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Major Essay #2

From White Picket Signs to 140 Characters: Activism is as Strong as Ever

Neda Agha-Soltan, a 26-year-old housewife who had dreams of becoming a musician, was killed June 20, 2009, by a bullet from an Iranian pro-government militiaman. Without social media, we may not have even known that Neda Agha-Soltan lived in Iran, let alone died for her dreams of freedom for her country. Her death was captured on video by several onlookers and was directly uploaded to YouTube. The videos instantly went viral, being posted on thousands of blogs and receiving millions of views. The hash tag “#neda” became the top trending topic on twitter that day. The video was not reported or recognized by the Iranian media, instead first appearing on an international news station (Brandzel). *Times Magazine* writer Krista Mahr considered it “the most widely witnessed death in human history” (par. 1). Almost immediately, Neda Agha-Soltan became the symbol of the opposition movement against President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's widely disputed re-election. In the days and weeks that followed, Agha-Soltan's name became a battle cry for Iranian protesters, her face a representation of the thousands of people who agonized under the government's oppression. Former US national-security adviser Mark Pfeifle called for Twitter to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize when he wrote, “Without Twitter the people of Iran would not have felt empowered and confident to stand up for freedom and democracy” (par. 5).

Recognized author Malcolm Gladwell considers Pfeifle's claim "puzzling" (315). He argues that social media had minimal effect on the revolution in Iran. In fact, in his article "Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted," Gladwell argues that organization through social media plays no meaningful function in influencing progressive social change. Gladwell claims that social media only "makes it easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact" (327). While I agree with Gladwell's statement that social media alone cannot terminate the injustices in our country, I disagree with the assertion that social media has no role in igniting social change. The Internet promises its users a wealth of information easily accessible at their fingertips, and the opportunity to collaborate and share their opinions with whomever they wish. Social media has already shown that it can rally people together to promote change and, with its growing popularity, has the potential to be the main platform for kindling larger scale transformations in the future.

Gladwell proclaims that social change must include "high-risk activism" (320). He reflects on the Greensboro sit-ins during the civil rights era and how the four students who provoked the sit-ins were all close friends, which he calls "strong-tie" (318) connections. Gladwell continues by stressing, "the platforms of social media are built around weak ties." Twitter, says Gladwell, is "a way of following (or being followed by) people you may never have met" and Facebook is a tool for "efficiently managing your acquaintances" (319). While this statement is true, Gladwell dismisses the fact that Facebook gives users a way to communicate with their "strong-tie" friends faster than ever before.

Take, for example, the story of Michelle Lauto, an 18-year-old student from

Bergen County, New Jersey. She hoped to battle New Jersey Governor Chris Christie's proposal for budget cuts to the state's education system through social media. "The youth who will be effected by all these cuts need to rise up and do something," Michelle wrote on Facebook. Michelle posted a Facebook event calling for a student protest on April 27, 2012 during school hours. She invited all of her friends and by the night before the scheduled protest, the group had grown to 16,000 people. School officials tried to intimidate the protesters by threatening suspension and even criminal charges. The students were not deterred. On the morning of April 27, thousands of teens took to the streets across the state of New Jersey with signs such as "We Love Our Teachers!" and "We are the Future!". "All I did was make a Facebook page," Michelle told the New York Times. "Anyone who has an opinion could do that and have their opinion heard" (Maplewood).

Michelle and the students of New Jersey public schools provide a prime example of social media's power to rally people around a cause. It shows that "high-risk activism" *can* be created online. Michelle and her peers were threatened with harsh punishments, yet the reprimands did not discourage them from fighting for their goal. Facebook cannot replace real friendship, true, but it provides a channel for already existing strong-tie connections to communicate ideas and opinions much more efficiently than ever before.

Gladwell's second main argument is that the Internet cannot establish hierarchical organization. In his article, he decrees "Facebook and the like are tools for building *networks*, which are the opposite, in structure and character, of hierarchies." (322).

Gladwell correctly points out that social media can create these types of connections, but is wrong in stating that these "networks" are the way in which people organize online. In

fact, social media campaigns resemble more of a hierarchy than anything else. Social analysts Brendan Smith and Jeremy Brecher provided a good definition of hierarchies in their article “Is Social Networking Useless for Social Change?” They argue, “Hierarchies -- armies and corporations, for example -- are based on a centralized control structure that plans coordinated activity and then commands subordinates to implement their assigned pieces of it” (par. 10). Facebook-organized groups work similarly to this. There are central controllers (admin and page creators) who post propaganda and organize events for the subordinates (followers) to read and attend. The one difference between Facebook-organized groups and hierarchical-organized groups is that orders are not necessarily forced upon the members. Gladwell’s unfamiliarity with how Facebook groups function questions his knowledge on the inner workings of the social media site.

Another confusing part of Gladwell’s argument about hierarchical organization is that his lead example, the Greensboro sit-in, was not formed in a hierarchical way. The four students were not leaders of any specific group or movement. They decided only a month before that they would sit-in at the restaurant and did not tell anyone else. Once word was spread what the four had done, students around the area wanted to join them. This appears to be more of a “network” approach than a “hierarchical” approach, contradicting Gladwell’s argument.

People who share Gladwell’s opinion on social media’s role in activism may point to the fact that though social media has accounted for small, local activism, it hasn’t conquered the large-scale issues our society face today. Though I can admit that social media hasn’t caused historic change, such as revoking the Jim Crow laws of the South during the 60’s, it is important to remember that social media is still so new to us.

Twitter, after all, has only been around for six years. We do not fully know what progress in activism will come in the future. It is absurd to think that social and political engagement in the twenty-first century will look the same as it did in the 1960's. With information being shared constantly and news being reported instantly, journalism is entirely different now than it was many years ago. Social media may very well be the future platform to best promote a cause, whether political or otherwise.

Prominent rapper Macklemore saw the potential social media could play in fighting for a cause when he released the music video for his song "Same Love," a song that openly supports gay marriage. The emotionally moving video was created to raise awareness of a Washington state law that would ban gay marriages. He asks the viewers to "Vote for Love" and provides a link to "Music for Marriage Equality" home page. The video immediately spread like wildfire across the web. Though it was created only one month ago, it already has 6.5 million views. People seem to be supporting the message too, as the comments on the video are filled with people who write that they were moved by the video, some even claiming they were brought to tears. It is safe to say that the goal of raising awareness was met, as Washington voters rejected the law this past November.

It is evident that social media can play a vital role in increasing activism. The future seems to be heading towards a more virtual world. Activism will most likely conform as well. We are already seeing major evidence that supports this idea: even the political leaders of our country felt that social media could have helped them get elected. President Barack Obama and Governor Mitt Romney used social media as a way to share their views during their respective campaigns. Every day, a new video on YouTube or a new message on their individual Facebook page was posted with hopes of swinging

undecided voters. They know that social media is the new and effective way to get their messages out to supporters. Look back at the 2004 presidential election and you will find no Facebook pages or twitter accounts made for George Bush or John Kerry. How fast we have made progress through the Internet is astounding. That is why it is a premature statement to say that social media will not have a significant impact in creating social and political progress. We have already seen it used as a platform to spread messages on important issues such as education and same-sex marriages: it may have even helped President Obama sway undecided votes to reelect him as the President of the United States.

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