



## Hash Tagging But Not Trending: The Success and Failure of The News Media to Engage with Online Feminist Activism in India

Pallavi Guha

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# HASH TAGGING BUT NOT TRENDING: THE SUCCESS AND FAILURE OF THE NEWS MEDIA TO ENGAGE WITH ONLINE FEMINIST ACTIVISM IN INDIA

**Pallavi Guha, University of Maryland**

Hashtags were popularized during the San Diego forest fires in 2007, when Nate Ritter used his hashtag “#sandiegofire” in Twitter to identify his updates related to the disaster (E. Zak 2013). Hashtags have since emerged as crucial, not only to search information on Twitter (and now Facebook) but also as a powerful mechanism to rally support and promote activism around diverse topics. Tanja Carstensen (2014), for instance, identifies the significant role played by hashtags such as #MooreandMe and #aufschrei<sup>1</sup> in highlighting feminist issues and bringing them to the notice of the mainstream media. While the role of Twitter hashtags in generating public debate has been frequently celebrated in public discourse, the focus has been almost exclusively on examples derived from Western democracies that are characterized by considerable digital access. However, given that technological practices do not operate in a vacuum, it cannot be assumed that the impact of hashtag campaigns is similar all over the world. Indeed, I argue that feminist hashtag campaigns are unlikely to succeed in an emerging digital environment such as India unless they converge with the mainstream media.

On September 23, 2013 the hashtag #victimblaming appeared on Twitter India, in response to a satirical video on sexual abuse, rape, and the culture of blaming the victim. The satirical video, “It’s all your fault,” released on Youtube, went viral and the English print media reported extensively on the video, and its message that Indian victims of rape and sexual abuse are subjected to humiliation, while the perpetrators are defended. But even though the video was shared on social media networks such as Twitter and Facebook, the hashtag #victimblaming did not trend in Twitter; citizens and the mainstream media did not notice it. As a result, the hashtag #victimblaming in India did not engage the people in a broader conversation about preventing victim blaming in cases of sexual violence and abuse. I argue that such feminist campaigns need to resonate and interact with mainstream media in order to reach larger audiences including policy makers in India.

Simply hashtagging a cause like #victimblaming is not enough to raise awareness in a digitally emerging country like India. For a successful feminist campaign to take off, there needs to be a convergence of social media hashtagging and news media discussion. Social media is widely used for political campaigning in India, as evidenced by the most recent general elections in 2014. However, it is yet to become a part of governance, whereby it is used by government agencies and/or policy makers to actively engage with citizenry. The primary source of information to create policies is still the mainstream media. Therefore, I suggest the notion of “Collaborative Agenda Setting,” in the context of feminist activism,

where social media and the news media successfully collaborate to set the agenda in order to enhance public engagement on issues like victim blaming.

As Matthew Hindman points out, while there is a lot of information floating around the Internet it does not lead to heightened democracy since most people visit only a few websites (2008). The same is true of social media and feminist campaigns; they only reach select groups since most people remain insulated in their information bubbles (Eli Pariser 2011).

Social media provides women and feminists with the means to collaborate and create awareness to take a campaign forward (Hande Eslen-Ziya 2013). However, to get a wider cross-section of the population involved, feminist activism needs the support of the news media. This is clearly indicated by the digital activism surrounding the gang rape of a para-medical student in New Delhi in December 2012. In this case, the hashtag #Nirbhaya (meaning fearless in Hindi) was given to the victim by the country's leading English daily, *The Times of India*, and became a trending and popular hashtag in 2012. This hashtag and the surrounding social media activism were picked up by the Indian media and eventually produced a major campaign by the mainstream media against rape and sexual abuse of women in India.

Indeed, in order to get citizens involved, it is important to develop a bridge between mainstream media and social media activism. Based on this, I argue that while feminist campaign hashtags like #victimblaming in India have the potential to engage concerned citizens and policy makers, the mainstream news media needs to be equally supportive of the activism and work in collaboration to set the agenda for public discussion. In the case of #victimblaming, although the mainstream Indian media highlighted the video, they paid comparatively little attention to the hashtag since reporting on social media hashtags was, at the time, not the norm in Indian mainstream media. This then failed to evolve into a bigger discussion in the media. The election campaign of 2014 changed this scenario, where mainstream media became more receptive to reporting on social media, albeit strictly limiting themselves to following political candidates and their conversations.

It will be interesting to note in future whether hashtag feminist activism can reach more people in India via the support of the mainstream media in India. Mainstream media should follow and report on citizen conversation on feminist hashtags, by searching for related keywords to feminist activism. This can bring feminist campaigns to the mainstream, compelling policy makers and citizens to take notice and get engaged. I urge feminist activists and the mainstream media to use "Collaborative Agenda Setting" to engage the public.

## NOTE

1. #aufschrei is the German-language campaign through which women collect and publish experiences of sexism and which has provoked expansive public and political debates far beyond Twitter (Carstensen 2014).

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## DISRUPTING DOMINANT DISCOURSES: #HERESPROOF OF INTEREST IN WOMEN'S SPORTS

**Dunja Antunovic, Pennsylvania State University and Andrew  
D. Linden, Pennsylvania State University**

Feminist sport scholars have observed the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women athletes and women's sports in media with great concern (Cheryl Cooky, Michael A. Messner, and Robin Hextrum 2013). Scholars have attributed this drought to decision making: national surveys indicate that industry leaders in sports media operate under the assumption that their readers, viewers, and listeners are not interested in women's sports (Marie Hardin 2005; Marie Hardin, Dunja Antunovic, Steve Bien-Aimé, and Roubing Li 2013).

To challenge this assumption, in November 2013, the Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport at the University of Minnesota launched a social media initiative titled the #HERESPROOF Project. The Tucker Center encourages Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook users to post photos from girls' and women's sporting events and to attach the "HERESPROOF Seal" to images in order to dispel the "damaging and untrue myth" that women's sports events draw little fan interest.

We believe that #HERESPROOF furthers feminist agendas in sports media. In light of the systematic exclusion of women from mainstream media and the dominant discourses around female athletes, it may be too optimistic to expect social media to challenge these discourses—even if social media users escape the restrictions placed by gatekeepers (Toni Bruce and Marie Hardin 2014). Considering the ubiquity of social media conversations around sport, the hashtag's impact on the majority of users may be minimal. However, we see great potential in the #HERESPROOF hashtag to make disruptive discourses available to journalists. As Paul M. Pedersen (2014) pointed out, to stay competitive, sports journalists "now participate in online interactivity, social media engagement, and overall digital media convergence" (279). In light of this, the #HERESPROOF project could become a successful endeavor not in bypassing industry leaders (or gatekeepers), but in *reaching* them. The key function of the hashtag's feminist advocacy lies in the opportunity to bring the visibility of fans and advocates of women's sports to mainstream media outlets.