

Hashtag Feminism and Twitter Activism in India
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Abstract

The use of Twitter by activists protesting violence against women, particularly sexual violence, is complicated by the fact that microblogging services use hashtags to identify relevant content to their audiences. Activist communities congregate around these particular keywords, and archives that map the history and morphology of controversies in public discourse online depend on shared terminology in the metadata. It is noteworthy that trending topics are particularly likely to reference proper names. After a prominent fatal sexual attack in India, the mobilization of activists through online organizing progressed through several stages, and some users privileged #delhirapecase or delhigangrape – which protected the private identity of the victim – while others made her into a public martyr by using her proper #jyotisinghpandey. Many also used a series of pseudonyms, such as #damini or #amanat. This study focuses on the informational labor of two specific activist groups in India - - Breakthrough and Blank Noise -- and how careful hashtag use reflected their policy decisions and deliberative activities about metadata management, which is becoming an increasingly important aspect of transformative social movements that bring citizens out into the streets.

The use of Twitter by activists protesting the structural oppression of women is complicated by the fact that microblogging services depend on using hashtags to identify relevant content easily for their potential audiences. Online communities form and congregate around particularly charged keywords, and often political conversations appear to be energized by this access to a shared lexicon. Although “hashtag feminism” often tags content with particular slogans, such as #yesallwomen, it is noteworthy that trending topics on Twitter are also likely to reference proper names and thus to tether the language of social movements to stable and specific informational tags. Such proper name hashtags may identify geographical locations that can serve as sites of gathering, or they may name specific individuals who are commemorated as victims of violence. Unfortunately, this desire to name the victim with a hashtag can be problematic if the consciousness-raising effort involves awareness campaigns about rape or sexual assault, as in the case of 2012 Delhi gang rape case. Legal, medical, and journalistic norms had contributed to persistently high statistics of unreported and unprosecuted gang rape in India, and until 2008 coverage of rape cases in the news media in the country was forbidden, even if identifying information about the victim was not released. Twitter offered a new channel to publicize rape as a widespread human rights abuse, but it also challenged norms about privacy for victims by using identifying hashtags.

A hashtag, as Wikipedia explains, is “a word or an unspaced phrase prefixed with the

hash character, #, to form a label,” which is “a type of metadata tag” that “allows grouping of similarly tagged messages, and also allows an electronic search to return all messages that contain it.” Examining the unique rhetorical and indexical strategies associated with establishing resistance and solidarity in short-form online communication with hashtags raises a number of important research questions about new discourse practices within social movements. How can we understand the informational labor of activists who choose particular hashtags, educate the public in how to use them appropriately, steer participants in social movements toward particular naming conventions, and coordinate their informational labor with others? Furthermore, how does this informational labor of managing a bank of potential search terms relate to other more traditional forms of labor associated with social movements, such as face-to-face recruitment, telephone banking, speaking at consciousness raising events, or planning media campaigns? This essay looks at two specific human rights organizations – one based in Bangalore and one in Delhi – that used hashtags in a variety of ways to orient participants who were outraged about a horrific gang rape case in which a 23-year-old physiotherapy student was mortally wounded during a grotesque sexual assault. These activists’ work generating, deploying, and curating hashtags was also critical in promoting other feminist causes, such as ending domestic violence, street harassment, gender segregation on transportation, and the early marriage of girls.

Twitter may influence political discourse (Parmelee and Bichard) and encourage users to occupy public space (Gerbaudo), but it is important not to overstate the influence of one software company alone. Even though many U.S. news outlets – especially CNN – have attributed a disproportionate influence to Twitter when covering mass demonstrations in recent years, the utopian narrative that access to distributed communication networks combined with the globalization of new U.S. products for short-form user-friendly mobile communication is inherently liberating for the citizens of the Global South is obviously far too simplistic an explanation for how digital behavior influences social movements and vice versa. In response, a chorus of Internet critics have questioned naïve ideas about Twitter activism. Henry Jenkins and his collaborators have ridiculed technological determinism by asking if anyone would assert that “the telephone was the essence of the civil rights movement.” Malcolm Gladwell – citing Evgeny Morozov – has asserted that “the revolution will not be tweeted” because participants need to have “skin in the game” as embodied actors willing to assume risk rather than participate indirectly from a distance. Siva Vaidhyanathan has questioned the universalizing missionary mentality of Silicon Valley and how Internet-based businesses may actually constrain knowledge with personalization that masks how new solutions create new problems. Teju Cole has argued that easy to “like” digital media campaigns perpetuate “the white savior industrial complex.” Geert Lovink has insisted that would-be activist networks generally fail to operate with any purposive action, because the interests of corporate entities and reactionary nation-states generally align to empty Internet discourse of any meaning.

Working across multiple national political contexts, some critics still cherish the model of collective intelligence. Clay Shirky’s analysis of the candlelight protests in Korea, the pink chaddi campaign in India, and the use of Ushahidi during election violence in Kenya imagines that technology allows us to tap the resources of a “cognitive surplus.” Similarly, Manuel Castells’ depiction of activist interventions by Occupy Wall Street, the Indignadas in Spain, and social movements in the Arab Spring suggests that the energy of online networks can be harnessed, even while acknowledging the role of embodied interactions and infrastructural engagements in urban geographies in bringing people to the streets. Those who congregated in Delhi to express outrage about the prevalence of gender-based violence in the country, widespread failures by police and other authorities in reporting and prosecuting crimes against women, and poor public safety records more generally could be seen confirming the existence of patterns of mass protests by digitally empowered populaces that Shirky and Castells identify. Of course, it is important to acknowledge that the technologies that matter in the Delhi story of political mobilization are not just those of telecommunication. Anger about the failing transportation infrastructure that left citizens dependent upon itinerant autorickshaws and private buses – as the Delhi victim and her companion were – also galvanized activists, and access to public metro lines and large stations at the intersections of multiple transit trajectories facilitated large-scale protests at India Gate and at the city’s police headquarters.

I would argue that what it means to be “there” – subject to arrest or torture or execution – or to identify or show solidarity with those who are protesting “live” is complicated by new forms of digital participation in which “the metadata is the message.” The relationship between transnational digital communication networks and massive civic participation is remarkably complex. As users hack, share, remix, tag, map, visualize, and curate particular political memes, they rarely behave like disinterested citizen journalists or adopt an idealized hacker ethic of democratic inclusion. The Delhi gang rape case brought tens of thousands of protesters into the streets of the city, including many female college students and other young educated women who hoped to share their experiences and find safety in numbers despite the whips and firehoses of police, but this unified front was actually composed of a number of splinter groups that were often engaged in more intimate consciousness raising activities. The online conversation about political resistance encompassed even more diversity, although the demographic characteristics of Twitter users tended to skew toward the opinions of youthful tech-savvy participants and to reflect the views of elites in education, caste, and class.

After the Delhi rape case was first reported, activists adopted several approaches to nomenclature to mobilize and energize participants. Some activists tagged content with generic subject matter headings, which functioned much like common search terms, as in the case of the #delhirapecase or #delhigangrape hashtags. Many also followed the lead of newspapers and television channels in using pseudonyms to name the victim without naming her. In an environment of competition for an original scoop, pseudonyms proliferated such as #Amanat, the Urdu word for “treasure,” or #Damini, which means “lightning”, or #Nirbhaya, “the fearless one.” To participate in a common cultural

conversation, some Twitter users deployed all three hashtags in one tweet, sacrificing valuable ASCII characters in the name of comprehension.

Not all commentators joined the rush for naming the victim, even when done so discreetly with a pseudonym, despite its obvious value for an informational politics of collective action. As Aryana Banerjee wrote, “should she become a Google search” rather than a person with her own identity? In contrast, the survivor of the Suryanelli rape case lamented that “no one ever gave me a name like Nirbhaya or Amanat . . . **I will never be the nation’s pride or the face of women wronged.**” Like #braveheart, #Jagruti or “awareness” also became a hashtag, but because these proper names also correspond to the titles of popular films, these metadata schemes invited confusion, as movie fans shared hash tags with activists pursuing very different agendas. Furthermore, as Nishant Shah asserts, access to digitally networked social media services such as Twitter may also lead to cybervigilanteism. Many Twitter users did express violent ideation about what the perpetrators deserved. Hashtags such as #inhumanbastards or #death4rape indicated how rage and desire for retribution may have also been an important part of online discourse at the time.

The global women’s rights movement has done much to ensure that the identities of victims of sexual assault be kept confidential and that names of those accusing perpetrators of rape are not published. However, prioritizing guarding female reputation might do little to dissuade criminal behavior or to change to gendered power relations. After the father of the victim came forward to name his daughter publicly, some news outlets still avoided publishing her name. In contrast, there was little hesitation on the part of many Twitter users who embraced the #jyotisinghpandey hashtag in their postings. Much as the violent death of Neda Agha-Soltan during a 2009 anti-government Iranian protest led to many adopting the #Neda hashtag, tweets around Pandey’s martyrdom for ending sexual violence such as #shinejyoti or #justiceforjyoti soon proliferated. Twitter users even adopted the murdered woman’s identity in their user IDs in order to publicize the cause, although it was much more common for sympathizers to adopt a minimalist black circle on a white background as an avatar in online social networks. The accompanying text encouraged others to do likewise: “Make this picture as your profile picture showing your protest against rape cases. This black dot is a mark of collective shame that the society faces today; it marks our collective mourning at the loss of humanity.”

At the same time, activist NGOs were concerned about connecting these ephemeral gestures of online solidarity, which were often generated and adopted temporarily by what Howard Rheingold has called “smart mobs” without clear leadership structure, to long-term engagement with more sustained civil society agendas that required substantive commitments of labor. A hashtag could register a momentary trend, but it could also archive a longer history of discussion. In an article in *First Monday* on “Making big data, in theory,” anthropologist Tom Boellstorff discusses how metadata functions in relation to other cultural imaginaries about data with the famed analytic triangle of Claude Lévi-

Strauss to argue that an exclusive focus on data that has been processed from “raw” to processed or “cooked” misses the possibility that data may also be “rotted.” Using Boellstorff’s appropriation of Lévi-Strauss as a starting point, it is reasonable to attend to how the preservation, transformation, and treatment of data can be understood as a process that involves procedures, rituals, negotiations, reciprocity, divisions of tasks, systems of oppression, and a politics of labor and credit, much like the preparation of a literal meal in which the transubstantiation of raw ingredients in the process is much more than a simple chemical process, because it is deeply embedded in multiple social and cultural practices that are imbued with meaning. In *Virtualpolitik*, I point out that there is manual labor marked by gender, race, and class invariably involved in the supposedly abstracted work of generating metadata and that it is work that is difficult to automate; in this article I want to pay tribute to the other forms of invisible and immaterial labor behind the reproduction of metadata, including the affective labor invested in political causes.

The NGO Breakthrough describes itself as “a global human rights organization that uses the power of media, pop culture and community mobilization to inspire people to take action to ensure dignity, equality and justice.” As Radhika Takru, the manager of social media in India, explained in an interview, to respond to the Delhi Rape Case, Breakthrough adapted elements from an earlier social media campaign about taking action to prevent violence against women: Ring the Bell or Bell Bajao in Hindi. The Ring the Bell initiative originated in 2008 with an emphasis on taking action to interrupt domestic abuse by having neighbors ring the doorbell on the theory that the inaction of bystanders perpetuates cycles of violence. In 2012, after the death of Pandey, Breakthrough launched Ring The Bell: One million men, one million promises – a call to men and boys around the world to make tangible promises to promote women’s safety, such as “if a woman is waiting for an auto at night, I will help get her one.” Twitter served as a venue for circulating some of the men’s promises. However, it is important to note that relatively few Indians subscribed to Twitter, so it often reflected the biases of the bourgeois concerns of those climbing corporate ladders or clamoring for consumer culture, and male participants sometimes needed direction to avoid reinscribing patriarchal protections. The recent elections that have brought the BJP to power may demonstrate that the wired middle classes may still be averse to progressive politics. As Sayaan Chattopadhyay observes in his work on the earlier Pink Chaddi campaign, Hindutva conservatives exclude women from the public sphere if they do not perform in their proscribed roles as “ideal mothers, chaste wives, and compliant daughters” (66). In recent years advocates for reactionary policies have embraced the same channels as feminist activists, which can pose challenges for the information workers at Breakthrough.

Such managing of online messaging involves many kinds of invisible labor in tending the social interchanges facilitated by Internet access and in instructing users in naming conventions. Breakthrough staff must deter counterproductive trolls advocating “men’s rights” and trying to derail meaningful conversation, distance themselves from revenge-

oriented advocates for the death penalty and thereby affirm their position in the global human rights community, and steer discussion toward applying the right metadata. Takru describes how she sometimes uses the @Bell_Bajao Twitter voice to retweet problematic statements in order to encourage her audience to “correct the message.” As another Breakthrough staffer, Shobha_SV notes “RTs are not always endorsements.” Because satire is such an important way to effect political change, Takru must also make decisions about when to use humor to address sober subjects. For example in her Tweeting identity, Takru has chosen to adopt a sarcastic tone sometimes in addressing irrational theories that rape can be discouraged if women wear stockings that simulate hairy legs or that rape is stimulated by the practice of eating chow mein. Breakthrough personnel are also well aware that sympathetic users may be less persistent than sexist Internet harassers. Those responding to momentary trends may only like, share, pledge, or sign in transitory expressions of solidarity if cyberspace seems to offer a respite from rape culture. Thus Takru has tried to facilitate long-term online engagement in many emotional keys.

Working with the Vodafone Foundation, Breakthrough is now attempting to tap into the popularity of “selfies,” a transnational Internet genre that documents networked mobile photography oriented around microcelebrity, quantifying the self, placemaking, and meeting the gaze of the consumer electronics apparatus. As part of a campaign in Rajasthan to urge female children to finish their educations, Breakthrough is promoting uploading selfies tagged with #Selfies4School as a way to coordinate urban awareness with rural enrollment and retention. Using a low barrier approach that initially seems to be devoid of any compulsion for charitable giving, the appeal promises that participants will receive inspiring “updates on how your selfie has changed lives.” Radhika Gajjala has argued that subaltern people must present certain kinds of public faces to those who digitally invest in their futures from elsewhere, but with #Selfies4School the faces presented are those of privilege.

However, aiming to achieve “trending” by coordinating a large-scale public data stream of conversations marked with similar metadata does have its hazards, particularly when @whyblocknow and others market softcore teen porn with the same #Selfies4School tag. Although Breakthrough’s oppositional stance to allowing the weddings of child brides might less clear with its #earlymarriage tag, which could seem just as likely to represent “pro” positions on early marriage as “con” ones to the uninitiated, the flow of #earlymarriage Tweets appears to be less subject to interruptions from other streams using the same tag.

Breakthrough also uses a variety of lower-tech solutions to reach people who are not like-minded urbanites. Phones in India tend not to be smart phones, which remain prohibitively expensive if the devices don’t use pirated technologies. Despite rapid modernization efforts, many inhabitants of the country remain illiterate, and thus they are less likely to be influenced by channels of text information. As she explained in an interview, Takru doesn’t expect rural villagers to “like our page” in sites without

electricity, connectivity, or other infrastructural basics, such as reliably clean water. To adapt to the constraints of serving these underserved populations, Breakthrough is using “video vans” with content that responds to the needs of particular linguistic and ethnic communities and live stagings of “theatre of the oppressed” scenarios that solicit audience participation and community deliberation about the appropriate course of action for treating the fictional women in the play with justice. In each community, as Takru explains, talented street theater performers put on “a lovely play without an ending” about “Chanda,” a girl who “has aspirations to study but has a father forcing her to get married.” The organization also has launched an adaptive mobile phone system for rural villagers that can function as a kind of oral online social network. Breakthrough has developed a cellphone menu that also allows participants to air grievances, listen to the thoughts of their fellow locals, enjoy folk music, and hear updates on hyperlocal events. The organization adopts a randomized control trial philosophy that tests combinations of all these approaches, which also includes youth training and mass media campaigns, and they also use a “360 degree methodology” to engage different audiences

Other feminist groups often face the challenge of curating the language around sexual violence to process keywords that mark euphemisms, diminutions, denials of responsibilities, and other distancing from accountability that can only be addressed ironically, as the online practices of the Bangalore-based activist group Blank Noise also indicate. For Blank Noise, the hashtag #Rejects not only marks this content with more metadata but also provides instructions for how to read the text rendered in quotation marks. Blank Noise is an expansive polymorphous research-based public art project founded by Jasmeen Patheja, which seeks to confront street harassment, commonly known in India by the euphemism of “eve teasing” with social media campaigns coupled with live events. As Patheja described the initiative in an interview, Blank Noise was devoted to “building testimonials, creating vocabulary, and creating a safe space for people to be able to talk about their experiences.”

It is notable that Blank Noise adopts vehicles for online communication that often depend on the barriers of so-called “walled gardens,” such as private Facebook groups or protected Tweet streams, to provide a safe space for audience participation. As in the case of Breakthrough, Blank Noise uses a variety of strategies for face-to-face activist interventions as well. According to Patheja, staging these offline opportunities for confrontation and cooperation are important because paternalism perpetuates “an environment of blame and warnings” in which “the onus of safety falls on women.” Blank Noise volunteers have been encouraged to adopt new identities as “Action Heroes” and to reclaim public space by allowing themselves to appear in public with an idle and relaxed affect. Sometimes demonstrators were differentiated with arrows to publicize the street action, and sometimes participants in flash mobs performed street actions without special demarcation. During Blank Noise events, “Action Heroes made eye contact, leaned by the railing, worked towards being unapologetic about their presence and purpose in city spaces.” In one of Patheja’s best known public performance pieces Blank noise volunteers sat at five tables for “Talk to Me” for a one hour conversation opposite a

stranger about anything but street harassment. Patheja uses the #ActionHero and #ActionHeroes tags to mark online participation in public discourse and the intention to actively counter sexist hostility with embodied rhetorical presence, although these particular tags are also deployed by a heterogeneous user base that ranges from marathoners to fans of costumed roleplaying.

Much like Breakthrough, Blank Noise encourages participants to use Twitter to make “safe city pledges” to “influence change in their own sphere,” according to an interview with Patheja. Pledges could be eloquently simple, such as “I pledge to walk alone at night.” Breakthrough and Blank Noise have also teamed up in joint Twitter campaigns, although this partnership also limits the length of messages in common, because of the use of dual hashtags that recognize the branding strategies of both campaigns, #safecity and #ringthebell. By making signboards with hand-lettered responses for their #safecity campaign, Blank Noise manifests an implicit resistance to machine readability by privileging the personal “character” of those attesting to the veracity of their statements. In their #ineveraskforit campaign – which makes Blank Noise’s feminist orientation clearer than the more ambiguous #eveteasing hashtag might – women append photographs of the clothing they were wearing when they felt victimized by street harassment. Many also donated their apparel as a striking form of display media, which has appeared on hangars in Patheja’s site-specific installations to spur public conversation. The neutrality and mundaneness of the garments shown to the public offers additional evidence of the fact that the women were not instigators of the abuse.

The climate of fear about the dangers facing women can constrain movement and perpetuate protectionist ideologies, which undermines universal design everywhere, even in the transportation infrastructure. Blank Noise has organized events in which women sit in the general compartment on different forms of transportation. (India is famous for its female-only train cars and bus sections.) In these actions, participants were encouraged to use the hashtag #segregationnosolution in their Tweets. Despite the unwieldy twenty-character hashtag, Breakthrough also joined this campaign and signaled others to use this metadata naming convention.

Both Blank Noise and Breakthrough perform important hashtag activist labor in retweeting content from feminist power users with large bases of followers such as @Kavita_Krishnan and @UN_Women. The new media ecologies of online social movements are often characterized by a mix of original content generated by specific grassroots activist groups – such as Breakthrough and Blank Noise – and reposted content from like-minded political celebrities or well-established organizations. Similarly, primary and secondary content-creation is often intertwined. In work with Sam Gregory about online human rights remix videos that are set to the tunes of popular songs, we argue that activists chronicling the Arab Spring in real time needed to perform critical forms of metadata labor on YouTube that validated the testimony of the mobile camera and certified attention to evidentiary tests. The curation of metadata that identifies persons, places, and things can make the case to journalistic and juridical

audiences that investigate and prosecute human rights abuses. The affective labor performed by other second order remixers pairing content with stirring music indexed by title or key terms like “amazing” and “shocking” is also critical metadata work that facilitates content being “spreadable” and “sticky.”

The management of the online reception of new information – such as evidence of fresh human rights abuses, breaking news about disingenuous statements by public figures, or announcements about planned protests – by assigning metadata in two approaches to Twitter feminism in India should indicate to readers the appropriate emotional register that one should be expected to feel. Despite having a very limited number of characters at their disposal, tone is often carefully modulated by women’s rights activists. Some of this labor is devoted to collective deliberations about strategies for messaging, and some of this labor is expended by individuals tasked with responding to conversation streams, often outside of conventional work hours. There is not always a clear demarcation between rational and emotional forms of informational labor. It is a fundamental mistake to give too much credit to corporate design teams and not enough to communities of practice, and participant-observers may present much more valid interpretations of the text, images, video, and links that they curate than the interlopers who harvest activist labor. These invisible forms of informational labor need to be included in discussions about the role of distributed networked technologies in social movements, and infomediaries need to be properly credited for their tacit knowledge and prodigious expertise.

Activists from Breakthrough and Blank Noise moderating the cultural conversation on Twitter about gendered bodies at risk steered people new to the conversation to the “right” naming conventions with hundreds of attentive nuanced responses that addressed both individuals and groups. Sometimes organizers used the backchannel of direct messaging to handle particularly vexed conversations and to limit the appearance of public conflict with the interests of potential members. In asking what feminism can learn from new media, Larisa Kingston Mann argues that a compulsion to digital visibility can be extremely counterproductive, even though “the mainstream press, policy and technology discussions about new media often appear to assume that publicity, visibility, connectedness, and access are de facto good things for those represented,” because “being visible or accessible to others is not necessarily liberating and that having the ability to say ‘no’ and deny others access to one’s image, words, or creative output can be a requirement for liberation” (293). At the same time, codes of silence may perpetuate patriarchal and authoritarian cultural expectations, and many activists use hashtags on social network platforms such as Twitter to make the taboo topics visible and part of the larger cultural conversation.

Dorothy Kim and Eunsong Kim urge academics and journalists to adopt a shared understanding of “Twitter ethics,” because too often the “emotional and intellectual labor of women of color is being casually appropriated/borrowed” by outsiders who present the content of others merely to bolster their analysis of Twitter and its impact on social

movements. Even if a Twitter researcher is a woman of color, as Tressie McMillan Cottom observes, the ethics of consent matter, as well as the ways that Twitter may “solidify an identity,” “constantly calibrate” its “group power,” and “unleash” this power “periodically to maintain its efficacy.” It is important for me to acknowledge as an author that activists at Breakthrough and Blank Noise expended labor in sharing information about their specific understandings of social epistemology during my research visit to their workplaces and in subsequent online conversations.

Although this essay may be written about the informational labor of specific activist communities from a very different identity position of sexual politics, national citizenship, and urban experience from the subjects who are interviewed, I would argue that the particular form of hashtag feminism practiced by Breakthrough and Blank Noise offers insight into the use of mobile computational media by social movements more generally and the growing role that managing metadata plays in sharing information about text, images, video, links, and user names with networked publics efficiently and effectively. Choosing, using, and appropriating online hashtags can require significant expenditures of labor. Lengthy periods of work and repetitive activities can be taxing, as can time-intensive design processes of iteration, reflection, deliberation, and discussion with other human rights knowledge workers to refine hashtag use. This investment of labor is not trivial, particularly when the number of characters in a message is so constrained and the number of competing Tweets so large.

Hashtags must be simultaneously short, unique, memorable, unambiguous in meaning, resistant to variant spellings, and descriptive as content labels. Yet all of the hashtags regularly used by Breakthrough and Blank Noise invariably fail at least one of these tests. The metadata schemes that these activists use by appending hashtags are necessarily imperfect and fluid, but workers from these two groups demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the discursive norms of their online communities and the logics of search that might bring others to the conversation.

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