

The Tweet Life....

New micro-blogging site Twitter is all over the news at the moment: but is it just another online fad, or do sites like this have real potential for inspiring activism in a new generation? Josephine Middleton investigates...

When I first wrote about cyberfeminism for StopGap in 2007 I had never even heard of Twitter and social networking sites such as Facebook barely got a mention. Two years on and we now seem to have more ways to network than we could possibly ever keep up with. Used predominately by young people, these types of site offer the potential to promote feminist activism where it is needed most. But in the case of social networking and micro-blogging does quantity necessarily equal quality? Does the internet offer a genuine opportunity to engage with young people or is it all just a case of Too Much Information?

“Sites like Twitter are perfect for posting links to petitions, campaign updates, letters to MPs...”

There is no doubt that young people are relying less and less on traditional media when it comes to news, information sharing and socialising, and social networking is still very much a phenomenon of the young. Around 65% of online teens and three quarters of 18-24 year olds use online networks compared to just 7% of adults over 65. A quick straw poll of my daughter – ‘what percentage of your friends would you say use things like Facebook and Twitter?’ answer ‘all of them’ – seems to confirm this! It makes sense therefore that if we are to make political activism relevant for new generations of young women then we need to appeal to them in a format that they can engage with.

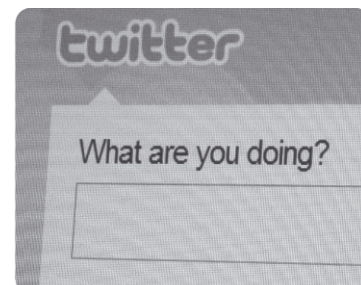
Sites like Twitter are perfect for this. 140 characters may not be enough to give detailed campaign information but it is perfect for posting links to petitions, campaign updates, letters to MPs – all very real actions that followers can take quickly and easily.

Although some people do doubt the ability of social networking sites to spawn genuine activism, there is no doubt that in the right hands they have the power to mobilise support. Take the recent US presidential elections for example: Barack Obama’s campaign was remarkable for its use of social networking, raising \$500million in donations from 6.5 million people using sites like Facebook and Twitter.

Obama’s online success proves there is huge potential in such sites and many charities and campaigning groups have now begun to exploit these new methods of e-communication as a way of garnering support from a younger demographic.

An excellent recent example of a Facebook group translating into positive activism is the case of ‘A Consortium of Pub Going, Loose and Forward Thinking Women.’ The Facebook group was set up in early February 2009 by a group of young professional Indian women. The protest was in response to assaults by Sri Ram Sena (Lord Ram’s Army) on several young women in a pub in Mangalore, a college town in the southern state of Karnataka.

Within weeks the group had tens of thousands of members and supporters were asked to take action on Valentine’s Day by sending pink underwear to the headquarters of the SRS. The response was overwhelming - over 40,000 items of underwear flooded into the army offices. The peaceful protest sparked a national debate about what is culturally acceptable behaviour for women in a time of great social change in India. Although this generation of young women are experiencing many new freedoms, they are still fighting against ingrained conservative attitudes. Pink knickers were chosen to symbolise one of the many unspoken taboos in India. Spurred on by the success of the ‘pink chaddi campaign’ the consortium is going from strength to strength with over 53,000 members at the time of writing.



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Social networking sites have the added dimension of allowing you to engage not just with your own supporters but also potentially their supporters too. The beauty of networks like Twitter is that every person or organisation you follow will be following tens if not hundreds of other tweeters who may interest you. Within minutes you have opened up whole new networks of networks! And this works both ways. As a charity or campaigning group posting on Twitter each one of your followers comes ready made with a whole pyramid of potential future supporters for your cause. This ripple effect can happen very quickly - in the time between starting and finishing writing this feature for instance the number of people following the Fawcett Society on Twitter has tripled!

It’s clear that to exploit the enthusiasm of the next generation of feminists we need to make use of new and emerging media. The key will be to understand how young people use the internet and how it fits into their lives and then to use this knowledge to produce engaging web content that will capture people’s imaginations.

Quick-start guide to Twitter...

1. Log on at www.twitter.com
2. Register and create your profile
3. Search for people to follow. Here are a few ideas to get you started... click on ‘find people’ and type in the names below to get to their page.

fawcettsociety: stay updated on Fawcett’s campaigns and news in real-time with our tweets

womensaid: key national charity aiming to end violence against women and children

blogher: community for women who blog

whywomen: tweets from the Women’s Resource Centre

Become a fan of Fawcett on Facebook: <http://tinyurl.com/c6bgb2>