Old Frames, New Frames: Constructing Narratives of Women’s Rights Movements

Kali Wright-Smith, Ph.D.

Westminster College

Fulton, MO

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“We have to be creative in opening up ways of communicating so that we can still get the message out,” said Aung San Thar, a video journalist for the “Democratic Voice of Burma,” an independent media organisation promoting human rights and freedom of expression in Myanmar.

“In countries where the government has monopoly over the media, I work to offer alternative information and other points of view,” said Henda Chennaoui, a journalist and social media blogger widely followed on Facebook in Tunisia (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2011).

This is an era of renewed activism on a global level. Social movements have popped up in every corner of the international system since the start of the global recession, and they were galvanized in 2011 by the Arab Spring. Many social movement theorists trace the beginning of the current era of activism to an even earlier time. Norris (2002) notes how protest politics have become increasingly normalized and diffused across the globe. In recent years, social movements have organized around issues such as economic inequality, human rights, societal violence, democratic freedoms, corruption, and institutional reform. Regardless of when we see this period of activism beginning, it is clear that we increasingly see social movement activism and protest as routinized means of articulating demands for political change.

The combination of this transnational trend of heightened activism, the increased presence of female public officials who serve as movement allies, the expansion of women’s rights NGOs, and focusing events of extreme, public acts of violence against women has contributed to a re-energized global women’s movement. Women’s rights activism is certainly not new; in the United States we have witnessed multiple waves of feminism. Women’s rights activism has deep roots in many countries outside the U.S. as well. Nevertheless, the opportunities for expressions of activism appear greater today than ever before. In part this is due to the extended range of activities in which one can participate to promote women’s rights. The list includes traditional activism, such as demonstrations, and newer forms of activism such as online campaigns. New media has changed how activism occurs and has provided new avenues of recruitment, awareness-raising, and campaigning. However, we are less aware of how new media has shaped the communication that takes place within movements. In particular, while the social movement literature has spent considerable time analyzing social movements’ use of frames to construct the message of the movement, we have not assessed framing through new media in the same way. As changes in the form of activism have an inevitable effect on communication practices, this scrutiny is essential if we want to understand how new media campaigns may influence the tactics, strategies, and outcomes of social movements.

This research will evaluate the effects of new media tools, including how they shape the external message frames used by global women’s rights movements. When assessing new media, this research will focus most specifically on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, but also the use of blogs and web platforms that host campaigns. It will analyze how these tools have been used by women’s rights movements and what potential benefits these tools bring. The primary intention of this piece, however, is to contrast the types of public-directed movement messages that have been disseminated in traditional campaigns with those present in campaigns that utilize new media. It will also make it possible to determine whether the use of new media is having any significant effect on the ways in which women’s movements are constructing their movement narrative. In particular, it will allow us to see if the expansion in the availability of media tools is influencing the choice of frames by these movements. This will contribute to the literature on social movement theory by assessing frame choice and frame effects in a new, relatively uninvestigated context.

This research will demonstrate that new media has facilitated changes in the forms of activism that occur within women’s rights movements and has contributed to the evolution of specific frames. While this study only begins to address the question of movement effectiveness, there is evidence to suggest that usage of new media resources can alter the equation for movement success. Utilizing a comparison of historical women’s rights movements with current activism in cases like India and the Middle East, this study suggests that new media can allow activists to at least partially create, rather than respond to, positive opportunity structures by increasing the diversity of recruitment methods, movement messages, and campaign formats.

***Expansion of Communication Politics***

In Manuel Castells’s book, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, he makes the argument that

Communication is the process of sharing meaning through the exchange of information…The process of constructing meaning is characterized by a great deal of diversity. There is, however, one feature common to all processes of symbolic construction: they are largely dependent on the messages and frames created, formatted and diffused in multimedia communications networks (13).

Castells shares much in common with political scientists working from a constructivist mindset. He contends that power is not only material; power can be gained by affecting how people think. This depends on the construction of messages and the way that information is shared. Creating and sharing the message of a movement is a strategic process that involves choosing the appropriate message frames, building networks of solidarity, evoking emotion, and demonstrating how action can produce change (Brysk 2013; West 2013).

Framing is essential to the success of any social movement, whether it is using traditional or new media strategies (Reed 2005). According to Harlow and James (2011, 1361), “frames identify problems, establish their causes, offer moral judgments, and recommend solutions.” For example, the Liberian Women’s Peace movement, chronicled in the documentary *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, strategically framed their message as an inclusive demand for peace coming from apolitical, frustrated mothers. By taking political demands out of the equation and criticizing both sides of the civil war, the movement sent a message that they were simply tired of war and desperate to move forward to a new era. This made it more difficult to attack them or what they were asking for. According to Brysk (2013, 32), a successful movement will construct and disseminate a message that builds empathy for victims, conveys a sense of “strategic interdependence,” or shared responsibility for addressing the problem, and persuades society that it is in their rational interest to contribute to the efforts of the movement.

Evoking emotion and building solidarity behind a cause are easier with the use of new media. Harlow and Johnson (2011, 1360) argue “Whether through blogs or social media, the Internet allows protesters to circumvent the gatekeeping of traditional media and take control of the message they want presented publicly.” In their study of the Arab Spring, the authors suggest that online media forums allow citizens to “voice alternative views,” which allowed them to voice their opposition to a repressive regime and lead citizens to believe that it was actually possible to engage in a collective effort to stand up against the state (1360). When comparing *The New York Times* coverage of the Egyptian Revolution to the “Global Voices” blog, the authors find that while *The New York Times* relied on a traditional “spectacle” frame in its coverage of the protest, Global Voices “provided an alternative view,” in order “to emphasize the injustices being committed, to provoke sympathy for the protesters, and to legitimize and validate their causes and emotions” (1367).

It is important for social movements working on the ground to disseminate their narrative, and this is possible by highlighting certain symbols of the cause or bringing attention to victims or movement participants. For example, the 2009 Green Revolution in Iran gained international attention due in part to the video showing the death of student Neda Soltan during the protests. In addition to the dissemination of the video via YouTube, multiple Facebook pages popped up to share the story of Neda and allow people to express their emotions. This immediately created empathy for the pro-democracy movement and a sense of outrage at the government. New media provides a wider variety of avenues for engaging in communication politics. The ability to construct a mobilizing narrative, disseminate the movement’s message, and amass supporters is facilitated by social media sites, video, and blogs.

In this research, I posit that new media will have three significant areas of effect on communication. First, there will be audience effects as the story being told to recruit activists and supporters will be different than in traditional campaigns and these frames will reflect the broader reach of the movement and the ability to overcome traditional ideas associated with “feminism” or “women’s rights” through non-traditional forms of communication. Second, new media will enable more distinct symbolic and emotional appeals than traditional campaigns. Finally, new media tools will affect the outcomes of social movements, by increasing the scope of campaigns and the heightened opportunities provided by these tools.

**Global Women’s Rights Movements**

Research investigating social movement theory has looked at various aspects of social movements: their formation, strategies, goals, efficacy, and determinants of success and failure. One of the most prominent theorists on social movements, Sydney Tarrow (1994, 3-4) defines social movements as composed of “collective challenges by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities.” Historically, there has long been a presence for the women’s movement, though it is simplistic to conceive of a single, unified women’s movement on a global scale. Women’s movements have pursued different policy goals- some national or international in scope, but often local- and their strategies and ideologies frequently differ. There is also the question of what constitutes a “women’s” movement. We often conceive of women’s movements as those movements directed at achieving gains in women’s rights, such as political representation, equal rights, or protections. However, we can also look at movements that are focused on broader issues, such as human rights, but are composed primarily of female members. A prime example would be the Madres of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina.

While there is significant diversity among women’s movements, there has been a consistent presence of social movements working to promote issues of specific importance to women worldwide. This is not a new phenomenon, but it is worth paying particular attention to women’s movements today for a number of reasons. First, women’s movements have continued to proliferate on a global level as political changes and focusing events have created openings for these movements to emerge. Second, women’s rights have continuously become a greater focus of global campaigns, including those created by the United Nations, such as He for She. Finally, when analyzing the influence of new media on social movements, there is reason to believe that these tools might be more meaningful to women’s movements than other forms of social movements, given that they provide a way to more safely and indirectly counter systems that can be closed off to women’s influence. The next sections will identify trends across contemporary women’s movements and then move to investigate framing within women’s movements in India and the Middle East.

**New Media, New Frames**

When asked about the use of social media to enhance women’s rights activism, activists frequently cite education and mobilizing support as the two main outcomes they wish to achieve (Buling 2012). Social movements hope to increase recognition of their concerns at both societal and governmental levels. When the aim is to educate society about women’s rights issues, movements provide information in the hopes that spreading awareness will help the movement gain supporters, thereby increasing human and financial resources. A frequently articulated benefit of new media is that it expands the reach of social movements.

In order to capitalize on this resource, many social movements have tried to raise societal awareness and affect agenda-setting by mobilizing the power of celebrity, or as Brysk (2013, 3) terms it, “employing charismatic speakers.” The role of celebrities in activism is nothing new; indeed we can see it in traditional forms of activism as celebrities are often found participating in demonstrations or promoting certain political issues. Between celebrities from Audrey Hepburn to Angelina Jolie working as United Nations Goodwill Ambassadors to others such as Matt Damon promoting issues like water rights through their own organizations, celebrity activism exists with or without new media. Nevertheless, online campaigns for women’s rights frequently contain media participation by celebrities. Most women’s rights organizations take advantage of new media tools to disseminate their celebrity-supported campaigns in the hopes that attaching a famous face will help the videos to go viral and reach a larger audience.

The “Ring the Bell” Campaign by women’s rights NGO Breakthrough was kicked off by actor and activist Patrick Stewart, who appeared in BreakthroughTV videos promoting the campaign. The campaign aims to get “one million men” to pledge to “make one million ‘concrete, actionable promises’ to end violence against women and girls” (Schnall 2013). Stewart has become a strong spokesman, linking the issue to his personal experiences growing up in a household in which his mother experienced physical abuse, while arguing that the drive to end violence against women is a “human” issue rather than a “women’s issue.”

A second campaign launched in 2014 by the United Nations is the “He for She” campaign. The UN’s campaign aims to bring greater attention to issues of abuse against women and to change the culture around activism by incorporating men and women into the process of speaking out against violence (Elliott 2014). Emma Watson, a newly minted UN Goodwill Ambassador, launched the campaign, and videos in support of the campaign feature prominent names like UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and Matt Damon. This campaign got an immediate boost following Emma Watson’s well-received speech before the UN General Assembly, which trended on Twitter and spread across various new media sites.

Finally, in response to greater attention to reports of rape on college campuses, the White House has launched a new campaign called “It’s On Us.” The White House campaign is focused on disseminating information and teaching people how to look for signs of dangerous contexts and situations that can increase vulnerability to sexual assault. The goal of the campaign is to enhance access to informational resources to create cultures of awareness, and one piece of that campaign is a series of videos- featuring a multitude of celebrities- voicing support for the cause.

These three examples show that despite different actors behind these campaigns, an NGO, the United Nations, and the White House, they all used celebrities to increase issue awareness and participate in campaign videos. Organizations like Breakthrough and UltraViolet do not use celebrities in every campaign, but they consistently employ innovative advertising tools, interactive online games, YouTube, Twitter, *Huffington Post*, and online petitions to bring attention to their causes. Their ability to couple innovative online tools with protests on the ground has brought far more attention to their campaigns (Bassett 2012; Losh 2013). Traditional news outlets, such as television and print media, did little to promote these causes, and it seems likely that most public awareness that exists comes from coverage on new media sites. While awareness of these campaigns is predominately limited to those audiences most likely to be engaged in such issues already—for instance, those individuals who “like” human rights causes on Facebook—it is also arguable that awareness of these campaigns is higher than it would have been in the absence of new media.

In addition to utilizing celebrities to create a “face” of the movement, these three national and international campaigns also share a common frame: the attempt to make women’s rights activism a gender-inclusive fight. Women’s movements over time have wrestled with the idea of what role men should play within these fights. In some movements, men have been key figures in advancing the ideals of the movement, but there are often questions about how the identity of the movement should be constructed. Frequently men have been discouraged from having visible roles within movements so as to keep a coherent movement identity structured around gender. Other movements, like the Madres in Argentina, initially kept men from the movement because they felt that their gender and construction of identity as non-confrontational, apolitical, peaceful mothers insulated them from confrontation with a repressive, violent regime (Navarro 2001). However, in current movements we are witnessing a far more intentional effort to incorporate men into the movement. When Global Citizen echoes Patrick Stewart’s message that “gender equality is not a women’s issue, it’s a human’s issue,” this is an attempt to reframe issues away from the traditional emphasis on womanhood to build a larger sense of collective ownership. This follow’s Brysk’s discussion of how social movements attempt to not only build empathy, but also to create a deep feeling of collective responsibility to act within the target audience.

Utilizing gender-inclusive frames allows a strategic attempt to broaden the audience of a movement, but this framing also offers away to reframe women’s issues away from traditional feminism. In recent years, feminism has come under attack online, particularly within the millennial population. This is evidenced by sites such as The Anti-Feminist, Women Against Men, and the Anti-Feminist League, in addition to Women Against Feminism’s “I Don’t Need Feminism” online message movement, which is most popular among young women. The “feminist” frame has brought opposition to women’s rights issues in previous studies, and the “anti-feminist” counter-frame has always had a similar dampening effect on support for women’s movements. In contrast, broader “political rights frames” have gained more positive responses (Terkildsen and Schnell 1997). While frames oriented toward feminism have long brought questionable results, the online world has created even more fertile ground for expressions of anti-feminism and a framing of feminism as exclusionary and hostile. Consequently, a concerted attempt to make women’s issues “human issues” responds to a framing problem the broader women’s movement experiences.

Social movement theory has shown that frames are most effective when they are aligned with cultural values and ideologies (Edwards 2014). This makes the shift toward inclusion strategic within a national context. However, for transnational movements it is likely aimed at reaching the biggest audience and creating a mass sense of accountability for action. Campaigns created by transnational movements may create pieces that resonate with local contexts, but they need to have a broad reach given that they are not culturally-specific but rather are universal in message. Although this shift makes sense in Western contexts and within transnational movements, do we see the same framing dynamics occurring in nationally-focused, non-Western movements? Are the frames more differentiated and culturally or politically-specific? Are these movements using new media in unique ways? To begin to answer these questions, the next section will examine two movements that have been active in recent years: the regional movement for women’s rights within the Middle East and the Indian Anti-Rape Movement.

***New Media and Framing in the Middle East***

Women in the Middle East are often characterized as repressed and politically disengaged, as voiceless victims of patriarchal societies. Western culture’s “static” and “immutable” image of Middle Eastern societies shapes Western representations of Middle Eastern women as “either reified out of their socio-temporal context, or are regarded as wholly determined by their cultural and religious traditions” (Jacoby, 1999, 512). However, this flawed idea ignores the complex political roles assumed by women and a long history of direct political engagement and extra-institutional activity among Middle Eastern women. In Jacoby’s (1999) discussion of women’s activism in the Middle East, she attributes the origins of many forms of women’s activism to national liberation movements. She traces identity to a number of factors, including religion and nationalism. Bazir (1999) demonstrates a similar evolution of Moroccan women’s activism out of nationalist movements, and notes that this origin created gains for women, but at the expense of framing. She notes,

Feminists had to frame their activism as a secondary demand in the broader (masculine) political agendas; they also had to comply with parties’ priorities and ideologies. Finally, political affiliation created a dependence that limited and even condemned women’s groups to disappearance. Political affiliation was a restrictive venue yet a necessary strategy. It enabled women groups to be legitimized, but women’s issues were marginalized because independence was the priority.

Consequently, it is clear that women’s movements within the Middle East have a long history, but they have often been bound by nationalist expectations and unable to pursue their own agendas with autonomy.

Movements grounded in nationalism or Islam may seem at odds with feminist constructions of identity and traditional notions of progressive activism, but Jacoby makes the point that women in the Middle East have been expressing a political identity for decades, albeit in ways that may look very different from Western feminist understandings. This is because in the Middle East, Western visions of freedom are often constructed in ways that can be directly threatening to respected traditional values. Consequently, many women’s rights activists have framed their goals and identity as separate from feminism but grounded in respect for traditional “indigenous” cultural values such as family (Jacoby 1999). Additionally, working with Islamist groups enabled women’s movements to break free from state-restrictions on activism that might challenge traditional values. With such restrictions in place, few women felt an incentive to participate. Thus, while working within the Islamist framework also limited the autonomy of women’s movements and led to framing that placed “feminism” within a culturally acceptable traditional framework, it did enable activism (Bazir 2013).

Similar trends are present within the women’s movement in Iran. These movements evolved out of reformist attempts to gauge and refine Islam’s political role within Iranian society. Often in the Middle East, “feminism” becomes associated with “sexual liberation,” which is frequently incompatible with cultural and religious values. While the internet allowed discussion of “taboo” topics to proceed via anonymous discourse, the public aspect of social movement discourse via the internet excluded such frames. Thus, frames within women’s movements in the Middle East often emphasized the value that the Qur’an places on women within society and attempted to create change through such progressive interpretations of Islam. In fact, research has demonstrated that in Iran today two groups that are the savviest about using new media to further political activism are the women’s movement and the reformist clerics. Rahimi and Gheytanchi (2008) study the development of activism within these two movements over time and assert that the long-standing goal of the women’s rights movement in Iran has been political equality, particularly in terms of labor rights and legal protections. They emphasized coalition-building with students and political and religious reformers and most of their early efforts centered on circumventing state restrictions on activism and attracting external support for their platform.

What changed in this case were not the frames, but the method of delivery. The Iranian women’s movement was consistent over time in its message of deserving equal treatment in public life. The frames stressed evidence of the economic and social importance of women in society, thereby creating basic rights to “social justice” and “equality.” The movement grew stronger in the 2000s with the Green Revolution and contested election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In taking on a conservative state, the movement combined non-violent resistance, grassroots efforts, and mobilization of broad groups to directly challenge the power structure. However, it summed up and disseminated its demands via petitions and the internet. It even emphasized the long-standing, consistent nature of its goals by titling this document the “100-year-old demands.” These demands listed very clear, concise demands for basic legal rights and equal treatment in areas like the justice system, marriage, and the workplace. The internet did not change the movement’s message, but it did bring together different narratives and goals under one movement and reach a broader, younger audience (Rahimi and Gheytanchi 2008).

While women have been critical members of past movements within the Middle East, this region has seen a marked change in participation due to opportunities provided by new media. In 2011, a Dubai School of Government survey found that the percentage of female users of Facebook in the Arab world had increased from 32% to 33.5% in just the first three months of the year. This increase in female users accompanies a corresponding decline in male usage, suggesting that it is women who have been turning increasingly to new media tools in the region (Watson 2011).

Activists in Iran have credited new media tools with the ability to enter into discourse about issues that are confined to the “private sphere” due to moral taboos, such as violence against women. Female activists who have agreed to tell stories online about their experiences with violence are not only increasing awareness, but also changing the norms surrounding the topic. In order for a political opening to ever occur, agenda-setting is necessary. Women who film and publicize their stories are contributing to that agenda-setting by utilizing the frame of “challenging the private sphere.” This is one of the more radical frame changes seen through new media in a society where social movement activism generally disseminates traditional messages. In reference to a woman who detailed her arrest and treatment by the Iranian government following the 2008 elections, it was asserted that

The student is part of a younger generation of women who are more willing to challenge traditional attitudes about their position in society, says journalist and women's rights activist Parvin Ardalan. "Rape is something that is very difficult to talk about because of the attitude that exists, not only in Iran, that victims are to blame for what happens to them," she says. "But attitudes are slowly changing and women are starting to talk more. By going in front of a camera [the student] has challenged traditional thinking that if something happens to you, then you don't say anything (Tomlin 2011).

The effects of this type of activism and the use of new media tools are not going to create an immediate change in Iranian policy. Policies and societal norms are too entrenched for a dramatic shift to occur. Nevertheless, the ability for women (and often men) to have these discussions is necessary to mobilize societal support for greater protection of women. This movement toward publicizing the private is a key frame seen in new media activism.

By opening up alternative avenues for engagement, new media not only enables a challenge to gender roles and norms, but also offers opportunities for directly challenging repressive laws and exclusion of women from aspects of the public sphere. Particularly where traditional outlets of expression are restricted by social, religious, and legal norms, women are searching for new outlets for expression. In countries like Saudi Arabia where women make up half of university graduates but fewer than 20% of women are employed, new media tools provide a way to contest the conservative, repressive cultural norms outside of the public sphere (Watson 2011). This is particularly important in a place where change means influencing government policy while also working to demonstrate on a cultural level why social norms need fundamental revision. During the Arab Spring, we saw these discussions occurring, as Bazir (2013) notes, “Indeed, social media challenged gender divisions. The internet took power away from the patriarchal powers; it opened a new space for meetings, sharing, and learning.” During the Egyptian protests in Tahrir Square, women engaged in activism faced even greater threats than their male counterparts due to cultural norms that discourage women from participating in public action and the violence perpetrated against women in large crowds. Female activists who used websites to publicize their intention to protest and challenge men to join them placed themselves in danger by participating in public demonstrations (Castells 2012). New media activism has been used to lessen this problem. Thus, in Egypt social media created a context in which frames of women’s movement were not molded to fit a specific set of cultural expectations of gender, but rather involved creating a narrative that confronted traditional expectations about women’s place in politics and public life.

In Saudi Arabia women have used the internet to create campaigns that mobilize criticism of discriminatory state laws and entrenched social constructs about gender (Black 2013). In 2011, in response to restrictions on female behavior in Saudi Arabia, including a ban on driving, many women took part in the #Women2Drive campaign, in which they uploaded videos or pictures of themselves driving to Twitter. This campaign, while launched by a small group of women, gained international attention and the support of political figures such as Hillary Clinton (Watson 2011). The use of new media allowed for the presentation of interesting movement frames in two ways. First, it represented a clear modern challenge of antiquated social rules, which is highlighted both by the act of protest itself and the use of modern media to disseminate that message. Second, it is a radical protest that is achieved through a mundane act. The use of new media means that the scope of this protest is much grander. While simply seeing a woman driving in Saudi Arabia would be a provocative moment, it becomes far more provocative when shown to a global audience. It forces a Western audience to confront the notion that something as simple as driving is an exclusive privilege that is still denied to women. That makes the campaign simple but also radical, and the message would not be possible without new media. Additionally, the use of tools such as Facebook and Twitter allowed these women to take bold action against the government in an indirect way that did not require them to stand up directly against government to challenge the law. In the words of one Saudi columnist, “Twitter helps us breathe” (Black 2013).

***Anti-Rape Movement in India***

As in the Middle East, women’s rights activism has a significant history within India, and early activism was linked to pre-independence nationalist movements within India. However, unlike the Middle East, demands for women’s rights were not secondary or incidental to the nationalist cause; instead, they were placed front and center as a part of the challenge to British rule (Wilson 2013). Another difference is in the earlier evolution of autonomous women’s movements that were organized around a variety of cultural, political, and economic issues and inclusive of different ideologies. This led to a broader, less focused “women’s movement” that incorporates an ever-changing number of groups (Moase 2008; Bagri 2013). The inclusion within the women’s movement in India has obvious advantages; unfortunately, it also produces a splintering of focus and lack of a unified internal movement identity or clear externalization of demands in society. As in the Middle East, certain conservative cultural norms, patriarchal structures, and gender expectations still permeate Indian society, creating some critical obstacles for activists. Nevertheless, the formal democratic structure of the Indian government provides some advantages over the Middle East which makes activism a less dangerous prospect for Indian women’s organizations. Thus, open political activism, while always challenging, is still an available alternative for these groups in India. The question becomes how organizations can make their activism more effective in this context.

One of the key elements that can create a greater opening in the political opportunity structure is a focusing event, such as a crisis, change in government policy, or accident (Meyer and Staggenson 1996, 1638). Although social movements may be able to create focusing events, their more important roles are recognizing, publicizing, seizing, and controlling the narrative surrounding such events. This requires the use of media, and when there are more media tools available, there are more avenues by which to emphasize and frame such focusing events. A tragic example of such an event is the case of the gang rape of 23- year-old Jyoti Singh Pandey in South Delhi in December 2012. The case garnered significant outrage in the region and spawned a protest movement that spread across the country and ultimately throughout Southeast Asia. What started as a march of hundreds became a series of marches of thousands, in spite of the forceful violent response of the Indian security forces to attempt to disperse protesters (Timmons, Harris, and Mandhana 2012). Protests diffused through the region into Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan as well. Cases of violence against women were brought forward in several of these countries, inspired by the mass protests in India.

The women’s movement within India has often been galvanized by focusing events such as cases of rape or dowry deaths. While these cases have brought periodic attention over the years, it has been suggested that India’s rapid economic growth has brought more “immediate” demands for social change to keep pace with the economic modernization (Bagri 2013). Thus, this focusing event was not like all others. Not only was the scope of protests much greater, but the mobilizing messages accompanying activism changed as well. First, there has been a concerted attempt to broaden the target audience and bring together non-traditional women’s movement supporters such as women from different economic classes and even men. Incorporating men was relatively rare in previous women’s rights protests in India but is consistent with the shift toward emphasizing inclusion and broadening collective identify that was discussed earlier in the paper. Activists within the movement came to believe that achieving change meant directly attempting to change male perceptions and responses to issues of violence against women (Bagri 2013). Second, part of the surprise at the scope of the protests was wrapped up in the traditional cultural response to issues of violence against women and the opening of discussion about an issue that is typically off-limits in the patriarchal culture of the region. As in Iran, such discourse—usually confined to the private sphere—was explicitly made public, through demonstrations, government discussion, and via the media. This has shed more light on the vast problems of harassment faced by women in the region, the lack of formal government responses and accountability in the justice system, and the need for institutional reform (Burke 2013). According to Amartya Sen, the scope of these protests was due to the fact that “the insecurity of women, including their vulnerability to rape and abuse, became overnight a national issue in a way it had never been” (Sen, 2013). This highlighting of fear and insecurity would be persistent ideas within this movement.

This publicizing of the private was accomplished through an explicit message frame of “freedom without fear.” Kavita Krishnan of the All-India Progressive Women’s Association, one of main activists promoting this frame described it as “challenging the culture of victim-blaming, and seeking accountability from the State towards women’s freedom and autonomy” (Krishnan, 2013). Krishnan was at the center of a video of a street speech in which she explicitly rejected the state’s plan to “protect” women and help them to avoid becoming victims. This idea has taken hold with younger generations of activists who believe that the focus should be on changing fundamentally flawed social structures such as patriarchal norms that shield those who commit such crimes, rather than focusing on modifying the “behavior” of victims (Krishnan, 2013). The video went viral and helped bring together activists who wanted more than a resolution to this single case; who sought instead a direct confrontation with the accepted societal notion that violence against women could be addressed if women dressed differently and behaved more cautiously in public spaces. For these activists, “protection” simply prevented the state from tackling the deeper issues and creating a society in which women are able to be present in public spaces without fear (Krishnan, 2013). The ideas of this movement, expressed in slogans, have spread across parts of India through the aid of new media. The primary frame of the movement was subsequently used to create a new organizational structure for activists pushing for attention to violence against women: the Freedom From Fear Platform (Wilson 2013).

It is undoubtable that without traditional activism this focusing event would not have created an opening in the political opportunity structure. Nevertheless, new media did four important things for the anti-rape movement. First, it heightened awareness of the December 2012 rape case and those that occurred shortly after. This expanded the scope of knowledge about the case from India to the regional level and ultimately to the international level. According to Sen (2008), traditional media has long failed to report on such issues. In his words,

One of the positive consequences of the agitation following the barbaric incident of December 16 has been to draw attention both to the prevalence of sexual brutality and rape in India, and to the failure of the media to report on it seriously, thereby limiting public discussion and the likelihood of social change. Even though Indians buy more newspapers every day than any other nation, the reporting of sexual assaults and sexual harassment had been quite rare in the widely circulated papers. It is, therefore, impressive and encouraging that newspapers in India, smarting from intense criticism of the negligence in their coverage, rapidly reinvented themselves as rape-reporting journals, and many of them have been devoting several pages every day to reports of rapes gathered together from all the different parts of India.

A benefit of new media is that “providing activist-created media content gives them journalistic control over the message, and a way to quickly diffuse their chosen frame to millions of users” (Edwards 2004, 97). Without the scope of new media attention to protests and the spread of a common movement slogan it is unlikely that there would have been this expansion in traditional media attention and subsequent governmental focus, as rape was a prevalent problem in India before 2010. Second, new media helped spread information about the victims of rape in India and helped to build an emotional connection to the victims. Drawing on emotions is a key element in persuasion, and building emotion is easier when movements can teach the public about the victims, show pictures, and make them into real people rather than statistics (Brysk 2013, 37). Third, an additional symbolic impact was created directly by the use of social media. Protests on the ground were supported by an online movement on Facebook and WhatsApp in which individuals expressed support for the movement by replacing their profile picture with a black dot, reminiscent of an earlier movement in favor of same-sex marriage using the red equal sign symbol on social media (Losh 2013). This symbol brought immediate recognition of the cause and allowed it to gain momentum internationally. Fourth, the creative protests that were inspired by online activists and organized via social media allowed the movement to become multi-dimensional and bring in various audiences, which is essential to movement success and longevity.

The movement has managed to sustain momentum and mobilize around new cases of rape. A number of Indian women’s rights organizations and anti-caste discrimination organizations came together in June 2014 to protest outside of the Indian High Commission and pressure the state to provide more protection for women across castes (DNA India 2014). The tragic situation and the protests that followed did result in several notable institutional changes. After a government assessment of Indian institutions, several laws were changed and the judicial system was reformed to fast-track cases of rape. Many within the country have expressed doubt that meaningful change is on the immediate horizon due to entrenched governance flaws and traditional norms that undermine attention to demands for protection of women (Burke 2013; *BBC News* 2013). Legal change may be necessary, but for many the more difficult—and important—achievement will be changing the patriarchal culture that is the foundation of the institutions (Patel 2014). Although cultural and legal change is slow, the Indian anti-rape movement can be considered a success due to the changing discussions and normative shifts it is inspiring, along with the institutional and legal changes that have begun. Just as it led to small successes in India, new media is helping movements to achieve change elsewhere in the region. A growing movement in Indonesia has credited the Indian anti-rape movement as an inspiration for its efforts and a contributor to its success, which illustrates how today’s movements can diffuse their influence (Karmini 2013).

**New Media, Framing, and Effects**

One of the earliest works on political opportunity structures by Kitschelt (1986) maintained that differences in movement effectiveness can be traced to differences in the context in which they operate. It posits that movements respond to a specific set of structural conditions which either facilitate or inhibit their growth. The political structure can provide opportunities, or “openings” for movements when there is positive momentum surrounding that movement. In the words of Shawki (2010, 384),

The POS encompasses a range of structural features of political systems that can make them more or less insulated from civil society and more or less open to the demands of social movements. These features include the degree of centralization of the political system, the nature of the electoral system, the position of political parties, international alliances, and the degree of state repression within a country. In addition, the configuration of actors, a term that encompasses allies, adversaries, countermovements, and the larger public, can shape the structure of political opportunities in ways that facilitate or constrain social movement mobilization and success.

Meyer and Staggenberg (1996, 1633) argue that political opportunity structures may be perceived as “static” or “dynamic.” The emergence and success of movements can be affected by stable institutional rules and structures, or momentum can be created by dynamic processes such as a focusing event such as a crisis, a change in public opinion, an example or precedent set by another movement, a shift in societal norms, or a new set of laws or policies.

This study argues that one of the most important ways that new media is affecting the success of women’s movements is by helping to create these openings. While it is clear that new media helps to raise awareness, a considerable mark of success, the goals of women’s rights movements outlined previously include efforts to influence both society and government. Online petitions frequently illustrate how new media can help to create new societal discussions and mobilize pressure by framing causes in both instrumental and moral terms. The strategic nature of frame choices is promoted through earlier work by Gamson (2004) and Polletta (2006). Sometimes the target of that change is not a governmental actor, but rather a corporation. Consequently, utilizing shaming tactics that are connected to consumer pressures can be an effective method of achieving demands. New media broadens the scope of such campaigns. According to the Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change, a 2013 Change.org petition with 220,000 signatures encouraged Facebook to “remove pictures, groups and videos that promote rape, violence and sexism against women.” This was accompanied by a Twitter movement to pressure advertisers on such pages to remove their ads, thereby making the pages financially worthless to Facebook. This campaign, organized by forty women’s groups and individuals in the United States and United Kingdom has had some success by both convincing Facebook of the need to address content issues and forcing corporations to revisit their advertising policies (Kleinman 2013). This is a prime example of what new media can do.

Government policy changes slowly and a number of factors go into these shifts in policy. Issues of causality and incrementalism make attribution of successful policy change to new media tools difficult. Nevertheless, in addition to legal changes seen in cases like India, we can find individual cases of successful advocacy for women’s rights that have been facilitated by new media. In China, an American woman, Kim Lee, took to social media to publicize her fight for a divorce on the grounds of domestic abuse at the hands of her famous husband. She both drew attention to her personal situation and used social media to challenge the elite-dominated, patriarchal system of justice within the country. After her case received widespread attention online via Sina Weibo—a Twitter-like service—Lee became the first woman in China to gain a protective order against her husband. The influence of social media is particularly interesting in this case given China’s restrictions on internet traffic. Lee’s case was viewed as a breakthrough moment in starting a conversation about domestic violence in China (McDonough 2013).

Dalton and van Sickle’s (2005) empirical investigation of social movement behavior finds that protest has become “normalized” in advanced industrialized democracies. This is due in part to the fact that these contexts have greater economic resources and greater civil society resources, which gives them a greater foundation for success. However, the most recent wave of protest behavior seen since 2011 involves developing nations. From India to Egypt to Saudi Arabia, activism in support of women’s rights has popped up in numerous non-advanced industrialized democracies. As new media access has expanded in these regions, women’s rights movements have found tools that are harder for the government to control or obstruct (UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights). A European Parliament study of women’s use of new media to enhance political participation concluded that women face specific barriers to traditional political participation. Such barriers include “the prevalence of the ‘masculine model’ of political life and of elected government bodies, women’s relative lack of material resources to support their move into politics; women’s additional work burden which denies them the time necessary to engage in politics and cultural values which enshrine male behaviours and norms in political cultures” (European Parliament 2013, 13). Circumventing traditional institutional and cultural obstacles to women’s participation in the political sphere is facilitated by new media tools and the progressive, challenging frames that activists are able to disseminate using online forums.

Traditional activism commonly attempts to appropriate public spaces for demonstration. This reclaiming of public space is a way for movements to create a tangible mark on society while challenging traditional structures of power. Although differing in scope, a similar process of claiming space occurs online. By using new media, activists not only attempt to “leave their mark” online and gain publicity, but they are also able to create new spaces for the proliferation of discourse and debate. Violence against women is a problem that thrives in darkness; societies that fail to engage this issue are doomed to see it perpetuated. It can be challenging for women to discuss experiences of abuse in any situation. Nevertheless, in patriarchal societies, it can be incredibly dangerous to take public stands against this issue (Tomlin 2011; Black 2013). Thus, as in the China case above, new media forums can be particularly important in repressive societies which do not provide open outlets for women to seek help or engage in productive discourse about efforts to enhance the position of women in society.

**Conclusion**

New media provides another resource for a movement’s tool kit as it allows activists to draw attention to a cause, control and diffuse a favorable movement narrative to a broader, more diverse audience, and open up new spaces in society for participation in a movement. All of these effects are present within the Middle East and India case studies previously presented.

New media provides innovative ways to represent a movement’s narrative and promote messages that would be more difficult to articulate through traditional public activism. It also enables creativity and larger, broader audience reach. This shift in audience and corresponding support changes the political opportunity structure available to social movements. It also creates opportunities for the increased use of symbolism within social movements. Whether through the use of celebrity voices, literal symbols like the black dot in India, or social media support pages, there are far more options for making citizens aware of repressive conditions and instilling a sense of collective responsibility for promoting change. For example, Facebook has been a common source of raising collective feelings of support through tribute pages to victims. This was seen in the “We are all Khaled Said” page that galvanized protests in Egypt during the Arab Spring, and it has been common in the women’s movements as well. In addition to the aforementioned viral video of the death of Iranian Neda Soltan, similar online attention has been created through the symbolic cases of Jyoti Singh in India and Amina Filali, a 16 year old woman who committed suicide following her forced marriage to her rapist (Bazir 2013). These cases bring a specific, non-abstract face to a movement are place women’s issues more squarely on the public agenda. By creating frames of universalism surrounding these victims (“I am...,” “We are all…”) a sense of unity of cause is created, as is a sense that the crimes experienced by these individuals could be felt by anyone- mothers, sisters, daughters. This is not a new frame within social movement activism, but it is strongly facilitated by Facebook and Twitter sites that are filled with images of victims, videos from YouTube and other sites, and an online sphere that can keep cases on the global radar for a longer period of time than on the street activism can allow.

When success is defined as policy change, new frames and new media alone cannot alter the opportunity structure. Nevertheless, shifts in frames facilitated by new media do alter the equation for movement success. The anti-rape movement in India demonstrates that new media can aid in mobilizing a broader group of supporters around a common, collective message of societal responsibility to change the scale of protest activities. Such large-scale protests and persistent pressure helped to change the calculus of behavior of the Indian government, prompting it to make policy changes. If policymakers recognize that a societal transformation is taking place and new norms are emerging, that may also produce changes to the political opportunity structure.

Several cases demonstrated that when social movement success is defined as educating society and challenging cultural expectations surrounding public gender roles and legal rights and protections for women, new media can be a critical variable in success. Consequently, new media can directly affect societal conditions and indirectly affect political decision-making. Brysk (2013, 15) asserts, “We come to care across borders as we construct common visions of our shared humanity, common fate, and social purpose.” It is in these long-term socialization efforts where new media is likely to have the most significant effect in helping women’s rights movements to achieve change.

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