

## 8 Twitter doth not a revolution make, but it maketh a difference

Finally, no context analysis in the 21st century would be complete without looking at how activists who are seeking to make an impact on that context are using modern means of organizing and communicating their messages – new media!

The Arab Spring was 'sprung' by Twitter, Face-book and mobile phones! So mainstream media will have us believe. Elections are lost and won, thanks to messaging via social media, again we are told. Social media and new media have become critical forces, shaping hearts, minds, and indeed whole communities. The feminist movement has not been immune to its influence, and is consistently reminded to make use of these modern communication tools to spread its message.

Cellphone usage in Sub-Saharan Africa has been one of the fastest to take root. In a context in which most citizens did not have access to landline telephony anyway, the mobile phone has been a boon to communication starved people. In addition, the fact that governance systems, processes and decision making in most African countries tend to be shrouded in secrecy and absolute opacity, social media and the internet have become the means through which citizens talk mostly about and on the odd occasion, TO their leaders.

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The most commonly used, in descending order, are;

- Mobile phone; text messaging and more recently **whatsapp** are the most popular and affordable
- Email
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Websites (& occasionally blogs)

Little data is available on women's access to and use of new media in Southern Africa. Generally though indications are that mobile phone usage, with the

attendant paraphernalia such as **whatsapp** and **facebook** have become the tools of choice for the majority. In Kenya and Zimbabwe the fact that women in remote rural areas can also now receive cash via mobile phones has seen mobile phone popularity tripling.

A casual Google stroll through the most well-known women's rights organizations in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe, by the writer showed the following disturbing trends;

- Nearly all of them have not updated their websites since 2012, some of them as far back as when they set them up five years ago!
- The few who have updates barely talk to the issues of the day, topical subjects, and or respond to issues in the news
- Very few have substantial research or new knowledge that they have generated in the last two years.
- The websites are not interactive
- The Facebook pages are more up to date, but tend to have very scanty material/information and the little there is looks frivolous
- Interestingly, the individual leaders of those organizations have very active personal Facebook pages, Twitter accounts and rarely, blogs. Read differently this implies the leaders are 'celebrity feminists' who use these spaces for personal branding.

It would appear that feminist organizing in Southern Africa has not quite modernized and is yet to find its new media voice. Most of the women's organizations still use their old spaces – which it must also be acknowledged took a long time to fight for and acquire; Women's pages in mainstream daily or weekly papers; air time on national/state owned radio and television stations. The problem with most of these, at least in the case of Zimbabwe and Zambia is that they are now very unpopular with the citizenry let alone the women they are meant to reach.

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While new media has presented new, faster, more interactive ways of reaching women, it has also come with a number of negative implications for women's rights. Most of these have already been documented especially in the global north, I will only recount a few here;

- Individualism, personal branding, celebrity culture at the expense of the collectives of women
- Anybody who is anybody now has the tools to spew their sexist vitriol at feminists, already seen in UK and USA where feminists were targeted by trolling and subsequent abuse.
- Anybody who is anybody can now speak on behalf of women, about women, rather than rights holders or the women affected by issues speaking for themselves.
- Abuse of young women and girls; cyber bullying; stalking; sexting; in some cases resulting in the death of the young women as happened to a 14 year old girl in UK.

## Opportunities

There are lots of questions that feminist movements and their leaders need to grapple with as they seek to understand the context in which they want to reach, organize and talk to women; Who is the woman we are talking to, or about today? Where she is? What do we know about her? Her reading habits? Her communication habits? Her entertainment hobbies? What does her day look like – which determines what she can or can't listen to, watch, or even physically participate in? Is she in a rural or urban area?

New media has taken over most women's lives in the region – even as we continue to say women are excluded and or have less access than men. But they do in fact have access to something, and are actively using it. At the same time, our movements are straining to be heard above all the cacophony of voices, causes, (and more worryingly outright misogyny), that the world has become. Gone are the days when women's groups with their workshops, newsletters and radio programs had close to a monopoly over women's ears and eyes. More strategic thinking is necessary so that feminist movements can adequately seize the opportunities new media present.