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Social Networking Tools in the Modern Era of Human Rights Protection

Odessa Balumbu, Richard Fazio, Mera Geis, and Michael Karsy

Where after all do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home - so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any map of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.

Remarks by Eleanor Roosevelt at the United Nations, March 27, 1958¹

The technological advances employed during each major period of historical social change, whether it be the printing press or internet, have been at the forefront of organizing and fostering activism. From the drive of Eleanor Roosevelt in the passage of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10th, 1948, to the modern creation of online blogs and social networks championing a particular social cause, the field of human rights protection has undergone vast change. Modern technologies have only supplemented the unremitting passion and drive that encourages social movements to improve the human condition worldwide.

Social networks have become a mainstay used for an enormous variety of interest groups in the promotion of an ever increasing number of causes. Websites like Facebook, Myspace, LinkedIn, and Wayn have grown from solely social networks used to connect individuals to becoming tools used to raise awareness, organize activism and create a permanent constituency devoted to a particular cause.^{2,3,4} In fact, specific applications have been designed and marketed for these networks to allow any user to raise funds for their favorite non-profit organization.⁵ Other flavors of networking also exist, such as microblogging through Twitter, which allows individuals to rapidly dispatch very short messages to many others and has been successfully utilized in a variety of recent, real world cases.⁶ Social bookmarking, such as Delicious, Stumbleupon, and Reddit, allows individuals to quickly generate a public bookmark of websites geared towards any theme, thus being able to focus attention across the enormity of the web onto humanitarian issues and causes. Many other forms of social medial tools exist, including video-sharing (YouTube), photo-sharing (Flickr), podcasting (Blog Talk Radio), mapping (Google Maps), social voting (Digg), livestreaming (Friendfeed), wikis (Wikipedia), and virtual worlds (Second Life), all with various capabilities and untapped potential.⁷

Numerous organizations representing different platforms, from political parties and biomedical research foundations to humanitarian agencies, utilize social networking tools to promote their cause. A website such as Facebook boasts over 400 million members globally and serves as the largest social networking medium in the North America and Europe.⁸ It is unclear how many distinct social causes exist within Facebook, but their impact on grassroots organization and fundraising has been importantly cited in political campaigning and voting patterns.^{9,10} Despite the wide range of online tools for social networking, most large-scale organizations (e.g. Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation, Michael J. Fox Foundation, Bill & Melinda

Gates Foundation) arguably utilize only a limited portion of available online resources. These mostly include tools to allow individuals to send general online petitions to congressmen, donate to the foundation or passively follow the activities of the organization. Furthermore, despite the immense potential of social networking tools in the biomedical sphere, most discussions involve the ethics of such tools and their misuses, such as medical students posting unprofessional content on social sites.^{11,12,13,14} Instead, many grassroots organizations and humanitarian agencies (e.g. Genocide Intervention Network, STAND, Amnesty International) seem to have utilized the capabilities of online networking tools most effectively towards their respective causes. These groups have generated tools to allow for local, self-organization in an effective way.

One of the first cases of online social networking arose serendipitously around U.S. citizen Eric Volz.¹⁵ In 2006, Volz was falsely accused and imprisoned in Nicaragua under doctored charges of rape and murder.¹⁶ Working in Nicaragua as the editor of the magazine *El Puente*, Volz was prosecuted under suspicious circumstances. Although eye-witness accounts, cell phone usage, and credit card receipts placed him two hours from the scene of the crime; nevertheless, the government of Nicaragua proceeded to try him. The cause of his ordeal was later attributed to a strained geopolitical situation between Nicaragua and the U.S., in which Volz was entangled¹⁵. During Volz's one-year ordeal, a website was created from his mother's living room simply as a way to keep friends and family informed of his condition.¹⁷ A phenomenal world-wide movement emerged where the website received on average 140,000 visits a month with many asking how they could help¹⁵. A Spanish version of the site was also created.¹⁸ These websites helped to organized numerous telephone calls to the U.S. State Department which implemented screening to direct calls to the Nicaraguan embassy and website, eventually resulting in a crash of the embassy webserver at one point. Volz's ordeal was described in a video narrative posted on Youtube, the first cited event where the site was used to champion a human rights cause as oppose to solely entertainment^{15,19}. In addition, this video also resulted in a propagandized video placed on the site by the Nicaraguan government vilifying Volz.²⁰ In fact, the story of Volz's online support led to mainstream media stories on this situation, helping to garner further support and eventually aiding in Volz's release and deportation from Nicaragua.²¹ Currently, the site is now used to generate support for other human rights abuses in Nicaragua and elsewhere.

The Volz case highlights the first self-organized social movement supported by online tools. The power and widespread reach of social networking tools was illustrated quite clearly. However, despite the great benefit of an online medium to support his cause, Volz cites several examples where social networking acted detrimentally to his case in an unexpected way. The increasing publicity of Volz's court case resulted in the case becoming extremely politicized and perilous in Nicaragua for any judge to overturn the decision. Furthermore, the Nicaraguan government saw Volz as a more valuable bargaining chip when negotiating with the U.S. on diplomatic and trade issues¹⁵. Misinterpretation of information generated from Volz's site, Youtube video and online following was propagandized by the Nicaraguan media to vilify him often as wealthy American extorting the Nicaraguan justice system^{20,22}. Additionally, during multiple instances throughout the ordeal, the Volz's family was extorted by various individuals threatening his life in exchange for money. In spite of these drawbacks, Volz still tours the country supporting the power of online social networks in organizing individuals towards a common

goal and using his site to raise awareness of ongoing human rights abuses in Nicaragua¹⁵.

One of the most creative organizations to utilize the collective power of the internet and social networking to advocate for humanitarian issues has been the Genocide Intervention Network (GI-Net). Formed in 2005 by Mark Hanis, a descendent of Holocaust survivors, GI-Net was designed to create a permanent anti-genocide constituency which could rapidly be mobilized.²³ Two key lessons Hanis learned from elder Holocaust survivors during his upbringing were to never forget and never let such a situation happen again¹⁵. GI-Net has been involved in a variety of activities through their website, including the creation of advocacy and divestment tools, and mobilizing constituents.

Research by GI-Net in collaboration with genocide scholars have identified eight ongoing areas of genocide or ethnic cleansing occurring globally, namely Iraq, Sudan, Chad, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Sri Lanka and Burma.²⁴ Educational tools remove any excuse for not knowing about genocide but beg the question: how can genocide still occur despite better global awareness? One possibility is that there is zero political cost to an absent Congressional vote against genocide. In response to this, GI-Net created Congressional report cards depending on how Congressmen voted for anti-genocide legislation.^{25,26} The effect on Congress was dramatic and effective. Multiple members of Congress called immediately after the formation of the webtool and in response to a deluge of phone calls and e-mails from constituents, to inquire about how to improve their scores¹⁹. Some wrote op-ed pieces in their constituent's districts.²⁷ The combined effort greatly improved the awareness of Congressmen and the public about the ongoing genocide. In addition, the lobbying was important in the passage of a variety of legislation to protect the people of Darfur, including the Sudan Divestment and Accountability Act signed into law in December 2007.^{28,29} In response to improving interaction with Congressmen during the passage of bills, GI-Net helped to establish the genocide hotline (1-800-GENOCIDE) where constituents could call, enter their zip code and automatically be transferred to the White House, their senators or representatives.³⁰ While Hanis states that GI-Net has been an important tool towards mobilizing activists in genocide intervention, he stresses that personal interaction with Congressmen still remains a key method of supporting one's cause. These tools demonstrated the capability of online networks to foster rapid and widespread mobilization of constituents in order to allow individuals to collectively increase the power of their voice.

In addition to advocacy, GI-Net and its student wing Student Anti-Genocide Coalition (STAND) have helped to organize targeted divestment against companies that do business in Sudan, which supports the ongoing genocide. While U.S. businesses are not allowed to operate in Sudan due to anti-terrorism legislation, stocks of companies operating in Sudan are exchanged on the U.S. stock exchange and can receive investments from mutual fund companies. GI-Net and its collaborators helped to identify and publish an online list of companies involved in investments which funneled money into military equipment purchases while avoiding companies that were involved in infrastructure development and delivery of aid to the people of Darfur. Next, GI-Net and STAND provided online resources which encouraged the self-formation of student and grassroots groups that lobbied states, cities and universities to divest their pensions and funds from these companies. Harvard University and the UC Regents became two of the most publicized cases where divestment was successfully accomplished, although it was by no means simple.^{31,32,33,34}

Grassroots movements and student groups have also been able to expand from lobbying to broad fundraising campaigns using social networking tools. STAND helped to create and organize the STANDFast Project through its website and student chapters, resulting in annual fundraising efforts by groups all over the country. These efforts have helped to raise more than \$500,000 over the course of three years.³⁵ In fact, the Genocide Awareness and Prevention Group (GAAP) at New York Medical College (NYMC) has been involved in these efforts and has helped raise over \$1500 in the past two years.³⁶ Recently, a new tool has been developed by social entrepreneurs involving the ability to donate via text messaging to a number of registered charities.³⁷ Texting PROTECT to 90999 allows any person to donate \$5 to GI-Net directly from their cell phone bill.³⁸ In fact, this tool alone was cited for raising over \$25 million dollars for Haiti after its 2010 earthquake.³⁹ These and other tools have helped to organize the fundraising of many small groups of interested people over a large area, which otherwise would have been impossible.

New technology has rapidly changed the way that human rights issues are addressed both locally and globally. The benefits and negative effects of social networking on human rights protection and other important issues were not anticipated. In today's era, where thousands of e-mails or Tweets can be fired off regarding one cause or another, there is an increased immunity to the impact of social networking due to the large volume of messages which can be sent on a daily basis. Despite this, online networking continues to play an important and developing role in social issues. These tools serve to supplement rather than replace organization on a face-to-face level. Social networking has allowed for greater participation on a variety of issues and has forever changed the landscape in the fight for social causes.

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