Using the master’s tools: women’s movements and social media

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As Richard Harper principal researcher at Microsoft Research points out, we are well and truly in the age of ‘communication overload’. He cites the familiar figure of 500 million active Facebook users, 175 million tweeters, five billion mobile phone connections (Harper, 2010). The age of Web 2.0 means we are living in an era where most people can access, exchange and publish whatever information they want digitally, sending it to one or thousands of people, in voice, text, images and video.

Instant communication around the world is now many layered, cheap and easy. One now talks of Facebook addiction, of lives lived more in cyberspace than in the real world. Information and communications technology (ICTs) have rapidly shifted spaces and ways in which we interact. These channels of communication have been vital in building up social media for social interaction that have fed into movements working for rights, justice and human rights, using highly accessible web-based technologies to turn communication into interactive dialogues with a political purpose.

In this article I look (with apologies to Audre Lorde) at how women’s movements have used the Internet to build transnational movements on core issues impacting on women globally such as the fight to end violence against women (VAW). As well as giving examples of activities I also look at some of the difficulties and contradictions for women using the Internet as a tool for change, when the Internet itself is full of some of the very things women’s movements are fighting to end.

As Lorde pointed out, the master’s tool, in this case the Internet, is not in itself neutral. It is embedded within the larger framework of global inequities and injustice. So though it offers vast possibilities to build trust, to share values and bring about change, it carries within it rigidities and controlling mechanisms, as well as scope for misogyny and violence.

Women and social media

In the last 10 years using social media has shifted from being an elite, developed world privilege to being part of almost all societies, even the very poor. Mobile phones, cybercafés, apps, digital cameras and videos, can be found in the glitzy high city life of Tokyo, London and New York but also in towns in Romania and Iran and in rural villages in Pakistan, Kenya and Peru. Digital images zoom around the world of women of all ages using mobile phones to check currency rates, videos to record their family history, computers to blog and produce e-zines.

But for all it offers the cyberworld is not free of deep seated patriarchal ways of viewing women. Alongside all the potential to communicate and strategize across the globe from the comfort of their homes or nearby cybercafé, there are also women and girls who are being exploited and threatened as objects of pornography, one of the most profit-making industries on the Internet. The violence is not only found in seedy chat rooms, or porn sites and Web cam sex. The potential of the ICTs can threaten traditional gender roles.

For example the alternative media service, Inter Press Service on 25 November 2010 reported how ICTs can exacerbate gender-based violence in East Africa (Kagumire, 2010). According to the article by local reporter Rosebell Kagumire, almost a third of Ugandans have mobile phones with 10.7 million subscribers in 2009. In her recent research on the use
of ICTs Aramanzan Madanda from Makerere University found that about 46% of people had problems with spouses in relation to the use of mobile phones.

Mobile phones allowed women to contact relatives directly without their husband’s consent leading to major concern by men that they could not control whom their wives were contacting. This led to SMS stalking, monitoring and control of partners’ whereabouts and has led to spouse violence. In April, Uganda’s Domestic Violence Act for the first time acknowledged the link between the use of ICTs and domestic violence.

Enthusiasm about the Internet and social media has to be put into this gendered context. ICTs are not operating or creating an entirely safe space. Nor is VAW clearly linked to ICTs. Ugandan cyber laws for example give limited attention to gender in general and none at all to gender-based violence. As Madana states, ‘Most actors in the ICT industries are preoccupied with expansion and profit without much emphasis on the ramifications on gender based violence resulting from adoption,’ (quoted in Kagumire, 2010).

The emphasis on expansion and profit has broader implications than most of us using social media realize. Going below the surface of what users think they are sharing, very few people really know much about the digital capitalism which is driving the profitable ‘back end’ of the technologies, the databases, the connections to various applications. When you read interviews of those doing the programming, pushing the products of ICTs are part and parcel of their work within the core of global capitalism. They are able to make the global communication age happen by driving consumer and market use of the Web and internet applications.

What they are excited about is the openness of the global internet economy. The world of Microsoft, high finance and telecommunications business, even Facebook and Google are not pushing a transformative agenda. Apple and Microsoft are mega businesses which despite user friendly images are there to make profits. Not to speak of the dark underworld of the Internet that few of us care to investigate, where the real profits are around, for example, cybercrime including pornography.

On the surface Facebook and social networking sites are connecting families and sharing billions of digital greetings of love and connection, but they also provoke worrying issues around privacy, power/knowledge issues. Connecting people as Mark Zuckerberg keenly promotes is about getting ‘consumer.com’ to use the big ‘free’ services and selling their names and links to companies which are where mainstream ICT interest and investment lies.

Social media are thriving because they are based on monitoring peoples’ conversations that reveal their likes and dislikes which are then sold to social media marketers. The assumption is that users imagine what they read and see in ‘social’ platforms are trustworthy sources of information. The social media strategy is to build social authority so people using their sites buy the products they see.

The ‘free’ platforms (Youtube, Twitter, Facebook) are operating as free because they are being crafted on this assumption. They sell advertising and user information on that basis. With the rise of social networks it is becoming easier to understand what makes people buy.

Social media for change

www.waccglobal.org
Despite this reality, ICTs are still being used for social change such as to counter violence against women (VAW). The Internet has emerged as a tool that can be navigated and shaped by women's movements around the world in their struggle for rights, justice and social change. In the last decade women’s networks have increased and strengthened with the connections made possible through the Internet, Web 2.0, imaging, writing, sharing, lobbying, connecting. New strategies for greater equity and feminist transformation that respect cultural difference are being crafted from these global connections, ultimately creating new structures of power and new forms of culture (see Harcourt, 2009).

The use of social media has greatly supported the fight to end violence against women. Among the many projects to end VAW has been how to tackle gender based violence within the technology itself. The IPS article mentioned above for example, points to the campaign ‘Take Back the Tech!’ which has supported local Ugandan organisations such as WOUGHNET to raise awareness of violence against women in Uganda and fight it by training women to use SMS to inform and counter violence.

‘Take Back the Tech!’ is a collaborative campaign of different women’s technological groups that train women to use and understand how ICTs can be a political tool for their cause. As part of the worldwide 16 days of activism against gender-based violence held every year from 25 November to 10 December it calls for women and girls to take control of technology. Through blogs, twitter, on-line chats, digital story telling, petitions, e-mail exchanges, the campaign ‘Take Back the Tech!’ is a collaborative campaign (in English, French and Spanish) calls attention to ways to end violence against women.

The campaign seeks to counter the growing trend that women’s rights to expression and information are increasingly under threat in online spaces. According to the campaign, ‘The UN estimates that 95% of aggressive behaviour, harassment, abusive language and degrading images in online spaces are aimed at women. As women go online using computers and mobile phones, many are silenced through acts of violence, sexism and censorship.’ (see http://www.takebackthetech.net)

Some of the actions that ‘Take Back the Tech!’ encourages is for girl gamers to build online communities to post their thoughts, do game reviews and point out games that are sexist. For example, they lobbied the company producing Grand Theft Auto which includes rape of sex workers as part of its gaming strategy. The goal is to change the videogame industry’s approach to game development so that it become more gender aware and inclusive.

Another key strategy is to use the Internet to share document and women’s own stories including stories of violence and discrimination.

Practical support provided by the networks contributing to ‘Take Back the Tech!’ includes helping women’s groups using the Internet to support abused women. When websites are closed down they support them to relocate quickly in a safe space on the Net. For example the One Million Signature Campaign has been calling for the end of discrimination against women in Iran since 2007. Their websites are continually blocked and having to be moved (see http://www.we-change.org/english/).

The Pink Chaddi campaign (or pink underwear campaign) in India was set up as a peaceful protest against violent attacks on women. The Campaign used a Facebook group that was continually being broken into and defaced. When the group owner complained to Facebook, Facebook disabled her account. The group now boycotts Facebook and is using blogspot and other public platforms (see Wikipedia and thepinkchaddicampaign.blogspot.com).
In its 2010 campaign, ‘Take Back The Tech!’ aimed to provide basic building blocks for women to use the Internet to ‘organise for change, inform public debate, define culture, build safe spaces and end violence against women’. They offer a Take Back the Tech! campaign kit on their website to women’s groups which wish to join and invite them to use the site to report in, and to twitter all that is happening.¹

Social media creating new values?
Social media still have several contradictions. As Christian Fuchs (2008) wrote:

‘The networking of the world advances the idea of bottom-up, grassroots self-organization and of a participatory society. However... under the given conditions, humans are confronted with a colonization of ever more spheres of society to an ever-larger extent by economic reason and the competitive logic of accumulation.’

The sense of what is private and what is public is creating contradictions for many in the Web 2.0 age and particularly those trying to promote social justice and protect women’s rights. It is somewhat confusing for the notion of citizenship and democracy that Web 2.0 has created a type of privatized public where cultural platforms are being sponsored by corporate capital, marketing messages pop up alongside strident political messages for change.

A major problem is that the development of social media is happening so quickly that there is no clear political space on the Internet. For example if Facebook closes down a site because the owner complains about harassment, there is no institution to which one can turn. And, sadly, the many women’s movements setting up thoughtful and engaged sites are being dwarfed by far more popular sites selling teenage love stories, soft porn, health and beauty advice.

The Internet has in many ways trivialized political democracy, when to expression and action is to tweet your approval, blog your every day movements, or to engage anonymously with other anonymous people in cyberfantasy worlds. Internet allows everyone to participate with no action beyond typing on the screen, or mobile phone or posting up digital images, thus emptying empty the space of political agency (see Gladwell, 2010)

Towards Web 3.0
There is an ongoing discussion among social justice groups about how to build a truly democratic knowledge system with ICTs. ‘Take back the tech’ represents one of the attempts to build a more open and participatory digital environment. Such commons based peer production and activism online is forming a small vibrant culture on the Internet from collaborative cooperative cybercultures like Wikipedia to critical online journalism and high quality cyberscience. These are the emancipatory spaces which are challenging the hegemony of mainstream social media.

The push for new gender frameworks based on citizenship and rights-based approaches is part of an emerging alternative knowledge society based on social justice that critique market based approaches to social media.⁶ These groups aim to create both agency and community that can shape new institutional frameworks. They look towards a Web 3.0 where technology and vision will forge a truly democratic, equitable and safe social media.

Notes
1. I refer here to feminist poet and writer Audre Lorde’s quotation ‘The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’. (Lorde, 1984).
2. 25 November is commemorated around the world as the International Day to End Violence Against Women
3. For example see the online debate by Chris Anderson with Tim O’Reilly and John Battelle creates of Web 2.0: ‘The Web is Dead’ a Debate/Magazine Wired September 2010 (www.wired.com/magazine/2010/08/ff_webrip_debates/all)
4. The tool kit supports women’s groups around the world to:
   - Document abuse, contest discriminatory attitudes, share knowledge
   - Use their mobile phone, camera, social networking spaces to document the reality of VAW where they live
   - Experiment with technology as part of local activism
   - Make a podcast
   - Create a video or make a digital story
   - Write a blog post
   - Map cases of violence against women in your neighbourhood
   - Report hacked women’s movement websites
   - Petition against censorship of women’s rights web pages
   - Email political representatives on the issue of VAW
   - Tweet political representatives on the issue of VAW
   - Start an online community that talks about violence against women
   - Respond to sexist comments
5. See for example the website of ‘IT for Change’ based in Bangalore, India and the series of articles on gender and ICTs (www.itforchange.net/gender.html)

References

Wendy Harcourt received her PhD from ANU, Canberra Australia in 1987. Since 1988 she has been living in Italy working at the Society for International Development www.sidint.net as senior advisor and chief editor of the quarterly journal Development. She is actively engaged in global feminist politics in particular with Women in Development Europe (www.wide-network.org). Her work and commitment to global gender justice has taken her around the world teaming up with UN policy makers, research institutes, women’s groups and social justice movements. She has written extensively on globalization and development from a gender perspective. Her latest book Body Politics in Development 2009 won the FWSA Book Prize for 2010. She is currently Zed books series editor for Gender and Environment.