How Women’s Health and Social Media Won 2012: Retrospective

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This is an election commentary guest post by Echo Zen. Echo is a feminist artist, blogger, speaker and reproductive health advocate, currently deployed in the States to counter the influence of Tea Party moppets. (18 Dec 2012)

“Gentleman and ladies, your hard work paid off. Tonight we demonstrated to the other party what happens when you sneer at rape survivors, birth control and equal pay for equal work.”

By all accounts, it shouldn’t have ended like this. The president running for re-election was supposed to be an enemy of American values, waging the real “war on women” by giving out free contraception on street corners, encouraging girls to become sex objects by sleeping with hundreds of men and covering themselves in venereal disease, having abortion after abortion as their birth control inevitably failed them, until they no longer had any respect for their own bodies or lives – thus destroying the Christian work ethic that once made America’s economy great.¹ And that was on top of Obama’s takeover of healthcare, bailouts for the billion-dollar abortion industry, and attacks on religious institutions that believe they have a right to discriminate against the healthcare of female employees.²,³,⁴

This should have been a sufficient platform for the opposition’s campaign, so accustomed to winning elections by smearing liberals and women’s health advocates as morally depraved baby killers. But in defiance of all political wisdom about U.S. politics, it didn’t work. Instead, as Nobel Prize winner Paul Krugman observed, “human dignity for women swung votes the other way.”⁵ And social media was a key element in securing that swing.
Long before the dust had cleared, it was clear the 2012 election was a win for American women. Quite a few had noticed a major political party in the U.S. was earnestly campaigning on a platform of violating women’s bodies, allowing employers to discriminate against them and pay them less, and raping them with mandatory, medically useless transvaginal ultrasounds if they needed abortion care. No wonder the party of misogyny lost by the largest gender gap in U.S. history.

But the election was also an unprecedented win for women’s health advocates who believe reproductive healthcare is a basic human right. Consider how in 2010 the Tea Party rode to power on a Trojan horse promise of jobs – and once in power, immediately proposed a shocking 1,860 bills to restrict women’s access to abortion, birth control and basic reproductive healthcare, while refusing to pass a single credible jobs bill. Between attempts to ban contraception and bar impregnated rape victims from obtaining abortions if their rapes weren’t “forcible” enough, one ex-senator from Pennsylvania managed to campaign for the GOP presidential nomination on a virulently anti-birth control platform, the first politician to run a viable campaign on such a platform.

Even by today’s standards, where Congressional Republicans have now politicised sexual assault by refusing to re-authorise the (once bipartisan) Violence Against Women Act, Rick Santorum’s attempt at the presidency was an especially shameful development. And from these developments, one might conclude Americans as a whole are hostile to the notion that women deserve control over their bodies. For many advocates, working in reproductive healthcare for the past few years was a soul-draining experience, and that was without the periodic death threats from “pro-lifers” trying to terrorise them for daring to care for women.
But contrary to previous elections where women’s health was an afterthought in voters’ minds, it was a centrepiece of the 2012 election – which devolved into a rout for the party that had tried for years to ram their anti-health agenda down the throats of our communities.\textsuperscript{17,68} Presidential results came early in the night (it tends to happen when a candidate wins by a landslide), and as the night wore on, the scale of victory became unmistakable.

One by one, extremists in competitive races – who’d campaigned to strip rape survivors of abortion access and ban women from accessing birth control through their own insurance – fell in flames. Todd Akin and Richard Mourdock earned the most visible defeats for their questionable views on legitimate rape and gifts from God, but even minor candidates like Linda McMahon – who’d advocated for Catholic hospitals to deny emergency contraception to rape survivors – lost to opponents with more respect for women as people.\textsuperscript{18} At times the night grew confusing, as some of the dozen aspiring members of the Republican Rape Caucus lost races simultaneously.\textsuperscript{19} As one observer tweeted, “You know your party’s in trouble when you read this: A: The rape guy lost. B: Which one?”\textsuperscript{20}

Impactful, dynamic, and cheap – that’s what made social media outlets like Twitter and Facebook so vital to women’s health advocacy in this election. And that’s what differentiates social media from the limited, static and costly traditional media that dominated past election cycles, when whoever bought the most TV spots could drown out the grassroots and anyone with less money than Wall Street. Politicians could traffic in blatant lies without repercussion from reporters, intimidated by decades of “bias” claims whenever they reported facts that conservatives disliked.\textsuperscript{21} And facts were certainly absent when reporters repeated the Tea
Party’s lies about Obamacare “death panels,” and the GOP’s claims that healthcare reform was “the biggest advance of the abortion industry” in U.S. history.22,23

Such rhetoric was nonsense, of course, as confirmed by fact-checkers across the country. Taxpayer funding for abortion was banned by the 1970 Hyde Amendment, by politicians who believe abortion isn’t a health-protecting, lifesaving procedure but a lifestyle convenience for irresponsible sluts – much like the modern GOP’s attitude toward contraception, family planning, anti-rape laws, etc.24,25 Such contempt for women’s health has been endemic to U.S. politics since the 1980s, when the Religious Right began developing a strategy of smearing abortion providers as murderers to encourage their assassination.26 That same contempt was at play when the Republican Party, believing 2010 was a mandate to re-enact the 1950s, launched an all-out assault on rape victims, domestic violence laws, pay equality in the workplace and Planned Parenthood.

And that same contempt was what defeated the party that chose to politicise rape, sex discrimination and birth control, as social media bypassed the gatekeepers of traditional media and communicated facts directly to voters. Social media may have been around since the mid-2000s, but never before has it reshaped a political fault line like women’s health – something no politician ordinarily wants to talk about, except to smear women’s health supporters as anti-family monsters – to such an extent that it became a pivotal issue on which advocates could campaign to victory.

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Women’s health advocates flipped conventional wisdom about U.S. politics on its head. They demonstrated that, even when traditional media abdicate their role as society’s watchdogs and instead engage in the lazy he-said-she-said stenography of modern U.S. journalism, advocates can still speak truth unto people, if not unto power. Without social media, the GOP’s assault on women may have gone the same route as their attacks on healthcare reform – an avalanche of lies, debunked by fact-checkers everywhere but embraced by millions of Americans who could not hear the fact-checkers.27

That’s why Facebook and Twitter were the game-changers that enabled advocates to fight back, when the opposition attempted its same strategy of deceit to destroy women’s access to healthcare. When the House GOP’s first act of 2011 turned out not to be about creating jobs but rather denying abortion access to rape survivors whose rapes weren’t violent enough, the news spread like a fire through the social networks of millions of Americans, whose outrage forced the GOP to at least remove “forcible rape” from their bill of female-only government regulations.28

Then when they tried to ban funding to Planned Parenthood, claiming the nation’s oldest family planning provider actually kills babies and turns women into diseased sluts, the response was backlash not just from women who rely on PP for healthcare but also millions of family members and friends who know someone who depends on PP. The GOP genuinely believed shutting down the federal government over birth control pills was a winning issue.29

But the last straw, according to surveys commissioned by women’s health agencies, was when the GOP smeared no-co-pay birth control for insured women as an assault on family values – despite every study demonstrating birth control reduces the abortion rate that “pro-
Unmistakable to millions of women then was that the “party of life” had no concern for actual people’s lives, and was instead driven by a pathological obsession with preventing women from pursuing education and careers by stripping them of the ability to plan their families and futures.

That might have made sense in a Religious Right universe where sex is evil and birth control destroyed the work ethic that once made America’s economy strong. But for millions of women who believe their worth should be measured by their achievements rather than what they do between their legs, this GOP obsession with their bodies had nothing to do with job creation.

And women didn’t simply voice their disgust through Facebook updates. They became advocates for advocates, using social networks to relay to millions of friends the latest insults to their bodies and dignity, whether it was Rush Limbaugh’s attack on Sandra Fluke or the Komen Foundation’s politically motivated ban on funding for Planned Parenthood. Both Rush and Komen suffered for their contempt for basic decency – but even the most cynical consultants were surprised by the ferocity of the backlash to Limbaugh’s pornographic tirade against Fluke. After all, he already had a long history of claiming women enjoy sexual harassment and that Native Americans should be grateful for genocide committed against them. What changed?

Kate Harding offers the most succinct analysis of how social media altered the advocacy landscape: “Feminists were always out there, but often isolated from one another.” As individuals speaking in isolation, advocates were easy to dismiss as isolated cranks – which is why women’s groups have historically had to rely on marches and rallies to raise the
visibility necessary to force media coverage of the issues. This wasn’t easy, or cheap. They required ongoing leadership and material support, and since both were always in limited supply, the capacity of advocates for messaging was limited as well.

With social networking, advocates succeeded in their Limbaugh boycott and Komen backlash, because they finally had a visible space – online or otherwise – to express themselves. As Harding points out, “Who knows how many feminists were sending letters and making phone calls over similar instances in the past? But without any way for an outside observer to measure it, the target of a boycott or letter-writing campaign was never forced to acknowledge that criticism publicly. When your brand’s Facebook Wall is overtaken by feminist outrage, you can’t just write it off as a few man-hating cranks and continue on as usual.”

So with tiny budgets and largely behind-the-scenes leadership, millions of women exercised their power to fight back. Social media was a cost-effective force multiplier, though that alone would have been meaningless without a steady stream of focusing events from anti-women extremists to draw attention to the issue. And the GOP supplied those focusing events in spades, whether through Darrell Issa’s all-male contraceptive hearings, or Todd Akin’s theories on rape, pregnancy and women’s magical powers.

Ultimately the party that was projected to lose seats – by virtue of running an allegedly hated Muslim incumbent for President, and being funded more by people than by corporations – ended up gaining them. It defied not only political wisdom, but also the bank accounts of conservative superPACs that had attempted to defeat liberals by outspending them by record-setting 4-to-1 margins. Instead, a dozen women’s health advocates were elected to office –
so if anyone needs binders full of women, just look to Capitol Hill, where they’ll make up 20 percent of the new Senate in 2013. As a comedian named Groucho once said, money can’t always buy everything.

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Social media may be a cost-effective force multiplier, especially for cash-strapped women’s health advocates without the $700 US billion budget of conservative superPACs. Why else did women’s health emerge victorious in this election cycle?

Analysts have assessed all sorts of reasons, from demographics shifts to President Obama’s GOTV strategy, to poor messaging by the opposition party’s campaign. It’s a bit redundant to point out that social media enhanced all these elements, but it’s worth noting you need material to work with for your social media to work. Had the GOP been less vocal about how their top priority wasn’t job creation but rather stripping healthcare from sexually active women, social media consultants might have had fewer opportunities to highlight and satirise their agenda.

Still, most advocates would be sceptical that the GOP lost because it did a bad job of communicating its views. Let’s face it – when a party’s platform openly vows to ban lifesaving abortions for dying pregnant women and survivors of legitimate rape... well, it’s hard to make that sound good, no matter how they spin it. Even political wunderkind Karl Rove was stumped when responding to Akin’s claims about women’s bodies, aside from awkwardly joking that someone should murder Akin (to protect the reputation of the “party of life,” of course).
Of course there were the usual pundits who, like clockwork, emerged from the post-electionwoodwork to claim the GOP lost because... its messaging wasn’t conservative enough. To which any reasonable person should respond: Huh? People voted against you because your message wasn’t extreme enough?

Hello? Your party ran on a platform of eliminating protections for domestic violence survivors, pay equality for women, and health plans that cover contraception without co-pay. You attacked birth control users as sluts who want government to pay for their sex – as if women don’t know that if they pay wages into their health insurance, then they already paid for their contraceptive benefits and simply believe they have a right to access it, without co-pay discrimination from employers who think they have a right to control how women spend their wages.49,50,51

By the way, did you think women wouldn’t notice your party voted 33 times to repeal Obamacare protections that keep insurers from charging women more than men, cancelling policies when women get breast cancer, or denying coverage on the basis that women who’ve suffered domestic violence or rape have “pre-existing conditions”?52 Did you think women wouldn’t notice that you tried ramming bills through Congress to allow religious hospitals to withhold abortions from women with life-threatening pregnancies, or that your platform calls for abortion bans and criminalisation of birth control?53,54

How exactly would you make your message more conservative? Do you think you should have instead run a candidate who claims the Great Recession was caused not by Wall Street but by gays and abortion destroying the American work ethic, and that prenatal testing
should be de-funded because it magically promotes “abortion”? Rick Santorum tried running on that platform. It didn’t turn out so well for him.

Granted, that idea might have worked a few election cycles ago. Darrell Issa of the House GOP certainly thought so, when in February 2012 he held a congressional hearing on restricting women’s access to birth control. Issa likened himself to Martin Luther King Jr., claiming his crusade to strip women of healthcare was about protecting American freedom. This was yet another GOP falsehood, of course – King was an adamant supporter of contraceptive rights throughout his life, along with labour unions, family planning and everything else the modern GOP despises. A few election cycles ago, Issa may have even come across as believable, just as a certain president seemed believable when he claimed to support a “culture of life” while his war in Iraq killed over 100,000 civilians.

Alas, this being the era of Facebook and Twitter, Darrell Issa’s play at freedom fighter didn’t go quite as planned.

One Planned Parenthood employee noticed Issa’s hearing seemed comprised entirely of male religious leaders – in fact Issa had barred women from testifying, claiming that female patients whose lives would have been threatened by birth control restrictions didn’t “have appropriate credentials.” Said employee took a photo of the hearing and posted it to Facebook, where it quickly became the butt of jokes from comedians curious about how regulating women’s vaginas would create jobs. As an act of advocacy, it was faster than nightly news, cheaper than TV ads, and a powerful reminder to countless friends of friends of advocates of what the GOP’s true priorities were.
And faster, cheaper, more effective advocacy was a game-changer. No longer were advocates forced to tolerate the same mendacity that nearly sank Obama’s healthcare reform, as the GOP screamed that Obama’s attempt to reign in the worst insurance company abuses – denying coverage for pre-existing conditions, spending more on CEO bonuses than on patients, etc – was really about funding abortion and killing grandmas. When the GOP response to journalists who questioned the party’s dishonest ads during the 2012 election was, “We're not going to let our campaign be dictated by fact-checkers,” advocates made sure voters heard that position, even if the press didn’t see fit to give much coverage. And when a kindergarten teacher at the presidential debates asked why the GOP refused to support pay equality for women, Romney’s meandering response about binders became a spontaneous ongoing meme among voters with Facebook and a desire to make their voices (and values) heard.

America is now coming off an election cycle where, for the first time in history, a major political party (hint: not the one seeking binders) included in its platform unqualified support for women’s reproductive equality; where a family planning provider which for decades has been smeared as an enemy of family values was honoured at the Democratic National Convention for the millions of women’s lives it has saved and changed; where the President himself spoke of every woman’s right to healthcare without discrimination from those who believe in forcing their beliefs between women’s legs.

As we look to the future to begin developing communication strategies for 2014, some advocates might even miss the violent rhetoric that once came from GOP quarters about how women’s healthcare isn’t real healthcare, since only sluts and prostitutes need contraception and family planning. If the extremists have learned anything from this cycle, it’s that openly
campaigning against women’s lives is no longer a winning strategy, just as relying entirely on the white Christian vote is no longer a viable tactic. We’ve come a long way since the 1980s. Now we prepare to collaborate with the next generation of advocates – and learn from them as well.
Appendix I: References


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Appendix II: Background on Feministe

*Feministe*, based in New York City, is the oldest feminist blog in the U.S., founded in 2003 by a recent barrister with a dream of creating an online space for feminists to engage in dialogue around gender. It has since grown to become one of the blogosphere’s most respected and visited sites, home to both regular staff writers and numerous guest writers of different specialities. *Feministe* covers a range of topics, from politics to pop culture, and caters to an audience of primarily younger feminists interested in expanding their views through news and commentary about the latest in gender equality (or lack thereof) in the U.S. and worldwide. Articles on *Feministe* encompass a wide spectrum of styles, from profane rants and humour to solemn analyses of human rights in developing countries like Texas and Mississippi.

The audience of *Feministe* numbers in the thousands, and sometimes tens of thousands for popular articles about provocative subjects such as rape culture or TSA policies toward sex toys. A cursory look at the comments sections of articles indicates the blog’s readership includes LGBT women, transgender people, feminists with disabilities, breastfeeding mothers and women of colour, though rarely do they agree on the same things at the same time. The debates and disagreements that occur via the comments are among the blog’s strengths, and are part of the reason for the enduring popularity of *Feministe*.

You can read the latest articles here: [http://www.feministe.us/blog/](http://www.feministe.us/blog/)