

A few months ago, not many had heard of net neutrality. But a combination of humour, solid research and a practical game plan turned a nerdy cause into an online movement

NET ACTIVISM PACKS A PUNCH

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For the first time in the history of internet campaigns in India, a protest movement has successfully changed the course of a debate without having to take to the streets. The net neutrality movement is being fought almost totally in the virtual world.

Hashtag activism isn't new in India. In recent times, several big campaigns have been bolstered by the internet which helped mobilize mass support and kept people constantly updated on events. Pink Chaddi, Jan Lokpal and the Nirbhaya movements were some examples of successful on-the-ground campaigns that were galvanized by social media. But they still needed public action — dharnas, candlelight vigils and actual pink undies — to make a difference.

But the ongoing battle for internet freedom has proved that clicktivism isn't just about passive engagement with a cause. While it's all too easy to 'like' a cause, leading to what David Carr describes as "favoritism fatigue" in an article in the New York Times, some clicks can count in the real world.

It all started when the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (Trai) posted a vaguely worded and complicated discussion paper on net neutrality and called for public responses to it. "Clearly, many people understood that some of the proposals put forward by Trai in its paper threatened the internet as they knew it," says Anja Kovacs, who directs the Internet Democracy Project and has closely followed online activism in India.

Soon, an unlikely collective of techies, lawyers, journalists and even stand-up comics had banded together. Some of them — such as tech entrepreneur Kiran Jonnalagadda and journalist Nikhil Pahwa — had been writing and tweeting about the issue for a while but the Trai paper galvanized them. "I dropped everything and asked for help. Kiran, (lawyers) Apar Gupta and Raman Chima, Sandeep Pillai, standup group All India Bakchod and several Reddit India users (some of whom remain anonymous), started getting involved," says Pahwa, who is the founder of Medianama. The only common factor was their love for internet and an acute worry what this policy consultation might do to destroy its open and equal nature.

Though scattered across India, once they came together online, this 'apolitical collective' was able to rope in engineers, developers, open source activists, entrepreneurs, policy experts, lawyers and journalists as volunteers.

The best way to counter propaganda and opposition was to get people involved. An abridged version of the voluminous Trai paper was posted online, and a FAQ section created on a public Google Doc. "Many came forward to answer the questions and that exercise helped create an understanding of the situation," explains Pahwa. By the time, Jonnalagadda and a few other developers set up the savetheinternet.in website by April 1, there was enough information and data points. Lawyers Gupta and Chima had also decoded the legalese and prepared cogent answers to Trai's 20 questions. This was turned into a ready-to-use email template for users to hit 'send'.

And send they did. The flood of emails to the Trai inbox number is already 803,723 and counting. The results of the social media backlash are evident — with e-commerce retailer Flipkart pulling out of Airtel Zero and several websites back-



Nikhil Pahwa, founder of MediaNama and volunteer with the Savetheinternet.in coalition, talks to Anahita Mukherji

'People have taken ownership of the net'

Has internet activism finally come of age with the campaign for net neutrality?

We don't see ourselves as activists. We're just a bunch of people who are terribly worried about a Trai consultation paper that may negatively impact the manner in which we access the internet in India.

How did all of you come together to campaign for net neutrality and spread awareness about a lengthy, dense consultation paper?

Public consultations are often inaccessible to people. Our challenge was to deconstruct something complex and difficult so that people were able to understand how it affected them. We put out a Google Doc online and asked for help. Lots of people came forward to support the cause. I don't even know all their names. This was not an organized campaign. Anyone who was concerned about the matter could come forward, just as AIB did when they made their video on net neutrality.

When we asked people online if they could help translate the savetheinternet.in website, people whom we do not even know came forward and translated it into languages such as Gujarati, Malayalam and Tamil, which we will launch soon. People from across the country are taking ownership of the internet. This is not about 50-odd people fighting to save the net, but over 9,00,000.

The argument put forth by telecom operators is that much of India does not have access to the internet at all. They say their services will offer a portion of the internet free for those who have none.

Simply because somebody is poor does not mean we have the right to restrict his choice. They deserve what the rest of us deserve. If a telecom company wants to give internet for free to the poor, how about offering 20 MB for free? Why should we give them only a selective slice of the internet controlled by powerful sites? Zero rating schemes result in walled gardens. We don't want the internet to turn into walled gardens.

ing out of Facebook and Reliance's internet.org. "I was hoping to get around 15,000 responses to counter, say, 15 from the telecom lobby. Now, people make fun of me because I said that," laughs Pahwa. In this case, what also struck a chord was the idea of a bunch of young guys using tech to take on mismanagement by the older generation and corporate greed, says entrepreneur Mahesh Murthy. "We were telling them we like things on the internet as they are now."

But it is hard to sustain online outrage without an action plan, relentless groundwork and some comic warfare. So, when the contentious paper came out on March 27, the website was followed by AIB's punchy video that decoded the concept and took irreverent potshots at those who wanted to limit access while urging people to write to Trai. A lot of the lessons for the campaign came from the US where a John Oliver video turned the tide in the net neutrality debate. "We had seen that several people don't take internet petitions seriously. Also, we wanted to follow the proper legal course in this issue and not hold dharnas," says Jonnalagadda.

It is also important for campaigns to result in doable action. As Kovacs points out, savetheinternet.in and netneutrality.in gave users practical tools to respond before the April 24 deadline. The team also kept clarifying doubts and complex concepts on social media and also had an AMA (ask me anything) chat on Scrollback on Saturday while the 'other side' stuck to big words and jargon.

Of course, like every movement, this one too has attracted criticism. The pro-neutrality band has been branded as socialist and utopian and there were intense arguments amongst supporters. "Disagreements and arguments are not unique to the activism online," says Prakash Prakash, policy director at Centre for Internet and Society.

Earlier in the debate, Prakash had said he'd received strong pushback from friends and allies when he spoke about the possible benefits of non-competitive zero rating, an example would be allowing companies to offer free access to their sites and apps via an arrangement with a telecom company — if effective competition exists. Airtel Zero and Reliance's Internet.org claim to do the same though most supporters remain critical. Says Prakash: "There might've been differences. But the fact that a lot of people are thinking about effects of 'free', and comparing it to predatory pricing shows that #savetheinternet is one of the better examples of engaged activism."

Online campaigns have previously also successfully mobilized people to get involved in issues they do not know much about, says author Nilanajana Roy, who is an influential voice on Twitter. The J&K flood relief efforts last year started on Twitter but got volunteers moving on the ground, she says. "People don't always realize what they care strongly about so, despite the risk of compassion fatigue or armchair volunteerism, it's worth having some online activism," says Roy.

Meanwhile, those behind the savetheinternet campaign are struggling with their new-found identity as 'activists'. "I think of myself as a venture capitalist and marketing consultant, not a khadi kurta-jholawala from JNU," says Mahesh Murthy, among those who strongly support the movement.

And at the end of the day, most of these activists would like to go back to their cubicles, free to browse or start a business. But not before they've tried to keep the internet open.

