Social Media as a Formidable Force for Change

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The power of social media is hard to dismiss. What once seemed like a trivial way to keep in touch with friends, sharing photos and jokes, has become a force for societal change, shining light on subjects previously unknown, deepening conversations and empowering citizens of the world to unite and effect change in a number of ways. Interestingly, social media as a medium for connecting, organizing and communicating is powering and spreading democracy far better than billions of dollars of aid or war in corners of world very resistant to such change.

**Creating Visibility**

The ability of the Internet, and social media particularly, to bring issues to bear is unique. Consider the still-too-common problem of domestic violence. Though former President Clinton passed the Violence Against Women Act in 1994, and changes have been made, incidents like the recent [Ray Rice video](http://www.cnn.com/2014/09/08/us/ray-rice-new-video/) have made it clear we still have a ways to go.

Enter social media, and the hashtag. The sharing of experiences marked by grassroots campaigns like #WhyIStayed is just one example of the people of the world refusing to sit idly by and let anyone fall into blame-the-victim habits by showing just how many have been affected; how surprising some of those people might be (Meredith Viera); and how resolute and united they are in demanding the attention of those in a position to enact change.

The subtext of every #WhyIStayed, every #YesAllWomen seems to be, “You think this isn’t a widespread problem? Think again.”

**The Evidence is Mounting**

It would be easy to shrug off these campaigns as flashes in the pan, or much ado that comes to nothing in the end, but it wouldn’t be true. These are not isolated incidents, and they’re not just noise. Recent history has given us a number of examples of hashtag campaigns that have led to change. Here are a few:

**#Ferguson** called for awareness of police brutality and the racial divide in Missouri. The story might not have come to many folks’ attention save for the hashtag which caused people to follow events as they unfolded on social media, blogging, sharing and talking about it all.

**#NetNeutrality** continues to bring attention to the fight to keep the Internet free and open, without fast lanes for elite customers who can pay more, resulting in nearly 4 million comments on the open forum established by the FCC to help them decide on proposed Net Neutrality rules.

**#IceBucketChallenge** raised record-breaking funds for the ALSA ($115 million since July 29) thanks to the grassroots awareness campaign which went viral, proving that a bucket of ice water has the means to warm people’s hearts and loosen their purse strings.

**#ArabSpring** [brought attention to protests and unrest in countries from Tunisia to Syria](http://abs.sagepub.com/content/57/7/871.short), uniting those ready to take action in hopes of a new order.

[Muna ~ منى @ArabsUnite](https://twitter.com/ArabsUnite):

*The people were ruled for decades in fear of regimes this year the fear was over taken by hope and dreams of change.. #ArabSpring
10:40 AM - 20 Oct 2011*

**#DelhiGangRape**brought the culture of violence and rape in India into the spotlight, effecting changes in the law and in sexual education in the country. The events also inspired playwright Eve Ensler to start [One Billion Rising](http://www.onebillionrising.org/), a global campaign dedicated to ending violence, and demanding change and justice for women.

While recent occurrences of gang rape in India show the problem is far from solved, **#WakeUpAkhilesh** has become a rallying cry to hold Akhilesh Yadav, the chief minister of the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, accountable to his constituents. The fight for change continues.

**The Benefits of Social Media and Hashtag Unity**
One of the most powerful aspects of social media is that it provides an environment and a medium for people to express themselves independently, and yet find community. This “hashtag unity,” to coin a term, is as real and as powerful as a group of people physically gathered in the same space. It can educate, heal and provoke change by sheer strength of vocal numbers.

And it doesn’t cost a thing. Consider the resources spent on the military, for the sake of bringing peace to war-ravaged countries, while we struggle at home to find funds for health care and education. Then consider that we may have found a better alternative to reform, thanks to this byproduct of Silicon Valley, able to solve some of our most pressing problems using social media.

We’re already impacting the issues of health (from the perspective of terminal diseases like ALS) and overall wellbeing (impossible in an environment of domestic abuse), gender equality, sexual violence, civil rights. These issues being brought to light offer all of us the chance to educate and be educated. Quite unexpectedly, social media has become the strongest tool of democracy at our disposal.

It’s not just noise. *It’s having an effect*. The issues highlighted above each gained exposure through social media, but that exposure inspired people to take action. Those taking action shared their experiences, which were amplified by social networks spreading them in solidarity. There is action, attention and further action. So it’s a virtuous circle.

**Taking it Further — Dos and Don’ts**
So what do we do next? What are our roles as nonprofits, as members of society?

I think it’s important for us to seek out and boost the causes that mean the most to us. To shine that spotlight, to educate and be part of that hashtag unity. We should take action where we can, but sometimes simply guiding the action of others is enough. “Share this story, sign this petition, recognize that this is happening and be part of the chorus of voices demanding change.”

It’s not always in our power to do much more than that, but when enough of us band together, we can convince those with the power to create solutions to act.

There are caveats, of course (just as fire can keep you warm and cook your meals, it can also burn your house down). Social media can be a community, or it can be a mob — as community leaders, let’s be sure we encourage our constituents to use it responsibly.

For example, we would never want to encourage or promote any acts of vigilante justice. We lose our power when we give in to revenge, not to mention losing credibility. These social media campaigns offer a self-correcting democratic method, where the story is no longer controlled by only a few people, or people trying to keep things quiet. Our job as citizens is to press for solutions by the proper authorities — not to take things into our own hands.

Social media alone will not solve all the world’s problems — I know that. But without necessarily meaning to it has served as a very powerful tool in imparting democracy, education and justice, both at home and abroad.

So what if we put our heads together and did attempt to thoughtfully harness this power? Think of the ways we could educate each other. Think of the ways we could empower people to own their own activism, to truly be the change they wish to see. We can incorporate government and educate via these platforms, but we can also go beyond government, training others in advocacy and activism so they can help themselves.

Social media put an oft-ignored disease into the collective consciousness. It got laws changed in India. Yes, there is more to do — always. But as more of us take on the burden, the lighter it will be.