When social media and social justice intersect

In 1962 Michael Harrington discussed poverty in the United States saying, "That the poor are invisible is one of the most important things about them. They are not simply neglected, and forgotten...What is much worse, they are not seen."

In one way Harrington's words are as true today as it were in 62, -- hunger, homelessness, and poverty are far from our traditional mainstream news and rarely on the top of our minds. Today, our modern media focus on consumption rather than deprivation. We focus more on celebrity hook ups that can be broken down to the three-simple minute rather than on issues that are complex and long term. Just as in 1962-injustices remain exotically distant. But – for the first time – the human rights violations and injustices are no longer invisible – each one of us in this room has instant access to information about virtually every issue that exists today. All we need is the laptops in our book-backs and smart phones in our pockets. In just a few minutes on social media sites one can link to statistics to eyewitness accounts, and learn about genocide, homelessness, joblessness, instability, poverty, and famine.


PHOTO: Salim, 28, rejoices with his baby son after finally getting treatment for his TB. #worldTBday http://ow.ly/9QwGF

More than 13 million people's lives are still being threatened due to drought in the Horn of Africa #realhungergames

Today – one no longer needs to be a Peace Corps member and travel to Somalia to find hunger or South Africa to learn about HIV. Social media sites such as facebook bring more to our finger tips than the initial “liking friends photographs” or “following Justin
Biber’s every move” It brings the opportunity to learn and know how people are living around the world and more importantly – about what injustices they maybe facing. With knowledge and awareness comes the responsibility to engage as citizens both locally and globally – and social media allow us to achieve that. Tonight I will argue that though social media may initially seem extremely powerful – it is in fact extremely limited.

**Social media is powerful.**

All together, people spend over 700 billion minutes per month on Facebook. Facebook is now used by 1 in every 13 people on earth, with over 250 million of them who log in every day. Guilty. In 20 minutes on Facebook over 1 million links are shared – some of which are about news and social issues. Ideas are being shared through a global community – and access to information regarding social justice issues is no longer a really valid argument. Facebook and Twitter are effective at getting the word out about information simply because of the large number of individuals they are able to reach – and quickly.

What do I mean by quickly? The example I will be discussing largely tonight is the most “viral” video that has ever been on the Internet. The 30-minute film called KONY2012 is about a gorilla leader – Joseph Kony. More than 30 Million viewers around the globe watched the video within 48 hours. Some go as far as to refer to social media as the “21st century news source.” I agree. In the realm of journalism. there has been a clear decline of printed news while there has been a rise of news found online specifically through social media. According to the 2011 State of News Media report by the Pew Research center, only 40% of people get their news from newspapers – compared to 46% that read news online – many of which finding the links on social media. Moreover, a 2012 study found that 1 in 4 individuals regularly get news from social media. Just over
half of the individuals surveyed has found out breaking news stories on these websites. I remember, and I’m sure others in this room do too – that I learned about Michael Jacksons Death through a facebook status – and about the death of Osama bin Landen on my twitter news feed.

Even though Hundreds of thousands of people may read an article in the new York times - over 850 million people have Facebook. And people on facebook are more invested and influenced by what their friends, family, and colleagues are sharing rather than what some faceless journalist or editor deems important. This very fact is powerful. This is why our news currently comes largely from social networking sites. If two friends post the same video – there is a good chance we will watch it. IF a dozen friends post about something – we are definitely going to be interested. I – along of millions of facebook users don’t want be left out. When KONY 2012 was viral – I was at home with limited Internet access. I finally logged onto my facebook a few days in and had over 217 friends that had shared, reposted, and liked the KONY videos. How could I not watch it? Facebook and other social medias are set up to encourage popular links – when users log on to their home page – the most popular links appear on the very top of their news feed. Tonight I will also argue that even though social media lets us reach a lot of people- it remains somewhat ineffective at truly engaging viewers to be a part long lasting social change.

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1. Facebook, twitter, and other sources of social media are simply not as powerful for individual user engagement - users are not truly as engaged with the issues. Issues on social media come and go through fades even though many of the issues are actually long lasting.
2. Social justice issues on social media are often over-simplified and misleading.

I will be using KONY2012 as my prime example – even though others exist. I could have as easily discussed the 99% - Occupy Wall Street movement via social media or the role that facebook and twitter played in the Arab Spring uprising debate last year. I chose KONY because of how recently it occurred, how it was just one video that went viral - and for the sake of time. What is KONY? Kony 2012 is a video that was created and shared by the group Invisible Children, which depicts the story of Joseph Kony, a Ugandan warlord who has forcefully recruited over 30,000 African children into his command over the past 20 years, forcing them to carry out atrocities and in some cases even murder their own parents. Along with the education piece comes a very emotional, persuasive and inspiring plea for everyone across the world to get involved with this Project Kony 2012 to “make Kony famous”, which will (apparently) help us to capture him and bring him to justice.

Users on Facebook, twitter, and other sources of social media are not as truly engaged with the issues – and when they are it is only for a short time. People’s impact is limited when they just use social networks. Facebook and Twitter will never replace voting or marching, but it's a tool to organize; a way to convince your friends to register to vote or be aware of a cause. The problem is that many facebook and twitter users are engaging social justice issues only on the Internet – rather than taking real life action. The worst
part is that Facebook users often feel as though they are involved. By sharing news articles or updating status about social justice issues – some feel as they have done enough - done their part. I once asked a student if they referred to themselves as a human rights advocate – even though their human rights persona was only via Facebook. Their response was “Obviously – I post at least once a week about an issue.” But what about writing to senators – calling congressmen and women – traveling to different countries to bear witness – reading more than a 3 page blog or article – fundraising for a cause – marching in DC?

The KONY example shows how many people simply posted or watched the Youtube video and stopped there. Even though it was viral via Facebook – I heard very few friends talk about it in real life. It is as though – what’s on Facebook walls becomes trapped on the World Wide Web – and is never translated to real life – action.

Temporary fads - The Uganda conflict has been going on for the past 30 years. That is a longer time period than most of us have been alive. Within a few days – the KONY video was the most viral in the history of the Internet. Yet not even 30 days have passed, and not a single one of my 216 friends that originally posted about it are saying a thing about it today. It breaks my heart to know that social justice issues can come and go as quickly as they spread. Looking on Google trends - which analysis google hits on specific subject matter, it is evident that KONY2012 peaked a few days after its release and has significantly declined since.

My second argument tonight is that social media often over simplifies complex social issues in mislead ways. A one page blog, a dozen photos, or even a 30 minute video simply cannot capture the complexity of many international issues. Many of my friends posted that there were “inspired” about the KONY video. I’m sure it was not the content
that fully captured them – rather strong imagery and unique use of music. The problem is that – many do not then go beyond the videos or posts – and research issues. There was some critique of the KONY video, but most was not regarding the content - rather critique of the organization that created it (invisible children).

A Washington and Lee University law professor who has written extensively about child soldiers agrees that the Kony 2012 video unduly simplifies the problem of child soldiering. Mark Drumbl – author of Reimagining Child Soldiers in International Law and Policy, says that focus on Uganda, where there currently are few child soldiers, hampers efforts to prevent child soldiering everywhere. The KONY video extensively discusses child abduction in Uganda. Even though child soldiers are abducted in Uganda, Professor Drumbl argues that worldwide “a majority of child soldiers demonstrate some initiative in coming forward and enlisting in fighting forces.”

The professor goes on to say that the KONY campaign showcases that “ability of social media to omit crucial details, sensationalize and reductively simplify.” Especially for this video – in addition to the horrors by KONY and his followers – the government of Uganda has also been responsible for large human rights abuses. However, in the video – viewers are encouraged to work with Ugandan government.

My point here is that these issues are complex and social media takes away the complexity and presents them in a black and white format. For someone who has academically extensively studied the LRA – in my human rights / human wrongs class – where my asylum seeker was once recruited for LRA – I knew immediately the misrepresented facts in the KONY video – but most of my friends on facebook were simply not aware – and have not thought about the issues critically.
In one way Harrington's words "That the poor are invisible is one of the most important things about them. They are not simply neglected, and forgotten...What is much worse, they are not seen." Is no longer completely true. Organizations like invisible children that launched KONY2012 - work every day to ensure that children across the world are not invisible. A former New York Times reporter DePalma says about social media "That is all part of how advocacy has changed - and our attitudes towards it have changed." The world is changing – ever so quickly – and we grapple with how to stay informed and what to care about. What invisible issues we should make visible. Social media provide enormous advantages for advocates of social justice. Within minutes – meaningful ideas can be shared across the world. However, as I have demonstrated here tonight – social media is limited, and true advocates must push beyond these limitations.