The Revolution Will Not be a Downloadable Application! /Downloaded (Or Will it?)

by Preeti Shekar

There is no doubt that I wouldn't have met my deadline to finish this article in time, without the Internet and online communications technologies. I am eternally grateful to be a part of the wired, tech-savvy generation – with easy and reliable access to technologies and gadgets, especially based here in the Global North. As a feminist journalist and activist constantly working with online tools and technologies on the communications team of a leading women's rights organisation, I am constantly amazed by both the quick pace and shift in technological use and access.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have come to be regarded as hugely critical for all social justice movements, including the women's movement. Indeed feminist activists have long recognised how women's use and access to technologies can enable women to both strengthen their activism and/or be completely transformed by it.

In the last 10 years, technology has quite revolutionised communications by allowing much greater access than has been ever been possible. The availability of free and open source technologies, tools like Skype that allow people to communicate across borders and boundaries with much ease, and the increasing number of platforms and spaces where more voices enable a plurality of opinion that is easily accessed, highlight the plethora of opportunities made possible by transformed technologies available to activists today.

Across time zones, contexts and borders, a growing number of women's rights and other activists are engaging with each other in a way that has not been possible before. The way information can be generated, shared, consumed and engaged with is changing as you read this piece.

Mobilising and organising with the aid of technologies is definitely time-saving and can have a viral effect as technologies like social media can further attest.

"I feel more in touch with what's going on in different places in the world and of course it also means that we can get news quickly – news of bad things like repression, like conflict and disaster, but also news of good things, like victories, passages of laws, mobilising efforts, moments of resistance so I think it has really changed," notes Masum Momaya, information and communications manager of Association of Women in Development (AWID). "Before we had to wait for things to be published in a paper, or published in an academic journal or a book in order to really learn so I think the speed of learning, and the kind of access we have to a variety of information is very different now from how it was ten years ago."

Blank Noise and Pink Chaddi – the role of ICTs

Easy to use technologies have been helpful in enabling a rapid response to patriarchal attacks on women's rights. Two recent cases in India exemplify how technology can aid and strengthen activism, making it visible, accessible and gain momentum. Blank Noise in India began in 2003 as a participatory arts project by three young women. It is a campaign initiated to make politically visible the overwhelming incidences of street sexual harassment that girls and women face in urban public spaces in India. With the aid of a blog, the campaign built quick momentum in enabling girls and women to upload pictures and share personal anecdotes and experiences of harassment that could be anonymously published and shame the perpetrators.

Similarly, the Pink Chaddi Campaign, a feminist campaign also based in India, used social media to mobilise over 50,000 supporters within a span of a few weeks including a large number of Indians residing outside of the country. The campaign was basically a response by urban Indian feminist activists to right wing Hindu fundamentalist groups attacking women who visited pubs. Campaign supporters were encouraged to send pink chaddis (underwear) to the offices of the fundamentalist groups.

Both campaigns gained global media attention and information and enthusiasm about them spread literally like wildfire. Other countries too have had useful instantiations where women's groups have been able to use technology for swift and successful mobilising and making visible issues that are ignored or underplayed by local media, such as the million signatures campaign in Iran is a remarkable example by Iranian feminist activists to push for Iranian women's rights that has gained widespread international attention.

Such campaigns showcase how online spaces like the blog and tools like social media have become vibrant alternatives particularly for young (but also older people increasingly), urban groups to mobilise support and strengthen their visibility. It has increasingly served as an alternative avenue for mobilising especially at a time when corporatised mainstream media in many countries fail to highlight crucial issues especially women's rights. Yet the other side of the coin is that these technologies are still not widely accessible to marginalised communities of

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women, and thus curtails or fail to include their voices and perspectives. Technological disparities are more steep in rural areas – both for men and women but especially for women due to cultural and other restrictions in access to training or learning opportunities.

Another critique of the Internet is that it reflects real time divisions between ideologically opposed constituents and communities. Left/radical, alternative, feminist and other progressive voices are just as vibrant as are right-wing, conservative, hate-mongering spaces online. Just as communities in real time many a time mingle in separate spaces and do not necessarily engage with each other meaningfully, so too is the Internet seen as a space to just be cautious of and is seen sometimes as operating in silos without engaging with divergent viewpoints. Still the ability to quickly share information through email and social media outweighs many of these concerns and limitations, and the nostalgia of a pre-Internet era dissipates in the face of geographical distances and increasingly regulated boundaries between countries!

Conclusion

The extraordinary world of ICTs have proved to be true gamechangers for feminist activists who are boldly envisioning and working towards a equitable, and indeed a gender just world. Online technologies have played a huge role in this regard in leveling the playing field in ways unimaginable before.

But we do need to keep in mind the pitfalls of information overload and disparities of access as we also simultaneously evaluate the use and impact of ICTs.

Three other aspects or consequences to consider regarding online technologies are impacts on health, the growing world of online pornography that are extremely violent and have enabled instant access to violent depictions of women; and issues of privacy and security that also further are complicated by gender disparities.

Best practices of ergonomics are a luxury to even the most privileged activists as overwork, fatigue, and information overload characterises activist movements everywhere. While on the one hand they enable extraordinary linkages in short spans of time, information driven activism has also caused overwhelm and exhaustion among rights activists. Working long hours peering into the computer screen is quite a health hazard. Anti-pornography activists note how the online porn industry has grown by leaps and bounds in even the last decade and runs into several billion dollars of profit. And tech surveillance by governments and corporates raise serious concerns around issues of privacy and security. Feminist bloggers and other activists have reported several cases of abuse and threats by conservative users.

Given this reality, a way forward for feminist technology use and praxis by both women's groups and other social justice organising is to consider how to use free and open source technological platforms and to create training/learning spaces for especially women and girls to use these powerful tools with a realistic awareness and consideration of some of their limitations and negative impacts outlined above, to amplify grassroots activism and to make vital linkages between the local, regional, national and the global for truly strong, vibrant movements that enable long lasting social change.

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