowledge, ideas and messages transcending geographic, cultural, and social barriers, can make social media an effective tool for campaigning triggering social change.

### Conclusion

Social media, a continuously evolving medium of communication formed of internet-based applications, facilitates the creation and sharing of messages, pictures, and videos and information by its users. The features of social media such as its openness, its availability at low running costs, worldwide-reach, and dynamicity in accommodating everyday technological advancements, enable its use for campaigning for social causes and on gender related issues. The emergence of social media has changed how people engage with different forms of social media encouraging a conducive environment for social change and greater activism centered on online participation of Internet users.

The role of social media as a tool for social organization, focusing on the application of social media for campaigning with the intent of social change has been reviewed. The campaigns studied highlight the use of internet and social media, specifically Facebook and Twitter, in catalyzing social and public movements and campaigns on a wide array of gender related issues and concerns. Blogs have been used for discussions on various activities of ongoing campaigns and movements and not for organizing and/or coordinating the movements. The accessibility of social media through mobile phones has accelerated mass acceptance and adoption of campaign related causes amongst people all over the world.

Girls face discrimination credited to complex deep-rooted causes and grave consequences. Deeply revered social institutions – societal norms, codes of conduct, laws and tradition – cause gender discrimination. For activists of women's issues and concerns, social media and

online campaigning offers much more than traditional media; primarily its potential to give voice to the voiceless, and wider reach that allows activists to target more people towards efforts to change social institutions to improve the status of girls and women.

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