Sharing Human Rights

If you were to get onto to Twitter right now and type “human rights violations” into the search bar, your search would return thousands of results. But between the United Nations addresses and the NGO pleas for help, you would find the heart of the matter. Right there on Twitter, accessible to anyone and everyone, are countless videos that capture real life human rights violations. Anyone can find a video of child soldiers asleep with guns pointed at them in Burundi, or Kashmiri citizens being abused in their own country, or police attacking protestors in Morocco. Anyone with the internet can see, in full and uncensored, videos of human rights violations in Iran, Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, Tibet, Manila, India, Colombia, Egypt. The list goes on and on. As shocking as this is at times to come across gruesome and disturbing videos on social media, its advantages are enumerable. The pits and downfalls of spreading information about human rights violations are undoubtedly present, however the awareness that social media creates on human rights’ behalf is a huge advantage for anyone who believes that these rights are important and necessary.

Before this goes any further, it is important to understand social media and its nature. Social media is, “forms of electronic communication (as Web sites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (as videos),” (“Definition of
Sites that are considered social media include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Vine, and even the professional site LinkedIn. Of the over 7 billion people on earth, roughly 2 billion of those people have some sort of social media account, with about 1.7 billion of those peoples’ accounts being active. With around 288 million Twitter accounts and nearly 1.4 billion Facebook accounts, it is safe to say that a good chunk of the world is getting information from social media on a daily basis (Bullas). It is well known that most information floating around on social media comes from regular people and not journalists or politicians (though they contribute a lot). Furthermore it is accepted a lot of information is false, misleading, old, or partial. This being said, social media is a crucial part of today’s society and a major way that information moves across the world. Because of social media, information is moving faster and farther than it ever has before and it has effectively transformed the way people understand and react to current events.

Human rights news is no exception to the workings of social media. It has been a crucial part of spreading awareness and helping to oversee the issues at hand, however one of the biggest issues is that social media has made is that suddenly these issues are omnipresent. As stated earlier, on a single social media site the results for a simple “human rights violations” search are in the thousands. The question that comes to mind here is “how is this a problem?” The truth is that social media gives people a way to get involved in issues in the least committed way possible. He argues that “...Facebook activism succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice,” (Gladwell). The biggest revolutions in history all happened without social
media. From Martin Luther King, Jr. to Nelson Mandela to Mahatma Gandhi, these were real people making real sacrifices in the face of real strife. Now what we see is real strife and minimal sacrifice. In the New Yorker, Malcolm Gladwell points out how easy it is to share something on social media and never make a real commitment to it. However this leads serious activists to believe that they have real backing. Often, the reality is that real world changing movements rely heavily on high-risk action; the kind of action that results from strong relationships between people and between people and situations. Social media can only promote weak relationships, which results in low-risk activism (Gladwell). Sharing stories on social media does not have the same effect of real people making real strides towards balanced human rights.

Furthermore, there is suddenly so much information floating around on the internet that people around the world have a new kind of freedom. This is the freedom to pick and choose; the freedom to go through general information and make decisions on what they think is the most important, or more likely, most interesting. Moreover, we often find that there is a bit of a numbing that people feel towards serious violations due to the sheer number of times they have heard about it or seen it. The shock factor disappears and with it goes the feeling of needing to act. Some of the most significant examples in recent memory would be Darfur and Kony. These were both incredibly, for lack of a better word, popular issues to get involved with. However, no amount of Facebook posts or inspirational videos could stop these movements from slowing down over time. Another example would be the commercials on television that depict starving children, where organizations ask for a small donation in order to keep starving kids alive. Sure, tons of people donate $.09 a month, but after a while those commercials
came on less often. Furthermore popular television shows, like Saturday Night Live, even made fun of them. People became desensitized to the situations they were seeing. The growing number of suffering people and the waning attention spans of non-suffering people are a bad combination. Social media in a way provides so many problems that people often find themselves moving on to the next issue before their first one was solved.

Regardless of the negative impact of social media, the use of social media is optimal for groups who work to actually protect rights. Perhaps the use of social media is less helpful for the masses, however for activist groups and governments and other organizations it can be a very useful tool. Human Rights groups such as Amnesty International report that it is very useful to monitor situations going on in the world (Koettl). Obviously these groups can not be everywhere at all times and they often have the advantage of seeing videos or reading stories posted across the globe from people who were really there. Especially there are places where they cannot be or it is difficult to get information from. In places like North Korea, information faces serious difficulty in getting across the border. A video or post could be crucial for making strides in human rights. Or in dangerous places like war zones, social media can transform a war. Also important, social media has helped to uncover misinformation to groups (Koettl). Misleading and incorrect information is spread all over the internet, and for human rights groups a video that is filmed from someone’s phone that was there can really impact the moves that they make. Social media is a cheap and effective way to communicate across the world. Clay Shirky, a renowned writer and consultant, argues that social media should be a tool for human rights activism rather than replacing
human rights activism. It is not a form of activism itself, but rather a way to communicate between those who participate in activism or those who could potential participate in activism. He says that, “In fact, the adoption of these tools... as a way to coordinate and document real-world action is so ubiquitous that it will probably be a part of all future political movements,” (Shirky). These media outlets are incredibly important for getting information across the world and the likelihood that that will change in the foreseeable future is very slim. People are connected to each other and other peoples' interests today by the touch of a button.

This being said, the usefulness of this may at first seem a little far fetched. What good is it that people are connected to each other, that people can see the problems across the globe if they do not plan to do anything actually helpful? Social media is incredibly important for educating people. In a lot of places that human rights violations are occurring, people do not have a chance to do research on human rights or voice their opinions (thus the human rights violations). Things like blogs from real people or statements from the UN can be very informative and moving and can end up being the entire story behind a human rights movement. A woman named Rosebell Kagumire started a blog that became a huge part of the women’s rights movement in Uganda (“Using Social Media to Promote Human Rights”). Information like this reaches the corners of the globe and regular people and groups like Human Rights Watch, and even other governments, take notice and often times take action. On the subject, Kwon Eun Kyoung, the editor of the online newspaper “The Daily NK”, said, “It is important to encourage individuals in liberal countries to educate themselves on the problems and human rights violations happening in heavily censored countries to help make a
difference,” (“Using Social Media to Promote Human Rights”). These kinds of movements are often times the only hope that people in highly oppressive countries have. People in places that are heavily censored often face very serious consequences for speaking and acting out in their own self-interest. More serious violations of human rights are often so far from freer states that it can often be lost on people who are able to exercise their human rights. Social media brings the truth into the homes, directly onto the laps, of people who have the freedom to speak out on oppressed peoples’ behalf.

Moreover, social media can be used as a tool not only for people to communicate their issues across the world, but it can also be used as a tool for people who are the victims of human rights violations to challenge their oppressors. The journalist Courtney Radsch says that cyber activism can be very powerful. Her piece from the Huffington Post covers a meeting between women who suffered severe human rights violations in Egypt. One woman used social media to talk about the time she was sent for jail for driving a car though there is no law against it and started the #women2drive campaign to fight the cultural and non-legal ban on women driving. Another Egyptian woman talked about how she posted nude photos of herself online in order to raise awareness for freedom of expression. Radsch states that, “The convergence of networked media and street protests have helped women shatter cultural taboos,” (Radsch). This is true for so many different places and movements. Social media creates an outlet for the oppressed to challenge governments and authoritarian groups in an environment where these things are not only accepted, but also encouraged.

Perhaps that there is some dissonance between what Gladwell is saying and what other pro-social media people might think. However it seems as though what Gladwell
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says can be seen as completely compatible with what people like Radsch and Shirky say.

In many ways, social media creates a way for people to sit around and seem interested in helping solve problems of grave importance in terms of human rights issues without actually doing anything useful. However, one cannot help but wonder what would be the consequence of having no social media? Would it actually be helpful to not have a way to get information to ordinary people across the globe? Would that somehow actually create an environment in which people actually act on human rights violations rather than just Tweet about it? I suppose, in the way that Gladwell writes about it, the answer is potentially yes. But Gladwell writes about human rights on a national and local level, which was the priority back in the 1960s, however today people are part of a global community. The truth is that Gladwell is right, most people will see these stories of atrocities and never do anything but hit the “share” button. However, Shirky claims that this form of communication is crucial to movements. It sheds light on situations that are otherwise swept under the rug. And as Courtney Radsch set off to point out, it also allows people to have direct communication with people of authority. People are able to make their points clearly and make an impact almost immediately. It seems as though Gladwell write with the intention that everyone in the world should be a human rights activist. This simply is not true. Would it be ideal? Of course. Is it necessary? No. However it is very important for everyone to be aware that these things are happening, day in and day out, every hour and every minute. If there is one thing that social media does well, it is emphasize the never-ending cycles of just about everything. The world just needs people to have a general understanding of human rights, and to in someway support them, even if they do not get off the couch to do so. Social media is the absolute
perfect way for these things to work. Whenever activists or citizens of a poor and suffering country reach out, people are waiting to listen and respond. They are not alone, and they so often have the backing of so many people who are on social media.

The next time you get onto Facebook or Twitter or whatever social media site you like, perhaps you should take a second to search “human rights violations”. What you find might be shocking or offensive. However, if you look harder you will probably find many, many people who are speaking out in favor of human rights. These people are the ones who are providing a platform for people to fight for what they deserve. So yes, social media has caused issues in so many ways and on so many levels that it is hard at time to give yourself a reason not to delete every account you have. But the reasons you keep it are many. It keeps you connected and aware. And in terms of human rights, social media can not only provide support, but also save a movement. Human rights are ever evolving, and social media has been very advantageous in that evolution over the past decade.
Works Cited

Bullas, Jeff. "33 Social Media Facts and Statistics You Should Know in 2015."


