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Abstract

This essay examines two cases of anti-rape media campaigns that originated in particular cultural contexts, but went viral online. The first of these is #ThisDoesntMeanYes campaign that began when four English women teamed up with renowned photographer Perou and hit the streets of London and snapped 200 women in their own clothing. The second is the It's Your Fault video in which a group of Indian female comedians lampoon controversial comments by public figures after the gang rape of a student in New Delhi in 2012. Given the specificity of the socio-cultural contexts, as well as the impact of transnational new media tools, the above campaigns can be read as largely transgressive in the modes employed to critique rape culture and intersectional in their emphasis on diversity and solidarity.

Keywords

Digital media, feminism, intersectionality, online activism, rape culture

Introduction

During a short stint at a prestigious undergraduate college at Delhi University in 2002, I and a number of my peers were shocked to hear a public figure's advice on how to avoid sexual harassment when taking public transport in the city. 'Just dress like a boy', she told us, unreflective of the misogynistic message she was sending to young urban women. Most of these women were aspiring to be mobile career people, unhindered by the dogmas and archaic gender dynamics of their parents' and grandparents' generations.

In April 2012, when visiting another prominent South Delhi institution, the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), for an international conference, I was struck with the high levels of campus activism and gender sensitivity in the postgraduate cohort. I also happened to be monitoring the nation's

numerous and culturally powerful English-language television news networks for my postdoctoral research project (funded by Professor Graeme Turner's Australian Research Council Federation Fellowship). Again, I noticed a remarkable increase in the featuring of previously taboo gender-related issues (Khorana, 2013) on prime time news, as well as talk shows on political and social subjects.

To give a snapshot of the kinds of stories that were making headlines, these included the battering

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of baby girls by their fathers in low-class and middle-class homes in big metropolitan cities, gang rapes of minor girls and reports on the failings of public schooling. In May of the same year, the Bollywood superstar with a difference, Aamir Khan, brought such issues more conspicuously into the public and media spotlight by starring in and producing a 13-part Oprah-style chat show called *Satyamev Jayate* (or, the truth always triumphs – see Star Plus, n.d.). The series had an overwhelmingly positive, class-transcending response, with the very first episode on the high prevalence of female foeticide dissuading hundreds from sex determination tests (sonography that is conducted to reveal the sex of the embryo). For instance, according to a report in the current affairs magazine *India Today*, the government of the western Indian state of Rajasthan announced stern measures against these tests soon after the *Satyamev Jayate* episode focusing on female foeticide in 2012 (see Parihar, 2013).

So what has changed in middle-class India and its media in terms of reporting on feminist activism in the last decade? And, does this reflect or leverage wider transnational patterns? If so, what does transnational feminist solidarity mean in the new post-global, post-Internet age?

Many detractors would err on the side of political correctness and argue that it is not even possible to talk about one India, let alone speak of this India as undergoing youthful, self-initiated, introspective social transformation. However, when I met Shoma Chaudhury, then managing editor of leading news magazine *Tehelka* at the Storyology conference (see Walkley Foundation, n.d.) in Sydney in July 2013, she too noted that the tenor of the recent anti-rape movement was markedly different from previous instances of orchestrated civil society protests (such as the anti-corruption movement in 2011). Another visiting Indian journalist, Manu Joseph, suggested that this was potentially due to a vast increase in the number of young women working in the Indian media.

So, while empowered female media professionals are taking the reins in terms of spotlighting gender issues, and young urban audiences are clamouring for a shift in media and societal values, the media in the west seems to be taking its time to adjust its orientalist framings of this now transitioning society. Most stories on major world news satellite networks

reported on the anti-rape protests, and the recent conviction of the four accused with nuance and adequate contextual information. There were even those that rated the Delhi reportage and responses as more gender-progressive than the victim-blaming discourse of the Steubenville rape case around the same time by the major US news networks (Mackenzie, 2013). This is because in the reporting of the latter case, the US media focused its attention and sympathy on the perpetrators of the assault who happened to be high-school football players (Mackenzie, 2013). In the coverage of the Delhi rape case, on the other hand, the emphasis was on the country-wide vigils and demands for political and legal action (Burke, 2012).

However, some western media commentaries began to give the impression that India was not a safe place to visit for female tourists, and painted South Asian men with a rather broad, and a rather unflattering brushstroke. Noteworthy among these was the account of a University of Chicago exchange student who allegedly suffered constant sexual harassment and was diagnosed with a traumatic disorder on her return home (Sashin & Hawkins-Gaar, 2013). This was followed by the account of an African-American student on the same trip who had similar experiences, but added that she also met Indian men who were extremely kind and supportive (trowseat, 2013).

While giving a talk at a student feminist society at the University of Wollongong, I was asked how west-based feminists could support the movement in India. The answer lies not in telling people what to do, I replied, but in staying well-informed, looking past stereotypes and expressing solidarity:

After the talk, I wondered what solidarity looks like in a post-colonial, transnational era? How does it manifest in new mediated forms that are potentially progressive, yet also risk reinforcing the problems of old media? And, what makes a viral anti-rape campaign transgressive? This short essay will attempt to address these questions by examining two recent online anti-rape campaigns – #ThisDoesntMeanYes campaign that began when four English women teamed up with renowned photographer Perou, hit the streets of London and snapped 200 women in their own clothing (that is, wearing clothes of their choice, and not selected by stylists or designers); and the ‘It’s Your Fault’ video

in which a group of Indian female comedians lampoon controversial comments by public figures after the gang-rape of a student in New Delhi in 2012. I will examine these campaigns within a broader context of the global rise in the use of new media for feminist activism. While it may appear that India and the UK are not comparable milieus for studying anti-rape campaigns, this essay is based on the premise that transnational, intersectional feminism and its mediated manifestations call for precisely such comparisons. In other words, it is imperative to both understand and study rape as a global problem, and responses to it (such as social media campaigns) as conversations taking place across boundaries of class, nation, region, religion, and ethnicity. This is not to overlook the context-specificity of sexual assaults, and the transnational disparities in political and legal redress, but to highlight the importance of local as well as global elements in devising successful grassroots campaigns.

Feminist activism and new media: a transnational perspective

According to Kaitlynn Mendes (2015) in her book on the history of the SlutWalk movement, the significance of the movement lay not in the premise of a protest against sexual violence per se but in its ability to capture the attention of the mainstream media in a range of national contexts (p. 11). After recounting sexual assault cases and subsequent protests that emerged in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Singapore, New Zealand, South Africa and India from 2011 to 2014, Mendes (2015) concludes, 'All of the above examples are evidence that rape culture is not just a Western/Eastern, northern/southern, first world/third world problem, but one which is experienced, albeit in different ways, around the globe' (p. 9). In other words, what she sets up at the start of the book is the need for an in-depth examination of a movement that simultaneously transcends national borders and operates across various media platforms.

Among the media platforms of significance that led to the popularity of SlutWalk, and related feminist movements in the last 5 years are blogs and social media. According to Loney-Howes (2015), these

two kinds of media are primarily used to detail women's experiences and to obtain support, especially in the case of anti-rape politics (p. 4). Her work also suggests that 'For many of these women, the use of social media to speak out about their experiences of rape and sexual violence demonstrates the limited scope of the law to recognise the diversity of rape victims and prosecute perpetrators' (Loney-Howes, 2015, p. 4). This sort of speaking back is in turn theorised in terms of the emergence of fluid counter-publics:

In the context of the online sphere, I contend that the counter-publics discussed in this article have the capacity to transcend and propagate counter-public, or non-normative (feminist) political deliberations, into the public sphere. This is facilitated by the fact that these campaigns are publically accessible and are created and/or supported by public institutions. Therefore, I contend that these anti-rape campaigns are fluid counter-publics. (Loney-Howes, 2015, p. 6)

In a similar vein, McLean and Maalsen (2013) discuss the emergence of the online-based 'Destroy the Joint' feminist movement in Australia as though it were an alternative social space. They add that social media unsettles space by 'creating a quasi-public/private space where people can express and support causes and potentially choose an anonymous identity if required, but which, like a personalised politics, is a space encouraged by an ethos of diversity and inclusiveness' (McLean & Maalsen, 2013, p. 252).

Despite the largely positive accounts of feminist use of new media described above, other scholars characterise this relationship as rather more complex and context-dependent. For instance, 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' (cited in Losh, 2014, p. 19). Loney-Howes (2015) is also of the view that acts of 'speaking out' in feminist online spaces often 'reflect individual forms of activism, resistive politics, or claims for redress, rather than collective action' (p. 5). In other words, it appears

that feminist movements in online spaces have the capacity to both challenge existing representations (especially in the case of sexual violence) and also to reinforce some of the dogmas of 'old media' in terms of discourse and audience attention. The two case studies examined below are at the transgressive end of this spectrum, and this possibly also contributed to their transnational, viral reception.

Case studies: anti-rape campaigns (UK and India)

In April 2015, the hashtag #thisdoesntmeanyes went viral by virtue of a South London-based campaign which aims to highlight that 'there are no blurred lines when it comes to consent' (Moss, 2015). It was created by four feminists: Nathalie Gordon, Lydia Pang, Abigail Bergstrom and Karlie McCulloch, who took to the streets of London with photographer, Perou, and photographed 200 women to show that 'no matter what a woman is wearing, she is never "asking for it" and the mentality "she wants it" is fundamentally wrong' (Moss, 2015). The campaign website is thereby a visually rich archive of professionally-shot photos of 'real women' in a range of clothing, with the hashtag #thisdoesntmeanyes in the top left-hand corner of each image. It is also participatory in that it enables women not included in the original photo exercise to upload their own image via Instagram and use the relevant hashtag.

In addition to the above, the website is explicit in detailing the transnational impact of the campaign, with links to mainstream and independent media articles from across the world (countries besides the United Kingdom include the United States, France, Australia, Italy, New Zealand and Mexico). The home page features a well-designed interface that begins with the picture of one of these 'ordinary women'. As one scrolls down, one's attention is drawn to the prominently displayed message – capitalised and centred – that women are never asking to be raped, whether they wear a short skirt, or flirt on a night out. Equally prominent below this are a number of pictures of women as well as information about the start of the campaign. Towards the bottom of the page, one sees logos of a number of prominent UK-based and international media outlets that link to

stories about the widespread take-up of the #thisdoesntmeanyes campaign. The left margin of the page displays symbols for various social media platforms, including Twitter and Facebook, thereby indicating that the page can be shared. By featuring images of women of diverse skin and hair colours, dress sizes, body shapes and sexual orientations, the website creates a space that is both quasi-public/private and inclusive. Therefore, while there isn't a text-based discussion of myths surrounding rape, the campaign uses visual cues by spotlighting the ordinariness of women's clothing and bodies, and inviting identification with these. This constitutes a challenge to the spectacle-oriented representation of sexual violence against women.

Another instance of an online anti-rape campaign emerging in a particular cultural context, yet going viral in a transnational sense is the 'It's not your fault' video starring Indian actress Kalki Koechlin and video jockey Juhi Pandey. At the time of writing in early 2016, the YouTube clip had received over 5 million views and responses from Indian as well as non-Indian media (such as *The Independent* in the United Kingdom and SBS News in Australia). The 3-minute video is a parody of rape culture created by 'All India Backchod' (AIB), a comedy collective comprising Tanmay Bhat, Gursimran Khamba, Rohan Joshi and Ashish Shakyia. It appears to be a direct satirical response to statements from certain public figures and politicians in India who blamed the rise in reported cases of sexual assault on everything from 'provocative clothing, working too late, Bollywood movies and chowmein' (Sieczkowski, 2013). In a deliberately mocking tone, Koechlin and Pandey suggest that scientific studies suggest that women who wear certain types of clothing invite rape because 'men have eyes'. They then go on to demonstrate the outrageousness of this comment by wearing a range of outfits (from short skirts and dresses to burqas and raincoats) and having a red cross sign appear on each of them. This is aimed to demonstrate the ridiculousness of the victim-blaming claims about women's clothing in particular. They also critique conservative people and groups who propagate these myths by falling back on particular notions of 'Indian culture'. These include charismatic gurus who suggest that women who are

being assaulted should refer to the rapist as a brother to stop him. Finally, Koechlin and Pandey comment on the absence of legal redress for marital rape in India. The use of the English language and references to working women and mobile phones (as one of the many causes of rape parodied in the video) assumes a largely middle-class audience in India, yet it is precisely because of this that the campaign has achieved global reach.

At the same time, the video became viral in India as it was made in the wake of and as a complement to the populist protests that emerged after the much-reported gang rape of a medical student in New Delhi in December 2012. At the same time, the precedent for using new media for feminist activists in India was set much earlier by the 'Pink Chaddi' (or pink underwear) campaign. According to Subramanian (2015), it was launched in 2009 as a protest against Hindu right-wing group Sri Ram Sene's attack on women in a pub in Mangalore (p. 71). This led to a group of women who called themselves 'Consortium of Pub-going, Loose, and Forward Women' to launch a Facebook group which saw close to 30,000 members in a week and a petition to send 3000 pink panties to the head of Sri Ram Sene (Subramanian, 2015, p. 71). Similar to the #thisdoesnotmeanyes campaign, the use of social media in the above instances in India creates a space that is simultaneously safe and public enough for widespread outreach. The 'It's not your fault' video, like the 'Pink Chaddi' movement, largely operates in a middle-class milieu in a nation where the vast majority still doesn't own mobile phones. Nevertheless, their campaigning is pertinent to the Indian context and attempts to transgress conservative religious and cultural dogmas.

Both campaigns discussed here point to the complexity of transgression as an analytic concept. The act of rape is clearly, morally and legally transgressive in most societies – be it the United Kingdom or India. Yet, in the efforts to raise public awareness to the causes and consequences of this egregious social problem, activists in both countries have to resort to rhetorical strategies and discursive tactics which themselves transgress their respective cultural and gender norms. Given the specificity of the socio-cultural contexts, as well as the impact of transnational

new media tools, the above campaigns can be read as largely transgressive in the modes employed to critique rape culture and intersectional in their emphasis on diversity and solidarity. In the case of #thisdoesntmeanyes, conventional notions of feminine beauty are challenged by featuring ordinary women rather than models. Using participatory platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, it also attempts to give women agency by enabling those interested in the campaign to send their own pictures. In a similar way, the 'It's your fault' video is potentially unsettling for those propagating the culture of victim-blaming as it uses satire to highlight the ridiculous nature of the excuses used to hold women responsible. Therefore, these new spaces, and the modes they employ have the potential to raise awareness, effect attitudinal and legal changes, as well as build intersectional feminist solidarities.

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