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### 1. Urbanization and Cyber-Urbanization in Kathmandu

As Kathmandu and other cities in Nepal have rapidly urbanized, so have Nepal's cyberurban social media neighborhoods. However, while the physical urbanization of Nepal has caused its neighborhoods to grow more unsustainable, the population boom of Nepalis in cyber-urban social media enclaves has boosted the sustainability of its grassroots non-profit sector.

"Social media has done wonders globally," wrote Pushpa Basnet on her Facebook page on September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2012. Pushpa, founder of Early Childhood Development Center, a non-profit that cares for children of prisoners was announcing on social media that she had become a Top Ten CNN Hero, meaning she was now eligible to be 'elected' as Hero of the Year. Pushpa appealed for supporters to vote for her, writing, "Please remember that by voting, you are not only supporting, but also helping voice the need for the protection of children growing up in prisons all around the world." Pushpa was awarded a \$250,000 prize by CNN when she won the most votes of all ten nominated CNN Heroes of 2012, becoming CNN Hero of the Year on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012.

Occupants of government offices in Nepal's capital are regularly blamed for its woes, and activities of the government and political parties are typically met with criticism and opposition. Where state-led democratic processes have been weakened by cronyism and corruption<sup>1</sup> and stalled in the houses of parliament, online voting for social good initiatives has taken off. People have become more inspired by social initiatives than political leaders. "This is the real people's movement," assert Duncan Maru and Bibhav Acharya, referring to the surge of online voting that won their nonprofit, Nyaya Health, as well as two other Nepali nonprofits, \$100,000 in Chase Community Giving's 2012 grant competition. In contrast to the People's Movements I and II in 1990 and 1996 respectively, that brought democracy to Nepal in different forms, the crowd-voting democratic revolution, in Maru and Acharya's eyes, has delivered more meaningful change in a much shorter timeframe. In the cyber-neighborhoods of social media spaces, Nepalis and friends of Nepal vote for and donate to causes they believe in, carried out at the grassroots rather than the state level. In contrast, Nepal's political leaders

and their parties have been unable to inspire the enthusiasm that social workers like Pushpa Basnet and causes like the Help Nepal Network inspire, because they are seen as lazy, greedy, corrupt, without vision, and obstructors of democracy, as they continue to squabble over power and fail to write and pass a new constitution.

A September 2012 YouTube video entitled "Appeal for Vote for Help Nepal Network" by Bharat B. Rawal shows how people anywhere in the world can use social media to support community level initiatives in Nepal. Three neighborhoods are involved in this offline to online to offline journey of support. Two Nepalis in London videotaped themselves requesting a woman they encountered on the street to vote for the Help Nepal Network on Chase Community Giving's contest. In the video they explain the campaign to her and, holding an iPad, request her to vote on the spot. By voting, the Londoner has briefly entered and made an impact on the social media neighborhood of the Help Nepal Network. In turn, the funds granted the Network based on its many votes, impact the rural neighborhoods of Nepal that will benefit from the Network's educational and medical projects.

While critics of online social activism such as Morozov (2011) and Gladwell (2010) term this activity slacktivism or clicktivism and argue that it does not produce meaningful results, these online crowd-voting and crowd-funding contests have netted initiatives funds by awarding their ability to motivate people to click, share, and click and share again, demonstrating their support. It is hard to make a case that these funds, won through a torrent of slacktivist mouse clicks, are not meaningful to the organizations, communities, and people who benefit from these winning initiatives. Schools, children's homes, and clinics have been built and staffed, art and film festivals have been held, community gardens have been paid for, among other activities, using the spoils of slacktivism. Morozov (2011) makes a convincing case that the power of social media fueled political activism has been overhyped as an authoritarianism fighting tool by a cold-war obsessed West. However, small-scale social improvement initiatives have been able, through skillful social media use, to obtain volunteers, tap into funding and net other forms of support they previously had been unable to access through traditional fund and awareness raising channels.

Kathmandu neighborhoods are both impacted by and are impacting social media neighborhoods populated by Kathmandu-ites and others with connections to the capital city. This paper examines local sustainability initiatives taking place in neighborhoods of Kathmandu during 2012. These initiatives are being supported by neighborhoods of social media users who utilize sharing, crowd-voting, and crowd-funding to obtain additional supporters and funding to help carry out, grow, and sustain these initiatives. Moreover, a large and integral component of these online campaigns involves offline campaigning, where campaigners travel through city spaces, often equipped with laptops and smartphones, putting up posters with online voting instructions and encouraging people in face to face conversations

to vote on the spot.

## 2. Controversial State-led Road Widening, Dubiously Legal Tree Felling, Wall Sloganeering and the Rise of Street Art

Government apathy in providing social services, already at heightened levels during the civil war, has grown since the peace process began in May 2006. This neglect, combined with the deleterious environmental effects of rapid urbanization, has prompted many Kathmandu residents aspiring to combat the degradation of their surroundings to take matters into their own hands. While small-scale organizations have formulated plans for urban eco-parks, street murals, navigation tools, and other initiatives, the government, under the caretaker administration of Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai, embarked on a costly and controversial road widening project, which has felled numerous trees, spread dust in the air and debris on the streets, and will primarily improve conditions for private vehicle users at the expense of everyone else.

In wake of the mass felling of trees in Kathmandu Valley during the road expansion campaign, Trees Liberation Army, an environmental advocacy group that plays on the name of the Maoist rebels' forces, the People's Liberation Army, was founded in September 2012. Members posted photographs to their Facebook page of trees on which they had painted messages of protection and tied ribbons.



Image 1: "Save Me"

Following this, an article in an English language daily newspaper criticized the road widening campaign and commented on the activities of the Trees Liberation Army, writing of "allegations of corruption surrounding sale of the felled trees – a lucrative business – [which have prompted] activists to call for an investigation" (Terzon 2012, para. 8). Trees Liberation Army, along with partner organizations Roots and Shoots and Animal Welfare Network Nepal, is requesting that instead of the haphazard and environmentally insensitive road widening activities that have been going on for the past year, the government develop "an intelligent road design which includes existing and new trees," (Animal Welfare Network Nepal 2012).

Along with its indifference to disappearing greenery, Kathmandu Metropolitan City devotes little energy to beautifying its cityscape. Advertisers are allowed to purchase space on huge, unsightly billboards overlooking streets, dominating the Himalayan skyline, with, as one respondent, the founder of the group Alcohol Recovering Voice<sup>2</sup>, noted disgustedly, no provision against placing cigarette and alcohol advertisements near schools. In addition to glaringly garish billboards, political slogans are plastered on walls everywhere in the city, which are also frequently used as public urinals, due to a severe shortage of public toilets and lack of sanitation in the few that exist.

One form of response during the last few years has been the emergence of street art. Appearing on Kathmandu walls and obscuring the outdated and unfulfilled political slogans of years past, produced by artists working solo or in groups, street art has been promoted by a number of artistic organizations.



**Image 2: Education ministry wall** 

The act of art making on walls of the capital is one way of reclaiming this public space from the political party cadres and their hired hands who were responsible for plastering wall after wall of Kathmandu with outdated and unfulfilled political slogans of years past (remnants of a political slogan are visible on the leftmost part of the education ministry wall pictured above). This opposition to political slogans on Kathmandu walls reflects a broader opposition by everyday civilians to the self-centered, obstructive and destructive activities of political parties in Kathmandu, such as public transport blockades and the tire burning and windshield smashing that accompanies them, and the desire for a more beautiful, artistically vibrant public space. Urban renewal is depicted here as being carried out by politically unaffiliated community members rather than party cadres. In 2012 with an old guard of politicians still clinging to power, enriching themselves at the country's expense, and refusing to work for the public good, political slogans no longer inspire; street art with no ties to political parties, by the people and for the people, does.

In an initiative launched in September 2012 called Kolor Kathmandu, artists, often with the assistance of community members, are painting 75 murals on street walls that represent Nepal's 75 districts. Kolor Kathmandu showcases these pieces on social media platforms, popularizing the idea of the city as public art gallery and social media as a window into this

urban gallery space.

A similar urban revitalization initiative, launched in October 2012, is Bato ko Cinema (which means cinema on the street). To finance Bato ko Cinema, where documentary films would be screened for free at public squares in Kathmandu, the parent organization Sattya Media Arts Collective carried out a successful social media-fueled crowd-voting campaign. By obtaining more votes than any other initiative during the two weeks of campaigning, Sattya won a \$2,500 grant from GOOD Maker, a platform where organizations submit ideas for community improvement which can then be voted on using a Facebook account.

### 3. Traversing Neighborhoods on Foot for Votes Online

On April 6th, 2012, Sattya Media Arts Collective launched a crowd-funding campaign for their community park project, Hariyo Chowk<sup>3</sup>. The campaign, which lasted one month, was very successful, raising \$3,417 more than the target amount of \$9,000 for a total of \$12,417 from 229 backers. In September, the start-up GalliGalli<sup>4</sup> raised \$10,145 from 169 backers in a crowd-funding campaign on Start Some Good for their online public transportation route mapping project. Although data-gathering rather than vote-seeking, GalliGalli's public transportation app designers took microbuses across Kathmandu, charting routes and interviewing drivers about their schedules.

While online crowd-funding campaigns, to be successful, require direct monetary contributions, crowd-voting campaigns require only a small time commitment to vote. As Pushpa Basnet repeatedly describes it on her Facebook page, the process of online voting for these campaigns is much less bureaucratic and restrictive than actual voting: "To vote we don't need citizenship, passport, identity cards but your time." To obtain online votes from offline sources, campaigners for Pushpa Basnet as CNN Hero of the Year 2012 printed out leaflets with voting instructions and distributed them in neighborhoods in Kathmandu and other areas of Nepal during autumn and winter 2012.



Image 3: "Vote for Pushpa Basnet" poster

In October 2012, members of Sattya Media Arts Collective traversed neighborhoods in the Kathmandu valley with laptops and smartphones, explaining their Bato ko Cinema initiative and soliciting votes from people they met on the street.

This strategy of carrying out offline campaigning for online votes was pioneered in Nepal in 2009 by Sarvodaya Nepal, which won a \$100,000 grant from Chase Community Giving for obtaining 61,953 Facebook likes, the equivalent of a winning number of votes. A major voting bloc were Kathmandu school children, who learned about the campaign when volunteers from Sarvodaya Nepal visited their schools, wrote voting instructions on blackboards, and set up laptops for the students to use to vote. Without on the ground "get out the online vote" efforts, crowd-voting campaigns cannot reach their potential.

#### 4. Of Likes and Hype

Although social media neighborhoods cannot solve all the problems Kathmandu neighborhoods face, they are making a significant and positive difference. Hariyo Chowk began by planting the idea of neighborhood eco-parks in the minds of residents, encouraging them to help make it a reality through efforts in the virtual and real neighborhood – at the Kickstarter page and at the proposed physical site.

Crowd-voting and crowd-sourcing campaigns that engage social media platforms appeal to supporters on the strength of their ideas, rather than the personalities of their leaders. The idea of making local and international documentaries accessible to everyday people in Kathmandu neighborhoods proved its appeal to residents of these neighborhoods and social media neighborhood dwellers when the Bato ko Cinema initiative obtained a grant to fund its series of screenings by amassing more online votes than any of the competing social improvement initiatives featured on the website. In an environment where political leaders have not made efforts to fight against the worsening environmental conditions of Kathmandu's neighborhoods as the capital haphazardly urbanizes, small scale initiatives that only require a few minutes of time spent online in support, and that inspire longer commitments, are revitalizing sections of the city.

Hampton, Livio, and Sessions write that "mobile phones change the character of urban spaces not just for the user, but for all participants in that space" (2010: 710). This extends to social media spaces and their relationship with urban spaces, which affect each other's character through their users/residents. Peoples' photographic, video, and other representations of their urban environments proliferate through social media, populating the screens connecting us to these spaces. These mediated representations of neighborhoods in need or in process of renewal and revitalization draw volunteers, votes, and funds from social media spaces to spaces on the ground, where the cycle continues, and where the spaces grow and evolve.

Morozov (2011) cautions against putting faith in technology in general and the Internet and its ever updating slew of applications in particular to solve social problems. He criticizes cyber-utopianism, "a naïve belief in the emancipatory nature of online communication that rests on a stubborn refusal to acknowledge its downside," (p. xiii). This study does not claim that online voting via Facebook accounts for ideas and funding to revitalize Kathmandu is an all-encompassing solution to the city's myriad ailments. However, it does argue that online, crowd-sourced voting and fundraising has enabled and will continue to enable many smallscale initiatives to obtain support that may have otherwise been unreachable, and that these initiatives are increasing urban vibrancy, livability, and sustainability in small but significant ways. The first Bato ko Cinema screening featured a local documentary on migrant Nepali workers in the gulf, *The Desert Eats Us*, and was broadcast in November 2012 at an open air public street in Kathmandu valley where people from the neighborhood could view it freely. The first Hariyo Chowk park opened around the same time, featuring an art show and a video DJ performance and workshop. Events like these make neighborhoods more vibrant and cohesive, and ultimately contribute to citywide sustainability.

Online voting and crowd-funding for social initiatives is not and is not intended to be a substitute for long-stalled offline democratic processes in Nepal. But it is a way in which a democratic activity can take place without the corruption and power-brokering, and the harassment and property destruction people are used to from the country's political leadership, their violent and extortionist youth groups, and their hired thugs. If a group of people living in Kathmandu come up with an idea that would improve city life, such as a public eco-park, they know, as it stands, that proposing it to their local parliamentarian would not get it off the ground. Yet proposing this idea on a platform geared to publicizing, evaluating, and supporting – via online votes or donations – these kinds of initiatives could.

GOOD Maker, Kickstarter, and similar platforms that enable online votes, sharing, and donations facilitated by social media platforms will not guarantee this idea gets the support it needs to be put into practice, but they provide opportunities to enact small-scale neighborhood improvement initiatives that simply aren't provided by public servants and politicians. Online gathering spaces enable these initiatives to gather volunteer support on the ground. The mud bricks used to construct Hariyo Chowk's pizza oven were made and transported by volunteers, many of whom connected with the organizing team at Sattya through their Facebook group. That doesn't change the fact that online gathering spaces can can be used by hate groups to do social harm. However, the way Sattya and similar initiatives are using social network site groups and crowd-sourcing platforms has helped them put their proposals into practice.

Had Sattya opted to carry out street protests to petition the government to build a public eco-park or hold free screenings of documentaries on neighborhood streets, Hariyo Chowk and Bato ko Cinema would not have come to fruition. That is not to say that street protests have no

place in Kathmandu civic life; without street protests, absolute monarchy would likely still be in place and a civil war may not have ended. Rather, street protests are not a workable means to gain support for a neighborhood renewal initiative like a public park. Online voting, like street protests, is not a one size fits all solution. Each social initiative that is launched needs to be examined in its context to determine the best means for it to gain support.

That US corporations such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google (which owns YouTube) no doubt obtain public relations benefits from their roles in assisting initiatives to receive online votes, funding, and publicity is a concern. However, initiatives need to work with the Internet as it is structured if they want to get the most they can out of it when engaging in crowdsourcing, and Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are currently the social media tools most frequently used for online publicity, fundraising, and voting campaigns. Facebook identities, as well as email addresses (where Gmail, Hotmail, and Yahoo are the most popular email services), are used as voting credentials online. Certainly, as Facebook helps popularize campaigns to support initiatives for social good, these campaigns help popularize Facebook. This situation is at present unavoidable, given the dominance of YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter online as communication portals, similar to the way that Visa and Mastercard dominate the credit card market, Amazon dominates online book sales, Ebay dominates online auctions, Paypal dominates online payments, and the US dollar dominates global finance. When groups of people congregate online, they may use Facebook groups; when they meet offline, they may patronize a private establishment too, perhaps a multinational coffee shop chain or a local business. However, it is in a group's best interest to use the most popular social networking hubs as meeting spots when they congregate online.

It thus becomes important not to view Facebook specifically and solely as a force for social good, any more than Google or Wikipedia specifically and solely is viewed as a force for knowledge, Amazon specifically and solely is viewed as a force for literacy. Yet we can say that in its role in assisting people to vote for initiatives aimed at improving social conditions, Facebook contributes to social good. Similarly, Facebook contributes to social bad in its role in allowing groups that promote racist, anti-gay, and sexist causes to congregate online. Amazon contributes to literacy by allowing people without access to bookstores to purchase books, yet it also has negative effects on literacy (and local economies) when it puts local bookstores out of business. People working to help social good initiatives achieve success must engage with the Internet as it is, which means identifying and using the platforms that are best suited to provide the most opportunity to solicit the greatest number of votes, the strongest publicity, and other support. These popular platforms should continuously be characterized and evaluated on a case by case basis, examining the individuals, groups, and institutions they are affecting and how they are affecting them, nothing more and nothing less.

That is not to say social media technology, or technology in general, is neutral, just

because it can have positive effects in some contexts and negative effects in others. Rather, technologies need to undergo constant scrutiny when they are designed and when they are used, their positive, negative, and neutral qualities measured for each and every situation under analysis. In the case of the small-scale neighborhood revitalization initiatives examined in this paper, social media technologies in general, and Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube specifically have played positive roles.

### Appendix

Iable 1: Profiles of Selected Organizations Addressing Urban Issues 1					1	
Name	Est.	Areas of Focus	Urban Issue(s) Addressed	Urban Initiative(s)	FB/YT/ Twitter Use	Crowd- funding/ Crowd- voting Platforms
1. Alcoholic Recovering Voice	2006	Substance recovery, HIV awareness, anti- alcohol abuse advocacy	Alcohol and cigarette advertising near schools	No alcohol day, various cleaning programs, meetings and marches	Facebook	None
2. Animal Nepal	2004	Animal welfare, public health, environmentalism	Tree cutting during road widening campaign	Tree Liberation Army	Facebook, YouTube, Twitter	None
3. Bird Conservation Nepal	1982	Environmental research and conservation	Dwindling habitat for birds	Treatment of injured birds	Facebook	None
4. Change Fusion Nepal	2008	Social entrepreneurship	Traditional craftmanship preservation	Night bazaar, training programs	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube	None
5. Creating Opportunities and Resources for the Excluded (CORE)	2005	Poverty, women's skill training, health care, education	Urban poverty	Out of school learning for urban poor	Facebook	None
6. Environmental Camps for Conservation Awareness (ECCA)	1987	Environmental education and conservation	Urban environmental degradation	Student environmental groups at local schools	Facebook, YouTube	Global Giving
7. Environment and Public Health Organization (ENPHO)	1990	Public health, environmental welfare	Urban sanitation	Various water conservation, public health, and sanitation campaigns	YouTube	None

### Table 1: Profiles of Selected Organizations Addressing Urban Issues in Kathmandu

8. GalliGalli	2012	Public transportation navigation, government services wiki	Mapping and navigating Kathmandu	NoTensionSawari, MaiDalal	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube	Start Some Good
9. Kathmandu Animal Treatment Center	2003	Animal welfare and public health	Street dogs	Animal birth control, animal rescue, foster homes, education programs at local schools	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube	None
10. Siddhartha Arts Foundation	2011	Community arts promotion	Kathmandu as an arts center	Kathmandu International Arts Festival	Twitter, Vimeo	IndieGoGo
11. Lasanaa	2007	Community arts promotion	Alternative art space in Kathmandu	Lah (art space)	Facebook	None
12. Lumanti		Urban poverty	Housing for the urban poor and squatters	Various housing projects, Urban Resource Center	Facebook, Twitter	
13. Nepal Sports Dance Training Institute (NSDTI) Yuwa	2009	At-risk urban youth	B-boy dance training program	B-boy performances	Facebook, YouTube	None
14. Recovering Nepal	2003	Drug addiction, HIV awareness	Rehabilitation for drug users	Rehab centers, various training programs	Facebook	None
15. Sarvodaya Nepal	2008	Alternative education, volunteerism	Volunteerism and philanthropy by urban youth	Various volunteer opportunities for Kathmandu secondary school students	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube	Chase Community Giving, Kickstarter, Global Giving
16. SathSath	2005	Street children's welfare	Homeless urban youth	Skills training and housing for street children, street theatre, radio program	Facebook, YouTube	None
17. Sattya Media Arts Collective	2009	Media arts, DIY environmentalism, street art, urban environmentalism	Countering negative effects of urbanization, contributing to media arts education and production, urban gardening	Hariyo Chowk, Kolor Kathmandu, Bato ko Cinema		Kickstarter, GOOD Maker

18. The Small Earth Nepal (SEN) 19. SOUP		Environmental sustainability Urban poverty	Urban environment alism Income	Various exhibitions and conferences Literacy classes,	Facebook, YouTube Facebook	
(Society for Urban Poor)			generation and literacy for			
20. Tewa	1995	Women's empowerment, organizational sustainability, philanthropy and volunteerism	Philanthropy and volunteerism by Kathmandu residents	Teaching philanthropy and volunteerism to Kathmandu residents	Facebook, YouTube, Twitter	
21. WATO (We Are The One) Nepal	2000	Urban environmentalism	Urban decay in Kathmandu	Community park, tree planting	Facebook, YouTube, Twitter	Ammado
22. Work Together Nepal		Environmentalism	Rising pollution in Kathmandu	Various clean up and tree planting campaigns	Facebook	None

### Table 2: Selected Crowd-voting and Crowd-funding Campaigns to Benefit Kathmandu Neighborhoods

Campaign	Aim	Organization	Cause
1. GalliGalli Taxi and	Raising at least \$7,424, and ideally	GalliGalli	Information on public
Takeoff	\$16,423 to support the initial phases		transportation routes and fares,
	of development of an application to		as well as government office
	provide data on public transportation in		procedures in Nepal
	Kathmandu		
2. Hariyo Chowk	Raising at least \$9,000 to transform a	Sattya Media	Environmentally sustainable
	small, vacant plot of land in Kathmandu	Arts Collective	neighborhood parks and
	into a park and outdoor arts area		community art areas in urban
			Nepal
3. Bato ko Cinema	Obtaining a \$2,500 grant to support	Sattya Media	Inspiration, opportunities and
	some of the costs involved in showing	Arts Collective	affordable resources for the
	documentaries on the streets of		arts community in urban Nepal
	different neighborhoods in Kathmandu		
4. Kathmandu	Raising up to \$25,000 to support some	Siddhartha Arts	An art festival featuring
International Art	of the costs to run an art festival	Foundation	international and local artists
Festival			that promotes Kathmandu as
			an arts hub

Campaign and Duration	Host organization or platform	Awareness raising for votes/ donations
1. Kathmandu International Art Festival (13/10-13/11/12)	IndieGoGo (IndieGoGo.com)	Donations (via email account registration with host, then credit card or PayPal); Donation appeals via Facebook, Twitter, and Vimeo
<b>2. GalliGalli Taxi and Takeoff</b> (29/5-20/8/12)	StartSomeGood (StartSomeGood.com)	Donations (via email account registration with host, then PayPal); Donation appeals via Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube
<i>3. Help Nepal Network as Chase</i> <i>Community Giving 2012 Awardee</i> (6/9- 19/9/12)	Chase Community Giving (Chase.com)	Votes (via Facebook or Chase bank account); Donation appeals via Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube
4. Hariyo Chowk (6/4-6/5/12)	Kickstarter (Kickstarter.com)	Donations (via Facebook or email account registration with host, then amazonpayments); Donation appeals via Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube
5. Bato ko Cinema (27/9-11/10/12)	GOOD Maker (maker.good. is)	Votes (via Facebook or email account registration with host); vote appeals via Facebook and Twitter

**Table 3: Details of Selected Campaigns** 

### Notes

- 1 In 2012 Transparency International ranked Nepal as 139th most corrupt country globally, out of 176, in its annual Corruptions Perceptions Index.
- 2 Interviewed November 11, 2010, Kathmandu.
- 3 Green public square.
- 4 "Alley alley".

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