

Social Media: Social Strategies for the Prevention of Violence against Women

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“Media mediate human relationships, and when media changes, human relationships change”
(Wesch, 2008).

In 2012, three girls started a petition on Change.org. They had just learned from their high school civics class that a woman had not moderated a presidential debate since 1992. Their petition asked the debate commissioners to choose a woman to moderate that year's debate between Obama and Romney. When the petition attracted over 120,000 signatures and gained significant media attention, the commissioners announced the first female moderator in 20 years: Candy Crowley (Axelrod, Tsemberis, & Siegel).

Equal media representation of women challenges and undermines the gender stereotypes that perpetuate violence against women. Online petitions and other social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have been used to create the awareness and political pressure needed to make preventative changes in media and in society. These new forms of communication have revolutionized the way we interact and the voices we pay attention to. Social media has also facilitated the primary prevention of violence against women by increasing the audience of prevention organizations, providing links to educational information, and creating a bridge from awareness to action.

Background on Primary Prevention

The Difference Between Prevention and Intervention

Facilities and services that help women who are experiencing domestic violence or sexual assault are called “intervention”. *Primary prevention* aims to stop violent behaviors before they begin. It “relies on identification of the underlying, or 'upstream', risk and protective factors for intimate-partner violence and/or sexual violence, and action to address those factors” (Harvey, Garcia-Moreno, & Butchart, 2007, p. 5). So, rather than trying to put in place restraining orders

to keep an abuser from their victim, prevention tries to create an environment that does not produce abusers by changing social norms, working with young families to prevent abuse, and teaching youth about media literacy and healthy relationships, among other things. Prevention looks and feels very different from intervention, and because it is unfamiliar work it can sometimes be seen as ineffective or unnecessary. However, many studies have shown, and the Center for Disease Control corroborates that, “the best way to effect social change is to begin teaching healthy attitudes and behaviors to young people... It is important to launch a campaign for adolescents that will correct misperceptions surrounding dating violence early in their relationship development when their norms are being developed and tested” (Griffunder, Noonan, Cox, & Wheaton, 2004, p. 10).

Feminism as Prevention

Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines Feminism simply as “the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities” (“Feminism”, n.d.). Harvey et al. (2007) of the World Health Organization, state that “existing research suggests that effective primary prevention approaches for intimate-partner violence and sexual violence would include strategies to improve gender equality; to change social norms regarding violence, masculinity, gender roles, and relationships,.. [and] to promote healthy and equal relationships” (p. 10). Feminism is preventative in its impact on society because it promotes equality between the sexes and dispels the gender role myths at the heart of violence against women. All activities that promote the empowerment of women and normalize equality between men and women help create a society that does not tolerate the verbal, financial, mental, or physical abuse of women.

Some may wonder, why all the focus on violence against women? What about the men who are abused by women? The Center for Disease Control explains, “Research indicates that

males are responsible for the overwhelming majority of sexual violence perpetrated against women, children, and other men” (Griffunder et al., 2004, p. 10). Thus, preventing violence against women does not just benefit women, but also children of both sexes, as well as men.

Negative Uses of Social Media

The internet gives perpetrators of violence against women new tools for their old tricks: cyberstalking, cyberbullying, blackmail sexting, and men's rights activists blogs dedicated to glorifying and validating the degradation and harm of women. Inasmuch as social media is used to further harm women, prevention organizations must use it to provide a counterbalance to educate and inform the community. Historically, it has been much easier to engage people at the individual and relationship level, but now social media makes it possible to engage communities and society.

Go Viral: Increasing Audience

Social media increases the audience of prevention organizations through its ability to connect people while minimizing the effects of time, distance, and economic inequality. Because of the potential to “go viral” and reach much larger numbers of people, social media provides a method of engaging the community and influencing society.

Small to Large

One of the many advantages of social media is its “inherent scalability... i.e. interventionists can move from dissemination to a small population to an extremely large one with relatively little change in approach” (Collins, Martino, & Shaw, 2011, p. 38). This feature gives prevention organizations the ability to create social media programs, test for effectiveness, and easily go forward with implementation.

Inherent scalability and the potential for viral dissemination make social media an

incredible asset to prevention programs. The capacity to reach millions of people, get conventional media attention, and enter household conversations is necessary for the wide-spread awareness that is needed to change social norms around violence.

Broad or Narrow

Most adults and adolescents use social media, and use it regularly (Duggin & Smith, 2013). The concentration of users on Facebook makes it easy to spread information on that platform. According to PEW surveys, 73% of online adults and 93% of adolescents use social media. 71% of online adults, and 94% of social-media-using teens have a Facebook account (Duggin & Smith, 2013, p.1; Lenhart, Madden, Smith, & MacGill, 2007, p.1; Madden, 2013). Taking these statistics into account, an organization could do well with just a Facebook page. However, Brown, Keller, & Stern (2009) point out that one benefit of using social media is the capability to “target messages to specific audiences ... not only by style and content, but also by channel” (p. 15). Duggan and Smith (2013) find that “while Facebook is popular across a diverse mix of demographic groups, other sites have developed their own unique demographic user profiles.” Pinterest attracts a female audience, the educated and well-off use LinkedIn, and Twitter draws a younger, urban, and ethnically diverse population (pp. 1-2). Successful use of social media requires that prevention organizations define their audience and find out what social media platforms it uses. Statistics on platform use, as well as focus groups, can be helpful in identifying appropriate platforms for a target audience.

Unintended Effects

Even targeted campaigns will inevitably spread to other audiences. Collins, Martino, & Shaw (2011) suggest that “researchers should also consider the risks involved in using media that can go viral.” For instance, a social media campaign that targets a more mature audience will

very likely also be viewed by younger media users. If this likelihood is not taken into account, the campaign may have negative consequences for the younger, unintended audience (p. 54). Careful precautions must be taken before implementing any plan to avoid possible negative effects and misunderstandings. Often, even a carefully implemented, targeted approach may not be enough to gain a sizable audience. To go viral, an organization must also provide entertaining content.

Infotainment: Educational Information

Prevention organizations would do well to use social media to inform *and* entertain. They can “utilize the full potential of [social media] by posting external links, pictures, and discussions” that engage the audience (Young, 2012, p. 25). PreventConnect's Social Media Coordinator, Sniffen, explains, “You could have a great idea, but if you don't know how to express it in a way that's interesting, your great idea just becomes boring” (personal communication, March 14, 2014). The usefulness of social media in providing entertaining educational information seems to be neglected in the research literature. Many blogs, YouTube videos, and podcasts can be used to enhance preventative education, spread healthy memes, and spark conversation. The following are three examples of informative and entertaining social media productions that can be shared on an organization's Facebook, or other social media page.

Sex + (YouTube): Laci Green, a peer sex educator, talks about healthy relationships, busts gender myths, and gives accurate sex information in her highly entertaining, bubbly way.

Feminist Frequency (YouTube): Anita Sarkeesian is media literacy in action. She reviews popular movies, television shows, and video games and analyzes each for sexist tropes. She packs her videos with images, clips, and culturally relevant information.

TED Talks (ted.com): TED talks cover a range of topics including negative effects of porn on

men and women, violence against women, the empowerment of women, and many many others from a wide variety of experts. These videos usually range from 7-15 minutes and are attention-grabbing and intriguing - a great jumping-off point for class discussions in youth prevention programs.

Professional Education

Social media can also be used to educate primary prevention professionals. In Oregon, one generally must live near a big city to access training to become a Certified Prevention Specialist, fast becoming a necessity in the field. Easy access to online education and certification would further prevention by allowing more professionals to be credentialed. The more trained specialists in the field, the more legitimate it becomes, the more programs will be implemented, the more work can be done to improve our society and prevent violence against women. Social media could support this process by allowing collaboration with peers and teachers across great distances through the use of webinars and video conferencing platforms such as Google Hangouts and Skype. Students using online materials for certifications would thereby get the opportunity to question and discuss with knowledgeable mentors and peers.

It is necessary to emphasize that media cannot replace the impact of human interaction. Liou (2013) states that “social media campaigns are less effective when conducted as standalone activities, compared to when integrated with face-to face and on-the-ground activities” (p. 11). Educational social media can become an excuse for less-involved instruction. Teachers must remember to interact with their students and involve them in social modeling. At the same time, prevention organizations must remember to engage their local audience with chances for personal involvement in the community.

Idle No More: From Awareness to Action

Prevention organizations can encourage community involvement through their participation in social media. “Many researchers argue enhancing the relational components of organizational websites [and social media] will increase opportunities to engage new donors, increase fundraising potential, recruit volunteers, and build community” (Young, 2012, p. 23). Relational components include all activities that promote interaction with visitors, including responding to comments, asking questions, joining discussions, posting on others' pages, and taking surveys for feedback. Virtual actions, such as signing online petitions and making online donations, also have the capability of leading to in-person action and volunteerism.

Fundraising 2.0

Fundraising can be crowdsourced with social media tools like Kickstarter and Indiegogo. “Crowdfunding is quickly becoming the go-to fundraising technique for entrepreneurs and small-business owners. According to crowdsourcing research firm Massolution, a growing 16.9% of the crowdfunding activity, which raised \$2.7 billion last year, came from small businesses” (St. John, 2013). If small businesses can use these resources to their benefit, why not nonprofits? A crowdsourcing campaign can be as simple as uploading a video that explains the organization's cause and plans for future development if funds are procured.

Effective Petitions

Mispercieved social norms fuel myths and discourage positive action to prevent violence against women (Fabiano, Perkins, Berkowitz, Linkenback, & Stark, 2003). Amplifying the actual positive norms gives them power. Online petition platforms, such as Moveon.org and Change.org can be used to shed light on an issue, embolden those with healthy beliefs, and put pressure on key stakeholders to make preventative changes.

With some effort, petitions have pretty good odds of making a difference in an identified

problem. In 2013, Change.org shared some of its success statistics. A petition shared over 50 times or covered by the media, doubles its chances of winning. Including a picture or video in the petition, raises chances of winning seven-fold. Of petitions that gained less than 200 signatures, a whopping 40% still succeeded (“What can 50 million people change?”). Creating and promoting online petitions effectively harnesses the power of the silent majority and uses it to hold key players in the government, media, and corporate worlds accountable.

Attract Volunteers

Prevention organizations can attract dedicated, informed volunteers through their social media activities. In her article on just this subject, Fish (2013) interviews Janice Babineau, community manager with the Canadian Red Cross, who points out that “social media can “bridge the gap between someone being interested and someone actually getting involved” (para. 4). Fish (2013) explains that organizations should “encourage volunteers to post stories, images and video on their own social media channels.” Babineau adds, “If someone says this is a good organization to volunteer for, their friends will trust them” (para. 13). Connecting awareness to personal experience creates evangelists – people who will spread the word for their prevention organization.

Liou (2013) warns that, “overall, social media can expose large audiences to messages, but only engages much smaller numbers of people in learning and activities, and an even smaller number of people... take concrete actions to prevent [violence against women]” (p. 11). However, it is still possible to create lasting change with the action of just a few people, and it is not impossible to gather larger numbers. The challenge is to try to figure out a creative way to do it. Take, for example, One Billion Rising, Eve Ensler's world-wide Valentine's day dance party to raise awareness of and bring an end to violence against women. The 2013 campaign

used social media to promote and organize “tens of thousands of events held in 207 countries” (Swan, 2013). It was hailed as the “biggest global day of action ever held to end violence against women” (Swan, 2013). What makes a social-media-based campaign, like One Billion Rising, successful?

Best Practices

Be Strategic

Young (2012) states that “in order to be successful these human service organizations should begin to think strategically about social media.” He recommends setting goals for the use of social media, making a plan, implementing the plan, and evaluating its outcomes (p. 123). Many organizations use social media ineffectively because they have no direction in their use of it and no way to gauge its effectiveness. PreventConnect's Media Production Coordinator, Maier, emphasized that an organization needs to be “clear what [its] strategy is and how [it] intends to use these platforms” (personal communication, March 14, 2014).

Create a Code of Conduct

Despite the amazing potential of social media to facilitate the activities of violence prevention, one must not be too hasty in its implementation. A host of ethical considerations and implementation strategies must be taken into account to protect privacy, avoid misunderstandings, and manage “trolls”.

Collaborate, Share, Be Social

Getting involved in conversation with visitors allows prevention organizations to correct misconceptions, educate, show transparency, fundraise, and attract new volunteers. (Young, 2012, pp. 21-25). Bryer (2013) notes that the “design and use of social media is important in shaping the quality of citizen participation.” Platforms should not be used as a one-directional

website to provide information without interaction. Questions should be answered, and reciprocal information provided. Links within the community should be formed, and civil debate encouraged and moderated (pp. 47-48).

Hire a Social Media Staff-Person

Interacting with people who leave comments or questions takes a lot of time and skill (moderation, conflict resolution, etc.), and is vital to the success of a social media page. This underscores the importance of having a specially-trained, full-time staff-person for social media activities. Sniffen, of PreventConnect, warns of the tendency of some organizations to recruit a “magic teen volunteer” to manage social media sites. His experience suggests that this is an unreliable and unsustainable method of dealing with the challenges of new technology (personal communication, March 14, 2014). “A full-time staff member is required to implement and serve as convener and facilitator of the social media space. [Social media] can be transformational, but if [they] are not implemented fully and strategically, it may be better to not implement them at all” (Bryer, 2013, p. 50).

Conclusion

Social media has the potential to vastly improve the impact of prevention organizations at the community and society level. Small organizations now have the tools they need to challenge media, corporations, and government, and draw the attention of the nation to their cause. New ways of educating prevention professionals and the public, combined with the ability of organizations to inspire action in their communities makes social media an unparalleled benefit, if used correctly.

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