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**ACTIVISM VIA SOCIAL NETWORKING:  
A CASE STUDY OF  
URBAN INDIAN WOMEN FACEBOOK USERS**

**Paula Ray**

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# ABSTRACT

Several cases of digital activism via social networking sites (SNS) have recently appeared worldwide which specifically address women's issues. These instances point to the fact that women are active on the Internet and use SNSs (such as Facebook) to promote causes and garner support for issues as varied as feminine sexuality, health and social agency. SNS, perhaps for the first time in the history of communication technology, is a communication tool that is used as extensively by women as men. One explanation for this may be found in the chatty nature of interaction that takes place on SNS, amounting to information exchange that verge on gossip but is not thereby less effective for activist purposes. Gossip need not be flippant and spiteful, but can rather gratify the actor and serve her self-interest, which is very similar to her experience when she engages in a quick chat on Facebook, irrespective of where she or her friend is located. Overcoming geographical and temporal limits, SNS as a 'virtual public sphere' facilitates gender-based activism, using tactics akin to the consciousness-raising groups of the second-wave feminist movement. This thesis investigates the uses of SNS by women for political purposes, and asks, first, whether this form of cyber-activism actually has an impact on society and, second, which political issues it is able to address most successfully.

To explore this research question, I take up India as a case study because it is a developing country with a high level of technological penetration, especially amongst the urban populations, boasting the second highest usage of mobile Internet in the world. Even low-end mobile phones are enabled with data access options and SNS can now be accessed in vernacular languages. While digital activism is unfolding in urban India via the mobile Internet, in non-urban areas activists are resorting to simple cellular handsets. Thus, this development in mobile telephony has the potential to overcome the socio-economic and linguistic diversity of the country's population and make SNS available to the masses, which in turn can connect millions of users instantly and efficiently. It is not surprising then that Indian SNS-users are quite active in promoting causes online and garnering public support on socio-economic and political issues.

Along with the theoretical data collected from existing literature, the analysis depends on three sets of empirical data collected for the project. The first set involved conducting interviews with experts who have used SNS in promoting their causes or are observers of digital activism in India. Secondly, a questionnaire was sent to urban Indian women Facebook users between the ages of 18 to 55. Lastly, based on the questionnaire respondents' SNS usage patterns, the top 10 most popular Facebook groups were identified. I became a participant observer of these groups from January 2011 to January 2013, to gauge the interactions among the members within each group. In the analysis, these 10 groups were divided into three categories: consciousness-raising groups, civic awareness groups and groups promoting political participation. The feminist issues raised range from personal issues to formal political concerns.

The recent acceptance of the Anti-Corruption Bill by the Parliament, along with the amendment of the rape laws in a predominantly patriarchal and sexist society, indicates that India is beginning to address some deep-rooted issues of concern, spurred by Facebook activism. These developments also signify a quiet revolution that has been brewing among women digital activists worldwide. This thesis claims that the digital tool of activism has the potential to unite the disparate waves of feminism, and in fact, to herald the beginning of a new wave of the feminist movement, initiated by digital gadget-totting young women as well as men who go online to voice their support.

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In the course of this research, the greatest loss in my personal life was the demise of my father. He did not live to see the completion of this thesis, neither did my mother whose original wish it was that I pursue a doctorate degree. I feel grateful for being able to honour her wish and for this opportunity to write a doctoral thesis. The absence of my parents has been somewhat overcome by my friendship with my sister, Ruby. She had once said: 'I may not always agree with your decisions, but I will always support you with what you do.' She has lived up to her promise and has never failed to show me the light during my most difficult and dark days.

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**Chapter 1**  
**INTRODUCTION**

*It took me quite a long time to develop a voice, and now that I have it, I am not going to be silent.*

- Madeleine Albright, first woman to become US Secretary of State, 1997-2001

In recent years, women have become highly active in building up political communities on the Internet, particularly in the interactive version of information exchange known as Web 2.0 (Knights, 2007). These communities are formed through social networking sites (henceforth referred to as SNS) such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, which are considered to be the most definitive feature of Web 2.0 (Gauntlett and Horsley, 2000). Among other uses, these digital forums have been central to facilitating social activism in cyberspace. According to statistics, Facebook, which is the most popular SNS (Pempek et al, 2009) with a billion active users (Facebook 2013, n.p.), has a substantial number of women users. comScore, a digital business analytics company, released a report in 2010 stating that not only do women outnumber men on cyberspace, but they engage with SNS as their primary online activity, often spending longer hours on browsing through the networks than their male counterparts. This thesis focuses on digital activism among women. Given their high usage, are women SNS users expanding this capacity to digital activism?

A number of international cases have made this gendered shift in digital activism visible. On June 17, 2011, the Women2Drive campaign was launched in Saudi Arabia to protest against the religious ban imposed on women drivers (Al-Shihri, 2011). Dozens of videos surfaced on social networking sites showing local women taking to the wheels of their cars rather than depending on hired drivers or male members of the family to drive them to their destinations. Following this, several women drivers were physically abused for going against Arabic tradition. The campaign was spearheaded by Manal al-Sharif in May 2011, who uploaded a YouTube video of herself taking a test drive, urging women to follow suit. In the video, she says, 'This is a volunteer campaign to help the girls of this country [learn to drive ...]. At least for times of emergency, God forbid. What if whoever is driving them gets a heart attack?' She started a Facebook page called 'Teach me how to drive so I can protect myself', requesting the authorities to lift the ban. Instead, she was detained by the police and

forced to sign an agreement saying she would not drive again. In protest, the Women2Drive campaign took off by forming a Facebook group with the same name, which is now actively gathering comments that pour in continuously from Facebook users across the globe, with the 'likes' accumulating daily. Till January 2014, the 'likes' on this Facebook group were at 18,816.

On September 30, 2008, in a breakthrough case of digital activism in the US, mothers responded to what they considered to be an offensive online and print advertisement launched by Johnson & Johnson so strongly that the company was forced to withdraw its advertisement before the end of the week, with the marketing vice president issuing a public apology over the weekend for hurting the sentiments of young mothers. The protest was against an advertisement for a pain-killer called Motrin aimed at mothers who carry their babies in slings. The advertisers referred to the practice as a fashion statement made at the cost of suffering from back pain. This offended the mothers and they started a campaign on Twitter with the hashtag #MotrinMoms (Petrecca, 2008). The campaign gathered momentum so fast that the product company did not even have time to react before it spiralled out of control.

On February 5, 2009, the Pink Chaddi campaign launched in India found an expression for the nationwide outrage against Shri Ram Sene, an extremely conservative Hindu political group, when their activists beat up a group of young women at a Mangalorean pub. The Hindu group claimed that women who wear western clothes and drink alcohol at pubs violate Indian tradition. By coincidence, a local journalist, Nisha Susan, was also present at the incident. She decided to set up a Facebook group called 'The Consortium of Pubgoing, Loose, and Forward Women', and urged women to gift pink *chaddis* (panties) to Pramod Mutalik, who heads the political group, to stop him from disrupting forthcoming Valentine's Day celebrations (Mishra, 2009). It became so successful that today it is considered one of the best examples of digital activism in India. It brought together Indian women from across the world to take collective action (Banerji, 2010; Hariche, Loiseau and MacErlaine, 2011), using social media tools.

Several such cases of digital activism via SNS, affecting the political status quo worldwide, give credence to the fact that women are active on internet, and they use SNS to promote causes and garner support for political, social and economic issues. This has been facilitated by a sudden surge in 'prosumer'-generated (Comor, 2011) content on SNS like YouTube and Facebook, often also referred to as citizen journalism. Either in textual, audio or video format, these tend to be amateur compositions which serve as a primary source of

information to outsiders, frequently about conflict-ridden regimes, and go viral within hours of being uploaded or remediated. Thus, this mode of communication technology facilitates the pattern of information spread and creates awareness about a certain cause. But do these instances of protest via SNS only serve the purpose of making some noise and generating furore before the ‘prosumers’ move on to the next cause, or are the effects more lasting? Can such cases of digital activism be referred to as political, and on what grounds? More importantly, what is the possible impact of such protests on society or on those who read the posts and simply ‘like’ them? These are some of the questions I will attempt to explore in this thesis.

### WHEN POLITICAL ACTIVISM IS DIGITALLY-MEDIATED

Although the term *politics* refers in general to strategic acts of power play within formal institutions in the public sphere, it is found in every aspect of life: within the family, at home, at the workplace, and in social settings. It operates at all levels at which resources are produced, organised and distributed, and regulators of any sort seek to have control over such processes. They exercise control publicly through formal institutions like the state governing body, religious organisations, bureaucracies, universities as well as trade unions. Control can also be exercised at an informal and personal level within the family and other intimate relations. In a broad sense, politics can be best understood as all acts of “cooperation and conflict, within and between societies”(Leftwich, 2010, p.11) whereby each actor is looking after his/ her own interest “to maximise their benefits and minimise their costs [...]choosing between particular courses of action aimed at achieving desired ends” (Leftwich, 2004, p.7). These end-benefits, even though everyone desires the best and the most, are to be equitably distributed according to the efforts each actor puts into building the society they inhabit. But given that resources are limited, it turns out that the competition for the best and biggest, or even a sufficiently justified, share leads to power play among the actors, some of whom might join hands to operate as a team. Every act of cooperation and conflict in a society determines the power relations that operate within it. These relations then determine who controls the production of resources, the system of distribution and redistribution, and the structures of power and decision-making, which in turn are fundamental to the organisation of society, culture and ideology, as well as the history of technology, social behaviours and value systems.



Similarly, a family is organised by power relations and follows certain rules when it comes to dispensing members' income, procuring their food, and determining the role and responsibility of each family member. The family member who decides on habitation, distributes household chores and/or determines who will look after children is engaging in politics, because the other family members recognise this person's authority to make a decision on these aspects of their lives. They owe allegiance to these decisions, but at the same time the expectation of allegiance to authority may lead to conflict. The power play operates via the internal systems of production, distribution and expectation within the family, which is based on the socio-cultural beliefs of its members. In this way, people engage with politics as they go about "obtaining, using, producing and distributing resources in the course of the production and reproduction of [...their] social and biological life" (Leftwich, 2010, p.11). Politics, therefore, defines the basic characteristics of all human associations, whether at the micro or macro levels of social organisation. It is inevitable and inescapable whenever decisions in a group have to be made.

The exercise of politics can be made democratic and just if politicians show accountability for their actions and decisions, and if they find ways to mitigate their own power by promoting wider participation amongst the people. When political power is restricted to the hands of a few, opportunity to participate becomes limited and transparency in decision-making is thereby hindered. Those in power claim to have "political expertise" (Leftwich, 2009, p.267) to take decisions, but this leaves the majority of the people in the dark with regard to the circumstances under which such decisions are taken and the factors that were considered important to come to that conclusion. On the model of the French Revolution in 1789, democratic politics was designed to provide equal representation in the decision-making process to each of the four estates: the legislative (to make laws and policies), the executive (to execute the policies), the judiciary (to review laws and policies) and the press or media (to mediate between the three estates and the people). If each of these estates has an equal opportunity to voice their opinion, then decisions affecting all can be made together to create an equal society. A representative democracy is aimed at "linking citizens and the state", and it is essential to facilitate "bargaining among multiple interest groups" (Norris, 2008, p.5). That way the four estates can each safeguard their own interests and together arrive at a decision that is beneficial to all; this improves the opportunity to participate and promotes transparency in decision-making.

The tenets of formal politics can also be applied to the private sphere of social life, in which most people share resources unwittingly. People often engage with politics “accidentally” and find “that they have transgressed regulatory codes of personality and self” (Jordan, 2002, p.154). Jordan refers to these accidental acts as “pleasure-politics” (ibid.), because such small actions may be undertaken for pleasure but often have repercussions that are as deep as formal political acts. For instance, discussing the style fashions of popular characters from television shows or even the decisions taken by these characters at certain junctures of the narrative may appear to be trivial talk, but these discussions can define the political identity of the people concerned because by expressing their views they are making a political statement, which makes them a part of a community that thinks along the same lines. This can be referred to as small-‘p’ politics, as opposed to the formal big-‘P’ politics of regimes and electoral systems. This project engages mainly with the former. The everyday political issues that Facebook-mediated activism deals with, especially with regard to the personal matters that women discuss, can probably be termed small-‘p’ politics, just as the category of feminism can be regarded with a small-‘f’. As the second-wave feminists insisted, however, these personal issues in the lives of women can have potentially profound political outcomes.

*Political activism* is an act designed to challenge the existing power relations, and occurs usually in solidarity with like-minded others as a collective action. But how does a crowd coming out of a theatre differ from an activist group? Jordan (2002) defines political activism as “a sense of solidarity in pursuit of transgression” (p.12). This definition combines the acts of ‘solidarity’ and ‘transgression’, both mediated by interaction among the activists. In taking up solidarity through transgression, people come together to form a protest group because they recognise each other’s frustration with a particular issue, along with the desire to progress to a social situation that transgresses the status quo. Similarly, the group of people inside a theatre have a sense of shared purpose, which gives them an identity. What distinguishes activists from ordinary viewers is the fact that the latter leave the theatre at the end of the show and walk out of the building in the direction of the ‘exit’ sign, irrespective of where it might lead them to. The activists, in contrast, challenge this normatively accepted path and demand an alternative route that is convenient for the people of their collective. They seek to change the normative social organisation in such a way that every person has a share of the resources, the portion of which is justified by their legitimate efforts to operate as a constructive member of the society.

The history of activism can be traced through three phases of evolution (Jordan, 2002). In the first phase, a host of activist movements accompanied the Industrial Revolution to address issues of suffrage, slavery, labour unrest and dictatorship versus democracy. This resulted in international conflicts that redefined territorial boundaries and cultural conflicts that developed national cultures. The second phase of activist movements was mainly focussed on class struggles, with the Bolshevik Revolution opening the door to political activism based on class relations. The New Social Movements heralded the third phase in the 1960s with feminism, anti-racism and environmentalism as some of the topics advocated by activists. Class conflicts, which included struggles against economic and socio-cultural differences, gradually began to expand to address “gender, racial, sexual or other oppression” (ibid., p.31) by the 1970s. Popular political activism around this time still “saw class as the primary political determinant [but] acknowledged many different political struggles as of equal importance” (ibid., p.32). Political activism in this way transgressed the boundaries of formal politics to include issues of concern in the private lives of people, which collectively applies to all whatever their socio-economic situation and cultural perspective.

*Activism* can be defined as an amalgamation of several acts - namely protest, resistance, dissent and rebellion (Hands, 2011) – aimed at tilting the power balance in favour of those who lack power. When we articulate our displeasure at an occurrence on the basis of an injustice being done, or in other words on the basis of our ideological evaluation of what justice means, then it is an act of protest. As such, protest is strongly opinionated by nature as well as aspirational in its anti-normative aims. Resistance takes place when we prevent events judged to be unjust from taking place by obstructing their operation or even by refusing to take part in the normative social construct. This is suggestive of a focused and active, but obstinate approach. Dissent, on the other hand, is expression of dissatisfaction that occurs within the limits of democratic practices; it is “designed to engage with and draw opinion from a body of citizens” (ibid., p.4). It is, moreover, dialogic in nature; an act of dissent may not produce an immediate change to the existing circumstances other than drawing out opinions from the citizens. In comparison, rebellion involves a more proactive stance, bordering on defying the establishment and, as a consequence, being unlawful.

Both dissent and resistance come with the similar objective of protesting against an event or social condition. But resistance is a “stubborn approach” (ibid.), often backed up by force “implicitly or explicitly” (ibid.), which may defy authority and become unlawful. Tilly (1978) asserts that democratisation actually limits effective popular collective action because

democratic institutions inhibit violent popular rebellions. In this sense, resistance is one step ahead of dissent; while the former is often aggressive and visible, the latter is often not so apparent compared to the creative ways in which resistance engages in to express protest. Sustained engagement with dissent can produce potentially effective results. But when the creativity of resistance aims at transforming the beliefs and behaviours of the people concerned by actively or even violently countering the existing circumstances, protest takes the form of rebellion. Activism, in essence, is a spectrum of actions that stretches from mild forms of dissent to intense and potential violent acts of rebellion.

An activist movement covers the entire trajectory, beginning with protest and often culminating in a rebellious act. Broadly speaking, activism seeks solidarity, equality and freedom from existing unfavourable circumstances. A rebellious act – often successfully culminating in a revolution – aims at dissolving existing power relations. As John Holloway (2002, p.17) argues, “[I]f we revolt against capitalism, it is not because we want a different system of power, it is because we want a society in which power relations dissolve”. Activism, in this sense, strives to achieve a social system that ensures equal access to resources for everybody and “justice as fairness” (Rawls, 1958, p.164) when it comes to the distribution of those resources. Activism, however, does not limit itself to protesting against the dominating and exploitative effects of institutional authority, but is also applicable to dissentious acts against personal, domestic or social relations of “micro-power” (Hands, 2011, p.5). The latter form of activism, in due course, has the potential to become a formal act of protest against institutional forms of domination, if successfully channelled through the progressive stages of an activist movement. This is how small-‘p’ politics may graduate to address a more formal big-‘P’ political cause.

When the four stages of protest, resistance, dissent and rebellion are facilitated by digital tools of communication, this is referred to as *digital activism*. McCaughey and Ayers, however, point out that “[t]echnology is hardly new to activists” (2003, p. 4). Historically, activists have always adopted new technologies within their protest ecology. Be it the printing press, newspapers, radio, telephone, television or even film-making, activists have utilised each communication technology to spread the word of their movement and raise awareness about particular issues to encourage participation in social movements. In fact, with each technological advance, the activist tools have become more user-friendly and each technology has been used by both the perpetrator and the activist in similar ways. While dictatorial regimes used the radio to broadcast politically hegemonic messages to the masses,

activists used the same radio to transmit audio messages from popular leaders directly to the people, while the television added visual images to these voices, which often made the messages even more powerful. This did not mean that activists gave up on real-life meetings with the supporters of the cause. But the Internet, as a digital technology, brought with it an accessibility that was unprecedented. It is “more immediate than a daily newspaper” and “more interactive than TV” (ibid.). It is this immediacy and interactivity that has made communication via digital technology “transspatial” and “multilateral” (ibid., p.5), which in turn helps connect a larger number of participants with like-minded activists than in previous eras.

The structure of digital technology aids in creating a “snowball effect” (Hands, 2011, p.3) of the communication process and the accumulated power of the collective has deeper potential to reach out to a higher number of supporters. More interesting is the fact that real-life face-to-face interaction is no longer a requirement, as the Internet, particularly SNS, facilitates communication without the physical presence of “voices, faces, and bodies” (McCaughey and Ayers, 2003, p.5). In this way, activist messages traverse spatial and temporal boundaries, simplifying entry to the four stages of activism – protest, resistance, dissent and rebellion - and thereby reducing the turnaround time required to organise a movement. The fusing of time and space, in turn, strengthens participation and organisation – the two pillars that determine the success of an activist cause.

## CHANGES IN THE COMMUNICATION CULTURE OF ACTIVISTS

In this thesis, I have narrowed my focus on cyber-world inhabitants to the SNS users, particularly those on Facebook, who are connected by their “social identity” (Wellman, 2001, p.228), which is in turn enhanced by their online presence. As SNS-users, they “engage in supportive and sociable relationships” with their peers “and imbue their activity online with meaning, belonging and identity” (ibid., p.229), which extends to the real world they live in. The social identity of an SNS user becomes their political identity, enacted in part whenever they ‘like’ or ‘share’ a friend’s post on Facebook. It acts as an acknowledgement of the message and extends the demand of support for the cause. Craig Calhoun (1994) refers to ‘identity’ as “personal self-recognition” (p.20) as well as recognition by others, because “nonrecognition” (ibid.) is born out of the politics of repression. An actor is relegated to insignificance in such a power play, because by not recognising a person’s contribution to society it is easier to usurp his/ her share of the resources. Rosalind Brunt (1989, p.151)

defines *political identity* as “politics whose starting point is about recognising the degree to which political activity and effort involves a continuous process of making and remaking ourselves – and ourselves in relation to others.” By expressing an opinion, for instance, or ‘liking’ a post, an SNS user makes a choice that could reflect his/her political preferences and this conscious effort or act of political identity distinguishes the user from the ‘others’. In other words, it gives the user an identity as a member of a community. Thus, a pleasurable act on an online forum could potentially come with political consequences.

It helps that in the “wired suburb” (Wellman, 2001, p.236), which is often restricted to urban areas, there is no need to boot up the computer each time to connect, making cyberspace and SNS pages in particular a convenient place to access updated information which can be re-shared by a quick touch of a digital key, even from the mobile phone. In most cases, this is a much faster, and often more convenient, mode of information exchange than physically walking up to the neighbour’s door in the real-world suburb to share the same information. SNS communication is making information broadly accessible and the interactivity of this technology has increased the speed of information flow as never before. Nearly 20 years ago Fang claimed that “[t]he Internet is exploding” (1997, p.xv), and over the years this increasing accessibility and interactivity has resulted in an information revolution that is taking place not only because of the interactive messages of SNS users, but also due to the advancement of other technologies like the blog spaces that are making almost every user a creative publisher, or the increased number of videos shot by amateur film-makers and the evolution of computer software that is gradually making physical libraries obsolete. With the invention of every new means of communication technology, society has undergone some form of information revolution. But the information revolution initiated by the Internet, especially SNS, has been as sudden as it has been thorough. The media consumption, as well as production, habits of SNS users have become an integral part of the currently changing society.

If we look back at history, technology has always had an intimate relationship with those in power. The Industrial Revolution spearheaded a host of inventions with regard to communication technologies, including photography, the telegraph, phonograph, telephone, typewriter, television, radio and cinema. Each one of these technologies not only contributed to the knowledge enrichment of those who had the socio-economic power to possess the tool, but also tilted the power balance in favour of those who had access. The “Information Highway” (Fang, 1997, p.xvii), however, takes this one step further because it is born out of

the convergence of communication technologies, for instance, the camera, radio and basic email services. This has resulted in radical and wider changes in the information consumption patterns of SNS users as well as the ability to participate in information distribution (ibid). The relatively easy and affordable access to converged communication has lead SNS activists to harness its effectiveness in challenging power imbalances by diffusing information monopolies.

As Jordan (2013, n.p) notes, “[i]nformation has become a politics, not just a political issue.” Information, via SNS like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, not only flows in favour of the oppressed to democratise access to power, but also flows in the other direction from the activists to the authorities and back again. This is how in 2011-12, information not only helped topple totalitarian regimes but also equipped the corrupt political powers with the ability to lash out at the activists during the Iranian uprising as well as the Arab Spring (Al Jazeera, 2011). The same can be said of the counter drive launched by Sri Ram Sena activists against the Pink Chaddi campaign, called Pink Condom campaign (Dudeja, 2013), which posted comments on Facebook such as, ‘Go and enjoy in pubs, but do not forget to use the pink condom sent to you guys’. In this case, SNS was used by both the activists for the cause as well as the counter-activists. But the success of counter-activism in these cases was diminished by the limitations in the ability of the counter-activists to use technology to mobilise the people.

Mobilising the masses to support a cause was the prime objective of social movements in the 1970s and '80s. The strategy of “resource mobilization” (Young, 1997, p.148) involved both economic resources to sustain the campaign and media exposure as well as reliable networks to refine the organisation. But the New Social Movement activists, who had already started gathering steam since the 1960s, laid emphasis on the socio-psychological processes involved in the mobilization of resources. They were interested in finding “what motivates actors envisioning alternative forms of selfhood/ subjectivity and identity as the means to transform society through cultural changes rather than specific kinds of legislation” (Langman, 2013, p.511). There were concerned primarily with “identity, culture, and meaning” or the philosophy of lifestyle, because they believed that it is “the transformation of identity [that] becomes the basis of subsequent social transformation” (ibid., p.510). Once the people are given a basis for their political identity, by raising their awareness about a certain social issue, they potentially become agents of socio-political change.

Computer-mediated communication plays a key role not only in promoting the activist cause to raise resources, but also in the formation of a political identity, by building up effective information networks that help deliver the message efficiently and directly into the recipient's SNS inbox. What makes this effective is not just the speed at which it is delivered, but the negligible cost incurred to reach a variety of networks composed of equally varied users, adding diversity to the recipients' list. This reach of SNS-mediated activism is what makes the communication tool political, because its efficiency in information delivery often makes it difficult to prevent information flows from reaching the people. The interactivity of this technology usually finds a way to ensure feedback, based on which the activists can improve their strategies for better mobilisation of participants and subsequent organisation of the movement.

With the advent of the SNS, activism is therefore not limited to just 'acting' on an issue. It is equally important for activists to communicate or mediate the message behind every 'act' (Myers, 1994) on the interactive platform, to impress upon and influence the political identity of the participants. Not only have the exposure levels of SNS users increased, but with it their assessment capability has also become more refined and discerning. This new-found awareness prompts them to look for very different qualities in their leaders than they did in the past. When the first political debate was aired on American television during the 1960s presidential election campaign, it dramatically changed the results of the poll, which tilted in favour of John F Kennedy as opposed to Richard Nixon. Druckman (2003) writes that while Kennedy looked like a 'bronze beauty' because of his newly-acquired tan, Nixon, who was recovering from a bout of ill health, "looked like death" (ibid., 563). It was also reported that people who had heard only the audio feed of the debate voted largely in favour of Nixon (Druckman, 2003). It appears that it was the power of television that changed the character of electoral politics.

Similarly, the Internet, or SNS in this instance, is pushing the communication between activists and participants towards a political identity formation of the latter "that stresses strong collective group identities as the basis of political analysis and action" (Mandle, n.p). Different media have different means of effecting 'political identity'. In the televised debate between Kennedy and Nixon, it had to do with the power of the image, while the central component to the effectiveness of SNS is its interactivity with like-minded people. A simple SNS post can bring together like-minded people from the farthest corners of the globe whom the SNS user could not have met otherwise in real life. By virtue of their "shared beliefs", the



people form a “collective identity” (Loader, 2008, n.p.). The ease with which information is exchanged among SNS users and the level of interactivity it results in, makes this communication medium democratic and facilitates identity formation.

When an activist message travels through a network of SNS users, it builds up a community “of interpersonal ties” (Wellman, 2001, p.228), a community whose members share similar views on the information being circulated. Freeman (1992) says that even if people form groups of community members who think alike, they operate via networks where the boundaries are porous. This, in turn, facilitates connection across a diverse range of networks that are inhabited by a variety of people who might harbour similar strands of thought. The online ties may include intense connections between close friends as well as weak ties amongst acquaintances. Interaction with such a varied population transmits information through a complex network, where relations “are far-flung, loosely-bounded, sparsely-knit and fragmentary” (Wellman, 2001, p. 227). In due course, this information flow can potentially re-arrange the hierarchy of power-play by redistributing power for particular purposes and equalising discrepancies in the connected world.

In this way, SNS acts as a medium for activism by forming a political community amongst a range of people who were not aware of their potential as activists until they came across an issue via their SNS networks. The message is posted several times through the several networks that they interact with and the multiple posts make the users become ‘like-minded’ as numerous users share the same thing with them. But this community of ‘like-minded’ people is not just about getting the message out there, as the information acquires a certain persuasive spin when it makes its way through SNS networks. The repetitive appearance of the posts on the users’ SNS feed, always in a new micro-community context, also contributes towards influencing the consumer of the message.

## SNS USAGE AND WOMEN

Men and women have different kinds of relationships with the Internet. As a medium, the Internet is “deeply embedded in masculine codes and values” (van Zoonen, 2002, p.6), but as an interactive technology it is “close to the core qualities of femininity” (ibid.). Interactivity, often socially mediated via ‘gossip’ as a form of information exchange, is identified normatively with women (Spacks, 1985). But technology facilitates social shaping as much as the usage of the tool determines the viability of the technology within the society. As such, there is mutual influence between the Internet and gender-specific usage. Although I began

by saying that the way women use the technology of SNS is very different from that of men, it may be more accurate to say that the way each gender uses SNS reflects the way society takes shape around them. Thus, the mutual shaping between SNS and gender usage leads to social shaping.

Socially constructed normative attributes are also associated with each gender, in keeping with the social shaping of the technology. A few decades ago, when the telephone became household equipment, amongst the elite, women would use it to chat and keep in touch with friends and family, and to exchange daily personal experiences as well as the local news. For them it was “a companion in lonely times” (ibid., p.7), but the male-dominated society wrote it off as “one more female foolishness” (Fischer, 1992,p.231). The gendering of telephony continued as the telephone industry recognised women as their prime consumers and tried to target their marketing strategies to cater to the comfort and convenience of this consumer base. Today, the same telephone has gone mobile as a device for social networking. While society considers it to be a tool that helps men with professional networking, women are normatively expected to use the device to continue with their gossip in the virtual world.

Similarly, cyberfeminists consider the connectivity of the digital technology of SNS as a device for empowerment, because “connectivity is at the heart of feminism” (Hawthorne and Klein, 1999, p.5). If SNS has the potential to virtually connect like-minded people across socio-political, economic and cultural divides, then these “virtual kinships” (Gajjala, 2012, p.13) encourage a kind of user participation that foregrounds the exchange of personal experiences around similar struggles or interests. Van Zoonen (2002, p.14) claims that the “communicative, consensual and community-building” features of the Internet aid in the construction of identities. When applied to the communicative features of an SNS like Facebook, users end up interacting with peers across diverse cultures. Communicating a ‘like’ or a ‘comment’ on a post amounts to consent, which in turn lays the basis for a community of like-minded people. By becoming a member of the virtual community, the users acquire an identity that is potentially political in nature. These newly-formed identities, along with the information exchange, come with peer pressure to improve their personal situation to match that of their peers. This urges users to better their personal situation and also provides them with the means to do so, ultimately resulting in changes to the society they inhabit.

The primary reason for choosing Facebook as the preferred SNS for this thesis is because it operates as a relationship-building platform, an act that women are considered socially adept at. Women are said to be “intuitive, holistic, and connected, in contrast to scientific and mathematical thinking, which is also defined as ‘masculine’ in character” (Sapiro, 1998, p.76). Given these factors, quite unsurprisingly, statistics show that Facebook has more women users than men. But what makes such statistics (refer to Chapter 3) interesting is the fact that, for the first time in the history of communication technology, a tool – an SNS platform in this instance – is used more widely by women than by men (comScore, 2010; Haferkamp et al, 2012), making Facebook the uncontested choice of SNS for this research project. It also helps that unlike the telephone, SNS as a technology is more universally accessible across all cultural and socio-economic divides via the mobile internet.

Although ‘gossip’ is normatively considered to be negative, it can also be thought of more neutrally as the sharing of personal experiences for unforeseen collective outcomes. In other words, embracing the political potential of gossip can be part of reactivating the second-wave feminist mantra that the ‘personal is political’. I argue that the chat-based communication of SNS, especially Facebook, allows women to continue with their ‘gossip’ on a digitally mediated platform. This idle talk acts as a social lubricant that binds likeminded users, which in turn means that gossip can serve as a vehicle of activism for cyberfeminists and become a political tool. With the evolution of digital technology and onset of a platform like Facebook, a user can post a message, comment on a post or even leave a message in the personal inbox of a ‘friend’. This helps to pick up the conversation thread from wherever it was left and continue once again with the gossip, at whatever time. This has eased the flow of information, made the tool democratic, and released users from being tied to a certain geographical space, which is traditionally known to have restricted women’s access to information. Geo-tagging, to use a Facebook term, helps identify the location of the messenger, albeit broadly by the neighbourhood or the city the user is located in, which in turn can facilitate cultural advocacy, in the form of ‘gossip’, from those who read the message. This is how women appropriate Facebook as a democratic platform for their interactions.

## INDIA AS A CASE STUDY

This project focuses on Facebook usage specifically among urban Indian women, between 18 and 55 years of age. India has been chosen as a case study because of the unique socio-

economic disparity between its urban and rural population. This difference is not only reflected in the choice of SNS between the urban and semi-urban/rural areas, which are Facebook and Orkut respectively, but also in the nature of the activist purposes for which these SNS are used. The rural areas are mostly dependent on ‘mobile connectivity’ due to lack of infrastructural support for ‘data connectivity’. As a developing economy, India has jumped a number of technological generations as it strives to keep up with contemporary technologies; thus, the unaffordability of a computer or even a laptop for SNS access has been overcome by making mobile internet available at a reasonable cost. The vernacular capacity of the device has also conquered the barrier of reaching out to a multi-lingual nation. The consequent increase in the consumption of mobile internet has led India to become the second largest user of mobile internet in the world, after the US (Eluvangal, 2010). The ever-evolving nature of India’s technological development, and the diversity in its SNS usage made possible by the innovative ways in which the tool has been adapted by different socio-economic and cultural segments, often for women’s issues, makes it a viable option for a case study.

Given the uniqueness of circumstances in India, ‘mobile journalists’, or journalists who use mobile phones for information dissemination, are utilising this opportunity to reverse the flow of information from the bottom up. For instance, Ravi Ghate’s SMSOne and Shubhranshu Choudhary CGNet Swara projects transmit information via digital newsletters in far-flung and unconnected villages or bring information of their living conditions to mainstream activists, thereby laying the foundation for an information revolution that encourages grassroots politics. In urban India, examples of digital activism via Facebook are endless, the most prominent being Anna Hazare’s campaign of 2011 for the Anti-Corruption Bill and, more recently, the campaign against the New Delhi gang rape case of December 2012. The success of the former resulted in the formation of Aam Aadmi Party (the People’s Party), whose leader Arjun Kejriwal took over as the chief minister of Delhi after managing to secure the highest percentage of votes at the Delhi Legislative Assembly election of 2013, only months after the political party was formed. The New Delhi gang rape case was instrumental in pushing for the amendment of the rape law in the country. In this way, digital activism is effecting socio-political changes in India by redistributing traditional power balances via SNS-mediated information flows.

In addition to the disparities in the socio-economic situation between the rural and urban population of the country, their choice of SNS platform, and the issues that are

addressed by digital activists from rural and urban areas, there is also disparity in the way Facebook users respond to such calls for action. Scholars like Chadwick (2006, p.25) feel “that increased political information on the Internet might [...reduce] political apathy and [...increase] political participation.” As such, the innumerable forums that have sprung up in cyberspace are bringing together people from diverse backgrounds to argue on issues of content or simply share information that is of interest to them. The response to these discussions can either be passive (for instance, ‘liking’ a status update or a comment posted by an FB user) or active (starting a discussion on the online forum by posting an update on an issue of social concern). While the former is referred to as ‘slacktivism’, the latter can be called ‘craftivism’. Digital tools of communication can often be used in ways that are passive. By engaging in ‘clicktivism’ (Cornelissen et al, n.p), which is a form of slacktivism that consists of clicking on the computer mouse to ‘like’ or ‘share’ a Facebook post, users express their solidarity with an issue. This is political, because by expressing support the users become members of the community that has raised the issue. In due course, this political community can potentially initiate social change. Clicktivism, however, involves “minimal costs and limited tangible benefits” (ibid.) and as such, it is often referred to as “slacktivism – a catchy new word that describes such feel-good but useless Internet activism” (Morozov, 2011, p.13). Critics, such as Morozov, say that SNS users who engage in such acts do it for personal gratification, because they feel that by clicking on the ‘like’ option they have done their share to improve society. But I argue that this, in fact, should also be considered political participation because digital communication has made it equally important to ‘communicate’ a cause to increase support. To amend Jordan’s claim (2013), passing on information has become a politics.

These apparently passive acts reflect another way in which digital tools have changed the traditional approach to activism in which an activist’s main purpose was to ‘act’ on an issue to bring about changes. These “symbolic actions” (Cornelissen et al, n.p) accrue political connotations, even though they may not achieve the direct impact of an activist act. They can be interpreted as an opinion or a user’s support for a cause and, thus, a response to activist communication. The social system that digital activists seek to establish is based on participatory democracy (Held, 1987) which lays emphasis on the tenets of interactivity, leading to identity building and empowerment (Langman, 2013). The symbolic and passive feedback process is empowering to any democratic act, as it not only helps an activist to mobilise support to organise a campaign but also to improve the strategies of operation.

Despite popular concern over the passive responses to activism, digital tools of activism have embedded what is referred to as ‘vigilantism’ (Johnston, 1996) among SNS users. Their awareness is manifested in both active and passive ways. They may not actively participate in an offline real-time gathering, but they are in tune with the day-to-day progress of an activist movement via regular feeds from the active supporters in the field. This has been made possible by the efficient planning of their ‘active’ counterparts, who often plan the details of a campaign along the lines of a corporate marketing strategy. Although aimed at non-profit causes, there is an aspect to Facebook users’ interactivity which can be mistaken with corporate promotion. For instance, during the first online presidential campaign in the US in 2007, the ‘Obama Girl’ video played a significant role in increasing the Democratic candidate’s popularity among young voters. Apparently “an unofficial online campaign” (Powell, 2010, p.83), the video showed Amber Lee Ettinger, an actress and a model, lip-synching to a song while pole-dancing and staring admiringly at a photograph of Obama bare-chested by a beach. The video was first released on BarelyPolitical.com on June 13, 2007, and then reposted on YouTube. It received three million views in the first couple of months, and went up to 13 million by the end of the campaign – a few million above any of Obama’s official campaigns. In this instance, an apparently amateur video on SNS generated more visibility than a professionally strategized election campaign, which raises the question whether the video was not actually part of a corporate, guerrilla-marketing strategy.

Just as the political debate on television between Nixon and JFK changed the role of this media technology in political campaigns, Obama’s presidential run transformed the way campaigns are strategised via SNS to draw young voters. But opposition candidate Ralph Nader criticised such tactics as undemocratic and marketing-oriented (Wilcox, 2008; Small, 2008). I argue that a political or even an activist campaign may verge on covert as well as overt persuasion, the same principle on which corporate advertising is modelled. Similarly, such a campaign needs to be planned out like a corporate strategy, with a defined structure of implementation, in order to be successful. The second-wave feminists built up their networks by engaging with women in weaving, or making ‘crafts’ (van Zoonen, 2002), an act that is normally associated with women. I argue that on the digital platform, this approach to politics takes the form of ‘craftivism’, which is opposed to ‘slacktivism’, because the success of a campaign depends on how well it is ‘crafted’ or planned like a strategy. Fundraising, also intricately associated with political and activist campaigns, is both a political as well as an economic activity that is important for the sustenance of the cause, and as such, it is

empowering. SNS communication has the potential to aid activists with this economic empowerment so that they can continue with the political cause, just as Obama has been doing since the early days of his first election campaign.

Both the craftivists and the slacktivists facilitate spreading the word for an activist cause as well as promoting participation among their networks. Both the groups aid in keeping the conversation going, and that is important for a movement because “[t]here can be no strong democratic legitimacy without ongoing talk” (Barber, 1984, p.136). This is how a digital platform enhances a community’s “cohesion, political deliberation, and participation” (Chadwick, 2006, p.83). Through networks and online political communities, SNS increases civic engagement, thereby laying the foundation for an e-democracy that decentralises the policy-making process by redistributing political power among citizens. Such strategies for e-democracy further the development of a digital public sphere, because they highlight interactivity and political participation amongst people who are linked only or primarily through online contact.

Nisha Susan’s Facebook group named ‘Consortium of Pubgoing, Loose and Forward Women’ as part of the Pink Chaddi campaign was perhaps the first successful case of SNS-mediated digital activism in India. Ever since, there have been several Facebook campaigns on various issues furthering women’s rights. For instance, the ‘Bell Bajao’ campaign against domestic violence launched by Breakthrough.tv, or the ‘I never ask for it’ campaign against sexual harassment launched by Blanknoise. While the former urges men and boys to bring an end to domestic violence by ringing the door-bell at victims’ houses, the latter urges women to share their experiences of sexual harassment on online forums. One of the ongoing campaigns on Facebook is the ‘Women’s Reservation Bill’, which advocates the reservations of 33% of seats in government institutions for women, including admission to educational institutions, public sector employment and political representation in the Parliament. This campaign was interrupted by Anna Hazare’s fast-based protest against corrupt government officials in India, which was later pushed to the back burner by the gang-rape incident in New Delhi on December 16, 2012. Each of these incidents prompted online activists to temporarily pause their own campaigns and join the fervour of the more immediate cause, by posting about the latter on their Facebook walls. But do such means of protest have an impact on decision-makers, influence legislative amendments and effect changes in the society? If yes, then what kind of causes does Facebook communicate most successfully?

To find an answer to this question, I begin the thesis with a theoretical section. Chapter 2 analyses how the digital public sphere of SNS mediates the activist cause. Chapter 3 explores women and their use of SNS as a certain kind of gossip formation. Chapter 4, the last chapter in the theoretical section, engages with the diversity in digital usages among India's population in relation to two paradigms of activism: empowering with information and inspiring for a cause. The empirical section begins with Chapter 5, which explains the methodology used and establishes the three types of empirical data collection used in the project: namely, a questionnaire sent to urban Indian women Facebook users between 18 and 55 years of age; participant observation of 10 Facebook groups selected on the basis of the questionnaire; and interviews with digital activism experts from India. The 10 Facebook groups have been categorized under three main headings, depending on the issue each addresses: Consciousness-Raising Facebook groups, Civic Engagement Facebook groups, and Facebook groups promoting Political Participation. The Consciousness-Raising Facebook groups include Balaji Telefilms, Zubaan Books, Bell Bajao and Blanknoise. The Civic Engagement Facebook groups include Elle Breast Cancer India; Honour Killings in India – Stop it please!!!, Parentree and Veg Recipes of India. The last section includes The Women's Reservation Bill – India and Join Anna Hazare's Fast to Bring the Jan Lokpal Bill.

One empirical chapter has been dedicated to each of these categories, to trace the stages of gradual progression of a political activist movement, from the consciousness-raising groups that inspire people to organize as collectives, to the civic engagement groups they form, through to the political participation they ultimately promote. The stages of activism also trace the graduation from small-'p' politics to big-'P' politics in accordance with the issues that have been raised by each Facebook group. The analysis of these groups also engages with the various acts of activism – namely protest, resistance, dissent and rebellion – undertaken in these groups during the two years of data collection, from January 2011 to January 2013. Thus, Chapter 6 analyses the activities of the Consciousness-Raising Facebook groups; Chapter 7 assays the formation of Civic Engagement Facebook groups; and Chapter 8 seeks to ascertain what aids Facebook groups in the promotion of Political Participation, since only certain forms of activism appear to be successfully mediated via Facebook. In Chapter 9, I conclude with an assessment of what comprises socio-political changes for Facebook-mediated activism, as well as a comparative overview of traditional versus digital tools of activism.



Since the early days of this research, instances of digital activism even from in the Indian context have multiplied manifold. The Pink Chaddi campaign, which almost every Indian woman Facebook user I interviewed posted about on her wall up until 2010, is now considered passé. Its place has been usurped by the likes of Gulabi Gang (which translates to ‘pink’ gang) and The Ladies Finger, which is a “new women’s zine”, to quote the website, edited by Nisha Susan, who had launched the Pink Chaddi campaign. Gulabi Gang is a group of pink saree-clad women protesting domestic abuse and violence against women in semi-urban and rural areas of northern India. Led by Sampat Pal Devi, a mother of five children and a child-bride herself, the success of this group is now being documented in a Bollywood production. The year 2011 saw the rise of the India Against Corruption movement with famed activist for rural development Anna Hazare as its face of protest. The response to this cause was so overwhelming that almost all of the Facebook groups on which I was a participant observer started posting on this issue irrespective of what their own cause entailed.

The New Delhi gang rape case of December 2012, popularly referred to as the ‘Nirbhaya’ case, took the country by storm and Facebook, along with other SNS platforms, played a remarkable role in gathering momentum for offline protests. It resulted in the amendment of the rape law of the country, while efforts are still going on to reign in the culture of sexual violence towards women in patriarchal Indian society. In the wake of these incidents, the double murder case of 14-year-old Aarushi Talwar along with 45-year-old Hemraj, who was a hired domestic help at her house, was also resolved. After almost five years, the judgement went against her parents, who, the court ruled, were guilty of committing honour killing because the two victims were involved in an illicit relationship. Since no direct evidence could be retrieved to support this claim, the conviction of the Talwars has started a debate on the credibility of this judgement, which continues to be a hot topic of discussion on SNS platforms. The most recent incident that has outraged cyber activists is the sexual assault charge brought by a young journalist against Tarun Tejpal, editor-in-chief of *Tehelka* magazine, best known for carrying out a series of high-profile sting operations against corrupt government officials. This is how SNS-mediated digital activism continues to provide ordinary citizens with a platform to raise their voice against issues that deserve to be highlighted, even if the perpetrator belongs to the fraternity that is supposed to be the watchdog of a democracy.

By the time this research project was drawing to a close, the feminist revival had caught on worldwide. In the UK, in October 2013, the variety of activities that a women's activist could sign up for on a weekend included "a feminist freshers' fair in London, the North East Feminist Gathering in Newcastle, a Reclaim the Night march in Edinburgh, or a discussion between different generations of feminist activists at the British Library" (Cochrane, 2013, n.p.). Laura Bates' Everyday Sexism Project was introduced in April 2012 in London, and has become operational in 17 countries within the first year of its launch. The project documents harassment on the street, on public transport and at the workplace that people face on a daily basis. By the end of 2013, as Cochrane states, 6,000 stories were submitted which led to the training of 2,000 police force in London in a drive to create public awareness against sexual harassment. These campaigns have truly raised the consciousness of women worldwide and reinstated the second-wave feminist slogan that 'the personal is political', albeit in ways that have used the tools of digital communication to go viral and in most cases to register an immediate response. The "quick, reactive nature" (ibid.) of feminist drives in recent times can be attributed to SNS as a digital tool of activism that is used to increase participation, enhance organisation and raise impact.

On its own, SNS perhaps only makes a noise and generates furore, but when combined with traditional tools of activism, such as processions and barricades, the campaigns can yield long-term effects. This is exactly what led to the amendments in the rape laws in India. Although still in its nascent stage, the repercussions of similar feminist campaigns have been hard to ignore in the recent past. This could very well be termed the beginning of the fourth wave of the feminist movement, which is comprised of a much younger and more digitally informed demography of activists who are adept at using social networking tools. What is more interesting is the fact that these feminists include not only women but also men who support feminism, as my Facebook group studies will show.

**CHAPTER 2**  
**SNS AND THE DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE:**  
**MEDIATING THE ACTIVIST CAUSE**

*The dream behind the Web is of a common information space in which we communicate by sharing information.*

- Tim Berners-Lee, 1997

Amazon.com is one of the few Web-based businesses that made a smooth and successful transition from the Web 1.0 era to the Web 2.0 phase of Internet operation. It was established at the height of the dot-com boom in 1994 as an online bookstore. Founder Jeff Bezos gave up his job at a Wall Street firm to set up Amazon, and the company, contrary to its initial plan for slow growth, made an unexpected profit. Bezos' business plan was a success (Porta et al, 2008), but he continued to strive to develop Amazon.com's services and customer relationship via a feedback process that spread through customers' personalised websites, public chat rooms on the Web, instant messaging services, regular contests, sweepstakes, and other interactive activities. "In fact, more than 70% of Amazon.com sales is generated by repeat customers" (Hirakubo and Friedman, 2002, p.98). Quite evidently, it is the interactive nature of the business model that lies at the core of Amazon.com's success.

A decade later, this same interactivity has become the guiding light for digital activists, who lay an equal emphasis on establishing a dialogue with the participants as they do on organising for a campaign. In this chapter, I argue that by rendering interactivity as a distinguishing element of Web 2.0, SNS facilitates democratic interactions. The digital public sphere thus created helps activists mediate their cause via the phatic culture of the virtual platform. I begin with a brief history of the Internet and trace it to the arrival of Web 2.0. Blogging developed as an activity for commercial feedback while at the same time promoting participation, to the extent that bloggers have overridden journalists' responsibilities by becoming 'producers' of media content. These interactive discussions facilitate activist causes by spreading the word on the virtual public sphere, as blogging activity mutates into microblogging on SNS platforms. The distinctive features of SNS, such as participatory surveillance, invisible audiences, crowdsourcing and the blurring of the boundaries between the private and the public, aids social networking sites in creating a phatic culture that had previously been limited to face-to-face contact. The interactions of virtual selves in the digital

public sphere are therefore conducive to democracy, as it overcomes the limitations of traditional communication platforms.

## INTERNET, INTERACTIVITY AND WEB 2.0

The Internet is nothing but a network of wired computers that are interconnected globally. It was initially developed in the US for military purposes (Gauntlett and Horsley, 2004) in the late 1960s. But Tim Berners-Lee realised how complex the Internet was “for a noncomputer expert” (Berners-Lee, 1999, p.20) and came up with a user-friendly interface called the World Wide Web in 1990-91, which became operational in 1993, and made the Internet more social. This led to the invention of more sophisticated browsers, such as Netscape Navigator, and the concept of hyperlinks that connect two websites so that users can retrieve related data by moving from one website to another with a click on the link. All of this eventually led to the “Web revolution” (Gauntlett and Horsley, 2004, p.5) in the commercial sector as the Internet moved further away from its original military purposes and started being used primarily with profit-making objectives. However, as the new millennium rolled in, the world of highly-profitable Internet-based businesses – and with it the optimism of e-companies – collapsed, which is also referred to as “the dot-com bubble burst” (ibid., p.9). Only a few of these businesses survived and one of the reasons for their sustainability can be traced to the feedback process from consumers that they had incorporated into their business plan. The simple but effective Web interactivity of Amazon, the online bookstore, allowed buyers to review products on their website, which prompted new buyers to decide on the same products by connecting with the existing buyers. This feedback process, along with Amazon’s service standards, earned the company a reputation that helped it tide it over during the depression in online marketing.

Online interactivity was further heightened by ‘blogging’ activity on the Internet, which was believed to be “the perfect democratic internet application” (ibid., p.11) and heralded the arrival of Web 2.0. Over the years, the interactive platform of the Internet has given people a voice and “an opportunity to contribute to the media culture” (ibid.). In 2004, in an attempt to re-invent the Internet, Tim O’Reilly emphasised the shift from product trading to information sharing based on participation, via his Web 2.0 conference (Allen, 2008). By terming Web 2.0 the “architecture of participation” (O’Reilly, 2005, n.p), O’Reilly shifted the feedback model developed for commercial purposes to a more democratic concept of participation that emphasises the freedom of choice and empowerment of the Internet user.

This initiated a debate about the notion of Web 2.0, since prior to that the term Web 1.0 was never used. But the terminology did mark a shift in the way Web enthusiasts viewed the architecture of information flow and participation within this new version of operations.

Platforms for ‘blogging’, referred to as Web logs, are personal sites on the World Wide Web where Internet users share personal information or information on any particular topic. They update the information regularly and each update is called a ‘post’. With access mostly open to a public audience, blogs act as a meeting place where blog authors and readers exchange information and culture (Pierce, 2010). The “perceived interconnectedness” is quite “entrepreneurial”, especially for lifestyle bloggers (Notley et al, 2013). The popularity of this platform has resulted in a “sandpit of the rambling amateur” (Gauntlett and Horsley, 2004, p.12), which suggests that the unpredictability and sheer number of blogs often lead to interesting discussions on the virtual stage. This forum has given bloggers a platform to break news or write about niche incidents, which often encroach upon the space of professional journalists. Although these bloggers are amateur, the collective volume and depth of the knowledge that is posted on a daily basis almost makes a journalist’s job redundant. Via their online discussions, these bloggers sometimes even influence and facilitate decision-making, often taking influence away from the opinion pieces of journalists who act as media representatives.

In fact, editors of media publications worldwide encourage reports from ‘citizen journalists’, especially in crises situations. The editors suggest “that ordinary people are often ‘compelled to adopt the role of a reporter’ [...as they] ‘bear witness to crisis events unfolding around them’” (Stuart Allan and Einar Thorsen, cited in Cottle, 2009, p.xii), such as the critical responses of ordinary US citizens to Hurricane Katrina or the Japanese people to the tsunami disaster. Citizen journalism, in this way, can bypass the “news ecology” or “traditional hierarchies [...] of communicative power” (ibid., p.xiii) and broaden the democratic voice. Editors prefer “first-hand testimonies, visceral accounts, and graphic images [...] to dramatise and humanise stories, injecting emotion, and urgency into the stories of people’s plight and pain” (ibid.). These humane accounts give a face to the objective of mediation of information by news agencies which perhaps also helps the decision-makers decide “the necessary politics of what should be done” (ibid.). Therefore, it can be argued that the Fourth Estate of the traditional democratic system is making way for a Fifth Estate (Dutton, 2009), comprised of ordinary citizens who no longer require mediators (Benkler, 2011; Newman et al, 2012) as information travels directly from them to decision-

makers. Moreover, some of these blogs that discuss citizens' accounts of activist causes are often interlinked with new social movements and are in turn used as weapons of protest and dissidence.

These blog posts, over time, have mutated into microblogs via SNS, which are considered the most distinctive feature of Web 2.0 (Gauntlett and Horsley, 2004). Irrespective of the length of blog posts, the SNS feature of Web 2.0 has modified the traditional consumers of media into "produser[s]" (Jarrett, 2008, n.p.), who do not just consume media content but also produce content for other consumers. The participatory media structure promotes self-organising through social networking, where information flows "bottom-up" (ibid.), directly from the citizens to the decision-makers without mediation by the media representatives. In the instance of the Motrin Moms, although it was a protest for consumer rights with commercial overtones, the fact that young mothers could connect online and join their voices to change the marketing policy of a multinational corporation, manifests the power of information flow through participation. This makes Web 2.0 potentially revolutionary with political implications. In this way, the Internet can be mapped as a trajectory, starting off as a communication tool for the US military services, becoming a profit-making platform for entrepreneurs, and currently serving as a virtual public sphere for socio-political communication.

## WED 2.0 AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The most prominent feature of SNS is that it is not used for economic transactions, namely buying and selling, but rather as a forum for debating and discussing issues of interest through which information is shared. In the age of Big Data, this information can potentially be used for profit-making purposes. But after Web 2.0 technology was deployed, it was this nature of user interactivity which was prioritised by its users, making this virtual sphere more democratic and allowing users to perceive it as a regulatory institution in the hands of themselves, the 'public'. In today's highly dispersed, complex societies, "time-distance 'defying' media" (Dahlberg, 2007, p.828) have made it possible to keep the communication process going unhindered by geographical and temporal limitations. SNS, in this sense, has made communication instantaneous and globalized, where participants do not have to be physically present in the 'virtual public sphere' (Goode, 2009) for an interaction to be effected. SNS offers users an opportunity to engage in a huge variety of discussions that transcend local, national and international barriers.

Saskia Sassen argues that this new type of social space is redefining existing social relations, on the basis of the following properties: “decentralized access, simultaneity and interconnectivity” (2002, p.3). ‘Decentralized access points to the fact that this public-access medium of communication rests on distributed power, with millions of users making millions of contributions which ultimately end up pooled as concentrated power – or what could be called public opinion. ‘Simultaneity’ refers to the real-time access and response, exemplified by SNS messaging, that takes place when users log on to the same website from different time zones across the globe. This feature also increases the scope of participation when it comes to voicing public opinion on certain issues, because SNS can receive instant feedback from users, amplifying the process of opinion-making. ‘Interconnectivity’ joins all users on the same network across all time zones, helping in the instant circulation of information, which ultimately aids in the formation of ‘public opinion’. This, according to Jürgen Habermas’ concept of public opinion, means the opening up of state authority to public control.

Scholars like Dahlberg, however, point to factors that inhibit an “open and reflexive debate online, including inequalities in access and participation, unreflexive communication, corporate domination of online attention and state surveillance and censorship” (Dahlberg, 2007, p.828). Kramer, Guillory and Hancock (2014) refer to the adjustment of emotional states of FB users by manipulation of the news feeds they are exposed to, making the communication platform undemocratic. But, Dahlberg questions whether the online discussions, which open up a Pandora’s box of countless varied opinions, actually find any common bases on which they overlap or whether these opinions travel in completely different directions that do not connect. He argues that much online interaction simply revolves around the meeting of ‘like-minded’ individuals who are already in agreement, leading to a “fragmented public sphere” (ibid) in which each group of individuals emphasises its own positions. As such, instead of being productively critical of each other’s thoughts, these online discussions invariably work in circles with each group trying to establish its own opinion. Dahlberg (ibid.) himself ultimately critiques this view by opining that participants in SNS discussions consciously seek out individuals or groups with opposing ideas and engage in debates with them, with the objective of justifying their own viewpoints, thereby expanding the range of discussions in the virtual public sphere. I argue that whether it facilitates debate amongst lobbies of like-minded people or amongst individuals voicing their

opinion, the communication platform of SNS opens up the ambit of public opinion to a wider population, and thus the virtual sphere has the potential to incorporate democratic processes.

The term 'virtual public sphere' derives from Habermas's 'public sphere', which centres on the idea of participatory democracy, based in the question of how public opinion transforms into political action. The public sphere is defined by Habermas as "a site governed neither by the intimacy of the family, the authority of the state, nor the exchange of the market, but by the 'public reason of private citizens'" (Habermas cited in Peters, 1993, p.542). In his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas conceptualizes the term as an area where private citizens come together to discuss public issues. He writes that in 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment Europe (namely England, France and Germany) these debates would take place in coffee houses and salons. But with the advent of mass media the public sphere grew to encompass wider participation, whereby the mass of opinions were often controlled by the economic interests of the "bourgeois 'public'" (ibid. p.544). The Habermasian public sphere is based in the notion of 'publicity', literally translated from the German word *Öffentlichkeit*, which means 'publicness' or "openness to discussion and commerce as well as popular access to government" (ibid., p.543). *Öffentlichkeit*, in the sense of being open, may also mean 'freedom of information'. In this sense, "the state opens itself up via 'publicity', and the people respond with 'public opinion'" (ibid. p.549). Such openness indicates that the public sphere is not (as the English translation suggests) bound to a specific and well defined place, but rather evolves as a process of public discussions, irrespective of where it is physically located.

However, Habermas argues that by the 19th century, open political discussion nurtured within the public sphere began to be suppressed by the private interests of media organisation owners. He laments that this structural change in publicity has led to "a structural transformation from critical participation to consumerist manipulation" (ibid. p.543). In industrial democracies, mass media developed a "Janus face" of "enlightenment and control" (ibid. p. 559). Along with providing information to citizens framed as the public, the mass media would also provide entertainment to the same citizens framed as audiences and thereby generate revenue from advertisers. In this way, the democratic potential of the public sphere was lost to economic interests of a select few. The 'public' no longer remained a politically independent forum for citizens. Over time, the public sphere became a body that influenced and decided 'public opinion' as well as implemented policies, because the economic interests of the bourgeoisie would often influence political decisions.



To keep civic participation democratic, ‘representative publicity’ developed as the preferred form of public communication. In feudal Europe, publicity took the form of authority represented as spectacle or the display of lords and estate owners to the public. Though representative publicity came to mean representational democracy, Habermas has been perennially suspicious of its capacity to fall back into spectacle, as opposed to the democratic if economic inclinations of the “bourgeois public sphere” (ibid. p.545). He compares representative publicity to “the theatre”, where people are the audience and hence passive, while he finds a parallel for the bourgeois public sphere in “the marketplace” (ibid., p.546), where people are the actors and engage in active communication. Thus, he understands the mass media to be our only resort for democratic participation, yet warns us of a ‘refeudalisation of the public sphere’, whereby ‘representation’ will take place “through the media rather than the king’s body” (ibid., p.560). Under such conditions, as Peters puts it, “public relations [replace]... public opinion as the basis of institutional legitimacy” (ibid.). However, in 2006, at the annual Conference of the International Communication Association, Habermas updated his stance on media, saying, “Allow me in passing a remark on the Internet that counterbalances the seeming deficits... The Internet has certainly reactivated the grassroots of an egalitarian public of writers and readers.” Thus, he seems to believe that the Internet provides the means to revive the public sphere in his own sense. I argue that SNS promotes this kind of discussion precisely because it is in virtual space without the need for physical congregation at a given location, which in turn ensures participation among dispersed crowds in larger numbers than were ever possible in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century European coffee houses and salons.

The virtual sphere is comprised of ordinary citizens, not necessarily the ruling class, and thereby ensures participation from all sections of society (accessibility issues aside), even if that conversation is fragmented by numerous strands of divergent opinion. Hence, this virtual space has the potential to express and help form public opinion, and thereby promote participatory democracy. The apparently ‘baseless’ judgement on the Aarushi murder incident opened up a gamut of debates and discussions in the virtual public sphere, even as the police and the judiciary grappled with the evidences they could collect from the crime scene. Attributing the importance of the trial to the way that it fomented expressions of public opinion, the BBC called it “India’s ‘Most talked about murder verdict’” (November 2013). The double murder in May 2008, of 14-year-old Aarushi Talwar and 45-year-old domestic worker Hemraj, who worked in her household in an affluent suburb in eastern New Delhi,

had shocked the nation. For several years, the mystery could not be solved due to lack of evidence, while Aarushi's parents continued to come under investigation by the prosecuting team dealing with the case. It led to much speculation in the virtual sphere of what could have happened on that fatal night, even as traditional media continued to explore similar possibilities. In spite of the fragmented opinions, this incident illustrates the democratic participation of ordinary people in a discussion of national importance.

In general, people blamed either the police for their incompetence at gathering relevant evidence from the crime scene, or the parents for destroying evidence, or both. The parents, in turn, blamed the media for feeding stories to the public and fanning the flames of opinion against the Talwars. A Facebook group named 'Give Aarushi Talwar Justice' gathered more than 56,000 'likes' with about 1,500 members of the group talking about it. A member writes:

Really sad to see demise of judgment and rubbish remarks of judge [...]. Probably he reads too much Shobha De stories (sophisticated porn literature) Media has turned this tragedy into a salacious story and how we derive voyeuristic pleasure reading those stories. Even the public has to demand higher accountability from media. I wonder how Talwar couples can be punished for tarnishing evidence, why not the Noida police questioned for their inefficiency to coordinate the place of crime, for being unable to find Hemraj's body for more than 48 hours?<sup>1</sup>

After a wait of five years, the Central Bureau of Investigation concluded the case in December 2013, accusing Aarushi's parents, who are dentists by profession, of committing an honour killing because their daughter and the paid domestic worker were involved in an illicit relationship. Although the local court sentenced them to life imprisonment, Talwars' friends and family continue to plea for justice and the defence lawyers prepare an appeal to a higher court. The court decision has not stopped the online discussions that continue to challenge the judgement on the legal case, the most apparent reflection being the 'likes' that the FB page for the cause is still gathering.

The tools of Web 2.0 have thus become extremely powerful in the hands of digital activists, especially in environments where free speech is limited. These tools are elements of empowerment in the newly-developed 'virtual public sphere'. Gauntlett and Horsley (2004)

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<sup>1</sup> Identity of commenter concealed to retain privacy.

describe the Web as a tool that allows people to express themselves by producing creative media products and displaying them to a global audience. As a result, it has boosted creativity among the users; now there are more writers and painters than in the pre-Web era, even if the majority of them are amateurs. This has been made possible by the fact that every media text has an audience. Users are brought together by the Web and communities are formed of like-minded people. Howard Rheingold's 'virtual community' (1993) is a reality, because it is quite easy to connect with people with similar interests, although they may never meet in real-time.

Netizens take to cyberspace to seek redress for their grievances about what they consider unfair and unjustified practices. Thus, they take the issues to the virtual court of appeal and influence the voice of the public (Tai, 2006). In fact, if we consider any case study of digital activism, we can link its success to Habermas's belief that the public sphere guides political action, in the sense that every government, to be democratic, has to justify its actions to the public sphere. Netizens as a collective force demand such justification. "Democratic governance rests on the capacity of and opportunity for citizens to engage in enlightened debate" (Hauser, 1998, p.83). Web 2.0, through its SNS-mediated interactions, is providing netizens with this opportunity and is thereby transforming politics and international relations.

#### WHY FOCUS ON SNS?

One of the main reasons I am focussing on SNS-mediated digital activism is because of its four properties as laid out by danah boyd, namely "persistence, searchability, replicability and invisible audiences" (boyd, 2008, p.3). SNS is persistent in the sense that a platform like Facebook, especially in the context of a Facebook group, stores all the communication data – posts, comments, situational banter – indefinitely, allowing it to be referred to at a later stage. This accessibility makes the data democratic, and activists can search for data at times of need and refer to it for guidance when framing strategies or searching for incidents to incite protest. Instead of keeping a private archive of activist data, SNS data can be located by running a quick search under a combination of keywords chosen according to the topic of interest. This ensures equal and public access to information flow.

Because it is digitally produced, the data can be taken out of one context and applied to another completely different context, perhaps with minor alterations, and applied according to relevance. The digital nature of the data facilitates replication without any error, which when searched for, can be further located in all the contexts in which the same data has

been remediated. This property of remediation of SNS data helps in spreading the word for an activist cause. With every remediation the same set of information reaches a broader array of SNS users, and thus increases the concentric circles of contacts, which Mark Granovetter (1973, p.1360) refers to as “the strength of weak ties”. Finally, the invisible audience that boyd refers to as a property of SNS takes the form of readers of posts, comments and other messages beyond the audience that is intended or even imagined by the user-writer. This wider access to information and audiences makes SNS as a communication tool more democratic and thus better conducive for activist purposes.

SNS, as a practice, is based on participatory surveillance (Albrechtslund, 2008), which is characterised by the “sharing of activities, preference, beliefs, etc to socialize” (n.p). Conventionally, surveillance is a top-down “hierarchical system of power” that operates “between the gaze of the watcher that controls the watched” and the watched who are controlled by it (ibid.). Albrechtslund compares it to the Panopticon, where the watcher is in total control of the situation and the watched is a puppet in his/her hands with no decision-making power. But surveillance can also be defined as a horizontal practice, or a peer-to-peer mutual monitoring act. Mark Andrejevic has termed this “lateral surveillance” (2005, p.7) in a nod to the practices mobilised by SNS. As Andrejevic writes,

Lateral surveillance, or peer-to-peer monitoring, understood as the use of surveillance tools by individuals, rather than by agents of institutions public or private, to keep track of one another, covers (but is not limited to) three main categories: romantic interests, family, and friends or acquaintances. (ibid.)

Users monitor each other’s activities and thereby keep in contact with friends on the network. This helps in maintaining the law and order of the communication system, by enforcing a certain discipline so that one or more users who are entrusted with monitoring responsibilities, do not end up becoming more powerful than the rest. However, such mutual monitoring acts have the potential to turn users into spies, which in turn can clamp down on other users’ freedom in cyberspace. “In an era in which everyone is to be considered potentially suspect, we are invited to become spies – for our own good” (ibid.). Nonetheless, the open-endedness and broad accessibility of mutual or lateral monitoring makes it a preferred option to top-down surveillance, as the mutual form retains the rights of all users and keeps the activity democratic. Each user has an equal right to scrutinise the act of another.

At the same time, too much surveillance can infringe upon the users' freedom of expression, by stifling their spontaneity. When users become conscious of the monitoring gaze, such as in their quest to choose the politically correct expressions about what they post, they might unknowingly edit out words that are crucial for that communication. But participatory surveillance overrides the limitations of conventional surveillance, because the interaction between users of SNS is not related to information trade and is focussed on sharing information, which helps promote participation along with peer-to-peer surveillance. Thus, the participatory approach to surveillance "can empower – and not necessarily violate – the [SNS] user" (Albrechtslund, 2008. n.p). With no economic gain for users in the process, SNS communication does not involve users spying on each other in a top-down system, but rather tracking each other on the same platform to keep abreast of information-sharing. Mutual monitoring also introduces novel ways of constructing the SNS users' identity. Through information sharing, this platform can potentially facilitate meet-ups with strangers as part of the social networking process. This, in turn, renders SNS interaction active, as opposed to being passive. Participatory surveillance also helps maintain existing friendships through 'likes' and comments, which may be shallow but are nonetheless a method of contact and self-expression.

The empowering capacity of SNS has, however, been questioned by scholars like Trebor Sholz (cited in Zimmer, 2008), who compares it to "crowd sourcing" (n.p.). As Soren Mork Petersen (2008) notes, Web 2.0 represents an "architecture of exploitation that capitalism can benefit from" (n.p.). The crowd-sourced data is comprised of personal information posted by users as statuses or comments on the SNS pages, which are in turn aggregated by capitalists as consumer data for commercial gains. On the other hand, McKenzie Wark (2012) argues that relations of communication create new class relations, and new means of counteracting, albeit not escaping, capital. With reference to political and ethical concerns about loss of privacy, Mark Andrejevic (2007, p.7) notes that individuals experience "an asymmetrical loss of privacy: individuals are becoming increasingly transparent to both public and private monitoring agencies, even as the actions of these agencies remain stubbornly opaque in the face of technologies[...]" In the context of big data economics, such contemporary trends are driven by the need to interpret what is becoming, not least because of SNS, a staggering quantity of information available online.

Without actually considering individual data, these informatics are analysed as aggregates. "[T]he sheer volume of available information highlights the impasse of

representation” (Andrejevic, 2013, p.114). Aside from the theoretical problem of representation, a notable inequality lies in the question of who has access to this data and who does not, and what are the implications of such access. Although it is tempting to interpret issues of access hegemonically, Allen (2008) contrasted the level of engagement of users and producer, who are often the same people, in networked media services with the hegemony of producers over the consumers in traditional media services, to show that in fact the former trumps the latter. The former also fuses humans with machines in a way that liberates the users of the technology from temporal, geographical and even identitarian confines. An SNS user has control over the content of the message that flows through his/ her network of contacts, which signifies that that information can be customised to meet the users’ requirements. At the same time, web businesses and governmental agencies profit from these producers’ engagement with the technology, by collating the data they leave on SNS platforms.

If the commercial ends of big data collection are becoming apparent (even as debates rage with regard to their political ends), then why do SNS continue to be popular with the producers? Web 2.0, facilitated by SNS, blurs “the boundaries between web users and producers, consumption and participation, authority and amateurism” (Zimmer, 2008, n.p.). This empowers users to source, discuss and promote information among themselves, which is why SNS has become a favourite tool of activists to promote their causes. This “writeable generation” of “content creators” (Silver, 2008, n.p.) participates, manipulates and presents data through their interactions within SNS. These user exchanges are then organised into meaningful groups to form online communities, who actively participate in furthering their causes. Thus, ‘participation’ and ‘organisation’ are embedded in the very nature of SNS, and these are the prime pillars of activism.

In fact, the information flow in cyberspace takes place across different platforms that reach across national boundaries, depending on the participatory nature of the users. This is further heightened by the ‘convergence culture’ (Jenkins, 2006) of the media, which makes it convenient for the users to contribute fragments of information to the media flow through the various channels of technological convergence. The ever-increasing buzz created by collective flows of information, in the form of photographs, posters, audio or video clips or even simple text, can help activists spread the word beyond territorial limitations, as each SNS user carries the conversation forward by commenting, ‘liking’ or ‘sharing’ a post on a topic of socio-political concern.

The many-to-many, highly interactive, chatroom conversations under SNS have led to “grassroots journalism by the people, for the people”, as Gillmor (2004) discusses in his book of the same name. As participation widens to include ordinary people who are citizens of the democracy, the Fourth Estate is gradually becoming irrelevant as a watchdog of society (Benkler, 2011; Newman et al, 2012). As people have direct access to information via SNS, it helps them to voice their opinion on issues of concern to the authorities, without requiring the press to interpret and mediate that information to them. Interaction on SNS is also facilitated by users who are connecting on cyberspace to find each other, keep in touch and share information with such swiftness that the traditional media channels are often left far behind in disseminating news.

This is prompting the formal media market to become smarter with its technology. But the constant expansion of content on the Internet made possible by the SNS users’ participation perhaps poses too strong a competition for the conventional media market to keep up with, and it is thereby making the latter redundant when it comes to updates on information. This form of user participation on SNS has made the virtual platform democratic. It does not necessarily mean that there is more freedom and equality in society as a whole. It does, however, suggest the possibility of greater equality being achieved through the democratisation of ‘networked communication’. As Cass Sunstein (2001) points out, as long as the SNS conversation does not become fragmented in such a way that the *jihadis* are conspiring in one chat room of cyberspace, this tool for networking can be used freely to further democracy.

#### PHATIC CULTURE OF SNS

Web 2.0, as we refer to the current Internet technological environment, simulates the real world in a virtual form by enabling users to interact with each other and engage in what Assa Doron and Robin Jeffrey refer to as “lifelogging” (2013, p.162). By recording and transmitting “the transactions of their everyday lives”, users network with a wide variety of people across all time zones and territorial boundaries. The regular posts on these forums and the comments left by the readers of the posts create a web of conversation which can be compared to a real-life conversation with an acquaintance at a pub, leading to an exchange of life experiences. Both the exchanges on the virtual forum as well as the real-life pub experience come with a sense of fulfilment at being heard and acknowledged.

This use of the Internet as a platform for ‘self-presence’ (Socor, 1997) reiterates Anthony Giddens’ concept of the “reflexive project of the self” (1991, p.9), wherein each individual is free to choose how they project themselves to the world around them and is responsible for the social outcomes of such projection. Individuals’ “reconstructive endeavours” (Gauntlett and Horsley, 2004, p.148) should be mature enough to allow them to “organise and improvise, set goals, recognise obstacles, accept defeats and attempt new starts” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001, p.4). The process of self-realisation is facilitated by the virtual world with its interactive chatrooms and self-help forums.

The interactive feature of SNS redefines the phatic culture of the communication process. Emoticons and ‘cyber-slang’ (Thurlow and Bell, 2009) substitute for the now absent body engaged in the exchange of information. SNS is based on a communication model that operates solely with the objective of socialising and not with the purpose of informing or developing a dialogue among its users. It creates a “connected presence” (Miller, 2008, p.387) which increasingly dominates media culture. SNS is based on the concept of virtual face-to-face communication, referred to as phatic communication in the area of linguistic studies. Bronisław Malinowski, who coined the term ‘phatic communion’ around early 1920s, defines it “as a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words” (Ogden and Richards, cited in Kendon et al, 1976, p.215). Much later in the 1940s, Eliot Chapple, one of the first scholars to define behavioural patterns in face-to-face communication, pointed out that “the duration of time an individual spends in active speech or gesture” predicts how the same actor will “behave in a variety of other interactive situations” (ibid., p.3). Over a period of time, certain people become associated with certain phatic trends or mannerisms, which help to build up familiarity and develop trust between actors, which in turn bind them together. Thus, phatic communication is an interactive act that results in social solidarity.

Traditionally, it includes not just speech but various other levels of communication expressed through body movements, such as eye contact, posture and facial expressions (ibid.) that are woven together as part of the conversation. This is how phatic communication differs from other forms of communication that do not require physical presence, such as a telephone conversation, an email communication, etc. In this sense, phatic communication goes beyond establishing a union. The several layers of parallel communication that are involved, from those that are apparent to others that are not so apparent, establish a deeper understanding of the interaction for the actors without this being fully expressed in words.



The additional gestures help in the transition through various phases of conversation – starting a conversation, carrying it forward and also ending it on a note open to future encounters. SNS chats are based on similar principles, with emoticons making up for the additional gestures.

V Miller has updated the notion of phatic culture for the networked age of new media. In the context of virtual interactions, Miller's concept of phatic culture includes communicative gestures aimed only at socialising and is unburdened with the intent of imparting information to others or beginning a dialogue with other actors within the social network. He says that online media culture, increasingly characterised by SNS, includes activities like 'commenting' on a status message or 'posting' your own status update, which are used mainly to network. This form of networking, in turn, blurs the notions of "presence" and "absence" (Licoppe and Smoreda, 2005, p.318), thereby imparting a feeling of being in constant touch with your family and friends. In other words, it overcomes the issues of distance and time associated with traditional means of communication.

An SNS-user is certain to communicate with his/ her active contacts at least once in 24 hours, if not more frequently, irrespective of the physical distance between them and the different time zones. Giddens (1991) refers to this kind of relationship as continuous communication that is built on mutual trust. It is linked to the way users renew and refresh their contacts list on SNS, and thus reach out to an increasingly wider base. It is not what they write to friends through narrative communication, but how they keep in touch by commenting on existing contacts' SNS updates or searching for old friends and adding new acquaintances to their contacts list, that has given rise to the 'database culture' in digital age. Lev Manovich (2001) attributes the term 'database' to the Internet as a storehouse of information that can be organised and sorted according to separate themes so as to improve its searchability. Today, the Internet has turned into such a library with an "over-abundance" (ibid., p.55) of information of every kind, but importantly this information is increasingly based in participatory, phatic culture.

Prior to SNS culture, it would have been awkward to ask newly-met acquaintances for their contact details. But now, it is perfectly acceptable to send out a Facebook invite to an acquaintance met only for a few minutes perhaps while travelling to work. As Miller (2008, p.399) puts it, this kind of communication medium compels us to "write, speak, link and text others on an almost continual basis to maintain some sense of connection to an ever-expanding social network". Our theoretically endless database of contacts, also referred to as

'connections' on SNS, is perhaps much longer than it ever was or could have been when communication was limited to offline interactions. Similarly, the traditional concept of phatic communication did not enable one to convert acquaintances into connections or friends as easily as SNS facilitates, mainly due to the shifts in the communicative ecology that are redefining social relations (Sassen, 2002).

To keep in touch with an ever-expanding network of contacts, SNS users usually end up chatting or sending offline messages often simultaneously. The multi-tasking thus involved has almost become the norm and not a choice in the digital age. To continue building social bonds within this environment has pushed users to developing styles of social communication that are "non-linear" and "open-ended" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p.vii). This in turn makes it difficult to establish security in relationships. At no point does an SNS-user pay complete attention to one particular interaction – she is either reading her friend's updates, commenting on them, posting her own updates, chatting with another friend or sending a message to yet another friend. Her attention is fragmented by all these tasks. However, the inconsistencies sowed by the erratic communication of SNS are countered by its model of constant communication, which breeds familiarity and builds up trust, even though it might be within the structure of a virtual community. Spiro Kiouisis (2001) points out that it is the interpersonal nature of the information source that regulates the "credibility perceptions" (p.381) of its users. The interactive nature of SNS has helped this medium of communication gain the faith of its users. S Mestrovic (1997, p.ix) refers to it as the "postemotional society", where overt display of emotions are regulated and detached from actions to keep users' emotional self-presentation in sync with the social requirements of the moment. The focus on phatic-oriented information collection through users' social contacts has made their emotions not simulated or synthetic, as was once argued about the virtual sphere, but rather regulated by the collective expectations of the online society.

Such a level of computer-generated interconnectivity aids a frequent user's continuous efforts to build and restore social bonds. Web services such as SNS push the networking objective to the forefront, however ephemeral the social act of online 'catching up' might be. The more contacts users add to their Facebook friends' list, the more secure they feel in the thought that they can connect with them at the press of a button. Thus, the phatic culture associated with SNS is aimed at maintaining social connections and not necessarily carrying information to the receiver of the message. But phatic communication is by no means trivial, as it can be used to not only build social contacts but also to disseminate

information. By virtue of its non-intrusive nature, as compared to a dialogic communication, an SNS message manages to deliver the required information in the receiver's inbox without necessarily making the act of delivery too onerous. The light nature of the SNS message is actually easier on the recipient. Rather than a heavily-worded message that would demand more time and attention to acknowledge or even to reply to, SNS aids in conveying a detached yet emotionally expressive message to the user from his/ her friend.

Digital media experts, like Sherry Turkle (2011), foresee a future when phone calls will be reduced to cellular phone texting. In fact, there is a possibility that all forms of digital communication will take place through SNS – emails will be replaced by what we know as Facebook messages, just as cellular phone texting will mutate into microblogging or even status updates on SNS. This is expected to become more convenient with the rise in the usage of mobile Internet. Cellular phone users have already reached a phase where they send a text message asking if it's convenient for the receiver to receive a call, before they actually call up their contact's cellular number. Sherry Turkle narrates an incident of a mother deciding to pay her prospective nanny a surprise visit by turning up at her apartment to interview her for the job, only to find that the nanny's housemate has sent a text message to inform her about the surprise guest; the lesson of this story, says Turkle, is that "texting puts people not too close, not too far, but at the right distance" (2011, p.15). This makes text messaging the most appropriate communication etiquette in the postmodern digital society. In the near future, SNS-users will tweet or send a chat message instead of a text. But since a tweet or an SNS 'comment' can reach more than one person simultaneously, this kind of communication is also becoming a convenient tool to spread a message and promote a cause.

According to Turkle, however, even as we become more and more intimate with technology and depend on it for every form of communication, it pushes us away from our human connections. "Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other" (Turkle, 2011, p.1). As human beings, we are social animals, involuntarily gravitating towards companionship and intimacy, not necessarily of a romantic nature. However, the demands of friendship come with the risks of betrayal and mood swings. So, we look for companions that need not be restricted to fellow humans; they could also include other living beings like pets as well as non-living objects like gadgets. To the extent that "[w]e romance the robot and become inseparable from our smartphones" (Turkle, 2011, p.3), we use "machine-mediated relationships" that make users more dependent on technology and deny them "the rewards of solitude" (ibid.). Our vulnerability prompts us to

search for unconditional affection and companionship, which we often attempt to find in the comfort of a virtually networked world.

In a strange contradiction, we suffer from solitude in an ever-connected world, craving a few moments away from the virtually maddening crowd of constant interactions. The cellular phones that were supposed to cut down on work hours by increasing the connectivity of its users have, on the contrary, made users 'available' to their employers round the clock. Similarly, SNS is expected to defeat loneliness by always keeping users connected to their friends. But some scholars like Turkle argue that constant dependence on the screen stops SNS-users from interacting with real people in real time. Even an intimate dinner is interrupted by the partner's eyes straying back to the screen of their smartphones at regular intervals. Turkle argues that as long as we are able to find a way to make technology work for us, instead of succumbing to its lure, we will manage to keep our humanity intact. I am less interested in adjudicating humanity, but I would argue that as long as activists succeed in using the many tools of SNS to raise awareness, further their cause and potentially have real-world impact, then the networked post-emotional society works in their favour. After all the interactivity of the tool and constant interaction of the user are both inherently democratic in nature. Besides, the detachment with which the message is conveyed keeps it crisp and pointed, hitting the targeted audience at the right spot.

#### THE VIRTUAL PUBLIC SPHERE, INTERACTIVITY AND DEMOCRACY

With SNS as a platform, users are finding it easier to find diverse sources of information on topics that are of interest to them, on both global and local issues. While some information is sourced from the Fourth Estate, most of the online discussions engaged in by SNS users for a "potentially potent political force" (Newman et al, 2007, p.7) are collectively called the Fifth Estate. The flow of information these discussions entail are often much more intense than the clues pursued by investigative journalism. As I have noted, this has led editors to introduce citizen journalism as an intrinsic component of news production. In 2005, Richard Sambrook, then head of the BBC News, declared, "From now on news coverage is a partnership" (ibid. p.13). During the Asian tsunami of 2004, Sambrook said that "[w]hen major events occurs, the public can offer us as much new information as we are able to broadcast to them" (ibid.). This not only made the relationship between the traditional news producers and the digital 'producers' an equal partnership, but also instilled interactivity as an essential element of information flow.

This form of communication rouses the interest of readers and encourages them to participate in the discussions about events of import, making information interactive and democratic. Paul Saffo (2005) reflects on this change when he writes,

The Mass Media revolution 50 years ago delivered the world to our TVs, but it was a one-way trip – all we could do was press our nose against the glass and watch. In contrast, Personal Media is a two-way trip and we not only can, but also expect to be able to answer back. (cited in Newman et al, 2007, p.13)

The interactivity of the Web has no doubt made this virtual media platform a personal medium, as users can quite easily search for the information that interests them, rather than sift through a storehouse of otherwise curated information. Interactivity has also increased information flow in other ways. For instance, in a case of sexual harassment linked to India's own Fourth Estate, accusations of harassment in the workplace were delivered via email by a female journalist to the managing editor of *Tehelka*, a leading magazine best known for carrying out high-profile sting operations against corrupt government officials. Within a day of the media's first report on the incident, personal email<sup>2</sup> exchange between the alleged harasser, Tarun Tejpal, who is the editor-in-chief of *Tehelka*, the victim and the latter's complaint to the managing editor of the organisation, including explicit details of the ways in which she was sexually harassed, were available on SNS for users to read and comment on. This not only shows the speed of information flow, but also the fact that privacy of personal information is no longer respected, which in turn means that once-personal issues can become political matters of public discussion very quickly. In this case, personal information made its way to public viewership, either through the leakage of information or just as a means to prove that the harassment charges were genuine, where it became part of the vociferous public debates currently being held about sexual relations and the rights of women in India. The traditional media soon picked up on these pieces of evidence to add credibility to its reports, showing how traditional means of political dissemination are now being led by new media.

Unlike the Fourth Estate, which can be controlled by the state or by commercial interests, the Fifth Estate remains largely democratic, with accountability instilled by peer-to-peer surveillance and reflexivity instilled by the 'project of the self' (Giddens, 1991). The

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<sup>2</sup> The emails exchanged between the victim and Tejpal, as well as her emails to the managing editor of *Tehelka* lodging a formal complaint, reached my inbox too within hours after the media reported on the incident, via my personal network of journalists. It helped me validate what the media was reporting.

Fourth Estate no longer has monopoly over the production and distribution of news. The “authoring and distribution networks” of the digital platform have enhanced the “communicative power” of SNS users (Newman et al, 2010, p.15). Through their channels of information sourcing, these users have formed their own networks online that cut across socio-political and territorial limitations and go beyond the affordances of traditional news outlets. This is how SNS with its emails, instant messages and other features creates opportunities for its users and provides them with an unlimited flow of content, thereby enhancing their communicative power to facilitate activism.

**CHAPTER 3**  
**NETWORKS OF CHAT:**  
**WOMEN AND DIGITAL ACTIVISM**

*Internet makes it easier to delve into many worlds, sometimes answering questions that cannot be asked, or just opening new horizons.*

- Kuwaiti woman Internet user, quoted by Deborah L Wheeler, 2004

“Chicks rule” (McCandless, 2009, n.p), not only in terms of spending time on SNS, but also with regard to building up a network of contacts or ‘friends’. Never has a communication tool been used so extensively and predominantly by women, across all socio-cultural contexts. For precisely this reason, research is required not only on women’s use of new media, but also specifically on the ways in which women use SNS to fulfil their own personal and political purposes. In this chapter, I identify the chatty nature of interaction on SNS as a primary reason for its popularity with women. By tracing how this chatty mode of interaction has helped women to pool their voices around issues of shared interest, I highlight gossip as an important communication tool that has influenced political history over the years. Though gossip has negative overtones as superficial and malicious communication, it need not necessarily be flippant and spiteful, but can gratify the actor and serve her particular interests by interactive means. When a user engages in a quick chat with a friend on Facebook, irrespective of where her contacts are physically located, she may well be engaged in a larger political project that connects her interests to those of myriad others and ultimately establishes a network for the furthering of transnational feminism.

While this kind of talk is rarely associated with activism, women's communities are noticeably active on SNS, and they often promote causes online and garner public support for social, economic and political issues. Social media use, especially amongst women, is thus blurring traditional boundaries between social chat, community engagement and political activism. SNS tools, in this way, provide activists with a vehicle to organize their cause and promote participation for cross-border movements (Hands, 2011). The consciousness-raising groups of second wave feminism can be said to have used similar techniques of gossip and advocacy to further their cause and spread the message that ‘the personal is the political’ (Harris, 2004). Digital activism, as the current form of online political action is called, can

perhaps help to unite women across territorial boundaries and make transnational feminist dreams a possibility.

## WOMEN AND SNS

With a billion active users (Facebook, 2013, n.p), Facebook, is by far the most popular SNS (Pempek et al, 2009). This much is known, but what is less noted is that Facebook has had a phenomenal rise in women users, older as well as younger. A survey conducted by Inside Facebook (2009, n.p.) concluded, “the number of US women over age 55 using Facebook grew by 175.3% between September 2008 and February 2009,” while Rappleaf (2008), a Web 2.0 consumer research organization, claims that women in the 30 to 50 age-group are the fastest-growing segment of SNS users. What makes it more interesting is the fact that “women [56.2%] on Facebook in the US outnumber men in every age group” (ibid). A report released by Mashable (2010, n.p) also highlights women’s increasing association with Facebook: “[A]s many as one-third of women aged 18-34 check Facebook when they first wake up, even before they get to the bathroom.” At a Blogger Conference in 2010, comScore released a report stating that not only is the number of women in cyberspace higher than that of men, but they engage in social networking as their primary online activity. Women spend an average of 5.5 hours per month on SNS, according to the comScore report, compared to 3.9 hours spent by men. Given their high usage, it is worth asking whether women SNS users are expanding this capacity to digital activism, and in what forms.

Perhaps for the first time in the history of communication technology women are using a communication tool more frequently than men (Wajcman, 2010), across all socio-economic groups. In spite of the commercialisation of social media, as discussed in Chapter 1, even the more market-oriented activities undertaken by women online reinforce the fact that women “like communication and community building on the net” (van Zoonen, 2001, p.70). A technology like SNS simply “enhance[s] the possibilities” (ibid, p.69) for such community practices and hence offers opportunities for increased participation. Social media increases women’s scope of action and provides new opportunities for sharing their concerns, from traditional women’s issues to real-time chat options on topics that have traditionally been considered socially unacceptable. This, in turn, not only boosts the political potential of SNS, but also reconstructs the commonly “gendered distinction between consumption and production, between entertainment and information” (ibid, p.68) of media forms.



Engaging in feminist reflection on the function of the web in the 1990s, Dale Spender (1995) referred to the Internet as a medium for collective networking for women, while Sherry Turkle (1995) laid emphasis on the “construction of identities” (cited in van Zoonen, 2001, p.68) it made possible. Sadie Plant (1998) took this further by highlighting the “affection, intimacy and informality” (p.144) that this technology facilitates across its networks. Extrapolating these insights to the greater interactivity of Web 2.0, it can be said that Web 2.0 has made advances in overcoming the gender stereotyping of media (Wood, 2008), according to which women are not only portrayed in a negative light by the mass media, but technologies are also represented as predominantly male-centric. Although normative gender stereotypes still tend to be defined largely by what we see on-screen or read about in various mass media channels, Facebook usage statistics show that women too can be technologically savvy, and there is no reason why such savviness should not be utilised to further their interests through shared expression by digital means.

#### WOMEN, TECHNOLOGY AND FEMINISM

Web 2.0 has achieved something that none of the previous communication technologies could (Wacjman, 2004). The technologies of telephone and radio, too, arrived with a promise of radical emancipation from hierarchical structures of power, but they ended up creating a set of elites who controlled the flow of information. The Internet came with the same promise of connecting people, but this time it was said to be a true leveller (Spender, 1995). According to Spender, women's reticence to use media technology can historically be attributed to the social exclusion of women from science and technology (1995). The arrival of the Internet has gradually changed these dynamics between women and technology. This can be partially attributed to the fact that, unlike traditional forms of knowledge that were acquired by observing and reflecting in isolation (Code, 1991), in the digital information age knowledge is gained through interacting with others, which by definition connects it to the community-building exercise that women are normatively considered adept at (Reinharz, 1983). The democratic potential of the Internet, especially Web 2.0, is to be found not only with regard to righting inequities between the sexes, but also with regard to inequities of social background and economic status of women (CBFW, 2010). SNS, the most defining aspect of Web 2.0, can be accessed by women at their workplace, in a public Internet cafe or from their home, and is increasingly available over mobile platforms like cellular phones, which also broadens access.

Ever since Internet services have gone wireless, access nodes have been multiplying and users can link in from virtually anywhere within the web of connectivity (Lehr and McKnight, 2003). As Wellman notes, “The importance of a communication site as a meaningful place [...has] diminished even more” (2011, p.230). The vast amount of information made available across this web of connectivity (Shapiro and Varian, 1999) is now expected to gradually wipe out our dependence on manuscripts (Naughton, 2006) and goes well beyond what a single person can read in his/ her entire life. With so much information available literally at one’s finger-tips, Web 2.0 has been framed as a potentially democratic tool (Dutton, 1999), as this access to information is making citizens aware of their rights while virtual tools are making it easier to fight for them. It is this access to SNS connectivity and the swiftness of SNS communication that aided Manal al-Sharif, with regard to the Women2Drive campaign, in spreading her YouTube footage among fellow Arabic women, and the world, to protest the discriminatory driving laws in Saudi Arabia.

Turkle (1984) and Donna Haraway (1991) have argued that women’s traditional fear of the machine, now called the computer, has gradually been replaced by curiosity. Now the moment seems to have finally arrived when

[the] Internet has emerged as a powerful medium for non-elites to communicate, support each other’s struggles and create the equivalent of insider groups at scales going from the local to the global. The possibility of doing so transnationally at a time when a growing set of issues are seen as escaping the bounds of nation-states, makes this even more significant. (Sassen, 2002, p.117)

Issues of “struggle” for women in the digitised world could range from human rights and work rights to more localised concerns. Importantly, the Internet is not only providing women with a forum to discuss their concerns but also to join forces in voicing their grievances beyond their immediate community. The Internet, or rather SNS, has provided them with the vehicle to expand from their niche location and reach the world, so that local struggles ultimately become recognised and embraced translocally, thus facilitating cross-border activism. The activists are constantly connected with each other through digital means facilitated by SNS.

Digital connectivity thus makes it easier for these women located far and wide to be in constant touch and be quick in organising movements. Certainly, traditional means of political participation and organisation were never as swift (van Dijk, 2000). What is more interesting, these women do not have to shun their domestic duties to become an actor in

these global digital networks; they can very well join in from the confines of their kitchen and navigate the political implications of their personal concerns, much like the slogan of second wave feminism, where “political” came to refer to all power relationships rather than simply electoral politics (Hanisch, 2006, n.p.). As “safe and salubrious milieus”, SNS allows women to “sally forth...from their dens” (Wellman, 2001, p.233) as they unite for a cause. This is precisely how it was possible, in the Motrin Moms case, for a group of young mothers with babies in arms to force a multinational corporation, Johnson & Johnson, to withdraw its insensitive publicity campaign as well as to extract a public apology.

The term ‘feminism’ is used to refer to a collection of movements aimed at achieving gender equality by securing political, economic and social rights for women. Scholars divide these movements into three parts. The first wave came in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and was concerned primarily with voting rights. The second wave, which started with the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and continued into the 1980s, believed that cultural and political inequalities were inextricably linked to the personal lives of women. Hence, the famous slogan “The personal is political” was coined to raise consciousness and encourage women to speak about their personal concerns and turn them into political issues. Although Second Wave activism was a success in its own right, it was criticised for consisting of predominantly western, white and middle-class women. To facilitate a response to the constrictive ‘we’ of second wave feminism, the third wave feminists sought to unite women across “many colours, ethnicities, nationalities, religions and cultural backgrounds” (Tong, R. 2009, p.285), which prompted feminists to embrace the apparent contradictions and irrationality of the past to accommodate diversity and plan change for the future.

Such a movement seeks to seep across territorial limits and impact women globally by uniting them for a common cause. This can be facilitated by the fact that SNS is being accessed through various channels by women across the world and can therefore assist in their vision of transformation by weaving a network of communication (Mohanty, 2003). Such a vision entails participation on several fronts irrespective of how big or small the issue at hand is, aiming to bring about radical or even minor social transformation through the “politics of solidarity” (ibid., p.4). This form of cohesion keeps the actors dependent on each other, thus making the bonding stronger because they take decisions together for their rights and for the progress of their community.

By joining hands for a common cause via a networked communication, the movement for change in the socio-economic and political conditions of women is facilitated at various

levels. In daily life, SNS profiles help define the identity of the user; the contacts list identifies the community relations and interactions with other like-minded individuals; cross-network interactions and information exchange have the potential to realise feminist visions of social transformation. This form of feminist solidarity constitutes the best means to decolonize traditionally hegemonic appropriations of knowledge and power, accommodating diversity globally by opening community struggles up to like-minded, if far-flung, supporters. The second wave feminists, comprising of young, white, financially independent, western women, thought the feminist struggle was over as they had already achieved social equality at home and in the workplace (Bronfen and Kavka, 2001). But in the non-western developing world it is still a distant dream. The SNS as a communication technology has the means to connect these women across all geographical locations in the fight for their equality. In fact, this tool has the potential to overcome the conflicting visions of various waves of feminist thought by facilitating discursive networking among feminist activists across borders. Such an effort promises increased participation, making the potential impact of the feminist struggle stronger and more wide-reaching than before.

#### GOSSIP AS THE BASIS OF BONDING

The feminist consciousness raising groups (CRG) of the second wave helped women verbalize their feelings, especially those that might seem trivial. It is these feelings that helped the activists define their next form of action. Taking into account the importance of emotive talk to these political groups, Deborah Jones (1980) describes the actions of CRG as a form of gossip. The verb 'gossip', according to the Oxford English Dictionary (1971), means "to converse idly... about other persons" and is historically gendered, being applied to "a woman's female friends [who were] invited to be present at a birth" (ibid). Thus, the term involves divulging personal information in a "public" setting rather than "telling state secrets" (Holland, 1996, p.198). Jones mentions four functions of gossip, namely "house-talk, scandal, bitching and chatting" (Jones, 1980, p.196). Of these, bitching is defined as "an overt expression of women's anger at their restricted role and inferior social status" (ibid., p.197) and the CRG is "bitching in its political form" (ibid.). This makes 'bitching' a politically expressive act, but expressed only in private and to other women, which in turn causes people outside of the group to feel threatened or disempowered by the lack of access to information. In this way, gossip can change the power equation by conferring more power to the group engaging in little more than supposedly idle conversation.

An act of gossip can also be cathartic, because women engaging in it experience relief at having an opportunity to let out their anger and frustration. However fuelled by emotion, gossip is not necessarily flippant or spiteful; rather it converts a serious issue into frivolity. In practical terms, it serves the social intent of entertainment and relaxation, feeding participants' curiosity by distributing information and ultimately creating an intimate bond among the actors. By sharing interesting information about others, the dominant actor shows off her 'connections' and her knowledge about their personal lives, while the comparative and evaluative nature of the interaction enhances "self-satisfaction" among all actors involved (Holland, 1996). Such conversations help the actors weigh their own experiences against those of others and also assess their own judgement in similar situations. Taken as a whole, "gossip is a catalyst of social process" (Paine, 1967, p.283). It can bring people together or push them away, depending on whether it solves a dispute or aggravates it, as differences of opinion invariably follow such opinionated discussions about other people's lives and actions. Gossip often, in this way, forces people to make a choice and take a stand; it mimics, in other words, many grassroots discussions which aim to encourage participants to behave in ways that are political.

The term 'gossip' "[i]n its original meaning... [stands for a] godparent" (Spacks, 1985, p.19), an implication that is devoid of gender. However, socially speaking, the act "assumes gender – not only because women gossip, but, more importantly, because gossip is the sort of thing women do" (Spacks, 1982, p.22). The term 'male gossip' by contrast sounds condescending, almost like charging heteronormative men with homosexuality. Interestingly, the term 'female gossip' is a discursive anomaly, precisely because the qualifier is deemed unnecessary. Gossip is actually 'idle talk' that gradually melts the inhibitions among the actors involved in it, to a point where they start sharing personal experiences, as is considered appropriate to the feminine sphere. This production of shared truth has healing powers as well as political implications. Laurie Colwin compares gossip with "emotional speculation" (ibid., p.27), because by talking about others, people also find out about their own selves; it is interpretative in its essence. When the actors are comfortable discussing and passing judgemental comments on other peoples' lives, they reach a level of intimacy where they can perhaps confide in each other about their own personal concerns. By gossiping people learn about each other and by sharing their secrets, they assert their closeness and cement their bonding.

## GOSSIPING OVER THE YEARS

Historically, there is a close connection between gossip and politics. We tend to overlook that political discourses, right from the time of Plato, were actually embedded in gossip. The discussions and debates that took place in the Athenian public sphere were necessarily conversations on issues of public interest. Such communications can be interpreted as sharing information, forming opinions and evaluating other's actions - quite similar to the needs fulfilled by gossip. Habermas's concept of the public sphere depends on an idealized conversational zone that "guaranteed access to all citizens, freedom of expression, and open-ended deliberations" (Frost, 2011, p.13). Such objectives require an interaction between the public and the private spheres by collapsing the boundaries between the political and the personal. Heidegger himself notes this instability when he states, "[C]ommunication... [is the] purpose of discourse; [but] it provides the means to gossip" (Spacks, 1982, p.24). By talking about public concerns in private spaces and among private groups, gossip serves a purpose of "social solidarity" that "transmits often useful information" (ibid., p.26). Thus, public sphere discourse can be said to have arisen from, or perhaps even already included, many a gossip about the people and their issues involved. It is such discussions among the private citizens that have influenced the course of history.

If we look at historical anecdotes over the centuries, we often find them entrenched in the gossip of the day. Research in the area of cultural studies is habitually enamoured of the idle talk among members of the concerned community. Referring to 18<sup>th</sup> century England, Nicola Parsons (2009) notes the importance of the secret proceedings undertaken beyond the royal court to uphold the divine rights of kings. These gave rise to the "body of state secrets sacred to the monarch", on which royal decisions were based (Parsons, 2009, p.2). Members of this secret body would give their support to all decisions and legitimise them before imposing them on the public. Queen Anne, after her succession in 1702, reorganised the political principles of the state by making all court proceedings public and introducing public elections under a two-party parliamentary system of governance. Although her fragile health and repeated failures at producing an heir raised doubts about her power to be a monarch, as Parsons states, it was the Queen who set the political standards then adopted by her successors. We often fail to recognise that Queen Anne was instrumental in shifting the power from the Crown to the ministry, and instituting the bases according to which later governments would be free from constitutional conflicts between monarch and parliament.

In spite of her achievements, Queen Anne tends to appear as a minor footnote in British imperial history, with sociologists and historians at times going to the extent of describing her as “hopelessly ordinary” and “dim-witted” (Parsons, 2009, p.1 ). Yet, in the early modern period, not only were the expectations of a sovereign monarch set by public gossip, Parsons argues that the same tool was used to bridge the demands between secrecy and openness: “[I]n this period, gossip was a political instrument that had crucial public effects. Gossip... through its reification in printed genres such as the secret history, [...] also provides a crucial instance of the imbrication of literature and politics” (Parsons, 2009, p.8). By misunderstanding the capacity of gossip to serve as a political instrument, historians have typically over-written Queen Anne’s achievements as a sovereign ruler.

Leaping over several centuries and from the monarchical to the entertainment domain, we find gossip again at work as a public instrument during the Golden Age of Hollywood in 1930s and '40s. Here, gossip within and about the film industry proved crucial to the development of the ‘star system’, also known as the publicity machine of Hollywood. Referring to Hedda Hopper’s column in *Los Angeles Times*, Jennifer Frost claims, “Hollywood gossip intersected with, and illuminates, key developments in mass media gossip, ...newspaper journalism, and conservative politics during 1940s, 1950s and 1960s” (2011, p.6). In fact, in her anecdotes, there is evidence of Hopper’s political orientation in her celebrity gossip to help “shape popular conservative politics in the mid-twentieth century” (ibid., p.11). Her conversations with her readers helped in the creation of a new concept of citizenship that eluded women of those decades. The female readers were brought together as a community with similar socio-political and national sentiments, who participated voluntarily in the betterment of the society by voicing their opinions on and grievances against the information that Hopper shared with them. By the end of Hopper’s journalistic career, ‘soft’ news became an important area of news journalism, as opposed to the ‘hard’ news of politics and foreign policy. Initially trivialised, Hopper’s gossip column became an influential source of information exchange and contributed to the growth of fan communities in the film industry. She used gossip as “a weapon of the weak” (ibid., p.8) to hit back at the power of politicians, moguls and studio heads, as well as helping the readers to communicate with the ‘stars’. Gossip thus becomes a vehicle for giving voice to the disempowered and asserting their ‘right’ to know. It is no surprise, then, that Hopper thought of herself as a political activist and her readers as citizens (Frost, 2011), with whom she shaped the political direction of America.

The Hollywood industry is one place where private talk was often about issues of public concern. Frost notes that, while “all primary historical sources are partial and incomplete, [...] reader response[s allowed] for a close examination of [...] respondents, and their practice of Hollywood gossip” (ibid., p.6). The readers’ language evolved through their gossip. Through their interactions via the columns and the letters-in-response, Hodder and her readers “reflected and affected” (ibid., p.7) changes in the society they lived in. Gossip was used to criticise those in power and regulated norms by “stigmatising the celebrities who stepped outside the boundaries” (ibid., p.8) of what was considered appropriate. As Hodder wrote about the private life of film stars on a public forum, an act which she described as “invasions of privacy in the interests of democracy” (ibid., p.10), the reader embraced the details as well as confronted them. This gradually changed the social and sexual values of the film-going public and ultimately led to the transition of the Hollywood studio system to the “New Hollywood” (ibid., 9) of the 1960s. Thus, this form of gossip had direct political implications for society. Information sharing via debates, expressing ideas and advocating opinions constituted another kind of public sphere. Significant political actions were taken that directly affected the Hollywood system and consequently had an effect on film consumers, and more generally on American society.

With the spread of television as a domestic medium came also its feminisation and its availability for gossip. In the 1970s, when day-time soap opera was declared the most profitable television revenue earner, its viewership primarily consisted of women. Like every other trend associated with women, this development was also trivialised. Soaps were uniquely aired during the daytime because they were specifically designed for consumption by housewives (Brown, 1994). Accordingly, their storylines invariably focused on the private, if over-dramatised, lives of families very similar to that of the viewers. Set in the home amidst a swathe of supposedly feminine concerns, soaps took their drama from personal relationships, sexual repression, emotional and moral conflicts, all set within the living room, the kitchen or the bedroom. Seldom does one come across an outdoor scene in day-time television soaps, which successfully manages to help the female house-bound audience identify with the plot. These soaps easily escaped the confines of the television set, with the women viewers discussing the characters and plots with their friends, which would often end up with gossip about other peoples’ lives. Mary Ellen Brown (1994) claims that such gossiping about fictional characters helped negotiate a niche for these women caught in a male-dominated world.



As a consistent and important part of their chore-filled day, watching soaps provided women with a mythical escape from their daily drudgery. Brown refers to it as “resistive pleasure” (1994, p.ix). By watching the soaps together, even if technically it might be in the isolation of their respective living rooms, women could indulge in a social network of gossip that acted as a support mechanism by helping them vent their emotions – much like the politics of the personal realm discussed in CRGs. The social unity among these women provided them with an opportunity to voice their concerns, often leading to advocacy for each other. Gluckman (cited in Paine, 1967, p.280) says that gossip is fundamental to “the ‘overall unity’ of a community”, which could equally be applied to the community of TV soap viewers who engage in conversations about their favourite characters, or the grassroots communities of feminists.

In more recent times, gossip has taken on a similar function in cyber culture through online chatting. As Zeynep Tufekci boldly asserts, “SNSs replicate many of the functions of gossip” (2008, p.547). For instance, Facebook users leave semi-public messages on their friend’s profile, which affirms their relationship as well as their identity in cyber society. Their status updates and relationship verification with other friends on SNS are also an acknowledgement of their social status in real life. On the Facebook homepage users can chat with their contacts individually in real time, while they also send out collective messages which can be responded to at different points of time. As with historical forms of gossip, these are discussions of a personal nature taking place in a public setting, but now the role of magazines or television in inciting participatory gossip has been taken over by social media.

In the Indian context, the word ‘gossip’ is referred to in different languages by different words, but in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bengal, when the British ruled the country, *adda* (the Bengali word for ‘gossip’) was a popular leisure-time activity. Debarati Sen (2011, p. 522) writes, “*Adda* is a kind of informal social talk, usually done in Bengali, among friends, colleagues, even family members, but historically its content has always been tied to something intellectual, like local and global politics, art, literature, and music. Also salient is its urban setting”. Such talk is so central that the word *adda* has essentially “become synonymous with Bengali identity and culture” (ibid.), says Sen. Initially, only men took part in it and most of their discussions would revolve around critiquing the westernisation brought in by British rule. However, as women started receiving education in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, they began to participate in *addas* as well, as documented by Sen. In fact, there were dedicated physical spots for these *adda* sessions. Stressing the continuing relevance of the

term, Sen says, “Currently in Indian public discourse *adda* has become synonymous with Bengaliness, so much so that tourism brochures selling Calcutta tout that visiting famous cafés or joints where *adda* is still practiced – even participation – is a must before leaving Calcutta” (ibid.).

Similarly, in this chapter, I argue that the same gossip or *adda* continues over a digital public space, which is engaged in by women SNS users. I have found structural similarities between this communication model and that of second-wave feminism, thereby using ‘gossip’ as an analogy to define a dialogic act through which personal information goes public. In this sense, I have attempted to degender the word ‘gossip’ as defined by scholars like Spacks (1985), and reclaim it as a mode of communication to describe interactions on FB. Akin to the coffee shops where these *addas* take place in Calcutta, in the digital world these women are engaging in the act over the FB platform. Their discussions may not be as directly critical of governance as in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Bengal, but these digital interactions do establish an identity among the group members as they engage in small-‘p’ politics.

#### LANGUAGE AND INTIMATE COMMUNICATION

Although hardly a theorist of gossip, Habermas has referred to the “conversation of intimate equals in the lifeworld” (Peters, 1993, p.564) as the perfect communication model. Whatever the subject, such a conversation is an affirmation of alliance. While Spacks points out that “gossip, like poetry and fiction, penetrates to the truth of things”, she also notes that it reports “not fantasies of human greatness but realities of human pettiness” (1982, p.25) The constant analysis and reinterpretation of an emotionally-motivated decision bring the actors to a level of intimacy that confirms their bonded equality, however petty the subject matter or however ugly the truth that is revealed. Gossip can therefore gratify the actor and serve her self-interest by positioning her firmly within a community of shared truths and interests. Robin Dunbar argues that “gossip has taken over the social function of grooming. Instead of removing lice from each other’s hair, people check in with friends and colleagues, ask how they are doing, and exchange a few words about common acquaintances, the news, or the local sports team” (Dunbar, 1996, 2004, cited in Donath, 2007, n.p). Attaining such a level of communication leads to social catharsis based in trust. The bonding that such acts foster ensures trust among the participants in times of crises.

Language, as a vehicle for gossip, plays an important role in building up trust, because “[s]peech... is the most pleasant and human of social ties” (Plutarch, cited in

Holland, 1996, p.197). It helps with exchange of cultural norms and also develops ties amongst people from different geographical locations (Donath, 2007). The knowledge thus gained through the use of language flows through social networks, binding more people to the group. Within a community, language is used to keep the members informed, but also to enact social cohesion. But any social group is held together by strong and weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). The ties of the members are determined by how much information, or gossip, percolates to them through other members within the group. The strong ties within the core group need the actors' maximum attention to remain within that particular circle, while the weak ties are the low-maintenance elements within the network. Granovetter (1973) says that most network models emphasise their strong ties to define their group. They might make the group's profile reliable; however, it is the weak ties placed on the outer rings of a communication model of concentric circles that keep the network cohesive.

Often taking the form of gossip, language facilitates information exchange among the group members. But the 'information-management' (Paine, 1967) capabilities of the dominant actor in the group - in terms of what and how much information is circulated - are inevitably enmeshed with her personal interests.

The time spent on 'social grooming' may be a 'signal of need' – its purpose being not to indicate how much free time one had, but rather the importance one places on the relationship [or particular information]. (Donath, 2007, n.p)

Accordingly, any information shared with the strong and weak members of the group, so as to benefit her cause, is framed by 'social grooming'. Thus, an individual aware of the social implications of information can use the act of gossip to convey the information she wishes to spread within a specified group.

Gossip need not necessarily involve secrecy or exclusionary relationships. Just like removing lice from each other's head involves social exchange, which in turn fosters trust between the actors, the fundamental structure of SNS is designed to develop reliability among online users often through activities that are apparently pointless and irrational, such as status updates, posting comments on other's status, tagging photographs and remediating information from news portals. As Donath argues, "[T]he wastefulness of some seemingly irrational behaviours is actually a cost that ensures the reliability of a communicative signal" (2007, n.p). It is interesting to note here, that irrespective of the nature or content of online chatting, it is still associated mainly with women (van Zoonen, 2001), just as grooming,

reading gossip magazines or watching soap operas have traditionally been considered women's occupations.

SNS essentially creates a “supernet” (Donath, 2007, n.p) without the usual trappings of phatic tools (see Chapter 2). Social ties benefit a user in several ways, from providing camaraderie and support to being a constant source of information. These benefits multiply with the increase in such social ties. Just as people acquire new skills from their friends and acquaintances, knowledge flows through social networks to ensure constant exchange of information. With SNS, the possibilities of such informative expansions are infinite. The apparently irrational chats between SNS users ensure all the strong and weak ties in the community receive equal attention from their group members, as information rolls from one to another across the criss-cross of networks and is not limited by the physical presence of the members – just like a real-life “connected world of family, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances” (ibid, n.p). Since an instantaneous chat can be had with any member who is online, it is as easy to begin, drop or pick up a conversation to maintain this “connected world”. In other words, since “patterns of gossip reflect patterns of intimacy” (Spacks, 1982, p.29), SNS inherently thrives on active participation of the actors, which keeps the network thriving.

In the information age, gratification is derived from the fact that somebody in your network is paying some attention to you, via a ‘like’ or a ‘comment’ posted on your Facebook update. What makes Facebook convenient is the fact that the recipient of such attention can acknowledge it in his/ her own time. Quite similarly, a chat message can be answered with an SNS message whenever it is convenient, as all chatscripts are saved in the user's SNS account by default. Thus, when it comes to reaching out to the masses or spreading the word, even weak ties help reach an unexpected number of people, beyond what the core group of strong ties can achieve. The temporality of an SNS interaction leads to instant gratification, which paradoxically leaves a durable impression on the actors. In turn, these chats become an art form, when an actor controls, arranges and distributes the flow of information within a group or network, all the while tending the social relationships that undergird the group as a basis for collective interests.

## GOSSIP AS VEHICLE OF ACTIVISM

SNS is providing women with another vehicle to continue with their gossip in the virtual world. Rejecting the negative characterisation of gossip, Ralph L. Rosnow and Gary Alan

Fine refer to gossip as “talk with a social purpose” (cited in Holland, 1996, p.200). Unlike merely chatting about vacation plans or the weather, gossip as a form of evaluative and comparative talk involves discussions about other’s lives which often give insights to the actors on their own situation. The gossip that the CRGs engage in comes with a political intent, as it aims at sharing experiences and distributing information. This kind of communication, when mediated through SNS, helps unite women with like-minded concerns or issues. For instance, by showing empathy towards a person suffering from some kind of grief or crisis, the actors involved in gossip can resolve their own issues by finding points of similarity and commonality. This could well be a social purpose that gossip fulfils.

During the course of discussing other people’s lives, the actors find a comfort zone and begin confiding in each other about their own personal experiences. When they talk about their trauma with a person they trust and are comfortable with, it helps them discharge their pent-up emotions. Talking about it might also give a different perspective to the incident that could open up new avenues for coming to terms with an experience. Gossip thus amounts to a meta-commentary shared between friends, where they go through the processes together while discussing the steps that led to the unfolding of the incident, the decisions they made and the intentions that prompted them. By the end of such an intense analysis, the friends would have walked a long road together and shared some very private moments. In this way, gossip can promote social solidarity, in the form of empathy between the actors, and also transmit useful information because the actor who listens to her friend’s experiences ends up advising the victim, which often takes the form of advocacy.

This chatty form of communication that verges on gossip is facilitated by the various tools of SNS. For instance, Facebook chat enables a user to ease in and out of live chats, as well as to communicate simultaneously with more than one contact, even as she updates her own status message to inform all her contacts uniformly about a particular development. This information flow, which moves across weak ties into ever wider circles, can bring women together from every corner of the globe, even when they are deeply engaged in their domestic chores. In this sense, SNS can be measured against Mohanty’s (2003) vision of a transnational institution that provides conditions conducive for public participation, irrespective of their socio-economic, gender or cultural background of the actor. The very triviality of gossip means that online chat is pleasurable rather than onerous. Mohanty herself imagines a world “where pleasure rather than just drudgery determine our choices” (ibid., p.3). She also says that this can be achieved through everyday struggles that are small as well

as big, which together “are as important as larger, organised political movements” (ibid., p.4). Although Mohanty is making a plea for the ideas of transnational feminism, she brings out three elements which similarly secure the potential political basis of gossip: it must be based in public participation; it should be pleasurable; and it is bound by the importance of small, everyday struggles. All of this holds true for the chatty nature of women’s engagement on SNS. It helps that women have already taken up the information overflow that defines Web 2.0, with SNS as its most determining feature. The ever-increasing access to SNS among women from diverse backgrounds helps them to reach out to a wider social base. What makes this particularly conducive for activist purposes is that it involves no additional expenses.

An individual can influence the flow and content of the information that is circulated among the members of a particular group, and thus SNS can also serve the purpose of spreading the word for the movement. Indeed, as Plant points out, SNS is particularly useful for women’s purposes because it highlights “affection, intimacy and informality” (1998, p.144). Without doubt, activists keen on spreading the word and garnering support need to be careful to not reduce their gossip to too much frivolity and entertainment, as a comprehensive and result-oriented message will channel responses in the right direction more than one that is shrouded by promotional perks. Nonetheless, gossip can bring together women from different socio-economic backgrounds who can form pressure groups around issues that curtail their rights, perhaps in the form of Facebook groups. A responsive and aware population can, in turn, impact decision-making at the government level, influence legislative amendments and, ultimately, bring about changes in the society.

In fact, the universal language of SNS has the potential to promote discussions that would help overcome the ideological differences among feminist thought that have evolved in different eras and perhaps make the transnational dream, as articulated by Mohanty, a possibility. The instantaneous gratification of this apparently democratic mode of communication based on constant virtual phatic gestures can help build up trust and help SNS users unite across territorial limits to build up a connected world. SNS tools can assist an activist to inform fellow activists in organising a mass movement almost overnight, which was perhaps a distant dream with traditional organising tools. Thus, in digitally networked society the pleasures and ease of gossip can be manoeuvred to work in favour of activists who resort to the apparently non-aggressive tools of SNS communication to get their message across and potentially facilitate political activism.

## EXPERTS ON GOSSIP-BASED SNS ACTIVISM

During the course of my data collection, I spoke to digital activists from urban India who uses Web-based forums to circulate information, organise online appeals and offline campaigns, extract various degrees of response from authorities and sway government decisions on social, political and economic issues. My sample was limited to the urban demography because of ease of access. I made contact with them via SNS platforms from overseas because these activists use SNS frequently to promote non-profit causes and are considered ‘experts’ in their field of work given their success in raising a voice to bring about social changes. All of them are involved in actions that comprise mainly of protest, dissent and in some cases resistance.

Keith Gomes, Bollywood film-maker and digital activist, is a member of Jagrut Nagrik Manch (which translates to ‘Citizens’ Awakening Forum’), whose No Vote campaign, launched in 2008, asked citizens to refrain from casting their vote due to the absence of uncorrupted leaders who can represent the diverse potential of the country. The forum soon realised, however, that such a resistant act was not the solution. Aside from it being against the law in India not to vote, swaying public opinion in their favour was difficult to achieve without offering an alternate and more acceptable model. Instead, they started a new web-based protest group called Let’s Rebuild India, with constructive aims.

Gomes says that Facebook helps him connect with a wide range of people across different cultures and organisations. Initially, he used the SNS to reconnect with school friends. Gomes says:

But ever since I used Facebook to start the Jagrut Nagrik Manch [an act of dissent] and later the No Vote campaign [an act of resistance, verging on rebellion], I realized its importance as a tool to reach out and spread awareness among people.

Thus, he uses SNS as a promotional tool to further his cause. He elucidates this point by referring to his recent visit to the politically-disturbed areas of Chattisgarh in central India, where he took photographs of a neglected orphanage in the area and tagged his Facebook friends to them. He received responses from as far as California, through friends’ friends, who were keen on supporting the orphanage or even adopting the children. He says:

Facebook is good for information sharing. If you put up a post, the world reads it. It can start a debate, but only a few will act on it. In the online world, it is easier to locate and connect with such doers.

When online communication is reflected in offline activism – real-time protest - the social impact of digital activism becomes more tangible. As Gomes points out, because only a few will translate their (online) political interest into (offline) political activity, SNS is useful in helping activists to cast the widest possible net to interested parties, thereby increasing the number of potential ‘doers’.

Jasmine Shah is the national coordinator of Jaago Re! One Billion Votes campaign (‘Jaago Re!’ translates to ‘Wake up!’), a resistant act aimed at increasing the number of voters’ turnout at general elections in an attempt to arrest the influx of proxy voters. According to Shah, he uses different SNS for different purposes: “Facebook to primarily connect with friends and also to hear about my favourite causes/ non-profits. Twitter to primarily learn, discover and keep track of the activities of my professional contacts.” Interestingly, the Jaago Re campaign was a joint initiative of Janaagraha and Tata Tea - a tea-manufacturing organisation lending its support to a non-profit cause – and was based on direct usage of corporate marketing techniques, like prime-time television commercials. The campaign was promoted vigorously via all forms of media and its visibility was largely responsible for its success in spreading awareness among the masses, coupled by regular mobile updates. “Though the actual action of the campaign unfolded on [www.jaagore.com](http://www.jaagore.com), we used SNS (Facebook and Orkut) to engage and answer queries of our campaign followers and volunteers throughout the duration of the campaign from September 2008 to May 2010,” states Shah.

Unlike Gomes and Shah, who use SNS for resistant acts, Jasmeen Patheja, co-founder of Blanknoise, a campaign against sexual harassment, uses Facebook as a public platform to launch events and mobilise people onto the streets. “It is a back and forth process,” says Patheja, adding, “while working with this medium (SNS), we realised we were engaging in sustained public dialogue.” One of their most popular events, ‘I never ask for it’, asked members to put up status messages on their Facebook page about their experiences of sexual harassment without mentioning it directly. At the end of the message, they would add ‘I never ask for it’. This act of dissent aimed at expressing dissatisfaction with the male gaze went viral, with even men responding to it. This campaign was considered successful in the sense that it had some effect on male attitudes to female sexuality, at least amongst those men who responded positively to the cause.

Sonali Khan of Bell Bajao, a campaign against domestic violence, uses SNS mainly to spread the word and report on their latest campaigns to keep their supporters informed about



their activities. “Our key strategy behind our online presence was to reach out to the young SNS users in our society with our message,” says Khan. They are continuously devising ways in which to engage the readers with their issues, for example blog and Twitter festivals. Unlike other forms of media, SNS, and especially Facebook, facilitates interactivity, which became even more apparent when the group held their ‘16 days of Tweetism’ campaign. “Even though our emphasis was on Twitter, surprisingly we found a more engaged audience on Facebook,” says Khan. Their core campaign was considered a success given the extent to which they spread awareness and encouraged resistance to domestic violence in the urban and semi-urban landscape of the country. As Khan says:

When we did our analytics on Twitter, in terms of our followers and those who have retweeted your feeds, we were somewhere in the position of a social influencer. The highest position is of celebrity and we reached the status of a trendsetter.

The very fact that she is referring to the success of their campaign in terms of ‘setting a trend’, usually associated with a celebrity status, shows that their campaign strategy involves the use of corporate and entertainment marketing techniques.

As will be discussed later (Chapter 4), such tactics are not to be dismissed, however easily they may fall prey to Habermas’s suspicion of ‘representative publicity’. In keeping with the theme of hyper promotion, Urvashi Butalia, the first feminist publisher in India (Zubaan is the name of her current publishing house, the previous one being Kali for Women), uses Facebook to make contact with readers of her publications. She says, “It enables a dialogue with the fan base much faster than writing letters.” Thus we find that Facebook is a major digital tool being used by these activists to further their cause, for a variety of purposes but each based on interactivity and contact. Each one of their strategies falls within the trajectory of acts that together define digital activism.

**CHAPTER 4**  
**PARADIGMS OF DIGITAL ACTIVISM:**  
**INDIA AND ITS MOBILE INTERNET USERS**

*Over just a decade, the mobile phone was transformed from a rare and unwieldy instrument to a palm-sized, affordable staple, taken for granted by poor fishermen in Kerala and affluent entrepreneurs in Mumbai alike.*

- Assa Doron and Robin Jeffrey, 2013

‘We are the 99%’. ‘I am sluts’. These are some of the status messages that have gone viral on SNS in the past few years. Media consumers can immediately identify with the movements and their issues the moment these phrases are mentioned. It is similar to the taglines retail consumers have come to associate with certain popular consumer products like Coca Cola or McDonald’s. Perhaps the recall value of ‘We are the 99%’ is today almost as high as that of ‘I’m lovin’ it’. Interestingly, both the Occupy Movement protesting worldwide socio-economic inequality and the Slutwalk against male appropriations of feminine sexuality are considered successful cases of digital activism. In both the cases, information exchange by mediation and remediation of relevant text via SNS has facilitated the spread, organisation and outreach of these movements.

SNS is frequently used to send out information with a call for action. As the message is distributed, it compounds its own distribution channels through repostings, creating a network of SNS users who receive the message. This network of channels then becomes the field of mobilisation for organising an activist movement. Sandor Vegh (2003) assigns three key features to digital activism: advocacy, mobilisation and reaction. These features can easily be linked to the way SNS operates with regard to digital activism. Information circulates via SNS either in the form of story-sharing, advocacy or reactions from users voiced through online lobbying, and this pushes the movement forward. The coalition of these online lobbies has the potential to influence worldwide opinion. The online mobilisation can be used to organise offline actions by posting the time and location for a demonstration on SNS. In fact, SNS works as an asynchronous message distribution board by providing a forum for dialogue and channelling information back and forth beyond geographical limits. The users, in turn, express disapproval with the status quo or raise public

awareness through cyber-campaigns. The wide visibility gained makes SNS the most effective forum for publicising issues of contention and sparking action.

SNS activism, in this sense, incorporates the two layers that Richard Pollay assigns to the communication process: informational and transformational (cited in Leiss et al, 2005). While the former details the primary features of the issue to the recipient of the message, the latter tries to alter the attitudes of recipients towards the topic of the message conveyed. Vegh's concept of awareness or advocacy in digital activism is informational in essence. It informs the recipient to generate awareness. When the message seeks to mobilise recipients by influencing their attitude to the issue at hand, however, then the communication process is transformational in nature. A successful transformational communication generates reaction in some form from the recipient of the message.

Thus, we can assign digital activism two paradigms of operation – to empower with information and to inspire for a cause. Activism can therefore serve two different purposes of empowerment and inspiration, depending on the target consumer of the mediated message. Traditional, non-digital forms of activism might achieve the same objectives of informing and transforming through advocacy, but the digitally transmitted message can reach a pre-determined target audience, unlike the traditional communication process that reaches the audience indiscriminately. In addition, when a message is mediated through traditional mass media, it tends to stay in public memory only for a limited duration of time, whereas a digitally mediated message may come with a highly extended shelf-life, because the same message can be easily remediated or 'shared' several times over through its network of users till the message often goes viral. The virtual network of contacts takes the message beyond territorial and even temporal limitations of the traditional mass media. The remediable nature of the SNS-mediated communication process helps achieve the lobbying effect more swiftly and efficiently.

Social media analyst Gaurav Mishra says that the first model, namely to empower with information, is usually associated with the developing nations where people have limited access to basic information and so the activist tools involve "simple-to-use digital technologies" (Mishra, 2010, n.p) like text messaging via cellular phone. The audience often ends up being passive consumers mainly due to their lack of exposure to interactive communication devices resulting from their socio-economic limitations. The second model of digital activism is prevalent in developed countries, where people use SNS mainly for three purposes: instantaneous access to information, self-expression and social interaction (ibid).

With a consumer profile that includes steady demand for information, SNS activism can begin with spreading the word and create awareness about an issue by engaging with inspiration. This form of stimulation amongst a comparatively more proactive audience can influence the message recipients to express their opinion, leading to interactive communication among the users. Accordingly, activist groups use digital media as a communication tool to reach out to two distinct consumer bases - one belonging to the developed economies of the world and the other to the developing economies. The success of activism via SNS thus depends on who uses it for what purpose.

The model of empowering with information can be said to have been used in the Ushahidi campaign launched in Kenya, a developing nation. The campaign sought to democratise the flow of information by increasing transparency. It began with reporting on violence after the post-election fall-out in 2008, but since then Ushahidi, which in Swahili means 'testimony', has evolved as a platform for the citizens to voice their opinion and experiences, which primarily amounts to information distribution. The reports are submitted via the Internet and the mobile phone, and the platform is centrally supervised by the Ushahidi activists. Now, Ushahidi is often referred to as an SNS for grassroots communication. The second model of engaging with inspiration can be traced back to the Seattle protest of 1999 in the US (Kahn and Kellner, 2004), which used web-based tools that were individually owned by activists to disseminate information through alternate media (like Indymedia), blogging, photo-sharing from incident spots, and viral use of email lists.

In the former instance, the movement was launched using digital tools of communication with the objective of keeping people updated on a particular issue. In the second instance, information was shared through a communication tool that was considered highly sophisticated at an earlier phase in the development of social media technology, with the objective of garnering support against corporate globalisation. However, information does not stop at distribution; rather, information always demands response and engagement. The citizens in the former example engage with the information they receive through the platform. But being a developing economy, the people often lack the required level of literacy to use the technology and, in most cases, cannot afford an interactive communication device enabled with an Internet connection, which limits their opportunity to participate in digital activism.

Given the manner in which SNS or the Internet is being used to voice public opinion and impact on social change, it can perhaps be said that technology is determining the socio-

economic structure in today's world. Refusing the determinist view, however, Lee Salter (2003) argues that

[n]o matter how much social shaping takes place, ...a cautious balance must be held between the transformative capacities of a technology on the one hand, and the capacity of social agents to utilize technologies, and shape them in their use, on the other hand. (p.120)

SNS is perhaps the ultimate forum for information exchange in the digital world and an advanced communication tool at the disposal of the users. But unless the consumers know how to process the information they have accessed, the communication tool by itself cannot condition and shape the social order. There is always a certain level of interplay between technology and the society, because none of the elements by themselves can determine socio-economic and political transformation. The two paradigms of digital activism suggested here seek to articulate the interplay between technology and society depending on the economic development of the society and the access of its people to sophisticated communication tools.

#### SITUATING INDIA WITHIN THESE TWO PARADIGMS

India has the second largest number of mobile internet users in the world and the mobile phone has penetrated well into the rural landscape, which constitutes approximately 70 per cent of the population of the country (World Bank, n.d). The language barrier endemic to this multilingual nation has also been overcome by enabling both mobile technology and SNS usage in vernacular languages. Given the popularity of SNS, mobile phone sets, considered affordable in the Indian context, are already enabled with SNS-options that are easy to navigate. But in spite of such high technological advances in the country, economically speaking India is considered a developing nation that houses a population of 410 million living below the poverty line.

The economic development that the country has experienced is restricted to a certain section of the urban populace. The wealth earned through economic growth seldom percolates down to the masses, mainly because of lack of adequate infrastructure and deep-seated corruption within the system. This, in turn, has resulted in an ever-widening economic gap between the urban and the rural population. At the start of the new millennium, ICT4Ds (Information and Communication Technologies for Development) were introduced in India to serve twin purposes in a unique juxtaposition: to gratify "middle-class technofetishism" and to overcome "rural underdevelopment" (Mazzarella, 2010, p.783). As such, the Eleventh

Five-Year Plan (2007-2012) was formulated to achieve “inclusive growth” (Deloitte, 2011, p.3) to overcome the wide disparities in the economic conditions of the people. In keeping with the plan, the development in mobile telephony was seen to have the potential to overcome the socio-economic disparity of the country’s population by making SNS available to everyone, which in turn can connect millions of users in a technological instantiation of inclusivity. While this strategy is certainly affecting the penetration of mobile telephony throughout India, I argue that both the consumer bases of developed and developing economies are currently operative in the context of India’s urban and rural segregation, which has implications for the mobilisation of SNS-based activism.

Global connectivity in urban India has also been encouraged by SNS access via mobile phone, which increases accessibility and hastens dissemination of information. McKinsey and Company estimates that India already had 120 million internet users in 2012, which is projected to go up to 330 to 370 million users by 2015 (Gnanasambandam et al, 2012, p.1). The number of internet users on PCs, growing at a rate of 50 per cent per year, is estimated to have been 100 million by the end of 2010 (Eluvangal, 2010). More startlingly, there were 500 million users of mobile phones in the country in 2010, with the number of mobile internet users having grown five times between 2005 and 2010 (ibid). The number of internet users on PCs and on mobile phones is about to become equivalent, with the latter on the verge of outstripping the former, a major share of which will be utilised to channel local connectivity in rural India. Assa Doron and Robin Jeffrey in *The Great Indian Phone Book* (2013, book jacket) argue that this communication device has “disrupted more people and relationships than the printing press, wristwatch, automobile, or railways, though it has qualities of all four”. It would be relevant to mention here that online and offline communication, for instance computer-mediated Internet-based communication and mobile-based offline communication, are not “distinct and unrelated” (Foth and Hearn, 2007, p.2). Rather, online and offline modes together can create “portfolios of sociability” (Castells, 2001, p.132) by combining in a communicative network of friendship or kinship depending on the nature and intensity of bonding between the users.

There is little question that mobile connectivity allows for greater access. To use a phone, Doron and Jeffrey (2013) observe, the user needs to be familiar with about a dozen keys on the keypad. The literacy level of the user does not come into play, as Doron and Jeffrey found in their case study of a semi-urban community of boatmen on the banks of Banaras in north-eastern India, where “[p]eople who could not read or write often had

excellent memories” (ibid., p.141). In fact, it was the efficiency of communication via mobile phones that prompted these people to seek to improve their literacy levels. It made “literacy desirable, useful and attainable and initiated them into a world of record-keeping [...and] data-bases” (ibid.). These databases, in urban and literate societies, have given rise to the virtual communities amongst, for instance, booklovers or brand consumers. “[A] dispersed and unconnected aggregate of individuals who have the same [consumer] profile” (ibid.) is brought together via these databases. They may not ever meet in real life, but they share a special bond which often comes into play in times of information exchange on a product of mutual desire or interest. For instance, those who buy books on amazon.com often write reviews and recommend the best titles to fellow buyers.

Online networks based on the specialised interests of communities are similarly manifested via SNS interactions and their groupings. MySpace, launched in 2003, caught the attention of prospective users in India, as it became the favourite platform for upcoming musicians to display their creativity. Orkut, a social media format not unlike Facebook, was launched in 2004 and gradually picked up a strong user-base in India (Mahajan, 2009). Even today, it is a close second to Facebook users. Other networking sites that gained acceptance in India include LinkedIn and Hi5; LinkedIn continues to be a favourite with professional networkers to this day. Will Hodgman (2009), executive vice president of comScore, argues, “While there is certainly room for several players in the social networking space in India, the sites that have the right blend of having both a strong brand and cultural relevance will be best positioned for future growth.” In 2007, Orkut had 64 per cent of user share (Madhavan, 2007) and in 2008 it had 12.8 million visitors. Against this, Facebook had 20.9 million visitors in 2010 (comScore) – which was a notch over Orkut’s 19.9 million visitors.

What has helped Facebook push itself up the ladder of popularity is the shift from its global image to a ‘glocal’ image through the introduction of vernacular languages in its interface. Now Indian users can post updates in eight local languages (NDTV, 2012). In fact, while collecting data for this project, I observed a marked pattern in SNS usage and migration in India. Most of the long-term users of SNS in the country had started off with Orkut between 2005 and 2007. With Facebook gaining in popularity worldwide, they shifted allegiance by transferring their Orkut profiles to Facebook almost overnight. However, in the semi-urban and rural areas, it is Orkut that still rules the roost, thus creating an urban-rural divide even in the choice of SNS. Urban users are often members of more than one SNS, depending on who they establish a ‘friendship’ with. Apart from professional and personal

networking, another invaluable aspect of networking in the Indian context takes place with regard to matrimonial alliances. Accordingly, we find a separate category of SNS aimed only at the current and anticipated needs of marriage information-seekers (Pal, 2010). In these spaces, there is selective dissemination of information, controlled mainly by four big players: Shaadi, Bharatmatrimony, Jeevansathi and Simplymarry.

The evolution and consequent popularity of SNS appears to have aroused a sudden surge of “vigilantism” (Mahajan, 2009) among Indian users. Les Johnston (1996) defines vigilantism as a populist threat of force that “arises when an established order is under threat from the transgression, the potential transgression, or the imputed transgression of institutionalized norms” (p.220). Because “engagement is voluntary, vigilantism: constitutes a social movement”(ibid.), which can take the form of vigorous campaigning to bring about social and political changes. The frequent use of SNS has made Indian users aware of their rights and liberties as citizens, or has at least increased such awareness and helped them to voice their preferences. Several instances of activism via SNS tools can be classed as digital vigilantism, propagated primarily through Twitter and Facebook. The Pink Chaddi Campaign of 2009, often compared to the bra-burning feminist movements of the 1970s, is the most famous case to date. The terrorist attacks in Mumbai in November 2008 also saw a large number of Indians tweeting live from the insurgency spots and also posting updates on Facebook. In 2006, the anti-India propaganda campaign on Orkut, called ‘We hate India’ with a burning Indian flag for a profile picture, was countered by the formation of another online community called ‘We hate those who hate India’, until the Bombay High Court issued a notice to Google to pull it down. A list of similar instances has crowded SNS forums in recent years, which substantiate the increasing vigilantism of Indian SNS users who have the potential to become digital activists.

#### RURAL VS URBAN INDIA: INFORMATION VS INSPIRATION MODELS

In 2010, two associations – GSMA (Global System for Mobile communications Association) and CBFW (Cherie Blair Foundation for Women) – jointly published a paper describing how mobile phones can liberate women, especially in developing nations like India, where middle- and low-income families have at least one member who is a mobile phone user. At the third UN Millennium Development Goals on gender equality, the mobile phone was described as “an effective productivity and development tool which creates education, health, employment, banking and business opportunities” (GSMA and CBFW, 2010, n.p). As a



communication tool, it plays a crucial role in connecting people and families “at the bottom of the economic pyramid” (ibid., n.p). Research conducted by Deloitte (ibid.) has further shown that an increase in mobile phone usage is directly linked to a growth in the GDP of a developing country’s economy. Armed with a mobile phone, women not only feel more independent, but it also provides them with increased income and professional opportunities.

Jo Tacchi discovered this in her field research in rural India, where the mobile phones appeared “prominently and emphatically in the data about the women’s ‘communicative ecologies’” (2010, n.p). The mobile phone is considered a more personal communication tool because the caller can uniquely identify the person he or she has called, as opposed to a landline phone that is usually shared by a household; the former helps you choose who you want to talk to. This marks a shift from the traditional community behaviour as a group or *Gemeinschaft* in rural areas (Tönnies, 1887, cited in Foth and Hearn, 2007) and fosters a closer interpersonal bond. It presupposes that users are not constrained by their geographical social networks but can pre-determine their compatibility with “prospective communication partners” (ibid., p.2). It is understood that ICT-enabled networking overrides “physical closeness” to establish “social closeness” (Wellman, 2001, p.234), but Tacchi found that the mobile phone as a communication technology has opened up avenues for intimate conversations among rural women in India, who most often belong to the same family. She relates the story of an Indian family in which the mother feels comforted because she can interact with her married daughter every day about things that cannot be discussed over public phones. The mobile handset gives her daughter both freedom and privacy from her in-laws, with whom she resides in the same house, as she can speak comfortably without being overheard by her husband or his family. Tacchi (2010, n.p) argues, “This is a significant relationship for these women, and following this discussion we asked all the women we met about their mobile phone use, and sure enough it was talked about most animatedly.” If this is the impact that the mobile phone has on its women users in India, we can only imagine the potential of SNS access through the mobile Internet by these same women in the near future.

Indian ‘mobile activists’ (see Chapter 1) have already begun to harness the capacity of the mobile Internet for digital activism. Following closely on the paradigm of empowering users with information, Ravi Ghate’s SMSONE revolves around the concept of ‘mobile journalists’ comprised of school dropouts from rural areas of Maharashtra. They deliver community-specific news for free to people living in some of India’s most unconnected areas, along with paid promotional messages. The ratio is one free community news message to

four revenue-generating messages per month, with the mode of communication being a basic text messaging service. Although in essence this is a digital newsletter, in practice it empowers the villagers with information that was previously unavailable to them. For this local newsletter aimed at “the base of the pyramid” (Lacy, 2009,n.p), Ghate scouts villages for unemployed youth with good local sales or campaign experience and helps them make a decent living – although it is never enough to make them so ambitious as to pack up and leave for the big city. The employee gains a social standing from his apparent authority to disseminate information among the masses, but what the subscribers gain is more powerful. Armed with just a basic mobile phone, but no TV or local newspaper and an infrequent electricity supply, the farmers receive “instant updates about crop pricing or news of a seed or fertilizer delivery a town away” (ibid). Accordingly, the farmers plan their trips only when they are certain to benefit from them, rather than wasting time and energy on a futile trip and coming back empty-handed. This access to information has deep political implications for the farmers, because in these unconnected villages information is power and the oft-corrupt government officials or middle men suppress facts to exert their superiority. The information distributed by ‘mobile journalists’ helps these farmers ascertain their rights and protect themselves from the politics of the middle men. The politically motivated struggle for hegemonic control of information is countered by mobile activists who take the advantage of digital technologies to resist the powerful elite.

CGNet Swara is another such enterprise set up by an ex-BBC journalist, Shubhranshu Choudhary, who was frustrated by his inability to report on people living in remote tribal areas of India and speaking a language that is not understood by the mainstream population. He devised a news service that is distributed on mobile phones. The Gondi-speaking community of Chhattisgarh region had no means of communication with the exterior, as their villages had no radio, television or newspaper. The only device that worked across the rough and often impassable terrain of their tribal land was the mobile phone connected to distant telephone towers. CGNet Swara made available information on local concerns in their local language. The villagers, who often have to climb up a tree to capture the phone signal, have to dial a number which prompts them to press ‘1’ to record a story or leave information, or ‘2’ if they want to hear the day’s bulletin. At the same time, when any piece of information is validated by a substantial number of villagers via option ‘1’, it is translated by journalist activists into English and uploaded to the CGNet Swara website. Information posted online has prompted activists from other parts of the country to take up the cause of the Gondi

community and at times even challenge the central government for their unbalanced allocation of resources to these far-off communities. Choudhary argues, “Mobile technology is better than radio. Mobile is a two-way communication” (Doron and Jeffrey 2013, p.161), quite unlike the radio, which allows information to flow only in one direction. Interestingly, the Indian government could not crack down on Choudhary and his team’s activist enterprises because the privatised mobile phone service does not violate the broadcast laws of the country.

These are all examples of using information via mobile telephony for empowerment. The rural women, although many have access to mobile phones and are connected with their family and friends, cannot become an inclusive part of the networked communication ecology. This is primarily due to the fact that phone conversations are based on one-to-one communication. Even if they can afford mobile internet and have access to an SNS platform, their lack of literary skills might stand in the way unless SNS evolves to include voice messaging as one of their communication service options. The activists working in rural areas are actually based out of urban areas; the technology they use are stationed and operated from urban cities. For example, Ghate himself is based in the western city of Pune in India, from which he stays in touch with his team spread across several villages in western and southern India. Given the urban-rural dichotomy of India, there is a participatory gap between urban and rural women and their practices, with the rural women having far less access to SNS participatory politics.

With regard to the other paradigm, that of engaging users with inspiration, there are several instances of digital activism, the most recent being Anna Hazare’s fast-based campaign against the Anti-Corruption Bill. Hazare provided a voice for the middle class population’s frustration arising from the irrevocable corruption that seems to have gripped the nation (Khandekar and Reddy, 2013). A retired soldier and activist dedicated to the cause of rural development, 75-year-old Kisan Baburao Hazare, popularly known as ‘Anna’ (which translates to ‘father’ in the Indian language Marathi), launched his non-violent yet aggressive fast-based protest to demand a “comprehensive anti-corruption law and draft a citizen’s ombudsman bill” (Chand, 2011, n.p.), named the Jan Lokpal bill, which would protect whistleblowers against corrupt politicians and government officials. Inspired by the India Against Corruption team, Hazare’s supporters mobilised the entire country to join the protest movement and garnered support from all sections of society, In a move to offline activism,

people poured into the streets to celebrate a ‘people’s victory’ when the Indian Parliament gave in to the Gandhian activist’s demands.

Leading media outlets in the country joined hands with social media and helped spread the buzz about Hazare’s fast almost overnight. Several Facebook pages were set up and profile badges were distributed both offline at the protest points and virtually on Facebook. A ‘Missed call campaign’ asking the supporters to leave a missed call notice on the mobile numbers posted at the meeting points or on SNS, to express symbolic support for the cause, collected over 20 million responses. Online petitions via Avaaz.org registered above 6.17 thousand supporters, along with Twitter trends with hashtags like #janlokal, #annahazare and #meranetachorhain (which translates to ‘my leader is a thief’). YouTube shows over 2,000 uploads, many of which are amateur videos shot by participants (The Hindu, 2011). The total number of Hazare supporters was estimated at over a hundred million across all forms of social media. It is not easy to put a figure to the offline supporters who made it to the street-side gatherings across the length and breadth of the country. The promotion-based campaign obviously showcased in Hazare’s movement has, in the recent past, become a characteristic feature of digital activism. Such a heavy use of promotional tools recognizable from corporate and guerilla marketing should, however, force us to ask whether this form of activism can be considered democratic. To explore this question, we must consider the persuasive qualities of promotion and interrogate how they help recuperate the possible ‘democracy’ of SNS activist practices.

#### PROMOTION AS COVERT PERSUASION

The level of stimulation or ‘inspiration’ encountered at Hazare’s campaign is dependent on ‘promotion’, which is an act of publicizing a venture to generate desire. This verges on Pollay’s concept of transformational communication, in the garb of increasing public awareness. A deeper look at the ‘inspiration’ model reveals ‘persuasion’ as a possible technique that can be used via SNS to encourage people to engage in discursive interactions. Activism, in this sense, can be said to verge on ‘craftivism’. The term ‘craftivism’ is usually associated with third wave feminists who reclaimed knitting, sewing and other handicrafts traditionally regarded as women’s work and integrated them into profit-making enterprises (van Zoonen, 2002). Here, however, I use ‘craftivism’ in the sense of being crafty, which can be interpreted as a conscious effort to strategise a plan of action that draws on the public’s emotions to bring about change.

This is what former US presidential candidate Ralph Nader was referring to when in 2008 he criticised Barack Obama's online election campaign. Criticising Obama's efforts to use SNS as a democratic tool to urge people to vote, he reinterpreted it as a celebrity marketing strategy used for personal promotion. Much like the Hollywood celebrities who influenced American politics by turning citizens into fans and thereby undermining democracy (Ross, 2010), what Obama created through his tweets, according to Nader, was a pool of ardent supporters who would vote in his favour. This form of 'personality politics' (Street, 2011), prevalent at the level of formal presidential politics, has percolated to the grassroots level of informal politics with the help of digitized communication tools. A similar personality-based call for digital democracy was at play in the Hazare campaign and had much to do with why it was picked up successfully by the celebrity-obsessed media.

Digital or virtual democracy was defined in 2000 by Jan van Dijk (p.30) as "an attempt to practice democracy without limits of time, place and other physical conditions" with the help of ICT or computer-mediated communication. Over a decade later, it constitutes a powerful attempt to change the traditional means of operation engaged in by practitioners of politics. While some users of digital communication tools like Obama believe in the potential and reach of digital democracy, there are others like Nader who is extremely skeptical of the outcome of such usage. Traditionally, political decisions, whether at grassroots or *in camera*, are arrived at through face-to-face communication at meetings. It is an oral practice that places a certain level of importance on the "art of negotiation" (ibid) when it comes to the management and administration of issues on the table. Politics, in this sense, is "the sum of acts in a community meant to organize and govern [...the] community" (ibid., p.31). Digital democracy offers to change the relationship between politics and power, away from a dependence on the "properties of individuals or collectives" and toward "relationships made of communicative actions" (ibid.). To formally accept digital democracy as a practice in the politics of a community, the basic political culture has to be significantly modified.

Digital techniques of communication have enabled the limitations of time and place to be overcome and have thereby substantially accelerated economic and financial processes (Castells, 2011). In the same way, digital communication is expected to speed up "opinion formation, representation and even decision taking on account of the directness of the means of transmission" (ibid., p.31). Guehenno (cited in Castells, 2011) predicts that this transnational acceleration of the communication process will undermine the authority of the nation and centralized politics, the structure we are familiar with in a traditional democracy,

and replace it with “a relational system of networks without a significant centre” (ibid., p.32). He feels that digital citizens, via their use of “social and media networks” (ibid.), will be able gradually to dismantle the “artificial and increasingly irrelevant” (ibid.) institutions of traditional centralized politics. Lack of a centralized authority entails decision-making being dispersed across numerous networks of interaction, which are not limited by the territorial boundaries of the nation. Such a “polycentric” (ibid.) model of public administration is already in use, which is displacing traditional politics by privatising certain segments, outsourcing responsibilities and making certain other departments autonomous, despite the fact that the output of all these segments are centrally controlled via guidelines set up by the central administrative body. However, since these privatized bodies, such as business process outsourcing units that cater to customer care of public service departments of the government, have to survive in a competitive marketplace, it is often the case that market regulations override political guidelines.

In this way, individual nations are giving up their sovereignty to international organizations, which in turn is giving birth to what Mowshowitz calls ‘virtual feudalism’ (1992). The transnational organisations thus formed are interested less in control of territory than in control over production resources which are dependent on information that travels via virtual networks. The traditional bureaucracy is thereby replaced by ‘infocracy’ (Zuurmond, 1994, cited in Lenk, 1997), characterized by free and easier access to information, but at the cost of the market economy overriding politics and bestowing a substantial amount of decision-making on commercial and transnational corporations. Using these digital networks, the transnational corporations arrive at economic decisions that have strong impact on politics. In this sense, political decisions in digital democracies become dispersed and disjointed, and often blur the distinction between inspiration for a cause and a promotional act. At the same time, democracy is ‘restored’ through digitized decentralization of the decision-making authority. Along with the shift in decision-making, there is also a shift in the interests of this digital society. It no longer grants as much importance to churches and labour movements, as it does to new identities, cultural representations and lifestyle ecologists.

With reference to the Obama-Nader debate, both forms of promotion – activist and personality-marketing – can potentially affect the audience, encouraging them either to endorse a leader who has been digitally quantified as a product or to embrace socio-political change. In the interactive world, with SNS as a popular vehicle for communication, passive users are not the norm. Digital communication tools mark a shift in the meaning of ‘activity’,

whereby the consumers of information are expected to be more proactive than their traditional counterparts (Stolle and Micheletti, 2005). Information can empower consumers and perhaps increase democratic access, but unless the consumers respond to the information, either positively or negatively, there can be no activism. In this sense, the two paradigms of digital activism can be said to follow each other in succession: from empowerment to engagement, wherein the former is passive consumption while the latter is active response. In the former, activists promote the democratic distribution of information, which in turn equips the consumers to actively engage in a cause and voice their grievances or preferences. Digital activists enact the latter by using the persuasive interactive feature of SNS, in an attempt to inspire the consumers to bring about changes in their life situation by raising issues of concern.

The tactics of persuasion are, in fact, prevalent on three main platforms: in consumer advertising, to influence people to buy products; in political advertising, to influence people to vote in election campaigns; and in pro-social communication campaigns, to market environmental or charitable causes (O’Keefe, 2011). Thus, persuasion is employed in advertising, electoral politics and social activism. In the third category, strategic media coverage is often used to influence opinion on social and public policy questions. In developing countries, entertainment programming is used to convey persuasive messages, for example a television show on HIV/ AIDS. Similar tactics are used by activists to influence people to transform their lives by changing their attitude towards the cause at hand, which, in activism parlance, is referred to as creating awareness by campaigning for an issue.

This form of persuasion can be compared to the persuasive marketing techniques used in the US and Europe in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, to help people adapt to the lifestyle changes resulting from the transition from an agrarian to a market economy. Roland Marchand suggests that advertising and public relations techniques “helped consumers adjust to the tribulations of modernity” (cited in Leiss et al., 2005, p.74) and humanized the large industrial corporations by providing them with a vision of social consciousness. This, in turn, helped the corporations to “fend off government interventions” (cited in Leiss et al., 2005, p.75). The image of these corporations engaged in production on a massive scale made the consumers wary of their “greedy, inhuman and uncaring” (ibid.) characteristics. But advertising and public relations techniques sought to convey to the consumers that the new commercial arrangement would retain the intimacy of a traditional village life yet help them adjust to the socio-political structures of modern society. In the same period, radio

broadcasting as a novel technology integrated the newly formed nuclear family into one national consumer culture. Psychological research on consumer motivations helped create 'consumption communities' where media brought disparate groups of people together under one umbrella. Jackson Lears (ibid.) refers to this "therapeutic ethos as a cultural response" (p.74) to the uncertainties brought in by urbanization, industrialization, technological advancement and the market economy. A century later, digitised consumer communities operate according to a similar ethos and via SNS respond to the socio-political and economic issues of a changing society, by holding out the promise of overcoming injustices and other irregularities.

If we look at successful non-profit organizations whose primary aim is to raise awareness on dedicated issues, such as Greenpeace, we find that they largely follow established marketing techniques to raise funds and promote their causes. Greenpeace has about 2.8 million members with offices in more than 40 countries worldwide. But they customize their climate change campaigns depending on the cultural context, historical experiences and accepted traditions of the 'target market'. They also take into account the extent of the local government's intervention in such matters (Susanto, 2007). The organisation's activities and campaigns have always been oriented towards garnering media attention to raise awareness and fund their projects – be it the extravagant "non-violent direct action" (ibid., p.5) of civil disobedience in the 1970s, as with the Rainbow Warrior campaign, or their more recent strategy to focus on "producing scientific reports and specific policy proposals" (ibid., p.11). Their primary goal since the 1990s has been to gain "credibility among lawmakers" and they lobby to that effect by organizing "press conferences more often than [engaging] in environmental campaigns" (Page, 2004, n.p.). While Greenpeace is moving toward closer engagement with lawmakers, they also use market research like any other product-based industry to influence "public opinion polls and the wider political discourse" (ibid., n.p) on climate change.

With the statistics and reports they gather from their research, they target specific political pressure points through the use of mass media. Greenpeace seldom organizes for mass mobilization. Rather, they want their supporters to donate to Greenpeace, their motto being, "Give us the power of representing your voice" (Page, n.p). They prefer to be in control of their cause by selecting their sustainable environmental activities independent of external intervention. By urging their supporters to donate for the cause, they raise enough funds to invest in research and development. The statistical findings from such studies are



then used for further promotion of their cause, and the data seldom fails to make the authorities sit up and take note of the issue. Although they have been criticized for campaigns that are “more propaganda than actual information” (ibid.,n.p), Greenpeace has an indisputable influence on decision-making in world politics.

This level of social transformation involves persuasion to bring about attitudinal changes in the populace. Attitudes are built on normative perceptions, and persuasion as a technique is “designed to influence others by modifying their beliefs, values or attitudes” (Dainton, 2011, p.104). We are exposed to persuasive messages in every aspect of our lives – personal, political, social and economic. The very first mass-mediated messages bordering on propaganda were used during the World Wars to instigate people to embrace the political and social changes. Today, the extent of such messages have multiplied manifold, primarily – but certainly not only – in the form of commercial advertisements on media. While Dainton (1999) notes that persuasion involves intent on the part of the message sender, and hence a goal, she also points out that the recipient must have the freedom to accept or reject the message. Thus, a persuasive communication is neither accidental nor coercive. It seeks to bring about an attitudinal shift in the recipient of the message.

Attitudes as “learned evaluations” (ibid.), which are normatively acquired, are enduring but also subject to change with enough motivation, and are manifested through deep behavioural impacts. Advertisers, for instance, cash in on the insecurities of consumers about their appearance and body image. This creates a tension between the consumers’ attitudes and behaviour, which is resolved by altering their beliefs and thereby effecting a change. In other words, the consumers are persuaded to believe that the product the advertiser wants to promote is best suited to overcome their insecurities. Persuasive messages are inherently aspirational in nature. Moved from the commercial to the political realm, this aspiration is for justice rather than for products, and it is the potential eradication of power imbalances that social activists leverage when they attempt to promote their cause. Their persuasive messages create similar tensions between attitudes and behaviours amongst the recipients, which effect a change in their value judgment.

The Internet acts as a facilitating mechanism in the virtual public sphere “by allowing the articulation of collective identities” (Habermas, 1996, cited in Salter, 2003, p.125). As an informal interactive forum, it aids “unrestricted communication” (ibid.), thereby incorporating a more democratic demography of citizens than the original public sphere in the Greek city-states. This democratic interactivity is likely a reason why persuasive

messages are readily consumed by media consumers. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas had criticized the mass media as an anti-democratic tool that “dup[es] the public into accepting manufactured opinion as their own” (ibid.). However, given its reach, the internet as a mass medium can potentially facilitate a wider range of deliberate discussions among more disparate communities. The interactive communication model of the internet helps consumers interpret the media messages, further supported by peer translations, a choice of languages and other explanatory features. In this way, the Internet, and specifically SNS, can be said to overcome a basic communicative deficit of the mass media that Habermas so strenuously criticized.

In *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas rejected the “cultural dope” (1998) approach to mass mediated messages with the argument that citizens can customize their own strategy to interpret the messages they consume. This makes the Internet a democratic tool for communication, since the ways in which users can interpret a message is infinite. It is worth noting, however, that the tactics of digital activism are not infinite. Rather, the democratic capacities of the Internet, incorporated in SNS, return us to the two useful paradigms highlighted by the Indian context, which, with its rural and urban socio-political and economic disparities, is almost comparable to two different nations. By empowering economically underprivileged rural people with information, activists are providing them with the option of making their own decisions by utilising their knowledge as power. The urban population, on the other hand, is equipped to interpret the information they receive and derive the inspiration to mobilise in response to a call for action.

#### POLITICS OF PERSUASION: SHARMILA VERSUS HAZARE

“Indian politics has evolved from caste-based politics to fast-based politics” – claimed a recent poster on social media when Gandhian activist Anna Hazare’s anti-corruption campaign was at its peak. His campaign is a prime example of how media attention generated through SNS usage along with other commercial promotional techniques contributed to its success, when compared to similar protests in the course of the country’s history. In a comparable campaign, Irom Sharmila from the Indian state of Manipur has been on a fast for over 10 years. Her crusade is against the Government of India’s Armed Forces Special Act that gives the armed forces special powers to shoot or arrest on mere suspicion in the northeastern states of the country. Needless to say, it has set off a cycle of violence arising

from abuse of power and Sharmila is fighting for the freedom of her home state from such atrocities.

The 38-year-old lives in a high security prison and has not eaten a morsel for the past 10 years. The national government “has kept her alive on a cocktail of vitamins and nutrients. She is force-fed twice a day” through a nasal drip, reports CNN-IBN, a TV news channel (2011). In this country that reveres Gandhian principles of non-violence, however, Sharmila’s campaign has been seldom reported until recently in the context of Hazare’s similarly designed fast-based campaign. The Jan Lokpal movement spearheaded by India Against Corruption unfolded over several phases, but it went viral when Hazare, who is decorated with the *Padmashree*, which is the highest civilian honour conferred by the Indian government, began his fast on August 16, 2011. This was timed to fall a day after India’s Independence Day, since Hazare was claiming to fight for a free country all over again. As was expected, the government ended up arresting Hazare in an attempt to rein in the momentum. Although both the activists, Sharmila and Hazare, were arrested for their protests, I would argue that it is the age of rampant social media that determined the outcome of their situations.

News of Hazare’s arrest spread via social media and the nation spilled onto the streets. The government changed its mind and decided to release Hazare, but the Gandhian refused to come out of the jail and continued with his fast on-site. This opened up a series of discussions between the protesters and those in power. “Hazare’s fast brought tens of thousands of people onto the streets of New Delhi; it was covered round the clock by more than a score of television channels. Within hours, the movement and its message had spread to 400 Indian cities and tens of millions of people” (Chadda, 2012). The campaign was not only the breaking news on national television, but also lead the trending topics on social media platforms, with hashtags like #hazare or #isupportannahazare. This translated to more people on the ground protesting across the country, which drove public opinion against the ruling political party to an unprecedented level, and Hazare was permitted to campaign at a designated place in the capitol city. It was a peaceful protest, which “was attributed to the social position of the protesters” (Khandekar and Reddy, 2013, p.2). The middle classes, who until now had remained unresponsive to any calamity hitting the nation, and are usually not prone to street violence, rose in unity to support the cause of a corruption-free India. News reports pointed out the significant number of young urban white-collar professionals,

housewives and university students who joined the gatherings. Importantly, they were conspicuous by their use of digital media to make their presence felt and voice their opinion.

Soon, the Gandhi cap sported by Hazare became a mass fashion accessory, along with slogans of support like “I am Anna” converted into T-shirt sales. ‘Brand Anna’ (ibid., p.19) united people across cultural and religious divides, including a few popular Bollywood stars, who appeared to promote the cause on prime time television (Mathur, 2011). At the same time, all of these practices contributed towards Hazare’s popularity via personality politics. Helpdesks at protest points were manned professionally, with long yet organized queues of people waiting to send postcards to the government; the participants later reported on the efficiency of the process that was managed like any corporate project (ibid.). The messages communicated to the masses – through mass and social media or even the electronic boards physically present at the venues - were simple, direct and catchy, and their positioning ensured visibility. Supporters had only to look up the white boards at the venues or online to find out the time, location and intent of the next rally, along with a name and a cellular number – and the calls were always answered promptly and in person. Every question was efficiently responded to, urging callers to congregate at the next protest site. Updates on the campaign were distinctly visible at every venue of the protest, physical and virtual.

The faces of the supporters were comprised of the old and the young, the conservative and the cosmopolitan. “A significant feature of the nationwide demonstrations was that the bulk of the protestors were urban and middle class. Many of the protestors were well educated, relatively affluent professionals” (Chadda, 2012). Smartphone-toting, mobile-camera wielding youths were a common sight, as were traditionally attired elderly activists. This evidently reflected the support of the entire nation across all social strata. As an information-sharing tool, SNS played a vital role in organizing the operations, communications, marketing and customer service of the campaign, as well as promoting merchandise for the cause by playing up gimmicks such as the Gandhian cap and attractive T-shirt slogans (Burke, 2011). Through its social media presence, the campaign gathered momentum much faster and more efficiently garnered support among the masses than any other protest movement in the country’s history.

Although by the end of 2011 the India Against Corruption movement had fizzled out, as manifested by the low turnouts at the protest points, the corporate organization and commercial promotion of the cause can be argued to have tipped the movement in Hazare’s favour. The government had no other choice but to accept his demands on August 27 2011

(Chadda, 2012). However, Hazare ended his fast only the next day – a Sunday morning – almost 15 hours after the government had responded to his wishes (NDTV, 2011). This can be interpreted as another of his media publicity stunts, because Sunday mornings are considered a dry spot for news gatherers and a report on Hazare breaking his fast would invariably make front-page headlines. Leading national news organisations glorified Hazare’s fast-breaking with headlines like ‘Anna Hazare Breaks Fast After 288 Hours, Nation Relieved’ (*Times of India*, August 28, 2011), ‘Anna Hazare to Break his Fast Today at 10am, Govt Accepts his Key Demands’ (India Today, August 28, 2011), while live telecast of the fast-breaking ceremony on national television became the ‘breaking news’ of the day and was aired repeatedly for maximum viewership. The impact of the campaign was taken to be unquestionably positive, even ground-breaking: “This movement represented [for] the first time... that the Indian middle classes have played a determining role in counteracting abuse of power by elected officials” (Chadda 2012, p.120). Given these occurrences, it can be argued that Hazare’s campaign was well charted to gain media attention, in keeping with established marketing strategies.

The persuasive strategies that were used to inspire the people combined with personality politics to make this a successful case of digital activism. The success of this protest movement has often been referred to by traditional news media as a “people’s victory” that “exposed a weak government and ushered in a new middle-class political force” (Banerji, 2011). This only goes to emphasise the absence of ‘a significant centre’ that characterises the digitized decentralization of decision-making. However, Khandekar and Reddy (2013) attribute the gradual weakening of the anti-corruption campaign to the fact that the movement had become a “genericide” (p.20), that is to say, had met its death by being generic. According to them, the movement reduced the cause to a “product class” (ibid.) by virtue of failing to raise its voice on specific cases of corruption, and ending up with a string of casual disputes.

## HOW TO SUSTAIN THE STRUGGLE?

In spite of modern digital ICTs reconstructing our social interactions and emotional experiences, do they really help to sustain an activist movement? In SNS most interactions take place through chats, banter and gossip. In the course of such information exchange, the boundaries between the personal and the private domain collapse, thereby placing the personal life of the SNS user under peer surveillance and political monitoring via the SNS

itself. In effect, the users' social and cultural peculiarities, although they form the basis of bonding into a collective, also turn into mere data sets. The very presence of the consumer online is subject to electronic surveillance and the information gathered becomes a data set for future reference. Even as digital communication tools become more sophisticated, the communication process itself is subject to the politics of control mechanisms. Thus, the mere format for communication becomes a form of politics in itself. If we refer to the Arab Spring, the same YouTube videos that gave the protesters a taste of democracy in due course became tools for the government's suppression. At the Bahrain uprising, state agencies used Facebook to solicit support from citizens, as was reported by *Al Jazeera* in the documentary film *Bahrain: Shouting in the Dark* (2011).

In another criticism, SNS usage can give rise to what Evgeny Morozov (2009) refers to as 'slacktivism', whereby SNS users resort to armchair activism by 'liking' issues of concern and flitting from one cause to another in random succession. Such an enthusiastic 'click' approach to SNS may reassure activists that their campaign is gaining notice, but in the long run it can very much lack in focus. A revolution requires socially entrenched norms and practices to be overthrown for a new and often contradictory set of values to take their place. Slacktivism, for obvious reasons, does not accommodate such an active and focused usage of SNS. Unlike traditional media, SNS can help politically oriented information go viral, build up momentum and remain in public memory. All of these features of SNS aid activism and sustain a movement only when focus is maintained on the end result.

SNS not only helps in spreading the word and promoting participation, but also reduces the overall turnaround time of a campaign, instantly gratifying the activists at work. But are such movements sustainable in the long run? The longevity of a struggle perhaps also determines the extent of its impact. Referring to the 2011 London riots, Ramesh Srinivasan says, "Social media are part of a much larger matrix of tools and intentions that rally masses" (n.p). Ultimately, it is economic and political dissatisfaction among the masses that drives discontent. Online tools help in voicing these grievances and forming networks of protest. But the source of their discontentment is rooted in the circumstances they find themselves in and is not determined by the technology available. Thus, it can be concluded that the longevity or even success of the movements cannot merely be a matter of technological availability, nor can individual successes of digital activism automatically lead to transformation of the socio-economic and political situation. Even, as in the case of the Arab Spring, 'successful' revolutions do not necessarily bring political closure. There is little

doubt, however, that a string of successful cases of activism promoting a single cause can help keep the struggle active.

## CHAPTER 5

### **PUTTING METHODOLOGY IN PERSPECTIVE**

*Increasingly, people live in a networked world where they communicate with people through mediating technologies, even when they share geographical proximity.*

- boyd, danah. 2007. 'Choose Your Own Ethnography: In Search of (Un)Mediated Life.' Paper presented at 4S, Montreal, Canada, October 13

Towards the end of the last decade, SNS-based activities suddenly expanded, with women resorting to this tool quite often to voice their grievances, whether to do with a personal issue or a matter of national importance. But why are people using this particular digital tool over others and for what purposes? This is the question that the empirical research portion of this project aims to explore. My familiarity with the socio-cultural and political conditions of India, which is also my home country, prompted the choice of women SNS users within this social structure as the obvious sample for studying this surge in SNS usage. It helped that digital activism led by Indian women had already made an impact on the national and international arena, and that in India Facebook is the most popular SNS among women. However, SNS being a fairly recent area of academic research, it proved difficult to find an established and tested methodology. I began with an ethnographic approach to data collection as it appeared to be the most appropriate method to gather data specific to Facebook culture.

An ethnographic approach is often adopted when what is required is a qualitative means of analysing data collected first hand on a community that is somewhat unfamiliar to the researchers (Bryman, 2013). In digital media studies, the ethnographic approach is predominantly applied to the study of the communities and cultures created through computer-mediated social interaction (Roser, 2011). It is suited to taking account of the emotional as well as informational flows of the Internet and links it to our everyday life. The holistic analysis offered by an ethnographic approach, both online and offline, facilitates an understanding of the ways in which social information and communication technologies operate within our society.

Within this paradigm, there is an emphasis on “exploring the nature of particular social phenomena” (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994, p.248) rather than attempting to test hypotheses already stated in existing literature. Thus, the ethnographic approach is also suitable because of the lack of relevant literature in this area of study. Ethnographic data is



primarily based on participant observation of the target population, whereby the researcher observes the activities of the group from the 'inside', by being a member of it. Quite often, other members of the group are aware of the researcher's presence and intentions. In a couple of instances, the coordinators of the Facebook groups I joined, to whom I expressed my intentions and objectives, introduced me to the members.

Irrespective of whether the group members were aware of my presence or not, I did not actively participate in the groups' interactions, precisely because my presence would have influenced the interactions among the members. In the most objective forms of ethnographic research, the members are unaware of the researcher's presence, which means that "they are less likely to adjust their behaviour" (Bryman, 2012, p.436). This form of 'lurking' is quite prevalent "in computer-mediated communication forums like chat rooms and multi-user domains", writes Bryman (*ibid.*, p.659). Unlike physical communities traditionally associated with anthropological ethnographic studies, online virtual communities can usually be visited without the express knowledge of the members. In my own research, I had to join most of the Facebook groups as a member, so I could not be anonymously present in the community. While I expressed my objectives to the group coordinators, I did not announce my purpose to the entire group, nor did I actively participate in discussions. By observing the activities on the FB wall without revealing my role as a researcher, I was being an outsider to the groups' interactions, but an insider to the intent and implications of their interactions, because I was following their Facebook activities regularly. I was also familiar with the socio-political context of their discussions by virtue of belonging to the same geographical culture.

In ethnographic research, the data collected is not structured or coded at the source, because the researcher is not yet aware of the ways in which the data can potentially be analysed. At a later stage, the data gathered needs to be organized along "a closed set of analytical categories" (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994, p.248), which are arrived at through extensive and explicit interpretation, description and explanation of human actions. This particular project concerns communities of people who are using the SNS platform to promote issues that are distinctly different from one community to another. Given the flexibility of what can be done with the variable data gathered from the different communities, I chose to begin with one case study to be analysed in detail, and subsequently to complement it with additional case studies.

With this plan, I delved into the Pink Chaddi campaign in depth and found several interesting facts about how it was promoted, including information about the counter-

campaign that was launched by Sri Ram Sene in retaliation, which failed to take off. Preliminary analysis revealed that perhaps it was the oppressive and reactionary overtones of the message (see Chapter 1) that obstructed its success. The Pink Chaddi campaign was the first of many case studies that prompted me to argue for the efficacy of digital activism. However, to avoid making conclusive statements, a methodology had to be devised to collect data on the socio-political impact of digital activism and also to determine what kinds of political issues are most suited for Facebook activism.

The best option appeared to be a combination of several research methods, on the wisdom that “[e]ach approach has its own limitations or ‘imperfections’, which can be compensated by using an alternate method” (Hammond, cited in Bryman, 2012, p.637). My aim was thus to develop a mixed method in order to offset the potential weaknesses of each methodology and draw on the combined strength of all. J Mingers (2001) states that “all research situations are seen as inherently complex and multidimensional, and would thus benefit from a range of methods” (p.243). To deal with the different sets of data collection, different kinds of research methods needed to be predominant at different stages.

Applying this rationale to this particular research project, a triangulation of both qualitative and quantitative research methods has been used, although the analysis is predominantly qualitative. This has helped “to reduce the biases associated with each method and therefore improve our understanding of the cultural forces” (Harkness et al, cited in Bryman, 2012, p.637). The participant observation method used in this research, involves the study of a plurality of groups that have generated, or failed to generate, a series of events. These situations would include instances when a certain Facebook group has been successful in impacting public awareness on an issue or failed to do so. To focus on all of the situations or phases, as one continuous process, a multi-method approach tends to be more functional. In favour of the mixed method, Bryman (2012) also states that “our [research] tools are so inadequate and the material to which we’re applying them is so slippery that you’ve got to use everything you have” (p.637). The data, thus gathered, can be divided into three segments.

#### DATA I: INTERVIEWING DIGITAL EXPERTS

Data collection was initiated by conducting open-ended interviews with experts in digital activism in India. The people I selected are experts in the sense that they have either engaged with digital tools of communication to launch or promote their activist campaigns, or they are

analysts who blog about their observations of digital activism. This set of data was independent of both the synchronic and longitudinal studies that followed. This method was adopted to provide background information and to supplement secondary research in order to help confirm my research questions. Talking to the experts also ensured that I did not leave any gaps in gathering appropriate data, as well as ensuring that the overall information accumulated was comprehensive and relevant.

The initial plan was to interview nine experts who are associated with ‘activism’ in some way. They were identified as Nisha Susan, who launched the Pink Chaddi campaign; Urvashi Butalia, the founder of Zubaan Books, an independent non-profit feminist publishing house in India; Keith Gomes, Bollywood filmmaker and activist who spearheaded the campaign on Nagrik Jaagruti Manch (Hindi, meaning ‘citizens’ awakening forum’); Arundhati Roy, a writer/ activist; Shabana Azmi, an actor/ activist; Dina Mehta, a blogger/ social media observer; Jasmine Patheja, co-founder of the Blanknoise project; Jasmeen Shah, one of the key players of the Jaago Re campaign (Hindi, meaning ‘wake up’); and Sonali Shah, who founded the Bell Bajao project (meaning ‘ring the bell’). Since this research is primarily based on digital communication, digital means were used to establish initial contact. Most of the experts could be contacted via their online profile, which made it easier to organize appointments with them from overseas.

Between December 2010 and January 2011, I travelled to India to conduct the interviews. Butalia, Khan and Susan are based in New Delhi; Gomes and Mehta live in Mumbai; Patheja, who is usually based in Calcutta, was travelling to Bangalore at the time and I therefore interviewed her from Calcutta and recorded our conversation on my mobile phone; Shah was pursuing a master’s degree in the US and replied to the questions via email. With a list of five open-ended questions, the experts were primarily queried about their perception of the social impact of digital activism and were asked to compare SNS with traditional tools of activism, since all of them actively use SNS to further their activist objectives in preference to traditional tools. Unfortunately, not all of the experts I had selected were available or willing to take part in the interview. In spite of repeated follow-up calls and emails, no response was received from Azmi, Roy and Susan. Around the time I went to India to conduct my interviews, Roy had gone underground after having made ‘unfavourable’ comments with regard to the Kashmir issue (Mirani, 2010), a bone of contention between India and Pakistan, and had thus offended the fundamentalists.

## DATA II: THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The qualitative interview with the experts helped me gain information regarding initial research ideas as well as the interviewees' perspectives on previously unexplored concerns with regard to Facebook usage in activism. The open-ended questions, however, often took the conversation in directions that were far removed from my core research questions. To counter this drawback, I formulated a questionnaire targeting urban Indian women Facebook users. In a qualitative interview, there is greater interest in the interviewee's point of view, but in a questionnaire, the researcher's concerns take precedence (Bryman, 2013). The flexible nature of conversation with the experts broadened my insight and helped me find a focus for the questionnaire. The focus, in turn, gave the questionnaire structure and allowed for standardization through multiple choice answers; the latter is imperative when coding the responses.

Synchronic study is defined as a systematic and intensive study of one phenomenon in the belief that it can lead to "some larger phenomena" (Gerring, 2004, p.344). Therefore, I began with a synchronic study to determine how Indian women use SNS. At the time, Orkut was the preferred SNS in India, before a vast number of users made an exodus to Facebook around 2010. This shift was prevalent mostly among the urban population. As such, I restricted my sample to urban Indian women Facebook users. It helped the focus of the project to concentrate on only one SNS and not to attempt a comparison between Facebook and Orkut, given the urban and semi-urban/ rural divide within the economy that is reflected in the distinct user populations of these two platforms. As only 30 per cent of the national population lives in urban areas, there is a wide socio-economic gap between urban and rural India, which underlies the digital divide. Interestingly, in this case, this divide is reflected even in the choice of SNS among those who are above the digital line; while the urban dweller uses Facebook, the semi-urban and rural users prefer Orkut.

For the target sample, urban Indian women Facebook users, a 12-point questionnaire was put together and distributed to 50 respondents from different age groups. The questionnaire consisted of multiple-choice, close-ended questions on the frequency of their usage of Facebook and the specific ways in which they use it. These questions included:

- How often you use Facebook and for what purpose?
- When you spot somebody within your friends' circle mention a 'cause' close to your heart, what do you do?
- Have you ever raised an 'issue' of your own on Facebook?

- If something has happened to you in real life, do you write about it on Facebook to get your friends to comment on it?
- Do you take a 'cause' raised by you or your friends on Facebook beyond the virtual world?
- What kind of information do you look for on Facebook pages?
- What political issues, if any, do you engage with on Facebook?
- What political issues, if any, do you engage with beyond the virtual world?
- Have you joined any Facebook Group/s? If yes, please name them.
- Do you comment on or reply to a message from a stranger who might share your problem? (see Appendix 6)

All of these questions were intended to help identify the most popular Facebook groups formed around women's issues, which the target respondents are members of or like to follow through 'daily feeds'. Identifying these groups was a precursor to joining them myself as a participant observer, since it is believed that by seeing an issue through the research subjects' eyes, the participant observer can gain "a foothold on social reality" (Bryman, 2012, p.19).

To conduct the survey, the respondents were divided into age-groups ranging between 18 years and 55 years, as this helped identify the issues each age-group focuses on. The list of respondents was primarily drawn from the researcher's personal Facebook account, because I wanted to use an SNS to conduct the survey on SNS usage. A sample bias is negated by the fact that my Facebook contacts are predominantly urban Indian women, given my ethnic and socio-economic background, although they come from varied professions and educational backgrounds.

Choosing the respondents from my personal account served a dual purpose. Firstly, it was easy to follow up on the progress of the questionnaire by writing a simple Facebook message to the relevant contact. This communicative access was of vital importance given my geographical location compared to that of the respondents. Secondly, this method validated the reach of SNS, as my project is based on the claim that SNS users are able to connect with a wide network beyond the immediate circle of friends and family. When it came to finding the required number of respondents from the youngest and oldest age-groups, 18-24 and 45-55, I had to request my Facebook contacts to distribute the questionnaire among their friends, because my personal contacts in these age brackets are minimal. Thus, not only was there an inner circle of contacts, but also an outer circle which was constituted

through information dispersal across weak ties. The questionnaire was sent via email to the respondents and the responses were often quite prompt. Their identities, though apparent from the email addresses, were not revealed in the data analysed or stored. Pseudonyms were assigned to the respondents to refer to them in the analysis, in order to make the text reader-friendly.

### DATA III: PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION OF FACEBOOK GROUPS

The empirical data collected via the questionnaire helped identify 10 Facebook groups promoting issues, activities and causes that are indicative of the kinds of groups that urban Indian women Facebook users may engage with based on the responses of the women surveyed. Thereafter, a longitudinal study of these Facebook groups was conducted over a period of two years, from January 2011 to January 2013. A longitudinal study (Menard, 2002) is defined as an observational study that seeks to correlate variables over a sustained period of time. It works in opposition to a cross-sectional study, which focuses on different units with similar characteristics. By contrast, the longitudinal study is geared towards identifying changes in attitudes and behaviours of the target groups, who are similar units with variable characteristics. My objective was to participate in the activities of these pre-existing Facebook groups in order to observe their communication exchange and determine how they promote their causes, along with what tactics they use to increase participation in these causes. Here, I counted an increase in participation as one of the changes in the behaviour of these groups. The motivation behind this attitudinal shift, namely the decision to participate, would depend on the characteristics of individual groups.

As these observations were conducted on Internet-based groups rather than a physical community in the real world, there was no requirement for political or legal permits except for consent from specific Facebook group coordinators. Each selected Facebook group coordinator was emailed a copy of the consent form along with the 'Participant Information Sheet' (PIS; Appendix 7) seeking permission to engage through participant observation. In most cases, the documents were sent as Facebook messages, unless the coordinator's email address was mentioned in their Facebook account. The questionnaire had revealed that a majority of the respondents are wary of responding to communications initiated by strangers. This was validated by the fact that I managed to get the consent form signed by only seven of the 10 Facebook groups I had approached. All of them promptly accepted me as a member of their group when I sent a request, however, perhaps because membership is an indicator of

participation, but they did not respond to my 'inboxed' message despite repeated reminders. It is important to mention here that these are 'open groups' which users can join at will and the interactions on their wall are visible even to non-members. These groups are thus open to the public, the only limitation being that non-members cannot actively participate in exchanges by leaving a comment or 'liking' one.

The various means of gaining access to groups, which Bryman (2012) discusses with the help of several cases studies, include "via gatekeepers and via acquaintances who then act as sponsors" (p.437). A third way is to "hang around" (ibid.) the community to get noticed and ultimately become incorporated as a member. My first strategy was to approach the gatekeeper, or the Facebook group coordinator, for consent. If that failed, I resorted to sponsorships or referrals via mutual contacts with specific Facebook group coordinators. But since these are semi-public groups, it was not difficult to become a member of the community by "hanging around". Similarities can be drawn with the neighbourhood pub, which is open to everybody who walks past it. However, membership is subject to acceptable behaviour on the virtual premises. In this particular project, I avoided overstepping the rules of the Facebook groups primarily by being a covert participant or passive participant observer. Interviews with the experts, who were in some cases also the coordinators of these Facebook groups, provided clarifications about member interactions on their walls whenever necessary.

Data – in the form of posts, comments as well as 'likes' – collected by participant observation of Facebook groups was documented, transcribed and analysed or interpreted as part of the case studies selected for the research project. The PIS stated that Facebook groups would be identified by group name throughout my research and also in the thesis. Individual members of these particular Facebook groups, with whom I was involved in participatory observation, were identified as members of the group, but by pseudonyms rather than names to retain their anonymity. It is, however, possible for group members to identify each other based on the data used in my research, and it might be possible for non-members to identify group members by the name of the group and members' communications as used in my research. As the communications posted on the 'walls' of these Facebook groups by their members are semi-public information that can be easily accessed by non-members visiting the webpage, it can be argued that these interactions are actually taking place in the public domain.

The choice of participant ethnography as a research methodology entailed the researcher's participation, although restricted, in the activities of these online communities.

This facilitated the analysis of the Facebook groups' structures and modes of operation, in an attempt to understand their purpose in resorting to SNS as the chosen platform to further their cause. These methodologies are pertinent given the fact that one of my primary research objectives has been to find out if digital activism actually has a social impact and, if so, then how such an impact differs from that of traditional activism. In this way, the research attempted to investigate issues of activism that are of specific interest to women between the ages of 18 and 55, based in India. Several of these issues are shared by women globally, for instance breast cancer, while some issues are articulated differently by women of different ethnic/ cultural backgrounds even within the Indian cultural context. For instance, gender roles in the context of sexual harassment are interpreted differently in northern India than in the north-eastern parts of the country, where matriarchal societies are more prevalent.

The final list of Facebook groups researched include Bell Bajao, a campaign against domestic violence; Blanknoise, working against sexual harassment; Jan Lokpal (translated to 'People's Bill'), supporting the anti-corruption drive in India; Balaji Telefilms, a production house that produces some of the most popular soaps aired on prime time TV; Honour Killings in India – Stop it please!!, fighting for victims of honour killings; Elle Breast Cancer Campaign, the Indian chapter; Parentree, an Indian parenting community; Veg Recipes of India, dedicated to reintroducing traditional vegetarian dishes to the Indian dining table; and the Women's Reservation Bill, arguing for the introduction of a constitutional bill that would reserve 33 per cent of Parliament seats for women.

The 10 Facebook groups, mostly engaged with causes and activities that fall within the small 'p' of politics, were categorized under three headings depending on the nature of their activism. The Consciousness-Raising Facebook groups, whose interactions are quite similar to the CRGs of the second-wave feminist movement, espouse the private realm as political. These include Balaji Telefilms, Zubaan Books, Bell Bajao and Blanknoise. The Civic Engagement Facebook groups include communities that, as the name suggests, are involved with civic issues. These include Elle Breast Cancer India; Honour Killings in India – Stop it please!!!, Parentree and Veg Recipes of India. The last section includes Facebook groups like Jan Lokpal and Women's Reservation Bill, which actively promote Political Participation in electoral politics.

In the analysis chapters to follow, these categories are organized according to the order of stages followed when organizing a political activist movement: the consciousness-raising groups inspire people to come together as collectives, while the civic engagement



groups presume their knowledge of the cause and their readiness to engage with the collective, which ultimately promotes political participation. The actual data collection involved observing the activities and communications of these online groups, whose self-selected members span all ethnic and cultural diversities within the Indian context, as well as non-resident Indians. A substantial segment of their interactions tended to be class-specific, given the fact that Facebook users are primarily limited to the urban populace.

Each group's membership and consequent interactions also appeared to be delimited to certain age-groups, as indicated by the responses to the questionnaire. For example, sexual harassment as a cause is supported mainly by the 18-24 age-group; domestic violence is supported by both 18-24 and 25-34 age-groups; TV soaps, especially Balaji Telefilms production, are popular among the 25-34 and 35-44 age-groups; Zubaan Books appeals primarily to the 35-44 and 45-55 age-groups; breast cancer awareness as a cause is supported by the 35-44 age-group; the campaign against honour killing is taken up by 35-44 and 45-55 age-groups, parenting by 35-44 age-group and Women's Reservation Bill by 35-44 and 45-55 age-groups; while Anna Hazare's campaign against corruption was popular across all age-groups.

## METHODS OF DATA ANALYSIS

Digital activism had already begun to have a strong impact on world politics, especially with regard to dictatorial regimes, around the time I started collecting my data. Hence, my prime focus shifted to finding a way to determine the potential socio-political impact of SNS-based activism on the world we live in. As part of my impact study, I tried to identify a statistical formula that can be applied to quantify user traffic on the selected Facebook groups, as increased usage can be considered both an agent and measure of the socio-political impact of digital activism. However, the ever-evolving privacy policies of a relatively young communication tool like Facebook soon became a hindrance to data collection. For instance, the questionnaire results showed honour killing to be one of the issues the respondents like to protest against on Facebook. I sent a request to the most popular Facebook group that protests the practice and was readily accepted. But when I wrote to the group coordinator about my intention to be a participant observer of the community, the privacy settings of the webpage were changed to block my access to their interactions.

In another instance, one of the Facebook communities was moved from a Facebook 'page' to a 'group' and therefore I had to transfer my data sets, too. It is important to note

here that Facebook ‘pages’ and ‘groups’, which operate according to distinct rules on the social media platform, have been universally referred to in this research as ‘Facebook groups’ to connote a Facebook ‘community’. For some reason, the abovementioned ‘group’ became more active than the ‘page’ ever was, but it is more technically difficult to navigate through the posts on a ‘group’ than a ‘page’. This form of ‘slippery data’ (Bryman, 2012) made it difficult to locate relevant information on Facebook group traffic during certain decisive periods of data collection. A perfunctory look at the Facebook interactions across all groups revealed the following:

### **Fig 1 & 2: First week of data collection**

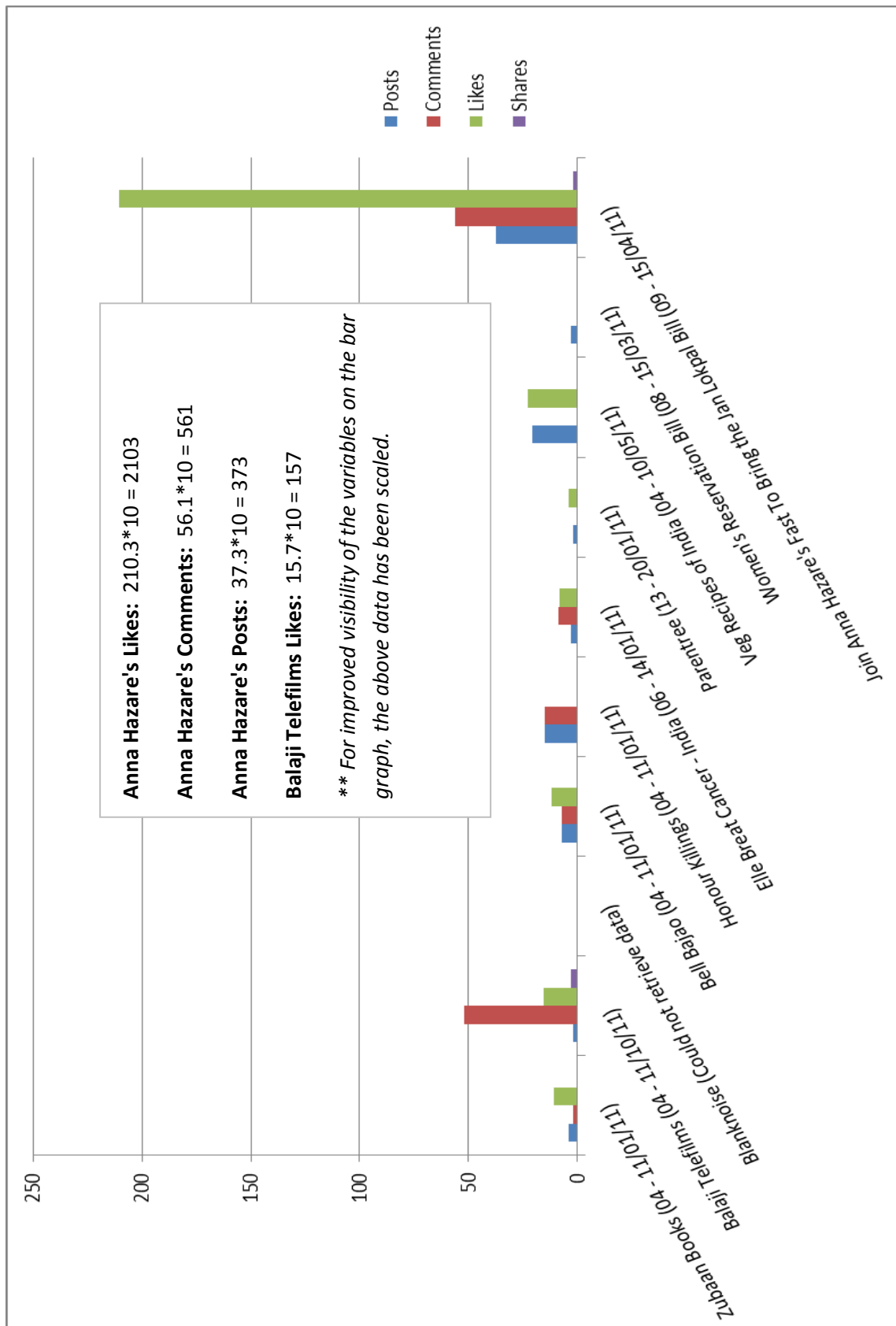
This is not necessarily the first week of the two-year period of participatory observation I engaged in, from January 2011 to January 2013. In each of the 10 instances, the Facebook groups started posting statuses later than the day they created their Facebook account. In some cases, they did not post in the first week of the year 2011, which is when I started collecting my data. For groups formed before 2011, the coordinators and members posted prior to 2011, and then again later in that year. Given these dynamics, the first week of data collection for each group is different. The data, as visible on the walls of the FB groups, was recorded digitally as a word document, with analytical notes on the more popular posts. For example, I recorded the numbers of ‘likes’, ‘shares’ and ‘views’, as well as the more insightful or provocative comments on each post. However, counting the ‘likes’, ‘shares’ and ‘views’ was a strategy I realised would be relevant to my data collection only after the Aam Aadmi Party (People’s Party) started gaining in power by following the lead of the Anti-Corruption movement as a successful case of digital activism. In the following tables I quantify and compare the data of each Facebook group on their first week of interaction with the group members in 2011. It is important to note that retrieving data for Blanknoise on their interactions dating back to the beginning of 2011 was quite difficult. This is a very active group and, given the ever-evolving nature of this communication tool, it turned out to be impossible to scroll back to a particular week from two years previously. This was a fault in my initial research plan as I realized I needed certain data from early 2011 only towards the end of my data collection period in 2013.

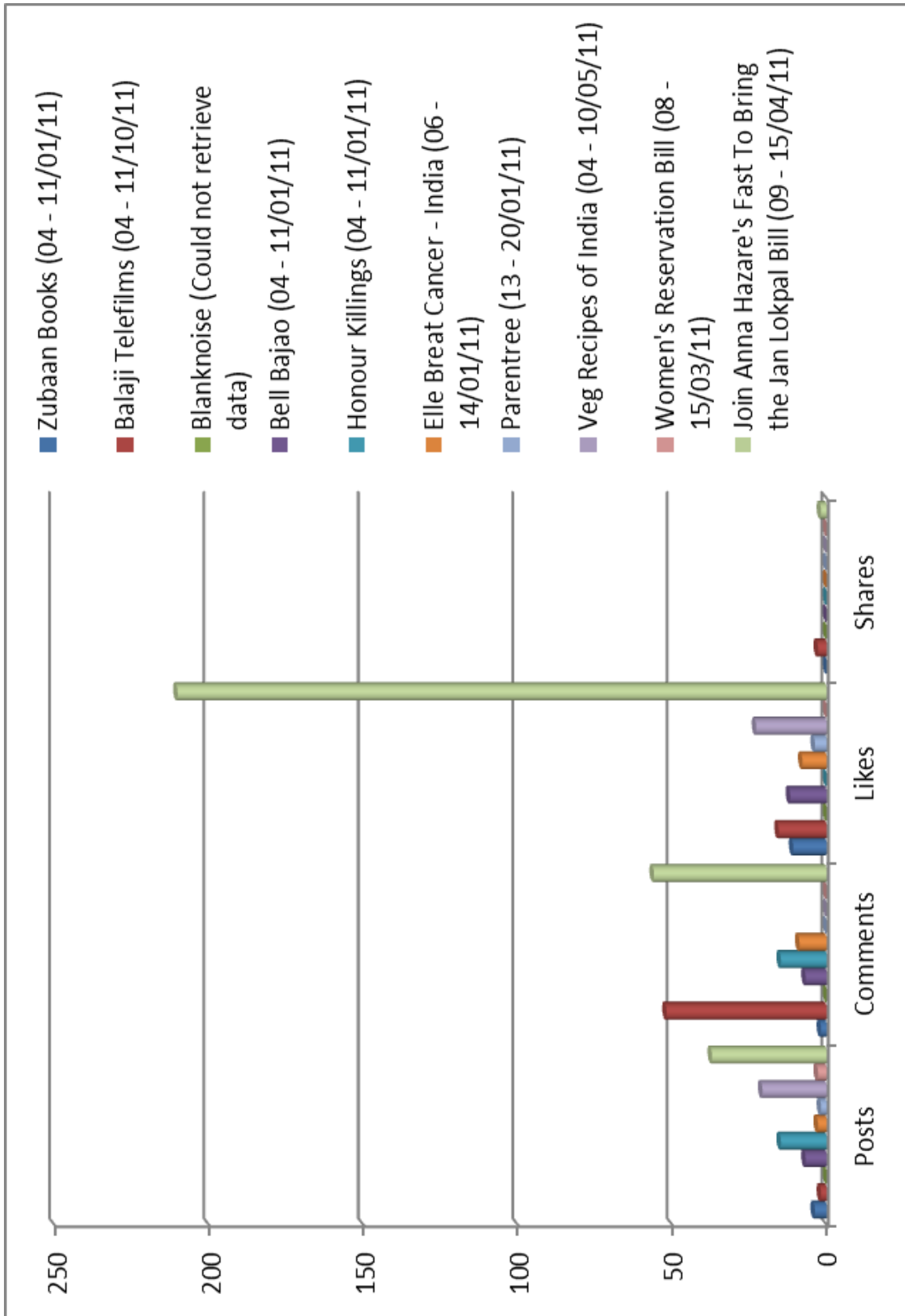
Another observation on the evolving nature of the FB platform is the fact that some of the FB groups I was a participant observer to started off with an FB ‘page’ and then imported

the group physically to an FB 'group'. While it was much easier to scroll down the FB 'page' if I needed to refer back to old data, on the FB 'group' it was quite difficult to scroll back to an earlier post. This was because the webpage would not scroll after a certain point.

**Figures begin on next page:**

**Fig 1: FB page traffic of all 10 groups in the first week of data collection**





**Fig 2: Comparison of various forms of FB interaction by each group in the first week of data collection**

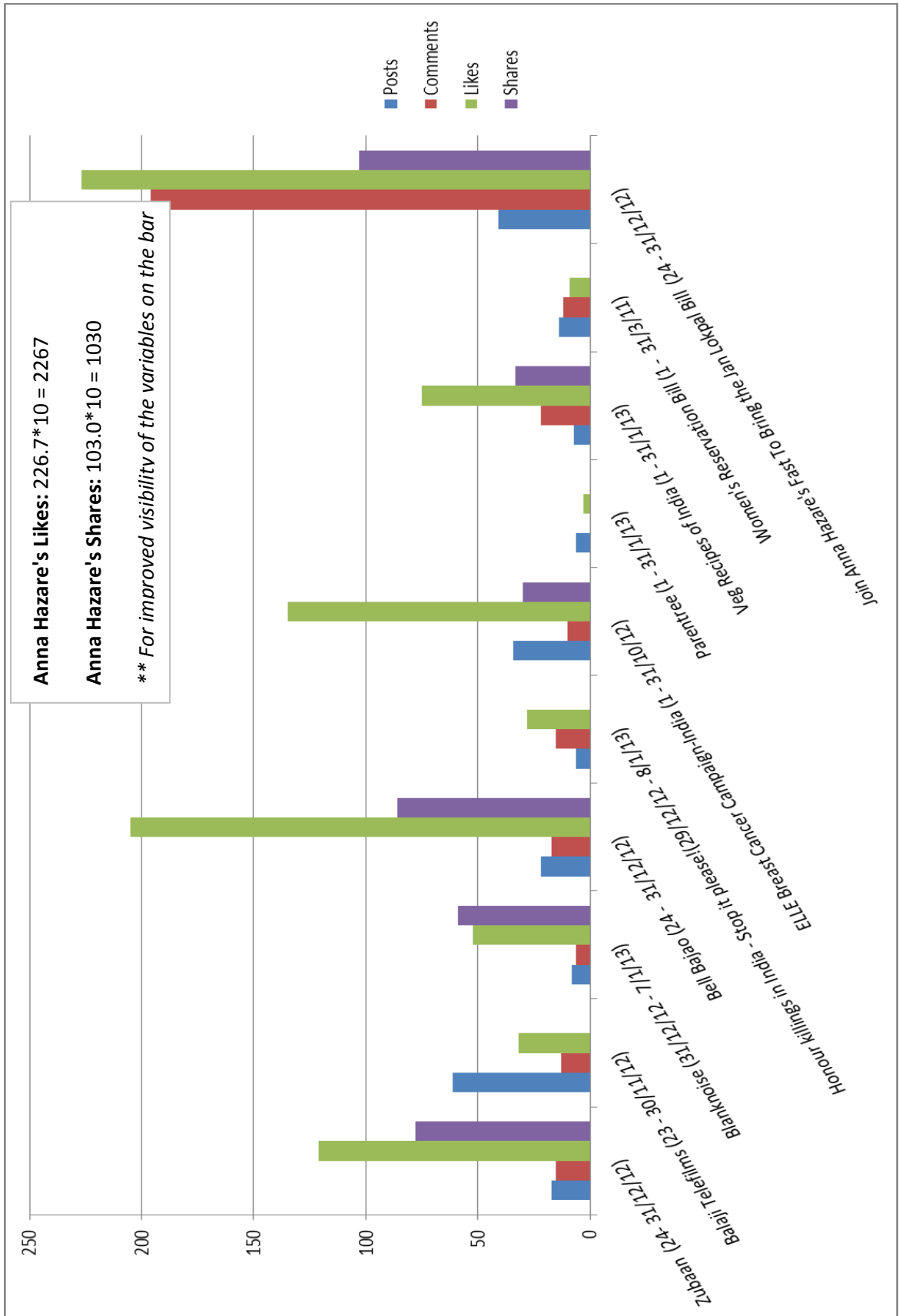


Fig 3: The busiest periods of interaction for each FB group

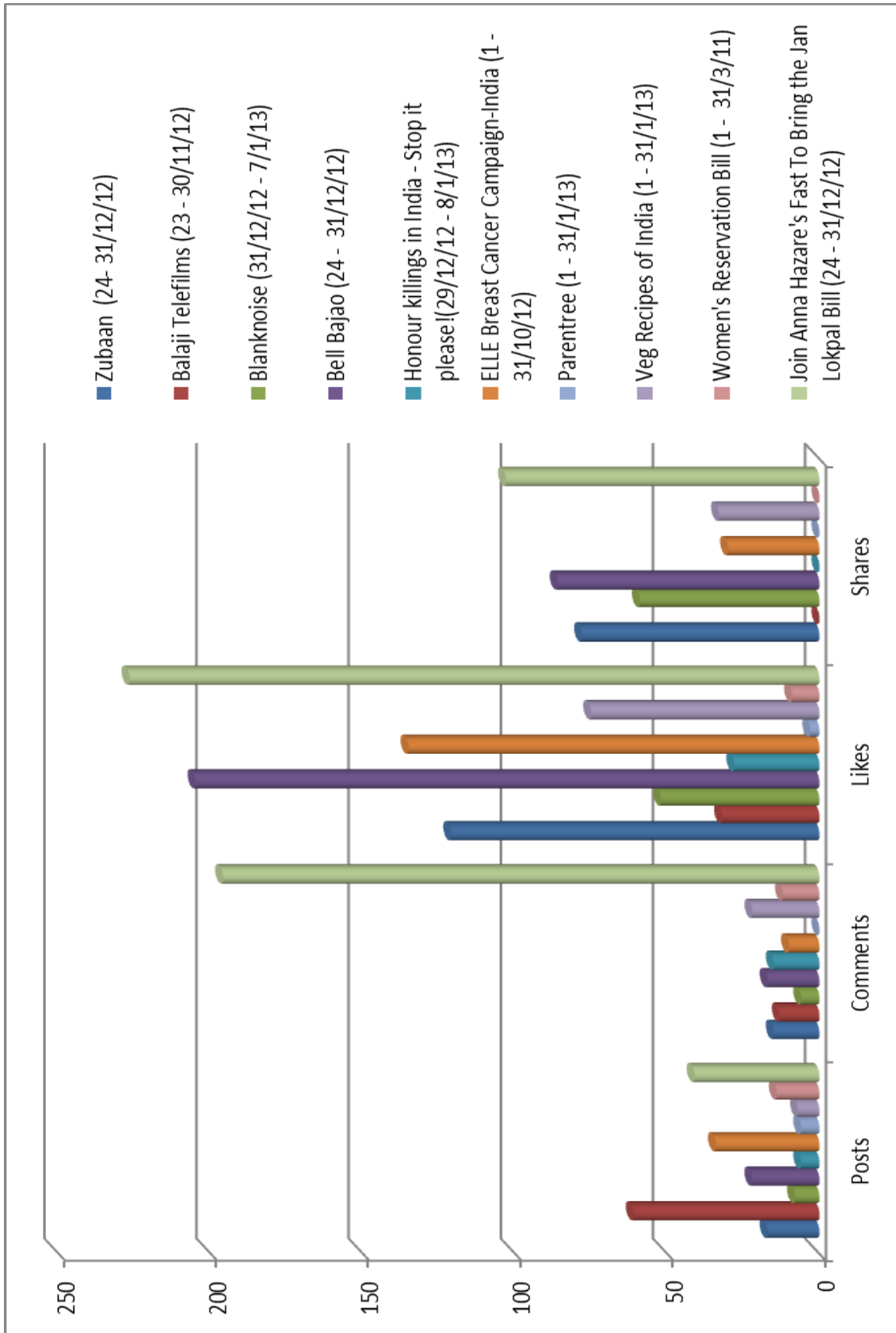


Fig 4: Comparison of various forms of FB interaction for each group in their busiest periods

In the above figures, the posts, likes and comments on the walls of each group were manually monitored, along with documentation of the number of times each post was shared. When compared, Figures 1 and 3 indicate a change in traffic – usually higher over the months – as well as the addition of new parameters, for example ‘shares’, to increase participation and information flow among the groups’ members. Figures 2 and 4 show a change in traffic within each specific form of Facebook interaction. This data has been referred to regularly throughout the analysis of online activities by the Facebook groups. It is important to mention here that the busiest periods of interaction for each of these groups was right after the New Delhi gang rape case on December 16, 2012. Although Hazare’s campaign mobilized the people of the country and was reflected on their FB group posts, it was the shock of the New Delhi incident that raised the consciousness of every person on the street, who came together to protest against the apathy of the government about the safety of women in the capitol city. This, in turn, increased traffic across all women-oriented Facebook groups of which I was a participant observer. Almost every group put their own personal quest on hold to post, comment and share updates on news, views and opinions with regard to the horrifying experience of the victims of the gang rape incident.

Facebook, as an SNS, attempts to produce its own virtual form of phatic communication via words and emoticons. But it has its limitations, in the sense that comprehending the message conveyed through the online activities of Facebook groups often requires knowledge of the socio-cultural and political context in which the interactions are taking place. Another aspect that needs to be considered is the fact that English is the official language of communication and is understood by the majority in urban India. But the Queen’s language comes in various versions and Indian writing in English is one that the members of these Facebook groups can relate to easily. As such, this version of the language, interspersed with words from various Indian languages, is often used to make a wider appeal among the group members. This language has been further embellished with acronyms and cyber colloquialisms that are pertinent to the age-group of particular Facebook users. For example, in support of Hazare’s campaign against corruption, one of the Facebook group’s members say: “Go on...Untl v achv d fnl gl” [Go on... until we achieve the final goal], while another member writes: “Am with yu sir...” [I am with you, sir]. For an Indian Facebook user, this is a language quite easy to comprehend. However, some of the analysis engaged with in this research perhaps depends on a subjective understanding of these kinds of statements, and



may be limited by my culturally defined normative understanding of the groups and their activities.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **DECODING THE WRITING ON THE FACEBOOK WALL:**

### **CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING GROUPS**

*There have been many victories, but still the violence continues. The refusal to hold perpetrators to account is a 'global plague' – and this year the campaign will focus on justice.*

- Eve Ensler, playwright and founder of 'One Billion Rising' campaign, 2013

'The personal is political', claimed the second wave feminists whose primary aim was to make women aware of the fact that their individual identity is reflected in their life decisions and so every personal act comes with political implications. This was achieved by sharing ideas and feelings from their private lives with other women in an atmosphere of "respect, support and acceptance" (Randolph and Ross-Valliere, 1979, p.922), which was facilitated by the mediation of consciousness-raising groups (henceforth referred to as CRG). These groups did not focus on problem solving; rather, they believed that through the sharing of personal experiences women could evaluate their personal situations better and that their politically-motivated decisions would help overcome the social stereotypes imposed on them. By bringing these women together in an interactive environment, where they could verbalise their feelings, the second wave feminists of the CRG offered them advocacy as a form of political education, thereby helping these women decide their next form of action.

In this chapter, I argue that the CRG of second wave feminism is quite similar to the women's communities on Facebook (henceforth referred to as FB). Both help in distribution of information and through this politically motivate members within the group. The debates and discussions that subsequently follow facilitate the construction of political identities as well as decision-making on issues being discussed. However, there is no compulsion on the members to take part in these discussions – they are free to join at will. The success of CRG or FB groups depends on how well they can disseminate knowledge, because awareness can prompt participation. There are several ways in which the two forums differ from each other; for instance, the former is a physical congregation of like-minded women activists, while the latter is a virtual meeting of the same. However, the activities engaged in by the four FB groups addressed in this chapter have been analysed on the basis of the four common features: information as politics, political decision-making, joining at will and knowledge

generation as the objective – that are shared with CRG, because the structural and historical differences between the two forums only enhance the tactics used by CRG to work towards women’s emancipation.

## COMPARISON BETWEEN CRG AND FB GROUPS

### **Information as politics:**

By sharing interesting information through trivial talk, the FB users measure their own experiences, at home or at their workplace, with that of others and also assess how they judge similar situations. Deborah Jones (1980) describes this engagement of CRG with trivial talk as a form of gossip. It serves the social intent of entertainment and relaxation, feeding curiosity by distributing information that is potentially political and ultimately creating an intimate bond among the participants. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, women showed interest in a CRG as a forum “to learn from, share with, and gain support from” (Kravetz, 1978, p.168) a group of women similarly affected by the socio-political and economic conditions of the society they inhabit. Within a common social situation, they examined personal issues by sharing their experiences and encouraging other women to join in. Similarly, the crucial function of FB groups is to raise consciousness among the members, or to inspire them with information about a certain issue, much like the feminist groups of the second wave. The CRG, after all, was born as a tool for mass organisation aimed at the liberation of oppressed women. It usually took them months of meetings to promote participation (Hanisch, 2006) among their members in order to organise for a protest movement. However, the instantaneous nature of FB interactions helps these communities to come together and raise their voices against injustices almost overnight. For instance, the Motrinmoms campaign started by young mothers forced a multinational corporation to withdraw its controversial advertisement campaign over the course of a weekend.

### **Political decision-making:**

The passionate discussions and at times heated debates that take place among FB group members on issues close to their hearts are very similar to the strong feelings of unity as well as disagreements that were shared by the women within CRG. Discussions, in either of the forums, may have sometimes deeper and sometimes smaller impact on the actors’ lives. In either forum, the act of discussion and debate may be immediate, but within CRG the protest idea took months to be firmed up. It was time-consuming to spread awareness among the group members on a particular issue via advocacy and then organise them for an action. In

FB, this translation of discussion to action can potentially be achieved much faster across all time zones and cultures with the touch of a computer key. Unlike the 1970s CRG, in the SNS world, group action in response to the problem of one individual member is not rare. For instance, in the Pink Chaddi campaign, it was Nisha Susan's call for dissent against gender segregation and violence that brought Indian women from all over of the world together to protest the injustice. This was achieved primarily because of the group's immediate and rigorous disapproval of the culturally oppressive approach of the political party, Ram Sena, towards women, largely mediated through SNS platforms.

### **Joining at will:**

With regard to membership, just about anybody who has an interest in the cause can participate in these FB groups. CRG membership, however, was limited to white, middle-class women, even though second wave feminist writer Hanisch (1969/ 2006, n. p.) says, "[y]ou didn't need an academic degree or other professional credentials or money to participate" in a CRG. In contrast, with sufficient inclination, anybody who is on the right side of the digital divide, has internet access and is social-media savvy, can set up an FB group based on an issue and make it operational. But unlike the CRG, where meetings were held in living rooms and other private spaces, FB groups can meet virtually any time and anywhere, thereby overcoming time and space constraints (Kravetz, 1978). This also helps overcome the boundaries between the private and the public life which form the basis of the sexual contract (Freedman, 2010). This contract, unlike the social contract, presupposes that sexual differences form the basis of differences in political rights and freedoms between the genders. Women are made subordinate by relegating them to the private sphere of their homes, which in turn lays the foundation for the public life of the dominant gender, who takes decisions on civic issues affecting the public as well as private lives of people.

The virtual nature of FB group interactions makes it easier for these women to participate in discussions about public life concerns. The digital reach of FB overcomes the limitation in access, and so women can partake in the dialogues even from the private spaces of their homes. This blurring of gender divide can, in turn, facilitate discussions literally from any physical space. As such, most of these FB groups, though focusing on women's issues, have both men and women responding to their calls for action. Moreover, FB groups, quite similar to the CRG, operate on the notion of decentralised access, so that all its members have access to posting comments on their walls. They can simultaneously interact with fellow members across time zones and promote interconnectivity of the discussion.

### **Knowledge generation as the objective:**

Just like the CRG, some FB groups are more successful than others, perhaps because some group coordinators express more commitment to and knowledge about the issue at hand than others, who are often too caught up in their debates and discussions to take any action in the real world. Ultimately, consciousness-raising is about knowledge distribution and promotion of engagement, before any action is taken. These groups, although focused on analysis of their emotions, contribute to knowledge exchange on the issue concerned, thereby inducing participation and engagement among members. In the 1970s CRG, this view of arm-chair activists or slacktivists (Gladwell, 2010) was acceptable in the sense that phatic communication engaged in by the women helped them feel they were part of the social movement without really risking a “move” (Hanisch, 2006, n.p.). This aspect of CRG can be equated to the ‘information paradigm’(discussed in Chapter 4) of FB, as the main contribution of these members would be via knowledge generation about the cause.

### **INTRODUCING THE GROUPS**

The name I have chosen for this category of FB groups is Consciousness-Raising FB groups, which comes from the nature of activities the members engage in. In each of these groups, member interactions are geared towards advocacy achieved through ‘idle talk’ about daily living, which is quite similar to the original CRG of the second wave. While the 1970s CRG members sat in a common space and ‘gossiped’ about their personal concerns, the FB users engage in apparently trivial activities - in the form of status updates, posting comments on other’s statuses and remediating information from news portals, blog sites and YouTube – from the comfort of their private spaces. The four FB groups referred to in this chapter, namely Balaji Telefilms, Bell Bajao, Blanknoise and Zubaan Books, engage in discussions that are apparently insignificant. Since their overall aim is to share experiences and distribute information about women’s concerns, however, it makes their intention to engage in such frivolous talk political. These are primarily open groups, allowing users to join at will.

Each group focuses on an issue that is considered relevant to all members. The messages shared by the members of the group are not based on interpretation of other members’ views. In fact, they are expressed in casual and simple language, making it easier for the women to voice their opinions or discuss the difficulty or impossibility of the situation they face. This is similar to the “trust” and the “commonality” (Randolph and Ross-Valliere, 1979, p.922) of experiences that the feminist consciousness-raising groups established: to

build up trust through advocacy by referring to everyday 'common' situations that all women can relate to. The changes in the socio-political circumstances of women in the CRG were effected by their life choices. Their independence and confidence were reflected in the decisions they took on a daily basis, within a society that is limited by socio-economic hierarchies in the public space, and decisions in the private space are usually taken by the patriarchal heads of the family.

There were no formal leaders in the consciousness-raising groups who would encourage the self-help approach to emancipation. This is very similar to the decentralised structure of FB-mediated communication. However, the FB group coordinator helps establish the rules of the interaction by blocking disrespectful comments to particular posts. Such actions would not make the group coordinator a leader but rather a referee who ensures fair play. The coordinator can also assure confidentiality to members when they voice their anger against an injustice perpetrated against them, via the option of inbox messaging to the FB group. Questions arising from socially defined notions of feminine sexuality are often what these women seek an answer to. The search often ends with the location of a role model who has successfully overcome these socio-cultural stereotypes; they usually appear within the FB group as another member, a television show character, a fictional character or even a victim of domestic or sexual harassment. For instance, during the aftermath of the New Delhi gang rape case of December 2012, Bell Bajao FB group re-posts Bollywood actor Amitabh Bachchan's personal FB post which says, "women are 50% of the force and culture and grace of any community and nation .." and calls it "a very very public stand for the integrity of women!" One of the group's members applauds Bachchan and says that the society needs more men who think this way. In FB groups, member appreciation may not always be verbalised through comments and posts, but also through 'likes' and 'shares', as manifested in the above post which received 22 'likes', 4 'shares' as well as 4 'comments'.

The questionnaire that was sent out to urban Indian women Facebook users revealed the 10 most popular causes these respondents engage with. Based on this data, the most popular FB group under each of these categories was identified. Of the 10 corresponding FB groups, only four groups are discussed in this chapter, under the umbrella term Consciousness-Raising FB groups. Although each of them is unique in the cause they promote, all four seek to reconfigure ideological values and power imbalances in society and, as such, their acts are political. Bell Bajao and Blanknoise are non-profit organisations that question socially accepted power structures that lead to sexual harassment at home as well as

on the streets, thereby politicising their objective to create awareness and bring a change. Zubaan Books, a feminist press, deals with political content, while the fan base of Balaji Telefilms often make political statements when they voice their opinion about a television show's characters. In this sense, the user of each FB group has an agency through which they express their opinion, thereby blurring the power equation between the producers of the contents of these groups and their consumers. This is in contrast not only to traditional tools of communication that invariably became enmeshed in power politics and ended up being controlled by an elitist group, but also personal FB accounts where the owner can potentially control what is revealed on their online profile, in spite of the Big Data economics at work (see Chapter 2). Although the FB group coordinators lay down the basic guidelines for discussion around a particular cause, the interactive comments are seldom modified unless they are unacceptable on ethical grounds.

Balaji Telefilms, owned and run by Ekta Kapoor, daughter of a Bollywood superstar of the '80s, has been instrumental in making what is called the most popular TV soap in Asia, *Kyunki Saas bhi kabhi bahu thi*, which roughly translates to 'the mother-in-law was also a daughter-in-law'. It aired for almost a decade, from 2000 to 2008, and ever since 60-odd soaps out of the 80-plus produced by Kapoor until 2012 have been named with a 'K' and are invariably based on the lives of women protagonists. By the depiction of these characters as mothers, wives and daughters, these shows make the viewer aware of their identity in similar social roles and their own struggles being quite similar to the ones onscreen. Balaji Telefilms's FB page took off with announcements about their new soaps and other productions, which included using the FB 'wall' as a casting couch. Today, their FB 'wall' is populated with posts from aspiring models and actors advertising their portfolios, which can be interpreted as an expression of the identity they wish to project to the world. This FB group had 30,218 members in January 2013, with 973 new members in December 2012. Within 24 hours of the end of a soap named *Kis Desh Mein Hain Meraa Dil* (which translates to 'In which country does my heart live' in Hindi), there were 22 posts requesting Kapoor to bring the characters back, an assertion of their desire, posted by 7 group members. The soap first aired from 2008 to 2010 and then re-aired a month later, ending in 2012.

Given the frequency of their posts, along with the intensity of the messages conveyed, these members are often instrumental in changing the narrative of the soaps. Balaji Telefilms's publicity manager, Tanuj Garg, confirmed that it is practically impossible for their team of writers not to be influenced by the audience feedback that trickles in through

every possible medium of communication. Garg also said that their FB page is not run officially by the production house, but rather by their audience. In fact, Kapoor's fans have also formed their own, often smaller, FB groups based on their consumption of individual soaps produced by her and have cross-posted updates that appear on the 'news feed' of the Balaji Telefilms FB page, showcasing their self-reliance to produce a new group on their own. It shows that the once-consumers have become the producer of a new Consciousness-Raising FB group through the confidence they have gained via their interactions within the core group. They are aware of the possibilities of forming their own community of a niche audience, even if in the capacity of a fan club, for which they do not need any intervention in the form of leadership or guidance from the core group. In this sense, the Balaji Telefilms FB group does not promote any political cause. But it exemplifies empowerment via virtual participation and organisation of the community. Virtual participation through knowledge sharing retains the anonymity of the members, which reduces the fear of criticism from fellow members. It is this inhibition that makes members hesitate to participate because they feel their contribution is not accurate and so irrelevant to a specific discussion (Ardichvili et al, 2003). The anonymity helps build up trust, on the basis of which a community is organised.

Blanknoise addresses the cause of sexual harassment in public places, for example on streets and workplaces, while Bell Bajao ('Ring the bell' in Hindi) deals with the issue of domestic violence. The latter urges men and boys in the neighbourhood to simply ring the doorbell if they hear a domestic disturbance inside a house. Such an act would distract the perpetrator and also provide the victim with an opportunity to call for help. Bell Bajao's FB webpage even has a Q&A session at a designated hour. As such, the communication is quite interactive, with instant member feedback on how they have been affected by their involvement with the cause. The Blanknoise FB group is one of the busiest among my sample groups, not only in terms of posts but also with regard to the emotionally-charged comments on each post. When one of the coordinator's posted:

Would you feel safe if you did know your local cop? If you established contact?

This post refers to the negligence of the police force in taking the victim of the New Delhi incident to the hospital in time, which many claimed was partially responsible for her death. Needless to say, it received a lot of comments, some of which are:

Meena: Not really. Cannot trust them.



Li: No. Indian cops are corrupt misogynists who seem to think they are there to enforce a moral stance.

Sheila: Yes. Always helpful to know police personnel. Wouldn't know how to begin though!



Fig 5 Critical engagement among Blanknoise FB group members

These reactionary and critical comments were perhaps owing to the sensitive nature of the issue, especially in the wake of a series of incidents that undermined the ethical characterisation of the police force in India following the New Delhi incident. Around this time, an online survey among Indian women, both within the country and abroad, revealed that seven out of 10 women have been sexually abused (Nagarajan, 2012). Given the numbers, members of Blanknoise undoubtedly have enough case studies to discuss and share.

The group is also active with regard to frequent online campaigns that involve the members' participation and are based around popular issues. The 'I never ask for it' is one such campaign, asking participants to put up status messages on their FB pages describing an incident of sexual harassment without actually mentioning the term, and ending with 'I never ask for it'. Soon after it was launched, a member wrote on their FB wall that she was no

longer scared to walk in the middle of the pavement and deal with real life bullies who actually take to the middle of the pavement to assert their power by pushing other pedestrians to the edge. This signifies that her participation in this campaign has made her psychologically stronger and instilled the confidence to tackle the perpetrators.



**Fig 6** One of the ‘I never ask for it’ posters

Zubaan, meaning ‘tongue’ or ‘language’ in Urdu, is an independent, non-profit feminist publishing house based in New Delhi, as they describe themselves on their FB page. Contrary to their offline publishing image, their online presence is expressed via a community of feminists, and includes both men and women, posting on book releases as well as literary festivals from across the globe. The members are primarily of Indian origin, even if they might be based overseas, and the most active age-group is 25-34, as stated on their FB profile. What is interesting is that every post addressed to Zubaan Books is personally acknowledged under the FB group’s name, perhaps by its coordinator, either with a comment or a ‘like’. This can be interpreted as an acknowledgement of the message or opinion shared, which encourages the group members to actively support the cause of a feminist press by partaking in its activities. The pace of postings on this group’s ‘wall’ is determined mostly by Zubaan’s engagements, either in the form of a book launch or a cultural event organised by them. There are, thus, peaks and troughs in their FB group participation. But surprisingly every post is followed by a substantial number of constructive comments, either on how to

reach out to a wider readership through a Kindle-version of a newly released book, or challenging a north-eastern Indian writers' conference because the majority of the writers invited to the workshop are of north-eastern origin but have settled in the more affluent capital city of New Delhi. In this way, the FB platform of this group is used by its members to debate and discuss on issues of concern as they seek to spread information and create awareness.

## ASSAYING FB-MEDIATED CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING INTERACTIONS

### **Information as politics:**

The many-to-many communication model of FB is based on gossip as its defining tone of interaction. According to Jones (1980, p.194), "Gossip is a way of talking [primarily] between women that gives the comfort of validation". When women communicate across race, class or ethnic limitations about their lives and interests to develop an awareness of their mutual oppression, then the talk is mutually validating and therefore often gratifying and potentially inspiring. It is this aspect of gossip-based communication of the FB groups that facilitates activism. When Priya of the Bell Bajao FB group posted an entry from her blog on women's safety in big cities, several other members or peers commented, voicing their personal take on her concerns, along with a few words commending her writing skills. Within the comments thread, there is even a post by Anjana asking one of the commenters, Bina, about the health of her mother – a personal enquiry perhaps - but such an intimate touch to the conversation brings the members closer together. Such conversations are pondered over and reflected upon by the members of the groups, and this encourages the participants to talk about their own experiences without inhibition.

This form of encouragement to participate is important because FB groups provide a support system to these women members in two main ways. A major part of a woman's life is spent accommodating the dominant group (Miller, 1976, p.10) or the male members of the society, while none of their own actions is documented (Brown, 1994). This has left women bereft of references to fall back upon, and the absence of this form of historical allusions is a political construct of the dominant group. The lack of documentation denies women ways to understand themselves, making it difficult to get "consensual validation" (Miller, 1976, p.10) or feedback. Moreover, the way the sacrifices of these women are recorded and made accessible to the public is conventionally constructed by the dominant group, namely men, thereby losing the very essence of having a sympathetic support group. An FB group, in this

regard, steps up to fulfil the role of a support group more ethically and impartially, as the group's content is produced by the consumers themselves. In the same manner, the starkness of the traditional structure produces severe repercussions the day that a subordinate, almost invisible and irrelevant, woman complains about her subordination. The response can take the form of a direct punishment and can easily be converted into a combination of economic hardship, social ostracism and psychological isolation for her, with sometimes even the diagnosis of a personality disorder (Miller, 1976). An FB group, under such circumstances, can perhaps pave the way for a smoother protest by providing a platform for women to voice their grievances without really standing outside of normative social constructs. The FB group is, after all, a shared platform of like-minded users.

### **Political decision-making:**

In the Blanknoise FB group, a member, Sarita, shared her experience of sexual harassment by an airlines employee and asked for suggestions on how to take action against it, because the airlines authorities had duly suppressed it. What is interesting is that not only women but even men have left constructive suggestions for her in the comments boxes. This shows that sexual harassment against women is gradually being recognised as unacceptable by men who are trying to change the patriarchal society and bring in gender equality. Gossip has the capability to make a discussion about an issue of national importance, which is often relegated to the public space, appear to be casual and personal. As Patricia M Spacks (1985, p.262) says, "Gossip interprets public facts in private terms." By referring to personal experiences, this form of trivial talk can actually can spur social analysis of issues of public concern by accumulating the views of a wide cross-section of people.

There are many ways in which interaction can be promoted among women. One such approach could be by finding humour in normatively constructed dominant notions (Brown, 1994) that are associated with gender roles in the society. On Zubaan Books FB wall, an announcement was posted about a talk entitled 'feminists also have a sense of humour' with the graphic of a heterosexual couple in a sexual position with the woman on top. While the woman wonders, via a thought bubble, about what her next 'achievement' should be for arriving at gender equality, her male partner, who apparently takes the position for granted, reads a newspaper. Although Zubaan was challenging two dominant notions – that of women's sexual subjugation by men, as well as the general belief that feminists are staid women deprived of any sense of humour - through its event title and the visual attached to it,

the post attracted three different strands on comments, each of which challenge a certain dominant notion in the society.



**Fig 7** 'Feminists also have a sense of humour'

Interesting to note here is the colloquial and casual language which has been used to voice their thoughts.

Radha: She needs to update the newspaper with a phone/I-Pad/laptop.

Zubaan Books: Ha ha ha ha. This is an old sketch..., we thought it would be great to resurrect it.

But here Radha is actually conveying that the woman in the graphic can express her empowerment through her awareness of technological gadgets and upgrade her partner's means of entertainment.

Bidisha: Oh jeez! Why don't these acts [referring to the talk Zubaan is hosting] ever come to Kolkata? Can I do something to bring them here?

The underlying question in her comment is why these interesting, and invariably popular events, are limited to the northern capitol city of New Delhi. As such, she wishes to decentralise political power of the north by bringing it to the eastern city of Kolkata. This tussle was also evident when Zubaan members challenged the north-eastern Indian writers'

conference. These interactions have direct political implications, in the sense that the north-eastern states of the country, and the eastern states to some extent, are often deprived and ignored by the Central government in New Delhi when it comes to assigning national resources. This percolates down to the private lives of women who transform these economic resources to usable resources at homes (Brown, 1994). In the midst of such an exchange,

Radhika [a young mum]: Can one bring a baby feminist along?

Zubaan Books: Of course...! And there will be nice homemade cookies for feminist baby.

The last interaction encourages political decision-making by challenging the dominant notion that feminists are hardened-up, single women, who prefer to not take up the responsibility of motherhood as that might come in the way of their commitment towards the feminist cause. By retaining the nurturing quality traditionally associated with motherhood, this communication portrays the fact that feminism is for everyone.

Political decision-making is also manifested among the aspiring actors within the Balaji Telefilms' community who are often picked up by casting agencies, as evident from their comments. They become members of various overlapping communities simultaneously, which potentially increase their exposure to employment opportunities. It makes them economically reliant and perhaps also, in due course, equips them to make politically independent life choices. The viewers' community, on the other hand, can find solace in the company of likeminded people. This negotiated niche provides them with an escape from daily drudgery, as all these soaps are based on stories that are similar to their own lives. Brown (1994, p.112) refers to it as "resistive pleasure", which creates a social network that acts as a support mechanism by helping them vent their emotions – much like the politics of the personal realm.

Balaji Telefilms is bringing viewers together as a community whose comments on the characters in the TV soaps often have political overtones, as manifested by Rekha's comment about how she stopped watching a show because it was unjust to prevent a couple in the narrative from uniting. This can be interpreted as an act of dissent against the television show producer. According to Jones (1980, p.197), television is "perhaps a kind of vicarious enjoyment of a range of experience beyond the small sphere to which the individual woman is restricted." Thus, TV viewing provides a social infrastructure of exchange, offering an alternative construction of reality, mediated via gossip-based interactions. Even if there might be barriers in the form of language, social situations and level of knowledge, women are still

able to communicate as a 'resistive' voice (Brown, 1994), by asking for redistribution of existing power equation or change in the existing situation. Women recognize each other's oppression, whether it is on-screen as a TV soap or a real-life incident of harassment, and develop a discourse out of their own experiences. Similar discourses are evidenced when one member of Bell Bajao FB group, Gopa, offered advocacy to Neeti via posts and comments. The non-profit organisation posted on its FB page a link from the well-known Bollywood actor Amitabh Bachchan's very popular blog; this particular blog post praises those who work to diminish violence against women. As expected, the post gathered 22 likes. But Sarita, a member, promptly questioned the actor's ethical values with regard to his endorsement of a brand of instant noodles aimed at children. This was followed by Geeta, another member, posting about yet another Bollywood actor's unethical endorsement of a fairness cream. It is important to mention here that in the Indian context, fair skin has always been considered a prerequisite of conventional beauty, a presumption which is now being questioned by liberal, Western-educated minds.

Interestingly, this form of resistant approach has also gathered a few 'likes'. This shows that women's values are evolving, as perceptible through their acknowledgements/ 'likes', made possible perhaps through these interactions, and is effected through a shift in their decision-making. These women no longer accept the world as it is presented to them, without questioning it. In the context of this particular post, Sarita also praises her daughter's discerning qualities:

When my daughter asked how could people who are icons in society other than on stage / picture be part of such unjust values, i was very happy. She was not just hero worshipping...

Needless to say, her comment was applauded by members of the group, including some of the 22 members who had 'liked' the original post, thus assuring acceptance within the group. This form of political act, referred to as 'protest', articulates displeasure towards the act of a public figure by distinguishing what is the right from what is not. It reflects the opinionated mind of the activist, which if not heeded by the opposition, can progress to the next political act called 'resistance'.

In another instance, when Zubaan Books posted about an upcoming book reading organised by the publishing house, Ranjita recommended a certain section of the book that she would like to read. In response,

Reema: You didn't tell me that you are reading. I will try my best to come now.



Zubaan Books: Yes, (Ranjita) will be reading, so you must come.

This not only established the already existing friendship between Ranjita and Reema, but also showed that Ranjita, a newspaper columnist, is popular with book lovers. As such, Zubaan Books tried to leverage publicity for the event by using Ranjita's popularity as the bait to increase participation – all through an apparently intimate interaction. In another instance, informal sharing and comments on a particular research paper helped the author gain direct feedback from her readers and also gave the readers an opportunity to interact with a writer they admire. Similar interactions when mediated through feminist presses have influenced remarkable shifts in decision-making among their women readers that have helped redress gender imbalances (Young, 1997). Interactivity promoted via FB group communications could be said to aid in instigating similar shifts and politicising decision-making.

When Bell Bajao posted the video of an advertisement of a cellular phone on its FB wall, it attracted several critical comments from the group members. In the commercial, a leading national level cricket player, Virat Kohli, endorses a mobile phone by showcasing to his group of young friends how the unique features of the device makes it easier to speak to random girls and even impress them. The derogatory overtone of the narrative infuriated the group members and they questioned the politics of the agency that created the advertisement and the integrity of the censor board that passed it. One of the members, Ravi, filed a complaint with the authorities and posted the tracking number, asking other members to follow it up and express support for the protest. Celebrity endorsements are often used in commercials to establish normative social constructs (Cooper, 2008). Rakesh, another member of the Bell Bajao FB group, explains this issue, saying:

It's funny ...in the first instance I couldn't decide if this is harassment....i guess over the years 'normalization' of certain kinds of behavior happens. Also because the guy is 'Virat Kohli' the hero image overpowers the harasser image .....BUT we need to wake up ...yes this is harassment of a sneaky kind ....can u imagine 1000s of boys trying this and thinking nothing is wrong with it cause Virat did it .....and we are 'normalizing' this through ads .....why don't they turn the ad around with a group of girls harassing the boy instead .....





**Fig 8** Virat Kohli (centre) in the mobile phone advertisement

By using a sports celebrity, the mobile phone manufacturer is trying to claim that it is acceptable and admirable to speak to girls and impress them with the unique features of this new product. The publicity managers are completely overlooking the underlying sexual harassment of such an act and thereby normalising such a practice. Rakesh, Ravi and a host of other members of the Bell Bajao FB group are raising their voice against this derogatory advertisement via their comments on group's FB wall. Although Rakesh's accusations are pretty direct and also points finger at Kohli, by virtue of being a chatty conversation on an SNS platform, the digital protest appears much smoother and non-violent in nature, even if the comments are reactive and reflective of women's angst.

**Joining at will:**

These FB groups give women a platform to ask their questions and voice their views, along with a willing audience, because an FB-user will not join the group unless its discussions are of interest to her/ him. For example, all the posts in Blanknoise reflect the collective angst among its members about sexual harassment of women. Analysing the female psyche, Pamela M Fishman (1978) says that women traditionally ask more questions because unless they ask they will not be answered and to get an answer they have to gain their men's attention. But her study shows that these conversations, primarily initiated by women, are sustained for as long as the men decide not to participate. These FB groups facilitate the continuation of these conversations, with or without male participation. As such, women feel they have an audience at all times. There is somebody to always acknowledge what is said and the anonymity of the members makes it easy to continue the conversation in the virtual world. In this way, the gossip-based mode of interaction within FB gives the comfort of validation and provokes a sense of intimacy. The informal information-sharing model of FB

groups like Bell Bajao and Blanknoise is designed to develop awareness and reliability among online users often through activities that are apparently pointless – through status updates, posting comments on other’s status and remediating information from news portals, blog sites and YouTube.

In another instance, when a member of the Zubaan Books FB group, Ravi, posted about how he enjoyed reading a book and wanted to share it with a friend overseas, another member, Deepak, suggested that the publisher should come out with a Kindle version. This was followed by Zubaan assuring them that the e-version of the book would appear in the market very soon. The self-imposed peer-to-peer monitoring and advising achieved through the gossip model of SNS communication, as opposed to a central monitoring system, ensures that the digitally reliant Consciousness-Raising groups crowdsource their calls to action. This keeps the communication democratic. However, such an act occurs concurrently with, and not separately from, the promotion of participation and organisation of the movement enabled by the same communication channel. All of these FB groups operate on this paradigm of decentralised access, simultaneity and interconnectivity, which encourages users to participate, as evident from the increasing membership of their FB groups. As of January, 2013, Blanknoise had 3,558 members, Bell Bajao had 5,087 members, Zubaan Books had 2,617 members and Balaji Telefilms, as mentioned earlier, had 30,218 members.

**Knowledge generation as the objective:**

Taking a severely radical approach to socially constructed dominant notions might provoke women to question them and refusing to succumb to them. These progressive patterns of interaction, leading to the political act of rebellion, can be identified in the communications within the FB Consciousness-Raising group, as was evident in the references to a feminist event in New Delhi organised by Zubaan Books. These virtual networks offer women in a socially subordinate position a significant space to construct positions of identity – a space to construct their world in their own terms. The very fact that Balaji Telefilms’ FB group members could unite into smaller groups to form their own niche community of specific TV soap viewers exemplifies their self-reliance, formed through their identity as a member within the core group. These smaller groups are formed mainly when one of them posts on the Balaji Telefilms FB page wall and it is then ‘liked’ by the rest of the sub-group members or some comment in support of the post. When the same set of members appears in clusters commenting and liking each other’s posts, then these members eventually create their own

niche group based on the mutual liking for a particular soap, thereby breaking the dominance of the core group.

The “connecting power” (Tacchi, 2010, n.p) of these FB group interactions has the potential to create a kind of meta-commentary whereby, for instance, victims of domestic and sexual abuse can analyse and discuss their actions through their interaction with other group members. It acts as a strong base and gradually develops a support network. However, to sustain the interest of members and also to attract new members to the group, the activists have to introduce attractive campaigns in the online sphere at regular intervals that are also reflected in their offline actions. The ‘I never ask for it’ campaign, for instance, launched by Blanknoise, is a leading example in this context – it was equally successful both on the online as well as the offline platforms. No wonder then that Zubaan sometimes posts about 3-4 events in a month on their FB wall to keep their members engaged. They could range from authors cooking for their readers to book launches, book readings and meetings with feminist writers. FB has been designed for users with remarkably short attention spans, for the consumption of the unending flow of information in the online world. This flow is heightened by repeated ‘sharing’ of posts on these events by group members, even though not all calls for action garner comments. A particular poster on saying no to sexual abuse, posted by Bell Bajao soon after the Delhi rape incident in December, 2012, gathered 29 ‘likes’ and no comments, but it was ‘shared’ 91 times by its group members. While the ‘likes’ denote solidarity towards the issue of concern, sharing of posts with the touch of a key can go a long way in promoting participation without being too demanding on the members.

Every time a member of Balaji Telefilms’ FB group adds a post, requesting the production house to bring back the next season of a popular soap, it is ‘liked’ and religiously followed up by a sub-group of dedicated members. In fact, the constituent members of each sub-group are constant, defined by particular soaps. So a certain sub-group of people interacts each time a certain television show is mentioned. As a genre, soap opera was developed specifically to cultivate the socially and economically isolated women in their homes, as consumers not only for themselves but also for their families (Brown. 1994). The women might be admiring the lifestyle of an actor in a show, but subconsciously they end up imitating it in real life. In the portfolios that some of the FB group’s members post in the hope of prospective modelling or acting opportunities, they often look like characters of the shows that Balaji Telefilms produces.

In a capitalist economy, the economic resources are earned by the dominant group (Freedman, 2010), constituted by the male members of the society, but it is women, and not only stay-at-home ones, who convert commodities acquired through these economic resources into usable resources at home. As such, the economic influences of these soaps are remarkable in their household. Even if these women work outside of the home, they usually perform most of the domestic chores, and tend to get exploited both in the labour market as workers and within the house as a wife, a mother or a daughter. They might provide the 'support economy', but women's work is considered peripheral (Brown, 1994). It is these soaps that overcome their isolation by giving them something to talk about and bond with similar women viewers over such discussions. Thus, this form of gossip becomes a catalyst of social processes (Spacks,1982). It gives them an outlet to voice their frustrations and aspirations, and at the same time provide them with an opportunity to exchange experiences with their peers which can potentially improve their social situation. Thus, three mutually interdependent dimensions of "pleasure, knowledge, and the power to break rules" (Brown, 1994, p.132) follow in succession, which is possibly how Balaji Telefilms FB group network can empower its members.

Bell Bajao Timeline 2012 Liked

Has this ever happened to you?

**SPEAK UP AGAINST PUBLIC MASTURBATION!**



**Indecent public masturbation violates a girl's right to feel free and safe.**

**MAKE THE STREETS SAFE FOR WOMEN, BE A HERO AND STOP HARASSMENT!**

Stop Street Harassment Report  
More than 37 percent of female respondents have had a stranger masturbate at or in front of them at least once in public.

MEETUS ON THE STREET  
breakthrough

Like · Comment · Share 30 20 12



Like · Comment · Share 6

Bell Bajao 21 March 2012

A fantastic campaign against street harassment from our friends at Must Bol! Lets Talk

**if clothes cause harassment.**

**plates make people fat, cars make people drive drunk, and pens misspell words.**

don't be a fool.

got stared at

Like · Comment · Share 113 4 63

Bell Bajao 19 March 2012

Ever stood up for yourself while being harassed? Tell us your story below! It might inspire others to do the same.



Catcalls, leers, groping, stalking & public masturbation

No one should face this harassment when they're walking down streets, taking the bus, or shopping at a store. This is unacceptable.

**INTERNATIONAL ANTI-STREET HARASSMENT WEEK**  
**MARCH 18-24, 2012**  
Join us.

MEETUS ON THE STREET

Like · Comment · Share 22 3 3

Bell Bajao 19 March 2012

**SPEAK UP AGAINST CATCALLING!**



**Women are not animals, stop catcalling them!**

**MAKE THE STREETS SAFE FOR WOMEN, BE A HERO AND STOP HARASSMENT!**

MEETUS Stop Street Harassment Report

**Fig 9** Posts on Bell Bajao FB group garner several 'likes' and comments, while some members 'share' the posts to spread the word

Zubaan Books, through its FB webpage, plays a crucial part in potentially bringing about individual and collective change. “[F]eminist presses exemplify the institutionalisation and practice of a theory of power” as dispersed among the literate and educated people of society, and provide an approach to activism in which discursive struggle is central (Young, 1997, p.26). These texts reflect the ideas and discourses that emerge from grassroots, community-based activism and consciousness. Similarly, each feminist publisher considers her work to be a form of feminist activism, as it reflects the angst of a certain community of oppressed women. All of the publishers maintain that publishing the works they do contributes to social change, though their ideas about the nature of that contribution differ, as is evident from the tone of posts on Zubaan’s FB pages. Although most of their posts are apparently notifications of their book releases, there is an underlying message of women’s empowerment through those writings. This “cultural arm” to activism is necessary “to help increase consciousness, open up worlds to people because of what’s being written about, and to be part of a ...revolution” (Young, 1997, p. 32). Through published works, an activist can reach people and have a dialogue with them, encouraging shifts in consciousness and action. It gives women a reference point to fall back on in times of need. These writings perhaps also act as an acknowledgement of the role of women in political, social and other achievements. This cultural arm of the women’s movement can also facilitate dialogue between people who would never otherwise engage with each other, as evident from the congregation of Indian women from across the globe on Zubaan’s FB page.

In this way, FB-mediated communication has the potential to create awareness for a feminist cause and promote participation for the organisation of a movement. With regard to grassroots activism, FB can create a forum for information and exchange of opinions among like-minded people, which, if sustained, can bring about perceptible changes in their political identity and decision-making capabilities. In the Indian context, a mother praising her girl child’s discerning criticism of a noodles advertisement, or even the posts and comments on FB in vernacular language expressing bold opinions against sexual harassment, can facilitate the possibility of a shift in the consciousness of these women.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **DECODING THE WRITING ON THE FACEBOOK WALL: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT GROUPS**

*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.*

- 1960s women's movement slogan, attributed to Margaret Mead, anthropologist.

Distribution of information engaged in by the Consciousness-Raising FB groups helps in political identity formation among the group members, which encourages participation in civic engagements. As a stage beyond the Consciousness-Raising FB groups, the four FB groups analysed in this chapter promote civic engagement by encouraging collective actions designed to identify and address particular issues of public concern. All of the groups' names are descriptive and do not require much explanation in terms of introducing their causes, perhaps because the members joining these groups are expected to be already aware of the issues each of them is raising. The groups include Honour Killings in India – Stop it please!!, ELLE Breast Cancer Campaign (India), Veg Recipes of India, and Parentree – An Indian Parenting Community. Although the causes discussed here are based on issues of concern to Indian society, the group members have joined the online community not only from within the country but across the world.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the impact of online media on globalisation (Lovink, 2008) resulting in the formation of virtual communities, like the FB groups, that go beyond geographical limitations. This is followed by an analysis of the three phases of collective behaviour that lead to civic engagement, as theorised by Charles Tilly (1978, 2004) and H. Blumer (cited in Crossley, N. 2002) respectively. Both of these authors' models overlap, as they are guided by Durkheim's concept of 'collective effervescence'. I argue that it is this same component of collective conduct that motivates FB groups to promote civic engagement. The activities of the four FB groups are analysed, in keeping with the phases listed by Tilly and Blumer, according to four distinct categories: grassroots to political calls for action, collective action based on 'collective effervescence', reflexive knowledge production and consumption, and the WUNC-inspired transformational paradigm. The social interactions that these groups promote lead to collective effervescence, which in turn enriches the members with 'social capital'.

## DIASPORIC PUBLIC SPHERE AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Overcoming geographically determined territorial boundaries, these FB groups have perhaps taken Benedict Anderson's concept of the "imagined community" (2006, p.xi) a step forward, in the sense that many of these groups that encourage civic engagement on India-centric issues are formed by non-resident Indians. Exposure and access to the more liberal and organised Western culture would often be a reference point for the founders of these FB groups whose membership predominantly consists of Indians residing within the country. The interactions on the virtual platform of FB groups have rendered space relative, by facilitating communication across all time zones and uniting the dispersed actors into collectives. It is how the communication tools are used that determines the outcome of the struggle, or at least to a certain extent.

The more sophisticated and intertwined the networks' mesh is, the less inclined the activists feel towards supporting the central governing of a system, which is comparable to the functioning of a nation-state. Nonetheless, these FB group members are brought together by an identification with India. As Anderson(2006) says, "nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time" (p.3). These FB groups are communities that are similarly structured around what Anderson describes as "deep, horizontal comradeship" (2006, p.224), with no power imbalances among its members. But unlike Anderson's 'imagined community', these FB group members often organise real-life meetings depending on the cause at hand. The discussions these FB groups engage in within the "diasporic public sphere" (Appadurai. 1996, p.22) encourages civic awareness that is achieved through public participation in the community and ,as such, is aimed at mobilising their members. When these activities are suitably channelled to engage the members along a common cause of concern, they can potentially impact the real world and bring about socio-political changes.

While a governing body seeks to established social norms, values and institutions, social movements seek to topple this order and bring about a reformation (Tilly, 2004). Tilly lists three acts of civic engagement that can lead to a social movement. Firstly, this may occur through campaign, which involves "a sustained organised public effort making collective claims on target authorities" (p.3). Secondly, a social movement can be facilitated by linking different kinds of political performances in effective combinations. These include, "creation of special-purpose associations and coalitions, public meetings, solemn processions, vigils, rallies, demonstrations, petition drives, statements to and in public media, and pamphleteering" (ibid, p.3). Thirdly, it can be achieved by unifying the community members



through what Tilly refers to as WUNC: “worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment” (ibid, p.3). This occurs not only among the members of the community, but also by propagating matters of public concern beyond their immediate community.

H Blumer (cited in Crossley, N. 2002), on the other hand, claims that in the beginning, “a social movement is amorphous, poorly organised, and without form” (p.28). He then identifies three stages in the development of civic engagement: various dispersed acts that lead to social unrest, which, in turn, leads to the formation of elementary groups calling for change to the existing social order, and finally, out of these acts of social unrest, comes “a positive force for change” (ibid, p.24). When the collective behaviour graduates from the entropic to a more refined level, the spontaneous interaction mechanisms also evolve and become more focussed. In the course of time, the same elementary communications “effect transformations in the way in which people perceive, think, feel and act” (ibid., p.29). These lead to potentially sporadic acts that are in conflict with existing patterns, and through these interactions, conditions of protest are created which focus on movements with specific goals.

If we consider both Tilly’s and Blumer’s progression of civic engagement towards a social movement, we find that the acts and phases they mention actually overlap. By combining the two approaches, we can arrive at three main phases: first, dispersed acts of social unrest converge in a call for participation in a cause; second, the newly formed elementary groups engage in repeated events for canvassing purposes, leading to actual congregation of affected people; third, these gatherings unify the members via ‘WUNC’ which provides the basis for civic engagement aimed at bringing about socio-political changes. The running theme that sustains all of these three phases is ‘collective effervescence’; it holds the groups together by creating an emotional bonding or passion to engage in civic acts.

Through sustained collective actions, the initially unorganised groups reach the next level when they get together to respond to social action and can potentially be mobilised for a political cause. The emerging “collective effervescence” (Durkheim, cited in Crossley, 2002) spurs the social change, which is more organised and focused on its issues than ever before. Durkheim considers this an important element of the collective behaviour which forms the basis of civic engagement. This helps members of a society form collectives of “both cognitively and emotionally engaged” (Shilling and Mellor, 1998, p.194) individuals. Durkheim argues that human beings “are internally divided between their egoistic impulses and their capacity for ‘reaching beyond’ these asocial passions to the realm of conceptual

thought ...held in common by a society” (ibid, p.196). It is the collective effervescence of social groups that harnesses people's passions and allows them to interact on the basis of shared concepts and form a community (Durkheim. 1995). According to Shilling and Mellor (1998), Durkheim's collective effervescence “captures the idea of social ‘force’ at its birth; when embodied humans ...are transformed through an emotional structuring of their sensory and sensual being”(p.196). This ‘force’ binds the members to the ideals valued by their social group, which can be comparable to the way FB groups operate.

The consequences of this ‘binding’ can be dramatic or mundane (Durkheim. 1982, 1995). During day-to-day interactions, the members experience a rush of energy that manifests as understanding and affection towards the cause at hand. The effects of this collective effervescence are usually ephemeral and last as long as the emotions that stimulate it. As such, it is important for the FB groups to sustain their acts that recharge this emotion among their members in order to have an enduring social significance. The Civic Engagement Facebook groups are usually formed by the culmination of public efforts and are sustained by collective claims of the members on a certain issue of concern, which is easily taken beyond their immediate community via virtual tools of connection. These “special-purpose associations” (Tilly, 2004, p.4), when successful, move on to coalesce with related political acts that are offline, such as, physical meetings in public spaces, processions, rallies and demonstrations. These offline meetings of the online members (Ayers, 2013) can perhaps reinstate the commitment of the participants, which, in turn, can potentially bring about real-life changes in the socio-political system.

Unlike a one-time call for action, a sustained series of campaigns helps build up the interest, which creates awareness and mobilises people to respond to the cause (Tilly, 2004).It is these repeated events, organised for canvassing purposes, leading to an actual physical congregation of the affected people, which FB helps to organise by targeting them at the concerned people. Rather than demanding immediate responses from the group members, an FB group coordinator can place a message in the users’ inbox. It shows up on the users’ FB wall as a ‘notification’, which they can respond to in their own free time. This less-imposing, passive form of message delivery is more effective as it does not require an immediate response from the FB users and thereby potentially do not repel them from the act of responding positively to the cause. FB groups formed around civic awareness issues evolve in similar patterns, because most of them are formed as grassroots groups whose members have little or no experience at organising a formal protest. A similar group of people from the FB

group against honour killing had organised for worldwide candlelight vigil soon after the Delhi gang rape case in December 2012. It received an enthusiastic response, as evidenced by the regular and detailed queries prior to the event from the group's members from across the world.

## INTRODUCING THE FB GROUPS

Honour Killings in India – Stop it please!! is an FB group that is coordinated by Ashish Verma, an activist based in New York City but still in touch with his Indian roots. He formed the FB group to protest against honour killings, which are rampant within Indian society, yet mostly unreported or disguised as suicide. To save the family's honour, men often kill their own female family members who engage in marital liaisons outside of their socio-economic strata or religious communities. They believe that this is in conflict with Indian tradition and, that these partnerships bring shame to the family. To put an end to this social practice, this FB group says on its profile:

It is not only a legal crime but also a social crime. Awareness is required now to uproot this belief. Please come forward to save love and life.

A call for action as this one is quite direct and aimed at bringing the members together via communal acts. To further their objective, they collate news reports and statistics on honour killing from across the world, while focusing on the Indian diaspora outside of the country as well as incidents from within India, and collectively attempt to shame them by condemning their heinous acts.

The FB group ELLE Breast Cancer Campaign (India), henceforth referred to as EBCC, uses hyperbole to generate awareness for their cause and glamorous activities, like carnivals and marathons, to promote participation among its members. These hyperbolic acts can also be interpreted as persuasive techniques to encourage participation by engaging the members in glamorous feats. They have several chapters across a few Indian cities, whose members often come together through the activities organized by this FB group, if not through their interactions on their FB wall. As their name suggests, this group's mission is to raise funds and awareness for breast cancer. Survival rates are greatly dependent on early detection and so awareness is their "biggest weapon in this battle", says their FB profile. EBCC has over 30,000 members who contribute time, services, products and donations for the cause. Their profile states that they work with Women's Cancer Initiative - Tata Memorial Hospital, Mumbai, and Cancer Patients Aid Association (CPAA), Mumbai, for cancer

detection camps, treatment and clinical trials for disadvantaged patients. ELLE, a fashion and lifestyle magazine whose Indian chapter is based in Mumbai, has already built up a reputation worldwide for its work towards enhancing breast cancer awareness and also with regard to raising funds. So it is an activist cause that is organised within a corporate system. This FB group is the Indian segment, which tries to replicate the same design, “because breast cancer by its very nature targets the women who are our readers”, as their profile states. Apart from the carnival that is used to raise funds in three Indian cities, their promotional techniques include illumination of landmark buildings in pink light, and ‘Wear Pink to Work Day’ on the third Friday in October, which they promote among their corporate clients.

Dassana’s ‘Veg Recipes of India’ brings popular vegetarian and vegan dishes to the dining tables of this FB group’s members. The chef calls the visuals she posts “a feast for the eyes” in the profile. By ‘Liking’ her FB page, members gain access to the recipes laid out on the webpage. What she lacks in written communication is made up through the constant nature of her interactions with her group members. It helps that she mostly caters to their requests and, when she is not equipped to, she is frank about it and guides members to other weblinks that can lead them to the requested recipe or food fact. Although dedicated mainly to the Indian palate, this FB wall is a melting pot of kitchen-talk across various cultures. The FB page is an extension of Dassana’s personal website by the same name, the only difference being the lively discussions on spices and recipes among the FB members. In this way, food as a symbol of culture defines the identity of the members and on the digital public sphere, it “satisfy[s] the soul rather than the body” (Pearson, S and Kothari. 2007, p.50). Their soulful exchange among the FB group’s members binds them together as a collective. In this way, although the level of engagement of this FB group members is not particularly political, yet the fact that the group brings people together and encourages them to participate in the activities of the group, showcases the group’s potential to organise for a common cause.

‘Parentree - An Indian parenting community’ focuses on the “practical aspects of Indian parenting”. It includes information and reviews of popular schools and preschools across the country, as well as local activities for children in members’ neighbourhoods. The community aims to foster, says their FB page:

intelligence and confidence and creativity in ...children, [through] reliable classes for arts and sports, safe products for ...children, good nutrition, parenting tips, pregnancy, child development, emotional development and behaviour... the list goes on.

It works as a sounding board for parents living in urban nuclear families where everyone benefits from sharing knowledge and experiences. This community took off originally from a website established in 2008, where parents write posts and editors, trained in pedagogy, voice their opinions based on the latest scientific and medical research that affects children and their upbringing. There are discussion groups among parents with similar interests; parents are also encouraged to start their own groups. All of their activities are aimed at “having fun and making friends”, states their FB profile. The editors claim that they use FB to reach out to more parents to expand the community. The educational and informational posts on their FB wall are geared at gathering responses from other parents, who are then encouraged to open Parentree branches in their own neighbourhoods and thus also extend the civic engagement of a similar demography.

#### ASSAYING FB-MEDIATED CIVIC AWARENESS ACTIVITIES

On the basis of the three stages arrived at by combining Tilly and Blumer’s theories on progression of civic engagement towards a social movement, the activities of these FB groups promoting civic engagement can be assayed under four distinct categories: grassroots to political calls for action, collective action based on ‘collective effervescence’, reflexive knowledge production and consumption, and the WUNC-inspired transformational paradigm.

##### **Grassroots to political calls for action:**

Unlike Max Weber’s concept of bureaucratic organisations, which are formed along rational objectives, these “ordinary” or “common” (Willie et al. 2008, p.ix) communities, which are similar to grassroots organisations, deal with issues that are fundamental to social life. It is these elementary organisations that address issues of public concern and ultimately end up advocating for changes to policy or the political system. Each of the FB groups discussed in this chapter is geared towards a similar objective – to discuss issues at a community level. Their activities are focussed on encouraging members to join in the discussions, so that they can contribute to the cause in some way.

As with every grassroots organisation, these FB group members “have something as yet unsaid to say to each other and a help to give one another” (Buber, M. 1951, cited in Willie et al. 2008, p.ix). Through this give and take, random acts of social unrest are voiced, which Blumer (cited in Crossley, 2002) considers the first stage of the formation of a social movement. Through their accidental or trivial activities, FB groups can engage their members in such a way that their acts become overtly politicised (Jordan, 2002). These apparently

unimportant acts, such as liking a status update, expressing an opinion on a particular issue and thereby engaging in it, articulate their political inclination. These small, individual actions have the power to implement societal changes by transforming existing social practices. The annual Elle Breast Cancer marathon, for instance, was organised to raise awareness about this illness and advise women to go for regular check-ups. The regular updates on the marathon gathered ‘likes’ and comments, some of which are constructive, thereby showcasing an awareness about the issue. This awareness advances the campaign’s objective of getting the group members to go for regular check-ups and make similar preventive acts a part of their lifestyle. Thus, by claiming their right to their body and their health, these women put forward their “life rights” (Deveaux 1994, p.229) as political rights.

When a group or a community is considered to have less power or limited access to resources, as opposed to another group of people who have greater access to bureaucratic structures, the former is called the subdominant and the latter the dominant group (Willie et al., 2008). Under the sexual contract (Freedman, 2010), it is women who are dominated over by the male members of the society, both at home and outside of home. In this power equation, the former can also be referred to as the grassroots as they engage in issues that form the basis of the family within the private sphere of their homes, and these issues, though apparently simple, often push these women to take political decisions. These FB groups can also be considered a community of people with limited power; their collective power enables them to raise their voice for bigger political causes, with shared knowledge, which is achieved only when they come together as a group with similar objectives of civic engagement (Tilly 2004). The civic engagement FB groups are geared towards taking constructive steps to change the existing conditions in the society. For instance, when the Parentree members decided to rate the primary schools in a certain neighbourhood, they are indirectly applying pressure on these schools to improve their facilities by forcing them to compete against each other. In this way, they attempt to redistribute existing power balances. The honour killing FB group, through its posts, aims to shame the involved communities and families to prevent them from committing similar acts.

Yasmine posts: Where there is no shame, there is no honor.’ n KILLING is SHAMELESS.....:(

In response, Benazir writes: these people will never understand love, India is country of brotherhood bt everywhere there is separation n this casticiskis meneater.....

Although not every word is legible, the sense of frustration with regard to the issue of honour killing comes out from posts such as these. The FB group thus tries to make honour killing a topic of national shame (refer to Fig 10) by instigating perpetrators to stay away from similar practices.



**Fig 10** The FB group tries to make honour killing a topic of national shame



**Figs 11, 12, 13** Breast cancer awareness promotions at corporate organisations (above); via carnivals (right top); via glamorous Bollywood celebrity-oriented promotions (right below)



ELLE Breast Cancer Campa... Timeline Now

ELLE Carnival For A Cause 2011 (Bangalore) (42 photos)




Like - Comment - Share 10

Liked




Like - Comment - Share 10

10 people like this.

Doing great Job ELLE  
25 April 2011 at 16:34 · Like

ELLE Breast Cancer Campaign (India) Thanks Kamlesh, it's a lot of work, but it's really rewarding  
25 April 2011 at 18:41 · Like

Please tell me what can I do for ELLE. I'll do it as much I can.

ELLE Breast Cancer Campa... Timeline Now

premier chefs - all for a great cause! See you tomorrow at the Taj West End for a spectacular Sunday Brunch!

Like - Comment - Share

ELLE Breast Cancer Campaign (India)  
9 March 2011

In the Hindustan Times today!

**Fashion's day out, for a good cause**



Like - Comment - Share 7

Liked



**SHOP FOR A CAUSE**

Like - Comment - Share 7

ELLE Breast Cancer Campaign (India)  
7 March 2011

Have you bought your donor tickets for the Carnival for a Cause at the beautiful Taj West End for the 13th of March? Write to us now to book...

Like - Comment - Share 3

3 people like this.

how to I book the tickets fr the event at Bangalore  
9 March 2011 at 02:01 · Like

### **Collective action based on ‘collective effervescence’:**

Sustained collective actions, as stated above, reflect Durkheim’s concept of “collective effervescence” (Tiryakian, 1995, p.269). This call for change, considered the second stage of social movement by Blumer, brings out the spontaneity among FB users, which is manifested through basic communication. For instance, the glamorous and Bollywood celebrity-oriented FB group promoting awareness of breast cancer organises for carnivals in Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore with a call for volunteers. They receive a good response with women asking for dates and talking about joining the carnival or apologising for not being able to make it. An example for a call: “Do invite all your friends to join - We promise every new addition will be ‘tickled pink’... :)”. The colour pink is used here not only to refer to its association with breast cancer, but the verb ‘tickled’ has been consciously chosen to bring out the collective effervescence of the FB members.

At the carnival even men run to raise funds, while Bollywood celebrities become ambassadors, and fashion designers endorse them with their labels; the venue is laden with salad bars and grills; news media resort to sneak peeks. All of these gimmicks of the carnival are promoted through its FB page. It ends with talk about spreading the carnival to other cities of the country. EBCC also posts internship advertisements on FB, as well as promoting the pink ribbon through fashion items with the logo on them and the proceeds from the sale go for the cause. They organise silent auctions of Dior, Estee Lauder and Gucci products, with the slogan: “Pamper yourself for a cause. Support us, make your contribution today!” Other attempts to generate collective effervescence include their campaign: ‘Wear pink to work day’. On certain days when all of the employees of ELLE follow wear pink, photographs are posted on FB of them standing in the shape of the ribbon. Even the office buildings are lit up with pink bulbs. One of their posts read: “45 companies wore pink to work in 2011 in an attempt to go pink for a cause.” The hype that is generated around every promotional event organised EBCC is reflected via the updates on the wall of this FB group, which can be attributed to the effervescence of the community arising from its participation for the cause.

Verma’s FB group members, campaigning against honour killing, engage in similar bonding as evident from the informal way in which they interact. Every time a new member joins the group, the update is ‘liked’ by several members. The generic ‘good morning’-s or ‘hii’-s are always acknowledged. They discuss every move of the group on the forum wall and take actions depending on the response. One such discussion was about changing the

name of the FB group to include other issues. Unfortunately, it was not possible due to technical limitations, say their posts. They also try to raise funds against female foeticide through bowling events and painting auctions.



**Fig 14** Campaign against female foeticide (left) through painting auctions (right)

The FB group also gathered a talent pool to write songs for the cause and make a YouTube album – all crowdsourced on their wall. One of the posts by a member outside of India talks about a music video about their cause that received international recognition at a film festival. A novelist writing on honour killing sources her information by getting in touch with those affected via this FB group. Her conversations with the members often generate collective reactions. Other efforts aimed at generating collective effervescence include starting a postcard campaign in which each member will send a postcard to the law minister reminding him of his promise to eradicate honour killing by passing stronger laws in the Parliament. Although this is a traditional political act, among a series of otherwise informal political acts, this approach to address the cause did not prove to be successful, as there were no follow-up posts on this and the effervescence died out after a few comments.



**Fig 15** The postcard campaign against honour killing sent to law minister

Perhaps Dassana achieves this by engaging with her readers on her FB group as if they are all in the kitchen together, sharing recipes or learning from each other. Such exchanges feed “a hunger for emotional, physical and social pleasures that can be gratified vicariously by watching someone cook, talk about and eat food” (Pearson and Kothari. 2007, p.46). On Dassana’s FB group, Reema acknowledges her association by saying:

I’m so grateful and thankful to have found your site. Every time I see a new recipe I get all excited and encouraged to experiment. Especially the vegan desserts, as they can be quite challenging :)

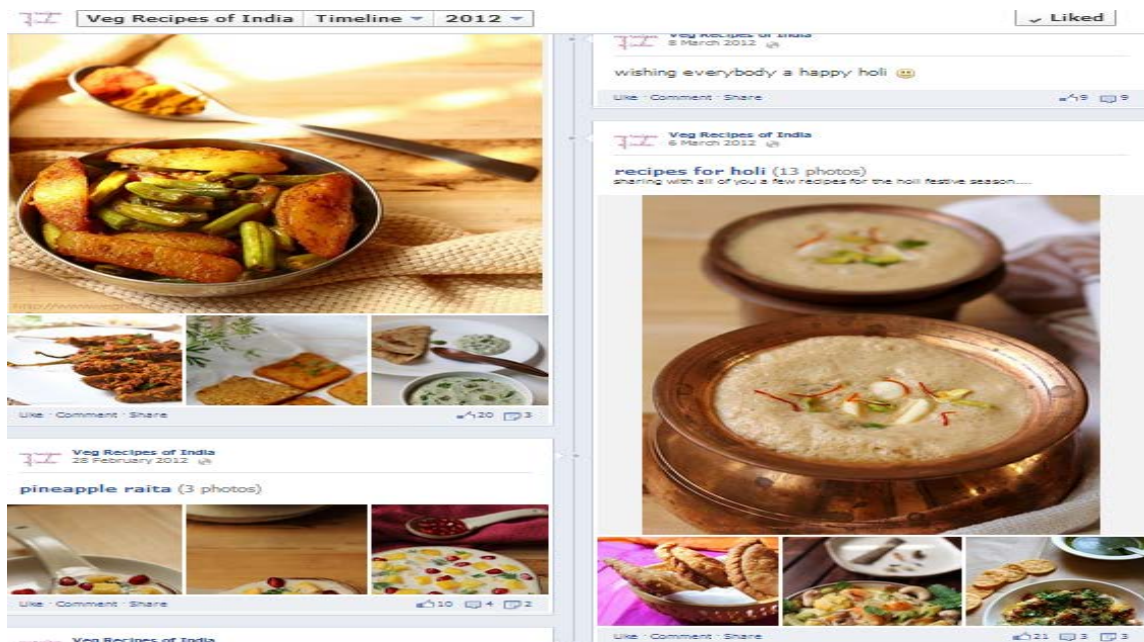
Another way of facilitating the formation of a collective, albeit without form, is when Dassana runs out of ideas or is busy “upgrading her laptop server”, and she asks her ‘friends’ to suggest recipes or gives them a choice and asks them to select one. It is a witty way of getting readers involved and keeps the conversations going. For example, Dassana posts:

if life hands you a box full of strawberries, what will you do? a fruit vendor came to our home thinking we are the previous residents of the house and gave a box full of strawberries. i usually make a smoothie or a vegan milk shake or have them plain. any recipe with strawberries, that you would like to see on the blog.

The FB group is an extension of her blog and she uses her FB posts to increase traffic on her blog. As such, her FB ‘friends’ also form part of her blog readers. However, this particular FB post on strawberries accumulated 9 ‘Likes’ and 10 comments with recommendations for 7 separate recipes, thus manifesting their spontaneity towards an apparently irrelevant call for participation. The interactions of this FB group are not directly



political, but communications showcase the potential of an FB group's members to participate and organise. The collective energy of this FB group's members is stimulated more often by the pictorial display of food on their screen rather than the recipes resulting in the meal. This, in a sense, downplays Dassana's efforts to educate her FB 'friends' about the delectables she writes about, but at the same time exposes the potential of this platform to promote interactivity by addressing niche interests of users.



**Fig 16** Pictorial display of food stimulating collective energy of FB group members

### **Reflexive knowledge production and consumption:**

Political activist ethnographers advocate “learning from other people” (Frampton et al. 2006, p.4), because they believe that forming a group or a community is a social process that comes with reflexive knowledge production. Frampton et al says, “We learn from doing, from social practice and from inter-acting with others” (ibid, p.4). Epistemologically, by sharing knowledge in the form of information, people empower each other and can collectively take potentially powerful decisions (ibid). In this instance, individual members of FB groups, through their own practices, aim to produce social change through their collective knowledge. One of the tools used by the FB group against honour killing is to foster sharing of collective knowledge among the grassroots by resorting to vernacular languages, mainly Hindi, which is the national language of the country. Since honour killing, as a practice, is predominant in non-urban areas, it is useful to reach out to the victims and the potential perpetrators in a language they know best.



**Fig 17** Resorting to vernacular languages to reach out to grassroots activists

The FB group on honour killing disseminates social knowledge collectively by narrating their own experience or quoting from news reports on similar issues as well as on dowry deaths from across the world, while members express their hatred and opinion about such incidents. For example, one post says, “1000 women were killed for honour in Pakistan in 2011” and gathers a number of critical comments. Talking against the issue, Meera says:

ofcourse n its worse..here ur own family members, dads n brothers n uncles n cousins who r ur blodd, who r supposed 2 protect u take away lives in cold blood...its d basest form of murder other than child murder...my opinion... .

In another instance, Hemant expresses his frustration:

god knows wat Honour one seeks in Killing!!!!!! me too strongly condemn it.

These reactions convey the directness of these members’ messages and also display their collective angst with regard to the statistic. Of course this reaction has been made possible because the information was posted by some members in the first place. But, some posts are quite disturbing, perhaps resorting to shock to make an impression on the readers. A post about the death of a couple by hanging from a tree, comes with a graphic photograph and raises the curiosity of the members. However, such gruesome posts are often offset by Bollywood songs on love. This is comparable to the military discourse of ‘shock and awe’

(Ullman and Wade, 1996) which is often used to affect the perceptive powers of the opponent [in this case, the FB group members] to such an extent that they lose their reasoning temporarily, which is when the attacker seizes control of the situation and launches an attack. In the instance of the FB group, the coordinators perhaps use such situations to guide the members with the best course of action aimed at controlling future occurrence of such incidents.



**Fig 18** Graphic displays comparable to the military discourse of ‘shock and awe’

Social engagement is productive only when mediated through reflexive knowledge production (Frampton et al 2006), whereby the actors learn through interactions with each other and from engaging in acts together as a collective. Parentree contributes to reflexive knowledge production via its parenting tips for newborns to teenagers. Articles on its FB

group include: Parenting a teenager, Tips on maternity hospitals in Bangalore, fighting in school, Teaching ideas for 4 year old. They try to include fathers in the communication too with posts like, How to be good dads even with a newborn at home. Generic health issues include, Is whistling good or bad, as well as raising moral questions like, “In present world what is important making the child smart or making child a good human being”. The amateur writing evident from these titles and the way sentences are constructed in these articles and experiences narrated, is designed to appeal to the second language English speakers of this country. For instance, a mother writes:

hi , my daughter is very bad at eating food... doctor has prscribed her of eating banana and apples.. but she does not like at all. if somebody eats bananna in front of her she feels like vomiting she just hates the smell of banana... i am very much worried as childrens grow up eating atleast one bananna a day... i have eventried giving her banana shake but she easily came to know with the smell of banana and she did'nt even had one sip....

It can either be argued that such a style of writing is aimed at getting the message across to certain demography of readers without bothering about the intricacies of grammar. They constitute the majority of this FB group’s members and they are also the ones who are expanding the community of parents to newer cities by launching new chapters. Indian writing in English is the most widely accepted version of the Queen’s language among the members of these FB groups who also come from non-urban and rural parts of the country.

Several non-profit organisations, for example Love Commandos, use the platform of the honour killing FB group to disseminate information on how the affected are given shelter and thereby spread awareness on the outcomes of such a horrific practice. Individual pleas for help with personal cases, often in vernacular languages, are responded to via personal messages. Such messages on the public platform are always preceded by an assurance of help. In another unique instance, Daniel, of non-Indian nationality, confesses his love for an Indian girl who is scared of her family’s reaction to a partner from another culture and so does not want to be with him. He uses this webpage to get in touch with her repeatedly because she is also a member of the same FB group. The FB group coordinators make frequent calls for offline engagement to take the issue forward in the real world by sharing of information among the social vigilantes. As evidenced by their posts, the honour killing FB group did manage to organise offline meet-ups of its members in several cities of the country, even though Verma, the coordinator, is based outside of India.



### **WUNC-inspired transformational paradigm:**

The civic engagement of these FB groups can be compared to the inspiration-based model of communication that digital activism engages with, as a paradigm of digital activism. The inspiration paradigm of this communication process is aimed at mobilising the consumers of social media texts by informing them about the issue at hand in a way that mobilises them to act on it [referred to in Chapter 4]. Thus, it is transformational in nature, because a communication process is considered successful only when the message generates a reaction that is conducive to the content of the message, in some form from its consumers. This, in turn, boosts a social movement that always aspires for a betterment of the existing condition by transforming it. The Parentree members discuss the importance of raising kids in an eco-friendly environment when they talk about playgrounds.

When Verma posts statistics and shares posts on female infanticide in an attempt to contain the cases of honour killing, members of the FB group denounce the practice irrevocably, only because they want to transform the society through the spread of such information. They often ridicule the slow response of the government to these issues, thus:

Unbelievable... I guess we live in a time where the Pizza is delivered earlier than the police reaches the crime scene.

Weblinks to short films, a traditional method of generating awareness, are also posted on the group's FB wall. One of the most obvious transformational posts against honour killing was sighted when the FB group members successfully persuaded a political party, via a spokesperson of that party, to take up their cause as one of their political promises for the next elections. Verma, the coordinator of the honour killing FB group, posted an open letter in Hindi on their FB wall to a BJP spokesperson in New Delhi, in September 2012, reminding him of the promise made by the BJP government when it was in power in 2010, to make a law against the practice. He says:

Our Great Govt. promised to make a LAW in June 2010. No action has been taken yet.

In response, the political party spokesman said:

thanks for ur faith on me...i will surely take up d issue... i promise..

This was another very strong formal political activity that the FB group promoted. But somehow the posts did not receive as many responses as some of the other more informal acts did and the politician never returned to the forum or the members referred back to this

incident again. Perhaps what is lacking is the consistency of the coordinators to keep the conversation going among the members.



**Fig 19** Reminding politician about his promise to make laws against honour killing

Blumer’s final stage of social movement arrives with activists focussing on specific goals to bring about positive change. The FB group on honour killing, reaches this point when, in an attempt to mobilise its members, Verma asks each member to donate 5 minutes of their time to do something meaningful and take the cause to its next level, as opposed to simply ‘liking’ the posts. He said:

Would you be intrested in donating your 5 minutes for a social cause ??????Instead of liking i would like to see YES/NO. Thanks!!” A few days later, he posts: “Members# 3755 in our social group; Like# 3 from people who can donate 5 minutes for a social cause; Reply#1 Only one. This shows much serious we are. Do we really want to do anything? Or here just for fun????

Although at the first look this looks like a harsh call for action, Verma wanted to take the activities of the group beyond merely establishing a political identity among the members. He wanted them to exhibit their collective effervescence by engaging in a real-world act. The positive reactions to the call for action became apparent soon. Several volunteers responded to it favourably, which prompted the coordinator to say:

Figure out: Time, date, place or places, people who will head the discussions and topics you will discuss. Establish at your first meeting with what frequency you plan to meet: Once a week, twice a month, once a month, etc.

Quite similarly, Dassana mobilises her FB group members to share recipes; EBCC achieves it via carnivals and other promotional acts; while Parentree does it by asking parents to form their own group locally and thereby, branching out to newer cities.

An essential constituent to the genesis of democracy comprises “a sense of unity” or “common good” of the community (Rustow, Almond and Vera, cited in Wang, 2008, p.56). This can be achieved through civic participation, which entails a transformation of both the civic and traditional attitudes of the community members. The desirable civic attitude that Daniel Lerner et al considers necessary for a democratic system, include attributes like “a capacity for empathy and a willingness to participate” (ibid, p.56). In the above instance, the eagerness of the FB group members to participate in various activities around the issues that interest them stems from the fact that they identify with these concerns and want to bring about a difference to the society by transforming the existing circumstances. It is the members’ compassion towards the victims or the deprived that motivates them to participate in acts that aim to counter the causes. Of the four FB groups discussed in this chapter, this attitude is displayed most notably by the groups protesting against honour killing and promoting awareness on breast cancer.

By being a part of an SNS community, which in this case is an FB group, these acts of solidarity generate a consciousness of self-identity. Through a sub-conscious act of sharing or ‘liking’ an FB post, the members show empathy towards co-members of the group. In fact, this sharing of FB statuses also gives the members an identity which amounts to taking a political stand on an issue. In the honour killing FB group, the coordinator posts a news report from a vernacular newspaper about a victim whose body has been recovered in 16 pieces. Not only have group members ‘liked’ the post but have also ‘shared’ it, with the group coordinator requesting the observation of a 2-minute silence in honour of the deceased. This identity motivates the FB group members to participate in public life and activities, even in real life, which in turn improves their awareness of public and social affairs. Putnam (2000) believes these acts of participation in public affairs, coupled with an obligation to participate, are an important indicator of civic awareness, which ultimately becomes a part of the civic culture of the community. These civic engagements facilitate FB groups to create a

shared social consciousness by inspiring its members to continuously and actively participate in public life and activities.

Verma's FB group's efforts to form physical regional clubs, in order to monitor such criminal acts and provide support to the victims, are driven by an urge to generate a civic awareness among the affected population. Dassana's candid confessions, for instance of losing a recipe before uploading or a dish not being good enough to be photographed, we can argue that it can make communication informal and help develop trust and empathy with members, which strengthens the bonding of the group, thus making it easier to generate collective action. She is upfront about saying no to a request for a recipe if she is busy or her oven has "gone for a toss" and needs to be repaired. Asking members to identify a pod collected on a trip to a spice plantation in Kerala, India, or asking readers for the best recipe for bread pattie not only keeps the conversation going but, in this context, this give-and-take also keeps the group together as one close-knit unit.

An FB group coordinator can utilise such solidarity to promote civic awareness, when the need arises. Parentree's FB group seeks to promote Tilly's WUNC, referred to earlier, by asking existing members to form additional subgroups in their own cities. Mark Magnier (2012, n.p) says, "As millions of Indians migrate from villages to cities, expanding India's middle class, parents increasingly view education as their family's best ticket to higher social status and material wealth." As such, Indian parents on Parentree, who are no less ferocious than the tiger moms of China when it comes to child rearing, have taken to this task of starting localised subgroups with great enthusiasm. This not only expands their network by bringing in new members but also instils confidence, trust and unity among their members located far and wide.

#### COLLECTIVE EFFERVESCENCE DEVELOPS SOCIAL CAPITAL

The term social capital is used to define the collective benefit of these social interactions. Like any other capital, this form of capital is also a profitable resource that is vital in the promotion of political participation. Putnam (2000) attributes this element not to the structure of relations between actors, but as a characteristic of the actors themselves. He says that social engagement, via social networks, increase productivity of individuals and groups. In the instance of these FB groups, this is an attribute that the coordinators are attempting to develop among the members, with the ultimate aim to motivate them to participate in political actions. It is this social capital that forms the basis of a community (Milner, 2002)

and is closely related to civic virtue (Putnam, 2000). Putnam says that social capital is not only useful in getting a reference for a job, but often quite effective in locating that helping hand, “companionship, or a shoulder to cry on” (ibid, p.20). In fact, social capital not only helps in our personal lives, but also does public good for the community. He gives the example of a neighbourhood where all the neighbours keep an eye on each other’s property to ensure prevention of criminal acts. Even if a certain resident is unsocial with his neighbours, “never even nod[s] to another resident on the street” (ibid), he still benefits from the acts of his vigilante neighbours. Similarly, the interaction between two or more members of an FB group benefits the entire group, because these exchanges take place on their common wall and are visible to all who access it. Such civic engagement, thus, entails responsibility for action. Putnam (ibid, p.21) refers to ‘community’ as a “warm and cuddly [conceptual cousin]” of social capital.

Through the participation in activities that these FB group members can readily identify with, a level of mutual trust is developed among them. “The components of social capital reinforce each other; their use builds up and their disuse diminishes the stock of social capital” (Putnam, cited in Milner, 2002, p.16). Civic virtue becomes the most powerful when embedded in dense networks of reciprocal social relations (Putnam, 2000). These acts reinstate social bonding and can ensure further participation for a bigger and more structured movement. In this sense, social capital is like a stock from which all members in the society can draw in times of need. In Dassana’s FB group, Suneeta posted:

went thru ur website in depth today...ws wondering i hv nvr spent so many hours in visitng ny cookery website for so long...m lowin it...well i hv a request if u provide me wd sm custard recipies ...thnq n waitin fr d response...

Such casual yet warm comments reinstate this trust in the group, which prompts other members to come forward and participate in the group’s activities so as to feel part of the community. Thus, social capital is “the universal lubricant that oils the wheels of cooperation” (Milner, 2002, p.21) and sets the activist cause rolling on the path to social change, whenever the appropriate arrangements are achieved.

Civil liberties of citizens are protected via the formation of associations that channel public grievances and ultimately turn them into socio-political movements. The importance of these movements is “the potential they generate. ...[As] sporadic forms of protest and conflict, they create the conditions out of which more effective and specific social movements may develop” (Crossley, 2002, p.29). In this way “social movements assert

popular sovereignty” (Tilly, 2004, p.13). The honour killing FB group sought direct political involvement via the BJP spokesman, as an issue that can help the political party to get back to power at the next election. Dassana, through her informal kitchen-talk and virtual ‘feast for the eyes’, caught the interest of FB users from across the world who took pleasure in undertaking culinary pursuits. EBCC’s FB group has been successful in inspiring several corporate houses in metro-cities across the country to adopt ‘pink days’ as part of their corporate culture, thereby promoting awareness for breast cancer prevention among their employees. Parentree, through its FB group, reaches out to more parents every day as their members engage in the formation of new groups in new neighbourhoods and rate schools, which potentially force the authorities to improve the facilities they offer to their students. The accumulated wisdom or ‘social capital’ of the people work as the apparatus of campaign, and this is what these civic engagement promoting FB groups sought to achieve through their posts, comments and online petitions.

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **DECODING THE WRITING ON THE FACEBOOK WALL: GROUPS ENCOURAGING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

*[D]irect participation in political activity is what makes a free society.*

- Robert F. Kennedy, Senator for New York, 1965-1968

While the Consciousness-Raising FB groups facilitate identity formation, the Civic Engagement FB groups promote collective action to address issues of public concern. Where such a concern entails a grievance against injustice or unequal representation, its correction begins with membership of an FB group. This action gives the members a political identity and secures their position within the collective, which is the FB group itself. As Fishkin (1995, p.148) says, in the context of political participation, “These habits of association, the widespread acceptance of working together, make it far easier for each individual to participate, to combine with others for some cause of mutual interest.” Fishkin’s claim works in both directions, suggesting that the end result is combining “with others for some cause” but also that political participation gratifies the participants’ “habits of association”, which is to say that democratic engagement gives participants “satisfaction regardless of any calculation about the effects of their individual actions” (ibid). It is precisely the satisfaction of participating in a political movement that Facebook usage is particularly adept at generating. In the cases of most activist FB groups, although there are political goals, these are less clearly defined in terms of specific “effects of . . . individual actions” (ibid.). The FB groups ‘The Women’s Reservation Bill – India’ and ‘Join Anna Hazare's Fast To Bring the Jan Lokpal Bill’ are based on a similar form of association, but these groups stand out because they encourage political participation with a particular effect as the goal, namely to change legislative policy.

FB is considered to be a relationship-building SNS (as discussed in Chapter 1) and thus it is involved primarily with informal grassroots politics, as evident from the Consciousness-Raising FB Groups and those that encourage Civic Engagement. When it comes to formal politics, such as getting a bill successfully passed in the Parliament, FB is not as efficient as it is at promoting participation and organisation. As such, the questionnaire sent to urban Indian FB users did not reveal many FB groups on formal political issues that are popular among the target users. A possible reason for fewer women engaging with formal

politics could be the fact that, traditionally, what prevented women from stepping out of their private space into the public sphere was not their natural capabilities or rationality, but the absence of conducive circumstances defined by formal education as well as acceptable roles within public institutions (Wollstonescraft, 1792, cited in Held, 2006). Thus, promotion of smaller-scale participation among women has traditionally been a favourable option to counter this gender imbalance. In recent times, there is “a shared belief in the ability of new media to create the conditions for political participation” (Street, 2011, p.270), which my research has borne out. But what my research also shows is that there is greater interest among urban, middle-class Indian women in using new media to expand the range of political participation than to engage simply with formal politics.

Formal politics manifested via political participation ensures that the diverse interests of the people are taken into consideration before arriving at a decision (Mill, 1910). Tocqueville (1969) considers any formal act intentionally engaged in to be a political act. Milner (2002) says that even the distribution of campaign pamphlets could be considered political participation. Putnam (2000) confirms that our involvement with politics has transformed over the years and now comprises activities other than mere voting. He says, “We have multiple avenues for expressing our views and exercising our rights...” (2000, p.31). These acts would include anything from wearing badges and signing petitions, to discussing politics with neighbours and joining election campaigns. Voting is the most common form of political activity, as it “embodies the most fundamental democratic principle of equality” (ibid, p.35). But citing the example of American elections, Putnam says that fewer voters show up at election booths every year, and more people are engaged in newer, mediated forms of political participation.

In fact, there was an upsurge in non-profit organizations towards the end of the last century, which has led to an increased interest in volunteering activities, often referred to as “participation revolution” (ibid, p.49). Just as the increase in non-profit organisations has boosted volunteering activities, I argue that the sudden rise in FB groups is increasing the engagement with and the range of FB-related activities. The various ways in which participation in FB groups is prompted is revolutionizing existing socio-political situations. This chapter focuses on the two FB groups from my sample that encourage participation in formal politics by targeting specific legislative action. The aim of the chapter is to discover how well this traditional activist goal, namely a formal change of legislative policy, is suited to FB as a platform for political participation. It begins with an introduction of the two



groups and the kind of activities they engage with. Then, I compare and analyse the activities of the two groups to ascertain why one failed in its objective while the other succeeded. Thereafter, I attempt to determine the various ways in which Facebook-mediated activism is successful in bringing about political changes.

## INTRODUCING THE FB GROUPS

The Eighty-Fourth Constitution Amendment Bill, referred to as the Women's Reservation Bill, is aimed at providing increased representation by reserving one-third (33 percent) of its 594 seats for women across all government bodies in India, be it at the central or state legislatures, or local governments. This reservation mirrors "the contradictions of Indian society and the contestations in access to power and resources between those who have been traditionally excluded and the socially and politically dominant sections of Indian society" (Vasanthi, 2002, n.p). In fact, the Women's Reservation Bill brings back the age-old question often associated with the Indian context of gender identity in relation to "caste and religion and their articulation in the public realm" (Ibid. n.p), which is predominantly male and concerned with formal politics.

The Bill, first introduced in 1974, was implemented at local *panchayat* (village council) and municipal levels after two decades. In 2010, it was passed by the Upper House of the Parliament, *Rajya Sabha*, with an overwhelming majority. The Union Cabinet has approved it, but it is yet to be passed by the Lower House, *Lok Sabha*. Manasa (2000, p.3852) believes that "[i]f increasingly women get into politics, the definition of politics itself may change." The current definition of formal politics, as discussed in the 'Introduction', takes into account only the power play in the public sphere which is dominated by men. The Women's Reservation Bill is not just an opportunity given to women to represent their concerns, but it is also aimed at providing a platform to train them to become leaders so that they can take their own decisions. This will not only involve women in politics but also redefine gender equations.

Representation of women via the Bill would effectively lobby for the participation of the female minority and "would lead to a change in direction of debates and policy" (Menon, 2000, p.3835) at the level of formal politics. Some of the arguments in favour of the Bill were based on the fact that political parties in India, being predominantly "patriarchal" (ibid) and sexist, would be reluctant to choose women representatives to voice their issues. Arguments made against these reservations emphasized that its implementation would contradict the

principle of equality laid out in the Constitution. Moreover, those opposing the bill argued that women are not a homogeneous community and cannot represent all socio-economic and political strata of society. As such, these representations would not be a true reflection of the needs of women across all social strata.

Critics like Menon (ibid) claimed that the Bill would encourage similar demands from other politically marginalised communities, which might threaten national integration. Sumita Ray (1999) argues, however, that there is no doubt that this quantitative increase in representation would effectively improve women's participation and allow them to implement and enforce laws in their favour, leading to gender equality and improving women's chances of getting justice as promised by the Constitution. Nevertheless, Ray concedes that "the elite will continue to dominate legislative bodies... However, even if a minute percentage of newly-elected women representatives raise their voices to highlight the needs, rights, and demands of the lower classes it will be a step forward for society as a whole" (ibid. p 72). Interaction on the FB group on Women's Reservation Bill reflect similar viewpoints and thereby give voice to the social minorities.

The FB group, The Women's Reservation Bill – India, introduces its objective thus: "An International Labour Organisation study shows that 'while women represent 50 per cent of the world adult population and a third of the official labour force, they perform nearly two-third of all working hours, receive a tenth of world income and own less than one per cent of world property.' Therefore, reservation for women is not a bounty but only an honest recognition of their contribution to social development." With this statement, the group makes its objective clear that they are not glamourising the cause but acknowledging the contribution of women and the need for change in the political system. In spite of pledging to secure women's nation-building role alongside men, this FB group failed to sustain the conversation among its members after a certain point, during January 2011 till January 2013.

Their first post in 2011 was on March 8, International Women's Day. There were three posts on this day and all of them were 'seen' by 39 of their 180 members, but with no 'likes' or comments. This indicates that the political identity gained by the members by becoming a part of this group did not encourage them to engage in conversation and improve participation for the cause. The posts include a news report noting that one year has passed by but the *Lok Sabha* has still not been able to decide on the outcome of the Bill. The second post is a news report on a woman political leader who wants women to join politics. The third news report questions the absence of women from Indian politics even after a decade of

campaigning to get more women to use legislative power. These efforts reflect the initiative among the FB group coordinators to encourage the members to participate in a conversation, which never seemed to take off. It is perhaps because there was nothing inspiring or innovative in what the coordinators posted.

However, there are no posts for the next few weeks. The next post appears only on May 9, which is reposted on May 15. The excitement is regained by a member post on June 18, about a women’s car rally organized in Delhi as one of the activities to garner support for the issue. Attractive slogans are used in the poster accompanying it:

Any car with a woman behind the wheel is eligible to participate.



**Fig 20** Attractive slogans about a women’s car rally posted on the Women’s Reservation Bill FB group wall to garner attention of members



This is seen by 40 members, but again with no response from any of them. The first post to receive some response, in the form of ‘likes’, is in regard to a poll on unsafe places for women in the Capital city amid quotes about what comprises a woman’s duty to remain safe. However, posts by the FB group coordinators or even by members fail to generate much response. During the two-year period of January 2011 to January 2013, there are a total of 20 posts, with only two posts in 2012. There are detailed posts on what constitutes Right to Freedom under the Indian Constitution, followed by a few inspiring quotes, more news reports, with an announcement about the country’s first certified political course for women, ‘India-women in politics’, but with almost no response from the members. Gradually, the same group members start posting about the India Against Corruption campaign; the first

such post appears on September 10, 2011, asking members to sign up in support of the *Jan Lokpal* Bill (which translates to People's Bill).

The Anti-Corruption Campaign devised Mahatma Gandhi's "fast until death" (Palazzolo, 2011, n.p) initiative as a strategy to persuade the government to pass the *Jan Lokpal* Bill in an attempt to eradicate corruption from the fabric of the nation. Although the India Against Corruption cell was formed by retired bureaucrats who have experienced in public service and activists, the face of the Anti-Corruption Campaign is activist Anna Hazare. The advanced organization of the movement is well reflected in the structure of their FB group. The 'About' page of the group laid out objectives, who has been instrumental in putting the bill together and what are their expertise. It says:

Justice Santosh Hegde (former Supreme Court Judge and present Lokayukta of Karnataka), Prashant Bhushan (Supreme Court Lawyer) and Arvind Kejriwal (activist) have together drafted a strong anti-corruption law called Jan Lokpal Bill which requires that investigations into any case should be completed within a year and the trial should get over in the next one year so that a corrupt person goes to jail within two years of complaint and his ill-gotten wealth is confiscated. It means that only two years should be given to bring a case of corruption to its logical end – all the investigation into the case and the trial of the corrupt person should be completed within this time period.

In complete contrast to the Women's Reservation Bill's FB page, the FB wall of this group has been busy from day it was formed. Its 62,000-plus members post regularly, which reflects their initiative and support for the cause. While some members quote from Hindi and Urdu poetry to inspire to reach out to a larger community of non-English speaking people to join the offline protests, other members like Nitin say:

Well thats a great initiative ..pls also add some actions against the unnecessary powers gvn to media as well.

This generates positive reactions from other members who commend Nitin on his suggestion and gets a conversation started. The collective effervescence thus created unifies the group members as they engage in a political act by voicing their opinion. Subsequently, they take part not only in the protest march, but also join Hazare in fasting until the authorities accept the amendments, as is evident from their posts and comments. But why did the FB group on Women's Reservation Bill fail to generate a similar level of response from its members?

## COMPARISON OF FAILURE AND SUCCESS

To understand why one FB group failed to garner participation while the other went on to accumulate an unprecedented response to their call for action, we need to explore the distinction between group identification and politicized group consciousness: group identification connotes “a perceived self-location within a particular social stratum, along with a psychological feeling of belonging to that particular stratum” (Miller et al. 1981, p.495). It is individual-centric in nature. Group consciousness, on the other hand, “involves identification with a group and a political awareness or ideology regarding the group's relative position in society” (ibid). This carries with it a collective or community feeling, with a commitment to follow up the objectives of the group (Jackman and Jackman. 1973; Gurin et al. 1980). Thus, it can be said that membership of a group leads to identification with its objectives. When the members gradually become habituated to the aims of the group, they develop an interest in achieving them. This form of participatory democracy succeeds only because people are able to realise the effectiveness of the political project as fellow victims of corrupt practices.

In the case of the Anti-Corruption Bill, Hazare's supporters gained an identity by joining the campaign. Through media channels, for example the FB group, they realized what the Bill stood for and became eager to work towards its incorporation within the Indian judicial system. Given how clearly the objectives of the campaign were laid out on the FB page, it attracted 147 posts on the very first day of the FB group's launch, on April 9, 2011. The group on Women's Reservation Bill could not generate a similar political identity as evident from the lack of responses from the members when coordinators posted updates on their FB wall. Apparently trivial, the posts on Hazare's FB group encouraged the solidarity of the members. A few examples of posts on the first day after the FB group was formed are listed here:

Dinesh: We need to jst follow him.....hw [he] wil do the rest.....

Vijay: kapil sibal should be a part of committee????? ... who says 2g scam never happened. [Kapil Sibal is the Minister of Communications and Information Technology as well as Law and Justice. He was critical of the Anti-Corruption Bill and has made controversial statements in the context of the 2G scam in India. The scam arose when the government illegally undercharged mobile telephone service providers for the license to create 2G spectrum subscriptions] (The Economic Times, 2011).

Bhavesh: He is a real hero. And we have support him.

Ganesh: Go on...Untl v achv d fnl gl

Sanjay: seacond [sic] hero after babu i support u in all way and all d corrupted neta [leader] hang on. ['babu' refers to Mahatma Gandhi]

Jayati: Am with yu sir...

Harshita: I am sure Anna will be able to root out corruption in public life. Let's extend our support. Long live Anna.

These statements showcase the exuberance of the members when they talk about Hazare and their trust on his capabilities. One member is also critical of the group's plans and refers to a rumour about a corrupt politician joining the committee that drafts the bill. The democratic nature of such discussions encourages political participation. These quotes also show that the members initially joined the FB group because they could identify with Hazare's cause. Speculations such as the one from Vijay, prompted the FB group coordinators to state the names of the steering committee members in the 'About' section of their FB page, which fortunately did not include Sibal. Similar assurances increased the members' faith in Hazare and they joined him in the protest movement. Their support for Hazare is evident from the phrases: "Am with yu sir..." and "...i support u in all way...". One member even identifies Hazare with Gandhiji. These euphoric reactions gradually started becoming more focused and analytical. An example of a member's post:

Bills or even Enactments are as such not going to make the difference. However, as one simple person [referring to Hazare] took a stand and millions joined him, have made the impact, India will have to come forward and say We insist for their implementations.

This post, along with the repeated comparisons of Hazare with Gandhiji, reflects the manner in which Hazare's personality swayed popular opinion on the issue of corruption



**Fig 21, 22** Simple posts (top) receive 'likes', comments and 'shares'. (Next page) poster saying 'Stop Corruption' gather 405 'likes, 49 'shares' and 45 comments



and made the protest movement the collective mission of the people. This faith in Hazare’s abilities was primarily responsible for generating the group identification among the members which led to political group consciousness to join the movement and make the bill a reality.

The India Against Corruption campaign, based around Hazare’s fast-based politics, has often been compared by the media to a “highly-efficient management model” (Mathur, A. 2011. np). I argue that this campaign is comparable to what John Street refers to as “packaged politics” (2010, p 237), which “suggests that nothing is left to chance; everything is controlled”. Digital tools have redefined political communication in ways that support this “mediatization” (Swanson and Mancini, cited in Street. *ibid*) of politics, which puts emphasis on the immediacy of its impact rather than long-term objectives. Liesbet van Zoonen (cited in Street, 2011, p.138) claims that this immediacy in popularity strengthens the trust of voters in their representative. In the age of personalised politics, personalities of people’s representatives have become a deciding factor in the popularity of a political concern. The celebrity-obsessed media, with the help of the FB group, created a symbolic reality around Hazare’s personality, as evident from the above conversation among the group members. He became the leader who can lead the people in their fight against corruption, by performing a “notional public good” (*ibid.* p 252). The regular updates on Hazare’s activities and constant feedback from members via the FB group wall only helped to establish this success.

The absence of any one person as a similarly identified representative for the Women's Reservation Bill could perhaps be considered a factor behind the failure of their FB group. It is a campaign for women and by women, which has still not been passed by the Indian Parliament in almost 40 years since the issue was raised. Women who are isolated by domestic chores and restricted by limited opportunities to participate in political causes (Wollstonescraft cited in Held, 2006, p.51) can only be swayed out of their comfort zone by the presence of an 'able' representative who can lead the way and make them a part of a historical arrangement. Unlike the inspiration-based posts of Hazare's FB group, the Women's Reservation Bill FB group's posts are mostly information-based. They consist of weblinks to newspapers and TV news reports on the Bill and its progress, or rather its lack of progress. Except for 'seeing' them, the members have not responded to them in any way. As such, the FB group created mere membership, but failed to generate identification or subsequent group consciousness. The posts were not 'motivational' (discussed in Chapter 4). They failed to provide the members with what Jackson Lears refers to as the "therapeutic ethos as a cultural response" (cited in Leiss et al, 2005, p.74): a culturally-motivated spontaneous response to an issue which brings out the 'collective effervescence' of the members. Therefore, the FB posts did not provoke enough reaction to start a conversation, which could have potentially brought out euphoric reactions from the members as one unified group.

When a group's identification transforms to group consciousness (Miller, 1981), the members manifest collective action through voting, participation and subsequent membership in political organizations, lobbying and demonstrations, or other pressure tactics to alter the social order in their favour (Landecker, 1963; Leggett, 1968; Morris and Murphy, 1966). Whatever the form of collective action, the group consciousness generated via such acts is political. On FB these actions often take on gimmicky overtones, like this post on Hazare's promotional web page:

Plz give a missed call on 02261550789 n join INDIA AGAINST CORRUPTION MOVEMENT with ANNA HAZARE. We need at least 25 lakh [2.5 million] missed calls. Plz copy n paste dis status on ur wall. Also forward dis msg through ur cel phone. Spread dis msg as much as u can..

The post received 95 likes, 38 comments and 2 shares, thereby indicating not only its popularity with the group members but also signifying group identification. The various forms of FB-mediated responses to an apparently pointless exercise – a missed call campaign



to pass the Bill in the Parliament – registered a group consciousness and confirmed participation of the FB group members. In comparison, only two likes appeared on the Women’s Reservation Bill’s FB group seven months after I started my data collection. This was in response to a crowdsourced list by Whypoll, a polling agency, of the “Most Unsafe Places for Women in Delhi”, asking the FB group members to add to their existing list of names. It is the interactive nature of the post that perhaps generated some form of response from the members. In its busiest period, March 1 and March 31, 2011, The Women’s Reservation Bill FB group had 14 posts, 12 comments and 9 likes. Compared to this, *Jan Lokpal* Bill’s FB group had 41 posts, 196 comments, 2267 likes and 103 shares between December 24 and December 31, 2012. These numbers register the visibility and activity of the latter group, which helps in promoting participation and engagement with the objectives of the group.

In another instance, a professional DJ, who is a member of Hazare’s FB group, says:

As cricket holds a special place in india ..ipl team players should decide 2 go on strike 4 nt playing until our anna ji's demands wont fullfil .. atleast i wont watch a single match of IPL .. wt say guys ?? let the TRP go into wastebin ..

This post shows that the movement had gained as much popularity as the most popular sport in India, cricket. So much so that Hazare’s supporters were calling for a boycott to the more glamourized and commercial version of the sport referred to as the Indian Premier League (IPL), with Bollywood stars and powerful entrepreneurs as owners of the cricket teams. It is noteworthy to mention here that cricket and Bollywood are the two industries that can sway public opinion in India (Rasula and Proffitta, 2011). As such, the reference to cricket in the Hazare context deserves attention. However, there are contrarians, too, who are critical of Hazare’s act and post reactionary comments like the one below:

I find all this nothing more than a publicity stunt and don't support it at all. If you really wanna fight corruption, go out there, do something about it. Don't just sit and starve. Nothing's gonna change. You are only spoiling your health and energy.

In response, he is asked to consider the end results and not be concerned about how they were achieved. Several members posted in response, among which Jayanti says:

[P]eople power prevails. 2nd war of Independence victory for India. Anna wins India's victory.promote Lokpal Bill against corruption.

Deepa posted: [W]e should oppose all type of direct and indirect taxation as we are aware what we are paying as taxes is mainly used for corruption.

Patil gets carried away and says: [A]nna hazare should [be] ideal person as pri[me] minister.

Although mostly unrelated, these comments reflect the collective angst of the people who are tired of the rampant corrupt practices they have been exposed to over the years. Another FB group on anti-bribery posts on the wall of Hazare's FB group:

For an act of corruption to take place, some one has to pay a bribe as well. We all know that just having a law in place is not enough to stamp out corruption. Let's all promise that we will not pay a bribe in any situation and for any reason.

Posts such as these unify the people as members of one community with a collective aim and boosts their consciousness. The inspirational component of the message, motivates the group's members to participate in a political action. Although it is casual exchange of experience or opinions that develop consciousness about a cause, people participate in political organizations primarily because they are motivated, mostly by the group's ideology. As a result, when they participate in the activities of the group, they do it on behalf of the group and not in their individual capacity. A motivational speaker posted on the FB wall:

in the end only truth prevails...

The speaker used Anna Hazare as a case study to teach the Gandhian philosophy of peace and patience (Salla, 1993), asking the group members to wait till "the end" to see the "truth". Some other members posted patriotic YouTube clips from Bollywood films to motivate the members by emphasising the group's ideology to counter corruption. Several members compare Hazare to Mahatma Gandhi, calling him the latter's reincarnation and comparing the protest march to the ones that took place in 1947, during India's freedom struggle from British rule. For instance, Jayanti says:

people power prevails. 2nd war of Independence victory for India. Anna wins India's victory. promote Lokpal Bill against corruption.

Another member even makes a rap video titled, *Anna Hazare – We Are With You* and posts it on the group's wall. One of the members was asked by a policeman if he was scared of being detained by police. The volunteer replied:

Why would I be afraid? I will get this notice framed and put it on the wall so that even my coming generations will know that I did something for my country. Getting this notice is a matter of pride not something to be afraid of.

This post earned 110 likes, 17 shares and 14 comments. Some posters against corruption were shared over 200 times, thus emphasizing the motivational power of FB posts which promote

group consciousness. The sharing denotes identification with the group's objectives and thereby influencing political participation. The distribution of the Gandhi cap with 'Anna' written on it or the badges with similar slogans on anti-corruption, along with celebrity endorsements, further facilitated the motivational process with visual aids in favour of media-savvy Hazare, which took the cause to the streets and ensured participation in large numbers. Social media analyst, Gaurav Mishra, estimated the total number of Hazare supporters at 1.5 million in April 2011 (Kurup, 2011, n.p).

In fact, various factors promote participation, of which group consciousness is primary. The motivation experienced as an impact of group consciousness, is manifested via words or actions that provide for avenues of political expression. In Hazare's FB group, these motivated reactions find manifestation as posts, which are not limited to members from within the country. The FB group's wall not only has posters, statistical graphs and graphics, but also news reports from the Middle East on how far the fast-based campaign could influence the government. Navita posted:

[L]et this inspire citizens from other corrupt countries to assert their rights!

Indian students from University of Edinburgh posted a photograph of them carrying Anna Hazare posters and students from University of Cambridge also joined in. Schuman and Presser (1981) conclude that even a small group of people can be effective in generating group consciousness if their attitudes are intense and focused on promoting action.

In contrast, scholars like Paul Marer often debate whether "political disaffection" (1995, p.479) can also mobilize people to participate. While some research suggests it can lead to apathy, others are more optimistic. In the case of Anti-Corruption Bill, it was dissatisfaction against the judicial system that motivated people to organize for the cause. However, in spite of their dissatisfaction with the existing political structure of the country, the Women's Reservation Bill's FB page failed to sustain the interest of its members. The lack of interactive posts, and long gaps of time in between, failed to work in their favour. It can be argued that a similar apathy towards the group coordinators' objective motivated its members to join Anna Hazare's call – which is indeed a much larger cause – and post about it on the Women's Reservation Bill's FB wall, as already mentioned. The formal political nature of its cause could also be the reason why a focused FB group on Women's Reservation Bill could gather only 178 members in the four years since its formation, while a relatively

generic FB group on gender studies, that garners a wider appeal, gathered 5,500 members in an almost equal duration of time.

A democratic society ensures participation of citizens and a higher level of participation is attained by equal distribution of political knowledge. The more “equally distribute[d the] intellectual resources” (Milner. 2002, p.13), the higher the political interest it generates, and a civic community with high social capital fosters active citizens. It is because these citizens are politically informed or knowledgeable that they take an active part in socio-political movements. To ensure equal distribution of informational resources, the FB group coordinators of the Hazare campaign post their rally updates with pictures. An example of a rally update on the FB group’s wall, during the peak of their first round of fast-based campaign:

“IAC Mumbai Rally From : Shivaji Park to Juhu(kaefi azmi park)  
between 10 am to 2 pm  
dated : 10-04-2011.”

Information, when it is specific, such as that above, is not only inciting, but also makes it easier for the FB group members to participate in the movement by being present at the right time at the right place. Various other kinds of information are posted to ensure knowledge dissemination and participation. For example:

Today about 10 IAC volunteers who were detained during gherao [Hindi for ‘hostage’] on 26th were called by Delhi police to Tuglak Road Police station for getting their statements recorded.

This form of information promotes group consciousness among the FB group members, which binds them together and can further be harnessed to promote organization and improve participation for the concerned cause. This is important because lack of “accessibility, intelligibility, and usefulness of political information” (Milner, 2002, p.42) can impact political participation adversely. It was these regular updates on the wall of Hazare’s FB group that kept the members together. They shared local addresses of where they were going to assemble physically on every day of their fast-based protest; to the extent of sharing mobile phone numbers of the volunteers working in the field on their FB wall. In fact, the moment the FB group coordinators realized that heavy online traffic on their FB page was slowing down navigation speed, they immediately directed the supporters to their official website to access similar details. Thus, they retained the constant flow of information and updates available to the supporters even during their busiest hours of offline protest.

## FACEBOOK ACTIVISM: WHAT WORKS AND WHAT DOES NOT?

In a digital democracy, computer-mediated communication facilitates the democratic practice by overcoming spatial and temporal constraints. Similarly, for digital activism this form of communication reduces the overall time traditionally taken by activists to organise a movement (van Dijk, 2000). However, “[c]ulture is central to development” (Servaes, 2008, p.390) and so the intended message has to be communicated in a culturally conducive language or approach. The form of communication engaged in by the ten FB groups referred to in this research can be considered culturally conducive.

A “multi-faceted, multi-dimensional” (ibid.) participatory programme, for instance, via constant posting of comments, ‘likes’, shares, status updates and chats on FB informs and empowers people, because with every such act they exercise their choice and express their opinion. That is one of the most remarkable social changes enabled by digitally induced political participation. J Hands (2011, p.3) claims, “the underlying power of digital communications... [is] a limitless snowball effect...” Twitter, for example, can demonstrate what the sheer power of cumulative connections can do to information flow. Although this does not necessarily ensure that all the information passed between the connections is relevant to the activist’s cause, it can build up pressure and mould public opinion.

In the networked age, any form of activism can transcend territorial boundaries and promote participation and organisation of activist movements “made possible by the design and structure of modern digital communications” (ibid.). In recent times, SNSs like Twitter and Facebook have provoked activism against several dictatorial regimes via the online forum, which have translated to street processions in real time. The contribution of SNS to activism came to widespread attention, for example, during the Arab Spring. It showcased an unprecedented incident of “horizontal connectivity” (Khondker, 2011, p.675) that facilitated “social mobilisation” (ibid) by combining digital with traditional tools of activism. The use of SNS helped “advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline” (Howard, 2011, p.145). In fact, the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) revolution was difficult to contain within state borders. “[T]he global information” (Howard and Parks, 2012, p.361) flow spread across the Arab world and inspired subsequent uprisings with a “catalytic spread of unrest” (ibid). Although many of these uprisings have not yet had a conclusive resolution, the capabilities of FB in promoting participation and organisation of these political acts has already been established beyond doubt.

Technological evolution has an impact on social change (Moore, 1960). But when it comes to digital communication tools like Facebook, the question arises, what kind of political projects are most suited to socio-political changes mediated by SNS and how do we determine their impact? The usage of SNS has become so intense that the communication equipment appears to have ‘withdrawn’ as technology and become embodied in the user (Heidegger, 2010). As such, the users are seldom conscious about the changes SNS is bringing to their behaviour and mostly fail to recognise the socio-political impact of their usage of this communication device. This is the effect technology has on the digitised society we live in. I sent out questionnaires to Indian women Facebook users asking them to comment on their SNS consumption pattern, and a few respondents claimed to be online and accessing it 24x7. This is made possible by the constant use of smartphones, but the users are seldom conscious about their engagement with media consumption. This is not only an instance of the technology being ‘withdrawn’ whereby the user does not realise the level of consumption, but it is also comparable to Haraway’s cyborgs (2013) that live in a world characterised by constant feedback which is considered to be a key element to determine progress (Wiener, cited in Mindell, 2000). To make an activism Facebook-able, the SNS user has to actively collect and respond to the feedback online, especially on the FB wall so that they are visible to other members of the activist group. An activist uses this digital communication tool to spread the word, with the ultimate purpose of organising a movement to bring about social change.

There are four ways in which social change is enabled (Staudenmayer et al, 2002). The stages appear in chronological order as follows:

- (i) by locating the trigger for change, which could be in the form of discontent among the people against the existing establishment;
- (ii) by providing relevant resources necessary for implementing the change, for instance, access to SNS;
- (iii) by acting as the coordinating mechanism, which could be in the capacity of an SNS-user;
- (iv) and by “serving as a credible symbol of the need to change” (ibid. p.583), which could be achieved by coming up with a workable alternate model through the campaign.

The newly constructed model offered by SNS can change power relations and the outcome can effect “fundamental social transformation” (Young, 1997, p.147). These apparently

minor shifts ultimately facilitate an attitudinal change in the people which has an impact on the society.

To counter the general apathy of citizens towards the voting process, the Jaago Re! One Billion Votes campaign supporters formed Facebook and Orkut communities, which registered more than 15,000 followers ['Jaago Re' translates to 'Wake Up']. This created an inevitable buzz by generating higher traffic on the main campaign website, which hosted India's first online voter registration engine in 2008-2010, claims activist Jasmine Shah. "The SNS also allowed us to engage and establish a real time communication channel with the most enthusiastic followers / volunteers of the campaign who were spread across 37 cities in India," he adds. Covering such an extended physical space within a limited time-span demonstrates how electronic communication can overcome time and space constraints (Innis, 2007). As an immediate impact, this SNS-mediated campaign successfully registered over 620,000 young voters online during the 2009 Parliamentary elections in India, making it the largest such initiative in the country.

Speaking on the impact of SNS in digital activism, Sonali Khan of Bell Bajao campaign refers to a case in Abu Dhabi (UAE), where a victim of domestic violence got in touch with them via Facebook, while another member from Dubai (in UAE) volunteered to help her out. Though the campaign is based in India, the FB group helped them reach out to activists beyond the country, whereby SNS overcame the temporal and spatial constraints of traditional communication tools. This is another instance of activism that FB can perhaps mediate successfully. However, the interactive nature of SNS, especially Facebook, requires sustained intervention to keep the users interested in a cause, which could make it a difficult process for the activists. But if the activist can sustain the momentum of FB communication and thereby keep the group members focused on the issue at hand, it offers the activists an opportunity to voice their cause at almost negligible expense, which is also another reason for activists to opt for digital tools of communication. In this way, the more active an FB group, the more successful is the cause it promotes.

The interactive nature of the tool provides user-generated content in the form of feedback from SNS consumers, which in turn helps activists streamline their strategies to reach out to their target communities. "We are also trying out other technologies like the mobile internet to reach out to people with our cause and pool in more support," says Shah. This illustrates the extent to which SNS can influence the decision-making of strategists by providing constant feedback on user choices. Barbara Smith, former publisher of *Kitchen*

*Table: Women of Color Press* (cited in Young, 1997, p.32), says about feminist publishing that “you never know who you might reach. People who you can’t ever meet and have a dialogue with, you can reach through words... [I]t’s a synergistic process... that can inspire [them] to keep on struggling.” This can be said of SNS posts too. As Keith Gomes, Bollywood filmmaker and member of Jagrut Nagrik Manch (Citizens’ Awareness Forum), says, “You post something on FB and the world reads it.” He experienced it when he posted photographs of an orphanage in an insurgency-prone region of India and received requests for adoption from as far as California. This was made possible via the feedback process of SNS communication; besides, it was its digital nature that helped carry the message far and wide to reach the relevant target consumer.

Encouraging a shift in consciousness and ultimately transforming the cultural paradigm through such communications is what digital activists prompt through their SNS-based campaigns. These updates are so easy to post and comment on that it encourages use and even extends its tools to those who ordinarily lack the expertise to articulate their thoughts eloquently. Many users benefit just from reading the posts, as they are informing, and by ‘Liking’ them, they express their preferences which they may not be able to do in the real world they live in due to cultural constraints. Quite similar to the “cultural arm” (referred to in Chapter 6) of feminist presses, these posts can be termed catalysts for change, indicated in the cultural shifts within a given community. The Blanknoise campaign believes in sustained engagement with the people to promote awareness on sexual harassment and create a space for interactive communication which has a personal impact and can bring about attitudinal changes in the people concerned. Jasmeen Patheja, cofounder of Blanknoise, says:

Tangible results have been a challenge. But we don’t strategise and so we are not worried about the numbers. The fact that people, including men, write back to us and join in to make our events a success, shows that there has been some impact. But we don’t want to quantify it.

Such impacts mark cultural shifts in these communities facilitated mainly by their access to SNS tools. As Patheja explains, as long as people respond to the posts on the Blanknoise FB page, the coordinators consider it a success, because it signifies support for a cause and group identification. In this way these FB posts bring about changes in the real society in which the digital netizens inhabit.

Most of the feedback they receive via Facebook denote constructive changes in the perception of the supporters, which can perhaps be considered the strongest impact of SNS



activism. For example, a victim of sexual harassment once wrote back saying: “Now, I walk on the side of the pavement and not in the middle anymore.” This could be quantified as a tangible outcome of digital activism. It is making the victim confident and strong enough to voice her discomfort in a public domain. Even if she is not courageous enough to walk in the middle of the road, the public admission of her fear, albeit on a virtual platform, can be considered a form of participation, however infinitesimal a shift it might be, achieved through Facebook politics. This form of influence on people’s world view is reflected in their collective action. As such the success of social movements is indicated not only by policy change but also through more fundamental transformation reflected in the psyche of the community – the way they assess a situation, make decisions and also advocate their peers is indicative of the social and emotional transformation of the people as a whole. Gomes says that the SNS updates on the No Vote campaign, which asked citizens to refrain from voting due to the absence of uncorrupted leaders who can represent the country, resulted in initiating a debate. Although nothing concrete came out of it, the discussions that followed on the SNS platform made people aware of their voting rights.

Facebook often brings a discussion from the virtual world to the street by organizing the supporters into a real-time community. If the community is affected, its members attend the real-life gatherings – they are the doers in the real world, too. In this context, Gomes talks about the debate that is easy to begin on an SNS forum. He explains that not only does the world read what is put up on FB, but “you are immediately connected with them. When the world starts talking about an issue, the government is forced to take action or implement changes.” On the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Hazare’s fast-based campaign, the Indian government conceded to the demands of India Against Corruption and agreed to make amends to the Bill as suggested by Team Anna (India Today, 2011, n.p). That was a “great moment in India’s democratic history” and a momentous victory for digital activism. As Paolo Garonna and Umberto Triacca (1999) point out, when our faith in the economic and the political system is eroded, social change is imminent. But this change may not always be reflected in policy.

Blogger Dina Mehta, however, is not convinced of the potential of SNS. It can amplify the cry for help, but not necessarily lead to political solutions: “It can make a lot of noise with regard to micro causes – idiomatic, one-off campaigns, like eve-teasing [a euphemistic expression commonly used in India to refer to random instances of sexual harassment that women are subjected to on the streets]. But it does not work in the case of bigger issues like sexual harassment.” SNS in activism has a limited role on limited issues.

“[T]he digital zone facilitates unprecedented levels of spontaneous affection, intimacy and informality” (Sadie Plant, cited in van Zoonen, 2001, p.68). As such, one-off issues are easily promoted by SNS, as stated by Mehta. It can give the user the visibility to market their campaign. This is precisely why the Pink Chaddi campaign, in 2008, received unprecedented response via their Facebook page and is rated as one of the successful cases of digital activism. But it could not encompass the larger issue of sexual harassment that, for example, led to the Delhi gang rape incident of December 2012.

One of the prime reasons as to why the Women’s Reservation Bill FB group did not work is because FB is not at its activist best with goals that aim directly at legislative change. The reason it worked in the case of the Anti-Corruption Bill was because of the personality-oriented campaign of Hazare. SNS is good tool for political participation based on informal, personal, and even gossipy modes of engagement. With regard to the India Against Corruption movement, Facebook could help amplify the cause because every person in the street is affected by it and a major section of the campaign took place on mobile phones, whereby people could call up and speak to volunteers who were physically present at the venues of protest. In this way Facebook reached out to a bank of likeminded people who could discuss issues across all socio-economic strata more efficiently on the virtual platform than they could through traditional tools of activism.

## CHAPTER 9

# CONCLUSION

*In passing, also, I would like to say that the first time Adam had a chance he laid the blame on a woman.*

- Nancy Astor, first woman at British House of Commons, 1919-1945

The success of an activist movement is indicated by the degree to which the cause becomes incorporated into policy, as discussed in Chapter 8. However, social changes initiated via Facebook-mediated activism may not always be reflected at a formal level in governmental policy decisions, although they might have impact at an informal or personal level among the Facebook users and in offline circles. In a similar vein, I argue that SNS-mediated activism has not replaced traditional means of activism; rather it works in tandem with them and augments their connective capabilities. In this chapter, I address the largest of the questions posed in the thesis and discuss the various ways in which digital activism impacts on social change. These considerations are supported by a debate among the experts I interviewed, who gauge the strengths of digital tools of activism over traditional means of activism. In drawing out the terms of this debate, this chapter focuses on the question: if digital activism can bring about social change, then how does it specifically impact on the feminist struggle for equal rights? I argue that digitally mediated transnational feminism is heralding the onset of a fourth wave of the feminist movement, which is mobilising a demography of actors who are different from that of any of the previous waves. This shift is marked not only by demography but also by the compressed turnaround time of an activist movement. The number of campaigns engaged in by feminists wielding digital tools of communication, along with the speed at which they are developing the promotion and organisation of these movements, is already changing “the political game” (Bennett, 2003).

### IMPACT AND SOCIAL CHANGE

During the course of this research, I came across two distinct pieces of evidence of social change. Incidentally, both of the instances came to fruition after January 2013, which is when my data collection period came to an end. The first instance was the fact that the Indian government took steps to amend the rape laws following the New Delhi gang rape incident, which represents an obvious case of policy change at the governmental level. Young (1997,

p.25) notes that “[s]ocial change is made possible by changes in how people understand their situations and how they perceive their options for altering those situations.” In the New Delhi case, the sudden popular upsurge against the crime, which was unprecedented in the country, indicated such a change “in how people understand their situations.” While traditional media played an important role, it was the digital platforms that presented the best “options for altering those situations” by articulating the uncontained frustration of the people and their desire to change the system. The capacity of social media to give expression to people’s frustration, along with the fact that the incident took place in the heart of the capitol city on public transport, was responsible for the intensity of the reaction, which ultimately resulted in the government making the laws more stringent (Nessman, 2013).

Prior to this, however, the frustration and even rage of the people had been channelled by social media towards another movement, namely the India Against Corruption movement under Hazare’s leadership. Although momentarily overshadowed by the New Delhi incident, the anti-corruption drive culminated in the formation of a political party called the Aam Aadmi Party. Its leader, Arjun Kejriwal, an ex-bureaucrat of the Government of India, went on to win the majority of votes at the Legislative Assembly elections in December 2013, less than a year after the political party was formed. He is at present serving as the chief minister of the state of Delhi. Weeks before Kejriwal took his oath as head of the state government, the Anti-Corruption Bill was passed by the Parliament, even though some of the bill’s supporters have expressed reservations about the clauses that were included.

The impact of digital activism may not always be as obvious as this. However, one of the primary ways in which SNS has an advantage over other tools of activism is that it facilitates the dissemination, exchange and analysis of information much more rapidly than any communication technology in the past, thereby offering a platform for a faster organisation of collective action against injustice. It is not only “giving voice to the voiceless” but also allowing “people to speak for themselves” (Downing et al, 2001, p. 206) as the means and content of such collective action. Just as SNS blurs the boundaries between private and public expressions, so it also shortens the distance between grassroots activists and policy-makers by allowing everyone, in any voice, to challenge ineffective policies and defend civil liberties. The digital connectivity resulting in “virtual kinships” (Levina, 2012. p. 13), as exemplified by Facebook groups in the context of this research promotes user participation and offers a platform for women to discuss their causes of concern. The ‘I Never Ask For It’ campaign launched by Blanknoise has now transformed into a collection of

living testimonial[s], a witness to and evidence of the act of violence that was committed. This is an act of rejecting blame. ...a statement of defiance – a way of declaring in the public spaces where street harassment occurs that a woman’s self-expression is never an invitation for acts of violence. (Source: ‘I Never Ask For It’ FB page)

The campaign was so successful that now there is a Facebook group dedicated to this particular project. It has given victims of sexual harassment a platform to narrate their experiences and voice their grievances; through the campaign, Blanknoise has taught them to speak for themselves. Blanknoise was also very active in the campaign against the Delhi gang rape incident towards the end of my data collection period, and it is no surprise that their Facebook page manifested high user traffic (as seen in Figs3 & 4, in Chapter 5).

New social movements are defined when a group of actors, however dispersed, find themselves in an untenable situation and together begin to imagine options for overcoming the situation. This awareness, or imagination, of possible ways to change the situation is made possible by the discourses they are exposed to. Language plays a crucial role here, and it could be said that the function of feminist presses in the second wave has now been taken over by SNS in the present day (as discussed in Chapter 3). Like the feminist presses, Facebook updates reflect the ideas and opinions of the grassroots, organised into communities of “virtual kinship,” and provide suggestions about how the situation can be altered as well as an analysis of actions already taken. These Facebook groups are politically motivated in terms of what they post and how they generate support for their cause, similar to the way that feminist publishers disseminate new ideas through discourse as “a form of political activism” (Young, 1997, p.33), as demonstrated in Chapter 6. Apart from books for adult readers, Zubaan Books now has a separate segment for children’s books under the name Young Zubaan, which consists of feminist discourse in the form of children’s literature that comes with messages about gender equality. The young minds are attracted to titles like *The Girl’s Guide to a Life in Science*, *A Foxy Four Mystery* series and *Flying High: Amazing Women and their Success Stories*, a book about offbeat career choices that women can make.

The same argument can be applied to SNS-based communication, because political commitment is based on sharing similar experiences of oppression as of the basis of a community’s identity (discussed in Chapter 7). Put simply, when Facebook users talk as a community about a shared issue of oppression, they are making a political statement. Through the ‘I Never Asked For It’ campaign, Blanknoise has successfully documented cases

of sexual harassment experienced by women on a daily basis. Simply by sharing their stories and by commenting on or 'liking' similar contributions by other members, these women are engaging politically with the cause. In the case of Zubaan's Facebook group, the very fact that they would include young mothers along with their toddlers in their list of invitees to events is an example of gender equality in action, as they are extending democratic access to all interested parties, irrespective of their personal situation. As Butalia, the founder of Zubaan Books, made clear in her interview, this is also an issue of feminist pedagogy, since she believes in teaching children about gender rights from an early age to make them aware of the social stereotypes they are culturally exposed to. She believes that this will help them grow up to be responsible citizens and to learn to respect women in an otherwise patriarchal social order.

Facebook groups are particularly important in women's movements because, just like the feminist presses, they facilitate communication among the members, both on an one-to-one basis as well as a collective exchange. The documentation of their interactions on the walls of the Facebook groups gives them a reference point to return to whenever the need arises (demonstrated in Chapter 6). In this way, these discourses become institutionalised in a way that is accessible to all members of the group, which is not dissimilar to the discourses disseminated among readers through feminist publications. "[D]iscursive struggle," as Young argues (1997, p.13), is central to feminist activism, not only for purposes of resource mobilization in traditional political movements, but also for the sake of identity construction, the importance of which is noted by new social movement theorists. This shift in the identity of actors is initiated psychologically, but is ultimately reflected in formal and even informal political outcomes (discussed in Chapter 7). These Facebook groups reiterate that oppression and patriarchal power relations can only be understood in political terms. The transformation of the actors' socio-cultural paradigm is grounded in the formation of their political identity, and this is exactly what the civic awareness Facebook groups against honour killing or for the breast cancer campaign are aiming to achieve.

Mobilization of participants can take place only through networks of people and the effect of solidarity is exemplified in people's decisions to participate. Mass reactions to negative events or situations are channelled in this way into collective actions that work in favour of a political cause. The success of a movement often depends on how long the attention of these participants can be retained. This also explains why movements tend to operate in clusters (Young, 1997), as when the Women's Reservation Bill Facebook group

members started posting about Hazare's campaign when the latter was at its peak. By indicating shared interests with the Anti-Corruption campaign, the Women's Reservation Bill Facebook group could at least aim to attract traffic to its own page and perhaps even engage the anti-corruption group members in a conversation, because their own cause did not appear to take off on the online forum. The campaign against corruption proved to be a cause that affects all segments of the society and that is why it was an issue that every Facebook group I was observing posted on. This was a clear indication of all socio-political and economic segments of the society being instrumental in urging the Indian government to pass the Bill.

Social movements do not only institutionalize a discourse and construct a political identity, but they more broadly create meaning through the fulfilment of these functions. The "meaning-creating functions of social movements" (Young, 1997, p.150) focus primarily on participation in the movement and subsequent identity formation of the participant. Meaning-creation prompts the participant to feel a ideological need to change the political system (demonstrated in Chapter 7). In their capacity as members of the Parentree Facebook group, parents rated schools in their neighbourhood and thereby prompted them to improve the standards of education or even change certain practices within the institutions. In the process, the Facebook group members would advise and guide new neighbours regarding their children's education and instil in them the same psychology of change. It is their identity as members of the collective that encourages them to participate in guiding others toward making similar decisions, thereby expanding the collective as well as its potential political force.

Publishers are not always aware of the exact number of readers of their books or even the profiles of their readers. Similarly, the posts on the walls of these Facebook groups are accessible to a much wider audience than those who are officially registered as members of the collective, by virtue of their status as 'open' groups. The "synergistic process" (Barbara Smith, cited in *ibid.* p 32) thus created acts as a catalyst that not only supports but also mentors an increasing number of women to speak about their experiences. Throughout my research, I found that Facebook users engaged in various forms of interactions, from mere 'likes' and 'shares' to 'comments' on other's posts and 'status updates' of their own. These interactions "reflect, rather than guide" (Young, 1997, p.32) the movements and unite women across region, age and interests, in keeping with the inclusive tenets of third wave feminism but now into political communities of "virtual kinship."

## DIGITAL TOOLS VERSUS TRADITIONAL TOOLS OF ACTIVISM

Digital communication tools have radically transformed our interaction capabilities and have, to some degree, overshadowed the traditional means of protest. But some of the traditional tools used in social movements, such as newspapers, books, flyers and posters, along with graffiti, street theatre, songs and poetry, “have lent the vitality of the imagination to alternative public spheres, have made those spheres exciting as well as informative, and have sent public conversation flying” (Downing, 2001, p 158). This is quite similar to the nature of discussions in the digital public sphere as facilitated by these Facebook groups. As an SNS, Facebook can thus be considered an extension of traditional activist formats that appropriate not only popular culture but also subversive art forms. In fact, the “mind bombs” (ibid., p 159) traditionally produced by the publication and republication of potent messages on a mass scale are easily comparable to the internet ‘memes’ that are lodged in user consciousness via Facebook groups and other SNS. These ‘mind bombs’ took various forms and used various techniques, such as photomontage, which entailed pasting together several photographs to create a message, as was popular in the Soviet Union and later adopted by the German Communist Party as a communication tool with the public (Downing, 2001). Similarly, graphic satire, combining humour with sex and escapism, was widely distributed and even purchased by mail order in 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe (Hallett, 1991. p 1). These messages would use playful forms to threaten existing political systems and socio-cultural beliefs, in the same way that viral messaging works in digital society.

Communication tools have evolved by leaps and bounds in the past decade, and scholars such as Shirky (2009) and Bennett (2003) agree that online tools like SNS are enabling activists to cut down on the time required to organise a movement. It cannot be denied that the communication technology used has a strong influence on how the information is transmitted (Fuchs, 2011). If we look beyond the Indian context and consider world politics, then our attention should be drawn to the Tehran uprising, which was organised and propagated via Twitter with a speed unheard of before then: “Twitter, with its 140 character limit and its cult of immediacy, has emerged as a key source of news and updates from Tehran” (Morozov, 2009, n.p). Twitter was also the basis of information access for reporters all over the world, and often international journalists blogged on the information received over the tweets. The noise of these tweets was amplified because traditional media was banned from reporting from Tehran, which meant that reporting functioned by means of repostings and remediation. These digitally-savvy tweeters had very little in common with



the rest of the country, and so they were referred to as “agents of change” (ibid). But in dictatorial regimes, such as Iran, where sophisticated Internet tools are restricted to the hands of a few, are the online tools of activism as effective in the long run as traditional tools? Can they generate a sustainable impact or are they only good for populist mobilizations which fade to status quo once people leave the streets?

To pursue this question with reference to movements I charted in the Indian context, the experts I interviewed were asked to compare their online presence with traditional means of communication for promoting and organising their causes. Butalia agreed that Zubaan’s Facebook page did make a difference to the responses they received: “When Kali for Women, my first publishing house, was set up, this technology did not exist. So it was not an option. Getting our brand name known through our Facebook page was a great success and way faster than any promotional technique we could have come up with for Kali.” Butalia then added, “Zubaan achieved the same level of popularity in seven years that Kali did in almost 20 years. We are known not only by those who buy our books, but also by those who subscribe to our online presence.” Importantly, while reading those who buy the books could be considered a marketing venture, making contact with online subscribers has much more to do with disseminating the political message, and this is precisely where Facebook is more advantageous than traditional means of promotion. This advantage, according to Butalia, extends across all ages, even to those who are too young to be on the site, such as Butalia’s 10-year-old nephew, who promotes his publisher aunt among his Facebook friends. Although Butalia admits that “the authorities know about their presence on the SNS,” which is meant for ‘adults’, she also appreciates that from a young age these children are gaining some level of awareness that could make them future feminists. Butalia says, “Hopefully, when they grow up and want to read what we write about, they might find it easier to access these books; even if at present they have no clue what feminism is. That is not something we could have achieved through traditional media.” At the end of the day, Butalia’s is not just about promotion, marketing and reaching sales targets; rather, she is using SNS to raise an awareness amongst subscribers that she hopes will have long-term, real-life implications.

Shah of Jaago Re!, on the other hand, claims that the online platform is simply a tool rather than the recipe for a successful campaign. As a tool, it needs to be matched to the appropriate cause, since some campaigns can benefit from it and others may not, depending on their target audience as well as the values and outcomes proposed by the campaign. The Jaago Re! One Billion Votes campaign aimed to inspire and induce the urban-educated youth

of India to go out and vote. It used SNS for this purpose by hosting India's first online voter registration engine, which reduced "the previously tedious process of voter registration to a quick and easy five-minute online activity," explains Shah. Hence, the online platform was the perfect choice for this campaign. In addition, the online medium gave this campaign greater reach and effectiveness, allowing it "to scale nationally to 37 cities across India, leverage innovative technologies such as GIS (Geographic Information Systems) and to form a thriving community of campaign's supporters in a short span of time. This is different from traditional tools of activism in the sense that it needs different skills to leverage this medium optimally," says Shah. Each kind of activism needs to emerge from an understanding of its core issue and devise a creative response to tackle the issue. Only then can it be a success, irrespective of whether it uses online or traditional tools.

The local / global reach of digital activism may work in varied ways. Grassroots activism might make headlines in the local newspaper, which has a limited readership, but it rarely spreads to national newspapers. However, if an issue appears on SNS, it may well reach out to a world readership via the strong and weak ties on the network. At the same time, the digital tool comes with its fair share of drawbacks. Most notably, critics have pointed out that pursuing politics on SNS is an escapist mode that encourages rampant 'slacktivism' (Morozov. 2009). As I have argued in the Introduction, slacktivism can also be considered a form of participation in activism, in terms of creating awareness and identifying potential activists. There is, as the penchant for publicizing 'likes' has shown, strength in numbers. Bollywood film-maker and activist Gomes agrees that "SNS can help to garner attention on an issue. But you have to go out in the real world to implement changes." The Internet, or more specifically SNS, is a virtual world where activists can connect with like-minded people and have them acknowledge their efforts through comments or 'likes' posted on the Facebook wall.

Comments and 'likes' alone, however, can never really change the world per se unless the activists do something about the issue in the real world. Gomes is particularly skeptical of SNS in this regard: "I don't see SNS as a world-changing source of connectivity," he says. On the other hand, activism is still dependent on the dissemination of information, and traditional tools of information distribution like telephone or writing letters are now considered cumbersome: "the world we live in is much faster and this momentum has made us lazy. If we write a letter, we have to go to the post-office and then wait for five days for it to reach its destination," says Gomes. Compared to this, the Internet is an unquestionably

efficient tool of communication. However, Mehta points out that online access, at least in developing countries, is limited to urban elites. The rural population with limited infrastructural support, by contrast, can be mobilised only in person. The conclusion to be drawn from this debate is that SNS is highly useful for specific activist purposes, but digital activism can only be broadly successful when combined with offline traditional tools. To date, at least, it is not an end in itself.

Digital outreach does not mean that activist organisers have given up on traditional means of protests like street processions and physical congregations at city centres. It does, however, mean that these protests are organised with a speed and efficiency that is unprecedented. Commenting on the usage of SNS in recent uprisings, Peter Beaumont (2011, n.p.) writes,

The medium that carries the message shapes and defines as well as the message itself. The instantaneous nature of how social media communicate... explains in part the speed at which these revolutions have unravelled, their almost viral spread across a region.

In an instant reaction of social media networks to the recent gang rape in New Delhi that took on an ‘almost viral spread’, it took only two days to track down the accused, while outrage spilled over from the online platform to the streets of the capitol city. SNS organization offers not only speed, but also greater democratic access. In the context of the New Delhi incident, protests from “the youth across class and caste divide” (Parashar, 2013, n.p) forced the government to set up “an independent commission led by former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, J S Verma, to recommend changes to its rape laws” (ibid.). There is little doubt that SNS helps in spreading the word and organising a movement much more swiftly than traditional tools of communication. Social media use drew the instant attention of the world to this incident and also contributed to the amendment of rape laws in the country, but ongoing sexual harassment of women and young girls, at home and on the streets, is still a cause for concern in Indian cities. This holds true particularly in semi-urban and rural parts of the country, where SNS activism is a distant dream, until vernacular access to SNS through the mobile Internet reaches the interiors of these regions (discussed in Chapter 4).

Beaumont identifies the greatest effectiveness of digital media in the “often loose and non-hierarchical organisation of the protest movements [that are] unconsciously modelled on the networks of the web” (ibid.). But he notes that such loose movements can exceed even the bounds of digital activism. After analysing millions of tweets and several gigabytes of

YouTube footage on the Egypt and Tunisia rebellions, Philip Howard (cited in Taylor, 2011, n.p) concluded, “[S]ocial media carried a cascade of messages about freedom and democracy across North Africa and the Middle East, and helped raise expectations for the success of political uprising.” The success of Egyptians and Tunisians in sharing their grievances and prompting political change influenced other countries like Bahrain to take the activist fight forward. In Bahrain, however, the government soon cracked down on social media, and the people were forced to take to the streets to keep abreast with the updates (Al Jazeera, 2011, n. p.). In this case, online activism initially overcame geographical limitations, only to be disrupted before leading to offline and more localized movements.

Interestingly, after the protests were forcefully suppressed, Bahraini state agencies used Facebook to solicit support from citizens, as reported by Al Jazeera in the documentary film *Bahrain: Shouting in the Dark*. The state urged citizens to identify the protestors and aid in their arrest. In this case, SNS was used both by the activists for the revolution as well as by the counter-revolutionaries. Mobilised equally to foment revolution and to crack down on the fomenters, SNS is not tied to one political ideology or solely to the function of releasing the voices of the oppressed. In this sense, it is a technology rather than an ideological vehicle. Further, though it proves useful for gathering support across territorial boundaries or as a tool to facilitate activism through the sharing of experiences, real-world effects continue to require real-world engagement.

#### DIGITALLY MEDIATED TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM

While SNS is being used extensively by activists, many of whom point out its limitations, there remains a sense that there is a greater future for SNS activism in store, especially with regard to feminist movements. Mohanty (1993) accuses long-term Western patterns of colonization of creating perceptions which contain all economic, political and cultural diversities under one roof referred to as the 'Third World' or 'developing economies'. Such colonizing mentalities mark the difference between the second- and third-wave feminists, with the latter calling for a discursive focus that will impart knowledge about the 'other' on her own terms. Mohanty says that it is an “urgent political necessity” (ibid. p.334) to break the silence and forge transnational ties to promote a better understanding among women, whatever their differences, about their political struggles. The relationship between the Western and 'third world' feminists should no longer be a binary; rather they should be

bound together by the “‘sameness’ of their oppression” (ibid. p.337), which they share irrespective of their socio-cultural circumstances.

The Eurocentric assumptions of Western feminists attribute the oppression of the female ‘other’ to her victimization by the colonial process, to slow economic development and to the politics of a patriarchal system taken to be universal. As such, non-Western women have been labelled by second-wave feminists as traditional and politically immature, needing “to be versed and schooled in the ethos of Western Feminism” (Amos and Parmar, 1984. p 7). As a recent case in point, Western feminists have deemed the Islamic veil to be a mark of sexual control by the patriarchal male, completely overlooking the cultural and historical ethos of the institution. Such an attitude overlooks the agency of the veil-wearer, who makes identity-based choices that might encompass characteristics of the society she lives in, but do not necessarily evacuate her of the capacity to engage in decision-making exercises. As Katherine Bullock (2002) says, “the mainstream, pop culture view [...is rather] simplistic and unsophisticated” (p.xv). The Western liberal assumption of what ‘freedom’ means needs to be combined with an anthropological approach to the history of the social practice from within the community. Facebook, as a platform for cultural exchange, can facilitate such a discussion swiftly while directly involving the people it concerns. Because of the broad accessibility of SNS, no one needs to speak ‘on behalf of’ another.

It is the diversity of experiences that adds richness to feminist understanding, and SNS is particularly good as a platform for sharing experiences. Parashar (2013, n.p) cites the New Delhi gang rape case as a call for a “rethink of third wave feminism and its ethical and political commitments”. She says that violence against women has been “documented as common to all societies” (True 2012, cited in ibid), since it affects women in general and is not dependent on their cultural and ethnic background. Selective channels of outrage about sexual violence, however, show that feminism has so far not overcome cultural barriers when it comes to advocacy. Western feminists have been selective in their critique of the cultural and legal responses to rape cases in developing economies, according to Brendan O’Neill (2013), but the increasing penetration of SNS into these economies may begin to change that. This is the bridge SNS-mediated activism can aim to construct by dissolving the physical location of the activist as a factor in the interaction, so that humanitarian laws and equality can be advocated for all.

On the other hand, the increasingly global accessibility of SNS does not mean that location-specificity is lost. On the contrary, location markers are added by default to online

interactions, for example ‘geotagging’ on Facebook. This continues to make even transnational activism culture-specific, albeit internationally networked, which in turn has political consequences. The New Delhi incident led to a sudden increase in coverage of rape incidents within the Indian media, perhaps with the objective of creating awareness about violence against women in a predominantly patriarchal society. But, in the process, this has resulted in India being tagged internationally as a country too unsafe to visit. This impression was further fuelled by a recent comment (2013) made by a senior CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation) officer in India, who compared the criminality of online sports betting with the taboo word ‘rape’ for want of an analogy, thereby instigating an international debate on the attitude to women of top-ranking police personnel in the country’s premier investigation organisation.

Even while social media is spreading the characterization of India as a place unsafe for women, Facebook is also being used as a political device to document women’s experiences of sexual harassment. Several Indian feminists have resorted to cataloguing discourses on rape and other forms of violence perpetrated against women, especially since the occurrence of the Delhi gang rape. Genderlog aims “to collect writings, posts and studies on gender violence/ women’s rights in India, in one accessible website”, states their Facebook page. Launched on December 30, 2012, their wall had recorded 240 posts by January 31, 2013, the end of my data collection period. Chatura Padaki converted her own Facebook wall into a gallery of media reports on rape and violence experienced by women in India. She pledged to post nothing else online until the Delhi gang rape case reached a closure. Between December 16, 2012, and January 31, 2013, she posted about 67 updates on media reports on this case.

Ultra Violet, a long-standing organization of Indian feminists, has devoted its Facebook group to a similar cause, providing a platform where men and women from across the world have posted about rape in the country, including the frequency of its occurrence and reports of how the authorities deal with it legally as well as socially. A very popular group of activists, this Facebook group logged 357 posts during the same time frame from December 16, 2012 to January 31, 2013. Several media reports and blog links have been cross-posted on these Facebook groups, just as there is overlapping membership across the three. These forums can all be considered leading examples of how effectively cultural exchanges can take place between Western liberal feminists and the more multicultural third-wave feminists, who are often mistaken to be conservative and oppressed (Amos and Parmar,

1984). Not only is there exchange of information between them on the walls of these FB groups, but there is also critical reflection on how the particularly shameful Delhi gang rape incident is perceived by the liberal West. It is important to mention here that rape or sexual harassment is not unknown in the developed countries of the West; the difference lies in how the authorities perceive it and how appropriately the legal system brings the perpetrators to task. Although India is considered the world's largest democracy (Lizphart, 1996), the laws governing its people are highly tainted by historically dominant patriarchal and sexist attitudes, unlike the liberal democracies of the western world.

The strongest international response to the New Delhi case came in the form of the 'Nirbhaya' project, undertaken by playwright Yael Farber, who is originally from Johannesburg but based in Montreal. 'Nirbhaya' was the name initially given by the Indian media to the victim to retain her anonymity, although the international media later released her name as 'Jyoti'. Farber was contacted on Facebook by Bollywood actress Poorna Jagannathan with an invitation to work on the project. When I contacted Farber on Facebook asking her how she received the request to make the play, she said:

"I learned of Jyoti's death on my FB news feed when the story broke. [...] I posted an image of Nirbhaya the day her death was announced. I posted my status as: 'My sister, my daughter, my mother, myself'. Poorna wrote to me on FB (since we were 'friends' she saw my status). She was in India. We started to exchange on instant chat. It was on instant chat that she asked me to come to India - and I said Yes. All this before we actually ever spoke to each other."

This invitation reflects the multicultural communication that takes place on FB. In this case, the communication took place between Mumbai and Montreal, between two people who are originally from New York and Johannesburg, respectively. This interaction also indicates the extent to which information is circulated among users depending on who is on their network, beyond geographical and socio-political limitations. It further manifests the ease with which Facebook users connect with each other and even engage in formal discussions, in this case the invitation to work on a play, irrespective of whether they are 'friends' in real life. This is how Granovetter's (1973) notion of strong and weak ties combine to spread the word of an activist, leading to real-world events.

With regard to global connectivity, another Facebook group's work comes to the fore. In 2010, UN General Secretary Ban Ki-moon joined the Bell Bajao campaign by combining it with his project on 'UNiTE to End Violence against Women', in an attempt to raise

awareness about the issue worldwide (UN media release. 2010). In 2013, at the UN Hotel in New York City, actor Sir Patrick Stewart urged “One Million Men ...to make 1 million ‘concrete, actionable promises’” to stop violence against women (Dylan, 2013). He claimed, “every nine seconds in the United States a woman is assaulted or beaten” (ibid). Apart from the US, the India-based campaign Bell Bajao is gradually extending its wings to other developing and developed nations, including Pakistan, China, Vietnam and Malaysia. Bell Bajao’s Facebook group, quite expectedly, plays a direct role in spreading the word universally across different cultures.

### RISE OF THE FOURTH WAVE OF FEMINISM

For every case of digital activism in India, there are more cases from other countries, both developed and developing, where women are coming together to promote awareness on feminist causes. Online access to information allows these ‘fifth estate’ vigilantes (see Chapter 2) to communicate their views to their communities and via them to decision-makers. Interestingly, these groups are comprised of digital gadget-toting young women as well as men who support feminism. The new wave of feminism is, in fact, marked by a quiet revolution that has been brewing for some time, often on anonymous forums that are digitally mediated. Martinson (2013, n.p) notes that these feminists do not make a distinction between the private and the public, or between small-‘p’ and big-‘p’ politics; they discuss “all sorts of subjects, from baking to relationship advice to work crises.” This is very similar to the issues that I found in my research to be popular among the urban Indian women FB users surveyed, which ranged from vegetarian recipes and television show characters to action against domestic violence on the one hand and corrupt bureaucrats and politicians on the other. The anonymity of their identities on anonymous forums, otherwise considered problematic among netizens (Andrejevic, 2005), is helping these activists talk about their personal lives from the comfort and safety of their homes and often confide about their private experiences to total strangers.

Such a seemingly indiscriminate range of interests can be pooled together in the category of feminism with a small-‘f’, catering to the small-‘p’ of politics. Precisely because of this range, the support these movements are garnering is not small in number. Mumsnet, a UK-based portal on parenting, has 4 million unique visitors every month and 50 million page views on a monthly basis, with most of its members being women. This can be considered an example of a “slow-burn resurgence in feminist thought... where middle-class parents gather



to discuss schooling and Velcro shoes [...from a] very, very comfortable space” (Martinson, 2013). Recently, when the Mumsnet portal ran a survey, 59 per cent of the members identified themselves as feminists, with a substantial number saying they had developed the identity after joining the group (ibid.). Although still in its nascent stage, the fourth wave of feminism is reviving the consciousness-raising approach across socio-cultural and political divides, and pointedly is using SNS to achieve this. “In a world in which women have equality under the law, but not in reality” (ibid.), these feminists are engaged in discussing issues like everyday sexism (see Chapter 1).

One of the primary reasons for the support of these campaigns is that they raise common issues which often instigate reaction, prompting more people to speak up because it affects them. Hazare’s anti-corruption campaign is a case in point. It caused activists to momentarily forget their own ends and extend support to Hazare, perhaps because all of their activist causes are affected by corruption in some form. In the feminist context, Cochrane (2013, n.p) notes,

Individuals are taking on the individual issues they feel passionate about and can usefully address - and they're often succeeding quickly, impressively, very publicly. In doing so, they're bringing thousands of women and men into feminist conversations, and building a movement potentially capable of taking on the structural issues.

It is not just that SNS links individuals’ passions to ongoing discussions about the issues close to their hearts, but the access to technology expedites the response process and aids in organizing for a cause. Rooted in digital technologies like SNS, this wave of feminism is riding on a wider shift in its support structure by overcoming political and cultural limitations, and enabling women to talk about their cause as one. The real-life inequality that has continued despite the successes of the second wave is a cause shared by all women. Every manifestation of gender discrimination intersects with this core point of gender inequality, which helps this new wave of digital activists to broaden their “feminist targets” and locate “the movement within a larger political project” (ibid.). Millions of women are responding to this call for equality and respect via a plethora of projects that they are undertaking within their own cultural context but on transnational SNS platforms.

Access to SNS content through various channels by these women across the world can assist in their vision of transformation by weaving a network of communication through topics and forms of discussion weighted lightly as ‘gossip’. Whether talking about recipes,

schools or sexual violence, informally worded posts on feminist-oriented sites use the democratic accessibility of SNS to build virtual communities linked to political identities, which in turn converge on specific causes to push for changes in the formal political system. SNS-mediated activism thus has the potential to realise Mohanty's (2003, p.3-4) transnational vision of "a world where women and men are free to live creative lives [...] in which democratic [...] institutions provide the conditions for public participation and decision-making for people regardless of economic and social location." The democratic reach of SNS can make possible transnational feminist dreams of a world united across differences of colour, ethnicity, nationality and cultural background, quite similar to the response the Pink Chaddi campaign had received. In fact, this tool has the potential to overcome the conflicting visions of various feminist waves by facilitating discursive networking among activists across borders. This could well constitute the most important real-world end of SNS-based activism for feminist causes.

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# APPENDIX 1

## PIS FOR INTERVIEW

### PROJECT TITLE:

Digital activism: Indian women and social networking

### RESEARCHER INFORMATION:

Paula Ray

PhD student,

Film, Television and Media Studies, University of Auckland

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

I am researching the impact of digital activism via social networking sites like Facebook on the society in which we live and whether this activism helps in furthering women's rights. Your participation in this interview would help me to better understand... (to be customised as per the area of expertise of the individual).

### PROJECT PROCEDURE:

The information from the interview with you will be used as supplementary data to answer my research question: Does the activism that takes place in cyberspace have any impact on the society in which we live? It will not take more than 30 minutes to answer the questions. The questions will be posed and answered verbally, audio-taped (with your approval) and transcribed at a later date by the researcher. Since you are an expert in your field, I would like to be able to quote you ad verbatim in my findings.

### PARTICIPANT RIGHTS

Participants will have the right to request that all or parts of the interview not be audio-taped. Although I would like to quote participants ad verbatim in my findings, participants will have the right to request that they not be quoted directly at any point in the interview.

#### FUNDING:

It is a self-funded project, as part of my PhD thesis.

#### DATA STORAGE RETENTION/ DESTRUCTION/ FUTURE USE:

The data collected hereby will be stored in electronic format until the completion of this research. The interview, along with the Consent Form, will be stored as audio recordings and subsequently transcribed into electronic text by the researcher. This data will also be stored for 6 years (until 2016) and then deleted. During the duration of the research (until 2013), if you wish to review the recording or modify it, it will be duly available. Following this, if you wish to access the information, you will be offered a copy of the thesis.

#### RIGHT TO WITHDRAW FROM PARTICIPATION:

At any point during the research, if you wish to withdraw from participation, you have the right to do so before January 1, 2013. You also have the right to stop the recording of their interview.

#### TRANSCRIBER:

The researcher, Paula Ray, herself will transcribe the interview data.

#### ANONYMITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY:

You will be identified throughout my research and also in the thesis as an expert in your field.

#### CONTACT DETAILS:

Researcher

Name: Paula Ray

Email: pray017@aucklanduni.ac.nz

Postal address (local):

Flat A10, Mont Vert 1, Sus Road, Pashan, Pune 410 021, Maharashtra, India

Telephone: 0091 99205 72748

Postal address (university):

Film, Television and Media Studies, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142, NZ

Telephone: 0064 22 362 8540

Supervisor

Name: Dr Misha Kavka

Email: m.kavka@auckland.ac.nz

Postal address:

Film, Television and Media Studies, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142, NZ

Telephone: 85351 (ph + 64 9 373 7599)

HOD

Name: Dr Laurence Simmons

Email: l.simmons@auckland.ac.nz

Postal address:

Film, Television and Media Studies, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142, NZ

Telephone: 87130 (ph + 64 9 373 7599)

#### CHAIR CONTACT DETAILS

For any queries regarding ethical concerns, you may contact the Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, The University of Auckland, Office of the Vice Chancellor, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142. Telephone 0064 9 373 7599 extn 83711.

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE  
ON DECEMBER 2, 2010, for (3) years, Reference Number 2010/ 566

# APPENDIX 2

## CONSENT FORM

(Interview)

**THIS FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF 6 YEARS**

Project title: Digital activism: Indian women and social networking

Name of Researcher: Paula Ray

I have read the Participant Information Sheet, have understood the nature of the research and why I have been selected. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.

- I agree to take part in this research.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time, and to withdraw any data traceable to me before January 2013.
- I agree / do not agree to be audiotaped.
- I wish / do not wish to have my tapes returned to me.
- I wish / do not wish to receive the summary of findings.
- I understand that the researcher herself will transcribe the tapes.
- I understand that data will be kept for 6 years (till 2016) in electronic format, after which they will be deleted.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE  
ON DECEMBER 2, 2010, for (3) years, Reference Number 2010/ 566

# APPENDIX 3

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### **Urvashi Butalla:**

She co-founded the feminist publishing house Kali For Women before branching out to start her second feminist publishing house, Zubaan, which has a Facebook page.

1. Do you use SNS?
2. What are the prime activities you use it for?
3. Have you ever used SNS to further your cause? If so, how?
4. How did it impact your cause?
5. Has the Facebook page made any difference to the response you have received to your second venture, Zubaan? If so, in what way?

### **Nisha Susan:**

She started the Pink Chaddi campaign, a leading example of successful digital activism in India.

1. Do you use SNS?
2. What are the prime activities you use it for?
3. Have you ever used SNS to further your cause? If so, how?
4. How did the Pink Chaddi campaign take off? Would it have been as successful if you had resorted to traditional means of activism? Which aspect(s) of the campaign was possible only because of digital means?
5. Did the success surprise you? Why? What were your expectations of social networking sites?

### **Bell Bajao / Blanknoise:**

They run campaigns against domestic violence and sexual harassment.

1. Do you use SNS?
2. What are the prime activities you use it for?
3. Have you ever used SNS to further your cause? If so, how?
4. How did it impact your cause?

5. How are you benefitting from your online presence? In what ways does your digital activism differ from traditional means of creating awareness and promoting participation? Would it have been possible without the online means?

**Dina Mehta:**

Blogger/ social media observer.

1. Do you use SNS?
2. What are the prime activities you use it for?
3. Have you ever used SNS to further your cause? If so, how?
4. From your research, do you see SNS having an impact on activism per se?
5. How is online activism helping users deal with traditional social or political issues related to women? What are these issues?

**Keith Gomes:**

Member of Jagrut Nagrik Manch, whose not-to-vote campaign got a lot of response. They realised, however, that this is not the solution and so now they have a new web-based protest group called 'Let's Rebuild India'.

1. Do you use SNS?
2. What are the prime activities you use it for?
3. Have you ever used SNS to further your cause? If so, how?
4. How did it impact your cause?
5. How does hosting an issue on an online platform contribute to a campaign's success? Is the online platform the main reason for such success? How is it different from traditional tools of activism?

**Jasmine Shah:**

Started Jaago Re, an Internet campaign, to get people out of their houses to cast their vote. The team is targeting the 18-30 age group that comprises 30 per cent of the voting population of India.

1. Do you use SNS?
2. What are the prime activities you use it for?
3. Have you ever used SNS to further your cause? If so, how?

4. How did it impact your cause?

5. How does hosting an issue on an online platform contribute to a campaign's success? Is the online platform the main reason for such success? How is it different from traditional tools of activism?

**Shabana Azmi:**

Bollywood actor/ activist

1. Do you use SNS?

2. What are the prime activities you use it for?

3. Have you ever used SNS to further your cause? If so, how?

4. How did it impact your cause?

5. Why would you use SNS as an online tool to promote your activism? How might it benefit?

**Arundhati Roy:**

Writer/ activist

1. Do you use SNS?

2. What are the prime activities you use it for?

3. Have you ever used SNS to further your cause? If so, how?

4. How did it impact your cause?

5. Why would you use SNS as an online tool to promote your activism? How might it benefit? How would you compare online activism with the written medium of protest?



# APPENDIX 4

## PIS FOR QUESTIONNAIRE

### PROJECT TITLE:

Digital activism: Indian women and social networking

### RESEARCHER INFORMATION:

Paula Ray

PhD student,

Film, Television and Media Studies, University of Auckland

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

I am researching the impact of digital activism via social networking sites like Facebook on the society we live in and whether this activism helps in furthering women's rights. I have India as my case study and so I would like to find out what kind of activities Indian women use Facebook for and if such engagements promote digital activism in any way. Based on the responses I receive from this questionnaire about Indian women's use of Facebook, I will then identify eight Facebook groups with whom I shall engage as a participant observer to monitor the communications/activities within the group.

### PROJECT PROCEDURE:

It will take you about 20 minutes to answer the multiple-choice questions. The data from the questionnaire will be analysed to identify Facebook groups that are high in popularity and potential impact. As a questionnaire participant, you will remain

anonymous, as I am only interested in finding out which Facebook group/cause the questionnaire participants are members of or follow.

#### RIGHTS OF PARTICIPANTS:

Participation is voluntary. If for some reason you do not want to take part, please feel free to ignore this questionnaire.

#### FUNDING:

It is a self-funded project, as part of my PhD thesis.

#### TRANSCRIBER:

The researcher, Paula Ray, herself will transcribe the questionnaire data.

#### DATA STORAGE RETENTION/ DESTRUCTION/ FUTURE USE:

The data collected hereby will be stored in electronic format, along with the Consent Forms, for 6 years (until 2016) and then deleted. During the duration of the research period (until 2013), if the participant wishes to review the questionnaire findings, they will be duly available. Following this, if participants wish to access the information, they will be offered a copy of the thesis.

#### RIGHT TO WITHDRAW FROM PARTICIPATION:

As you will remain anonymous, your answers will be aggregated with other data and your personal details will not be stored. Hence, the right to withdraw is not applicable.

#### ANONYMITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY:

The participants will remain anonymous because the researcher is only interested in their usage of Facebook and the Facebook groups of which they are a member. Questionnaires will be sent over email, but email addresses will not appear on the questionnaire or in the data stored.

CONTACT DETAILS:

Researcher

Name: Paula Ray

Email: pray017@aucklanduni.ac.nz

Postal address (local):

Flat A10, Mont Vert 1, Sus Road, Pashan, Pune 410 021, Maharashtra, India

Telephone: 0091 99205 72748

Postal address (uni):

Film, Television and Media Studies, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1124, NZ

Telephone: 0064 22 362 8540

Supervisor

Name: Dr Misha Kavka

Email: m.kavka@auckland.ac.nz

Postal address:

Film, Television and Media Studies, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1124, NZ

Telephone: 85351 (ph + 64 9 373 7599)

HOD

Name: Dr Laurence Simmons

Email: [l.simmons@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:l.simmons@auckland.ac.nz)

Postal address:

Film, Television and Media Studies, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1124, NZ

Telephone: 87130 (ph + 64 9 373 7599)

#### CHAIR CONTACT DETAILS

For any queries regarding ethical concerns you may contact the Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, The University of Auckland, Office of the Vice Chancellor, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142. Telephone 0064 9 373 7599 extn 83711.

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON  
December 2, 2010, for (3) years, Reference Number 2010/566.

# APPENDIX 5

## CONSENT FORM

(Questionnaire)

**THIS FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF 6 YEARS**

Project title: Digital activism: Indian women and social networking

Name of Researcher: Paula Ray

I have read the Participant Information Sheet, have understood the nature of the research and why I have been selected. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.

- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish / do not wish to receive the summary of findings.
- I understand that the researcher herself will transcribe the data.
- I understand that data will be kept for 6 years (till 2016) in electronic format, after which they will be deleted.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE  
ON December 2, 2010, FOR (3) YEARS REFERENCE NUMBER 2010/ 566.

# APPENDIX 6

## QUESTIONNAIRE - for women Facebook users

[Instructions: Mark your answers in bold and return to [digi.activism@gmail.com](mailto:digi.activism@gmail.com)]

1. Which age group do you fall under?

- a) 18-24
- b) 25-34
- c) 35-44
- d) 45-55

2. How often do you use Facebook?

- a) Once in two months
- b) Once a week
- c) Once a day
- d) Several times a day
- e) I am logged on to FB 24x7

3. What are the purposes for which you use Facebook?

(You can tick more than one option and/ or add further issues if they not in the list)

- a) To keep in touch with my friends.
- b) To track down childhood friends/ acquaintances and see what they are up to.
- c) To inform my contacts about my activities with regard to my work, etc.

d) To keep track of the latest issues being talked about.

e) To participate in such discussions.

f) Add your own: \_\_\_\_\_

4. When you spot somebody within your friends' circle mention a 'cause' close to your heart, what do you do?

a) 'Like' it.

b) Comment on it.

c) Ignore it, because I believe digital activism is similar to armchair activism.

d) Comment on it and form an FB group or join it if it's already existing, to promote the cause.

5. Have you ever raised an 'issue' of your own on Facebook?

a) No, I don't believe in such activities.

b) Yes, I did it once when I was truly affected by something.

c) I do it all the time and it's been very effective mostly in creating awareness or getting people together for support.

d) I do or have done it and felt it wasn't effective.

e) I would if I had the time.

6. If something has happened to you in real life, do you write about it on Facebook to get your friends to comment on it?

a) Yes, I update my FB status several times a day.

b) I put up a status message only when I have something to say.

c) I do not discuss events in my personal life on a virtual public space.

7. Do you take a 'cause' raised by you or your friends on Facebook beyond the virtual world?

a) I cannot be bothered.

b) I would if I had the time.

c) Yes, sometimes.

d) Almost always.

8. What kind of information do you look for on Facebook pages?

(You can tick more than one option and/ or add a further type of information to it if it's not in the list)

a) News

b) Parenting

c) Health

d) Music/ book launches/ social events

e) Women's issues

f) Add your own: \_\_\_\_\_

9. What political issues, if any, do you engage with on Facebook?

(You can tick more than one option and/ or add further issues if they not in the list)

a) Human rights

b) Women's rights

c) Voting rights



d) Add your own: \_\_\_\_\_

10. What political issues, if any, do you engage with beyond the virtual world?

(You can tick more than one option and/ or add further issues if they not in the list)

a) Human rights

b) Women's rights

c) Voting rights

d) Add your own: \_\_\_\_\_

11. Have you joined any Facebook Group/s? If yes, please name them.

a) No

b) Yes

Names: \_\_\_\_\_

12. Do you comment on or reply to a message from a stranger who might share your problem?

a) No

b) Yes, always

c) Sometimes, depending on whether I have the time

d) Yes, if I am convinced that his/ her problem is genuine

# APPENDIX 7

## PIS FOR FACEBOOK GROUP (NAME) COORDINATOR:

Dear [add name]

### PROJECT TITLE:

Digital activism: Indian women and social networking

### RESEARCHER INFORMATION:

Paula Ray

PhD student,

Department of Film, Television and Media Studies, University of Auckland

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND INVITATION:

I am researching the impact of digital activism via social networking sites like Facebook with the aim of finding out whether such activism helps in furthering women's rights. I have India as my case study and, based on the responses to a questionnaire distributed among Indian women Facebook users, it was found that your Facebook group rates highly in popularity and potential impact. Therefore, I would like to join your group as a participant observer to monitor some of the communications within the team.

### PROJECT PROCEDURE:

I shall transcribe some of the communications within the group for a period of two years, from January 2011 to January 2013. In my capacity of a participant observer, I shall interact with your group moderator as and when I require an information/ clarification. Throughout my research, your Facebook group will be identified and also in the thesis. Individual members of your groups, with

whom I will be involved in participatory observation, will be identified as members of the group but not by their names. It is, however, possible for group members to identify each other based on the data used in my research, and it may be possible for non-members to identify group members by the name of the group and members' communications as used in my research. It should be mentioned here that communication posted on the 'walls' of Facebook groups by their members, is considered semi-public information that can be easily accessed by non-members visiting the group's webpage.

#### FUNDING:

It is a self-funded project, as part of my PhD thesis.

#### DATA STORAGE RETENTION/ DESTRUCTION/ FUTURE USE:

The data hereby collected will be stored in electronic format until the completion of this research. Some communications on this Facebook page will be transcribed into electronic text by the researcher. This data, along with the Consent Forms from Facebook group coordinators, will be stored for 6 years (till 2016) and then deleted. During the duration of the research (until 2013), if the Facebook group wishes to review the transcription or modify it, it will be duly available. After 2013, if the group wishes to access the information, the group will be offered a copy of the thesis.

#### RIGHT TO WITHDRAW FROM PARTICIPATION:

At any point during the research, if a Facebook group wishes to withdraw from participation, it has the right to do so before January 1, 2013.

#### ANONYMITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY:

Facebook groups will be identified throughout my research and also in the thesis. Individual members of these particular Facebook groups, with whom I will be involved in participatory observation, will be identified as members of the group but not by their names. It is, however, possible for group members to identify each other based on the data used in my research, and it may be possible for non-members to identify group members by the name of the group and

members' communications as used in my research. It should be mentioned here that communication posted on the 'walls' of Facebook groups by their members is semi-public information that can be easily accessed by non-members visiting the group's webpage.

CONTACT DETAILS:

Researcher

Name: Paula Ray

Email: pray017@aucklanduni.ac.nz

Postal address (local):

Flat A10, Mont Vert 1, Sus Road, Pashan, Pune 410 021, Maharashtra, India

Telephone: 0091 99205 72748

Postal address (university):

Film, Television and Media Studies, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142, NZ

Telephone: 0064 22 362 8540

Supervisor

Name: Dr Misha Kavka

Email: m.kavka@auckland.ac.nz

Postal address:

Film, Television and Media Studies, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142, NZ

Telephone: 85351 (ph + 64 9 373 7599)

HOD

Name: Dr Laurence Simmons

Email: l.simmons@auckland.ac.nz

Postal address:

Film, Television and Media Studies, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142, NZ

Telephone: 87130 (ph + 64 9 373 7599)

#### CHAIR CONTACT DETAILS

For any queries regarding ethical concerns, you may contact the Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, The University of Auckland, Office of the Vice Chancellor, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142. Telephone 0064 9 373 7599 extn 83711.

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS  
COMMITTEE ON DECEMBER 2, 2010, for (3) years, Reference Number 2010/ 566

# APPENDIX 8

## CONSENT FORM

(Facebook group moderator)

### THIS FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF 6 YEARS

Project title: Digital activism: Indian women and social networking

Name of Researcher: Paula Ray

I have read the Participant Information Sheet, have understood the nature of the research and why I have been selected. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.

- I agree to take part in this research.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time, and to withdraw any data traceable to me before Jan 2013.
- I wish / do not wish to receive the summary of findings.
- I understand that a third party who has signed a confidentiality agreement will transcribe some of the communication.
- I understand that data will be kept for 6 years (till 2016) in electronic format, after which they will be deleted.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS  
COMMITTEE ON DECEMBER 2, 2010, for (3) years, Reference Number 2010/ 566