



# SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS ROLE IN NORMS SHIFTING



Social media is increasingly used in social and behavioural change (SBC) and norms-shifting interventions (Norms-shifting on Social Media, **Abstract**). Young people's engagement in digital spaces is rapidly growing, and their active participation in these spaces is essential to achieve sustainable, inclusive, and stable societies.

Provided the importance of digital media in achieving social change, the international development community in collaboration with academia, are looking for ways to capture the role of social media in shifting social norms and defining its main contributing factors. This work can be significant in determining future relevant policy frameworks and implementation strategies.

In July 2022, the Institute for Reproductive Health (IRH) at Georgetown University, conducted a research under the **Passages Project**, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). “**Norms-shifting on Social Media: A landscaping of programming**” builds on previous work done by the Passages Project, and seeks to contribute to a growing discussion on how norms are formed and shifted through social media programming.

**RNW Media** as one of the forerunners on this topic, was invited to share its expertise in using digital media for social change.

## NORMS-SHIFTING AND THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

“**Norms-shifting on Social Media**” argues that social media interventions that bring about social and behavioural change can be mapped along two axes, namely, **visibility**<sup>1</sup> and **approach**. **The research differentiates between these two approaches** to reach and engage with target audiences online: **communication- and community-based approaches, which contribute to shifting norms in their own unique ways**. *Communication-based* refers to interventions that use tailored media content or messages to influence knowledge and attitudes of the audience in order to shift norms, such as providing information on sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR) specific topic for awareness raising purposes. *Community-based approaches* are interventions that are intended to involve communities to create content and stimulate online interactions, such as reflective dialogues and peer support.

The study explains that **norms-shifting interventions are rarely used in isolation, programmes often combine approaches and strategies**. Similarly, RNW Media's digital media and learning solutions rely on combining approaches and strategies in order to achieve social change. In our partnerships with changemakers we work to unleash young people's potential to drive social change. Changemakers include the media, digital networks, human rights experts, gatekeepers, and others. RNW Media applies both communication- and community-based intervention approaches in programmes to bring about social change as demonstrated in the study through the example of Love Matters.

<sup>1</sup> Visibility, refers to the social media platforms' accessibility and capacity to foster interactions. On social media, different patterns and algorithms play an important role in how and if media content has been delivered. Thus, visibility impacts the capacity and extent of reach, as well as engagement.

The RNW Media Network is a network of media-makers and media collectives who build, nurture and grow digital spaces for young people around a range of human rights issues. Currently, the RNW Media Network has 19 members hosting 22 digital communities in 17 countries as of January 2023.

Within the RNW Media Network seven organisations run Love Matters branded digital communities in China, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, India, Kenya, Mexico, and Nigeria. Collectively to date, the Love Matters members have an audience in excess of 10 million young people. The network members independently implement the unique Love Matters model to support safe, healthy, pleasurable sex, love and relationships for young people.



The study mainly drew on Love Matters, a digital media community incubated by RNW Media. One of our members in Egypt operate Love Matters Arabic (LMA) which gives youth-friendly Arabic-language content on sexual health and wellbeing. Love Matters focuses on young people between 18 and 30 in different countries. Its main aim is to build online communities in order to facilitate dialogues on sexual health and pleasure that have the power to change norms around these topics. The platform opens up the topic of sexuality for young people in a region where talking openly about sex is deeply taboo. The Love Matters communities offer a safe space for young people to ask questions and engage in open conversations on love, sex and relationships, in addition to access to reliable information. The platforms' blush-free and evidence-based approach invites users to open up and support each other in a non-judgemental manner.

Communication-based approaches primarily have an informing role, but when performed in the 'open' sphere of social media it can lead to individual change in attitudes and behaviours. The Love Matter platforms rely on social advertising on their open social media pages in order to start an open discussion on specific topics. This is done through posting probing questions to engage specific target groups in the conversation and break taboos. Community-based approaches and strategies have been also implemented in RNW Media's work, such as peer support interventions in closed social media spaces. For example, in a campaign on gender-based violence conducted by UNFPA Libya, we saw significantly higher female engagement rates, despite the topic being deeply taboo. This could only be achieved with the use of gender- and culture-sensitive content and strategies.

## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON VISIBILITY OF SOCIAL MEDIA INTERVENTIONS

In addition to the examples highlighted in the study, **RNW Media is also engaged with the role of artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms and how they influence the visibility of social media interventions.** RNW Media's findings point to the disruptive role of AI algorithms in shaping online content. Tech giants use AI to define algorithms that can help them moderate online content. These content moderation strategies were initially used to manage the flow of information and protect online users against exposure to dis-information, cyber-violence and other forms of online adversities. However, our evidence shows that social norms are deeply embedded in AI algorithms making them at times biased in moderating content online. This results in undesired content censorships, especially related to women and LGBTQI+ communities, and therefore, this censorship limits their access to reliable information on important topics, such as on their sexual and reproductive health and rights. As previously mentioned, to counter this, RNW Media uses social advertising to reach specific target groups, stimulate engagement and influence the direction of it.



## NORMS-SHIFTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND RNW MEDIA'S WORK

RNW Media co-creates digital media solutions with changemakers to contribute to a world in which young people in all their diversity can confidently claim their rights, and drive social change. Through our collaboration with changemakers, young people get the information they need to make informed decisions. Social change<sup>2</sup> is our end game and human rights relevant to young people are our compass. We understand digital media and how young people use it. **Our goal is that by 2030, through digital media, one billion young people can make informed decisions, advance their rights, and affect society.**

RNW Media relies on different social media intervention approaches (digital media and learning solutions) at different levels as demonstrated in the above examples. RNW Media uses social media to engage with people at multiple levels, seeks community-level change on open social media and uses closed social media to create safe spaces for critical reflection (Norms-shifting on Social Media, p.25).

The study shares a number of ways by which social media can be leveraged to enhance and complement norms shifting. Our contribution to norms shifting, is connected to the 9 interventions identified by the research<sup>3</sup>:

1. Using social media to engage with people at multiple levels
2. Seeking community-level change on open social media
3. Using closed social media to create safe spaces for critical reflection
4. Community-based approaches for organized diffusion
5. Rooting the issue within communities' value systems
6. Social listening to identify misperceptions around harmful behaviours
7. Confronting power imbalances
8. Creating positive new norms
9. Accurately assessing norms

<sup>2</sup> We understand social change as changes in attitudes, behaviours, social norms, and policy  
<sup>3</sup> <https://www.irh.org/resource-library/social-media-landscaping/> Page 25-26

