

**“Can the Subaltern [e-communicate]?”**  
**Exploring the Complex Relationship between the Worldwide Web and the World’s Most**  
**Marginalized Women**

by  
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## ABSTRACT

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Famously heralded by early Internet pioneers and contemporary globalization theorists as providing a “state of perfect freedom and equality”, the Internet, on one hand, may be used to benefit the world’s least privileged women; these efforts have taken variety of forms, from serving as a space where women can share ideas, to creating an encyclopedia of practical women’s health and political information, to providing a medium through which women can directly access economic opportunities. Yet through critically examining the ways in which the Internet is used, we see how such apparently benevolent initiatives may sometimes silence the very marginalized, female voices they attempt to empower; this idea of Internet deployment gone wrong may manifest as the forcible assertion of certain socioeconomic values, the homogenization of unique individual women, and the aggravation of internal conflict within religious communities. My thesis will attempt to move beyond these two contrasting positions, in order to suggest the specific ways the Internet may be conscientiously deployed to benefit the world’s least privileged women; the most effective way to advantage such women, it concludes, is to deploy the Internet as a space where the subaltern can *directly* e-communicate her own, individual preferences, ideas and experiences.

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## PREFACE

*“Wikipedia is the best thing ever. Anyone in the world can write anything they want about any subject. So you know you are getting the best possible information.”* –Michael Scott, *The Office*

I remember the first time I *truly* understood the importance of philosophy, of questioning and challenging the world as it was presented to me. I was studying abroad in Athens, Greece, taking Professor Evgenia Mylonaki’s “Ancient Greek Philosophy” course, taught through DIKEMES University’s College Year in Athens program. Though I had been familiar with Plato, Aristotle, Zeno, Heraclites, and some of the other Greek philosophical giants that the course highlighted, it was not until Professor Mylonaki provided us with *her* first challenge to “the truth” that I understood their lasting significance.

She told us a story of her experience as a young, defiant student, who was unable to readily accept the “history” that her third grade teacher insisted was truth. “It is in the textbook,” the teacher told her, as if to suggest the textbook could not contain any historical information that was not the truth. *“But who wrote the textbook? How does he know? And why should we consider his account to be true?”* the young student wondered.

Dissatisfied with her teacher’s response, my professor purchased a notebook. In it, she wrote a series of blatantly false observations about the world around her: “the sky is neon pink”, “my school feeds us candy for breakfast, lunch and dinner”, “I, Evgenia Mylonaki, am the world’s first 8-year-old billionaire”. She then took the notebook, and all of its distorted assertions, and buried it in the ground, wondering if someday, someone would find the notebook, and assume that its content provide an accurate historical depiction of what the world was like when she was a child.

I use this example to suggest how important it is, and was for this thesis, to challenge the notions that the world regards as irretrievably true. In fact, ironically relevant to the topic of this thesis, I insist that it is *especially* important to challenge truths in the age of the Internet; I suggest this is critical for our existence in the supposed “age of Information”, wherein Googling a question like “why does my head hurt?” could lead you to accept “medical” explanations of why you are terminally ill with some rare, undetectable disease, or when reading the online dating profile that was *actually* written by Hank, the 61-year-old janitor at New Haven High, could lead you to believe you are reading about Brad, the “dashing, 23-year-old, rocket scientist at Yale University.”

As Michael Scott’s satirical observation allows us to recognize, the Internet allows the user to post whatever he or she wants; the Web facilitates an incredibly vast amount of information, depicts a wide variety of experiences, and, therefore, may sometimes perpetuate “truths” that are far from being universal truths. This thesis will not only exemplify the consequences of this phenomenon in regard to the world’s most disadvantaged women, but will

additionally recommend ways the Internet may be conscientiously deployed to mitigate the presence of such obscured “truths”.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“That’s what I consider true generosity: You give your all, and yet you always feel as if it costs you nothing.” –Simone de Beauvoir

To Lori Marso, my Political Science thesis advisor: This quotation is most resoundingly applicable to you. How do I begin summarizing all of the *true* generosity you’ve extended to me since we first met? If someone had told me at this time last year that I would be writing my thesis on feminism, I would have thought they were nuts. But your passion for your field is contagious, and I have you to thank for making me the proud feminist I am today. *You* have given me my “voice”, even when that voice originally wanted to preach how globalization was the best thing since sliced bread, and how buying things really could and would save the world. Your lesson to me is what I hope this thesis can begin to teach others: to think beyond the surface.

To Bob Baker and Leo Zaibert, my Philosophy thesis advisors: As your discipline suggests, you have similarly taught me to think beyond the surface; you have taught me to write like a philosopher- by which I mean to explain every potentially confusing term and pose *every* possible counter argument<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, you have also taught me to immensely reduce my use of irritating words (such as “indeed” and “immensely”), and I am extremely thankful for all of your patience and insight. I am not sure what this thesis would be without you two.

To my brother George Hotz, my self-proclaimed life advisor: Thank you for your rants and your criticisms<sup>2</sup> over the years, for they have made “counter-arguing”<sup>3</sup> in this thesis a whole lot easier than it otherwise would have been.

To Tom Lobe, Jim Lobe and Carey Biron, the three men to whom I owe this thesis’ inception: If not for you, I would have never had the delightfully, eye-opening experience of interning at IPS News Agency, during which I reported on topics ranging from the homosexuality stigma preventing AIDS treatment in Uganda, to the mass malnutrition crisis in South Sudan, to the worldwide pervasiveness of child marriage and genital mutilation. And if I had never had encountered such injustices, I would have never begun dreaming about the ways we could use modern communications to correct them. This thesis is both a continuation and challenge of that dream.

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<sup>1</sup> \*Insert counterargument here\*

<sup>2</sup> This even includes the criticisms that have called me a brainwashed, Marxist hippie.

<sup>3</sup> ~~This allowed to make the criticisms that have called me a brainwashed, Marxist hippie.~~

<sup>3</sup> Am I allowed to make up words in the Acknowledgements section?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Before we can understand how the Internet may be deployed to either help advance or further silence the preferences of the world's least privileged women, we must first establish what these preferences are, and how they have come to be represented. Chapter 1 begins this exploration through discussing "honor killings" in India; citing two contrasting feminist perspectives on the root causes of this issue, we learn of the tendency for local feminisms to become obscured and misinterpreted in the international community. Lori Marso elaborates on this tendency in her essay on "Feminism", published for the *Encyclopedia of Political Thought*. Along with Kwame Anthony Appiah, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen*, Marso suggests that domestic violence is not only a product of the Third World, but is also pervasive in the "industrialized West", namely the United States and Europe.

This transitions into Chapter 1's larger point, which is to demonstrate how feminism, defined broadly as claims for women's rights, is not one, sole unifying orientation, but rather is a movement that can have multiple forms, depending on the social, political and cultural context in which it is formulated. Estelle B. Freedman, author of *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women*, applies this concept to the formation of feminist movements throughout United States history, in tracking the respective contexts of first, second, and third wave feminism. In "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", an essay written in 1985 by Indian feminist Chandra Talpade Mohanty, we learn how cultural and political factors are similarly influential in Third World contexts. Mohanty's central focus,



however, is to debunk the myth that there exists a sole characterization, “poor, uneducated, tradition-bound and victimized”, to describe “average Third World woman”

Uma Narayan, author of “Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism”, further emphasizes how Third World feminism is a distinct, culturally-influenced movement, and how the Third World woman is a distinct, heterogeneous entity. Her specific grievance concerns the tendency for “Western” regions, namely the United States and Europe, to assert their conception of feminism on to Third World regions, and for Third World feminism to conversely be perceived as the “importation” of Western feminism. Echoing this point is Saba Mahmood, who wrote *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* from the perspective of a Muslim woman in Egypt. Mahmood elaborates on the tensions between Western and Third World conceptions of feminism, using specific examples to illustrate instances in which the two do not align. This tension, Mahmood argues, provokes internal polarization between Muslim women, with some joining international feminist movements, and others remaining staunchly committed to the traditional religious practices.

In spite of this tendency for the individual preferences of Third World women to be assimilated and/or misrepresented in the larger world, Chapter 2 asks how such women may use the Internet to dispute these assumptions, and to instead share their individual accounts and mobilize their collective consciousness. This exploration begins with a detailed explanation of “consciousness-raising”, and its successful employment within second wave feminism. To explain these terms, Chapter 2 uses a vast collection of texts, including Brandies University scholar Janet Freedman’s *Tools of the Movement: Democracy, Community and Consciousness Raising*, feminist historian Dawn Keetley’s *Public Women, Public Words: A Documentary History of American Feminism*, American historian Estelle B. Freedman’s *No Turning Back: The*

*History of Feminism and The Future of Women*, cultural critic Alice Echols' *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975*, renowned radical feminist Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father*.

Chapter 2 then begins to draw a link between traditional consciousness-raising and feminist blogging, an act that Barnard University scholar Tracy Kennedy regards as “virtual consciousness-raising” in “The Personal is Political: Feminist Blogging and Virtual Consciousness-Raising.” Elizabeth Anne Wood, an American sociologist, further affirms the benefits of blogging for feminisms in “Consciousness-raising 2.0: Sex Blogging and the Creation of a Feminist Sex Commons.” The chapter is thus peppered with examples of both personal and political feminist blogs, which will be thoroughly introduced and explained throughout Chapter 2. It also includes a variety of research studies that support women’s tendency to positively receive this new form of electronic communication, citing McCulley and Patterson’s 1996 “Feminist empowerment through the Internet” and Heimrath’s 1999 “Internet Perception and Use: a gender perspective”.

Beyond simply blogging, however, Chapter 2 goes on to suggest the Internet may be valuable for the world’s least privileged women to the extent it can facilitate information-sharing and provide a platform for women to create their own economic opportunities. These perceived benefits are supported by the data obtained within Intel Corporation’s 2012 “Women and the Web” report, which surveyed a large sample of women across a collection of low and middle-income countries, in order to better understand the relationship between such women and the Internet. To further validate the Internet’s ability to deliver information and democratize economic opportunity, Chapter 3 also features excerpts from the renowned *New York Times* contributor Thomas Friedman’s *The Lexus and The Olive Tree*, within which he both explains

and celebrates the implications of faster and more far-reaching technology. Like Chapter 2's collection of feminist blogs, Chapter 3, to support these claims, then cites a wide collection of websites deployed to either facilitate information-sharing or create economic opportunities for the women who need it the most.

Yet Chapter 3 challenges the idea that these underprivileged women *need* "saving", and questions the means through which they often are, or appear to be, "saved". This begins with citing Gayatri Spivak's 1988 *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, in which Spivak criticizes the ways a colonial power tends to perpetuate a false account of its subaltern group's grievances. Chapter 3 then uses the account of British journalist's Myriam Francois-Cerrah's "Feminism has been hijacked by white middle-class women", which similarly criticizes the way in which dominant white, middle class feminists tend to narrate the grievances of the world's most marginalized women. Guided by these arguments, along with the revisited arguments of Marso, Mohanty, Narayan, and Mahmood, Chapter 3 critically analyzes many of the aforementioned blogs and websites for the ways they sometimes homogenize the subaltern subjects they concern, and often promote both the culture and values of the dominant white, middle class, secular world.

These themes are further evident in the biased *way* we attempt to learn about the subaltern subject, as the research study, "Beliefs and Biases in Web Search" of Microsoft scientist Ryen White helps exemplify. Chapter 3 also suggests that the advent and dynamics of Twitter, in addition to the Google search, may be further conducive to the homogenization of subaltern subjects and promotion of Western values. We explore this hypothesis through the #BringBackOurGirls campaign, in which "Bring Back Our Girls' Campaign: Reinforcing U.S Imperialism, the Root of Terrorism in Africa", offered by Danny Haiphong of The Centre for Research on Globalization, further illustrates this tendency.

Chapter 3 concludes with an account of the tendency for the Internet to be associated with secularism; to elaborate on this idea, Chapter 3 uses Ben Barber's *Jihad vs McWorld*, which discusses the literal and figurative war between "Jihad" and "McWorld", a term he uses to mean "the secular, scientific, rational, and commercial civilization created by the Enlightenment". This tension is further confirmed through Greg G. Armfield and R. Lance Holbert's 2003 research study "The Relationship Between Religiosity and Internet Use", and through a glimpse at the countries which bear the world's most restricted Internet access.

Finally, Chapter 4 synthesizes the arguments made in Chapters 1-3 in order to offer a unique philosophical analysis on how the Internet may be *conscientiously* deployed to benefit the world's most marginalized women.

## INTRODUCTION

*“The Internet is the first thing that humanity has built that humanity doesn’t understand, the largest experiment in anarchy that we’ve ever had.”* –Eric Schmidt, executive chairman of Google

The mass expansion of the “world-wide” web is a seemingly omnipotent and unstoppable force, transforming everything from how we understand our past, to how we live day-to-day in the present, to how we can shape our own future. From e-mailing our friends and monitoring our Facebooks, to “Googling” a subject of interest and browsing international news reports, both the frequency and diversity of our Internet usage has increased dramatically since the web’s inception<sup>4</sup>. However, despite the Internet’s omnipresence and practicality<sup>5</sup>, we may be tempted to take its *symbolic* meaning for granted.

To appreciate the World Wide Web’s philosophical significance, it is helpful to revisit the works of early Internet (even pre-Internet) pioneers. Perhaps the first writings come from Marshall McLuhan, whose groundbreaking 1962 novel, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, predicted technology would create a “global village” of digitalized information that would ultimately replace print media (McLuhan). The Canadian philosopher also theorized that the existence of a shared information internetwork, colloquially abbreviated an “internet”, would transform the identity of humankind from “fragmented individualism” to that of “collective identity” (McLuhan). Indeed, McLuhan asserted that “electronic independence” would do more than simply change the way in which we retrieve information and

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<sup>4</sup> A January 2014 Pew survey, tracking Internet usage over time, estimates that 87% of American adults currently use the Internet, a figure up from 14% in 1995.

<sup>5</sup> This thesis assumes it is talking to a regular Internet user.

communicate with one another; he argued that a World Wide Web, by nature of the medium itself, would change our self-concept as a society.

When McLuhan's prediction of the Internet became an increasingly tangible reality at the end of the twentieth century, philosophers commented on the unprecedented freedom and opportunity that a World Wide Web could provide. John Perry Barlow, an American essayist and founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, wrote famously in his "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" that "Governments of the Industrial World...have no sovereignty where [Internet users] gather" (Barlow, 1). Speaking directly to such governments, Barlow declared:

[W]e are building an Internet to be a "global social space"...to be naturally independent of the tyrannies you seek to impose on us...Cyberspace does not lie within your borders. Do not think you can build it...It is an act of nature (Barlow, 1).

Many scholars agree with Barlow's conception of the Internet as a domain free of government regulation, while some have further considered it to represent a state of nature in itself. One such scholar is Efrat Shuster, who explores how Locke's idea of man's initial 'state of nature,' summarized by Shuster as a "state of perfect freedom and equality", can best exist in a "non-tangible cyberspace" (Shuster, 1). In the "The Political Philosophy of the Internet- From Locke's State of Nature to His Social Contract", Shuster claims that the Internet, given its lack of a traditional governing body, its unique manifestation as a non-physical space and its continually evolving nature, makes for an appropriate place to apply Locke's political philosophy, and understand its alignment with a Lockean state of [initial] perfect freedom and equality. He

suggests these ideals are evidenced by the informality of “the current structure of Internet governance”, which allows for “the variety of decisions and actions [to be] made by the different actors that comprise [the Internet]” (Shuster, 22). In other words, if an Internet user rejects a law concerning the Internet, Shuster suggests there is nothing to stop the user from going around the rules, and “manipulating the technology of the Internet to make the law void” (Shuster, 22)<sup>6</sup> Similarly, given that Locke’s state of nature argued man is guided by Reason, in which “no one ought to harm another in his life, liberty, or property”, we see how the Internet, in its intangible, ungoverned state, may similarly provide a medium to which man can assert his natural rights<sup>7</sup>

These accounts of the Internet’s theoretical potential, to create a “global village” of digitalized information, to act outside of government imposition, and to provide a “state of perfect freedom and equality”, seem incredibly promising in light of the massive inequalities existing under the world’s traditional governments and socioeconomic institutions. Such inequality is particularly consequential for women, whom the United Nations regards as “the poorest of the world’s poor...representing 70 percent of the 1.3 billion people who live in absolute poverty” (UNIFEM, 1). Oxfam UK similarly identifies how women are disproportionately victimized by lack of education, as “girls account for two-thirds of the children not in school” (Oxfam UK, 1). Beyond these two barriers, the United Nations’ “World’s Women 2010: Trends and Statistics” report identifies how social, cultural, and economic factors

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<sup>6</sup> This actually happened in January 2012, when a series of protests against the United States Congress’ Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and “PROTECT IP Act (PIPA) were viewed as unfavorably infringing on the free speech rights of Internet users. In response, an enormous number of websites, such as Wikipedia, coordinated a “24 hour blackout”, in which they shut down their respective websites’ operations for the day.

<sup>7</sup> This is not to necessarily suggest that the Internet is consistent with Locke’s *entire* theory of a State of Nature, in which he argues that we form a judiciary, executive and legislative branch when issues arise over how to enforce man’s natural rights. Rather, Shuster’s theory simply states that Locke’s *initial* state of nature, a state of “perfect freedom and equality”, devoid of governing bodies, is similar to the Internet’s early days, insofar as it acknowledges man’s freedom and ability to act with reason and avoid harming one another. Of course, given the advent of cyber-bullying and online threats, this theory does not hold as strongly as it did in the Internet’s early days.

may further affect a woman's state of well-being; for instance, the woman's expectation to marry below age 20 in certain countries makes her more prone to maternal health issues, and/or may make her vulnerable to HIV/AIDS (United Nations, 1). These inequalities additionally pervade both the working and political world; while less than 30 percent of women in Northern Africa and Western Asia participate in the workforce, a mere 17 percent of seats in national parliaments around the world are occupied by women (United Nations, 1).

While such statistics only begin to scratch the surface of the inequality faced by women around the world, they nonetheless confirm how traditional government institutions have been overwhelmingly unsuccessful in ensuring gender equality. But as the World Wide Web continues to stretch itself across the world, even to populations of women or parts thereof that have been historically victimized by poverty, disease, corruption, lack of opportunity, and institutional repression, we may begin to wonder how the Internet could compensate for such institutional shortcomings; we may wonder if and how the *theoretical possibilities* of the worldwide web, such as its ability to facilitate information-sharing, promote equality and subvert government oppression, have *practical applicability* to benefit such marginalized "Third World" women<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, we may want to explore the ways in which the Internet, in spite of its seemingly flexible and dynamic nature, could alternatively be used to *further perpetuate* the inequality experienced by Third World women. Given the Internet's roots as a Western innovation, and the tendency for Internet campaigns to be , we should inquire if and how the

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<sup>8</sup> Throughout this essay, the term Third World women will refer to women living in Asia, Africa and Latin America and experience one or more of the aforementioned forms of inequality (in terms of poverty, education, workforce representation, legal barriers, etc.) Though often used interchangeably, the term "developing world" women will not be used, as it may suggest that such women want to "develop" towards a prescribed economic order. It is also significant to note that "Third World women", as I will use it in this essay, do not necessarily identify under such a label. Chapter 1 will explore this point more thoroughly.



Internet is being tailored to the economic, political and cultural interests articulated by the West<sup>9</sup>. To use the language within McLuhan, Barlow and Shuster's respective theories, we could alternatively ask how the Internet facilitates a "global village" of *selective* information, how the web serves an *extension* of tyrannical government imposition, and how the Internet retains the *appearance* of a "state of perfect equality and freedom", but implicitly gives Western users an upper-hand.

Our essay considers these alternative theories through analyzing the complex relationship between today's Internet and the subaltern<sup>10</sup>, otherwise regarded as a Third World woman, or the world's most institutionally-marginalized individual; does the World Wide Web provide a space in which the subaltern can act *outside* of her institutional constraints, or is she confined within the same boundaries? Does the Internet articulate the subaltern's *direct* preferences, or are her preferences narrated by other individuals in other words? In other words, *can* the subaltern e-communicate<sup>11</sup>, or is she silenced yet again?

Though the Internet, like any other tool, does not have any inherent value, and does not lend *itself* to either of these two contrasting positions, this essay will explore how users, both within the Third World and outside of it, employ the Internet as an instrument to either end.

Chapter 2 explores the former position; it asks how the Internet may promote the liberation and

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<sup>9</sup> The division of the world into "East" and "West" may be dated to the time of the Roman Empire. At that time, the barbarian West, including the areas we today call "Britain" and "France," was contrasted with the civilized areas East of Rome, including those we today call Syria and Turkey. Throughout this essay, we typically use the West to refer to particularly powerful and prosperous nations within this region, namely the former colonial powers: the United States, Britain and France.

<sup>10</sup> We will more thoroughly define and contextualize the term "subaltern" throughout the thesis. However, for now, we may understand a "subaltern" to broadly mean a member of "the social group who are socially, politically, and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure of the colony and colonial homeland"

<sup>11</sup> The term "e-communicate" means electronically communicate, and the question "can the subaltern e-communicate?" is a play on words of the question raised in Gayatri Spivak's "Can the subaltern speak?". Spivak's essay similarly explores the relationship between the subaltern and the greater, civilized world in a post-colonial society. Spivak's theories, including the ideas he forwards in his groundbreaking "Can the subaltern speak?" will be discussed at length throughout this essay.

political equality of Third World women, inquiring as to how the web may act as a medium to raise feminisms' consciousness around the globe, as a platform for female users to share and obtain information, and as a tool through which women can reinvent the traditional labor model and create their own opportunities. By recounting the "consciousness-raising" tools employed during the feminist movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, this chapter will suggest that the Internet has become the premier consciousness-raising medium of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Citing contemporary case studies of feminisms' mobilization on the Internet as evidence of this phenomenon, Chapter 2 will reveal how online initiatives and social media platforms have provided a space for women's voices on the Internet, particularly in their ability to gather individual input from members of historically marginalized communities. It will additionally cite instances of women's online businesses and entrepreneurial successes to demonstrate how the Internet may serve as a gender-blind platform, in which women could potentially create their own economic opportunities and act *outside* of the gender-biased labor model<sup>12</sup>. These accounts will collectively suggest that the Internet may be used as a liberating and democratizing tool to *include* women's preferences and needs, when it is used for women and by women.

Chapter 3 will then explore the opposite phenomenon: it instead questions how the Internet promotes Western feminism<sup>13</sup>, homogenizes its users, preaches secularism and provokes internal polarization within the communities it reaches. Analogizing the spread of the Internet to

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<sup>12</sup> As argued in "Gender Inequality in the Workplace: What Data Analytics Have to Say", female workers in the United States are still paid only 77 cents for every dollar their male colleagues make, while a mere 4.2 percent of chief executive officers at Fortune 500 companies are women. Though there fails to exist hard data analytics to support this phenomenon in the Third World, one could infer this inequality in the workforce holds true to an even greater extent.

<sup>13</sup> The idea of "Western feminism" will be thoroughly explained both in Chapters 1 and 3. For now, however, we may understand it to mean feminism, defined broadly as "the advocacy of women's rights on the ground of political, social, and economic equality to men" that has become associated with dominant U.S and European accounts.

the spread of Western colonialism<sup>14</sup>, Chapter 3 explores how theories of “Postcolonialism”, regarded as “the study of the legacy of the era of European, and sometimes American, direct global domination...and the residual political, socio-economic and psychological effects of that colonial history”, pertain to the individuals that the World Wide Web’s reaches. It then explores the writings of Third World feminists, whose theories similarly criticize the assumptions and inevitable consequences that occur when the West attempts to “colonize” the Third World through mediums such as Internet campaigns. Citing explosive Internet sensations like Malala Yousafzais and #BringBackOurGirls, Chapter 3 then applies such Postcolonial and Third World feminist criticisms to actual Internet sensations, particularly in spite of their recognition as globally successful, to understand how the worldwide web may cloud internal differences between Third World women, in order to assimilate and match their preferences to Western feminists. The chapter additionally uses instances of Internet feminism gone viral to understand how such campaigns, as benevolently intentioned as they are, may simultaneously provoke internal polarization within the communities it reaches, by promoting secularism and devaluing religious fundamentalism.

The final chapter will offer a unique analysis of *how* we could utilize the Internet for the purposes of bettering the world’s most disadvantaged women, in light of the potential and criticisms respectively articulated in Chapters 2 and 3; in other words, how can we conscientiously deploy the Internet so the subaltern can e-communicate? Like McLuhan’s foundational writings, Chapter 4 will offer a symbolic conception of the Internet, which recognizes the worldwide web for its *potential* to promote equality and provide a space where women can directly share their experience, but simultaneously understands the *reality* of the

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<sup>14</sup> Western colonialism is technically defined as “the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploring it economically”,

Internet's use as an instrument to perpetuate inequality and taint the apparently "direct" space that it provides. The chapter concludes by offering a series of concrete recommendations of the ways individuals can utilize the Internet to maximize the opportunity this medium poses for diversely situated Third World women, and minimize the likelihood that the Internet becomes a further extension of the institutional inequality that is perpetuated.

Of course, before we can attribute legitimacy to either of the two theoretical positions (if either of them) articulated in Chapters 2 and 3, and move beyond such theories to ask how the Internet may *practically* benefit Third World women and mitigate the inequalities they experience (in Chapter 4), we must first understand *what* it means to "benefit women in the Third World", and how this meaning has come to be understood. In surveying a variety of First World and Third World feminists, the first chapter attempts to do just that; it uses actual manifestations of women's inequality as a starting point to analyze the representation of women's preferences in diverse geographical contexts. Through asking about the universality of feminism's political agenda, understanding the existence of multiple forms of feminisms, analyzing how political and cultural contexts influence such feminisms, and examining the problematic pictures of Third World Women displayed in the popular consciousness, Chapter 1 will explore how the representation of women's preferences tend to be a function of the socioeconomic context in which they are formulated.

## CHAPTER ONE- “DEATH BY CULTURE”? EXPLORING HOW THE PREFERENCES OF WOMEN ARE ALTERNATIVELY REPRESENTED THROUGH WESTERN AND THIRD WORLD LENSES

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### I. Introduction

Nilofar Bibi was 14 years old when she left her home in Kolkata (Calcutta), India to marry the man that her parents had selected for her. But after eight years of alleged torture by her in-laws, Bibi returned home to her family.

Within just a few weeks of being home, Bibi’s older brother, Mehtab Alam, had discovered that Bibi was living with a former boyfriend (notably, a blue-collar working boyfriend) and proceeded to take action. Rather than sitting his sister down for a stern sibling talk or offering her a dose of brotherly comfort, Alam dragged Bibi out into the street, reached for his father’s butcher knife, and beheaded her in broad daylight. Committing such an act within five kilometers of the main city center, Alam then carried his sister’s head to the police station and defended his murder in the name of their family’s honor and local reputation; “she had sinned and had to be punished,” he informed passing pedestrians (Arjunpuri, 1)

While the December 2012 murder of Nilofar Bibi attracted mass media attention from all over the world, an international consensus has yet to form on *what* Bibi’s murder should be considered; was it a bout of domestic violence taken too far, or was it an “honor killing”, defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary as “the traditional practice in some countries of killing a family member who is believed to have brought shame on the family”? The majority classified the incident as the latter, including the *Al Jazeera* article, entitled ‘Honour killings’ bring dishonor to India”, from which the details of Bibi’s story were cited. *Bonfire Impact*, an organization that claims to “promote the works of...change-makers and non-

profits...work[ing] to make good works and social impact infectious”, similarly characterized Bibi’s murder as an honor killing, covering the incident in an article entitled “Gruesome Beheading Just Another Honor Killing”, as if to imply such “honor killings” happen regularly.

But according to Nirmala Samant Prabhavalkar, a member of India’s National Commission for Women (NCW), “[t]here’s no honor in killing” (Arjunpuri, 1). She explained to *Al Jazeera* that “Killing is killing. It’s unconstitutional and illegal, it’s an offense” (Arjunpuri, 1). Having established her legal qualms with honor killings, Prabhavalkar then argued that the root problem exists within Indian police, who are not doing enough to address the phenomenon. “Many times, police do not take complaints by the victims seriously,” she argued. “They do not provide protection to a victim, which in turn boosts up the morale of culprits” (Arjunpuri, 1). Prabhavalkar also asserted that ‘understanding the male mindset’ and ‘establishing gender sensitivity in Indian society’ are two of the most critical steps we can take to prevent the next honor killing (Arjunpuri, 1).

Yet when Madhu Purnima Kishwar, founder of the women’s rights journal *Manushi*, commented on the subject, she argued that it is the *language* in which we speak about honor killings that may be the most critical issue (Arjunpuri, 1). “The term ‘honor killing’ is meant to make the crime appear exotic, as something that happens only in the ‘uncivilized’ non-Western societies,” she explained to *Al Jazeera*. Kishwar then provided an analogy of the situation in Western societies:

For example, when a jealous husband murders his wife in New York because he suspects her of having an affair, no one calls it a ‘jealousy murder’. In fact, that could also well be called an ‘honor killing’ (Arjunpuri, 1).

Between Prabhavalkar calling for “gender sensitivity” and Kishwar blaming the phenomenon’s misleading language, we may understand these contrasting perspectives on the causes of India’s “honor killings” to exemplify a microcosm of this chapter’s larger area of interest: to understand how the preferences, grievances, objectives and ideas of feminists in the Third World are *not* homogenous, nor do they necessarily align with the preferences, grievances, objectives and ideas of feminists rooted in the Western world<sup>15</sup>. By identifying how the objectives of feminisms, formulated in different cultural and religious contexts, both overlap with and diverge from one another, this chapter will attempt to identify *what* it is that women around the world want (here again, there is no one, homogenous answer to this), so that we may better understand the tendency for the Internet to facilitate and/or ignore such desires. It will thus contextualize our greater exploration in this essay, which is to determine the extent to which the phenomenon of Internet globalization may satisfy and/or compromise the diverse needs and wants of Third World women, who may not otherwise have a space to e-communicate such preferences.

## II. Are Women’s Rights Universal?

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<sup>15</sup> This is not to imply, however, that all *Western* feminists’ ideas are homogeneous. Furthermore, it does not suggest that all feminists living in the Western world are necessarily Western feminists, nor does it suggest that feminists living in the Third World are necessarily Third World feminists. This point will be reinforced throughout Chapter 1. However, for argument’s sake, we will use the term “Western feminism” to refer to the values that are most frequently associated with women living in the Western world. Throughout both Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, we will specifically identify what these values are.

In re-examining the case of Nilofar Bibi, it may be tempting to transform our empathy for the 22-year-old murder victim into an argument supporting a universal agenda for women's rights. Even if we were to accept Kishwar's analogy that equally-destructive cases of domestic violence occur periodically in the West (i.e. the jealous husband murdering his wife in New York City), or if we were to call Bibi's murder something other than an "honor killing", we are nonetheless likely to conclude that *certain* culturally-induced practices provoke intervention on behalf of women's rights, when and if they appear to so blatantly perpetuate violence against women. Under this assumption, we may then regard an omnipresent, far-reaching medium (i.e. the Internet) to be the perfect deliverer of such universal women's rights agenda.

But as Lori Marso cautions in her essay "Feminism," it may be fallacious to "assum[e] that feminism represents progress for a backward third world that must be liberated from its barbarisms" (Marso, 6). After all, as Kwame Anthony Appiah writes in his book *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen*, these "barbarisms" may be similarly prevalent in the Western world; just as Kishwar had argued was the case for domestic violence, Appiah writes that "even in the industrialized West...it has taken an enormous amount of work to persuade women and men that rape should not be treated as a source of shame for the victim (Appiah, 145)." Although Appiah continues his argument by citing how numerous institutional barriers, such as *jirgas*- "traditional courts that have extensive practical authority in the tribal areas"- may contribute to the phenomenon of "honor killings" in India, both Marso and Appiah emphasize how domestic violence, rape, and other forms of oppression against women are similarly prevalent, though characterized as less "barbaric", in the Western world.



Yet Marso argues that the West's reluctance to accept its own prevalence of domestic violence may explain why we tend to treat "honor killings" in Third World countries as worthy of intervention; as told by Indian-born, Columbia University professor Giyatri Chakravorty Spivak, the justification often supporting US-led military intervention in Third World countries is presented as a need for "white men [to save] brown women from brown men" (Marso, 6). Though both authors agree that so-called "brown women" living under the Taliban actually do experience pervasive oppression based on their gender, the answer is not necessarily military intervention, nor is it "a civilizing mission to save and protect women from dangerous and uncultured men" (Marso, 6).

Yet in these attempts to use war as a means to import Western feminist values of "freedom, democracy and women's rights" to Muslim countries, Marso argues that we subsequently "obscure local and indigenous feminist struggles and accomplishments" (Marso, 7). The consequences of such an occurrence could be seen within the Bush administration's efforts to invade Afghanistan; while Marso highlights how certain Western feminist groups in the United States, such as Feminist Majority, supported the U.S invasion of Afghanistan as a means to "liberate Afghan women from their Taliban oppressors" (Marso, 7), feminist groups *inside* Afghanistan, notably the Revolution Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), strongly opposed such an intervention on behalf of the "tremendous suffering and potential loss of life such a war could entail for Afghanistan's women (Marso, 7)."

These contradictory perspectives, offered by such geographically-diverse feminist groups, are indicative of the larger issue that this chapter seeks to identify: how do we universally assess, yet contextually consider, the preferences and needs of women on a global

scale, and how do these considerations manifest within the Internet? Though it may ring true internationally that “women are disproportionately adversely affected by poverty, unemployment, sexual and domestic violence, the ravages of global markets and religious fundamentalism,” (Marso, 2), the disagreement between the Western-rooted Feminist Majority and the developing world-rooted RAWA suggests that finding a universal solution through feminism may not be so simple. Indeed, Marso cites Linda M. G. Zerilli to describe our tendency to simplify the issue; she writes:

We [feminists] nod to the importance of acknowledging differences among women, yet we persistently return to the idea that feminism needs a unified subject. It is in this regard that we may consider feminism as not a sole, unifying orientation, but rather as “feminisms,” or as independent movements with “plural, internally contested visions and goals (Marso, 1).

This consideration is necessary to make when assessing how the Internet, a sole medium, may either facilitate or hinder the progression of such ‘internally-contested’ visions.

### **III. Feminisms with an ‘S’: Establishing the ‘Multiple Forms’ of “Feminism”**

While Marso writes that “women have been protesting second-class status since the earliest recorded history,” the roots of modern feminism, defined broadly as claims for women’s rights, may begin with the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848. Led by feminism pioneer Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the convention produced a “Declaration of Sentiments,” described by Estelle Freedman, author of *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women*, as a “litany of complaints about the unjust laws and practices that denied

women education, property rights and self-esteem (Freedman, 17).” Calling for both a legal and political movement to overthrow the male patriarchy, Stanton famously pronounced “the history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and inspirations of the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her (Freedman, 17).”

The spirit of the Seneca Falls Convention continued into the twentieth century and became increasingly focused on gaining women’s suffrage. Though it largely “ignored the voices of African American women,” who were similarly fighting for legal and political equality, the movement successfully won women the right to vote in 1920, based on the widely-accepted premise that women, as “moral guardians” active in the civic sphere, would be beneficial for society at large (Freedman, 67). These accomplishments came to collectively be called the first wave of feminism.

Unlike the first wave, the second wave of feminism, beginning in the politically-charged 1960s, conversely found momentum in collaborating with the decade’s simultaneous social and political movements. By actively including women of color and attempting to consider the interests of “developing nations”<sup>16</sup>, second wave feminists became primarily focused on passing equal rights legislation and abolishing white supremacy, in addition to promoting the sexual and reproductive freedoms of *all* women (Freedman, 84). As such, a 1972 poll revealed that two-thirds of black women, compared to only one-third of white women, were sympathetic to the women’s movement (Freedman, 89).

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<sup>16</sup> “Developing nations” is Freedman’s term, through it may be synonymous with what we have been calling Third World nations.

Furthermore, coining the phrase “the personal is political” the second wave of feminism introduced “consciousness-raising”<sup>17</sup> as a tool in which individual women could contribute their personal struggles to determine the root of sexism and take collective action (Freedman, 87). Borrowing this “telling-it-like-it-is” technique from the concurrent Civil Rights Movement, consciousness-raising, in the context of the second wave of feminism, “include[ed] stories of rape, unwanted pregnancies, lesbian desires, illegal abortions, and the dilemmas of child care and housework” (Freedman, 87).

While the second wave’s spirit of consciousness-raising is ever prevalent in the current wave of feminism (though, as we will see in later chapters, may have manifested in a new form), third wave feminism, beginning in the mid-1990s and still alive today, has also adopted similar goals and values as the first wave of feminism. Among them is the tendency for “contemporary women to draw on their identities as mothers to protect the interests of their families”, a tenet that was abandoned in second wave feminism (Freedman, 328). Also distinct from second wave feminism is the form of political expression that its participants utilized; while second wave feminism largely operated as an extension of the Civil Rights movement, which often communicated its political interests through grassroots organizations and public protests, third wave feminism has recognized traditional political power structures, through mobilizing women voters, encouraging women to run for office, and continuing to fight for wage equality (Freedman, 345).

This historical labeling of the three waves of feminism in the Western tradition help illustrate the idea that the women’s preferences articulated through feminisms may be

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<sup>17</sup> Chapter 2 will more thoroughly elaborate on the idea of “the personal is political” and “consciousness-raising”, as they are crucial for our discussions of the Internet’s potential to provide a space where women can share their experiences and mobilize political action

formulated by their contexts; therefore, just as a *generation's* values can influence the objectives that a form of feminism (in this case, the “first”, “second” and “third” wave) preaches, a *nation's* distinct political struggles and experiences may similarly shape the content of a particular form of feminism. This point is argued most notably by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, whose 1985 essay entitled “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” attempts to discredit the homogenous characterization of Third World feminism (without the s). In this account, Mohanty also criticizes the picture that Western feminists have painted of the “average Third World woman” (Mohanty, 337). Indeed, in the same way that *Manushi's* Kishwar criticizes the “exotic” language in which Western cultures tend to speak about “honor killings” in India (which, here again, makes male-induced domestic violence against women seem like an obscure, Third World occurrence), Mohanty criticizes the way in which Western feminists tend to characterize women in the Third World as “poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, and victimized” (Mohanty, 337).

Mohanty exemplifies the manifestation of such a “Third World” frame in her discussion of female genital mutilation in Africa and the Middle East. She begins by citing the theory of the Fran Hosken, a famous American feminist and founder of the Women’s International Network, who argued that “male sexual politics” in Africa and around the world “share the same political goal: to assure female dependence and subservience by any and all means” (“FGM” 14 in Mohanty, 339). Mohanty, however, disagrees with Hosken’s theory, arguing that such a generalization “defines women as archetypal victims”; she theorizes that this not only frames women as “objects-who-defend-themselves,” but also frames men as “subjects-who-perpetuate-violence” (Mohanty, 339). Mohanty adds that by attributing these fixed and

all-encompassing characterizations to men and women in Africa and the Middle East, Hosken simultaneously casts society at large into “powerless” and “powerful” groups of people (Mohanty, 339). Mohanty instead advocates that male violence be theorized and interpreted within *specific* societies, both to “understand it better” and to “[more] effectively organize to change it” (Mohanty, 339). Thus, by participating in Internet campaigns that condemn male violence as one universal phenomenon<sup>18</sup>, we may understand how this contradicts Mohanty’s recommendation.

Further developing her criticism of the Western perceptions of Third World Women, Mohanty then cites the writings of Beverly Lindsay, who states that Third World Women are linked by “dependency relationships” that are based upon race, sex and class, and are perpetuated through social, educational, and economic institutions. Yet under this label of women as “universal dependents,” Mohanty argues that Lindsay assimilates the values of groups as linguistically and culturally diverse as Black Americans and Vietnamese. Like Hosken, Mohanty suggests that Lindsay fails to contextualize how the historical contexts of such groups influence their respective feminist values. This creates the assumption “all third world women have similar problems and needs, and thus “they must have similar interests and goals” (Mohanty, 344).

However, as Mohanty demonstrates through her example of veiling in diverse Muslim countries, the appearance of shared victimization and “universal dependency” may cloud internal cultural differences, and thus weaken the legitimacy and tenability of such diverse objectives. Indeed, Mohanty writes that because Muslim women in Saudi Arabia, Iran,

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<sup>18</sup> We will explore some of these campaigns in Chapter 3.

Pakistan, India and Egypt all wear some sort of veil, this phenomenon seemingly reveals that “the sexual control of women is a universal fact in those countries” (Mohanty, 347).

Yet despite the physical similarity exemplified by women wearing the veils, Mohanty argues that the “specific meaning attached to this practice varies according to the cultural and ideological context” (Mohanty, 347). For instance, while middle class Iranian women during the 1979 revolution veiled themselves to indicate their solidarity with their working class sisters, contemporary Iranian women wear their veils because it is required by Islamic law. Therefore, because wearing the veil in the first historical case is a voluntary, revolutionary gesture, and wearing the veil in in the second contemporary case is an institutionally-enforced mandate, such diverse meanings help suggest the importance of analyzing female practices on a context-specific level, as opposed to assuming that they signify universal oppression of women (Mohanty, 347).

#### **IV. Influence of Cultural and Political Contexts on Feminisms**

Few understand the existence of multiple feminisms, as well as the context-specific objectives that define them, better than Uma Narayan, who identifies as a “Third-World feminist” despite her residency and citizenship in the United States. However, though she eventually moved to the states and became a Professor of Philosophy at Vassar College, Narayan spent her childhood in Uganda, and spent both her toddler years and teenage years in India. As such, Narayan’s diverse residencies in both the West and in various parts of the Third World make her especially qualified to deliver the point that a particular form of feminism relies on its context; she integrates her diverse experiences and identities in these regions within her collection of essays entitled “Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism”. Here, Narayan combines her personal experiences with her philosophical expertise to draw the same conclusion as Mohanty: Third-World feminisms are *not* homogeneous, but rather are influenced by their internal, national and cultural context.



Indeed, while both Mohanty and Narayan aim to clarify the often problematic connotations of “Western culture” and “Third-World culture”, Mohanty focuses exclusively on “the West’s” tendency to homogenize, whereas Narayan describes how this same generalization is made within Third World regions, such as her home country of India. She remembers how her mother, not unlike other middle-class Indian women, had been critical of Narayan’s objections to aspects of Indian culture, viewing Narayan’s opposition as submission to “Westernization”<sup>19</sup>. For instance, while Narayan writes that the Indian women in her mother’s generation often “saw education as a good thing for daughters...and saw it as prudent that daughters have the qualifications necessary to support themselves economically”, she adds that they were simultaneously “critical of the effects of the very things they encouraged” (Narayan, loc 332). These effects included Narayan’s insistence on citing ideas and books to “question social rules and norms of life,” her inclination to view careers as elements of a fulfilling life (as opposed to an alternative to marriage), and her indifference about possessing the “compliance, deference and submissiveness” required of a “good ‘Indian’ wife” (Narayan, loc 332).

While Narayan points out that these three values, along with a lessened appreciation for the institution of marriage, may be *consistent* with the objectives of [what had been] Western feminism, these beliefs are *not* necessarily a “symptom of Westernization,” despite her mother’s characterization of them as such. Narayan argues that this disjunction is in part because of the Western tradition’s tendency to self-idealize (and thus misrepresent) its own supposed values, when using them to “save” other nations. For instance, although “Western culture” may see *itself* as being “staunchly committed to values like liberty and equality,”

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<sup>19</sup> This is the term Narayan uses to describe her mother’s criticism. In her account, “Westernization” appears to mean the conformity to Western values.

this self-perception is challenged by the fact that Western powers, at the time when the “Western” label originated, had been engaged in antagonistic practices, such as slavery and involuntary colonization, and had resisted granting political and civil rights to even large numbers of Western subjects, including women. (Narayan, loc 515).

Narayan argues that another misconception about feminism in her motherland may concern *how* one becomes a “feminist” in India. She explains that true feminism is founded through “drawing political connections to other women within their cultural and political sphere”, rather than importing objectives from pre-established feminisms. But because many Indian women, such as Narayan, are accused of the latter through succumbing to “Westernization”, Narayan argues that some women, who possess objectives that *overlap* with Western feminism, deliberately refrain from calling themselves feminists (Narayan, loc 414). Rather, Narayan describes how certain women in India take pride in *naturally* coming to oppose oppressive institutions, such as that of arranged marriage, without claiming a label (Narayan, loc 414).

Therefore, Narayan asserts that the most defining feature of feminism in the Third World is not how a woman labels (or does not label) herself as a feminist, but rather is *how* (or if) the woman comes to identify and respond to the issues that feminisms seek to address. She argues that this process may explain why certain issues, such as dowry-related harassment<sup>20</sup>, take on different degrees of attention, depending on the generational and political context they are assessed in. For instance, while the political environment of Narayan’s generation

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<sup>20</sup> Dowry-related harassment is defined by the United Nations as “any act of violence or harassment associated with the giving or receiving of dowry, property or money brought by a bride to her husband, at any time before, during or after their marriage.

has presented dowry-murders<sup>21</sup> to be a growing problem (but a problem that is addressed through public protests), the political context of dowry-harassment within Narayan's mother's generation had alternatively viewed such a practice as both commonplace and unworthy of political response (Narayan, loc 442).

Thus, the notion of Third World feminism coming-to-be through the importation of "Western feminist" values is one that Narayan wholeheartedly dismisses, as she instead believes feminisms within Indian society correspond to their respective political and social contexts. With this consideration, we may assess the Internet as valuable to the extent it can be used to *correct* the idea that "feminism" is, or should be, imported.

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<sup>21</sup> Dowry murders, similarly, are defined as "deaths of young women who are murdered or driven to suicide by continuous harassment and torture by husbands and in-laws in an effort to extort an increased dowry

## V. Problematic Pictures of Developing World Women

Just as it is tempting to mislabel feminist values in India as either “Western” or “Third World”, and overlook the political contexts in which these internally-diverse objectives form, it is similarly tempting to overlook the contexts of feminisms in Islamic countries. Saba Mahmood, a professor of social cultural anthropology at UC Berkeley, makes this argument in *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*; she speaks of the tendency for Islamic movements to be “associated with terms such as fundamentalism, the subjugation of women, social conservatism, reactionary atavism, and cultural backwardness” (Mahmood, 4). Indeed, while it is initially troublesome for us to consider the feminist objectives of Indian women who might not whole-heartedly oppose a culture that condones honor killings, Mahmood writes it is similarly difficult to accept “women’s active support for ‘socio-religious’ movements that sustain principles of female subordination.” In fact, Mahmood writes that one of the most common associations feminists make with women Islamist supporters is “the supposition that [they] are pawns in a grand patriarchal plan , who, if freed from their bondage, would naturally express their instinctual abhorrence for the traditional Islamic mores used to enchain them” (Mahmood, 1). Yet just as Mohanty and Narayan emphasize the importance of considering the diverse internal contexts of feminisms, Mahmood optimistically argues that women can “resist the dominant male order by subverting the hegemonic meanings of cultural practices”, and alternatively tailoring them to their own interests and agendas (Mahmood, 6).

This self-tailoring may be best exemplified by the women's mosque movement in Cairo. She describes how fifty to one-hundred women, -ranging in age, occupation and outward conservatism from *khimir* (head-veil)-wearing housewives to jean-and-makeup-wearing students-, congregate to attend weekly lessons taught by Hajja Faiza. Gathering in the Umar mosque, set in an upper-middle class neighborhood in Cairo, the women listen to Faiza use colloquial Arabic to preach lessons from the Qu'ran. In an interview with Mahmood, Faiza asserted that her purpose is not to educate Muslims in the basic performance of religious duties (i.e. praying five times a day, fasting, etc.), but rather to remind Muslims of their "capacity to render *all* aspects of their lives into a means of realizing God's will" (Mahmood, 46).

The Ayesha mosque, in contrast to the Umar mosque, is located in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Cairo, and thus entails a different experience. Associated with al-Jam'iyya al-Shar'iyya, described as the largest Islamic nonprofit organization in Egypt, the Ayesha mosque provides extensive welfare services to neighborhood residents, including bi-weekly religious lessons offered by two women *di'yat* and one male *imam* (prayer leader) of the mosque. However, unlike Faiza's lessons, Mahmood describes teachings at the Ayesha mosque as more informal, with attendees often interrupting the teacher to ask questions or offer alternative opinions they have heard elsewhere.

Despite the socioeconomic diversity of their services and audiences, both the Umar and Ayesha mosques belong to a movement that claims to oppose the "increasing secularization of Egyptian society"; participants within the movement view it as a response to "the erosion of a religious sensibility considered crucial to the preservation of the 'spirit of Islam'" (Mahmood, 43). Troubled by the increasing prevalence of this form of religiosity, that

“accords Islam the status of an abstract system of beliefs” and has no direct bearing on how one lives and spends their day, participants in the Mosque movement equate their experience of “secularization” with “westernization” (Mahmood, 44). Indeed, Hajja Smira, a di’iyat from the one of the six mosques observed by Mahmood, writes:

Look around in our society and ask yourselves: who do we emulate? We emulate the Westerners [ *gharbiyyiri*], the seccularists [ *almaniyyin*], and the Christians: we smoke like they do, we eat like they do, our books and media are full of pictures that are obscene...Our sight, and dress, drink, and food should also be for God and out of love for him. They will tell you that this way of life is uncivilized: don’t listen to them because you know that real civilization for we Muslims is closeness to God.”

Mahmood describes how this frustration is echoed in the perspective of Egyptian politicians. She cites the explanation of Adil Hussein, a key Islamist public figure who served as the general secretary of the Islamist Labor Party. In a documentary on the Islamic Revival (which was ironically produced by the *American* Public Broadcasting System, PBS), Hussein describes why he believes wearing the veil, an act often criticized by Westerners as an indicator of women’s oppression, is important for Egyptian society:

In this period of [Islamic] Revival and renewed pride in ourselves and our past, why should we not take pride in the symbols that distinguish us from others [like the veil]?..Why can’t we have our own dress which expresses decency, a requirement of Islam, as well as the special beauty that would mark of our society which has excelled in the arts and civilization?”

Narayan articulates this same grievance in “Dislocating Cultures”, when she argues that indigenous practices, including “veiling, polygamy, child-marriage and *sati*”, are often viewed by Westerners as being “backward and barbaric,” as opposed to the “progressiveness of Western culture” (Narayan, loc 553). Indeed, Narayan takes specific issue with the way in which Mary Daly<sup>22</sup>, a renowned American feminist, had criticized *sati*, a funeral ritual in which a recent widow immolates herself (often on the husband’s ashes). While Narayan by no mean defends the objectively harmful practices of *sati*, she criticizes Daly’s “complete inattention to the variations in the practice of *sati* across Hindu communities”, the two-sidedness in which she presents the historical debate around *sati*, and her more general presentation of Third-World women as either “victims of Patriarchal Practices” or as “objects of compassion” (Narayan, loc 1441).

As such, Narayan writes that the “figure of the colonized woman”, one that authors like Daly help paint, has come to represent the oppressiveness of the entire “cultural tradition” of the colony. This generalization, Narayan argues, has been detrimental for mobilizing opposition to specific harmful practices, such as those who identify with a “modernist” anticolonial discourse. As opposed to the starkly “traditionalist” anti-colonialists, these “modernists” accept that some aspects of their “Traditions and Culture,” particularly the practices affecting women, are in need of change; however, they also insist that “their Culture” has distinctive, special, and valuable views about women and their “cultural place” that are preferable to certain aspects of “Western culture” (Narayan, loc 553).

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<sup>22</sup> Chapter 2 will extensively discuss the writings, contributions and reputation of Mary Daly in the Western feminism tradition.

But because these distinctions have been generalized as “colonial agendas” versus “anti-colonialist nationalist agendas”, it has been difficult to discuss the harm induced by such internally-controversial indigenous practices, without having such an opinion cast as either colonialist or nationalist (Narayan, loc 565). Furthermore, by focusing energies on this debate between “Cultures”, Narayan argues that we consume energy that could otherwise be spent on addressing how women are second-class citizens in *both* the West and the Third World (Narayan, loc 578). These arguments, put forth by both Narayan and Mahmood, will be especially critical when we examine (in Chapter 3) how certain viral Internet sensations, by the nature of their intention to mobilize support for women’s rights from around the world, have further perpetrated this issue of two-sidedness; we will assess how such catchy campaigns may glorify the virtues of Western intervention and ignore its consequences, such as further silencing the subaltern.

Nevertheless, to help *parallel* (but not assimilate) the gender-based oppression experienced by women around the world, Narayan compares dowry-murders in India to domestic-violence murders in the United States. In her exploration of, what she terms as, “Other cultures”, Narayan notes how fatal forms of violence against Third-World women are often said to have “suffered death by culture” (Narayan, loc 2063). Yet she argues that the subjugation of “mainstream *Western* women” to fatal forms of violence makes Westerners resistant to such “cultural explanations” (Narayan, loc 2063). To illustrate, Narayan recalls stumbling upon an Internet conversation in which an American man mistakenly defined *sati* as the process “bride burning...for having insufficient dowry.” When a man of Indian background attempted to correct the American, he explained that “sati is a traditional, but now rare, practice of voluntary self-immolation on the husband’s funeral pyre” and that dowry-murders, on the other hand, are “a



recent phenomenon,” characterized by “burning a bride for insufficient dowry” (Narayan, loc 2073).

Though Narayan takes issue with this explanation (specifically its characterization of dowry as “voluntary”), her larger concern is that conversations describing “culturally unfamiliar” practices might unintentionally establish an “understanding of forms of violence against women ‘specific’ to Third-World contexts as instances of ‘death by culture’” (Narayan, loc 2073). She also claims that this conversation illustrates the ease with which certain issues, like *sati*, get obscured in the eyes of the American public; to the contrary, she clarifies that *sati* is a virtually extinct practice in India, and that one recent, standout incident provoked momentum for the political struggle against harmful elements of Hindu fundamentalism as a whole (Narayan, loc 2073).

But perhaps most alarming is Narayan’s description of how Western feminists are similarly prone to cultural generalizations; in her extensive interviews with American women, she explains, despite their awareness of the many U.S. women who are killed by their partners as a result of domestic violence, how American women often fail to connect the “foreign” phenomenon of dowry-murder with the “familiar” phenomenon of domestic violence (Narayan, loc 2166). Further exemplifying this disconnect is the fact that Narayan, along with a collection of her American feminist friends, were unable to find data detailing how many women are killed annually as a result of domestic violence; she describes this as the difference between “disappearing dead women” in U.S. accounts of domestic violence versus the “spectacular visibility” of women murdered over dowry in India (Narayan, loc 2176).

Narayan attributes part of this “invisibility” of domestic violence-induced deaths in the U.S to the scattered focus of existing efforts to combat such an issue; between challenging police non-responsiveness to domestic violence complaints, to protesting the diverse ways in which women are victims of domestic violence (including brutal physical terrorizing and persistent stalking), she argues that deaths from domestic violence are rarely portrayed as the “typical” outcome of domestic-violence situations. In India, however, Narayan suggests that the public media is especially concerned with dowry-murders, as opposed to other issues such as police rape of poorer women held in custody, because of its ability to provoke a reaction; given the “general awareness that poor and lower-caste women [are] vulnerable to rape and sexual exploitation” (Narayan, loc 2239), Narayan writes that the media views dowry-murders as a “predominantly middle-class phenomenon”, and thus as more worthy of attention (Narayan, loc 2239).

Another explanation Narayan provides for the different contextual meanings of domestic violence-induced murders in the U.S and India is the diversity of solutions that respective feminists offer. While Narayan finds that a significant proportion of feminists’ efforts to combat domestic violence in the United States are spent publicizing the need for shelters for battered women, this solution is not central within Indian feminists’ agenda. Yet Narayan writes that Western feminists assume this lack of prioritization of constructing such homes implies that the Indian women’s movement is “less developed” (Narayan, loc 2259). To exemplify this idea, she cites Madhu Kishwar, the same local feminist whom we introduced earlier as an opponent of the language of honor killings; Kishwar argues that the preference to *not* prioritize the construction of battered homes marks the Indian women’s movement, in the eyes of Western feminists, as being at a “lower stage of development in the struggle against violence on women”, and that

such homes are an “inevitable outcome of the movement’s development” (Narayan, loc 2259). Rather, Kishwar explains that the preference to divert feminists’ efforts from constructing battered women’s shelters in India is contextual:

Battered women’s homes in the west...seemed to act as a useful type of short-term intervention because of (a) “the existence of a welfare system which includes some, even though inadequate, provisions for public assistance, subsidized housing, and free schooling for children; (b) the overall employment situation being very different from that in India; (c) the lower stigma on women living on their own and moving around on their own; and (d) the existence of certain avenues of employment that are not considered permissible for middle-class women here.

Thus, in light of these two plausible explanations of why “death by domestic violence” is met with different degrees of attention and cultural attribution in India and the United States, we should ask how the Internet, as a means of global connectivity, could *both* acknowledge such differences, *and* simultaneously mobilize common effort around combatting violence against women at large. When doing so, however, we must ask be sure to understand that *recognizing* the different cultural contexts of violence against women does not suggest that different cultural contexts are the problem altogether<sup>23</sup>.

Narayan’s explanations may additionally help shed us light on the case of Nilofar Bibi, whose honor killing (discussed in the beginning of this chapter) invited contrasting coverage from domestic and international media outlets, and provoked diverse responses from both Western and local, Third World feminists. Indeed, we may understand the difference between the

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<sup>23</sup> We will explore this issue in depth in Chapter 3.

solution offered by a Western-rooted feminist (i.e. to increase Indian police accountability and establish gender society) and a local feminist (i.e. to change the way in which we speak about “honor killings”, as to not frame as death-by-culture) to be indicative of the larger issue: the way in which Western culture, and even Western feminists, may sometimes assume superiority in advancing women’s rights. Saba Mahmood’s description of mosque movements in Egypt *explicitly* protests this phenomenon of Western superiority, while Uma Narayan and Chandra Mohanty’s accounts warn of the more subtle ways in which Western values dominate and obscure local feminist movements.

Thus, given Chapter 1’s account of how Western values tend to be asserted on feminist movements in the Third World, we may be inclined to evaluate the Internet, typically understood as a platform monopolized by Western-rooted Internet campaigns, to promote such cultural assertion. Yet on the other hand, in returning to Barlow’s conception of the Internet as a space *free* of government imposition, or McLuhan’s vision of the Internet as a global village of information-sharing, we may also understand how the World Wide Web could be used as a tool to subvert this traditional domination; we may explore how the Internet, given its existence as a non-tangible space with no supreme ruler, could be used to promote feminisms of *all* contexts. In Chapter 2, we will explore some of these possibilities, and analyze the extent to which they allow for the subaltern to e-communicate.

**CHAPTER TWO- IS CYBERSPACE THE NEW “NEW SPACE”? EXPLORING HOW GLOBAL CONNECTIVITY RAISES CONSCIOUSNESS, PROVIDES INFORMATION AND CREATES OPPORTUNITY FOR WOMEN IN THE THIRD WORLD**

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**I. Introduction**

It was a “moment of joy”, participant Vivian Gornick recalled to Janet Freedman, a resident scholar of the Brandeis University Women’s Studies Research Center. Reflecting on her entry into the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and early 1970s, Gornick recounted her experience of a small consciousness-raising (CR) group to Freedman:

I stood in the middle of my own experience, turning and turning. In every direction, I saw a roomful of women, also turning and turning... That is a moment of joy, when a sufficiently large number of people are galvanized by a social explanation of how their lives have taken shape and are gathered together in the same place at the same time, speaking the same language, making the same analysis, meeting again and again... for the pleasure of elaborating the insight and repeating the analysis.

Consciousness-raising<sup>24</sup>, characterized by feminist historian Dawn Keetley as a “bottom-up approach [to]...creating unity among women”, was formulated by Kathie Sarachild in her *Program for Radical Feminist Consciousness-Raising* (Keetley, 168). Presented during the fall of 1968 at the first National Women’s Liberation Conference, the program describes consciousness-raising as a technique in which “individual women took turns speaking emotionally, trying to locate the deep-rooted sources of their discontent and oppression”

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<sup>24</sup> We may recall how this technique was regarded as a key component of second wave feminism in Chapter 1’s discussion on the history of Western feminism.

(Keetely, 159). In 1971, the logistics of such a technique were transcribed by the Chicago Women's Liberation Union into a widely-distributed leaflet:

Consciousness-raising groups are the backbone of the Women's Liberation Movement. All over the country, women are meeting regularly to share experiences each has always thought were "my own problems". A lot of women are upset by remarks men make to us on the street, for instance, but we think other women handle the situation much better than we do, or just aren't bothered as much. Through consciousness-raising we begin to understand ourselves and other women by looking at situations like this in our own lives. We see that "personal" problems shared by so many others—not being able to get out of the house often enough, becoming exhausted from taking care of the children all day, perhaps feeling trapped—are really "Political" problems. Understanding them is the first step toward dealing with them collectively (Sarachild).

Described by Keetley as the stage in which women were to “move out of the living room cell groups and go public with their concerns,” consciousness-raising helped give rise to Sarachild’s notion of “the personal is political”; this rallying cry allowed women to realize how their “private” problems could become objects of political action if shared with other women and applied in political contexts. As such, one of the first “public”, CR-induced demonstrations occurred in September 1968 at the Miss America Contest in Atlantic City. In addition to constructing a “freedom trash can”, in which “high heels, bras, girdles, fashion magazines, stenographers’ pads” and other perceived tools of oppression were discarded, participants further protested the pageant by unfurling a large banner with the words “Women’s Liberation”, and mocking the pageant altogether by crowning a live sheep as the real “Miss America” (Keetley, 159).

Estelle B. Freedman, author of *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and The Future Of Women*, also draws a connection between the effectiveness of consciousness-raising and the success of the second wave's politically-charged public demonstrations, known to the movement as "zap actions" (Freedman, 216). In 1969, for example, she recalls how young feminists in Washington, DC, after engaging in private CR-sessions, had disrupted U.S. Senate hearings on oral contraception, after no women were called to testify about the safety of the birth control pill (Freedman, 216). Citing activist Alice Wolfson, Freedman additionally recounts the late 1960s demonstrations outside of the D.C. public hospital, which was prompted by the consciousness-raising of the "the disproportionate numbers of black women who were being maimed and were dying from botched illegal abortions" (Freedman, 216). Yet the decision to politicize such formerly "personal" and private matters here again came from consciousness-raising, within which women "shared stories of bodily pleasures and pain, admitted ignorance about sexuality and reproduction, learned self-examination methods, and claimed personal responsibility for health, reproduction and sexuality" (Freedman, 216).

Calling consciousness-raising the movement's "most effective tool", Alice Echols, author of *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975*, similarly regards consciousness-raising as instrumental for promoting the ideals of Second Wave feminism (Echols, 4). "By 1970," she recalls, "there was such enormous interest in radical feminism that some have even argued it was on the verge of becoming a mass movement" (Echols, 4). Yet Echols suggests that the increasing collective feminist consciousness was useful beyond its ability to generate action in the political arena. Rather, she believes consciousness-raising gave "rise to cultural feminism," which prompted the movement to become less about advancing specific feminist

causes, and more about creating a domain in which women could connect and identify with other women. (Echols, 4).

Indeed, Echols writes that this technique allowed the movement to “turn its attention away from opposing male supremacy to creating a female counterculture” (Echols, 4). She cites Mary Daly<sup>25</sup> in calling this counter-culture a “new space...where ‘male’ values would be exorcized and ‘female’ values nurtured”. In her world-renowned, 1974 book *Beyond God the Father*, Daly writes about the philosophical implications of consciousness-raising:

The process involves the creation of a new space, in which women are free to become who we are, in which there are real and significant alternatives to the prefabricated identities provided within the enclosed spaces of patriarchal institutions. As opposed to the foreclosed identity allotted to us within those species, there is a diffused identity- an open road to discovery of the self and of each other (Daly, 40).

To this end, we may wonder how the Internet, described in Chapter 1 by Barlow as “an act of nature”, could facilitate this very “self-discovery”; we may wonder if cyberspace, and its existence outside of institutional borders<sup>26</sup>, could serve as the *new* “new space”, wherein women may find alternatives to the “prefabricated identities” that patriarchal institutions forward. In fact, these possibilities are especially necessary to consider when learning that the number of active CR groups had significantly decreased by the end of the 1970s (Freedman, 3). Indeed, Gornick, the participant who had previously described the joy and freedom she felt from her consciousness-raising experience, recalls that “one day, [she] woke up to realize the excitement, the longing, the expectation of community was over” (Freedman, 3). Freedman attributes this

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<sup>25</sup> We may recall Mary Daly from Chapter 1 as the renowned American feminist whom Narayan criticized.

<sup>26</sup> This phrase also refers to John Perry Barlow’s theory mentioned in Chapter 1.



seemingly “sudden collapse” of consciousness-raising to the “many, many slowly developing cracks” within the greater movement; from the late 1970s and into the 1980s, she argues that feminism was not only being “attacked from the outside by an increasingly vocal conservatism,” but also “from within, from important critiques of the limitations of its own theory and practice” (Freedman, 4).

But Freedman suggests that this current generation of feminism, one that “refuses to be categorized,” has increasingly “found ways to live with, and often to celebrate, contradictions as they search for authentic personal and political expression.” Elaborating on her optimistic assessment of these so-called “Third Wave” feminists, she writes:

Their perspective is not only multicultural, but global, and rather than a single mass movement, they seek strategic coalitions around common concerns in particular settings. They work within and beyond the academy, and are deeply concerned about the millions of girls and women who have no voice due to poverty, lack of education, and sexual and economic exploitation.

Given these global concerns, Freedman explains how such feminists have created a *new* form of consciousness-raising, in which women are “enthusiastically utilizing new technologies....to creatively challenge and adapt to popular culture” (Freedman, 4). In other words, when a feminist encounters an element of popular culture, ostensibly deemed “*popular*” in today’s climate based on its pervasiveness online, she no longer has to simply accept it; instead, she may use e-communication to challenge and/or adapt to the popular culture, in order to further advance her feminism’s objectives. This is precisely what Olivia Lubbock, Zoe Ellwood and Adelaide Dunn, collectively known as the Law Revue girls, accomplished in their

“challenge” to Robin Thicke’s popular song “Blurred Lines”. Rather than accept the “culture of objectifying women in music videos”, as Thicke’s sensation blatantly appears to do, the Law Revue girls created a parody of the song; entitled “Defined Lines”, the song challenges the implications of Thicke’s sensation, with lyrics like “What you see on TV, doesn’t speak equality, it’s straight up misogyny” (Battersby, 1). Though not a traditional written blog, the Law Revue video serves as just one instance of third wave feminism’s “enthusiastic” utilization of technology.

This point is echoed by Tracy Kennedy, who similarly praises the Internet’s potential to benefit feminisms in “The Personal is Political: Feminist Blogging and Virtual Consciousness-Raising.” Indeed, Kennedy argues the Internet is both “working as a new vehicle for facilitating such intimate interaction” and is thus capturing the “potential for social transformation” (Kennedy, 1). As suggested by her title, Kennedy is particularly hopeful about the possibilities posed by blogging; she believes that that this medium serves as an “important way for feminist thinkers to connect and build community and to advocate for social-change,” especially at a time “when feminism itself has been called fragmented, disjointed, or even dead” (Kennedy, 1). Furthermore, Kennedy believes that blogging, a process she calls “virtual consciousness-raising”, is not only useful in its ability to connect with academics and community activists, but also in its provision of a voice for the “‘everyday’ people, whose experiences are often ignored or silenced” (Kennedy, 1). Thus, in revisiting how formal consciousness-raising sessions allowed for “the personal” to become “political” in second wave feminism, we may ask how an informal, yet globally accessible, blogosphere may similarly allow for current feminists to share their private, “personal” experiences in order to mobilize public, “political” collective action.

## II. The ‘New’ “New Space”: Exploring a Tool for Consciousness-Raising in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

According to *Technocrati*<sup>27</sup>, a renowned blog-tracking website, the total number of Internet blogs double every six months (Kennedy, 2). Though there is no data available to determine how many of these millions of blogs are female-operated, a 2012 Nielsen company survey<sup>28</sup> reported that women, on the whole, are “significantly more likely to engage with social media than men”, and that a woman is 8 percent more likely than the average online adult to build or update a personal blog (Nielsen, 1). While these figures may only be represent one sample of women, this glimpse indicates tremendous progress from the early days of the Internet, when Kennedy claims only 20 percent of women were active online (Kennedy, 2).

It is highly unlikely, however, that all of these women-operated blogs are explicitly “feminist”. In fact, it is also worth noting that there exist a vast collection of *anti-feminist* blogs, run by both women and men. While some of these blogs center around one particular anti-feminist ideology, such as blogs that preach “mother shaming” or “sex shaming”<sup>29</sup>, others dismiss feminism altogether. The most salient of these fully dismissive blogs is “womenagainstfeminism.tumblr.com”, which, as the URL suggests, encourages women to

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<sup>27</sup> According to Kennedy’s account, “Technocrati.com is a website that tracks blogs and allows people to search for them through topics, author, and so forth.”

<sup>28</sup> As the Nielsen report reads, “the Nielsen Global Survey of Social Media Usage was conducted between February 10 and February 27, 2012 and polled more than 28,000 online consumers in 56 countries throughout Asia-Pacific, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, Africa and North America. The sample has quotas based on age and sex for each country based on their Internet users, and is weighted to be represented of Internet consumers and has a maximum margin of error of 0.6%. This Nielsen survey is based on the behavior of respondents with online access only”

<sup>29</sup> The Archdiocese of Washington blog (<http://blog.adw.org/>), for instance, covers a range of anti-feminist topics, with posts ranging from “Premarital Sex is a Mortal Sin”, to “Homosexual Acts Cannot be Approved or Celebrated by the Church”

mobilize against “feminism”, however they may conceptualize it. Bloggers thus submit a photograph of themselves holding a handwritten explanation of the reasons, often appropriate to their personal experience, of why they “don’t need feminism”. For instance, one blogger writes, “I don’t need feminism because: in the past we needed equal rights, but now feminists are hypocritical, [because] I am grateful for everything my father gave me, [because] I want to be a stay-at-home mom, and [because] wearing tight-lacing, make-up and getting plastic surgery do not make me an object” (womenagainstfeminism.com).

Yet we must also note that these accounts of “anti-feminism” will exist regardless of the medium through which they are expressed. In fact, it might even be *good* for feminisms for such anti-feminist blogs, be they issue-specific or generally-condemning, to exist in cyberspace, as this provides feminists with incentive to fight back, and exists as a cause for feminists to mobilize around and against<sup>30</sup>. Such political mobilization within the blogosphere, Kennedy argues, comes in two forms: self-expression and storytelling. While diary-style, self-expression blogs may serve as a place for women “to unload and unpack feelings and situations” and share opinions on current events”, storytelling blogs, on the other hand, may allow writers to foster “meaningful interactions” with their readers and help recreate Sarachild’s notion of “the personal is political” (Kennedy, 3).

Furthermore, the feminist Internet blogger, as opposed to the face-to-face consciousness-raiser, is equipped with several unique capabilities that allow her to further resonate her message; these include “permalinking”, attaching written words to specific web page URLs, “trackbacking”, informing the blogger of when someone has posted her words to an external website, and “blogrolling,” enabling the blogger to recommend other similar blogs in an

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<sup>30</sup> We will discuss some of these blogs later on in Chapter 2.

accessible list. It is in this sense that we may better understand how the blogosphere provides a 'new' "new space", in which women may connect with one another, establish social networks, and, as Sarachild would say, "collectively analyze the situation of women", in ways that they previously could not (Kennedy, 3).

But perhaps more significant than the practical technological capabilities of blogs is the theoretical capability for Internet, the platform on which the blog is launched, to allow its users to disclose as much or as little information about themselves (such as their gender) as they choose. It appears that women value this capability; McCulley and Patterson found in their pioneering 1996 study, "Feminist empowerment through the Internet", that women tend to view electronic communication positively because it reduces their worry that they will be judged by their physical appearance (McCulley and Patterson). Heimrath's 1999 Loughborough University survey, "Internet Perception and Use: a gender perspective", found similar results, with one survey respondent remarking that "[the Internet forces] people...to judge you on what you say alone" (Heimrath, 1). Other respondents agreed, expressing a resounding opinion "that the Internet can overcome gender prejudice because others do not know your sex" (Heimrath, 1).

Yet not only is the Internet objectively blind to the user's gender, but is also blind to the user's race, class and ethnicity. On one hand, this has the potential to assimilate women and cloud the very identities that make them who they are. But on the other hand, through the creation of a feminist blogosphere, the Internet may serve as a space in which women can articulate the *internal* differences within their respective religious, ideological, and social identities, while allowing the blogger herself to remain anonymous, and thus safe from any chance of political backlash. Indeed, as established in Chapter 1, the wants and needs of

Third World women have historically been misrepresented, both by the West and by the most prominent voices within their own communities. Yet the blogosphere, given its inherently equal treatment of each blog, may serve as the ideal medium through which *individual* women can take ownership of their individual positions, while simultaneously allowing them to take on a “*collective* identity”, as McLuhan would say, that unites feminism’s diverse desires.

Such a phenomenon may be evidenced by “Me and My Hijaab”, a blog that defines itself as an “eclectic bunch of Muslim women”, with “different pathways” and the “same goal” Greeting its readers with the tagline “Assalaamu alaikum”, translated as “peace be with you all”, the blog asserts that its purpose is to “create a sense of sisterhood”, to “provide a support network for Muslim women who are ‘exploring’ their Islamic identity”, and to “create awareness regarding hijab and its misconceptions for Muslims and non-Muslims respectively” (Me & My Hijaab). Indeed, the blog contends that it was started in order to address women who were either scared or reluctant to wear the hijab, a phenomenon that seems to confirm the legitimacy of Mahmood’s theory that there exists a stigma about identifying as a Muslim and embracing aspects of one’s religious identity.

But with pages such as “My journey to hijab”, “Why we love Prophet Muhammed”, and “Muslims in the Media and Society”, this blog invites diverse Muslim women to individually share their experiences with making Islam a part of the woman’s daily life. Mahmood similarly emphasizes this importance, criticizing feminists’ tendency to associate the embrace of Islam with “female subordination” (Mahmood, 1). To quite the contrary, the “Me and My Hijaab” blog is particularly passionate about sharing the diverse stories of women’s empowerment through the Hijaab, accounts that seem consistent with Mahmood’s theory of empowerment

through wearing the veil<sup>31</sup>. Additionally, despite the blog's emphasis on language of sisterhood within the Muslim community, the blog actively expresses the *internally-contested* components of Islamic feminism, creating a space for debate on the degree to which Muslim women should embrace their Muslim identities. Thus, we may understand how "Me and My Hijaab" may both foster the collective identity of Muslim women, *and* create a space to articulate individual differences among them.

More explicitly addressing the perceived disjunction between Islam and women's rights is the "Fatal Feminist" blog. Unlike "Me and My Hijaab", which primarily serves as a storytelling medium for Muslim women, the "Fatal Feminist" blog is a forum through which specific issues pertaining to Islamic feminism may be discussed through personal observation; the website asserts:

[T]his blog will discuss gender equality, social justice, the lives and leaderships of the women before us who were close to the Prophet (P) and have since been forgotten, and the importance of sound interpretation and of respecting fundamental human rights- both in terms of Islamic feminism and in Islam and feminist separately.

The "Fatal Feminist" facilitates such discussions in two pages, "Quranic Verses and Misconceptions" and "Women in Islamic History"; while the former aims to disrupt the myth that 'Islam is Inherently Patriarchal' by "placing Quranic verses back in their contexts and correct mistranslations", the latter highlights the lives of figures such as Umm Salama and A'isha, in order to demonstrate that heroic *women*, not only men, exist in the Qu'ran. Thus, although Mahmood writes of the association that feminists tend to make in supposing that

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<sup>31</sup> Chapter 1 explores Mahmood's theory of the veil in depth.

women Islamist supporters are “pawns in a grand patriarchal plan”, the “Fatal Feminist” blog helps debunk this common misconception through its active and open discussions of women’s place in the Islamic tradition.

Yet just as the “Me and My Hijab” and “Fatal Feminist” blogs are disrupting misconceptions about women and Islam, “Ultra Violet”, self-defined as a “place for Indian feminists”, is the premier blog for promoting the diverse values of Indian women (Sengupta, 1). Vehemently clarifying that “Ultra Violet (UV) does not represent any school, wave, organization, institution, or categorization...approaching feminism from different locations, backgrounds and personalities,” it is as if UV is directly sympathizing with Uma Narayan’s concern that the values of modern feminism in India are misperceived to either be “culturally backwards” or “imported” from the West. Rather, the UV blog seems to help feminists “draw political connections to other women within their cultural and political sphere”, which Narayan seems to regard as the most fundamental source of feminism (Sengupta, 1). With posts entitled “Women-driven Bollywood Films”, “Children as Agents of Change: one Bangalore Activist’s Vision” and “The Mythic Disappearance of the Wage Gap”, UV facilitates discussion on a wide range of issues facing Indian feminists.

The Ultra Violet blog additionally features an extensive blogroll with links for similar webpages, such as “WIMN’s Voice”, a blog that enlists “a diverse online community of approximately 50 women writers monitoring media coverage of current social, cultural and political issues from a progressive perspective” (WIMN’s Voices). Indeed, as the blog proudly claims, of the writers participating in WIMN’s Voices, a sizable cohort (nearly 45%) are women of color, while all participants represent an age range of 19 to 64, embody a variety of sexualities ranging from straight to bisexual to transgender, affiliate with religions ranging from Catholic to



Hindu to Muslim to atheist, and self-identify their economic status as ranging from struggling to working class to upper middle class (WIMN's Voices). As such, the WIMN's voices blog draws attention to the *variety* of issues that women from diverse backgrounds care about, as opposed to suggesting that "women only care about abortion, rape and child care" (WIMN's Voices). With a list of more than 100 tagged topics, ranging from "Transgender Issues" and "Girls and LGBT Youth", to "Reality TV" and "American Culture", the blog articulates Chandra Mohanty's point: feminisms are *not* homogeneous, as they are influenced by their internal, national and cultural contexts (WIMN's Voices).

Though the writings of Mahmood, Narayan and Mohanty may imply that such self-expression and storytelling blogs<sup>32</sup> would be most conducive to the needs of historically misrepresented feminists in the Third World, the success of other "Western"-oriented blogs, such as "Not Alone", may suggest otherwise. The "Not Alone" blog is based on the story of Sherry Merfish, who was 20 years old in 1972 --the year before *Roe v. Wade*--, when she found out she was pregnant. After her "horrible experience" of traveling to Texas to have her abortion executed by a condescending and inexperienced doctor, Merfish's daughter submitted a viral *New York Times* article detailing the injustices of the situation. Upon receiving thousands of emails and letters from women who had read and sympathized with Sherry's story, Merfish became determined to create a platform in which women could share their abortion stories, free of judgment and censure (Merfish, 1). As such, the "Not Alone" blog, created in 2013, allows women to tell their abortion stories via YouTube video, in order to promote a woman's right to choose and reiterate the message that "abortion is neither shameful nor uncommon" (Merfish, 1).

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<sup>32</sup> By storytelling blogs, I mean to include both personal storytelling blogs, and blogs that retell the stories featured in the Qur'an. Thus, I mean to reference both "Me and My Hijaab" and "Fatal Feminism"

Yet it is significant to note that the blogosphere accommodates feminisms beyond simply *dismissing* the negative stigma surrounding women's issues, such as abortion and religious subordination. Rather, blogs may similarly promote feminist consciousness-raising by *celebrating* the positivity of exclusively female experiences, such as a woman's journey to sexual liberation and fulfillment. This is precisely what Elizabeth Anne Wood, a Sociology professor at Nassau Community College, argues in "Consciousness-raising 2.0: Sex Blogging and the Creation of a Feminist Sex Commons." Wood writes that "women's internet sex blogs help develop vocabularies of desire, reduce shame, and build community" around the idea of women controlling their sexuality" (Wood, 1).

Thus, as opposed to simply disseminating sexual information to a general audience, a delivery that Wood argues has previously been made through advice columns, the sex blog serves as a two-way street, allowing individual women to question, respond to and mobilize around such sexual information. One blog that exemplifies this two-way street is "wayswomenorgasm.org", which aims to "help women get more out of their sexual relationships with men," by facilitating a "female sexuality forum" in which women's orgasm techniques, such as clitoral stimulation and erotic turn-ons, are discussed. Yet perhaps more significant than its discussion on the specific *ways* women orgasm is the discussion of the issues surrounding the orgasm; through its "What Real Women Say" page, bloggers may provide individualized responses to such issues, which range from "How do women achieve sexual arousal during sex?" or "Very few women talk about orgasm" (Thomas, 1). Like the consciousness-raising sessions of the 1960s and 1970s, these cyber-discussions serve as a place in which women can take their private experience, an experience that tends to be especially "private" in the case of

sexual matters, to the political realm, a forum that fosters community and mobilizes action around the *collection* of these private experiences.

### III. **A Library in Your Own Home”?: How the Internet Democratizes Knowledge and Facilitates Information-Sharing**

While Wood argues that that such “sex commons” serve to facilitate consciousness-raising for women, she adds that the Internet, *beyond* the blogosphere, may be conducive to feminisms in another regard: its ability to *accept* and share information. On this same topic of women and sexuality, [kinseyconfidential.org](http://kinseyconfidential.org), sponsored by The Kinsey Institute, is an online forum designated to “meet the sexual health information needs of college-age adults”, “provide accessible, topical information based on current scientific knowledge”, and “share news and trends related to sex, gender and sexual health” (The Kinsey Institute). Yet the website’s most prominent feature, available in both text and podcast format, is its Kinsey Confidential Q and A column; currently featuring questions like “I Didn’t Bleed After Sex The First Time: What Should I Do?” and “Looking For A Space: Trans Students Transitioning to College”, women may anonymously submit their inquiries to [kincon@indiana.edu](mailto:kincon@indiana.edu). This anonymous transaction thus allows the woman to educate *herself* on topics that are often disregarded as non-essential; thus, especially in the case of women who lead sex lives that are subject to patriarchal oppression and institutional mandates, the ability for the woman to request information, which might otherwise be regarded embarrassing or dangerous, is incredibly powerful for her.

Perhaps this is why “information-sharing” and “self-education” were ranked by “the vast majority” of women in “developing countries” as the primary reasons why they use the Internet (Intel, 30). Such results were obtained through Intel’s “Women and the Web” report, within which 2,200 women across 144 low and middle-income countries, were both surveyed and interviewed by the Intel Corporation. Shelly Esque, President of the Intel Foundation, introduces the report by stating the potential of the Internet to be “a great equalizer”, given that “never

before has information been so widely available, business more efficient and transparent, or people better connected to one another.” Given this potential, the report notes how many respondents who use the Internet claimed that “women who do not use the Internet face the risk of getting left further behind...as more of the world’s business and communications shift online (Intel, 30).

Indeed, of the respondents who utilize their online access, 77 to 84 percent reported that their number one reason for using the Internet was to “further their education”. Specifically, the report notes that the information users most frequently sought was “research related to their studies, finding scholarships and grants, and doing online coursework” (Intel, 32). Yet just as the educational pursuits of women around the world vary, so does the nature of the information requested. One survey respondent from Veracruz state in Mexico commented on this diverse potential, stating that “the Internet is like having a library in your own home....If you know how to use it, you can find anything from a simple recipe to how to build a robot” (Intel, 30).

This is precisely why Thomas Friedman, the renowned *New York Times* contributor and author of *The Lexus and The Olive Tree*, views the Internet’s mass expansion as a positive force for *all* historically-marginalized populations, not only women. Calling this change, “the democratization of technology,” Friedman writes in his book that the web makes “the potential for wealth creation...geographically dispersed, giving all kinds of previously disconnected people the change to access and apply knowledge (Friedman, 43). He adds that this excitement about the Internet’s potential has existed since its early days, citing Kevin Maney’s August 1999 *USA Today* article as evidence:

As a world changing invention, the Net echoes many of the characteristics of the printing press. It brings a dramatic drop in the cost of creating, sending and storing information while vastly increasing availability. It breaks information monopolies. Think of all the medical information on the Web, which, until recently, only doctors could access.

Indeed, both Internet users and non-users surveyed in Intel's report seem to agree with Maney's theory, praising the Internet's ability to "provide women with a private database of health resources" (Intel, 32). Adding that this information is especially beneficial for "women with infrequent access to medical professionals, or who do not feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics with them", respondents cited "health information" as "key benefit" of getting online (Intel, 32). As one survey respondent from India reported, "Some things are difficult to ask someone- but if we surf, it becomes easy" (Intel, 32).

One website in which Indian women may execute this online "surf" is [indiatogether.org](http://indiatogether.org), described by the renowned Indian scientist Amitabha Basu as a "forum for people from diverse fields of expertise to present their views, share their experiences and raise questions about where our country and society are headed in the future." Though technically an independent news source, the website's "Women's Health" page provides Indian women with specific health information, such HIV prevention mechanisms and the prevalence of maternal mortality, in order to serve as a practical medical information provider. For instance, the website's most recent Women's Health story, "Sterilisation deaths: What's new, after all?", details how 14 women lost their lives at a camp in Chhattisgarh after enduring "horrific conditions" of botched sterilization procedures (Oorvani Media PVT).

Yet beyond describing these women's medical circumstances, the article additionally informs women of the *political* roots of their medical maltreatment, by looking at the ways in which India's exclusively-female family planning volunteers are abused. In this sense, we see how information-sharing and consciousness-raising are particularly effective when paired together, insofar as they instigate political change. From detailing how volunteers are "constantly threatened with dire consequences such as job transfer, sexual harassment, humiliation and delayed money", and describing how "women who belong to the lower socio-economic classes are not adequately catered to", the article considers policy reform to be the most necessary systematic fix (Oorvani Media PVT). It concludes with a quote from health journalist Vimal Balasubramaniam, who writes that "women [seeking family planning procedures in India] can be doubly victimized: by the patriarchal family which refuses to allow them to use contraception and by the population controllers who make them targets of unsafe contraceptive programs."

Such a policy grievance in health care is but one issue that Avaaz.org's petition to "End India's war on women" addresses. Clarifying that the website merely facilitates the dissemination of petitions started by members of "[their] community", Avaaz enables individuals to both inform and mobilize readers around a specific local, national or global issue (Avaaz). In the case of the petition to end India's war on women, the main issue addressed is violence and sexual assault against women; it opens with the brutal rape case of a 23-year old physical therapy student and asserts that, on average, a woman in India is raped every 22 minutes. While authors of the petition appear to be anonymous, it nonetheless calls on specific people and/or people(s), including the "Government of India, the Verma Commission, and the Mehra Commission", to "urgently strengthen sexual violence legislation and enforcement,...launch a massive public

education program...designed to bring about a profound shift in the shameful attitudes that permit and promote violence against women” (Avaaz).

Given that the petition has already gained 1,096,906 of its anticipated 1,250,000 signatures, it appears that women around the world similarly desire the sharing of legal information, in addition to medical information. This theory is supported by Intel’s report, which confirms that an additional primary reason why women use the Internet is “to seek out information on government services” (Intel, 31). For instance, of the survey respondents from India, 49 percent sought information on accessing government services (Intel, 31). Reem Bahdi, author of the 2000 “Analyzing women’s use of the Internet through the rights debate”, echoes this data; he argues that the Internet may additionally inform women of their legal rights and liberties, which are otherwise hidden from or insufficiently presented to them (Bahdi, 897). To support this phenomenon, he cites the United Nations, and suggests this institution “puts women’s issues in a ghetto and while failing to give [them] positions of influence in bodies that contribute to international standard setting” (Bahdi, 875). Therefore, because “the international regime reflects state interests and women are not sufficiently valued by states” (Bahdi, 875), Bahdi proposes an Internet, free of institutional intervention, could be the solution to both informing women of their rights, and allowing women to mobilize around and have a say in them.

Similar information sharing and community organizing may be seen in countries besides India, as evidenced by the efforts of law-uganda.org. In order to spread its mission of “ensuring that internationally recognized human rights standards, norms and principles on the rights of women and girls are domesticated into national laws and practices”, the Uganda-operated website informs women of their specific rights in terms of female genital mutilation (FGM),



divorce, domestic violence, sex trafficking, women's property rights, reproductive rights, and strategic litigation (Law Uganda). Managed by Ugandan lawyers with a mutual interest in women's rights, the webpage further educates its visitors through both citing and explaining official Ugandan Constitutional Court declarations. Additionally, beyond creating an awareness of these women's *current* rights, the website serves to connect Ugandan lawyers with individual victims, so that such lawyers may work to further "foster the development of jurisprudence that respects the rights of women and girls" in future legislation (Law Uganda).

It is in these instances that we may understand how the Internet not only facilitates a *culture* of feminist consciousness-raising, but also enables local feminists to achieve *tangible* outcomes from such collective information-sharing. This is what Emily Jacobi, director of the NGO Digital Democracy, claims is the case for the Haitian women in her organization, who she argues had become increasingly victimized by rape and other forms of gender-based violence (GBV) in the wake of the country's 2010 earthquake (Jacobi). Jacobi writes that the website is an effort to bring "technical training, digital tools and new systems" to Haiti's local women's groups, whose facilities and records were destroyed in the natural disaster (Jacobi). Though her organization is Western in origin, Jacobi is particularly insistent that Haitian women initiate their *own* changes, by "hav[ing] an active voice in advocating for their rights – including the rights to housing, clean water, education, and freedom from gender discrimination." One participating "community agent" from KOFAVIV (Commission of Women Victims for Victims) confirms the legitimacy of Jacobi's vision, reasoning that "we [Haitian women] have a better chance of getting the support we need...if we ensure these stories don't just stay within our own community" (Jacobi).

But beyond the realms of health and political information sharing, which respectively eliminate the traditional difficulties women face in accessing doctors and lawyers<sup>33</sup>, the Internet may enable women to directly access a variety of convenient e-services, thus eliminating the need for them to access financial institutions and administrative offices. Indeed, as one of Intel's older survey respondents from West Bengal claims:

Many services are now provided on the Internet, such as online banking, job-seeking, and applications. Often the services are not available offline, or cost more. (Intel, 32).

Intel's survey data supports this participant's observation; across the four countries surveyed, nearly half of the respondents claimed to use the web to search for and apply for a job, while 30 percent claimed to use the Internet to earn additional income. This phenomenon is especially prevalent in India, where 60 percent of surveyed Internet users claim they access the Internet to search and apply for jobs. Intel's survey also indicates that 38 to 60 percent of women Internet users, even the ones who are satisfied with their current job, use the Internet "to expand their career networks."

Yet perhaps more powerful than enabling women to expand and improve their current careers is the ability for women to *create* their own careers, based on the vast wealth of resources directly accessible to them. As Thomas Friedman writes:

[T]hanks to the democratization of technology, we can all now have a bank in our homes, an office in our homes, a newspaper in our homes, a bookstore in our

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<sup>33</sup> To illustrate this need, a 2014 *Independent* article "Why is Uganda exporting doctors it doesn't have?" claims that the country has less than 3000 practicing doctors, yet boasts a population of 34.9 million people.

homes, a brokerage firm in our homes, a factory in our homes, an investment firm in our homes, a school in our homes” (Friedman, 38).

Thus, whereas institutional barriers may have previously prevented women from traditional access to knowledge and capital, the Internet may, as Thomas Friedman writes, give “*individuals*”<sup>34</sup>, regardless of their gender, “direct access to the world stage” (Friedman, 38).

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<sup>34</sup> As we will address in Chapters 3 and 4, the Internet’s tendency to emphasize individual empowerment (ostensibly in *favor of* collective change) may be problematic; though it is not necessarily problematic in this particular context (of providing women with “direct access” to the world stage so they could oppose the patriarchal economic institutions they are exposed to), we will later see how individual success may come at the expense of collective success.

#### IV. Direct Access to the “World Stage”?: How the Internet Creates Opportunities for Women

It appears that few women have taken better advantage<sup>35</sup> of such “direct access” than Njeri Rionge, highlighted by *Forbes* magazine as “one of Kenya’s most successful and revered serial entrepreneurs” (*Forbes*). The list of the multi-million dollar companies that she has co-founded include WananchiOnline, renowned as East Africa’s leading cable, broadband and Internet-based phone company, Ignite Consulting, described as a “thriving business consultancy”, and “Insite”, one of Kenya’s most successful digital marketing hubs. After explaining her desire to help “build indigenous organizations that will support [Africa’s] growth...as the next economic frontier”, Rionge states she has adapted to the “shift[ing] rules of engagement” introduced by technology; she argues that this adaptability is key, as “the Internet and social media present great opportunities to quickly communicate developments, changes in activities and interests” (*Forbes*).

Yet for women entrepreneurs who have had less educational access and business expertise than Rionge, websites such as [globalgirlfriend.com](http://globalgirlfriend.com) eliminate the need for technological prowess, as they serve as a medium through which artisans and entrepreneurs can directly access their customers. Based on the premise that “buying products made by women in impoverished countries is one of the best methods to reduce poverty and create prosperity for women, families

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<sup>35</sup> “Better advantage”, of course, is a subjective assessment, guided by *Forbes*’ account of Rionge’s success. Yet Chapter 3 will point out that this assessment may be problematic for both (a) its suggestion that success is contingent on economic profitability, (b) its trust of *Forbes* as an objective source.

and communities”<sup>36</sup>, Global Girlfriend sells products, such as dresses, tea, and chocolate treats, made by exclusively female artisans from over 20 countries (Global Girlfriend).

But in order to “make [their] handmade gifts more meaningful”, the website additionally tells the story of each artisan; this allows the artisan to explain the history of her craft, and articulate the values that mean the most to her. For instance, the “Gahaya Links” basket-weaving businesses, founded by sisters Joy Ndunguste and Janet Nkubana after the 1994 Rwanda Genocide, trains rural women to perfect such a community practice, so that they may benefit from their craft and better their own lives. Though the business began with 20 women under a tree in a remote village called Gitarama, Gahaya Links has since expanded into a network of 4,000 weavers across Rwanda, sponsored by 52 savings cooperatives (Global Girlfriend).

Similar initiatives have taken off in India; these include “MyMela”, which describes itself as an online marketplace that “promotes a sustainable livelihood for artisans by providing a customer base for their handmade products” (Mehta). Founded by Navroze S Mehta in what she calls a “personal journey”, MyMela was born from Mehta’s concern for “declining local demand for artisans’ work”, as she would often hear of master artisans having to “give up their craft in exchange for a life of abject poverty as unskilled workers in India’s large urban centers” (Mehta). Nothing how “many dedicated organizations have...[made] commendable efforts to help”, Mehta states that she and her daughter Sonali felt the need to “create a more scalable, holistic online marketplace” that would allow customers, who are “interested in a global perspective on social issues and already connected through social media”, to directly purchase from and fund such artisans (Mehta).

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<sup>36</sup> Like the aforementioned criticism of Rionge, the suggestion that “buying products” is one of the *best* methods to “reducing poverty” will be challenged in Chapter 3.

As such, despite its recent launch of a mobile app, MyMela primarily operates on a web platform, in which customers can browse and purchase the artisan-made products, ranging from jewelry to textiles. Yet in addition to buying such products, consumers who visit the website can additionally lend artisans capital via “MyMela loans”. Through its partnership with Asha Handicrafts, MyMela enables artisans to post their loan requests on their website, of which MyMela will match the amount and provide a 10% bonus. Mehta additionally claims that MyMela invests 20% of its profits in community improvement initiatives, including education, healthcare, social services and vocational training projects (Mehta).

This commitment, of both MyMela and Global Girlfriend, to eliminate the middle man and create transparency in markets qualifies them for membership as “Fair Trade” businesses. As explained by [www.fairtrade.net](http://www.fairtrade.net), the Fairtrade International website, “Fairtrade is an alternative approach to conventional trade and is based on a partnership between producers and consumers”, given its claim that “farmers and workers at the beginning of the chain don’t always get a fair share of the benefits of trade” (Fairtrade International). In order for a product to feature the Fair Trade label, it must meet a distinct set of Fairtrade Standards that collectively address “the imbalance of power in trading relationships, unstable markets and the injustices of conventional trade” (Fairtrade International)

Yet Afae Daoud, spokeswoman for the Moroccan argan oil-producing Tighahime Cooperative, which was recently featured in one of [fairtrade.net](http://fairtrade.net)’s news stories, argues fair trade is particularly beneficial to women, who have historically been “financially dependent on men, one hundred percent” (Fairtrade International). But by forming a fair trade cooperative, consisting of 60 women farmers in Tighanimine, Daoud explains how workers have “challenged a long-standing tradition... of the woman’s husband or father serving as the sole bread-winner”,

have been able to afford “nicer clothes for themselves or their children”, and have “better maintain[ed] their households” (Fairtrade International). Daoud additionally observes how “women who work in the cooperative [begin] to have more confidence in themselves, because they feel more important in the home” (Fairtrade International).

Perhaps this is why many non-profit organizations, such as “Women on the Border (WOB), attempt to create awareness about the impact of consumerism on women. Opening with the claim that most of the world’s 1.3 billion people are female, WOB expresses the relationship between unregulated working conditions and women’s oppression (Women on the Border). Also noting that “70% of the world’s artisans are women”, WOB thus promotes the production and consumption of Fair Trade businesses, asserting that “Fair Trade gives consumers the opportunity to say ‘Yes!’ to safe work places, to childcare for working women, to living wages, and to respect for a woman’s laboring body” (Women on the Border). In providing both informative reports and legal research intended for the *artisan*, as well as captivating documentaries and activism projects intended for the *customer*, the Women on the Border website serves the two-fold function of engaging both the producer and the consumer in Fair Trade opportunities for women.

Between providing a feminist blogosphere to facilitate “cyber consciousness-raising”, facilitating the practical exchange of medical and legal information, and creating a marketplace, devoid of the “middle man”, in which women may explore entrepreneurial pursuits and directly access their consumer, the Internet certainly appears to be positively impacting “Third World” women. These reasons may explain why more than 70 percent of Intel’s survey participants considered the Internet to be “liberating”, while 85 percent agreed the web “provides [them with] more freedom” (Intel, 10). Perhaps this is also why countries such as Estonia, Finland and

France have recently enacted legislation to declare a formal “right to Internet access”. Citing Articles 18, 19, and 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which respectively discuss the freedoms of conscience, expression and association, many political theorists argue that the Internet *facilitates* the achievement of human rights, and should thus be regarded as a right in itself.

Perhaps this positive association explains why many non-profits, political organizations, private corporations and governing bodies have created specific initiatives to bring Internet access to women, given their disproportionate institutional victimization. Recent efforts include the “Connected Women’s Program”, the joint project of the Clinton Global Initiative<sup>37</sup>, the GSMA<sup>38</sup>, and Ooredoo<sup>39</sup>, which will provide Internet access to women in both Myanmar and Indonesia. The program will particularly target “lower to middle income” women to bring them further economic opportunity<sup>40</sup>. Explaining this decision, Chelsea Clinton argues “increasing connectivity for women [is essential], so that they can experience the economic benefits and growth that can make measureable differences in their lives and for all of us” (Ooredoo).

A similar initiative to “bring 50 million women online” is underway in India, based on the fact that women comprise just 30 percent of the country’s current online population. Supplemental to this Google-sponsored initiative to provide more Indian women with Internet access, Google has designed a website, [www.hwgo.com](http://www.hwgo.com), to provide such Indian women with both video and textual instructions, available in both English and Hindi, on how to operate a

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<sup>37</sup> The Clinton Global Initiative defines itself as a program, established in 2005 by President Bill Clinton, that convenes global leaders to create and implement innovative solutions to the world's most pressing challenges.

<sup>38</sup> The GSMA states that it represents the interests of mobile operators worldwide, uniting nearly 800 operators with more than 250 companies in the broader mobile ecosystem, including handset and device makers, software companies, equipment providers and Internet companies, as well as organisations in adjacent industry sectors.

<sup>39</sup> Ooredoo explains that its vision is to “enrich people’s lives as a leading international communications company”, while “contributing to the social and economic development of the communities [they] operate within”.

<sup>40</sup> We will explore and criticize this objective of Internet access more thoroughly in Chapters 3 and 4.



computer. The project, “Helping Women Get Online”, is spearheaded by Rajan Anandan, who suggests that the Internet may be beneficial beyond its provision of financial opportunities. Rather, Anandan writes “the Internet can help women achieve self-esteem, express their views freely, open up new opportunities and help them to gain education”

However, as Chapter 3 will now explore, other political theorists may disagree; they may instead view the Internet as a tool feigning the appearance of “free expression”, but as an actual medium in which dominant views are reinforced. While many of the blogs, websites, and online initiatives cited above were created and are operated by Third World Women, we would be remiss to ignore the concerns of Saba Mahmood, Uma Narayan and Chandra Mohanty, whom collectively articulate the ways in which Western values, of which the Internet is often associated with, tend to overpower local feminist movements. As such, Chapter 3 will examine why feminists in certain “Third World” countries may oppose the Internet’s mass expansion. In doing so, it will explore the ways in which the Internet may implicitly promote a “Western” agenda, by homogenizing, secularizing, and provoking internal conflict within the communities of subalterns it reaches.

## CHAPTER THREE- DOES THE INTERNET COMMIT “CYBER-IMPERIALISM”? EXPLORING HOW GLOBAL CONNECTIVITY PROMOTES WESTERNIZATION, HOMOGENIZES COMMUNITIES AND PROVOKES INTERNAL CONFLICT

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### I. Introduction

On the stage of the 2010 Web 2.0 Summit, a conference held annually in San Francisco, California to discuss the future of the Internet, a large map had been featured. Similar to the image one may conjure of Napoleon sieging territories in Western Europe, or of Christopher Columbus demanding stakes in the “New World”, the conference’s map displayed which tech companies were going to ‘claim’ different regions around the world<sup>41</sup>. But when Mark Zuckerberg, founder and CEO of Facebook, had noticed the map, he concluded it was “all wrong”, for he reasoned that the “biggest part of the map should be the uncharted territory” (Kincaid, 1).

The sentiment behind Zuckerberg’s comments was recently revived within Lev Grossman’s January 2015 TIME magazine feature, “Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook’s Plan to Wire the World.” Detailing what Grossman calls “Mark Zuckerberg’s crusade to put every single human being online”, the article explains how Internet.org, a website that describes itself as a “Facebook-led initiative bringing together technology leaders, nonprofits and local communities”, aims to connect two-thirds of the world’s population that currently lack internet access (Grossman, 1). Indeed, asserting that only one out of every five individuals can get online, Internet.org explains the “barriers” to why people lack Internet connection, such as the costly or

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<sup>41</sup> Certainly, the idea of tech companies claiming regions is not *entirely* similar to Western colonization, defined generally as “the act of setting up a colony away from one’s place of origin.” However, as this chapter will soon demonstrate, we may see the *conceptual* similarities between the two, as both involve some entity, presumably an entity with more capital, clout, and resources, entering, not necessarily with permission, the territory of another entity, and exercising control (either implicit or explicit) over this second entity. Throughout this chapter, we will also discuss how both phenomena, Internet colonization and Western colonization, have similar consequences.

limited availability of devices, service plans and power sources, the disparity of mobile networks, and the lack of content available in the region's native language. Yet perhaps the most questionable "barrier" listed on Internet.org's explanation for why the world lacks Internet access is that "people aren't sure what value the internet will bring" (Internet.org).

On one hand, as Saba Mahmood, Uma Narayan and Chandra Mohanty had observed in Chapter 1, we recall how the interests of Third World women are often misrepresented, and are both diverse and internally-contested. However, given Chapter 2's depiction of the Internet as an encyclopedia of practical health information, a means to orchestrate political action and a medium through which women can create their own economic opportunities, the Internet appears to be valuable for women *despite* such differences, insofar as it provides an objective source of information and tool for political and economic mobilization. Furthermore, given Chapter 2's account of cyber consciousness-raising through the feminist blogosphere, we may understand how the Internet provides such marginalized populations with a platform to articulate their respectively diverse interests. To these ends, it seems that the subaltern *can* potentially have a voice on the Internet.

Yet the operational word in this assessment is "potentially", as we are a long ways away from *actually* achieving an Internet in which all women can share their experiences and express their needs and wants via the web. Even if all women were *able* to access the Internet (which, as this chapter will later discuss, is also highly implausible at this time), there remains the question of how to ensure that each women's voice is heard *equally*. In other words, how do we ensure that a "voice" with more money, resources, clout and political freedom is "heard" in equal proportion to a "voice" whose network is limited and sentiment is unpopular?

In one regard, these issues of disproportionately heard “voices” may appear regardless of the medium through which they are expressed. We can date this sort of warped equality back to 431 BC, when democratic order, “equal justice to all in their private differences”, was first conceptualized by Pericles. However, while this form of government was praised for its “favoring the many instead of the few”<sup>42</sup>, a closer examination of Athenian democracy reveals its inherent inequalities, as it only gave a voice to “exclusively adult males who had been born in Athens” (Smith). Yet even if Athenian democracy were to include women, slaves, and immigrants, it could have nonetheless facilitated inequality by favoring (and disfavoring) certain outcomes. As Sheldon S. Wolin writes within *D\_mokratia: A Conversation on Democracies, Ancient and Modern*:

a constitution can be a potent means of shaping a particular kind of democracy by subjecting the demos to institutional constraints in the hope of preventing certain kinds of outcomes, such as confiscation of the property of the rich. Similarly, the idea of equality can be articulated in a set of practices designed to delimit its possibilities, e.g., all citizens regardless of property may vote but only those with a certain amount of property may hold the higher state offices (Ober, 63).

As such, this chapter will explore how the Internet, like democracy, has the *potential ability* to treat each voice equally and serve as an unbiased medium, but may similarly, in effect, ‘prevent certain kinds of outcomes’, based on the means it is often used for. It will explore how the Internet in itself, being a largely Western-associated invention, may be used to both implicitly and explicitly silence the very voices, namely that of the subaltern, that it could theoretically empower. Additionally, Chapter 3 will examine the ways in which “cyber-

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<sup>42</sup> This translation was provided by Cyril Smith’s *Karl Marx and the Future of Human*.

imperialism”, a term that Zuckerberg’s recent initiative has popularized, may commit some of the same errs that *literal* imperialism<sup>43</sup> has perpetrated, such as facilitating inequality, promoting assimilation, and diminishing the voices and experiences that contradict Western values.

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<sup>43</sup> By “literal imperialism”, defined technically as “economic or cultural power over other nations or territories, often by force,” I mean the *aftermath* of colonialism; colonialism refers to the act of acquiring another territory, while imperialism refers to the political and cultural implications of doing so.

## II. #CulturalAssertion: How the Internet Promotes Westernization

This phenomenon is precisely the issue that Gayatri Spivak<sup>44</sup> attempts to address in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Written in 1988 and considered a foundational criticism of colonialism, the essay begins by defining the “subaltern” as “the social group who are socially, politically, and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure of the colony” (Spivak, 283). He elaborates by explaining how subalterns are “irretrievably heterogeneous”, despite the colonizing agent’s<sup>45</sup> tendency to homogenize, or “to blend into uniform mixture”, the identity of this population (Spivak, 283). Chandra Mohanty (in Chapter 1) voices this same grievance in the context of feminism, decrying the West’s tendency to characterize “the average Third World woman” as “poor, uneducated, tradition-bound and victimized” (Mohanty, 337). This, she writes, renders such a population as powerless, and dependent on the allegedly “superior” power.

Yet Spivak goes beyond Mohanty’s suggestion that the subaltern population is merely dependent on its colonizers; she argues that the entire *development* of the subaltern is “complicated by the imperialist project,” as it inhibits her from attaining a true, unfiltered consciousness (Spivak, 287). However well-intentioned the colonialists’ efforts may be, Spivak writes that they often lack “permission to narrate” for the subaltern; this, in turn, allows the colonizing agent to perpetuate an account that glorifies itself, and ignore, or “silence”, the *direct* concerns of the subaltern. To illustrate this phenomenon, Spivak uses the account provided by Ranajit Guha, a renowned South Asian historian who observes how such dominant voices have tended to rewrite history, so to ignore the history and achievements of the subaltern:

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<sup>44</sup> We may recall Chapter One’s mention of Spivak, a renowned Indian philosopher and professor at Columbia University

<sup>45</sup> By “colonizing agent”, I mean to suggest the entity that *colonizes*, as opposed to the entity that is colonized.

The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism- colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism...shar[ing] the prejudice that the masking of the Indian nation and the development of the consciousness-nationalism- which confirmed this process were exclusively or predominantly elite achievements. In the colonialist and neo-colonialist historiographies these achievements are credited to British colonial rules, administrators, policies, institutions, and culture; in the nationalist and neo-nationalist writings- to Indian elite personalities, institutions, activities and ideas.

To substantiate this claim in the context of British and Indian populations, Spivak discusses the controversial Hindu practice of *sati*, a phenomenon we had discussed extensively in Chapter One. Before describing Spivak's account, we may recall Narayan's grievance that *sati*, despite being an objectively harmful practice, should *not* suggest that Hindu fundamentalism, within which *sati* is often associated, is itself the problem. We may also remember how Narayan grieves of the "complete inattention to the variations in the practice of *sati* across Hindu communities", and the lack of awareness that *sati* is "virtually extinct" in India.

Spivak similarly recognizes this tendency for *sati* to be misperceived by outside parties (such as the British), and for these parties to intervene based on their false assumptions. She describes this phenomenon manifests as "white men saving ...brown men from brown women." Yet Spivak further argues that this "white man's" mission to save "brown woman" is not only wrong for its false perception of how *sati* operates, but is also wrong for its inability to recognize the *agency*<sup>46</sup> of the brown woman, otherwise considered a subaltern, that is being saved. Throughout her essay, Spivak weaves the overarching question of how (and if) the subaltern can

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<sup>46</sup> By agency, I mean the *capacity* of a person, in this case the colonized person, to act in a world.

speak to illustrate her theory that the process of colonization tends to silence the subaltern's voice<sup>47</sup>.

Thus, in relating both Spivak's perspective and this recent talk of cyber-imperialism back to our subject of Third World Women, we should ask *how* the mass spread of the Western-dominated Internet may commit this same error of 'lacking permission' to narrate the grievances of the marginalized feminists it appears to liberate<sup>48</sup>, if we were to exclusively evaluate Chapter 2's account. We should explore how the Internet may similarly be employed to depict marginalized populations as "saved by" dominant culture. Indeed, this is precisely what Myriam Francois-Cerrah preaches within her speech, "Feminism has been hijacked by white middle-class women"; speaking of the "unequal balance of power between dominant white culture, and subaltern identities," Cerrah insists that "race, class and gender are critical to feminist discussions", but are often missing from dominant feminist narratives, which tend to be put forward by white, middle-class women (Cerrah, 1).

Cerrah writes that no example serves to better "validate white feminism's priorities and perceptions of other-ized women....in need of saving" than the cyber-"instrumentalization" of Malala Yousafzais. Malala has been hailed as the Pakistani schoolgirl who came to public attention in 2009 when, at age 11, she wrote a BBC diary about life under the Taliban, and was subsequently shot by the militants. Winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014, Malala's story has since inspired mobilization around a "Malala Fund", which, according to [www.malala.org](http://www.malala.org),

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<sup>47</sup> Of course, Spivak's terminology does not translate to the literal silencing of a literal voice. Rather, just as we had used the language of "voices" in our earlier discussions of feminisms, we may understand voice in a metaphorical sense, to mean the perspective of an individual, and the degree to which he/she can freely exercise this perspective.

<sup>48</sup> In the same way we have metaphorically employed the term "voices", we may understand "permission to narrate" as the consent with which a subaltern allows another individual, presumably not a subaltern, to use his/her own voice *in place* of that of the subaltern. We will soon elaborate on this phenomenon through specific examples.



intends to “break the cycle of poverty and empower girls through education”. Her story has also seen a bout of Twitter activism<sup>49</sup>, within which users have mobilized around Malala’s story to promote girls’ education in Third World altogether. Yet Cerrah argues that these seemingly benevolent efforts to sympathize with Malala end up depriving her of her *own* voice, which was initially, by the evidence of her BBC-published diary, a central tenet of Malala’s story. Now, Cerrah argues, Malala’s example may be used by “white feminists” to further perpetuate their *own* priorities; she writes that Malala’s employment through the Internet has “recast women’s education...as a justifiable motive for western imperialism” (Cerrah, 1).

But beyond arguing that the Internet simply perpetuates the dominant Western narrative of feminism, Cerrah challenges the “predominant assumption” *within* such a narrative; this assumption, she writes, suggests that “alternative feminists’ voices are playing ‘catch up’ with western feminism”, just as both Mohanty and Narayan had argued in Chapter 1. In fact, if we revisit the idea that the Internet can be used to create economic opportunities for women (as Chapter 2 argues), we may see this very assumption at work; specifically, we may identify this sort of account, in which women are playing “catch up” within the global economy, by returning to *Forbes* magazine’s glorification of Njeri Rionge, the founder and CEO of WannachiOnline, Ignite Consulting, and other “thriving” businesses in Kenya<sup>50</sup>. While Rionge is applauded *on* the worldwide web for her *use* of the worldwide web in her efforts to support Africa’s growth as “the next economic frontier”, we must wonder if and how Rionge’s ambitions, though celebrated explicitly *for* her status as a Kenyan woman, are indicative of other feminist ambitions in Kenya, including those of the “*alternative*” voices; despite the Internet’s glorification of Rionge, we

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<sup>49</sup>This chapter will thoroughly explain both the dynamics and consequences of using Twitter when it is discussed more extensively later on.

<sup>50</sup>Rionge’s account is discussed at length in Chapter 2.

must wonder if her prioritization of innovation, globalization and profit- all largely renowned as Western values-, represents the aspirations articulated by *most* Kenyan women.

To the contrary, one such Kenyan woman, Rebecca Lolosoli, argues that the most pressing issue facing women in Kenya is gender-based violence and subjugation to oppressive cultural traditions<sup>51</sup>. To this end, Lolosoli founded the exclusively-female village of “Umoja”, translated as “unity” in Swahili, in which women who are raped by men, subjected to forced marriage, or are abandoned by their husbands and are subsequently shamed by their community, could come congregate. Simultaneously running a cultural center and campsite for tourists who visit the adjacent Samburu National Reserve, the women’s village has become so flooded with visitors that they have recently hired *men* to assist with the center’s daily operations; such a development suggests that the village is not only economically successful, but is also successful in its reversal of traditional gender roles in the economy<sup>52</sup>. Yet despite the village’s profitability and success, Lolosoli maintains that her most pressing concern is to ensure that Kenyan women who seek refuge from patriarchal oppression can find it. Rather than seeking economic growth and global recognition, as Rionge claims to have sought, Lolosoli uses the revenue from the camping site and profits from the cultural center’s craft sales to “send their children to school for the first time, eat well, and reject male demands for their daughters’ circumcision.”

Therefore, while exclusively evaluating the popularized account of *Forbes*’ most celebrated Njeri Rionge may lead us to believe that all Kenyan women similarly prioritize

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<sup>51</sup> Here again, however, it is important to note Lolosoli’s account represents just *one* account of feminism in Kenya. Perhaps others do not view such cultural traditions as oppressive, as Narayan, Mohanty and Mahmood had illustrated was the case within their respective nations.

<sup>52</sup> By “traditional gender roles in the economy”, I mean to suggest, as both the accounts of feminism in Chapter 1 and 2 do, that men, as opposed to women, have historically had the upper-hand in terms of wages received and work performed.

economic growth, Lolosoli's localized success<sup>53</sup> suggests that *some* Kenyan women, likely regarded as the "alternative" feminists, may treat making a profit as less pressing than creating a safe space for women. Yet the success of the Umoja village is significant beyond its unwillingness to prioritize economic expansion; rather we may consider the village's homegrown success as evidence suggesting that communities of Third World women, despite their potential access to *global* connectivity, may nonetheless find profound success in mobilizing *local* action; it suggests that the "poor, uneducated, tradition-bound and victimized" Third World feminist does not necessarily require the resources, information and economic opportunities that the primarily Western-operated Internet campaigns may afford.

Yet here again, through exclusively evaluating *Forbes* glorification of Rionge's successes (as we had in Chapter 2), these alternative narratives become silenced, and we *may* be more likely to generalize the objectives of Kenyan women as matching those of Rionge. Furthermore, given Rionge's explicit values of entrepreneurship, innovation and profit- which traditionally associated with the West, we may also commit the fallacy that both Mohanty and Cerrah identify: assuming that Third World feminisms are playing 'catch up' with the West. In both of these regards, the Internet is not conducive to multiple feminisms, but rather to feminism as one, common set of desires.

This may explain why many of the Moroccan women that Cerrah interviews in her article (similar to the Egyptian women that Mahmood interviews in her book) reject the term "feminism" all together; they view it as an imported "western concept", which serves as "another form of cultural imperialism design to alienate native women from the real source of their power:

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<sup>53</sup> It is significant to note that Lolosoli's success, though originally localized, has now been widely popularized by PBS' *Half the Sky* documentary.

their own culture” (Cerrah, 1). Indeed, a perfect example that exemplifies the importance of native women *physically* engaging<sup>54</sup> with the power of their own culture, and thus embracing their different contextual circumstances, is the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective. Not unlike the consciousness-raising sessions discussed in Chapter 2, the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective allows “women [to] come together as women”, to identify *both* differences and commonalities amongst themselves (Marso, 267). One participant recalls her experience on the topic of abortion:

When we talked about it amongst ourselves, we discovered how varied our experiences were, depending on our different social locations- for example, what quality medical care one could afford. But even more marked were the individual differences between women. Some had never had an abortion because they were sterile, or because they did not have sexual relations with men, or had them in such a way as to not get pregnant, or because they preferred to carry out the pregnancy to term rather than abort...these various positions were the phenomenal, superficially diversified aspect of female experience.

To be fair, in reexamining the “Not Alone” blog<sup>55</sup>, which encourages women to tell their diversely-situated abortion stories via YouTube video, we may understand how the Internet, in *some* applications, may encourage women to embrace the diversity of their condition; similar to the consciousness-raising experiences facilitated by the Milan Bookstore Women’s Collective, the Not Alone blog allows women to articulate their diverse circumstances, all for the purpose of building community and ‘com[ing] together within a “politics of women” (Marso, 267). Rather

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<sup>54</sup> This is to suggest a distinction between *cyber* engaging, through the Internet.

<sup>55</sup> The “Not Alone” blog is discussed extensively in Chapter 2.

than “assuming sisterhood”, both the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective *and* the Not Alone blog encourage women to embrace the *diversity* of their experience, and are thus conducive to “...connections and insights without a mirroring of goals, desires, and the vision of the future” (Marso, 268).

### **III. #Homogenization: How the Internet Promotes Assimilation**

While certain Internet initiatives, such as the Not Alone blog, allow women to embrace the diversity of their situation, other Internet initiatives facilitate *anonymous* communication, allowing the woman to detach from her gender, race, class, and other characteristics which compose her unique identity. We recall (in Chapter 2) how many women tended to perceive this identity detachment as beneficial for feminisms; the women surveyed within both Loughbough University's 1999 "Internet Perception and Use: a gender perspective" and Intel Corporation's 2012 "Women and the Web" study found that the Internet's anonymous nature forces an Internet user to judge an Internet contributor by his/her contribution alone, as opposed to evaluating the contribution *after* knowing the contributor's gender.

As beneficial as this anonymity may be in certain contexts (for instance, in political climates within which self-identification would put the woman in danger), the prospect of having anonymous cyber communication replace, or even exist alongside, forms of consciousness-raising that require participants to self-identify may actually be detrimental for feminisms. As Marso writes, it is only through embracing the differences between the lives of women that we can understand "how our choices, even ones we might think of as feminist, could adversely affect the lives of other women" (Marso, 268). To exemplify how recognizing our internal differences helps us to better understand feminisms' diverse objectives, Marso asks that we consider "the upper-class woman who has her house cleaned (or her children cared for) by immigrant women so that she can stay in the work force," or "the women who ardently supported Senator Hilary Clinton in her bid for the presidency in spite of Clinton's record on the wars of Afghanistan and Iraq and her position on Iran". Therefore, anonymity on the web may not only hinder the woman's ability to express her unique gender, class, race, geographical

and/or political situation (which, as Chapter 1 demonstrates, may dictate the content of her *diverse* feminism), but may also be conducive to the promotion of a sole, “unifying” feminism; unlike consciousness-raising circles, the Internet, when used as a means of *anonymous* communication between women, may encourage its users detach from the very characteristics that could otherwise enhance their message. Such lack of identification may also increase the likelihood that women conform to the dominant and “unifying” feminist narrative,

This conformity is especially likely when the voices articulating the supposedly unifying feminism have more freedom, resources, and clout than the dissenting voices, such as the subalterns, who may not be as privy to self-identification via the web<sup>56</sup>. In revisiting Marso’s examples of instances that demonstrate the importance of embracing diverse characteristics amongst women, we may understand this sort of “silencing” in terms of “the ‘Western’ feminist who stridently speaks out against the wearing of the veil as inherently oppressive for Muslim women” (Marso, 268). Returning to Chapter 1, we may recall how Mahmood articulated this same grievance; she writes of “the supposition that [women Islamist supporters] are pawns in a grand patriarchal plan”, and the tendency for Islamic movements to be “associated with terms such as fundamentalism, the subjugation of women, social conservatism, reactionary atavism, and cultural backwardness” (Mahmood, 4). Also interesting for our purposes, Mahmood argues that conscientious efforts to engage women in the community, such as the women’s mosque movements in Cairo, may be beneficial in a similar regard to the Umoja village initiative and the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective; she writes that the mosque movements allow women to “subvert the hegemonic meanings of cultural practices” and tailor their cultural practices to their *own* interests and agendas (Mahmood, 6).

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<sup>56</sup> This idea will be discussed at length later in the chapter, when we identify certain governments and institutions that explicitly restrict Internet access for women.

However, when further examining Mahmood's criticism of Western domination, we may understand how using the Internet to further such localized interests may weaken and even contradict the movement's initial intention. This may be evidenced by the aftermath of Arab Spring, a contagious wave of political demonstrations and protests that spread across the Middle East and North Africa in 2011. In addition to overthrowing local governments and protesting various human rights violations<sup>57</sup>, the movement was and is widely renowned for its instrumental utilization of social media; a recent study conducted by the University of Washington quantified the centrality of social media's role in the Arab Spring protests. During the week before Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak's resignation, the study finds that "the total rate of tweets from Egypt- and around the world- about political change in that country ballooned from 2,300 a day to 230,000 a day", while the top 23 videos featuring protest and political commentary on the revolution reached nearly 5.5 million views (O'Donnell, 1).

However, while Mahmood agrees that "social networking technologies and the Internet (blogs, Facebook, Twitter) were *one* avenue for "issue-based activism" in Arab Spring, she writes that "there were others, key among them labor union politics that cut across lines of difference to create a common political project" (Mahmood, 21). These latter initiatives, however, tend to be ignored within the popular consciousness' conception of Arab Spring's success; rather, it seems as though Arab Spring becomes generalized in the popular narrative as a social media-induced protest for democracy. This may be evidenced by the way in which the objectives, context, and tactics of Occupy Wall Street<sup>58</sup> and the Arab Spring movement tend to be assimilated. While Occupy Wall Street's website, [what-democracy-looks-like.com](http://what-democracy-looks-like.com), features

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<sup>57</sup> These generalized answers come from John Price's "What Did the Arab Spring Accomplish?", published on International Policy Digest.

<sup>58</sup> Occupy Wall Street is renowned as a mass demonstration that originated in New York City's financial district on September 17, 2011 to protest financial greed and corruption.



an article “Their Fight is Our Fight: Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, and New Modes of Solidarity Today”, another website’s article, “Arab Activists: Little in Common Between Occupy Wall Street, Arab Spring”, claims that comparing the two “denigrates the [Arab Spring] cause; as Nasser Wedaddy, blogger activist and Civil Rights Outreach Director at the American Islamic Congress, writes:

Occupy Wall Street planners only see the skeleton of the Arab spring movement. They don’t know that it was an evolutionary process, the result of decades of work, trial and error, and eventual breakthroughs. These people went out in the streets out of shared desperation after all other means had been exhausted. And they know full well that they could die for it (Hilleary, 1)

Thus, despite the popular consciousness’ conception as otherwise, we may understand how Arab Spring, in the eyes of the Arab activists who participated in it<sup>59</sup>, may have not necessarily been similar in objective, context, and technique as Occupy Wall Street. But perhaps more consequential than ignoring Arab Spring’s alternative forms of political activism and less-celebrated achievements is our tendency to mistake Western support for Arab Spring’s values as *synonymous* with Arab Spring’s support for Western values. As Mahmood writes:

The hasty judgment that the revolutionary uprising in Egypt heralds a post-Islamist era also fails to take into account the transformation the da’wa movement as wrought in Egyptian society- the sensibilities it has created, the lifestyles it has made extant, the

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<sup>59</sup> Certainly, there may be some Arab activists who do regard Occupy Wall Street and Arab Spring as similar. But our purpose here is to discuss the ones who do not.

gender norms it has established, all of which are not going to dissolve or become irrelevant overnight.

Therefore, while the Internet may have been instrumental in allowing Arab Spring to become globally recognized and celebrated, it also may have inevitably blurred Egyptian society's local sensibilities, lifestyles and gender norms. As both Mahmood and Marso recognize, this may be evidenced by the contrasting *global* and *local* meanings of the veil in Egyptian society; though the former, as articulated by Western feminism<sup>60</sup>, associates wearing the veil with patriarchal oppression, the latter considers the veil "a symbol of resistance to the commodification of women's bodies in the media, and more general the hegemony of Western values" (Mahmood, 16).

This is why Mahmood stresses how "the terms people use to organize their lives are not simply a gloss for universally shared assumptions about the world and one's place in it, but are actually constitutive of different forms of personhood, knowledge and experience" (Mahmood, 16). Yet when we more closely examine *how* the Internet works, as an encyclopedia or "glossary" of accounts that a user could selectively search for, we may understand how executing such Internet searches facilitate such 'universally shared assumptions' about the world; here again, as opposed to consciousness-raising sessions and community engagement initiatives, which inevitably force the participant to encounter "*different* forms of personhood, knowledge and experience" before making a generalization about the lives of Third World Women, browsing Internet results allows such a user to *select* which accounts he or she wishes to factor into her analysis. Thus, while Chapter 2 depicted the Internet's "search" function to be

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<sup>60</sup> Here again, not all Western feminists may regard the veil as oppressive. But because these anti-veil movements originated as a project of Western feminism, we may conclude that a vocal majority of these feminists do.

beneficial for Third World women seeking health, political or legal information, here we see that the search function may *also* harm Third World women, insofar as it allows users to ignore authentic Third World women's accounts in lieu of Western narrations of Third World problems.

For example, from conducting a Google search on "*lives of women in Egypt*", one of the most salient results is a January 2015 Huffington Post article "New Report Paints Devastating Picture of Violence against Women in Egypt". Based on the conclusions made within a report released by Amnesty International, a *globally*-renowned human rights group headquartered in London, the article urges the government to "present a comprehensive strategy against women before the upcoming parliamentary election: It explains how Egypt, despite its "token" legal reforms such as the June 2014 criminalization of sexual harassment, continues to perpetuate violence against women by failing to enforce such laws. The article then quotes Mona Eltahawy, an Egyptian-American women's rights activist, who writes that "women in Egypt are entrapped by institutional systemic violence" and that "no revolution has taken place, unless combatting that violence becomes a priority" (Jeltsen, 1).

While both Eltahawy's argument and the *Huffington Post's* account may in fact be an accurate and widely-accepted depiction of violence against women in Egypt, there are several problematic observations we can make about (a) this account itself and (b) the way in which it was retrieved. First of all, despite its focus on an issue *in* Egypt, note that the Huffington Post, perhaps being the account of an American-based newswire<sup>61</sup>, *exclusively* features perspectives from either global organizations or Egyptian-American activists; intentional or not, the article fails to interview Egyptian women *themselves*, who could have each contributed a *different*

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<sup>61</sup> Founded by conservative-turned-liberal political commentator Arianna Huffington, *The Huffington Post* is one of the United States' most popular online news outlets. Huffington recently sold her website to AOL for \$315 million.

“personhood, knowledge and experience” to the issue, and thus may have offered a perspective contradictory to the ones offered. Indeed, this proposition is likely, given the starkly different perspectives that Western feminists and Egyptian feminists respectively offer on wearing the veil.

Yet perhaps it is also the terms, “lives of women in Egypt”, through which the search was executed that also help explain the nature of the results obtained. Given that I, the executor, am a “white, middle-class feminist”, arguably guilty of the criticisms Cerrah articulated in her article, perhaps my selective phrasing of this issue makes it more likely that I will obtain results that are consistent with my pre-conceptions as white, middle-class woman. Ryan W. White confirms this theory in “Beliefs and Biases in Web Search”, within which he explores how “Web searches exhibit their own biases and are also subject of bias from the search engine” (White, 1). Through designing and executing a detailed research study<sup>62</sup>, White finds that “people seek to confirm their beliefs with their searches and that search engines provide positively-skewed search results, irrespective of the truth”. As such, perhaps if I had executed my Google search on the lives of Egyptian women in terms that *Egyptian women themselves* would use, then my results would be more consistent with the true, unfiltered experience of the Egyptian subaltern.

It is also possible, even if we were to use the terms Egyptian women themselves would use, that there exist alternative, contradictory perspectives of violence against women in Egypt on the web. Yet given the *Huffington Post*'s immense capital, wealth, clout and network size, it is likely that the average “searcher” would find the *Huffington Post* results before they were to

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<sup>62</sup> As White's paper reads, “we study search-related biases via multiple probes: an exploratory retrospective survey, human labeling of the captions and results returned by a Web search engine, and a large-scale log analysis of search behavior on that engine. Targeting yes-no questions in the critical domain of health search, we show that Web searches exhibit their own biases and are also subject to bias from the search engine.”

read the account offered by a Third World feminist blogger, especially when considering how many of these “feminists” reject that term anyway. In fact, when revisiting the blogs and websites highlighted within Chapter 2, it is significant to note that GlobalGirlfriend, which impacts the global economy, was significantly easier to locate via Google search than the Me and My Hijaab blog, which, despite being an eye-opening account of the lives of Muslim women, seems to exist in a bubble, without direct impact on the global economy. Therefore, while the Internet may *contain* a vast collection of contrasting feminist accounts, it seems more likely that a user would read the already-popular accounts, based on the way Google search engines display the results. Indeed, because it would seem that far less users are interested in employing the Internet to learn about authentic perspectives of Muslim women than they are to, say, “buy stuff”, it seems that the average Googler is far more likely to encounter the dominant, white feminist account<sup>63</sup>, in the dominant, white feminist’s terms, than he or she is to encounter the narrative of the often uncategorized subaltern.

On this note of feminism’s “terminology”, it is important to note how the “hashtag” may also help to further popularize the dominant feminist narrative; according to Twitter, the medium through which the hashtag is employed, “the # symbol...is used to mark keywords or topics in a Tweet”. Doing so, the explanation continues, allows the Tweets to become categorized, and to be shown more easily in Twitter Search, as “clicking on a hashtagged word in nay messages shows [the user] all other Tweets marked with that keyword”. When and if a “hashtagged” phrase becomes particularly popular (which, like the Internet blogs, are usually the case when the ‘Tweeter’ possesses more capital, clout and relevance to the global economy), it is considered to

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<sup>63</sup> Based on the dominant white feminist’s privileged position in the globalized economy, it is likely that she would favor such “buying stuff” more than the Third World feminist, whose has likely not experienced such a privilege in the same sort of way.

be “trending”. Twitter users can then browse these “trending” topics to assess which issues are being discussed, and can then click on individual tweets to read each user’s personal experience, which Twitter requires to be expressed in 300 characters or less.

Perhaps the most salient example of Twitter’s relevance to feminisms worldwide is the “#BringBackOurGirls” campaign; launched in April 2014, the Twitter campaign addressed the 276 Nigerian school girls who were kidnapped by “Boko Haram”, an Islamist terrorist group whose name translates to “Western education is forbidden”. Though the kidnapping was initially kept quiet, activist efforts -namely those of the alleged campaign creator, American documentarian Ramaa Moseley-, had sought to create international awareness about Boko Haram’s actions. Yet Moseley, far from a technological prowess, writes that she “didn’t even know what a hashtag was” up until recently; she was simply “moved to tears by a brief radio broadcast about the abductions in Nigeria, and adapted the cries of the girls’ mothers into the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls” (Williamson, et al). This sentiment proved to be contagious, as the hashtagged phrase has since been retweeted extensively<sup>64</sup>, and by users ranging from the Vatican, to internationally-renowned pop singer Mary J Blige, to United States first lady Michelle Obama. In this regard, we may see how Twitter can be used to mobilize women (or any supporter of women’s rights) around a common political cause, while simultaneously allowing each user to bring his/her individual contextual circumstances (in Moseley’s case, the experience of a mother) to the table.

However, despite Moseley’s widespread reputation as the creator of the ‘BringBackOurGirls’ hashtag, and the seemingly benevolent intentions that “her” campaign has,

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<sup>64</sup> Less than a month after #BringBackOurGirls was first used in Nigeria on April 23, the hashtag, according to the BBC, was retweeted more than 3.3 million times by May 14.

further investigation suggests otherwise; sources identify Ibrahim Musa Abdullahi, a 35-year-old attorney from the Nigerian capital Abuja, as the *actual* creator of “#BringBackOurGirls”, who first “adapted the chant when he heard it on television there” (Williamson, et al). When Moseley was met with a “storm of angry tweets” in response to this discovery, the American mother claims she was “completely shocked”, for she “felt compelled to help spread the word” about the injustice caused by Boko Haram (Williamson, et al). Eventually crediting Abdullahi as the actual creator, Moseley contends that she “thinks she became the face of the cause in the media because ‘[the United States] do[es]n’t have photos of the [Nigerian] girls, and so the media in the United States... picked upon this as a human-interest story and attached me to it” (Williamson, et al). Yet more critical explanations suggest Moseley may have intentionally claimed credit as a means to help promote her documentary “Girls Rising”, a for-profit effort to address the global struggle for girls’ education in nine countries, which was co-sponsored by Intel Corporation, along with other philanthropic efforts in the private sector.

But beyond simply promoting for-profit enterprises, some argue that the campaign represents “Washington’s real mission”, which is “to protect corporate theft of Nigeria’s wealth” (Haiphong, 1). This is precisely what Danny Haiphong argues in “‘Bring Back Our Girls’ Campaign: Reinforcing U.S Imperialism, the Root of Terrorism in Africa”. Published by the Centre for Research on Globalization, the report notes:

The #BringBackOurGirls campaign doesn’t appear interested in asking the difficult questions necessary to understanding the forces behind the kidnapping of 300 young girls in Nigeria. The campaign instead calls for US intervention to track down the so-called “terrorist” organization, Boko Haram.

The report supports this notion by explaining the U.S' response to such a mission: "sending marines to Nigeria, escalating US militarization in a country already dominated economically and politically by the West" (Haiphong, 1). It then cites Kwame Nkrumah, the first revolutionary President of independent Ghana, who wrote in *Class Struggle in Africa* that "Washington aided [Ghana's] neo-colonialism by financially and militarily supporting the bourgeoisie" (Haiphong, 1). This testimony may further extend to Nigeria, which, since 1999, has been the recipient of U.S. imperialistic efforts, most notably through the Shell Corporation's oil exports and subsequent "mass impoverishment of Nigerian farmers and workers" (Haiphong, 1). Thus, Haiphong argues, the #BringBackOurGirls campaign not only fails to address the true barriers to girls' education, but also perpetuates the issue by emanating the same "mainstream, corporate rhetoric as US imperialism in Africa"; which Haiphong argues is responsible for "more poverty, internal conflict, and land theft" (Haiphong, 1).

Other accounts similarly accuse the #BringBackOurGirls campaign of having ulterior motives and provoking internal conflict. Cerrah, for instance, writes on #BringBackOurGirls that "the story, rather than focus on finding the girls, is used to justify the ongoing war on terror" (Cerrah, 1). Marso, in her account of "Feminism", identifies a similar phenomenon; she argues that experience of women under the Taliban, despite the oppression that they legitimately face, is often used as justification to pursue war in such Taliban-occupied regions (Marso, 6). This may remind us of Spivak's similar observation, in which the perceived experience of *sati* under Hindu fundamentalism tends to justify foreign intervention, described as "white men saving brown women from brown men". Cerrah, too, argues that this myth of foreign intervention exists, and is currently in effect for both the Democratic Republic of Congo and Afghanistan. She writes that this has additional consequences on the political freedom of women:



There is plenty of research on the impact of conflict on women, who are among its primary victims, not only in terms of actual casualties of war, but also in their struggle for autonomy because what conflicts actually do, is polarize gender roles: masculinity becomes more aggressive and women are idealized as “the bearers of a cultural identity” – women’s bodies become part of the battle field.

Therefore, as necessary as it is to *recognize* the oppression experienced by women around the world, as the Internet could very well be used for, it is also important not to assume that Western intervention, militarily or otherwise, is the solution. To do so, using Cerrah’s terms, would be to polarize gender rules and further perpetuate the harmful impact on women that military conflict already initiates.

#### IV. **#Secularization: How Using the Internet Polarizes Religious Communities and Provokes Institutional Backlash**

Other authors have similarly recognized the theme of Western intervention creating “internal conflict” amongst the populations it reaches. Notable among them is Ben Barber, who famously characterizes this dynamic as “Jihad vs. McWorld” in his best-selling book of the same title; he explains:

[t]he collision between the forces of disintegrable tribalism and reactionary fundamentalism I have called Jihad (Islam is not the issue) and the forces of integrative modernization and aggressive economic and cultural globalization I have called McWorld (for which America is not solely responsible) has been brutally exacerbated by the dialectical interdependence of these two seemingly oppositional sets of forces (Barber, 3).

As such, Barber further characterizes the former as “warriors who detest modernity- the secular, scientific, rational, and commercial civilization created by the Enlightenment as it is defined by both its virtues (freedom, democracy, tolerance and diversity) and its vices (inequality, hegemony, cultural imperialisms, materialism” (Barber, 3). Thus, he adds, if we are to ever succeed in “the war against Jihad”, under which Barber would likely classify the aforementioned efforts to suppress Boko Haram, we must *also* address the issues within “McWorld” (Barber, 3).

Mahmood echoes this sentiment when she speaks of the “ongoing importance of feminist scholarship on women’s agency”, which she argues is especially necessary given the tendency for Western popular media “to portray Muslim women as incomparably bound by the

unbreakable chains of religious and patriarchal oppression” (Mahmood, 21). Like Narayan and Mohanty, Mahmood expresses concern over the consequences of this portrayal: the increasingly secular and decreasingly religious lifestyles of Muslim women in Egypt, which further serves to diminish the expression of Muslim women’s “disparate class and social backgrounds” This is precisely why, Mahmood argues, the women’s mosque movement has emerged not as an “abstract tendency toward objectification”, but rather by a specific problem: “the concern for learning to organize one’s daily life according to Islamic standards or virtuous conduct in a world increasingly ordered by a logic of secular rationality that is inimical to the sustenance of these virtues.” To illustrate this point, Mahmood quotes one such mosque movement participant, Haj Faiza:

All of us Muslims know the basic of religion, such as praying, fasting, and other acts of worship. But the difficult question that confronts us today as Muslims is how to make our daily lives congruent with our religion while at the same time moving with the world, especially given that the present period is one of great change and transformation.

In their 2003 research study “The Relationship Between Religiosity and Internet Use”, Greg G. Armfield and R. Lance Holbert confirm the tension between Internet Use and Religiosity. The study finds that “religiosity....retains a significant negative relation with Internet use at the zero order...even after accounting for a host of demographic, contextual, and situational variables” (Armfield & Holbert, 1). Thus, if both Mahmood’s perspective and Armfield and Holbert’s analyses hold true, then we may understand how the Internet does *not* necessarily serve as an untainted new space, for it tends to exclude certain actively religious voices, within which the subaltern may identify. This is problematic, for it seems that these

actively religious voices would likely dissent to many of the dominant perspectives expressed, particularly those on *sati* or veiling.

Furthermore, while some women voluntarily abstain from Internet use, either because of its association with Western hegemony or its inconsistency with religious fundamentalism, other women may not have the choice, as many countries continue to deliberately restrict Internet access to its populations. Among these nations include North Korea, Iran and Saudi Arabia, which were recently regarded by USA Today as regions having some of the most restrictive Internet access in the world (USA Today). Incidentally, these countries are also renowned for their particularly harsh institutional oppression of women, ranging from North Korea's historical ban on a woman's right to wear pants or ride bicycles, to Iran's legal requirement that women obtain permission from their husbands to travel internationally, to Saudi Arabia's host of arbitrary limitations including a woman's restriction to enter a cemetery, drive a car and vote in elections<sup>65</sup>.

To this association, we should ask, in a "chicken or the egg" sort of paradigm, if it is the Third World woman's subjugation to institutional repression that precedes her lack of access to the Internet, or if it's the Third World woman's lack of Internet access that precedes her institutional repression. In simpler terms, does the government restrict Internet access because they regard the Internet's content and capabilities as inconsistent with its *pre-existing* restrictions on women, or do governments impose these particularly confining restrictions on women *as a result* of their perception that the ever-expanding Internet will make its people more secular? If

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<sup>65</sup> Though recently overturned through King Abdullah's decree, this restriction on the woman's right to vote in Saudi Arabia had made it the only country in the world in which women could not participate in elections.

the latter is true, could we say that the mere potential of the Internet's spread, and the perceived threat this entails, may *further* perpetuate institutional repression?

Such questions are too complicated and unanswerable for our purposes, yet they are nonetheless important to consider as we transition into a final evaluation, in light of the positions established in both this chapter and the chapter before, of how the Internet could be used to better the world's most disadvantaged women and allow the subaltern to e-communicate.

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## CHAPTER FOUR- OPENING UP THE “OPEN PLAIN”: EXPLORING HOW WE MAY CONSCIENTIOUSLY DEPLOY THE INTERNET TO BENEFIT THE WORLD’S MOST DISADVANTAGED WOMEN

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The year was 1962, and the closest conception of a worldwide web was a “Gutenberg Galaxy”; it was the year that Marshall McLuhan, the world-renowned communications pioneer<sup>66</sup>, had famously predicted that a theoretical, “shared internetwork”, or an Internet, would impact the world in three distinct ways: he argued that (1) print media would die in favor of a “global village” of information, (2) “fragmented individualism” would be transformed into “collective identity”, and (3) our “self-concept as a society” would be forever changed by “electronic independence”. Given the diverse accounts of the Internet forwarded in both Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, we may regard McLuhan’s predictions, more than fifty years later, as remarkably accurate in their description of today’s worldwide web.

For instance, in Chapter 2, we learned how (1) both grassroots news networks and other interactive platforms to share practical health and political information have become the premier mediums of information-sharing around the world<sup>67</sup>. We also learned how the feminist blogosphere is similarly conducive to accepting and sharing “information”, either in the form of “self-expression” or “story-telling”, to a “global village” of women around the world. In this regard, (2) today’s Internet may also foster the “collective identity” McLuhan speaks of; just as the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s had employed “consciousness-raising” sessions to show women that sharing their private differences could foster collective political action, the feminist blogosphere may serve as a means of “cyber-consciousness raising”, in order to achieve this same end of political change. Chapter 3, on the other hand, similarly recognizes how the

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<sup>66</sup> We may recall Marshall McLuhan from this essay’s Introduction.

<sup>67</sup> We should note that print media, though its presence is teetering and has severely diminished from what it once was, nonetheless exists.

Internet has contributed to both the embrace of “collective identity” *and* the deterioration of “fragmented individualism”.

Yet this chapter provides examples of Western-initiated intervention, like that of the Malala Fund or #BringBackOurGirls, to demonstrate how such identity transformation does not always have positive implications. Rather, both Chapter 1 and Chapter 3 suggest the “collective identity” that the Internet most frequently forwards, through its benevolent political campaigns, tends to be exclusively consistent with particular Western values, such as capitalism and secularism, and tends to disregard particular “Third World” values, namely regard for religious traditionalism, insofar as they are inconsistent with such Western values. Chapter 3 also suggests that the existence and continued promotion of this “collective identity” makes it especially hard for certain women to find a voice on the Internet when they *do not* identify with the collective, whether this is a voluntary choice or an involuntary circumstance<sup>68</sup>.

Nevertheless, both contrasting theories offered in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 would likely agree that the Internet, regardless of the degree to which they suggest it should be utilized, has tremendously (3) transformed our “self-concept as a society”. Whether you’re Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, engaged in a “crusade to put every single human being online”, or you’re one of Cairo’s mosque movement participants, attempting to “... organize [your] daily life according to Islamic standards or virtuous conduct in a world increasingly ordered by a logic of secular rationality that is inimical to the sustenance of [traditional] virtues”, you nonetheless recognize

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<sup>68</sup> By “involuntary circumstance”, I refer to women who may be limited by a language or access barrier; for instance, there may exist women in Egypt who *would* want to support the “#BringBackOurGirls” campaign, but cannot do so because they do not speak English, the language the campaign uses, and/or have access to the Internet, the medium on which the campaign is run.

how the Internet, by its existence alone, irretrievably transforms our daily lives, and affects both how we understand one another and how we understand ourselves.

But we should be careful not to overestimate the *degree* to which the Internet transforms our identity when we use it, and refrain from assuming that the Internet *must transform* our identity. In other words, we should not suggest that just because we are, or have the potential to be, “globally connected”, that the “global values”, namely freedom, equality, capitalism, and secularism, which tend to be frequently and pervasively articulated (or “tweeted”, or “shared”, or “liked”) should be regarded as *universal* values. Additionally, we should not assume that the individuals who *do* accede to such domineering global values are more superior than those who do not. Or, as Mohanty argues early on in this essay, that a Third World Woman who coincidentally accedes to such values indicates she has accepted the entire *set* of Western values. To illustrate this naïve assumption at work, we may recall the renowned, pro-globalization theorist Thomas Friedman, who writes:

That’s why today there is no more First World, Second World or Third World. There’s only the Fast World- the world of the wide open plain- and the slow world- the world of those who either fall by the wayside or choose to live away from the plain...because they find the Fast world to be too fast, too scary, too homogenizing, or too demanding.

As our self-proclaimed Third World feminists, Narayan, Mohanty and Mahmood, had collectively demonstrated in Chapter 1, this assumption is false; not only does it fail to acknowledge that there *is* a distinct Third World, wherein local feminists may take proud ownership of their geographic situation and unique values, but it also suggests that “Fast World” preferences are, or should be, applied universally, else you risk “falling by the wayside”.



Friedman's language thus confirms that not only *is* there a collective identity, or a type of world (a Fast World), that is dominantly perpetuated through the Internet, but that this world *does* in fact have a political and economic agenda; it implies that the Fast World is virtuous to the extent it expands economic globalization and gives historically marginalized populations a chance to participate in the globalized economy.

Yet it doesn't seem quite right to *blame* the Internet for these phenomena, for the Internet in *itself*, as we establish at the beginning of this essay, has no *inherent* value; instead, this value is deliberately assigned through one's evaluation of the Internet's potential, respective to one's sociopolitical context. Indeed, as we have seen, depending on whom the user is and the applications it is used for, the Internet could be perceived as equalizing, liberating, homogenizing, secularizing, and so on. Just as the advent of democracy (discussed in the beginning of Chapter 3) did not and could not *inherently* afford "equal justice to all in their private differences", neither could the Internet inherently serve as a "global social space" to act independently from the "tyrannical" government imposition, as Barlow had idealized in this essay's introduction.

Instead, there must be a conscientious *deployment* of the Internet *by* a specific user(s) and *for* a specific purpose. Given this essay's interest in subaltern women, identified in the beginning as being the most frequent recipients of institutional oppression, we should consider *how* the Internet may be conscientiously deployed as a tool that has the *end* of liberating, equalizing, and providing a space for such women. But as this essay has resoundingly demonstrated, between instances of "lacking permission to narrate" Third World Women's grievances, to promoting Western economic values, to assuming secularization and so on, the Internet has also been used for *other* ends, ends that, in effect, benefit the Westerner who often executes such Internet

intervention. Indeed, because this distinction is so tempting to obscure, we must be especially careful not to assume that the apparently benevolent intention to liberate, equalize, and educate women through the Internet is always the *exclusive* intention of such initiatives<sup>69</sup>. We must instead ask how the Internet may be deployed as a tool for the *exclusive* end of bettering the world's most disadvantaged women, namely by presenting it as an opportunity to be utilized for Third World women *and* by Third World women, in order to further the preferences that *they* individually identify with. In other words, how can we *truly* open, what Friedman idealizes as "the open plain", to better the world's most institutionally disadvantaged women?

But even to use the term "*bettering*" the world's most institutionally disadvantaged women is to open ourselves up to one of philosophy's most tempting traps: equating a *subjective* good with an *objective* good; it is to assume what is considered "good" for one person or one society of people is *inherently* and *necessarily* Good for all people. In some applications, it is easy to see the fallibility of this assumption. Consider this scenario: because I regard chocolate cake as the only food worth eating for the rest of my life, the world should also only eat chocolate cake until the end of time. Naturally, we would regard this proposition as absurd. But while the absurdity is blatant in this specific scenario, in which I regard *my* subjective value for chocolate cake as the *universe's* objective and exclusive value for chocolate cake, other scenarios, which promote economic "opportunity" and "freedom" of expression and political "equality", may more subtly commit this same assumption. To clarify, let us analyze our instinctive objection to the chocolate cake proposition; these objections are rooted in (a) the

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<sup>69</sup> This is not to suggest that the satisfaction of Western preferences should be explicitly *avoided*. Rather, it suggests that we should conscientiously deploy the Internet satisfy Third World preferences, which, as we have seen, are often disregarded or misinterpreted.

*quality* (or lack thereof) of the content of the good (the chocolate cake), and (b) my *agency* (or lack thereof) to declare a good as objective.

Elaborating on this first point of (a) *quality*, I suggest that we are unlikely to consider chocolate cake as having the quality of an objective good, or a good that is valuable in and of itself. Granted, chocolate cake is delicious, and many people agree; furthermore, the [perceived] experience of the cake's deliciousness may bring the cake-eater pleasure, which *is* often regarded as an objective good, particularly by hedonists<sup>70</sup>. But this association between chocolate cake and pleasure on its own is not strong enough to suggest that chocolate cake is "objectively good", and should thus be eaten by all people for the rest of time. For starters, there are many people who do not like the taste of chocolate cake, which prevents us from assessing it as *universally* delicious, or inherently pleasurable. Yet even if we were to suppose that everyone loved the taste of chocolate cake, we could not use pleasure alone to qualify it as an objective good, for there are consequences of its deliciousness. The most obvious consequence is the chocolate cake's poor nutritional value; because it is primarily comprised of sugar and fat, chocolate cake consumption, especially continued and unvaried chocolate cake consumption, could negatively impact our health; this is problematic, given that health *also* tends to be accepted as an objective good in and of itself. Therefore, if chocolate cake were to be regarded as *both* delicious (and thus conducive to the objective good of pleasure), *and* nutritious (and thus conducive to the objective good of health), then perhaps we could begin to consider chocolate cake an objective good<sup>71</sup>. But because these two qualifications do not hold, *and* because they do

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<sup>70</sup> Hedonism is defined as "the ethical theory that pleasure (in the sense of the satisfaction of desires) is the highest good and proper aim of human life."

<sup>71</sup> To be sure, this implies that chocolate cake does not contradict any *other* potential objective goods, aside from pleasure and health. For instance, if chocolate cake were to somehow decrease our ability to obtain knowledge,

not hold true *universally*, we see how the (a) *content* of a good (in this case, the chocolate cake) may limit its consideration as an objective good.

Before we discuss how (b) my lack of *agency* may also delimit my proposition of the chocolate cake as an objective good, we may wonder what any of this talk of objective goods has to do with Third World women and the Internet. To illustrate, let me propose another more realistic anecdote: Based on my background as an educated, white, middle-class, agnostic feminist raised in the United States, I may be inclined to regard economic opportunity, liberal democracy, and freedom of expression as *objectively* good, as my cultural identity has made it difficult for me to consider situations in which I would *not* regard these values as good in and of themselves. However, as this thesis has resoundingly demonstrated, there exist *many* women who would disagree with my evaluation, or rather, who would regard *other* virtues, such as tradition, to be objectively good. For instance, an impoverished, veil-wearing attendee of the Ayesha mosque services in Cairo may be less inclined to view virtues such as “freedom of expression” as objectively good, as she may more supremely value adherence to the Islamic tradition. Of course, one could suppose that her *decision* to adhere to strict Islam and wear the veil *does*, in one sense, constitute her freedom of expression. However, despite potentially having the same end, this is not the same as the Egyptian woman *conscientiously* valuing freedom of expression. Rather, to characterize the Egyptian woman as valuing freedom of expression is to communicate *for* the subaltern, and to potentially disregard her *explicit* value of tradition.

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which many philosophers believe to be objectively good, then we would not be able to so easily consider chocolate cake an objective good.

Therefore, when considering how the Internet may be conscientiously deployed to *better* the world's most institutionally disadvantaged women, we must be cognizant of the fact that "*better*" is subjective, as it depends on the (a) *content* of the user's conception of "what is good", which in turn depends on the context of user's cultural background. As such, we may regard the Internet as *objectively* beneficial for feminisms when it is deployed to facilitate the achievement of *objective goods*, such as pleasure<sup>72</sup>, health and knowledge. Furthermore, we may conclude that certain websites, which serve and *only* serve<sup>73</sup> to disseminate factual and practical information, are beneficial for the world's most disadvantaged women to the extent they facilitate the objectively good ends of "knowledge" and "health".

To this end, we want to refrain from regarding the Internet as *objectively* beneficial for feminisms when it is deployed to facilitate the achievement of a *subjective good*, such as economic opportunity. For instance, the *subjective* analysis of Thomas Friedman would likely assign *objective* value to the expansion of economic opportunity through the Internet; as such, Friedman may assume objective goodness in the potential for historically localized economies to engage in electronic currency transactions with the globalized world. Initially, we may be able to see a loose tie to objective goodness; if economic opportunity brings economic prosperity, and economic prosperity brings pleasure, and pleasure is an objective good, then Friedman's theory could hold. However, as was the case with the chocolate cake, to assume economic prosperity is *universally* regarded as inherently good is to ignore the potential *consequences* of economic prosperity, such as its tendency to make people greedy and/or make them disregard their closest

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<sup>72</sup> As opposed to "health" and "knowledge", it is much more difficult to give pleasure a uniform meaning across cultures. This is not to suggest that pleasure is not an objective good; rather, it is more cautious to suggest that pleasure takes one, universally-applicable form.

<sup>73</sup> This distinction is to suggest that there are some websites which, for instance, could provide women with political information but *simultaneously* promote a political ideology. We want to be careful to qualify those websites as being objectively good for subaltern women.

relationships; after all, we are also likely to consider our closest relationships as conducive to our pleasure.

On that note, Friedman's assumption also implies that economic prosperity does not displace the tenability of other "objective" goods. However, because economic prosperity is often associated with participation in the *globalized* economy, valuing "economic prosperity" may be inconsistent with valuing "tradition", which, as the hypothetical example of the Ayesha mosque participant demonstrated, may also be regarded as an objective good. Therefore, in revisiting examples employed throughout this thesis, such as "globalgirlfriend.com", which sells the clothing, accessories, jewelry and gifts made by artisans from 20 different countries from all over the world, we may be more hesitant to assume that such economic-opportunity-providing Internet campaigns are *objectively* good for the world's most institutionally disadvantaged women. Instead, we should evaluate these websites and their bearing on women on a context-specific basis.

This recommendation to contextually consider the *content* of Internet campaigns may additionally suggest that we contextually consider the (b) *agent* initiating them. To clarify, let us return to the chocolate cake example, in which we rejected *my* proposition for the world to eat nothing but chocolate cake until the end of time. Beyond its absurd (a) *content*, we are unlikely to accept this proposition based on *my* lack of (b) *agency*<sup>74</sup> to make any sort of recommendation to the rest of the world. Even if *my* recommendation *did* happen to constitute some universally agreed upon objective good, people would be unlikely to accept it, as they would likely wonder what qualifies *me*, more than any other agent, to preach such objective goodness for *everyone*.

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<sup>74</sup> Here, we use "agency" in the philosophical sense, meaning the "capacity of an agent (a person or other entity, human or any living being in general, or soul-consciousness in religion) to act in a world."

This is the same question we should ask when we encounter Internet campaigns that seem to preach for women's rights and assume what is best for feminisms. Unlike traditional campaigns, which inevitably reveal their agent, the agents behind Internet campaigns, particularly viral Internet campaigns, tend to be anonymous or misrepresented. We saw this phenomenon's negative consequences in effect for the Malala fund, #BringBackOurGirls, and Arab Spring, all of which became increasingly detached from their root sources as they grew in popularity.

This is not to necessarily say that an Internet campaign would need to explicitly recognize its founder in order to be considered beneficial for feminisms around the world; rather, some campaigns -such as Avaaz' petition for violence against women in India, or Not Alone's forum for women's diverse abortion stories-, work best with no individual agent, as they instead function as a *collective* political movement. But even when a collective political movement has formed (in fact, especially when a collective political movement has formed), it is imperative to understand the *diverse circumstances* of the participants.

This is why the expansion of the blogosphere, specifically *to* and *for* communities of subaltern women, may be another objectively beneficial way the Internet could be deployed to benefit feminisms around the world; while this is not to suggest that women in these communities *must* or even *should* utilize the blogosphere (to do so would assert my subjective value of freedom of expression), nor does it necessitate that women in the Western world should listen and respond to the subalterns' blogs (to do so would depict subalterns as women who *need* to be saved), providing this population of heterogeneous women with the direct, unmediated opportunity to "e-communicate" their stories, grievances, and preferences *in their own* terms, for

no necessary purpose and to no other party, is, perhaps for the first time in history, to allow the subaltern to speak.



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<sup>75</sup> NOTE: Because this text was read on a Kindle, I refer to "locations (loc)" rather than page numbers, when citing a quotation.

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