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Feminist hashtags have been utilized by millions of users around the world to aggregate and track content around a single topic. The recent hashtag campaign "#metoo" garnered more than 1.7 m tweets within 85 countries in the initial 24 hours (Park, 2017). However, like many social movements working to reorganize the structures of inequality and threatening the status quo of society, online feminist campaigns too have shown a trend of initially amassing popularity and support followed by backlash (which may be both a separate backlash hashtag campaign or change in the discourse of replies to the original hashtag). Through this summer, I conducted semi-structured interviews with gender rights activists in India to examine their communicative strategies to deal with the backlash discourse.

With the funds awarded by the Mellon Grant, I was able to carry out field research and establish international institutional connections in four cities in India (Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, and Kolkata), which will serve as fundamental sites for my dissertation research. Also, I expect academic publications with the data collected.

For my dissertation work, I aim to conduct an online ethnography and discourse analysis of backlash discourse surrounding the #metoo hashtag activism campaign. It will focus on analyzing the social, cultural, political dynamics and the intermedia content production and circulation that helped frame the social movement discourse online. I am especially interested in inspecting how and when social movements attract backlash discourse from not only active opposers but also sympathizers, bystanders, and active supporters.

I will use a 1 percent sample of Twitter archive available with SMAD research group in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at UW-Madison to analyze the twitter Discourse surrounding #metoo discourse. However, it is important for me in my study to interview the individual US and Indian feminist activists/ major influencers to understand their use of digital media for persuasive communication during social movements and protests.

Thanks to Mellon Grant, I was able to meet and forge relationships with a number of activists working in the purview of gender rights in India. The activists were highly varied in their approach to working on the issue as well as using mass and digital media in the process. This trip gave me insights into the differences and similarities in how gender rights movements are seen and function in India and the United States. It answered questions regarding the how activists generate content, who are their target audience, how do they think of attracting followers, how do they choose the topics that will resonate with their audience. It also helped me understand how the activists perceive and deal with backlash content, both social and political. Overall, the trip helped me examine how backlash informs and helps frame the message that goes out to the public, prior to, during and after a social movement.