

# Digital Natives' Alternative Approach to Social Change

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## Digital natives with a cause: Between champions and slackers<sup>1</sup>

My first encounter with the idea of new media technologies' crucial role in contemporary youth movements was when I read the United Nations World Youth Report in 2005. The report stipulated that emerging youth movements are characterised by the use of such technologies in organising, communicating, and campaigning (UN DESA, 2005:125). The interest on this topic has since considerably escalated among academics, policy makers, and other practitioners.

Studies have progressed from an initial pre-occupation with the instrumental role of technology (see, for instance Kassimir, 2006; Brooks and Hodkinson, 2008, and Shirky, 2008) to an inquiry on emerging new actors, politics, and forms of activism enabled by such technologies. At the centre of this new line of research are digital activism conducted by young people whose lives are significantly shaped by the ubiquitous internet technologies – the 'digital natives'<sup>2</sup>.

They are hailed as the new actors who are defining the potential future directions of activism – one that focuses more on issues related to everyday democracy and favours self-organised, autonomous, and horizontal networks (for examples, see Bennett, 2003; Martin, 2004; Collin, 2008). However, the emergence of this hopeful narrative is also accompanied by one of doubt. It questions the extent to which internet activism can contribute to concrete social change (Collin, 2008; Kovacs, 2010). Some proponents of this view insist that digital activism can only be effective if accompanied with rigorous

real-life activism, to the extent of calling those who engage solely in digital activism as 'slacktivists' (Morozov, 2009; Gladwell, 2010).

The current debates were propelled by the question on the impact of youth digital activism. The problem with this question lies in the inherent assumption that the researcher's idea on activism is universally shared, including by the digital natives. History has shown that new forms of activism have emerged along with the structural transformation of societies (Offe, 2008; Touraine, 2008). Hence, it is valid to presume that youth in the 21st century 'network society' (Castells, 1996) also give birth to alternative approaches to activism.

Instead of impact assessment, I argue that the effort to understand digital natives' activism should start by asking how youth imagine and approach social change to give room for alternative approaches to emerge. Inspired by Claus Offe's (2008) method to identify the "newness" in new social movements, I attempt to address the question by looking at the issue, strategy, site of action, as well as the internal mode of organising of a movement.

The framework will be first used to confront existing assumptions on activism and social movements, which will also serve as a point of comparison to a digital natives' movement chosen as a case study. As a response to the Global North focus in studying digital natives, the case study chosen is Blank Noise, a youth-led collective that has been addressing the issue of street sexual harassment in urban India through street interventions and online campaigns since 2003.

## **Activism with a capital 'A'**

What do we mean by activism? Literatures have acknowledged that it is a difficult concept to pin down, since it has been used in many different ways by a variety of actors. Broadly speaking, activism has been meant to refer to collective action for social change as one of the forms of civic and political engagement, such as protest events and direct actions, advocacy to change policies of powerful institutions, consumer boycotts, or public awareness raising campaigns (Kassimir, 2006; Sherrod, 2006).

The aforementioned understanding seem to be the lens with which the majority of researches on youth digital activism have been conducted (see, for instance, Juris and Pleyers, 2009), resulting in two problems. Firstly, most researches tend to only discuss the concrete and action aspects of activism, ignoring the intangible aspects that also determine activism as a practice: the underlying ideology, articulation of issue, the profile of actors, and how the movement organises itself.

Secondly, there seems to be some underlying assumptions on the established form of activism (Angelina, 2011). Referring to Offe's framework, the issue chosen relates to structural changes, manifested in making concrete demands for policy reforms or behavioural change. The demand is made to an identified 'opponent', formal entities such as the state or major corporations. The *strategies* include policy advocacy, campaigns, or marches with the streets or physical space as the *site of action*. As for the *internal mode of organising*, the movement consists of highly-committed individuals who are involved full time in the movement. To paint a picture, for many of us activism on women's rights might refer to a group of extremely dedicated people who have spent years advocating for a Domestic Violence bill to be passed by the government and attempt to raise public awareness by marching on the streets with placards saying "Stop violence against women!"

While activism in common understanding definitely plays an important role in today's society, is this approach the only form of activism? More importantly, is this approach to social change also employed by digital natives with a cause?

Despite the digital divide, it has been widely acknowledged that to some extent all of the current generation of young people is a part of a "network society" (Feixa et al, 2009), one in which technology is deeply embedded in social structures (Castells, 1996). This results in a number of shifts in our societies, most notably the interconnection between the physical and the virtual as public space, where "ideas and values are formed, conveyed, supported, and resisted; space that ultimately becomes the training ground for action and reaction" (Castells, 2009: 301). Other shifts include the decreased influence of the state, whose power is challenged by globalisation, and the significance of major corporations and mass media as power holders. These shifts provide ground to believe that young people who grow up in this societal structure may have different approaches to social change as opposed to the assumptions held by many current scholars and practitioners – a proposition we will explore through the case of Blank Noise.

## **Blank Noise: A digital natives' movement**

Blank Noise started in 2003 as a final year art project of Jasmeen Patheja, then a design student in Bangalore, as a response to the experience of many women around her, including herself, facing street sexual harassment on a daily basis. It was initially known for its street interventions, but what distinguished Blank Noise from similar initiatives is its prominent use of the web, with four blogs, a YouTube channel, as well as a Flickr, Facebook, and Twitter account. Today, Blank Noise exists in nine cities in India and consists of over 2,000 volunteers, most of whom are women and men between 16 to 35 years old. The collective has received national and international media attention and

was named as one of the most outstanding citizen activism in India (Mishra, 2010).<sup>3</sup>

## **The issue: A new kind of articulation**

Blank Noise was born to address prevalent acts of sexual harassment against women in public spaces in India, which ranges from staring, catcalls, to groping. The harassment is widely ignored by the society and called 'eve-teasing'.<sup>4</sup> The term, an Indian-English euphemism, both trivialises the issue by calling it "teasing" and places the blame on women through its play on the biblical Eve, a temptress who lures men into teasing her. Eve-teasing as a term is not formally recognised in the Indian Penal Code, but women could file a report under Sections 292 and 298 that criminalise any actions that make women targets of obscene gestures or violate women's modesty (Baxi, 2001). However, police rarely takes action unless it leads to violent death or fatal injury, and eve-teasing is often portrayed as being a romantic gesture as shown in Bollywood films (Natarajan, 2008).

Based on my conversations with 13 people in the collective, I discovered that Blank Noise shares similar characteristics with women's movements that focus on violence against women. Both identify the internalisation of patriarchal mindset as the root cause and the struggle to redefine cultural patterns regarding women's presence and engagement with the public space. Indeed, the Indian women groups of the 1970s laid the ground for Blank Noise's work by raising public awareness on the many forms of violence against women (Kumar, 1993). Although they acknowledge eve-teasing as a form of violence, the Indian women's movement has only done occasional, sporadic interventions, perhaps due to the choice of dedicating their limited resources to the more serious forms of violence - such as rape, bride burning, or dowry murder (Gandhi and Shah, 1992).

Blank Noise is the first one to systematically address street sexual harassment, but it differs from the usual women's movement in other respects as well. Most women's movements do identify patriarchal mindset as the source of violence, but they also make structural, tangible demands and identify opponents to make the demands to (Taylor and Whittier, 1995). New legislation criminalising domestic violence or service provision by the state are often advocated for an indication of concrete progress towards their overarching goal. The battle is for women; men are welcomed mostly only as far as signing petitions or joining the protests (Gandhi and Shah, 1992).

In apposition, the participants in the Blank Noise collective, all named spreading public's awareness on street sexual harassment as its overarching goal, but there were no intermediary tangible demands articulated. The collective did not even offer a rigid guideline of what constituted street sexual

harassment. Instead, it opened up the space for a collective vocabulary building through polls on its blog and the streets to explore, question, and trigger debates around the ambiguous forms of eve-teasing, like staring.

Furthermore, they unanimously refused to identify an opponent because all members of the society are deemed equally responsible. While many scholars might read this as a sign of youth's faltering trust in the state, it is actually more based on the grey nature of the issue itself. Hemangini Gupta, a Blank Noise coordinator, asked, *"Should we be allowing the state to legislate an issue like street sexual harassment where there is so much grey even with how it is understood and defined - from 'looking' to physical violence?"*

I would argue, however, that Blank Noise has a conceptual, intangible opponent: the mindset that normalises street sexual harassment. This is reflected in their strategy to create public dialogue, both in the physical and virtual public spaces. The expectation is to make the collective as inclusive as possible, including for men because this is also an issue of their concern. Blank Noise also has a significant number of men volunteers and a specific intervention for men called Blank Noise Guys that asks for men's perspective and experiences on the issue (Blank Noise, 2009). This is where Blank Noise differs from the general picture of activism in terms of the issue articulation.

## **The strategies: Public dialogue and culture jamming**

Blank Noise is a form of public art meant to provoke thoughts on a deeply normalised issue in a society that is already de-sensitised with the more established forms of protest, like street marches and petitions. Aarthi Ajit, a 25-years-old volunteer, explains this as: *"Maybe they don't have the same effects anymore and we need to look for new ways. Perhaps the more direct, playful ones will make people think and want to be a part of your movement."*

Art interventions to provoke thoughts on street sexual harassment can be exemplified by a poster made by Rhea Daniel, a Mumbai-based self-employed design consultant. Rhea, who has been following and commenting on Blank Noise blogs and Facebook group since 2008, was tired of the representation of women only as victims of street sexual and one day got the inspiration to draw a different image: Women who are not afraid to take action, or in Blank Noise's vocabulary, "Action Heroes."

She explained to me that the poster was influenced by the 1950s pin-up and Indian calendar art. *"I deliberately wanted to attract attention with established art forms, however kitsch or sexist, and turn it into an instrument for empowerment... I know sexist imagery influences people and I was trying to reverse it, using the same instrument for my purpose."*

What Rhea described is called culture jamming, a technique of raising awareness by subverting an element of a well-known cultural object and causing people to think critically about the message behind the twisted object (Cox, n.d.). The poster was provocative because it subverts the internalised popular notion of women in eve-teasing. She is dressed in a *salwar kameez* with a *dupatta*<sup>6</sup>, not Western clothes; she is feisty and winks as she smacks the hand that groped her belly, not looking afraid or humiliated by the harassment. This re-appropriation of mainstream cultural symbols is currently used by many consumer-based social movements and is especially popular among urban youth who distribute their work virally through the internet (*Ibid*). Although Blank Noise does not explicitly claim culture jamming to be its strategy, this is indeed its entry point to open up the space for dialogue in public spaces.

While the playfulness of Blank Noise differentiates itself from the protest approach employed by activism in general, what can be achieved from such a strategy?

I discovered the answer while studying one of its most popular street interventions, the 'I Never Ask for It' clothes collection campaign, which is a street exhibition of various clothes contributed by women who have been harassed by wearing them. It tackles the notion that women are to blame for the way they dress, for the clothes collected have ranged from tight shirts to a *saree*. There is no slogan like 'Stop Eve Teasing' or definitive messages of the type, but volunteers engage passers-by in conversations about the clothes gallery and the issue of street sexual harassment.

The twist of gender dynamics in this intervention is a form of culture jamming. While commonly culture jammers leave the viewers to think about the message, Blank Noise helps them process the message by taking the space opened by this thought-provocation and having volunteers engage passers-by on a conversation about street sexual harassment. Going back to the issue articulation, Blank Noise embarks on a dialogue in the streets without defining street sexual harassment or prescribing solutions. The people engaged are diverse in gender and class, a sign of 'everyone' being included.

What kind of impact is created by such an intervention? It is fair to assume that not many passers-by will change their behaviours after witnessing only one event and Blank Noise does not have the means to contact and check with them. The members admitted that they do not know how to measure tangible impacts generated for the people who saw the intervention, but this is not their main concern. "*This is an issue nobody talks about, so the very act of doing something about it seems to be enough right now,*" said Apurva Mathad (28, male). This indicates that Blank Noise's most significant impact is not external (the public), but rather internal (the activists). This is echoed by all the other

interviewees, all of whom felt that they were changed by their experience with the collective regardless of the length and intensity of their involvement. Some people realised how much their bodies have been disconnected from the public space; others felt empowered to deal with street sexual harassment.

This is when I understood the other, more central objective of Blank Noise that was verified later only by the founder and coordinators: To empower people through their experience with the Collective. The discussions and debates raised through the public dialogue help the volunteers themselves to learn more about the issue, reflect on their experiences and opinions, as well as to give meaning to their involvement. This is when I also understood the point of “no target group”: People in Blank Noise also learn and become affected by the interventions they performed. Influencing ‘others’ is not the main goal although it is a desired effect, the main one is to allow personal empowerment of those within the Collective.

In this sense, Blank Noise is again very similar with grassroot feminist collectives whose main objective is to empower its members and do artistic interventions on the streets. However, when they raise public awareness, there are usually clear verbal messages through protests or street theatres and the main intention is to attract media attention – a clear separation between the activists as content providers and the public as the target audience. This separation is not as clear in Blank Noise, where the performers and the audience are mutually dependent for them to create meanings from the intervention.

## **The site of action: The streets and the cyber**

Like so many other movements, Blank Noise started by taking its interventions to the streets, an example of which is already elaborated in the previous section. While Blank Noise shares most movements’ current use of the Web, which are mostly for communication and coordination purposes (Juris and Pleyers, 2009), it differs from existing movements in its engagement with the cyber public and its inception to its cyber public campaigns.

Blank Noise started its online presence with a blog that was used to announce upcoming street interventions. The nature of its web presence changed when it shifted from one-way communication using Web 2.0 tools, as what older activists mostly do.<sup>7</sup> The previous one-way communication in the Blank Noise blog changed after two events that I call the digital tipping points, the points where the communication shifts into an interactive joint content-production with other internet users. This mode of communication has been noted by scholars, such as Manuel Castells (2009) and Clay Shirky (2010), as being

the characteristics of the network society – where people are used to being producers and not only consumers of content.

The first was when Jasmeen started uploading photos of her harasser, taken by her mobile phone, to the blog in 2005. Comments immediately flooded in, raising questions about the nature of the violation, whether such actions are warranted, and the ethics of the action given that the man is of the lower class and has no access to the internet. The discussion resulted in Blank Noise deciding to blur the photos. This is when Blank Noise first realised that the cyber space is also a kind of public space that can give shape to the public conversation it imagines.

The second was the blogathon proposed by one of Blank Noise volunteers to commemorate the International Women's Day in 2006, which asked bloggers around India to write about their experiences with street sexual harassment and link it to the Blank Noise blog. The blogathon received massive responses, perhaps both due to the frustration on the silence around the issue and because blogging had just recently become a major trend at that time in India. Eve-teasing became an urgent topic on the cyber space and the success triggered the creation of Blank Noise's community blogs, in which the contents are contributed by other internet users. The tipping point was when the nature of Blank Noise's web presence changed due to its interaction with other web users. It took place when Blank Noise jumped into actions entirely dependent on the public response to be successful.

Now Blank Noise engages with the virtual public through comments in its main blog<sup>8</sup>, virtual campaigns, and the community blogs. The most famous of the community blogs is the Action Hero blog<sup>9</sup>, which hosts the stories of women's encounters with street sexual harassment and how they reacted. After speaking with a woman who contributed a post in the blog, I discovered that the anonymity granted by the internet and the supportive environment in Blank Noise's blog compelled her to write. She further shared that reading others' stories and receiving comments for hers made her feel less alone and helped her healing process. Blank Noise's cyber presence became a virtual support group for many women affected by street sexual harassment.

Kelly Oliver (in Mitra-Kahn, unpublished)<sup>10</sup> argued that writing experiences of a trauma, in this case street sexual harassment, helps the self heal by using speech and text to counter their emotions and exercise their agency; the process of empowerment that occurs hence establishes Blank Noise as a (cyber)feminist praxis.

Other than engaging with the virtual public through community blogs, Blank Noise also started conducting online campaigns. One of them is the online version of the same 'I Never Ask for It' campaign in February 2010, which asked Twitter users to tweet about their experiences with street sexual harassment



and provide posters that can be used as a Profile picture or on Twitter background. These interventions are forms of culture jamming: breaking the existing silence on street sexual harassment in the virtual public space.

## **Internal mode of organising: One full-timer among thousands**

In the words of Kunal Ashok, one of the male volunteers, the collective consists not only of, *“people who volunteer or come to meetings, but anyone that has contributed in any way they can and identify with the issue.”* In this sense, Blank Noise today consists of over 2,000 people who signed up to their e-group as volunteers.

How does a collective with that many people work? Firstly, although these people are called ‘volunteers’ for registering to the e-group, I would argue that a majority of them are actually what I call casual participants – those who comment on Blank Noise interventions, retweet their call for action, promote Blank Noise to their friends through word of mouth, or simply lurk and follow their activities online. In the offline sense, they are the passers-by who participate in their street interventions or become intrigued to think about the issue afterwards. These people, including those who do the same activities without formally signing up as volunteers, are acknowledged to be a part of Blank Noise as much as those who really do volunteer.

Blank Noise is open to all who share its concern and values, but its volunteers must go beyond articulating an opinion and commit to collective action. However, Blank Noise applies very little requirement for people to identify themselves with the collective. The main bond that unites them is their shared concern with street sexual harassment. Blank Noise’s analysis of the issue is sharp, but it also accommodates diverse perspectives by exploring the fine lines of street sexual harassment and not prescribing any concrete solution, while the latter is rarely found in existing social movements. The absence of indoctrination or concrete agenda reiterated through the public dialogue approach gives room for people to share different opinions and still respect others in the collective.

Other than these requirements, they are able to decide exactly how and when they want to be involved. They can join existing activities or initiate new ones; they can continuously participate or have on-and-off periods. This is reflected in the variety of volunteers’ motivations, activities, and the meaning they give to their involvement. For some people, helping Blank Noise’s street interventions is exciting because they like street art and engaging with other young people. Many are involved in online campaigns because they are not physically based in any of the cities where Blank Noise is present. Others prefer to

do one-off volunteering by proposing a project to a coordinator and then implementing it. There are people who started volunteering by initiating Blank Noise chapters in other cities and they gradually have a more prominent role. Some stay for the long term, some are active only for several times before going back to become supporters that spread Blank Noise through word of mouth. The ability to personalise volunteerism is also what makes Blank Noise appealing, compared to the stricter templates for volunteering in other social movements.

Any kind of movement requires a committed group of individuals among the many members to manage it. The same applies to Blank Noise, who relies on a group of people who dedicate time and resources to facilitate volunteers' and think of the collective's future: The core team. Members of the core team, about ten people, are credited in Blank Noise's Frequently Asked Questions page and are part of a separate e-group than the volunteers. In its seven years, the core team only went for a retreat once and mostly connected through the e-group. In this space, they raise questions, ideas, and debates around Blank Noise's interventions, posters, and blog posts. Consequently, for them the issue is not only street sexual harassment but also related to masculinities, citizenship, class, stereotyping, gender, and public space. However, there are also layers in the intensity of the team members' engagement.

The most intense is Jasmeen, the founder and the only one who has been with Blank Noise since its inception until today. Jasmeen is an artist and considers Blank Noise to be a part of her practice; she has received funds to work for Blank Noise as an artist. Thus, she is the only one who dedicates herself to Blank Noise full time and becomes the most visible among the volunteers and the public eye. According to Jasmeen, she is not alone in managing the whole process within Blank Noise. Hemangini Gupta who joined in 2006 has slowly become the other main facilitator.

Hemangini, a former journalist who is now pursuing a PhD in the United States, explains her lack of visibility, *"Blank Noise could never be my number one priority because it doesn't pay my bills, so I can only do it when I have free time and my other work is done."* The same is true for others in the core team: students, journalists, writers and artists. Unlike Hemangini who still managed to be intensively involved, they have dormant and active periods like the volunteers. The core team functions as coordinators that facilitate the volunteers' involvement in Blank Noise and ensure that the interventions stay with the values Blank Noise upholds: confronting the issue but not aggravating people, creating public dialogue instead of one-way preaching. This role emerged in 2006 when the volunteer applications mounted as the result of the aforementioned blogathon. They have also initiated or facilitated the growth of Blank Noise chapters in other cities. Although some of them have also moved

to other cities for work, they remain in touch online. Together, the core team forms the de-facto leadership in Blank Noise.

A strong nucleus of committed people is crucial in any form of social movement. However, Blank Noise is unique in its accommodation of people who cannot make Blank Noise a priority in their lives.

## Understanding Blank Noise

Returning to the prevailing assumptions on the concepts and practice of activism, it is clear that Blank Noise cannot be understood using the lens of these assumptions. Blank Noise shares most feminists' analysis of harassment, naming normalisation, internalisation, and patriarchal mindset as the root causes. Their standpoint of street sexual harassment being a societal issue that concerns women and men are the same, but they part ways when Blank Noise does not identify an opponent or propose a concrete structural solution.

Its aim to raise public awareness and enable people's empowerment through involvement with the collective are not new; neither is their use of art and performances. It is new in the translation of the objectives. Instead of a structural change, Blank Noise interprets social change it desires as a cultural change which can be seen in concrete at an individual level as well as in the increase of media and public attention on the issue of street sexual harassment.

The method of achieving this is not through clearly articulated messages that can be written on a placard and carried to street marches, but by exploring the ambiguity through public conversation and culture jamming through street interventions and online campaigns alike. Instead of having a clear distinction of content producer and audience, both performers and audience are interdependent in creating the meaning for the interventions. These are not the result of "slack", as proponents of the aforementioned doubt narrative would contend, but a critical deliberative process.

Speaking of "slack", Blank Noise also defies the stereotypical dichotomy of full-time activists and slacktivists. As a collective, there are many roles and degrees of intensity that are needed for it to sustain and expand itself. Many of them are 'everyday activists' (Bang, 2004; Harris et al, 2010), young people who are personalising politics by adopting causes in their daily behaviour and lifestyle, for instance by purchasing only Fair Trade goods, or being very involved in a short term concrete project but then stopping and moving on to other activities.

A collective of everyday activists means that there are many forms of participation that one can fluidly navigate in, but it requires a committed leadership core recognised through presence and engagement. As Clay Shirky (2010: 90)

said, the main cultural and ethical norm in these groups is to 'give credit where credit is due'.

Since these youth are used to producing and sharing content rather than only consuming, the aforementioned success of the movement lies on the leaders' ability to facilitate this process. The power to direct the movement is not centralised in the leaders; it is dispersed to members who want to use the opportunity.

## **Alternative approaches to social change**

Current studies on the intersections of youth, activism, and new media technologies have begun to leave the techno-centered paradigm and use activism as a conceptual lens. Nevertheless, activism as a concept is currently loaded with assumptions on the kind of social change desired and how it can be manifested. By identifying these biases and putting the case of Blank Noise into the picture, I have demonstrated that today's digital natives may have an alternative approach to social change and organising a movement that cannot be understood through the current stereotypes.

Many youth movements today aim for social and cultural change at the intangible attitudinal level. Consequently, they articulate the issue with an intangible opponent (the mindset) and less-measurable goals. Their objective is to raise public awareness, but their approach to social change is through creating personal change at the individual level through engagement with the movement. Hence, 'success' is materialised in having as many people as possible involved in the movement. This is enabled by several factors.

The first is the internet and new media/social technologies, which are used as a site for community building, support group, campaigns, and a basis to allow people spread all over the globe to remain involved in the collective in the absence of a physical office. However, the cyber is not just a tool; it is also a public space that is equally important with the physical space. Despite acknowledging the diversity of the public engaged in these spaces, youth today do not completely regard them as two separate spheres. Engaging in virtual community has a real impact on everyday lives; the virtual is a part of real life for many youth (Shirky, 2010). However, it is not a smooth 'space of flows' (Castells, 2009) either. Youth actors in the Global South do recognise that their ease in navigating both spheres is the ability of the elite in their societies, where the digital divide is paramount. The disconnect stems from their acknowledgement that social change must be multi-class and an expression of their reflexivity in facing the challenge.

The second enabling factor is its highly individualised approach. The movement enables people to personalise their involvement, both in terms

of frequency and ways of engagement as well as in meaning-making. It is an echo of the age of individualism that youth are growing up in, shaped by the liberal economic and political ideologies in the 1990s India and elsewhere (France, 2007). Individualism has become a new social structure, in which personal decisions and meaning-making is deemed as the key to solve structural issues in late modernity (*Ibid*). In this era, young people's lives consist of a combination of a range of activities rather than being focused only on one particular activity (*Ibid*). This is also the case in their social and political engagement. Very few young people worldwide are full-time activists or completely apathetic, the mainstream are actually involved in 'everyday activism' (Bang, 2004; Harris et al, 2010).

The way young people today are reimagining social change and movements reiterates that political and social engagement should be conceived in the plural. Instead of "activism" there should be "activisms" in various forms; this is not a new form replacing the older, but all co-existing and with the potential to complement each other. A more traditional movement focusing on changing legislations would benefit greatly from the existence of a digital natives movement aiming at empowering individuals and transforming attitudes, since they are addressing different stakeholders with different strategies but intending to achieve the same overarching goals. In cases where digital natives are taking an issue where no tangible opponent or goals can be identified, it can still be harmonious with the larger goals of a movement, the way Blank Noise's efforts to address street sexual harassment is still in line with the spirit of the wider women's movement. Hopefully, this will be a beginning to wider acknowledgement of digital natives' alternative approach to imagining and achieving social change.

## Endnotes

- 1 The paper is based on the author's 'Beyond the Digital: Understanding Digital Natives with a Cause' research project, documented through a series of blog posts and position paper on the Centre for Internet and Society (CIS) website as well as a Master's thesis. The author would like to thank Blank Noise, especially Hemangini Gupta and Jasmeen Patheja, as well as Nishant Shah of CIS and Fieke Jansen and Josine Stremmelaar of Hivos for their support for the research.
- 2 I use the term 'digital natives' while being fully aware of the debates related to the name, which I could not address given the limitations of this essay.
- 3 For more details on Blank Noise, visit: <http://blog.blanknoise.org>
- 4 Editors' note: For us what the Blank Noise project has in common with other digital native actions that we have encountered is that individuals who are directly or indirectly affected by an event, societal experience, taboo or distrust try to tackle these issues in the public sphere. For them it is clear that issues like eve-teasing or in Ivet Piper's contribution (Book 4, To Connect), child abuse can only be de-stigmatised if it is discussed in the open. To do this one needs to challenge existing power structures. There need not be tangible results, but once these issues are brought into the public domain, they find others affected by the same issues and the community of participants and supporters grows.

- 5 Loose shirt and pants popular in South Asia.
- 6 A scarf women wear with salwar kameez.
- 7 Based on an interview with Anja Kovacs, a researcher on the Centre for Internet and Society in Bangalore who is documenting forms of digital activism in India.  
<http://blanknoise.org>
- 8 <http://actionheroes.blanknoise.org>
- 10 Mitra-Kahn, Trishima (unpublished) *Holler back, Girl!: Cyberfeminist praxis and emergent cultures of online feminist organizing in urban India*. Quoted with permission.

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## Annotation

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As the digital age continues to shape and alter the way individuals interface with the world, new challenges to previously understood definitions and theories have begun to appear in recent scholarship. The idea of what constitutes "activism" in the age of easy clicks and digital signatures signifying support of a cause has been described both as "slacktivism" and as the powerful rise of a globally connected network society. Each notion of the digital masks realities on the ground, and rarely contextualizes how so-called "digital activists" choose to define themselves and their actions on the digital and physical ground.

The notion that digital activism is somehow fundamentally different from past histories of activism has challenged scholars and practitioners

to rethink how online protest and digital practices work in practice. Case studies, such as the one in question on Blank Noise, a collective created in Bangalore, India in 2003 by design student Jasmeen Patheja, allow "activists" to speak for themselves, to self-define their actions and provide crucial depth and context.

Before engaging with a case study, a sense of history and place lends nuance and provokes questions that the study itself may not address. Within India, a cursory overview of the women's rights movement reveals, at the risk of essentializing, a movement dedicated to objective-driven change through legal action and protest; a movement which calls for intense dedication and has been charged with being overly textual and locked in closed academic circles (for an overview of feminism in India, see Chaudhuri: 2005). This contextualises

Blank Noise's rejection of the activist label - they define themselves as "Action Heroes" - and their choice to be an awareness campaign rather than to be defined as an activist movement. It also allows the reader to critically question their stated rejection of these labels and histories, and place it within a historical legacy of feminist activism in India.

Within the article, several points spring to mind while engaging with this piece. The first is to always remain critically aware of the history and context of a locality. While it's clear that Blank Noise was and remains incredibly innovative in its approach as a public awareness campaign, can it be so easily divorced from and dismissed by the long and rich history of the feminist movement in India? The post-feminist move away from textual to visual mediums, from offline to online, is a conscious decision to bypass these very histories and the theoretical assumptions made when applying these labels to a movement. While the founder utilizes the tools and frameworks available to her, one cannot simply negate the history that came before. Instead this conscious shift represents an acute awareness of the disconnect between the feminist movement of the past and the "new" movements of the digital age.

The second point is to always keep the audience in mind. Who is the Blank Noise movement engaging with and for? By engaging with youth previously labelled apathetic to "activism," it made feminism

palatable to an urban middle class through manipulations of cultural iconography. It also successfully leveraged the considerable affordances of the Internet as the movement evolved from an art project into an awareness campaign and pan-Indian collective. Other movements, including the Pink Chaddi campaign in 2009, have successfully used the aesthetics of the visual to draw attention in a visceral way, and once more highlight the departure from historical textual discourse and shift into the realm of the digital visual spectacle.

As a final take away, it is always important to be aware of what movements speak to and who the intended audience is. This allows us to critically examine whose voices are not heard and who is perhaps denied access to certain avenues of digital empowerment. The struggle and disconnect between the offline and the online can lead to extreme generalisation. In a country as diverse in language, experience, and technological access as India, it is crucial to limit the generalizations made from any case study.

To engage with any case study, an awareness of history, locality, and generalisations made within a field of study generates a deeper engagement with the study's strengths and potential limitations. Placing a case study within an enhanced context can lead to new avenues of inquiry and enriches the wider academic field. The complicated social, technological, and



cultural nature of digital activism  
requires us to push beyond our

primary observations into deeper  
intellectual observations.

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