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DEVELOPMENTAL LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

Research Paper   **59**

Digital feminism in Fiji

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DEVELOPMENTAL LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) is an international research initiative based at the University of Birmingham, and working in partnership with La Trobe University in Melbourne.

DLP aims to increase understanding of the political processes that drive or constrain development. Its work focuses on the crucial role of home-grown leaderships and coalitions in forging legitimate institutions that promote developmental outcomes.

Contents

Acronyms

ELF   Emerging Leaders Forum

ELFAs   Emerging Leaders Forum Alumni

FWRM Fiji Women's Rights Movement

MIDA   Media Industry Development Authority

PERs   Public Emergency Regulations

Summary

This report explores how women's rights activists in Fiji are using digital technologies, particularly social media. The research involved 22 participants – women aged between 18 and 35. It questions some assumptions about social media's strengths and limitations as a platform for advocacy. The research highlights social media as valuable for influencing policymaking, particularly in light of challenges to the country's mainstream media environment.

Through the case study of digital feminism in Fiji, this report explores the emergence of social media as a valuable site where activists can network globally and access a range of alternative narratives and perspectives on particular issues. This shapes activists' practices and identities.
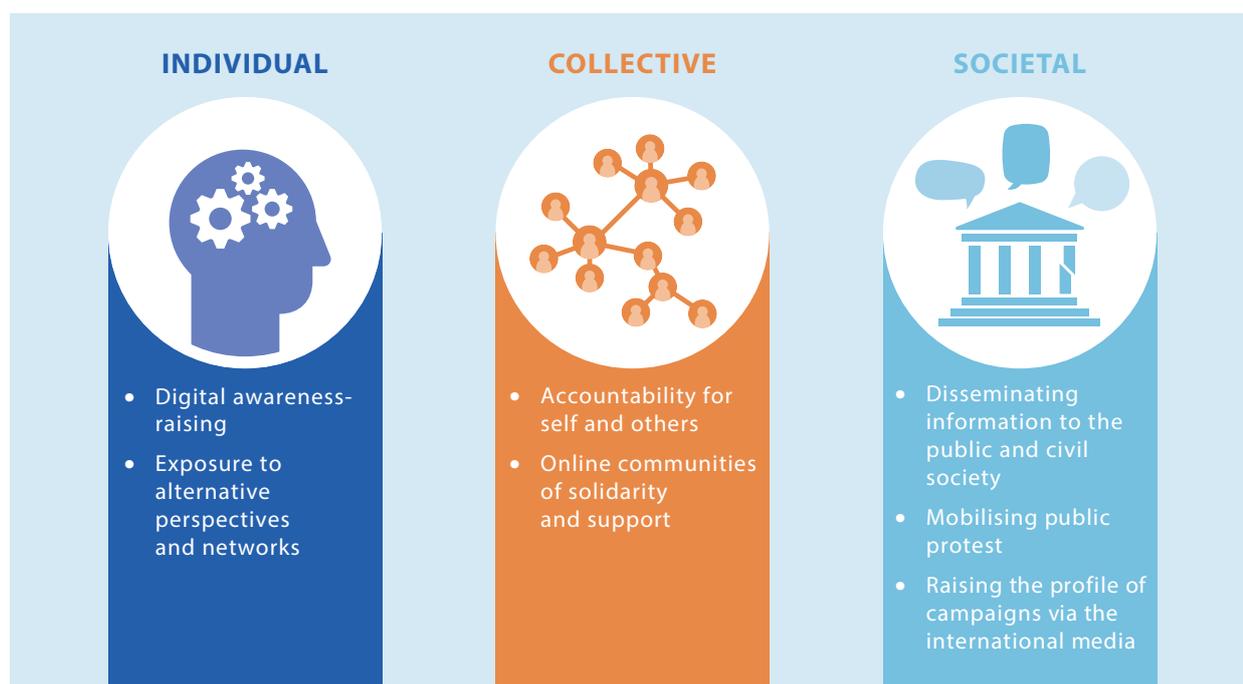
The research highlights the potential for social media to be used to put pressure on policymakers and to challenge misrepresentations (or the absence of discussion entirely) in the mainstream media. Through social media, activists can disseminate information, press releases and alternative narratives to generate public momentum and protest. In addition, these online campaigns raise the profile of particular issues, gaining the attention of international media outlets and eventually triggering domestic media coverage.

This study highlights important takeaways on online activism. At the individual level, social media plays an important role, raising activists' digital consciousness by improving access to information and alternative narratives. This, in turn, helps activists to determine and shape their identities and practices. Further, social media enables activists to access a range of views and perspectives beyond their immediate social and geographical networks.

At the collective level, digital technologies have fostered a virtual community of accountability and transparency for activists. Through digital archives, activists were able to hold themselves to account and reflect on their changing perspectives over time, as well as using these features to hold others to account for seemingly contradictory social media practices.

Social media platforms also enable activists to cultivate networks of solidarity and support, fostering local and global communities of practice. These experiences challenge the notion that Internet movements foster weak and decentralised processes of organisation. Instead, participants' experiences illustrate the strength of these collective identities – fostered initially through 'offline' networks and organisations, then expanded and solidified through digital technologies.

The role of digital activism in developmental leadership

INDIVIDUAL

- Digital awareness-raising
- Exposure to alternative perspectives and networks

COLLECTIVE

- Accountability for self and others
- Online communities of solidarity and support

SOCIETAL

- Disseminating information to the public and civil society
- Mobilising public protest
- Raising the profile of campaigns via the international media

At the societal level, online campaigns can mobilise public protest. The research examines two online campaigns: the campaign to reinstate the scholarship of a young university student and activist, and the anti-harassment Take Back the Streets campaign of 2012. Take Back the Streets, for example, created a Facebook group to enable women to document instances of harassment. This generated much debate, and activists later submitted this data to the Land Transport Authority (LTA) as part of consultations to amend the LTA Code of Conduct and the Land Transport Act.

These examples illustrate the potential of online campaigning to generate offline activities. In Fiji's political environment and media landscape, social media enables activists to publish and share statements, news and information that would otherwise have limited opportunity for public consumption. This enables social media to be used to generate public outcry and momentum, mobilising demonstrations.

Social media can also amplify activism, raising the profile of online campaigns through the international media. International coverage, typically through media outlets in Australian and New Zealand, often triggers domestic media coverage and puts pressure on policymakers. This enables activists to work through social media platforms as part of a broader, multi-pronged communication strategy.

1

Introduction

This report explores how women's rights activists in Fiji are using digital technologies, particularly social media. It questions some assumptions about social media's strengths and limitations as a platform for advocacy. The research highlights social media as valuable for influencing policymaking, particularly in light of challenges to the country's mainstream media environment.

Over the last decade, scholarly interest in social media from the perspective of social movements and collective action has intensified. This has been fuelled by the 'digital revolutions' in Iran in 2009 (Ems 2014), Tunisia in 2010-2011 (Zuckerman 2011), Egypt 2011 (Markham 2014) and the Occupy Wall Street protests that took place globally in 2011 (Tremayne 2014). Some scholars have enthusiastically highlighted the role played by technologies such as Facebook and Twitter in these social movements, noting the opportunities for mobilisation, communication and dissent these technologies can provide.

This interest in the role of such technologies has intensified following recent research which suggests, at a global level, that the space for civil society is shrinking. Opportunities to challenge power and promote dissent are becoming increasingly risky (CIVICUS 2017). As such it is more necessary than ever to interrogate other avenues for the fostering of citizen voice and engagement in political discourse, including online civic spaces.

However, this increased attention has spawned debate over the exact role of digital technologies in social movements and collective activism. Some commentators are sceptical about the ability of online movements to have a tangible and sustained impact offline. It has been suggested that the connectivity forged among individuals online is insufficient to spark a sustained social movement, which requires stronger bonds and a higher degree of organisation (Gladwell 2010; Morozov 2011). Commentators have also suggested that the potential for digital technologies to be co-opted and exploited by controlling forces casts doubt on their effectiveness as a vehicle for social change.

However, despite these concerns, there is some evidence that online networking can translate into offline results and benefits (Biddix & Park 2008; Harlow & Harp 2012). In particular, online movements seem to benefit from their engagement with traditional media platforms, both domestically and internationally, to generate public support and combine bottom-up and top-down avenues for advocacy (Ems 2014). A recent report on the Institute of Development Studies' Making all Voices Count initiative challenges some of the assumptions and expectations about the role of technologies in attempts to promote governance reform. It suggests that technology can help contest and disrupt power relations or assist in '…building the "critical mass" needed for citizens to push effectively for change…' (McGee et al. 2018, p.13). Such online campaigns can help individuals build collective agency and can generate the momentum required to mobilise for change (McGee et al. 2018).

Fiji is a useful context in which to explore these debates. Challenges to the mainstream media environment in Fiji mean that activists have limited opportunity to voice concerns, raise awareness of campaigns or debate issues through the mainstream media. In the past few years people have used social media as an alternative space for political engagement and dissent: for citizen journalism during the #FijiCrackdown in September 2016 (Chung 2016); for youth political engagement and a political campaign during the 2014 elections (Tarai et al. 2015); and for bottom-up regionalism – to transcend national boundaries and gain state-level attention – through the Free West Papua Campaign (Titifanue et al. 2016).

Commentary on these examples has focused on the evolution of social media as a comparatively democratic space for communication, information and dissent, in the wake of continued challenges to freedom of expression and a continued culture of self-censorship in the nation's mainstream media institutions. However, there has been little interrogation of everyday social media use by activists in Fiji, and its implications both online and offline.

Through the case study of digital feminism in Fiji, this report explores the emergence of social media as a valuable site where activists can network globally and access a range of alternative narratives and perspectives on particular issues – an important influencer for shaping activists' practice and identities. Further, this research interrogates the notion of digital activism, highlighting the potential for social media to be used to exert pressure on policymakers and to challenge misrepresentations (or the absence of discussion entirely) in the mainstream media. Through social media, activists are able to disseminate information, press releases and alternative narratives to generate public momentum, protest and demonstration. In addition, these online campaigns raise the profile of particular issues, gaining the attention of international media outlets and eventually triggering domestic media coverage.

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Research approach

The objective of this study was to explore how feminists and/or women's rights activists are using digital technologies in their activism. Specifically, the exploratory case study of women's activism in Fiji aimed to unpack the scope of digital activism, and to identify pathways for women into online activism (either individually or collectively).

This study used a qualitative research approach, employing an open-ended and semi-structured method that is preferred by feminist researchers. This research approach privileges active listening, relational knowledge, and reflexivity as an integral part of the research process (DeVault & Gross 2012). Data for this study was collected through in-depth, semi-structured focus groups. This was supplemented by follow-up interviews, where required for verification. Data collection took place in Suva, Fiji in March 2016. Four focus groups were conducted, each of between three and seven participants.

The research involved 22 participants aged between 18 and 35.[1] Participants were purposively selected based on their involvement with prominent aspects of Suva's women's rights movement and their engagement with online technologies for activism and advocacy. Participants had a history of engagement with Fiji's women's rights movement through their affiliation with NGOs such as the the Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM) or FemLINK Pacific, or through their status as Emerging Leaders Forum Alumni (ELFAs). The Emerging Leaders Forum (ELF) is a year-long training program for 18-25 year old women in Fiji, consisting of workshops and retreats aimed at developing young women's ability to critically analyse issues and further develop their advocacy skills. The graduates of ELF have formed a network of young women (EFLAs), who promote the concerns of young women throughout Fiji.

Participants were asked a range of questions, loosely structured around the following themes:

* the nature and scope of digital technology use, particularly social media;

* the extent of digital technology as a tool for advocacy and activism and the extent of any links between online activism and offline activity; and

* the existence of any risks, challenges or limitations associated with digital technology use.

Focus group discussions were audio recorded and transcribed, and transcripts from each focus group were analysed for key themes. Identifiable information about the participants in this research has been removed from the final report in order to respect participants' requests for anonymity. As such, a full list of participants has not been included. This study was granted approval by the La Trobe University College of Arts, Social Science and Commerce Human Research Ethics Committee (approval no. E16-010).

The researchers acknowledge the comparatively small sample size (22 participants) of this research. This research builds on, and complements, recent research into Fiji's social media landscape and the implications of this for collective action, political engagement and activism. While the small size of Fiji's young women's rights movement makes the 22 participants in this research a representative sample, it is acknowledged that the opportunities to draw broader conclusions from this research may be limited. The researchers view this study as an initial exploration of digital activism in Fiji, and hope to expand on some of these emerging themes through future research.

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1   The age range 18-35 is the official definition of 'youth' in Fiji according to Fiji's national youth policy. For further information, see http://www.youthpolicy.org/national/Fiji_2011_National_Youth_Policy.pdf

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Context: A changing media landscape

The Pacific region has experienced a 'technological revolution' in recent years. Significant reforms in its telecommunications sector have led to deregulation, cheaper access and usage, and increased uptake of telecommunication technologies (Cave 2012). Infrastructure advances such as the expansion of the Southern Cross Fibre Optic cable through Fiji to Tonga and Vanuatu, and the improvement of satellite networks in the Cook Islands, Palau and Federated States of Micronesia have expanded the reach and accessibility of digital technologies. In part, this 'technological revolution' is being sustained and accelerated by the Pacific's large youth population: Pacific youth are the fastest adopters of new technology (Cave 2012).

This 'technological revolution' has facilitated a rise in social media use throughout the region, enabling Pacific Islanders, including the Pacific diaspora, to connect with one another, network, produce and share content, and promote dialogue and debate (Cave 2012). Five Pacific Island countries were ranked in Facebook's top twenty growth markets from April to September 2012 (when considered as a percentage of total population), with this growth predominantly occurring in the 16 to 34 age group (Cave 2012, p.7). Facebook and other social networking sites have enabled the creation of new online communities, facilitated discussions on a host of socio-political topics, and provided Pacific Islanders with new opportunities to engage in low-cost dialogue at a domestic, regional and international level. The popularity of such platforms is fuelled, in part, by increasing youth engagement with social media, particularly in the wake of comparatively few opportunities for participation in more traditional discussion forums (Lee 2006).

Fiji has been at the forefront of this 'technological revolution'. It has some of the fastest growing rates of mobile phone uptake and social media use in the region, coupled with some of the lowest costs for accessing and using such technologies (Prasad et al. 2013). The introduction of Digicel into the telecommunications market in 2008 increased competition between telecommunications providers, resulting in a rapid expansion of mobile connectivity, and significantly lower infrastructure and operating costs for consumers (Finau et al. 2016). Statistics from January 2018 suggest that mobile phone penetration in Fiji is 142 per cent, as many individuals have multiple sim cards and phone accounts with different telecommunications providers (We Are Social 2018).

The proliferation of mobile phones means that the internet, previously limited to the urban centres of Nadi and Suva, has become more widely accessible through mobile broadband, and 3G connectivity has been available in the country since 2008. As of 2018 it was estimated that over 55 per cent of Fiji's population were using the internet and 52 per cent accessing social media platforms (We Are Social 2018). This represents a 16% increase in internet users in the country since the same time the previous year (We Are Social 2018). Similarly, it is suggested that 500,000 people, out of a total population of just over 900,000, are using Facebook (measured in terms of monthly active users), with an equal distribution of accounts between men and women (We Are Social 2018). Facilitating this are some of the lowest connectivity costs in any Pacific country: US$4 for 1G mobile prepaid broadband (November 2014) (PRIF 2015).

The increasing prevalence of social media access and use throughout Fiji has had a profound impact on the country's media and communications landscape, shaping how citizens are engaging with these new communications platforms (Titifanue et al. 2016). Since the introduction of Public Emergency Regulations (PERs) in 2009 and the Media Industry Development Decree (hereafter Media Decree) in 2010, Fiji's mainstream media landscape has been subjected to varying forms of regulation and censorship (Hooper 2013; Dutt 2010). Despite the lifting of PERs in 2012, breaches of the Media Decree carry penalties (up to two years in prison). Some argue this has fostered a culture of self-censorship in mainstream media outlets (Hooper 2013). Amnesty International has suggested that despite the removal of some restrictions, barriers to freedom of expression remain (Amnesty International 2014). Similarly, a report by Reporters Without Borders noted that while the 2014 elections improved access to information (as evidenced by the country's rise in the World Press Freedom Index from 67 in 2017 to 57 in 2018), the media are '…nonetheless still restricted by the draconian 2010 Media Industry Development Decree and the Media Industry Development Authority (MIDA)' (Reporters Without Borders 2018, p.1).

In the context of this challenging mainstream media environment, and considering the technological advances outlined above, online spaces have emerged as a unique communication platform and source of information in Fiji (Foster 2007). Online blogs began to increase as a form of resistance to military rule (Singh & Prasad 2008). These early blogs were a conduit for information, often alerting the mainstream media to rumours and developments in stories throughout the country. However, blogs have frequently contained inflammatory, incorrect and contested allegations (Walsh 2010).

In more recent years, social media platforms have begun to replace blogs as a tool for expressions of political dissent, lobbying, debate, dialogue and advocacy. Some social networking groups, such as Facebook's Letters to the Editor Uncensored (LTEU) have emerged as a direct result of the decreasing space for public dialogue in the mainstream media. LTEU's Facebook page notes that 'LTEU is a forum to post news, articles, press releases, opinions, and concerns which HAVE NOT or WILL NOT be published in mainstream media due to unfair media censorship and self-censorship in Fiji' (LTEU 2017). With over 18,000 members, this group is heavily used for debate and dialogue (Finau et al. 2014).

The rise of social media as a 'go to' source for information and dissemination has led to an increase in citizen journalism: citizens are collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information (Bowman & Willis 2003). For example, in September 2016 when prominent members of Fiji's political elite were detained by police after criticisms of the 2013 constitution, citizen journalists gathered at the police barracks and took to social media to document the unfolding events. As noted by Chung (2016) in her commentary: 'In this information age of scrolling newsfeeds and viral hashtags, politically active young Fijians tweeted #FijiCrackdown and live-streamed their political views across leadership barriers and international boundaries' (Chung 2016, p.1).

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Setting the scene: Digital feminism in Fiji

This study explores how a group of young women's rights activists in Fiji are navigating this new media landscape. For each participant in this study, the increasing prevalence of social media had had an undeniable impact on their activism and advocacy work:

> "Internet is part of my life, I have to be connected everyday"
>
> (Participant N, 03.03.2016)

> "I access the internet every day, it's part of my life …"
>
> (Participant V, 22.03.2016)

A digital connection has become central to these participants' everyday lives and identities as feminists and activists. Digital technologies and social media have enabled participants to access information and communicate in new ways and at an unprecedented scale. As one participant noted "…I find myself scrolling through women's and feminist organisation sites… picking up links left right and centre…" (Participant H, 03.03.2017).

Digital consciousness

Further, social media has enabled activists to gain exposure to a range of alternative narratives and perspectives on issues beyond the scope of their immediate social networks or personal perspectives:

> "it's [social media] giving us various perspectives to a story so we are able to read all like think pieces coming through and you're able to formulate a better understanding of one particular issue being discussed…"
>
> (Participant E, 02.03.2016)

> "Social media opens you up…right now [during a focus group] we're sitting in a closed room and we all know each other…but when you're out there [online] you are exposed to a variety of comments, a variety of points of view."
>
> (Participant I, 03.03.2016)

> "I think I have expanded the scope of my understanding based on comments, especially of other people's experiences. I have also instigated discussions on education and indigenous rights and that has allowed me to make more fully informed opinions."
>
> (Participant W, 25.03.2016)

Many participants alluded to social media being crucial to their understanding of alternative discourses – particularly the diverse spectrum of feminist identities and intersectionality. Accessing information through social media allowed participants to redefine their own feminist identities in their socio-cultural context.

> "Technology has greatly influenced my feminist identity and also understanding of feminism…Digital technology also has created the environment for me to be able to see more clearly the racial nuances and intergenerational challenges"
>
> (Participant W, 25.03.2016)

> "…[I] started reading up more on black feminism, North and South feminism…Moving away from white feminism to black feminism"
>
> (Participant V, 22.03.2016)

As these responses demonstrate, digital technologies, particularly social media, have become a key platform through which participants have been exposed to a range of alternative narratives and discourse. Through social media, participants have been able to access information and engage in dialogue on diverse topics they otherwise would not have had access to in their 'offline' lives. As articulated by one self-identified queer activist, "…there aren't many other queer activists in Fiji so my activism is informed by digital technologies and, through that, exposure to queer feminism" (Participant U, 22.03.2016).

Accountability and transparency

Digital technologies have also fostered a virtual community of accountability and transparency for activists. This is manifest in two key ways: firstly, digital archives enable activists to hold themselves to account and reflect on their changing perspectives over time; and secondly, activists are able to hold others to account for seemingly contradictory social media practices. The archiving and continued virtual life of online content, particularly through features such as Facebook's 'On This Day' function, means that participants are frequently reminded of content they posted online months, or even years ago. Participants noted that this 'digital memory' enabled them to reflect on their growth as activists, and acknowledge instances in which their continued education had resulted in a change of opinion or stance on a particular topic:

> "I think if you're a feminist you should be constantly questioning ideas, thoughts and people… I unlearn a lot of behaviours…and I love those conversations because I am constantly evaluating how I see things…none of us are the same and all of us come with different types of privilege..."

> (Participant A, 02.03.2016)

Similarly, social media also provides a window into the views and perspectives of people in a social network that may not otherwise have been known. Many participants acknowledged the power of social media for holding others to account and for facilitating honest conversations in the women's movement:

> "For me, it's important…not to, like, call you out…but to have a conversation with what's going on in your head. I don't think I would be true to myself as a feminist if I didn't talk to my friend about these things"

> (Participant A, 02.03.2016)

One participant, reflecting on her experience with a close friend who had been sharing sexualised photos of male celebrities on Facebook, noted how social media enabled her to have a conversation about double standards: "…feminists are always talking about men objectifying women on their pages so what is so different from [her friend] doing it" (Participant A, 02.03.2016).

Virtual communities of solidarity and support

Participants also noted how social media has the potential to "…transcend the physical space into the cyberspace" (Participant A, 02.03.2016), removing geographical barriers to communication and participation in regional and global movements. Castells (2012) reflects on the potential of social networking tools to foster a sense of togetherness: users can '…transcend time and space, yet…produce content, set up links and connect practices' (p. 232). Participants echoed these sentiments. One explained that "One of the coolest aspects of digital advocacy is how you're not restricted to time zones and distance…" (Participant H, 03.03.2016). Another participant expressed the sense of solidarity and belonging facilitated through some of these online connections:

> "My first real experience was on Facebook when I started sharing on my status of things happening to people I know or to me personally…it created this energy around it where people started commenting on it, showing solidarity and being supportive and sharing their own experiences."

> (Participant W, 25.03.2016)

Participants reflected on the number of international celebrities coming out in support of the feminist movement, and how they were able to link into key moments in the global feminist movement despite their geographical isolation:

> "Let's say that there is a celebrity feminist and you'll never get to meet them in real like, but [technology] gives you an opportunity to communicate."

> (Participant A, 02.03.2016)

> "I have engaged in many Twitter hashtag conversations globally and that has helped me understand the kind of experiences women experience around the world…"

> (Participant W, 25.03.2016)

For participants in this study, social media enabled the creation of virtual communities of solidarity and support. Scholars such as Banet-Weiser (2012) have described digital media as inherently narcissistic, implying that young women who use these

technologies are primarily interested in individualised identities and actions. But these findings suggest that digital technologies may facilitate communal identities and collective support.

Scholars such as Kabeer (2012) have recognised the power of association and collective action for women's movements in their pursuit of transformational change, as well as the more intrinsic impact that this relationship-building and solidarity can have on participants. For Kabeer (2012), this type of collective action enables the formation of safe spaces for women to discuss issues of common concern and facilitate shared reflection. The solidarity gained through building relationships based on shared experiences can be instrumental to achieving strategic gains across local, nation and international arenas (Kabeer 2011, 2012; Kabeer & Huq 2010).

In addition to the instrumental value of such collective action, and the inherent value of coalitions as power in numbers, there are also subtler, yet equally transformative dynamics at play:

> 'The bonds of friendship and solidarity between group members had been forged and strengthened through many years of dealing with adversity together. It was the power of these social relationships that they drew on in confronting relationships of power within their community.'

> (Kabeer & Huq 2010: 86)

As this quote shows, the formation of strong relationships based on solidarity among women with shared experiences can be crucial to the generation of momentum for social change. For Kabeer (2012), collective action and communities of practice give women the ability to acquire new knowledge and information, forge new relationships with each other and carve pathways for future engagement. This research builds on previous work by Brimacombe (2017) to suggest that digital platforms are playing a central role in building such communities.

For some participants, social media offered a sense of belonging in cyberspace that was lacking in their offline lives:

> "Growing up in Fiji you get made fun of for being Indo-Fijian. I found my niche on social media. Social media allowed me to find people who may have gone through things that I have gone through as well."

> (Participant R, 22.03.2016)

Other participants turned to social media to help them process their experiences of discrimination:

> "There was a time I was experiencing discrimination based on my ethnicity and me being a woman, and also because of my family background…and I didn't know how to articulate it…through readings and information I accessed online it broadened my understanding"

> (Participant W, 25.03.2016)

5

Digital activism or slacktivism?

Increasing social media use has resulted in the emergence of a 'digital generation' of Pacific activists (Cave 2012, p.3). Activists are increasingly recognising the potential of the Internet and social media as a force for social change and a vehicle for the inclusion of marginalised groups (Titifanue et al. 2016). Social media has played a key role in regional campaigns and movements such as the Free West Paua Movement and the Pacific Climate Change Campaign, enabling citizens at the grassroots level to use social media to reach and influence Pacific heads of state and contribute to regional and international debates (Macleod 2016; Titifanue et al. 2016, 2017).

Globally, these online forms of activism are often dismissed as lacking authentic participation, and referred to as 'slacktivism' or 'armchair activism' (Christensen 2011). But such a conceptualisation fails to recognise the potential for online platforms to mobilise movements and collective action, forge new social relations and solidify networks (Gerbaudo 2012; Kahn & Kellner 2004). As Gerbaudo notes, '[s]ocial media have become emotional conduits for reconstructing a sense of togetherness among a spatially dispersed constituency' (2012, p. 159).

Gladwell (2010) argues that social media cannot facilitate the high risk or direct-action activism of the civil rights movement. He explains this as due to a lack of strong personal connections forged through online media and the decentralized nature of online activist networks. Gladwell (2010) concludes, 'Facebook activism succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice' (p. 1). However, scholars such as Kahn and Kellner (2004), in their study of protest movements in resistance to neo-liberal institutions in the late 1990s and early 2000s, have documented how activists have successfully used the Internet to organise and facilitate protest. They suggest that online activism has created a 'vital new space of politics and culture' and has produced 'new social relations and forms of political possibility' (p.94).

New media scholars have been more nuanced in their analyses of online activism. They have demonstrated its potential to facilitate 'offline' activism and raise awareness of political issues, but have remained cautious about its potential to facilitate sustained social movements. For example, Gerbaudo's (2012) ethnographic research, conducted during popular uprisings in Egypt, Spain and the USA, contradicts Gladwell's assertions that social media lacks personal connections and structure. Instead Gerbaudo (2012) argues that activists use social media as a means of mobilisation, 'reweav[ing] a new sense of public space, refashioning the way in which people come together on the streets' (p. 160). Further, work by Tufekci and Wilson (2012) in relation to the Tahrir square protests demonstrates the centrality of social media to participants' protest activity through both communication and the global dissemination of protest visuals and narratives.

Participants expressed this tension between 'slacktivism' and 'activism' during focus group discussions. One participant noted: ''…sometimes digital tools can breed a generation of 'slacktivists'…now almost everyone is an activist – just taking photos at events…and nothing more'' (Participant U, 22.03.2016). However, others reflected on the success of some of their online campaigns, particularly when they had used social media as a catalyst for raising public consciousness and getting the attention of policymakers:

> ''Social media would be the form of us sharing that [statements] as news as opposed to mainstream media. Social media became our form of news outlet.''
>
> (Participant E, 02.03.2016)

> ''The two different mediums work hand in hand…social media has been a catalyst for stuff that I've done offline…On the other hand my 'on the ground work' has led to catalytic events online as well.''
>
> (Participant E, 02.03.2016)

> ''Mainstream media picks up whatever is fresh and whatever will get more attention…''
>
> (Participant G, 02.03.2016)

Exerting pressure on policymakers

For these participants, social media played a valuable role in raising awareness of particular issues and generating subsequent mainstream media coverage. It helped generate media attention even where institutions may have been reluctant to give press to an issue in the first instance.

Bonilla and Rosa (2015) in their study of 'hashtag activism' during protests against racial profiling and police brutality in the US argue that social media platforms have become powerful sites for the documentation and challenging of misrepresentation in the mainstream media. They note:

> '…while social media might seem like a space of disembodied engagement, for many, social media can become an important site in which to foreground the particular ways in which racialized bodies are systematically stereotyped, stigmatized, surveilled, and positioned as targets of state-sanctioned violence.'
>
> (Bonilla & Rosa 2015, p. 9)

This analysis highlights the opportunities for minority groups to use social media to counter misrepresentations and dominant narratives put forward by authorities and mainstream media sources. Further, social media has become an important avenue for citizen voice that has been largely absent, or intentionally excluded, from conventional media platforms, typically because of age and/or gender:

> "…in real life, it's difficult to speak, like culturally and politically when you're a young person. There's no one there to listen…when you have the internet…it's there in your face … it's there all the time… so somebody would read something that you had to say."
>
> (Participant J, 03.03.2016)

This was particularly true for activists who felt their voices were marginalised or missing from mainstream media platforms:

> "…90% of our [NGO] press statements do not get covered a lot hence we use alternative tools – social media…"
>
> (Participant T, 22.03.2016)

> "...at one point mainstream media would not touch any of the issues we [coalition of NGOs] put out so we just started using social media for it."
>
> (Participant V, 22.03.2016)

These responses demonstrate the challenges these activists face when seeking mainstream media coverage of their work or campaigns. For some participants these challenges could be attributed to particular issues not being of sufficient size or scale to warrant mainstream media coverage, or not having the right 'hook' or 'spin'. Whereas for other participants, these challenges stemmed from the political sensitivities associated with their work and the perceived reluctance of mainstream media institutions to report on any potentially antagonistic views.

For activists attempting to raise awareness of these issues, social media has become an important conduit. One participant, a youth mental health advocate, highlighted that the mainstream media's coverage of mental health issues tended to reinforce harmful stereotypes. Reflecting on a recent incident when the former Minister for Health had made highly negative and regressive public remarks about those suffering from mental health issues, she noted:

> "[we] tried to speak with the media to raise an issue with how this was stated but they did not allow us because he was the Minister and somehow it was being misconstrued that what he said was the truth. As a result, we used social media to vent our issue with the statement. We used social media to speak from our own perspective. As a result [of the public outcry that was generated] he was asked to apologise. Our social media frustrations were eventually picked up by the Fiji Times."
>
> (Participant Q, 08.03.2016)

The 'Take Back the Streets' campaign (see box overleaf) challenged the assumption that online activism, or the dissemination of news and information through social media, is largely 'preaching to the choir' and fails to move beyond an individual's immediate social networks. However, as one research participant noted in relation to the campaign:

> "a lot of women who shared their stories actually said in those posts that they just don't think about women's rights…they just wanted to talk to somebody who understood…which is how a lot of women came to us who have never thought of feminism."
>
> (Participant A, 02.03.2016)

This campaign, particularly its establishment of an inclusive Facebook group, was able to reach far beyond immediate ELFA networks and the women's movement to engage with a broader constituency.

Take Back the Streets, 2012

A number of participants reflected on the 2012 ELFA campaign 'Take Back the Streets'. This was a response to increasing harassment of women and girls, particularly by public service vehicle drivers. Activists created a Facebook group to document street harassment, where women could post details of harassment they experienced (date, time, location and vehicle).

The campaign was launched on International Women's Day in March 2012. Reflecting on how it started, one participant noted:

> "…it came out of a real concern of a friend of mine while in a taxi. We shared the story with the entire ELFA group and we got so angry that we thought this could be something we go do….the reason the page was started was that we wanted to document instances of harassment related to being on the street… a place where women could vent…"

> (Participant A, 02.03.2016)

Over the course of the campaign, the issue of street harassment became a hotly debated national issue. For example, the General Secretary of the Fiji Taxi Association often spoke about the issue on national radio, starting that young women and girls should avoid wearing short skirts which 'provoked men into sexually harassing them'. These comments provoked fierce debate on social media, both on the 'Take Back the Streets' campaign page, and on other Facebook discussion forums and news sites. They also attracted the condemnation of Fiji's women's rights movement. The General Secretary resigned, before being reinstated on leave.

Throughout the campaign, women's rights organisations (such as FWRM and the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre) were invited to provide gender sensitisation training to members of the Fiji Taxi Authority and the Land Transport Authority (LTA). After the campaign, EFLA activists collated the data from the Facebook group and submitted it to the LTA as part of consultations to amend the LTA Code of Conduct and the Land Transport Act.

Another online campaign that bridged the online-offline divide was the campaign to reinstate the scholarship of a young university student and activist. This student, who had been a volunteer in the campaign of an independent political candidate in the lead up to the 2014 election, had their government scholarship terminated by the Tertiary Scholarship and Loans Board for 'associating in political agendas'. Some activists suggested that this person's high visibility as a prominent LGBTIQ rights campaigner compounded the response to their political activities. Complaints were made to the university authorities and approaches were made to mainstream media platforms, but there was a general reluctance to cover the issue. The limited scope for mainstream media publicity resulted in the development of a concerted social media campaign. Campaigners published statements and press releases online, and posted accounts of the event across a range of personal accounts and public discussion forums on Facebook. One participant noted:

> "I think social media played a crucial role [in scholarship reinstatement]… there were people venting out from their personal accounts…it got the issue out across to other people who didn't know about it in a timely manner."

> (Participant D, 02.03.2016)

This campaign had two main implications. Firstly, the publishing of this news and information on social media led to public outcry over the scholarship termination, drawing the attention of human rights advocacy groups, NGOs and political commentators who mobilise protests and demonstrations nationally. This 'bottom-up' pressure for a reversal of the decision from within Fiji placed pressure on policymakers.

Secondly, the social media 'buzz' was large enough to gain the attention of international media outlets in Australia and New Zealand. They interviewed key individuals and told the story across both radio and online news platforms. This 'top-down' pressure from international media coverage meant that media platforms in Fiji could no longer ignore the story. Fiji's press, which frequently republishes content from sources in Australian and New Zealand, eventually reported on the issue and the ensuing public outcry. The combination of 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' pressure generated via this social media campaign culminated in a policy reversal and the reinstatement of the student's scholarship.

These examples demonstrate the potential of online activism and campaigning through social media to generate activities that move beyond the 'online' realm. In Fiji's political environment and media landscape, social media enables activists to publish and share statements, news and information that would otherwise have limited opportunity for public consumption. Further, social media acts as a valuable conduit for the amplification of activists' work, both nationally and internationally. The role of social media as a source for international news stories, and often subsequently national media coverage in Fiji, enables activists to work through social media platforms as part of a broader, multi-pronged communication strategy. Social media can help activists exert pressure on policymakers.

6

Risks and limitations

Despite being a powerful campaigning tool for activists, the use of social media is not without its risks and challenges. Participants reflected on the challenges associated with the blurred distinction between the personal and the professional when navigating online spaces, in particular the assumption that social media activity is essentially personal. They noted that it is often dismissed as merely 'socialising' and not validated as 'work' or professional activity. This affected how participants integrated social media use into their professional lives, an issue that was particularly prevalent in the lead up to the 2014 election:

> "when I was working [for an NGO]…and we were having elections…and we were supporting a particular candidate [as individuals]…the organisation felt that there needed to be a clearer distinction that it's your personal page."
>
> (Participant A, 02.03.2016)
>
> "I can't be seen to be commenting on something that might go against their company brand…I get angry about it because it is my personal page…"
>
> (Participant E, 02.03.2016)
>
> "There are strains in relationships because of government links…and it does limit what you can and can't do. At times I have changed how I use my platforms. For instance, now Facebook is more for my personal use than Twitter which is more professionally tasked…Since people watch you, you get to certain points where you can almost lose your job."
>
> (Participant P, 08.03.2016)

Participants noted that their social media use was monitored by their employers, and that they had to negotiate organisational guidelines on online activity. Participants who worked for NGOs, in particular, experienced a tension between the personal political participation of staff in online forums and the organisational need to ensure political impartiality.

Further, participants expressed frustration at the digital presence of many NGOs and other organisations in the advocacy and activism space. They described this presence as often merely an extension of the linear, one-way communication model of information dissemination and public relations, rather than an attempt to engage a broader audience in debate and dialogue:

> "I notice a lot of organisations have social media accounts, but they just post things up and don't monitor. For example, their page could be littered with comments from people asking for help but no one is responding…"
>
> (Participant A, 02.03.2016)

These digital NGO practices can be partially attributed to limited resources in the not-for-profit sector. For example, communication expertise is largely limited to marketing and promotions rather than more participatory practices. Similarly, given the climate of media censorship and regulation in which NGOs are operating and the harsh penalties associated with non-compliance, it is reasonable to expect such institutions to be risk-adverse when it comes to formal communications in the public domain (Hassall 2017; Singh 2017).

There is a need to recognise that many activists, particularly those in the women's rights space, are conducting the bulk of their digital advocacy in their capacity as individuals rather than through any formal organisational affiliation. In fact, often this digital activism takes place despite their organisational affiliation and the limitations imposed on social media use in a professional context. This means that these individuals are working in online spaces with little anonymity and few institutional safeguards, when compared to more conventional advocacy practices.

As explored by Tarai (2015), concerns have been raised in Fiji about online 'hate speech' and allegations of social media being used to incite civil disorder against the government. In 2015, the Chairman of Fiji's Media Industry Development Authority (MIDA) expressed concerns over the rates of online 'hate-speech' (Vuibau 2015a), leading MIDA Chairman Ashwin Raj to suggest that social media be 'unplugged' as a way of curtailing such activities. Similarly, the Ministry of Defence's cyber security unit has called for limits on internet freedom, particularly in relation to pornographic sites and imagery (Vuibau

2015). More recently, these discussions have intensified, culminating in the 2017 Attorney General's Conference, where Fiji's Police Commissioner, Brigadier General Sitiveni Qiliho, endorsed the suggestion that Fiji's cyber space needed regulation (Chaudhary 2017). The Police Commissioner's sentiments were underscored by a series of cases involving revenge porn, and racial and religious hatred discussions online (Tarai 2018).

These concerns about online behaviour and the dissemination of offensive material where echoed by participants, who recounted numerous experiences with cyberbullying and harrasment in online forums. These ranged from 'discomforting remarks' to threats of physical and sexual abuse and the unsolicited sharing of pornographic imagery:

> "There are the usual messages that kept telling me how they feel about me…telling me that I hate men and that 'all you feminists are dirty'…"
>
> (Participant R, 22.03.2016)

> "I get private messages from random men… I get harassed for sure"
>
> (Participant O, 08.03.2016)

> "As a transwoman I have experienced people taking screenshots of my profile picture and chatting me up online. They try to have sex chats with you"
>
> (Participant P, 08.03.2016)

> "I have been threatened with rape, death and violence. I have had images of me morphed and used for degrading memes. I have been called a whore and bitch and slut…"
>
> (Participant W, 25.03.2016)

These issues were brought into the public domain during the 2014 elections when Roshika Deo, an independent political candidate, faced vicious cyberbullying. This included threats of rape, degrading images, derogatory name-calling and character assassination.

In response to these debates and concerns, on the 15th of March 2018, the Fijian Government tabled the Online Safety Bill in parliament. This bill was enacted by parliament in May 2018. The bill explains that it aims to:

> '(a) promote responsible online behavior and online safety;
>
> (b) deter harm caused to individuals by electronic communications; and
>
> (c) provide an efficient means of redress for such individuals.' (p.5)
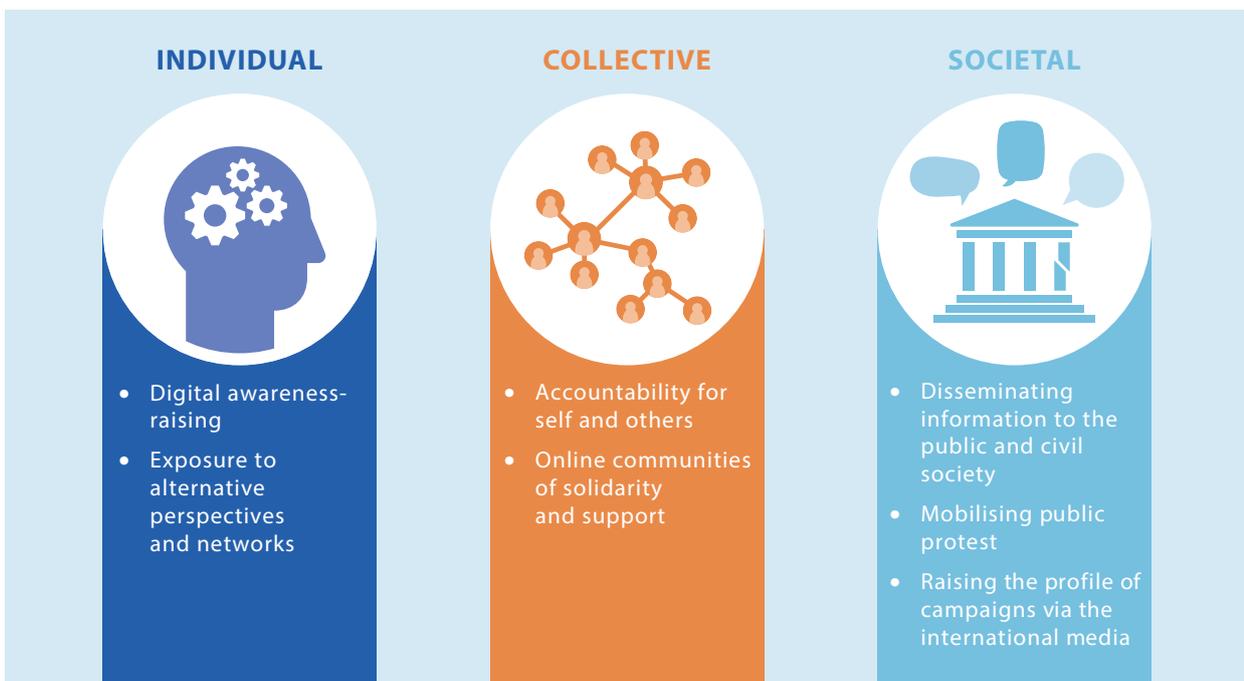
Participants in this study expressed a desire to feel safe and protected during their online activities. They were concerned that existing avenues for investigation and complaint through the Fiji Police Force's Cyber Crime Unit took a long time and rarely resulted in a charge or compensation. However, participants also noted a parallel need to ensure that their digital freedom of expression remained unregulated. They were concerned that attempts to regulate digital behaviour (such as the above Online Safety Bill) could lead to a curtailing of this freedom, as was seen with the introduction of the Media Decree in 2010.

7

Conclusion

This study builds on findings from ten years of Developmental Leadership Program research that has highlighted the collective nature of developmental leadership – the mobilisation and organisation of motivated individuals (DLP 2018). These collective endeavours can be positioned on a spectrum from formal coalitions to more informal networks and alliances coming together to '…solve the pervasive collective action problems which largely define the challenges of growth and development' (Lyne de Ver 2009, p. 3-4). The contestation of ideas, power and values is a central feature of these collective endeavours, and it requires spaces for questioning, negotiation and debate (DLP 2018). This research explores the potential for social media to act as a space for this contestation as well as a platform through which these practices of collective leadership are strengthened, challenged and enacted.

The role of digital activism in developmental leadership

INDIVIDUAL	**COLLECTIVE**	**SOCIETAL**
• Digital awareness-raising • Exposure to alternative perspectives and networks	• Accountability for self and others • Online communities of solidarity and support	• Disseminating information to the public and civil society • Mobilising public protest • Raising the profile of campaigns via the international media

This case study of digital feminism in Fiji highlights important takeaways on online activism. Firstly, social media plays an important role, raising activists' digital consciousness by improving access to information and alternative narratives. This, in turn, helps activists to determine and shape their identities and practices. Further, social media enables activists to access a range of views and perspectives beyond their immediate social and geographical networks.

Secondly, social media platforms provide avenues for activists to cultivate networks of solidarity and support, fostering local and global communities of practice. These are central to the loyalty and commitment required to organise and progress a social movement (Gamson 1992). These experiences challenge the notion that internet movements foster weak and decentralised processes of organisation. Instead, participants' experiences illustrate the strength of these collective identities – fostered initially through 'offline' networks such as ELFA, but expanded and solidified through digital technologies.

This paper interrogates the concept of digital activism. It highlights social media's potential to be used to raise public consciousness and catalyse and boost momentum for continued action. Further, social media platforms enable activists to challenge and contest the misrepresentation, or complete absence, of conversations from public discourse. These new avenues for citizen voice can put unprecedented pressure on policymakers, who may be unaccustomed to such challenges from more restricted and less democratic media platforms.

On the one hand, online campaigns exert 'bottom-up' pressure by disseminating information, press releases and alternative narratives to the general public, leading to local protests and demonstrations. At the same time, these campaigns exert 'top-down' pressure on policymakers globally by generating international media coverage. This international coverage, typically through Australian and New Zealand media outlets, frequently triggers domestic media coverage – able to reproduce international news items without fear of sanctions. The convergence of these two 'pressure points' on policymakers can trigger policy change.

While the campaigns illustrated in this paper may appear to be comparatively small, recent statements by government on their desire to regulate these new online platforms indicate this 'pressure' is indeed being felt. In wake of these concerns, it is more necessary than ever to build on this research with future investigations into Fiji's social media landscape, in particular the opportunities and challenges this new media landscape presents for political engagement.

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