



Building Blocks of Social Networks

“You are the leaders of social media. People need to know about you and the work you’re doing,” said Osama Manzar, Founder-Director of [Digital Empowerment Foundation](#), addressing the Finalists and other guests at the 5th annual [Social Media for Empowerment Awards](#) (SM4E). SM4E 2018 was hosted on May 25 at Eros Hotel in New Delhi. At this occasion, 23 initiatives were announced winners of the SM4E Awards 2018.

Welcoming the audience, Manzar highlighted the boons and banes of social media (which has massive penetration in South Asia), and encouraged social media users to become conscious consumers and producers of online content. Seconding this thought, Ritesh Mehta, Head of Public Policy at [Facebook](#), said, “Technology is a platform. It’s up to the users to decide if they want to use it for the good or for the bad. Everyone who is connected, is a potential beacon of hope for the world. While you may be surrounded by some amount of fake news and hate speech, there are also thousands who are doing good work on the same platform. We’re happy to partner with DEF, and see how our platform, and others’, are being used for positive changes in the community. You’ll be surprised to know how little we know how little we know of the impact you’re creating. So knowing about your work through platforms like SM4E motivates us to continue doing our job and serving you better.”

Digital Empowerment Foundation initiated SM4E Awards in 2013 to honour and recognise those social media initiatives that are using social media technology as a catalyst for communication, spreading awareness and fulfilling their mission and needs of social development. Every year, we receive over a hundred nominations South Asia across eight category. This year, SM4E received 180 nominations, out of which 169 were filtered as valid nominations and 60 shortlisted by the virtual Jury. Seventeen-member all-women [Grand Jury](#) then went through these nominations on April 13, 2018 to select the awardees. This year, 20 initiatives were recognised as Winners and three initiatives were felicitated with the Special Mention awards.

A complete list of winners is available [here](#), while photographs from the event and the award ceremony can be accessed [here](#). The awards book too, with details of 60 Finalists, is now available [online](#).

On the day of the Awards Gala, representatives from 60 Finalist initiatives are invited to showcase their initiatives to fellow social media-based change makers and social media experts. Three such experts, who are social change influencers in the world of social media and outside, came together for a panel discussion at SM4E 2018. They were founder of [SheSays Trisha Shetty](#), author of [Remnants of a Separation Aanchal Malhotra](#), and Chhattisgarh police constable [Smita Tandi](#).

PANEL DISCUSSION

Smita Tandi is a constable in Chhattisgarh police force, but unlike any you may have come across. With 8,40,654 followers on Facebook, few can match the popularity and reach she has on social media.

In 2013, Smita lost her father because the family could not afford the treatment. She realised she wasn’t alone in this battle, and there are many who lose their loved ones to illnesses because they are unable to

afford the cost of health care. In 2014, Smita joined Facebook with the goal to connect families of patients with those who could contribute towards their treatment. To bring in the “people connect” and authenticity to her work, Smita even visited these patients in hospitals, discussed their health with their family members, and posted pictures and their stories on Facebook. Today, she helps out about four families on a monthly basis, connecting them with blood donors or financial contributors.

Trisha is one of the most prolific social activists of India who started to fight against the prevalent sexual abuse in India at a very young age. Born and brought up in Mumbai, Trisha has launched an online platform, exclusively for the rehabilitation, empowerment and education of women on the topic of sexual abuse. She was recognised by the United Nations where she was selected among 17 UN Young Leaders for Sustainable Development Goals.

Trisha’s journey with Twitter started to get her the daily dose of news initially. Soon, she and her organisation were using the platform to talk about sexual abuse, raise awareness and counter gender-based bias and violence. However, this kind of messaging often earns people hate on social media. She faced a lot of flak, trolling and online abuse. Initially, she was aggressive towards those who abused her online, but soon she’d learnt to deal with them. She realised she could not have constructive dialogues if she began throwing punches at right from the beginning.

Aanchal is a multidisciplinary artiste, writer and oral historian living in New Delhi. She is interested in banality, acts of recollection and the malleability of human memory. Her projects explore the written word, various forms of the book and the versatility of traditional printmaking. They consider notions of cultural diaspora, withdrawing from or belonging to a certain place, collective experiences, and importance of family history and genealogy. Third generation of the Bahrisons Booksellers family, Aanchal has grown up surrounded by books and the written word.

Aanchal started working on a research project several years ago to explore the materialistic things that people carried with them during the Partition of 1947. Most of them were very mundane things like clothes and utensils; however, thinking about them years later brought back a lot of memories of their home and the fear of separation. It was during this research that her brother asked her to start using Instagram. However, Aanchal was apprehensive; she didn’t want to post pouting photos of herself. She soon realised that Instagram was much more than that. A *kadhai* could initiate a conversation between people of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. And soon enough, her small novice project of material memory had become a big project about similarities in stories of people on either side of the border.

The all-women panel also brought to light that social media is not an equal space yet. Just like the offline world, the online world, too, witnesses gender-biased discrimination. As many as 72 per cent women have no access to digital tools. More men have access to the Internet and social media than women. Women also face much more online abuse and trolling than men. Most of the online content, too, caters to a male audience.

There and more issues were discussed in the category-wise roundtable discussion for women empowerment, among other issues on other tables.

ROUND TABLE DISCUSSIONS

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

The roundtable discussion for the category Women Empowerment—moderated by journalist Seema Chowdhry and Microsoft India CSR Lead Manju Dhasmana—saw participation from representatives of six initiatives. They were MedHealthTV, Oxfam India, Gaon Connection Pvt Ltd, She Says, BBC Media Action and Asaan Taleem.

They discussed how social media has transformed gender-based “activism” from being led by a niche group to being everyone’s business. However, equal representation of women in the online space and equal opportunities for the women in the online space is still a distant dream. Representatives from the organisation strongly believed that women need to have a greater ownership when it comes to technology. While social media has empowered a lot women by giving them a platform where they can raise their voices, there are also a lot of gender stereotypes and patriarchal conditioning that have crept into the online sphere from the offline communities. This, often, makes messaging around gender difficult to execute and, thus, must be dealt with much care.

List of all Finalists in the category is available [here](#).

COMMUNICATION, ADVOCACY & DEVELOPMENT ACTIVISM

The roundtable discussion for the category Communication, Advocacy & Development Activism—moderated by author Nazia Erum, Public Policy Head at Twitter Mahima Kaul and Chief of Communications at UNICEF Stephanie Joy Raison—saw participation from representatives of 11 initiatives. They were Litmus Test Project, Factly, Katha, Save the Children, Smile Foundation, ZMQ Development, CREA, Free a Girl India, Leher, Centre for Social Research and Population Foundation of India.

They discussed the role of social media in social development, and its impact on advocacy. While social media gives a voice to everyone, the risk of slacktivism is also a real one. While the broadcast about the work can be amplified by social media, it is still the on-ground work that matters and is the real driver of force. Most of them agreed that social media merely supplements on ground work and cannot be the sole driver of change, even if they are alerting and sensitising people living in rural areas through their social media handles. Communities, too, begin to trust the organisation once they see some content on social media.

List of all Finalists in the category is available [here](#).

COMMUNITY MOBILISATION

The roundtable discussion for the category Community Mobilisation—moderated by broadcast journalist Radhika Bordia—saw participation from representatives of six initiatives. They were Search English, Enable India, Shunyakal, WASH United, IIM Raipur and BBC Media Action – Bangladesh.

They discussed the efforts governments need to make to strengthen government-citizen relations via social media channels. Participants pointed out that the government should invest in quality and innovation of adequate messaging so that it not only attracts eyeballs but also empowers individuals to become self-sufficient. They agreed that the Internet is an open forum that allows everyone to communicate through various media. Photographs, especially, have a strong visual appeal. Just one photo sometimes has the power to initiate a change or force people to think critically. While the government is using adequate messaging, there is still a lot of improvement that’s required. Equally important is for the government to measure the impact of its messaging, which is largely missing at present. However, all participants agrees that citizens, too, have to play a proactive role in taking charge to strengthen the government-citizen relationship and insure efficient information dissemination.

List of all Finalists in the category is available [here](#).

CITIZEN MEDIA & JOURNALISM

The roundtable discussion for the category Citizen Media & Journalism—moderated by film-maker and columnist Natasha Badhwar—saw participation from representatives of nine initiatives. They were Point of

View, Land Conflict Watch, Voice of Azamgarh, The Optimist Citizen, Kahaani Wale, Tape a Tale, Ideosync Media Combine, Appan Samachar and Rathinavani 90.8 Community Radio.

They discussed how social media is a boon for the marginalised and voiceless who often find no space in mainstream media. Several communities and groups have employed innovative approaches to transform local news into news of national importance or news that requires attention from other community members, local authorities, the larger society or even the government. However, there are various challenges. One innovative approach cannot be replicated everywhere else given the demographic, geographic and social diversity. Thus, the challenge to remain relevant, credible and reliable motivates them to deliver quality content and services.

List of all Finalists in the category is available [here](#).

SOCIAL COMMERCE & ENTERPRISE

The roundtable discussion for the category Social Commerce & Enterprise—moderated by documentary film-maker Yasmin Kidwai—saw participation from representatives of six initiatives. They were Haqdarshak, VMEDO, Parent Circle, Andhra Pradesh Information Technology Academy, Haryana Department of Elections and Pahal.

They discussed if India's ecosystem is able to sustain local commerce and enterprise using social media as a tool. Participants agreed that social media helps tremendously in showcasing products creatively and facilitating a direct communication between the service provider and service receiver. Social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram have given women, especially, to become entrepreneurial. However, while India's digital ecosystem is quite supportive for urban enterprises, it is yet to evolve in the rural landscape. However, WhatsApp is beginning to be a game changer, especially for women.

List of all Finalists in the category is available [here](#).

BLOGGING & VLOGGING

Participants from the category could not make it to the event. However, *list of all Finalists in the category is available [here](#).*

Social Media for Empowerment Awards 2018 was co-organised by [Digital Empowerment Foundation](#) and [Facebook](#) India. It was supported by [World Summit Awards](#) (institutional partner), [Mint](#) (strategic partner), [INOMY](#) (event partner), [GO News](#) (livestreaming partner), [Salaam Namaste](#) (outreach partner). We look forward to engaging with social media change-makers once again in 2019.
