

A new frontier in digital activism: An exploration of digital feminism in Fiji

Tait Brimacombe^{1,2}  | Romitesh Kant³ | Glenn Finau⁴ | Jope Tarai⁵ | Jason Titifanue⁵

¹Department of Anthropology and Development Studies, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, South Australia, Australia

²Developmental Leadership Program, University of Birmingham, UK

³Institute for Human Security and Social Change, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia

⁴School of Business, The University of New South, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

⁵School of Government, Development and International Affairs, The University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji

Correspondence

Tait Brimacombe, Department of Anthropology and Development Studies, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, South Australia, Australia and Developmental Leadership Program, University of Birmingham, UK.

Email: tait.brimacombe@adelaide.edu.au

Funding information

This research was made possible with funding from the Developmental Leadership Program

Abstract

Social media has become a crucial feature of the Pacific islands in the 21st century, providing people with the means to demand greater accountability and transparency and offering an alternative platform through which to engage in policy processes, dialogue, and debate. Increasing social media access and use has altered the existing media and communications landscape, with implications for mainstream media reporting, censorship, and citizen voice. This paper explores this phenomenon through an examination of the digital activism practices of a group of women's rights activists in Fiji. In doing so, this paper explores how social media is being used as an online platform for information dissemination and debate, as well as the implications this is having "offline" as part of efforts to influence policymaking.

KEYWORDS

feminism, Fiji, online activism, social media, women's rights

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2018 The Authors. *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies* published by John Wiley & Sons Australia, Ltd and Crawford School of Public Policy at The Australian National University.

1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the increasing prevalence of social media throughout Fiji and the implications of this for activist practices both online and offline. In particular, this paper examines the experiences of young women's rights activists and their use of social media platforms for online activism, a practice which is facilitating greater opportunity for voice, participation, and policy influence. These practices are particularly significant in the context of Fiji's "technological revolution" and the implications of these new communication platforms within the context of Fiji's existing media landscape, and comparatively limited opportunities for dissent and dialogue through more traditional media and information channels. In this paper, it is suggested that social media enables activists to exert pressure on policymakers from the "bottom up" via the generation of public outcry and mobilization of broader support for campaigns, as well as from the "top down" through the generation of international media attention, and subsequently national media coverage, access to which is otherwise heavily constrained.

2 | METHODOLOGY

This paper presents findings from research funded by the Developmental Leadership Program and conducted by researchers at La Trobe University and the University of the South Pacific. Data for this paper were collected through four focus groups with young women aged 18–35 years who are actively engaged in the women's rights space in Suva, Fiji. These participants were selected through purposive sampling through known organizations and networks in the women's rights movement. Participants had a history of engagement with the Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM) through their affiliation with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the FWRM or FemLINK Pacific, or through their status as Emerging Leaders Forum Alumni, having previously participated in the year-long Emerging Leaders Forum training programme for young women. The range of participants was further expanded through snowball sampling as participants circulated information about the project through their close personal and professional networks.

A total of 22 individuals participated in the in-depth, semistructured focus groups, which were loosely structured around the following research questions: (a) what is the nature and scope of participants digital technology use?; (b) to what extent is digital technology used as a tool for advocacy and activism?; (c) what links, if any, exist between online activism and offline activity?; and (d) what are the risks, challenges, and limitations associated with this online activism? Focus group discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed for key themes that emerged.

3 | BACKGROUND

Fiji has been at the forefront of the Pacific's "technological revolution," with some of the fastest growing rates of mobile phone uptake and social media use coupled with some of the lowest costs for accessing and using such technologies (Prasad, Finau, Samuwai, Prasad, & Green, 2013). The introduction of Digicel into the telecommunications market in 2008 increased competition between telecommunications providers, resulting in a rapid expansion of mobile connectivity, and significant decrease in infrastructure and operating costs for consumers (Finau, Rika, Samuwai, & McGoan, 2016). Statistics from January 2017 suggest that mobile

phone penetration in Fiji is 133%, with individuals often possessing multiple sim cards and phone accounts with different telecommunications providers (We Are Social, 2017).

The proliferation of mobile phones means that the internet, previously limited to the urban centres of Nadi and Suva, has become more widely accessible through mobile broadband, with the availability of 3G connectivity in the country since 2008. As of 2017, it was estimated that over 48% of Fiji's population were using the internet and accessing social media platforms (We Are Social, 2017). This represents a 13% increase in internet users in the country since the same time a year ago (We Are Social, 2017). Similarly, it is suggested that 430,000 people are engaging with Facebook as a social media platform (measured in terms of monthly active users), with an equal distribution of accounts between men and women (We Are Social, 2017). Facilitating this is some of the lowest connectivity costs out of any Pacific country (Pacific Regional Infrastructure Facility, 2015).

3.1 | A 21st century mediascape

The increasing prevalence of social media access and use throughout Fiji has had a profound impact on the country's media and communications landscape, shaping how citizens are engaging with these new communications platforms (Titifanue, Tarai, Kant, & Finau, 2016). Fiji has a diverse media and communications scene (Robie, 2016). However, it is also one that has developed and adapted in accordance with the country's history of political instability (Singh, 2017).

Since the introduction of Public Emergency Regulations (PERs) in 2009 and the Media Industry Development Decree (hereafter Media Decree) in 2010, Fiji's mainstream media landscape has been heavily regulated and subjected to varying forms of censorship. Initially taking the form of military censors in newsrooms (Dutt, 2010; Hooper, 2013), this censorship subsequently evolved into a more self-regulated model of editorial censorship by media outlets themselves. Despite the lifting of PERs in 2012, Fiji media industry remained heavily censored out of fear for the hefty penalties associated with breaches of the Media Decree, fostering a lingering atmosphere of control, suspicion, and self-censorship. It has been suggested that

“[p] aradoxically, journalists felt safer when government censors determined what would be banned or permitted to air. Without PER, any story might land a reporter in jail for offences under a Media Decree subject to arbitrary interpretation by government official.” (Hooper, 2013, pp. 44–45)

A 2014 Amnesty International report expressed concerns over the continued restrictions of freedom of expression and press freedom. The report suggested that, despite the removal of some restrictions, Fiji's media has been subject to ongoing intimidation and harassment since 2009 with several barriers to freedom of expression remaining (Amnesty International, 2014). This model of restrictive journalism has been categorized as “development journalism,” by which journalists are compelled to work with government in pursuit of a national vision (Obijiofor & Singh, 2016). “This involved shifting focus from what government sees as divisive reporting to reporting on issues that are believed to promote peace and development” (Obijiofor & Singh, 2016, pp. 13–14).

In response to these restrictions on media freedom, and considering the technological advances outlined above, online spaces have emerged as a unique communication platform and source of information in Fiji (Foster, 2007). When media censorship was at its most intense, online blogs began to increase in ascendancy, with the realization of online platforms as a channel for the resistance of military rule (Singh & Prasad, 2008). In more recent years, social media platforms have begun to replace blogs, as a tool for expressions of political dissent, lobbying, debate, dialogue, and

advocacy. Some social networking groups, such as Facebook's *Letters to the Editor Uncensored* (LEU), have emerged as a direct result of the decreasing space for public dialogue in mainstream media, as noted on the Facebook page "LEU is a forum to post news, articles, press releases, opinions, and concerns which HAVE NOT or WILL NOT be published in mainstream media due to unfair media censorship and self-censorship in Fiji" (LEU, 2017). With over 18,000 members, these groups are a heavily utilized site for debate and dialogue (Finau et al., 2014).

The rise in social media as a "go to" source for information and dissemination has seen an increase in citizen journalism, whereby citizens are playing an active role in collecting, reporting, analysing, and disseminating news and information (Bowman & Willis, 2003). For example, in September 2016, when a number of prominent members of Fiji's political elite were detained by police in the wake of criticisms levied at the 2013 constitution, citizen journalists gathered at the police barracks and took to social media to document the unfolding nature of events. As noted by Chung (2016) in her commentary of events: "In this information age of scrolling newsfeeds and viral hashtags, politically active young Fijians tweeted #FijiCrackdown and live-streamed their political views across leadership barriers and international boundaries" (Chung, 2016, p. 1).

Social media has also played a key role in activist campaigns such as the Free West Paua Movement and the Pacific Climate Change campaign. For instance, Titifanue et al. (2016) note that social media has played a pivotal role for West Papua campaign activists. In repressive mainstream media environments such as West Papua, social media plays a key role in disseminating information on events (Titifanue et al., 2016). Macleod (2016) notes that social media has influenced the opinion of Pacific heads of state, with leaders such as Gordon Darcy Lilo, of Solomon Islands, and Peter O'Neill of Papua New Guinea acknowledging social media's role in highlighting human rights issues in West Papua. In the case of Pacific climate activism, Titifanue, Kant, Finau, and Tarai (2017) note that citizens at the grassroots have employed social media to report disseminate information on environmental events impacting their lives.

4 | DIGITAL ACTIVISTS, DIGITAL FEMINISTS

As described above, increasing social media use has resulted in the emergence of a "digital generation" of Pacific activists (Cave, 2012, p. 3). Activists are increasingly recognizing the potential of the internet and social media as a force for social change and a vehicle for the inclusion of marginalized groups (Titifanue et al., 2016). Although globally, these online forms of activism are often dismissed as lacking authentic participation, referred to as "slacktivism" or "armchair activism" (Christensen, 2011), such a conceptualization fails to recognize the potential for online platforms to mobilize movements and collective action, forge new social relations, and solidify networks (Gerbaudo, 2012; Kahn & Kellner, 2004). As Gerbaudo notes, "[s]ocial media have become emotional conduits for reconstructing a sense of togetherness among a spatially dispersed constituency" (2012, p. 159).

The following sections explore this phenomenon as it is experienced by a group of young women's rights activists in Fiji. In particular, this research is focused on the experience of 22 activists, aged between 18 and 35 years¹ who have a history of engagement with Fiji's women's rights movement. For each of these 22 individuals, the increasing prevalence of social media had had an undeniable impact on their activism and advocacy work:

¹Age 18–35 is the official definition of "youth" in Fiji according to Fiji's national youth policy. For further information, see http://www.youthpolicy.org/national/Fiji_2011_National_Youth_Policy.pdf.

"Internet is part of my life, I have to be connected everyday." (Participant N, 03.03.2016)

"I access the internet every day, it's part of my life ..." (Participant V, 22.03.2016)

As these responses demonstrate, the internet has become central to the everyday routines and practices of these participants, highlighting the centrality of a digital connection to their everyday life.

Digital technologies and social media enabled participants to access information and communicate in new ways and at an unprecedented scale, as one participant noted "... I find myself scrolling through women's and feminist organisation sites ... picking up links left rights and centre ..." (Participant H, 03.03.2017). Furthermore, social media enabled activists to gain exposure to a range of alternative narratives and perspectives on issues beyond the scope of their immediate social networks or personal perspectives:

"it's [social media] giving us various perspectives to a story so we are able to read all like think pieces coming through and you're able to formulate a better understanding of one particular issue being discussed ..." (Participant E, 02.03.2016)

"Social media opens you up ... right now [during a focus group] we're sitting in a closed room and we all know each other ... but when you're out there [online] you are exposed to a variety of comments, a variety of points of view." (Participant I, 03.03.2016)

In addition, digital technologies were facilitating greater opportunities for voice, particularly for individuals who felt their participation in other communication fora were constrained by virtue of their age and/or gender:

"... in real life, it's difficult to speak, like culturally and politically when you're a young person. There's no one there to listen ... when you have the internet ... it's there in your face ... it's there all the time ... so somebody would read something that you had to say." (Participant J, 03.03.2016)

This was particularly true for activists who felt as though their voices were marginalized or missing from mainstream media platforms:

"... 90% of our [NGO] press statements do not get covered a lot hence we use alternative tools—social media ..." (Participant T, 22.03.2016)

"... at one point mainstream media would not touch any of the issues we [coalition of NGOs] put out so we just started using social media for it." (Participant V, 22.03.2016)

These responses demonstrate the prevailing challenges for these activists when seeking mainstream media coverage of their work or campaigns. For some participants, these challenges could be attributed to particular issues not being of sufficient size or scale to warrant mainstream media coverage, or not having the right "hook" or "spin." Whereas for other participants, these challenges stemmed from the political sensitivities associated with their

work and the reluctance of mainstream media institutions to report on any potentially antagonistic topics.

Participants also noted how social media has the potential to “... transcend the physical space into the cyberspace” (Participant A, 02.03.2016), removing geographical barriers to communication and participation in regional and global movements. Castells (2012) reflects on the potential of social networking tools to foster a sense of togetherness with users able to “... transcend time and space, yet ... produce content, set up links and connect practices” (p. 232). Similarly, Bonila and Rosa (2015) note the unique potential of social media to create a feeling of direct participation allowing “... users who are territorially displaced to feel like they are united across both space and time” (p. 7). Participants echoed these sentiments, noting “One of the coolest aspects of digital advocacy is how you’re not restricted to time zones and distance ...” (Participant H, 03.03.2016) and expressing the sense of solidarity and belonging that was facilitated through some of these online connections:

“My first real experience was on Facebook when I started sharing on my status of things happening to people I know or to me personally ... it created this energy around it where people started commenting on it, showing solidarity and being supportive and sharing their own experiences.” (Participant W, 25.03.2016)

For participants in this study, social media enabled the creation of virtual communities of solidarity and support. Scholars such as Kabeer (2012) have recognized the power of association and collective action for women’s movements in their pursuit of transformational change, as well as the more intrinsic impact that this relationship-building and solidarity can have on participants. For Kabeer (2012), this type of collective action enables the formation of safe spaces for women to discuss issues of common concern and facilitate processes of shared reflection. The solidarity gained through building relationships on shared experiences can be instrumental to achieving strategic gains across local, nation, and international arenas (Kabeer, 2011, 2012; Kabeer & Huq, 2010):

“Growing up in Fiji you get made fun of for being Indo-Fijian. I found my niche on social media. Social media allowed me to find people who may have gone through things that I have gone through as well.” (Participant R, 22.03.2016)

5 | SLACKTIVISM OR ACTIVISM?

Gladwell (2010) argues that social media cannot facilitate the high risk or direct-action activism of the civil rights movement. He explains this as due to a lack of strong personal connections forged through online media and the decentralized nature of online activist networks. Gladwell (2010) concludes, “Facebook activism succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice” (p. 1). However, scholars such as Kahn and Kellner (2004), in their study of protest movements in resistance to neoliberal institutions in the late 1990s and early 2000s, have documented how activists have successfully used the Internet to organize and facilitate protest, suggesting that online activism has created a “vital new space of politics and culture” and has produced “new social relations and forms of political possibility” (p. 94).

New media scholars have been more nuanced in their analyses of online activism, demonstrating the potential to facilitate connections between online and “offline” activism and raise awareness of political issues, while remaining cautious about the potential for sustained social movements. For example, Gerbaudo's (2012) ethnographic research conducted during popular uprisings in Egypt, Spain, and the United States contradicts Gladwell's assertions that social media lacks personal connections and structure. Instead, Gerbaudo (2012) argues that activists use social media as a means of mobilization, “reweav [ing] a new sense of public space, refashioning the way in which people come together on the streets” (p. 160). Furthermore, work by Tufekci and Wilson (2012) in relation to the Tahrir square protests demonstrates the centrality of social media to participants protest activity through both communication and the global dissemination of protest visual and narratives.

For activists in Fiji, this tension between “slacktivism” and “activism” was personified by participants during focus group discussions, with one participant noting: “... sometimes digital tools can breed a generation of ‘slacktivists’ ... now almost everyone is an activist—just taking photos at events ... and nothing more” (Participant U, 22.03.2016). However, other participants reflected on the success of some of their online campaigns, particularly when they were able to use social media as a catalyst for raising public consciousness and getting the attention of policymakers:

“Social media would be the form of us sharing that [statements] as news as opposed to mainstream media. Social media became our form of news outlet.” (Participant E, 02.03.2016)

“The two different mediums work hand in hand ... social media has been a catalyst for stuff that I've done offline ... On the other hand my ‘on the ground work’ has led to catalytic events online as well.” (Participant E, 02.03.2016)

“Mainstream media picks up whatever is fresh and whatever will get more attention ...” (Participant G, 02.03.2016)

For these participants, social media played a valuable role for raising awareness of particular issues and generating subsequent mainstream media coverage, even where institutions may have been reluctant to give press to an issue in the first instance.

Bonila and Rosa (2015) in their study of “hashtag activism” during protests against racial profiling and police brutality in the United States argue that social media platforms have become powerful sites for the documentation and challenging of misrepresentation in mainstream media. They note:

“... while social media might seem like a space of disembodied engagement, for many, social media can become an important site in which to foreground the particular ways in which racialized bodies are systematically stereotyped, stigmatized, surveilled, and positioned as targets of state-sanctioned violence.” (Bonila & Rosa, 2015, p. 9)

This analysis highlights the opportunities for social media to be utilized by minority groups to counter misrepresentations and dominant narratives put forward by authorities and mainstream media sources. As aforementioned, participants noted the reluctance of mainstream media cover, or inability to cover in an impartial manner. For activists attempting to raise

awareness of these issues, social media has become an important conduit. One participant, a youth mental health advocate, highlighted the fact that mainstream media's coverage of mental health issues tended to reinforce harmful stereotypes about mental illness. Reflecting on a recent incident when the former health Minister had made highly negative and regressive public remarks about those suffering from mental health issues, she noted:

"[we] tried to speak with the media to raise an issue with how this was stated but they did not allow us because he was the Minister and somehow it was being misconstrued that what he said was the truth. As a result, we used social media to vent our issue with the statement. We used social media to speak from our own perspective. As a result [of the public outcry that was generated] he was asked to apologise. Our social media frustrations were eventually picked up by the Fiji Times." (Participant Q, 08.03.2016)

These successes were echoed by activists who had run similar online campaigns for policy reform. A number of participants reflected on a 2012 ELFA campaign "Take Back the Streets," which was an initiative in response to an increase in the incidences of street harassment faced by women and girls, particularly at the hands of public service vehicle drivers. Activists created a Facebook group to document these instances of street harassment and where women were able to post the date, time, location, and vehicle details of harassment complaints. Reflecting on the commencement of the campaign, one participant noted:

"... it came out of a real concern of a friend of mine while in a taxi. We shared the story with the entire ELFA group and we got so angry that we thought this could be something we go do ... the reason the page was started was that we wanted to document instances of harassment related to being on the street ... a place where women could vent ..." (Participant A, 02.03.2016)

Over the course of the campaign, which was launched on International Women's Day in March 2012, the issue of street harassment became a hotly debated national issue. During these debates, the General Secretary of the Fiji Taxi Association spoke about the issue on national radio, starting that young women and girls should avoid wearing short skirts which "provoked men into sexually harassing them." These comments became the focus of fierce debate on social media, both within the existing "Take Back the Streets" campaign page and more broadly on other Facebook discussion forums and news sites. They also attracted the condemnation of Fiji's women's rights movement, culminating in the initial resignation of the General Secretary, before being reinstated on leave.

Throughout the campaign, women's rights organizations, such as FWRM and the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, were invited to conduct a series of gender sensitization training to members of the Fiji Taxi Authority and the Land Transport Authority (LTA). After the campaign, Emerging Leaders Forum Alumni activists collated the data that had been collected on the Facebook group and presented it as a submission to the LTA as part of consultations to amend the LTA Code of Conduct and the Land Transport Act.

Of particular interest in relation to the "Take Back the Streets" Campaign was the fact that it challenged the assumption that online activism, or the dissemination of news and information through social media, is largely an exercise in "preaching to the choir" and fails to move beyond an individual's immediate social networks. However, as one research participant noted in relation to the "Take Back the Streets" Campaign:

“a lot of women who shared their stories actually said in those posts that they just don't think about women's rights ... they just wanted to talk to somebody who understood ... which is how a lot of women came to us who have never thought of feminism.” (Participant A, 02.03.2016)

As such, this campaign, particularly the establishment of an inclusive Facebook group, was able to reach far beyond immediate ELFA networks and engage with a broader constituency beyond the women's movement.

Another example of an online campaign that bridged the online–offline divide was the campaign to reinstate the scholarship of a young university student and activist. This student had their government scholarship terminated as a result of their participation in the campaign of an independent political candidate in the lead up to the 2014 election. It has also been suggested that their high visibility as a prominent (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer) LGBTIQ rights activist further compounded the response to their political campaign activities. Complaints were made to the university authorities, and approaches were made to mainstream media platforms, but there was a general reluctance to cover the issue. The limited scope for mainstream media publicity of this issue resulted in the establishment of a concerted social media campaign, publishing statements and press releases online, and posting accounts of the event across a range of personal accounts and public discussion forums on Facebook. Reflecting on this campaign, one participant noted:

“I think social media played a crucial role [in the campaign] ... there were people venting out from their personal accounts ... it got the issue out across to other people who didn't know about it in a timely manner.” (Participant D, 02.03.2016)

This social media campaign had two main implications. First, the publishing of this news and information on social media led to public outcry over the scholarship termination, drawing the attention of human rights advocacy groups, NGOs, and political commentators who mobilized protests and demonstrations nationally. This “bottom-up” activity from within Fiji placed pressure on policymakers, calling for a reversal of the decision. Second, the “buzz” generated via social media was large enough to garner the attention of international media outlets in Australia and New Zealand who were able to interview key individuals and tell the story across both radio and online news platforms. This “top-down” pressure by virtue the associated international media coverage meant that domestic media platforms within Fiji could no longer ignore the story. Frequently republishing content from Australian and New Zealand sources, Fiji's press eventually reported on the issue and the ensuing public outcry. The combination of “bottom-up” and “top-down” pressure generated via this social media campaign culminated in a policy reversal and the reinstatement of the student's scholarship.

These illustrative examples demonstrate the potential of online activism and campaigning through social media to generate activities that move beyond the “online” realm. In the context of Fiji's political environment and media landscape, social media is a valuable platform for activists to publish and share statements, news, and information, which would otherwise have limited opportunities for public consumption. Furthermore, social media acts as a valuable conduit for the amplification of activist's work, both nationally and internationally. The role of social media as a source for international news stories, and often subsequently national media coverage within Fiji, enables activists to work through social media platforms as part of a broader, multipronged communication strategy. These functions render social media a trigger for the exertion of pressure on policymakers.

6 | RISKY BUSINESS

Despite being a powerful campaign tool for activists, use of social media is not without its risks and challenges. Participants reflected on the challenges associated with the blurred distinction between the personal and the professional when navigating online spaces, in particular the assumption that social media activity was essentially personal in nature, often dismissed as merely “socializing” and not validated as “work” or professional activity. This has ramifications for how participants integrated social media use into their work practices and professional lives, an issue that was particularly prevalent in the lead up to the 2014 election:

“when I was working [for an NGO] ... and we were having elections ... and we were supporting a particular candidate [as individuals] ... the organisation felt that there needed to be a clearer distinction that it's your personal page.” (Participant A, 02.03.2016)

“I can't be seen to be commenting on something that might go against their company brand ... I get angry about it because it is my personal page ...” (Participant E, 02.03.2016)

“There are strains in relationships because of government links ... and it does limit what you can and can't do. At times I have changed how I use my platforms. For instance, now Facebook is more for my personal use than Twitter which is more professionally tasked ... Since people watch you, you get to certain points where you can almost lose your job.” (Participant P, 08.03.2016)

As noted in the responses above, participants reflected on experiences of being monitored by their employers with regard to their social media use and having to negotiate various organizational guidelines with respect to online activity. For participants who worked for NGOs, in particular, there was a tension between the personal political participation of staff in online forums and the organizational need to ensure political neutrality and impartiality.

Furthermore, participants expressed frustration at the digital presence of many NGOs and other organizations in the advocacy and activism space, noting that this digital presence is often merely extension of the linear, one-way communication model of information dissemination and public relations, rather than an attempt to engage a broader audience in debate and dialogue:

“I notice a lot of organisations have social media accounts, but they just post things up and don't monitor. For example, their page could be littered with comments from people asking for help but no one is responding ...” (Participant A, 02.03.2016)

These digital NGO practices can be partially attributed to limited resources available within the not-for-profit sector, particularly communication expertise and knowledge which is largely limited to marketing and promotions rather than more participatory communication practices. Similarly, given the climate of media censorship and regulation within which NGOs are operating and the harsh penalties associated with transgressing these regulations, it is reasonable to expect such institutions to be risk adverse when it comes to formal communications in the public domain (Hassall, 2017; Singh, 2017).

Individual activists also articulated a concern with online activism in Fiji's current political climate, expressing concerns over political surveillance and monitoring of online activities. Participants discussed allegations of "online stalking" and digital surveillance by national security forces, as well as suspicions that particular activists had been placed under "offline" surveillance as a result of their digital presence:

"We knew for sure that our posts and digital advocacy was constantly under surveillance by the state. There had been questions to one or two of our volunteers about posts on Facebook ... and I got calls constantly from police intelligence about my posts." (Participant W, 25.03.2016)

"One recent example ... I was venting out [on social media] ... I vented out on Bainimarama [Fiji's Prime Minister] and his Government and the next thing I know a mysterious person said to be on Facebook ... be careful of what you say, people are talking down snapshots of your posts." (Participant D, 02.03.2016)

"I was actually told by someone that I was being followed in university [after a high-profile social media campaign]. We had this military guy in civilian clothes. So I had to watch my back and I had to go home with a group of people." (Participant D, 02.03.2016)

Finally, participants recounted numerous experiences with cyberbullying and harassment in online forums, ranging from "discomforting remarks" to threats of physical and sexual abuse and the unsolicited sharing of pornographic imagery. These issues were brought to the forefront during the 2014 elections when Roshika Deo, an independent political candidate, faced a series of vicious cyber attacks including threats of rape, degrading images, derogatory name-calling, and character assassination. Although these attacks, and others like them, were reported to the police, the process was exceptionally time-consuming and failed to result in the laying of any charges.

7 | IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

Policymakers and government stakeholders within Fiji are facing increasing and unprecedented criticism via social media, particularly in the context of a constrained mainstream media reporting environment. As noted in the preceding sections, activists are using social media to directly criticize, lobby for reform, and garner public support. This digital lobbying and "agitation" through social media can be juxtaposed with the "development journalism" mandate promoted by government. As aforementioned, this notion of "development journalism" is premised on the maintenance of peace and stability, a direct contrast to the debate and dialogue ensuing on social media platforms. As such, social media has the potential to become a victim of its own popularity, with government expressing interest to impose controls on this new online forum.

As explored by Tarai (2015), concerns have been raised within Fiji with regard to online "hate speech" and allegations of social media being used to incite civil disorder against government. In 2015, the Chairman of Fiji's Media Industry Development Authority expressed concerns over the rates of "hate speech" taking place online (Vuibau, 2015a), leading to

suggestions for social media to be “unplugged” as a way of curtailing such activities. Similarly, the Ministry of Defence’s cyber security unit has also called for limitations on internet freedom, in particular limitations to accessing pornographic sites and imagery online (Vuibau, 2015).

So what does this mean for digital activists as individuals and the institutions seeking to support them? First, there is a need for more nuanced consideration of the relationship between social media and public interest, particularly when it comes to calls for increased legislation and regulation. For many in the digital activism space, there is a fear that any government attempts to regulate social media will result in a further restriction of space for free expression and political dissent, much in the same way as the regulation of mainstream media. It has been suggested that countries such as Fiji adopt an “education rather than regulation” approach, which would see stronger public education to prevent online harassment and vilification. This could incorporate two strategies, the first being education around online expectations and responsibilities, including the outlining of some possible codes of conduct for online behaviour in order to mitigate the instances of cyberbullying and harassment and attempt to change the practices of cyberbullies. The second strategy incorporates public civic education with respect to existing legal frameworks and sanctions pertaining to libel, contempt of court, obscenity, or harassment, with a view to curtailing genuinely harmful online communication acting against the public interest.

Furthermore, there is a need to recognize that many activists, particularly those in the women’s rights space, are conducting the bulk of their digital advocacy in their capacity as individuals rather than through any formal organizational affiliation. In fact, often this digital activism takes place *despite* their organizational affiliation and the limitations imposed on social media use in a professional context. This means that these individuals are working in online spaces with little anonymity or institutional safeguards, when compared with more conventional advocacy practices. There is a need for NGOs, and other supporting organizations, to increase their protections for staff and volunteers from online harassment and violence, while simultaneously building their internal capacity to engage in meaningful debate and dialogue online, an exercise in not only increasing technological know-how within organizations but also affecting change in organizational culture with respect to public interaction. Many existing online projects initiated by NGOs fail to reach their potential due to a limited engagement and interaction. It is suggested that such organizations need to adjust their communications policies in order to facilitate more spontaneous online interactions and debates. Currently, these opportunities are somewhat constrained by risk-adverse NGO cultures that conceptualize social media largely as a tool for one-way information dissemination, rather than a platform for dialogue.

8 | CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates the ways in which young feminists are leveraging and utilizing new technologies as a valuable tool and platform for activism, particularly in a context where there are constrained opportunities for voice, dissent, and dialogue in more traditional media platforms and information channels and where digital opportunities and social media access are increasing at an unprecedented rate and scale. This research examines the ways in which these social media platforms are being utilized to access information, network and connect participants to global networks of solidarity and support.

This research challenges the narrative that digital activism is limited to the online realm, representing a less authentic form of “slacktivism” with limited opportunities for “offline” outcomes. Instead, this research demonstrates the ways in which participants are using social media as a tool to garner public support and generate momentum for particular issues, in a context where there are comparatively few avenues for this information to be communicated to the public. Similarly, social media also has the potential to act as a platform for the amplification of activist concerns to an international audience. Consequently, activists are able to work through social media to exert pressure on policymakers from both the “bottom up” via public mobilization efforts and from the “top down” through the generation of international media attention.

ORCID

Tait Brimacombe  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7918-8154>

REFERENCES

- Amnesty International (2014). *Fiji play fair: A human rights agenda*. London: Amnesty International.
- Bonila, Y., & Rosa, J. (2015). #Ferguson: Digital protest, hashtag ethnography, and the racial politics of social media in the United States. *American Ethnologist*, 42(1), 4–17.
- Bowman, S., & Willis, C. (2003). *We media: How audiences are shaping the future of news and information*. Reston, Va: The Media Center.
- Castells, M. (2012). *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the internet age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Cave, D. (2012). *Digital islands: How the Pacific's ICT revolution is transforming the region*. Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy.
- Christensen, H. J. (2011). Political Activities on the Internet: Slacktivism or political participation by other means? *First Monday*, 16(2), 1–11.
- Chung, M. (2016). Through social media Fiji's youth are challenging the political elite. Lowy Interpreter, 20 Sept 2016, retrieved from <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/through-social-media-fijis-youth-challenge-political-elite>
- Dutt, R. R. (2010). The Fiji media decree: A push towards collaborative journalism. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 16(2), 81–98.
- Finau, G., Prasad, A., Kant, R., Tarai, J., Logan, S., & Cox, J. (2014). Social media and e-democracy in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Paper presented at the 20th Americas Conference on Information Systems, Savannah.
- Finau, G., Rika, N., Samuwai, J., & McGoon, J. (2016). Perceptions of digital financial services in rural Fiji. *Information Technologies & International Development*, 12(4), 11–21.
- Foster, S. (2007). Who let the blogs out?: Media and free speech in post-coup Fiji. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 13(2), 47–60.
- Gerbaudo, P. (2012). *Tweets and the streets: Social media and contemporary activism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Gladwell, M. (2010). Small change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted. *The New Yorker*, 4 Oct 2010, retrieved from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/small-change-malcolm-gladwell>
- Hassall, G. (2017). E-government and civil society: Exploring new relationships in Pacific SIDS. In R. Cullen, & G. Hassall (Eds.), *Achieving sustainable E-government in Pacific Islands States* (pp. 365–390). New York City: Springer International Publishing.
- Hooper, R. A. (2013). When the barking stopped: Censorship, self-censorship and spin in Fiji. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 19(1), 41–57.

- Kabeer, N. (2011). Between affiliation and autonomy: Navigating pathways of women's empowerment and gender justice in rural Bangladesh. *Development and Change*, 42(2), 499–528.
- Kabeer, N. (2012). *The power of association: Reflecting on women's collective action as a force for social change*. Thinkpiece #2. London: UK Feminista.
- Kabeer, N., & Huq, L. (2010). The power of relationships: Love and solidarity in a landless women's organisation in rural Bangladesh. *IDS Bulletin*, 41(2), 79–87.
- Kahn, R., & Kellner, D. (2004). New media and internet activism: From the 'Battle of Seattle' to blogging. *New Media & Society*, 6(1), 87–95.
- Letters to the Editor Uncensored (LEU). (2017). Facebook description, retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/groups/LEU.Fiji/>
- Macleod, J. (2016). Citizen media and civil resistance in West Papua. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 22(1), 38–51.
- Obijiofor, L., & Singh, S. (2016). Changes in journalism in two post-authoritarian non-Western countries. *International Communication Gazette*, 79(4), 379–399.
- Pacific Regional Infrastructure Facility (PRIF) (2015). *Economic and social impact of ICT in the Pacific*. Sydney: PRIF.
- Prasad, A., Finau, G., Samuwai, J., Prasad, B., & Green, P. (2013). On facilitating regional integration and economic development with collaborative technologies in the South Pacific. *Pacific Asia Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, 5(2), 23–37.
- Robie, D. (2016). Unfree and unfair?: Media intimidation in Fiji's 2014 elections. In S. Ratuva, & D. Lawson (Eds.), *The people have spoken: The 2014 Fiji elections* (pp. 83–107). Canberra: ANU.
- Singh, S. (2017). State of the media review in four Melanesian countries—Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu—in 2015. *SSGM Discussion Paper 2017/1* ANU, Canberra.
- Singh, S., & Prasad, B. (2008). Coups, media and democracy in Fiji. *Fijian Studies: A Journal of Contemporary Fiji*, 6(1/2), 1–8.
- Tarai, J. (2015). *To regulate or not—Fiji's social media SSGM In Brief 2015/53*. Canberra: ANU.
- Titifanue, J., Kant, R., Finau, G., & Tarai, J. (2017). Climate change advocacy in the Pacific: The role of information and communication technologies. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 23(1), 133–149.
- Titifanue, J., Tarai, J., Kant, R., & Finau, G. (2016). From social networking to activism: The role of social media in the free West Papua campaign. *Pacific Studies*, 39(3), 255–281.
- Tufekci, Z., & Wilson, C. (2012). Social media and the decision to participate in political protest: Observations from Tahrir Square. *Journal of Communication*, 62, 363–379.
- Vuibau, T. (2015). Porn worry. *Fiji Times Online*, 17 July 2015, retrieved from <http://www.fijitimes.com/story.aspx?id=314069>
- Vuibau, T. (2015a). Education on freedom of speech vital. *Fiji Times Online*, 21 July 2015, retrieved from <http://www.fijitimes.com/story.aspx?id=314668>
- We Are Social. (2017). Digital in 2017: Australia, New Zealand & The Pacific. *We Are Social*, retrieved from <https://www.slideshare.net/wearesocialsg/digital-in-2017-australia-new-zealand-the-pacific>

How to cite this article: Brimacombe T, Kant R, Finau G, Tarai J, Titifanue J. A new frontier in digital activism: An exploration of digital feminism in Fiji. *Asia Pac Policy Stud*. 2018;5:508–521. <https://doi.org/10.1002/app5.253>