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A Place at the Table: Nepal and the Social and Political Impacts of Digital Inequality

By Elizabeth Saldaña

On November 19, 2012, a young woman arrived in the Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu, Nepal. Sita Rai (a pseudonym) was returning from working as a domestic in Saudi Arabia. Upon arrival at the airport, immigration officials noticed that she was traveling on a fake passport and detained her along with fifteen other women. After a few hours in detention, an immigration officer, Somnath Khanal, demanded a bribe of Rs (Nepalese Rupees) 218,000—around \$2500 USD—to ensure that she would not be prosecuted for traveling without documentation. Sita paid the bribe and lost most of the money she had earned while working abroad. Khanal let Sita go on November 21, 2012, and a police officer, Parsuram Basnet, offered to escort Sita to a bus park to return home. He took her to a lodge near the bus park and repeatedly raped her. He threatened her and told

her to tell no one about the robbery or the rape. A few weeks later, however, she broke down and told her sister and brother about the robbery. Sita's family enlisted the help of the women's organizations and the media to bring charges against Khanal and Basnet. [1]

By December 12, human rights advocates and women's organizations in Kathmandu were already staging sit-ins and demonstrating for justice for Sita. [2] Sita's brother filed a complaint with the Ministry of Home Affairs on December 16, 2012, [3] and the *Kathmandu Post* began to report on the incident the following day. [4] Two weeks later, on December 28, approximately forty activists showed up outside Baluwatar, the residence of then-Prime Minister, Baburam Bhattarai. Activists initially began to organize on Twitter, and presented PM Bhattarai with a petition that had been circulated through email and Twitter. As they gathered, the Nepal Police told them the area was restricted, and forcibly removed them from the premises. [5] After the incident with the police, activists met to discuss their next steps. Someone in the group mentioned an American social movement, Occupy Wall Street, to which another activist joked, "Hey we're Occupy Baluwatar". Another activist, Arpan Shrestha, tweeted, "The #OccupyBaluwatar sit-in protest will carry on today. Concludes at six with a candle vigil Please drop in for a few minutes. Please support." With that tweet, Occupy Baluwatar was born. [6]

Occupy Baluwatar was not the first instance of political mobilization in Nepal that incorporated social media into its strategy, nor will it be the last. [7] People all over the world are increasingly incorporating

social media into their lives and politics. Despite its comparatively low Internet penetration, Nepal is no exception to this rule. [8]

However, there are concrete limitations to the efficacy of social media use for political mobilization. In this essay, I examine Occupy Baluwatar as a case study in the difficulties of using social media as an organizational tool, and the impact of global digital inequality on smaller localized political mobilization.

In looking at Occupy Baluwatar, I argue that digital inequality is the result of not only digital and infrastructural processes, but also acculturation and choice in information consumption. Jurgenson's articulation of an "augmented reality" suggests that separating online-offline analysis is less useful than understanding how these two social worlds interact and overlap with each other. [9] From Jurgenson's analysis, it follows that offline information gaps and differences in geopolitical power are reified and re-entrenched online. If Nepali political movements like Occupy Baluwatar have little influence on the political situation in geopolitically "powerful" countries like the United States, their online mobilization similarly reaches few in the United States and the West due to both structural and social processes. [10] In contrast, American political movements and decisions have important reverberations in Nepal, as I will show in the case of Occupy Baluwatar. I explore some of the implications of these one-way information flows in the conclusion of this essay.

After the initial protests and sit-ins, Occupy Baluwatar protestors continued to mobilize from late December 2012 to early April 2013. They relied on a variety of grassroots and online mobilization strategies to garner support from both Nepalis and international actors.

Occupy Baluwatar activists used social media, particularly Twitter, in three primary ways: to amplify and spread information; to support and bond with each other; and to directly confront people in positions of power, including Baburam Bhattarai. They tweeted about police presence during and after the protests and about the arrests of activists like Ishan Adhikari and others. [11] They similarly posted news articles about Occupy Baluwatar, articles that came from Nepali and English-language daily newspapers in Kathmandu, and once or twice from international news sources.

Activists also tweeted jokes and words of encouragement to each other during the movement. A small group of approximately twenty-six unique users produced the majority of the tweets since the movement began. Many of these users retweeted one another's reports and commentary from the protests. These tweets exemplified the personal connections between activists and their investment in the movement; these connections helped keep Sita's story and the protests alive from December 2012 until the movement's end in April 2013. [12]

Additionally, activists tweeted scathing remarks to Prime Minister Bhattarai. In an editorial in the *Kathmandu Post*, one activist and journalist, Bidushi Dhungel, criticized the government's unwillingness to meet with activists and the difficulty of confronting Bhattarai directly. [13] Occupy Baluwatar activists circumvented these restrictions by tweeting at Bhattarai. They asked him to launch an investigation and berated his slow responses. Bhattarai occasionally responded to complaints and tweets, enabling activists to have a two-way conversation with him, mediated through Twitter.

Journalists and non-participants alike recognized the ways that social media helped to keep Occupy Baluwatar alive. [14] As I waded through the Twitter archive after the movement ended, I believed that these activists were the primary organizers of the movement. However, when I went to Nepal to speak with Occupy Baluwatar activists in person, I saw a different picture emerge than the one I saw online. As one activist and social media expert told me with a knowing smile, "The people online were not always the ones running the show."

The group of highly active Occupy Baluwatar Twitter users made passing remarks about others who spent less time on Twitter and more time focusing on grassroots organization. One of these grassroots activists, Bidushi, described this group's strategies and goals for Occupy Baluwatar:

...after that first day, some of us said, okay, how do we make this inclusive?...You know, so that it would include non-upper-middle-class English-speaking elite Nepalis? We wanted to include everyone...We tried to use very grassroots styles of organizing. We made posters in Nepali, and they were black and white, and we did them on cheap paper – we didn't have a lot of money, so that was easier to do, and I mean, our posters looked awesome –...I remember one time we took like three hundred flyers and four motorcycles and just went and hung them in the middle of the night... [15]

These activists tried to speak to Nepalis in their mother tongue. They relied on phone trees, word of mouth, cheaply produced posters made from homemade materials, or public performances like arrests, street theater, and graffiti to reach Nepalis in offline social and political settings, using symbols and language that were organic to Nepal. These activists saw “ordinary Nepalis” from all walks of life as the source of political power within Kathmandu and tried to tap into these populations to garner support for the movement. [16] According to one activist, Ishan, Nepal needed “people to be active...to step into leadership positions to deal with problems.” [17] For these activists, it was important to galvanize the support and political strength of a multi-class, multi-caste, and multilingual group of Nepalis living in Kathmandu.

As the movement progressed, the Occupy Baluwatar organizers dispersed into two general groups with different ideas about the most effective ways to put pressure on Bhattarai and the Ministry of Home Affairs to achieve justice for Sita. One group used social media to relay information to each other and outside actors and subvert the physical boundaries to governance that existed offline. The other group focused on addressing Nepalis in the streets of Kathmandu and getting them engaged in Sita's struggle for justice. These divisions over strategies echoed broader class and infrastructural divisions among Nepalis in Kathmandu and made it difficult for movement organizers to agree on appropriate mobilization strategies.

The difficulty of social media as an organizing tool stems from disparities in Internet infrastructure in Nepal. According to the United Nations, Nepal is classified as a "least developed country." [18] According to the 2011 Nepali census, around 3.33% of Nepal has Internet access. [19] According to Ujjwal Acharya, a social media expert based in Kathmandu, if one includes access to cybercafés and mobile phones, Internet penetration is likely closer to around 12-15%. [20] Because of the high cost of personal computers, mobile phone maintenance, and Internet access in a city with rolling blackouts, the Internet is very much accessible only to the elites of Kathmandu. Bidushi commented that, "less than 1% of people in Kathmandu are on Twitter." [21] Although low hourly rates for cybercafés are comparatively cheaper than the high, up-front cost of a computer or a mobile phone, access remains prohibitively expensive for many Nepalis.

For these reasons, the highly active Twitter activists seem to be targeting a very different group of Nepalis than were Bidushi, Ishan, and other primarily grassroots organizers. Although Twitter activists interacted with each other locally, they were interacting in a digital space that was not accessible to all Nepalis. Regardless of intent to include low-income, low-caste, or non-digitally linked groups, Twitter activists seemed to be focusing their activism on elites in Kathmandu, or towards Nepali expatriates abroad. [22] These differences in strategies and targets became a significant point of contention for these two factions of organizers within Occupy Baluwatar. These conversations among organizers were essentially debates about elitism and class given that certain groups were left out of political discussions because of their inability to meaningfully access the Internet.

Meanwhile, as Nepali activists continued to pressure the Nepali government to bring charges against the perpetrators, Indian activists across the border similarly took to the streets to protest a similar incident in India in which six men brutally gang-raped a young medical student living in New Delhi. When she died from her injuries in mid-December 2012, protests broke out all over India. Protestors demanded justice for the young woman and structural and legal changes to more harshly punish rapists. The protests in India coincided with the timeline of events and protests in Nepal surrounding Occupy Baluwatar; two countries in South Asia were ignited at the same time, with a shared interest in ending violence against women.

In response to the Delhi rape protests, the Internet and news media outlets exploded in outrage. American commentators knowingly cited India's "patriarchal values" and hostility to women as the cause of the rape, and they were not alone. [23] Indian news media and women's advocacy groups criticized widespread sexist behaviors and practices in India as the underlying cause of this act of violence. In news comment sections online, many Nepalis weighed in on the problem of "North Indian patriarchal values" that influenced Nepal and its response to women's rights and public safety. [24] The problem of rape in Nepal bore important commonalities with rape in India.

Because of the increased reporting on violence against women in India, Sita's case and Occupy Baluwatar could theoretically have given Nepali advocates and activists a foothold in an international discussion about violence against women in South Asia. However, while the Delhi incident received substantial coverage from traditional news media, social media users, and activists, Occupy Baluwatar saw far less coverage from Western media outlets, despite Nepal's and India's shared border, histories, and mobilizations against rape. Although activists in both Nepal and India were dealing with similar questions of rape and women's public safety, far fewer people saw the conversation about Nepal's Occupy Baluwatar movement. Within the regional public space of South Asia, Nepalis may have been drowned out by the conversations happening all around them.

What accounts for the discrepancies in media coverage and social media commentary between the Nepali movement and the Indian movement? One possible explanation is the differences in Internet infrastructure between India and Nepal. In regards to the Delhi rape incident, Twitter became a source of information and commentary from both Indian and non-Indian Twitter users. However, as discussed above, Twitter remains a largely untapped source of information and engagement within Nepal. Even if everyone currently on Twitter in Nepal tweeted the same thing for several hours, it is unlikely they would be able to overpower the frequency of hourly tweets about celebrities and musicians, or in the case of the Delhi incident, even the voices coming from other South Asians. The algorithms guiding Twitter's Trending and tag functions and, more recently, the Homepage Twitter feed, [25] likely would not highlight the concerns of Nepalis on Twitter or propel them to the forefront of discussions on women and public safety in South Asia. Moreover, according to Bidushi, journalists in Kathmandu had attempted to get the attention of International news organizations, but gave up after it seemed that such organizations were disinterested in Occupy Baluwatar. [26]

Nepali activists' ability to participate in a global discussion about women's issues was limited by two things: the infrastructure of the Internet, and the choices of media outlets and consumers who did not actively seek out more information about violence against women in the region more broadly. The conversation about India did not expand to include the rest of South Asia. From this, it is clear that Nepal's

“low” position in the world in comparison to its neighbor, India, is reflected and reinforced in global online public space.

What began as a call for justice for Sita Rai became an important case study into the meanings and practices of social media in Kathmandu, South Asia, and the world. The exclusion of activists in Occupy Baluwatar at a regional and global level also show how the stories and voices of Nepalis are left out of digitally linked conversations because of structural barriers, both online and offline. Occupy Baluwatar shows us that social media’s democratizing promise is still subject to structural problems and conflicts, including economic development and class, caste, racial, ethnic, and gender disparities.

Like many of the Twitter activists of Occupy Baluwatar, Westerners tend to see the Internet as both a normal component of our social and political lives and simultaneously as something fundamentally different from politics-as-usual in its ability to circumvent the physical, in-person boundaries that exist between people. Those boundaries can be the result of security forces, as in the case of Bhattarai, or the geographical boundaries that exist between friends, family members, or political allies who live across the globe.

As we have seen with the Arab Uprisings and various global Occupy movements, the Internet holds tremendous potential for social change and political mobilization – yet it can be difficult to reconcile this obvious potential with the material limitations of the power of the Internet that emerge due to social and structural digital inequalities.

From the case of Occupy Baluwatar, it is clear that the power of the Internet emerges not simply from its existence in social and political spheres, but from the ways that people access and understand it.

This essay has explored the myriad ways that digital inequality manifested and impacted a single prolonged instance of political mobilization in Nepal. These issues included the difficulties of engaging a majority of a population that is not online and the barriers to galvanizing support for localized movements like Occupy Baluwatar. From Occupy Baluwatar, we learn that the roots of digital inequality are more than just the algorithms, but are socially and politically enforced by Internet users all over the world and in our localized contexts.

The implications of these findings are as yet unclear. The media coverage and social media response to Occupy Baluwatar suggests that this political mobilization in Nepal bears little personal or geopolitical significance for most Westerners, apart from South Asian specialists and academics. At present, digital inequality continues to exacerbate and reify social and political divisions locally, regionally, and globally. The promise of the Internet to illuminate all corners of the globe is perhaps overly optimistic considering the discrepancy in coverage, concern, and education about Nepal. However, this discrepancy begs the question - what are our obligations and responsibilities as citizens of the Internet? In what ways should the technological, social, and political configurations of the Internet be used to reconfigure and reshape physical, offline boundaries? From the analysis presented

here, the answers to these questions will likely not be found in the technological and structural changes to the Web, but from the choices and actions of ordinary citizens, online and offline.

Note

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