

Spring 2012

# I Am Human Rights: Leveraging Social Media Identity Recasting for Human Rights Acceptance in the United States

Noah Echols  
*Kennesaw State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/etd>



Part of the [Communication Technology and New Media Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Echols, Noah, "I Am Human Rights: Leveraging Social Media Identity Recasting for Human Rights Acceptance in the United States" (2012). *Dissertations, Theses and Capstone Projects*. Paper 508.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu).

I AM HUMAN RIGHTS: LEVERAGING SOCIAL MEDIA IDENTITY RECASTING  
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS ACCEPTANCE IN THE UNITED STATES

A Thesis Presented to The Academic Faculty

By

Noah Echols

In Partial Fulfillment Of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in American  
Studies

Kennesaw State University  
May 2012

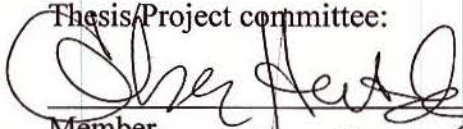
College of Humanities & Social Sciences  
Kennesaw State University  
Kennesaw, Georgia  
Certificate of Approval


This is to certify that the thesis/project of

Noah Echols

has been approved by the committee for the capstone requirement for the  
Master of Arts in American Studies  
in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Thesis/Project committee:

  
Member

  
Member

4/24/12  
Date

4-24-12  
Date

Original filed in MAST office.

## **Acknowledgements**

Foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my thesis advisors, Drs. Kenneth Maffitt and Amber Hutchins, for their constant support, for their patience, motivation, enthusiasm, and immense knowledge.

I would also like to thank two other professors who had a profound impact on my education. Without the subtle pushing of Dr. LeeAnn Lands along with the inspiration I got from her community involvement, it would have been difficult to get through this program. Similarly, Dr. Laura Dabundo's encouragement to pursue creative perspectives drove me into the pursuit of the answers that formed the basis of this project.

Lastly, I would like to thank my loving wife for supporting me through frustrations and encouraging me to keep going. Indeed, I could not have done this without her.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	4
Introduction .....	5
Leveraging Identity Recasting .....	8
A Case for Human Rights Social Media .....	13
Methodology .....	20
Definition of Tools .....	21
For-profit Brands Data .....	24
Apple .....	24
Starbucks .....	27
Disney .....	34
Human Rights NGO Data .....	36
Amnesty International .....	38
Human Rights Watch .....	45
Conclusion .....	48
Bibliography .....	52

## **Abstract**

People have changed. Citizens have been transformed by the constant barrage of corporate messaging into consumers and through technology from consumers to prosumers. This identity change is recognized and leveraged by for-profit brands, but has been largely ignored by non-profit human rights NGOs. While brands have become embedded in American culture, human rights have not, despite most Americans willingness to fight for those ideals, and this has happened simply because of a glaring disconnect between the NGO and the prosumer.

I argue that human rights NGOs must first recognize that citizens have changed and alter movement building strategies to target this new digital prosumer. Specifically, I examine how individuals perform for assumed audiences through social media in a process I call identity recasting, where carefully considered, idealized versions of their selves are presented. I show how three for-profit brands have successfully leveraged this recasting process for their advantage, giving prosumers the opportunity to interact with the brand and its advertising in a way that plays into their performances resulting in conversions. I then show how two human rights NGOs are leveraging social media in ways that do not recognize this change in American identity, concluding with a recommendation that human rights NGOs radically restructure their organizations to engage the 21<sup>st</sup> Century prosumer or risk becoming obsolete.

## Introduction

Continuing its efforts to find Joseph Kony and bring him to justice for the atrocities he has committed in Central Africa, Invisible Children launched a social media campaign in March of 2012.<sup>1</sup> Relying heavily on a well-produced 30-minute video that was uploaded to YouTube.com and Vimeo.com, Invisible Children presented the history of Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army. According to the website, Kony has "abducted more than 30,000 children in Central Africa and forced them to be child soldiers" in the LRA.<sup>2</sup> In addition to clearly explaining the atrocities of Kony, the video had a clear call to action – make Kony famous so that world leaders could not ignore him. The goal was to inspire viewers to purchase kits that contained stickers, posters, bracelets, and t-shirts that would be displayed in every city around the world by April 20, 2012.

The video was a huge success. In under a month, it had accumulated a combined 100 million views from around the world, and with that attention, more scrutiny than the organization was prepared to handle. The Internet erupted in a storm of debate over everything from the ethics of Invisible Children's financial structure to the video's overly simplified explanation of the conflict. Because of the controversy, the campaign was featured in newspapers and nightly news television programs; it was on blogs, vlogs, and dominated Twitter discussions.

Despite the unexpected result of the campaign, however, it was extremely well executed. Invisible Children understood film and narrative, demonstrated by the entertaining format of the viral video. It intentionally used a young boy as a central figure

---

<sup>1</sup> "Home." Invisible Children | Kony2012," accessed April 21, 2012, <http://www.kony2012.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> "Customer Service," Invisible Children, accessed April 21, 2012, <http://invisiblechildrenstore.myshopify.com/pages/customer-service>.

in the documentary in an effort to explain the history of the LRA in simple terms that are easily digestible, and (presumably) to give a relatable face of innocence to viewers who were learning about the abduction of children. It launched the campaign with all of the pieces of a strong campaign in place. It presented a very clear call to action that gave viewers options for involvement according to their willingness or means; they could simply share the video with a Twitter hashtag #Kony2012, sign a pledge demonstrating solidarity with the movement, or purchase the aforementioned kit. Most importantly, it gave viewers all over the world a way to get involved in something that mattered in a way that allowed them to feel like their contribution mattered.

It will be demonstrated in this paper that most of the human rights campaigns that are launched today by leading human rights NGOs give concerned citizens very little opportunity to do something to make a difference. Most campaigns ask for signatures on petitions or donations to the organization. It will also be shown that people do want to make a difference in the world. While most American citizens do not think about human rights in those terms, atrocities like child abduction and murder are easily digestible. Although Americans are largely not yet willing to move to house the homeless or save the lives of murderers on death row, most will fight to bring child murderers to justice. Invisible Children understands that normalizing human rights in the United States is a process of incremental acceptance.

American's individual identities are changing while America's dividual identity is evolving. A Twentieth Century strategy aimed at appealing to concerned citizens is no longer sufficient. The saturation of corporate messaging has fundamentally changed the way that individuals react and respond to calls to action – from purchasing a new



deodorant to demanding the capture of an international child murderer. Indeed, we have been transformed into consumers; no, *prosumers*, conditioned to proactively participate in the consumption of information and products.<sup>3</sup> While it is unfortunate to watch as the Kony2012 movement is hindered by well-intentioned critics, it is inspiring to know that millions of people were so quickly and effectively energized around a human rights issue by an organization that understands this shift in American individual identity. Likewise, all human rights NGOs are required now to compete for the attention of these citizens-made-consumers by leveraging similar corporate tactics for reaching them, just as Invisible Children did in its campaign.

This paper will argue just that – that as citizens change, so must the means of building movements. I will begin with an explanation of how social media is changing the way that consumers understand themselves and each other. Next, I will review the ways that for-profit companies have realized these changes and implemented marketing strategies to reach them effectively. Finally, I will end by showing how Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch are working to normalize human rights in the United States.

---

<sup>3</sup> G. Ritzer and N. Jurgenson, "Production, Consumption, Prosumption: The Nature of Capitalism in the age of the Digital 'Prosumer,'" *Journal of Consumer Culture* 10, no. 1 (2010): 13-36.

## Leveraging Online Identity Recasting

American citizens live in a computer-mediated society where Internet users collectively rehearse offline behaviors online in an effort to better understand the expectations of society, to test reactions to behavior, to experiment with sexuality, and to better understand themselves. Social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube provide the digital landscape for these identity exercises, asking users to manage relationships with others in real time, rehearse responses to social expectations, and construct an identity that is acceptable to an assumed audience. As we have seen with the uprisings in the Middle East over the past year, online simulations are quickly translating into offline behavior.

As Tunisian and Egyptian citizens (most notably) used these social networking sites to protest their governments in a way that offered less risk and a deep sense of community, their online behavior quickly translated into offline action as it was quickly normalized online by mass acceptance. For many multinational corporations, this phenomenon is no surprise. Corporate brands have inserted themselves into these performances, becoming a part of the online identity recasting process for over a decade. Rather than watching a television commercial (if not changing the channel to ignore it), users now interact with advertisements in an intimate way.<sup>4</sup> They participate in the ad, choosing what to see, how or when a video plays, which of their online connections should also see it, and even how the ad functions.<sup>5</sup> Even more importantly, users “like” or “follow” brands as an outward display of their affinity for them in an effort to more

---

<sup>4</sup> I offer the phrase *identity recasting* to describe the activity whereby consumers are reintroducing or re-presenting themselves to their peers online in a more carefully considered form.

<sup>5</sup> Desparados has an example of a creative interactive social media ad on YouTube. It can be found by clicking on “Breakthrough” here: <http://www.youtube.com/user/desperados>

completely convey to their audience who they are (or at least who they want to be).<sup>6</sup> For example, a user might “like” Coca Cola on Facebook rather than Pepsi, or Barack Obama rather than Mitt Romney, or Apple rather than Hewlett Packard. Users of these sites project an identity that is very simply a sum of the things, places, and people with which/whom they choose to associate, recasting their offline self as an improved, sometimes idealized, online version.

Erving Goffman, in his 1959 seminal text The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, argues that all interactions between humans are performance, an attempt at demonstrating a predetermined “self” to an evident or assumed audience. According to Goffman, an individual will offer a version of her/himself only according to the audience present.<sup>7</sup> As the audience differs, so does the presentation of self. Identity recasting then is the online translation of this exercise, where consumers project an idealized version of self to a presumed audience present. Unfortunately, this process becomes complicated by the fact that a presumed audience is often mismeasured, wrongly identified, or sometimes there is no mechanism for targeting a defined audience at all.<sup>8</sup>

Facebook users are forced to consider many audiences when presenting an image of their selves. Although Facebook has recently released controls that allow users to categorize their connections in order to more carefully control which audience sees certain status updates, it is not yet possible to control which connections see the rest of

---

<sup>6</sup> The verbs “like” and “follow” are associated with Facebook and Twitter respectively. Facebook, however, is now introducing several new verbs (called “edges”) to give users more control over the presentation of their actions around the web. For instance, a user will soon be able to show that she/he “read” an article or “cooked” a recipe or “watched” a video.

<sup>7</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

<sup>8</sup> A. Marwick and danah boyd, “I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience,” *New Media and Society*, (Published online before print, July 7, 2010): 1-20.

their actions on the site.<sup>9</sup> For example, if a user “likes” the Barack Obama page, each of her/his connections will see that action. This inability to subdivide audiences has in recent years been referred to as *context collapse*, most notably by dana boyd.<sup>10</sup> Marwick and boyd recognize this problem of unidentifiable audiences by saying that “the requirement to present a verifiable, singular identity makes it impossible to differ self-presentation strategies, creating tension as diverse groups of people flock to social network sites.”<sup>11</sup> Their research demonstrates how Twitter users’ habits are adapting to the issues arising from context collapse and that many users imagine the most potentially problematic audience - parents, bosses, government officials, etc. – to structure their interactions in the least offensive manner.

While context collapse is problematic for the individual attempting to project different versions of self to different audiences, for brands hoping to reach as many people as possible, it is beneficial. It means that shared content will reach all of a user’s connections rather than a selected few. It is also a core feature of Facebook’s Open Graph, which leverages a consumer’s social connections all over the web to make participation and collaboration easier.<sup>12</sup> The Open Graph, technology that gives developers access to Facebook user data to build applications that enhance the usability of other websites around the web, allows the owners of websites to tailor content to the interest of the visitor while also showing her/his connections’ actions on the site.

---

<sup>9</sup> John D. Sutter, "Facebook makes its privacy settings act more like Google+," CNN, accessed November 2, 2011, [http://articles.cnn.com/2011-08-23/tech/facebook.privacy.change\\_1\\_privacy-settings-facebook-users-facebook-friends?\\_s=PM:TECH](http://articles.cnn.com/2011-08-23/tech/facebook.privacy.change_1_privacy-settings-facebook-users-facebook-friends?_s=PM:TECH).

<sup>10</sup> Dr. boyd chooses to not capitalize her name.

<sup>11</sup> A. Marwick, A. and danah boyd, “I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience.” *New Media and Society*. (Published online before print, July 7, 2010): 9.

<sup>12</sup> The Open Graph Protocol. <http://ogp.me/>

A strategic benefit to context collapse for brands is the ability for users to experience events online that are happening offline by consuming media seamlessly across the boundaries of connections as it is easily and widely shared among users. For example, because users have a limited ability to control the audience for a particular post to Facebook or Twitter, the actual audience that sees that post could be much larger than it would be if the user limited it to just a select group of people. This ability to unintentionally consume content being posted online from live events as it comes across a users feed, creates an opportunity for those who are not present at the offline event to experience it. Alison Landsberg argues that “prosthetic memories are adopted as the result of a person’s experience with a mass cultural technology of memory that dramatizes or recreates a history he or she did not live.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, memories that were not experienced can be imagined in such a way that it convinces the individual that the event was actually experienced because of the powerful influence of mass media.<sup>14</sup> The power then of these media to elicit a response is limitless. “By giving people visual images and stories to which they can relate, people are able to better empathize with the complexities and the implications of the human rights abuses affecting others,” claims Miller,<sup>15</sup> arguing for the use of documentary in Africa to break stereotypes. If a film can create in a media consumer the feeling of participating in, or otherwise experiencing, the torture of a political dissident, that person is very likely to deeply care about the issue.

---

<sup>13</sup> Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: the Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, (New York: Columbia UP, 2004), 28.

<sup>14</sup> Mass media is commonly understood to refer to news organizations. I am, however, using the term more generally to refer to widely distributed media that are intended to reach a large audience for communicative purposes.

<sup>15</sup> N. Miller, “Projecting Hope and Making Reel Change in Africa.” *Human Rights Quarterly*, 30.3. (2008): 827.

Social media, particularly Facebook, offer users the opportunity to produce and share content on a massive scale. Images, videos, websites, articles, and products are shared with a user's connections in an effort to accomplish some goal – to convince them of something, to move them to act, to solicit a response, etc. If, then, the content being shared is powerfully centered around a specific, emotional human rights issue, the potential for a prosthetic experience, one that wasn't actually experienced but feels as if it was, is great.

As users of Facebook use the platform as a means of rehearsing offline behavior and recasting a version of self that will project the identity they most desire others to accept, introducing media that becomes sutured to that identity is a strategic aim of many brands. Human rights organizations then should be similarly involved in providing or soliciting content that is emotional, that creates or demonstrates an experience, that appeals to the process of identity recasting, and that can be easily remixed and shared.

## A Case for Human Rights Social Media

For organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, it may be difficult to compete with the campaigns of multinational corporations for the attention of consumers, but neither organization lacks the financial resources to implement an innovative digital strategy to do so. According to Kathleen Rodgers, “between 1981 and 2004, Amnesty membership grew from 250,000 to 1.8 million, with an impressive increase (from 250,000 to 1.1 million) in the decade 1981–1991,” and their income “more than doubled between 1987 and 1996 (from USD\$13,654,675 to USD\$31,602,621).”<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Human Rights Watch’s budget grew from US\$200,000 to US\$26,462,566 between 1979 and 2003.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, while both are present in the digital space, neither organization is capitalizing on users’ online identity recasting behavior in the same way that their for-profit competitors have been able to do.<sup>18</sup> It seems as if they are using social media as a publishing platform rather than as a participatory environment where consumers<sup>19</sup> can carefully construct an image of self that both includes and normalizes social and economic human rights as a legitimate cause that should govern their offline behavior.

It is, perhaps, reasonable to assume that Amnesty International’s and Human Rights Watch’s inability to garner the same success as their for-profit competitors is less

---

<sup>16</sup> Kathleen Rodgers, "When do opportunities become trade-offs for social movement organizations? assessing media impact in the global human rights movement," *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 34.4 (2009): 1094.

<sup>17</sup> Kathleen Rodgers. "When do opportunities become trade-offs for social movement organizations?," *Canadian Journal of Sociology*. 1094.

<sup>18</sup> I mean *competitors* in the sense that every Internet user, whether an individual or an organization, is competing for the attention of others.

<sup>19</sup> I will use the term “consumer” throughout the paper to signify the citizen whose identity largely now is dependent on consumption to understand her/him self. I realize this is controversial, but because of time restraints I chose not to spend time outside of its mention in the introduction.

a result of a lack of financial resources and more likely the result of either a hesitancy to invest comparable resources due to legitimate ethical concerns or there is a lack of understanding of the benefits of said investment. Douglas and Turkle both argue that these advances have caused Americans to turn inward, Douglas pointing to the lack of news media coverage of foreign affairs and students' inability to locate key countries on a map as evidence of young Americans disinterest in the world,<sup>20</sup> and Turkle arguing that people have grown dependent on technology for companionship, learning to disregard "real" relationships.<sup>21</sup> Further, in regards to online organizing, Etling et. al. discredit social media due to the State's ability quickly halt uprising beginning online by simply shutting down the internet or using fake events to lure protestors into captivity.<sup>22</sup> And Malcolm Gladwell asserts that online connections are too weak to result in the same intense action that occurred around the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>23</sup>

Contrary to these critics' claims, however, is research that shows the benefits of social media. Kaveri Subrahmanyam and Patricia Greenfield show that the Internet is an important place for teenagers to build significant relationships.<sup>24</sup> They explain that "for today's youth, media technologies are an important social variable and that physical and virtual worlds are psychologically connected; consequently, the virtual world serves as a playing ground for developmental issues from the physical world, such as identity and

---

<sup>20</sup> S.J. Douglas, "The Turn Within: The Irony of Technology in a Globalized World," *American Quarterly*, 58.3. (2006): 619-638.

<sup>21</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Alone together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less From Each Other*. (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Etling et. al. "Political Change in the Digital Age: The Fragility and Promise of Online Organizing." *SAIS Review*, 30.2. (2002): 37-49.

<sup>23</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, "Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted." *The New Yorker*. Published: Oct. 4, 2010: 42-49.

<sup>24</sup> Kaveri Subrahmanyam and Patricia Greenfield, "Online Communication and Adolescent Relationships," *The Future of Children*, 18.1. (2008): 119-146.



sexuality.”<sup>25</sup> EJ Westlake argues that teenagers “have demonstrated that they do care, and they have demonstrated that they will take action on issues that matter to them.”<sup>26</sup>

According to Westlake, teens are organizing online around political, social, and cultural issues in a strong way. She goes on to argue that “not only do Generation Y people discuss politics more than any group of incoming [college] freshman in the last 40 years...they seek to make social change through volunteerism.”<sup>27</sup>

This shift in behavior, marked by Generation Y’s ubiquitous use of technology, could be an important contributor to the general acceptance of social and economic human rights as this generation gains power. In order to do so, however, human rights organizations must immediately begin making changes to effectively reach that demographic. Chong offers several challenges that must be overcome by human rights NGOs in order to gain acceptance of social and economic rights and implores organizations to “make strategic decisions about where to allocate its effort, staff, and other resources in the most effective manner.”<sup>28</sup> Skepticism among United States citizens, fueled in part by exceptionalism, is a significant challenge noted by Chong.

Internationally, the United States has continuously blocked the extension of economic and social rights in international law - the rejection of the right to housing at Istanbul in 1996; voting against a UN General Assembly resolution on economic and social rights in 1998; opposing any mention of the right to food in Rome in 2002, and attempting to

---

<sup>25</sup> Kaveri Subrahmanyam and Patricia Greenfield, “Online Communication and Adolescent Relationships,” *The Future of Children*, 18.1. (2008): 125.

<sup>26</sup> E.J. Westlake, “Friend Me if You Facebook: Generation Y and Performative Surveillance,” *The Drama Review*, 52.4. (2008): 38.

<sup>27</sup> E.J. Westlake, “Friend Me if You Facebook,” *The Drama Review*, 52.4. (2008): 37.

<sup>28</sup> Daniel Chong, “Five Challenges to Legalizing Economic and Social Rights,” *Human Rights Review* 10 (2009): 185.

block the work of the UN Working Group on the Optional Protocol to the ICESCR.<sup>29</sup> Domestically, the welfare reform law that was passed in 1996 officially ended the acknowledgement that each resident had an entitlement to a minimum livelihood. Chong suggests implementing the plan of Philip Alston “who recommended a major new effort to directly confront the U.S. on its international legal obligations on economic and social rights.”<sup>30</sup> He offers a tactic for this confrontation: “reframe economic and social rights issues in such a way that they are not only palatable, but perceived as vital to the U.S. public.”<sup>31</sup> This, however, leads to another challenge.

According to Chong, most Americans generally accept civil and political rights because they are embedded in our cultural understandings in a way that social and economic rights are not. He points out that “most average citizens in the global North understand what due process and equal protection require because they watch these themes play out regularly in popular media.”<sup>32</sup> But the discourse surrounding social and economic rights is inaccessible to the average citizen according to Chong. In order to reframe these rights in a way that are “palatable” and perceived to be “vital,” they must be embedded into American culture. While Chong argues for NGO training that would help workers translate confusing legal jargon into easily communicable messages, I posit that the recommendation should go even further in advocating for those messages to be

---

<sup>29</sup> Anuradha Mittal and Peter Rosset, *America needs human rights*. Oakland, Calif.: Food First Books, 1999.

<sup>30</sup> Daniel Chong, "Five Challenges to Legalizing Economic and Social Rights," *Human Rights Review* 10 (2009): 192.

<sup>31</sup> Daniel Chong, "Five Challenges to Legalizing Economic and Social Rights," *Human Rights Review* 10 (2009): 192.

<sup>32</sup> Daniel Chong, "Five Challenges to Legalizing Economic and Social Rights," *Human Rights Review* 10 (2009): 193.

strategically distributed through mass media partnerships and social media campaigns in order to insert them into participatory online culture.

There is precedent for this type of media dependence. Amnesty International's advocacy model depends greatly on media partnerships, even going as far as to say in their very first annual report that "it was through the generosity of the London *Observer* that Amnesty was launched on May 28, 1961. Without the help of this paper and the others Amnesty would not be the established movement that it is today."<sup>33</sup> Kathleen Rodgers claims that in the mid-1990s, "Amnesty undertook a massive tactical shift...dramatically increasing the production of news releases, a more media-oriented product."<sup>34</sup> Ali, in a paper arguing for the potential benefits of social media to help overcome the digital divide, argues that information and communication technologies (ICT) have had "enormous consequences for the international human rights movement as an aid to its efforts to collect, interpret, and disseminate information and to push for appropriate action in response to violations."<sup>35</sup> But there is a lack of academic research showing how the Internet, ICT, and specifically, social media are being used to facilitate the cultural acceptance of social and economic human rights in the United States.

---

<sup>33</sup> The first annual report can be read here:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/POL10/001/1969/en/36325d2a-0429-4840-96ff-1f11b1f3762c/pol100011969eng.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> Kathleen Rodgers, "When do opportunities become trade-offs for social movement organizations? assessing media impact in the global human rights movement." *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 34.4 (2009): 1101.

<sup>35</sup> Amir Hatem Ali, "The Power of Social Media in Developing Nations: New Tools for Closing the Global Digital Divide and Beyond." *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 24 (2011): 195.

Although social media's potential to ignite social movements has been observed recently in the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street uprisings<sup>36</sup>, there is still a large question about the differential level of participation in social movements. For example, why are some Americans willing to camp on Wall Street or in public squares while others are either only willing to participate online or not at all? Passy and Giugni offer a possible answer to explain differential participation in social movements. They find that there are two factors that determine the level of participation: "the embeddedness in the social networks" and "the individual perceptions of participation."<sup>37</sup> Their argument is that for one to be willing to participate in a movement, she/he will have to be embedded within a social network that is actively involved and have a sense that her/his contribution is accomplishing something. Two other, less important factors in terms of the degree to which they would discourage involvement, are the levels of cost and risk associated with participation.

If Passy and Giugni are correct, then Facebook offers a platform ripe with opportunity for encouraging involvement in social movements. Online costs and risks are minimal, and social networking sites foster a feeling of community, making participation possible through livestreaming, retweeting, and sharing. Critics will say, however, that while social media does provide the opportunity for easier, cheaper, quicker involvement in movements, participation that includes little more than retweeting or "liking" a Facebook status (dismissed as "slactivism") cannot garner the same results as offline, in-the-streets protest. Christensen counters critics in his study of the history of slactivism by

---

<sup>36</sup> Gilad Lotan, Erhardt Graeff, Mike Ananny, Devin Gaffney, Ian Pearce, and danah boyd, "The Arab Spring| The Revolutions Were Tweeted: Information Flows during the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions," *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 1375-1405.

<sup>37</sup> F. Passy and M. Giugni, "Social Networks and Individual Perceptions: Explaining Differential Participation in Social Movements," *Sociological Forum* 16.1 (2001):123-153.

saying that “many of the Internet sites aiming to mobilize citizens online ... emphasize that they have achieved an actual political impact through their online activities.”<sup>38</sup>

Online activity, which usually starts with a retweet or share, is normalized through slactivism to the point that many users feel safe enough and embedded enough in the movement’s community to translate their online behavior into offline protest. The question becomes how to do it. How does an organization present a message to a consumer that moves her/him from passive consumption to slactivist participation to ultimately suturing her/his identity to the organization’s cause?

---

<sup>38</sup> Christensen, Henrik, "Political Activities on the Internet: Slacktivism or Political Participation by Other Means?," First Monday, accessed December 8, 2011, <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3336/2767>.

## Methodology

Broadly, this project is a digital ethnography or “netnography.” Dick Hobbs defines ethnography as a cocktail of methodologies where “participant observation is the most common component of this cocktail, but interviews, conversational and discourse analysis, documentary analysis, film and photography all have their place in the ethnographer’s repertoire.”<sup>39</sup> Similarly, netnography uses “computer-mediated communications as a source of data to arrive at the ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon.”<sup>40</sup> Admittedly, this project is limited by time, and is therefore limited in its ability to conduct a full digital ethnography. It is nonetheless a qualitative thematic analysis that borrows the methodologies of digital ethnography and netnography. Further, this project incorporates quantitative methods for comparing the popularity of various organizations.

Specifically, this project relies on the analysis of digital marketing communications of five organizations: Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Disney, Apple, and Starbucks. These five brand communities were separated into two groups and analyzed separately, the two groups being for-profit and not-for-profit organizations. Each of the five communities is made up of fans, customers, employees, and marketing professionals who have organized around each brand online. I observe how marketing messages are being delivered, noting trends, goals, and outcomes, and I also note how the community responds to those messages. I analyze what is being

---

<sup>39</sup> Victor Jupp, "Ethnography." In *The SAGE dictionary of social research methods*. London: SAGE Publications, 2006.

<sup>40</sup> Robert V. Kozinets, *Netnography: doing ethnographic research online*. Los Angeles, Calif.: SAGE, 2010.

communicated, at whom it was being targeted, how the messages are structured, and what opportunities the recipients of the messages are given to interact with each other, the organization, and the content itself. Lastly, I look for similarities within both groups in order to define their norms.

### **Definition of Tools**

Klout.com is a controversial website that seeks to quantify Internet users' influence on the web. The controversy largely centers on the fact that the site refuses to release details about the algorithm used to generate the Klout score.<sup>41</sup> However, because it has become the standard score in this emerging industry, its numbers are used across the Web to rank users. I use Klout as a mean of quantifying the influence of the brand on the social media community.

The Klout Score is a combination of three metrics: Reach, Amplification, and Network. Reach is the number of people influenced by the average message published on the Web by an individual or brand. The larger the audience and the more engaged that audience becomes, the larger a user's Reach will be. Amplification is a score between 1-100 that measures how likely a user's audience is to respond to any given message. And finally, the Network score is a measurement of the influence of a user's audience. These three numbers are factored together to produce the Klout Score.

SocialMention.com is a website that aggregates and measures the conversation around any topic on the Web. For the purposes of this paper, I look at two metrics specifically: Reach and Strength. Strength is the likelihood that the topic searched is

---

<sup>41</sup> "The Klout Debate: Should You Stay or Should You Go and Does It Matter?" BlogWorld & New Media Expo Blog. <http://www.blogworld.com/2011/12/07/the-klout-debate-should-you-stay-or-should-you-go-and-does-it-matter/> (accessed April 1, 2012).

being mentioned on the Web at any given time. This number is calculated by dividing the total number of mentions of the topic by the total possible number of mentions over the past 24 hours. Reach, on the other hand, is a measure of the range of mentions. It is calculated by dividing the total number of unique authors by the total number of mentions. I am using SocialMention.com to measure the conversation by social media users of each brand. While Klout indicates the influence of a brand, SocialMention indicates the engagement level of other users around the brand.

QuarkBase.com aggregates information about websites from across the web. I will use this site to record the unique monthly visitors to each brand's primary website, the number of blog mentions (that is, the number of times a blog linked to each brand's website within the last 7 days), and for the purposes of this paper, I look at two proprietary scores in particular: Google's PageRank score and the Alexa Ranking. PageRank is a numerical value from 1 to 10 assigned to a webpage to indicate its popularity on the web. Google's theory is that each time someone links to a site, it is essentially a vote for that site. Those votes are added together to produce the PageRank Score where 10 indicates a very popular website. The Alexa Ranking is the standard measurement in terms of monthly traffic to a website of its popularity on the web. The lower the number, the more popular the site, with number one being the most visited site on the Internet.

Each of these scores and measurement algorithms serve as a starting point by which to compare each brand. They, by no means, represent a conclusive judgment of the brand's online success. My goal is to provide a consistent quantified comparison of each brand that that would be demonstrated by the qualitative findings. Because each brand



approaches social media differently according to its business objectives, these numbers require a qualitative explanation in order to understand the brand's success.

## For-Profit Brands Data

*Apple*

Apple						
	Blog					Website
Klout Score	References	Page Rank	Alexa Rank	Reach	Strength	Traffic
na	132K	9	42	33%	37%	27.3mil

Figure 1

Apple was chosen as a brand from which we can glean insights for two reasons: first, according to Sociagility's Top 50 list from 2011<sup>42</sup>, it is the third most valuable brand in terms of its competitive influence through social media, and second because it is possibly the most obvious example of a brand targeting identity in its marketing. In fact, the *I'm a Mac* campaign is perhaps the best example of a corporate marketing attempt at leveraging identity formation. It pitted the more expensive Macintosh computer against the more affordable Windows-based personal computer by representing the machines as people, the Macintosh as a young, trendy smooth-talker and the personal computer as a middle-aged awkward fellow. The campaign (and others) has contributed to the growth of Apple's cult-like following that has made it an enormously successful company as well as a cultural icon.

Belk and Tumbat explore brand devotion by examining the allegiance of consumers to Apple in a study that includes 14 interviews with Mac fanatics from which the authors conclude that this extreme devotion is equivalent to a religion, containing

---

<sup>42</sup> "The Sociagility Top 50." Sociagility. <http://www.sociagility.com/top50/> (accessed December 9, 2011).

many of the same attributes, including an evil other (Microsoft), a messiah (Steve Jobs), and deep loyalty.<sup>43</sup> According to their study, this dichotomy of the messianic Steve Jobs and the satanic Microsoft encourages allegiance to Apple, while intentionally othering the consumers of more affordable personal computers. The result is an often fierce devotion to the Apple brand that convinces its customers that the product is not only superior to its competitors, but that it is somehow morally wrong to use any other computer brand.

Interestingly, of the three for-profit brands chosen as case studies for this project, Apple invests the least in direct social media marketing. The brand is not on Twitter or Facebook officially. It does not host a blog. From a high level view, it looks as if the brand is failing at social media marketing. But while many brands are chasing large follower counts Apple has built a movement by encouraging its customers to become advocates on behalf of the brand. And that should be the real aim of any organization, especially human rights organizations.

A review of the numbers above shows no Klout score because there are no official accounts for Klout.com to review, and modest Reach and Strength scores. But its blog mentions are abnormally high, and that is the key to Apple's success. Their strategy is to seed bloggers, to tempt and tease them with small amounts of information requiring regular blog posts about each update. That investment in influencers in the blogosphere saturates technology blogs with free mentions of the Apple brand, and when coupled with its traditional advertising that targets identity, consumers perception of the brand becomes exactly what Apple intended – innovative, trendy, exclusive, powerful, life-changing. The result of this strategy is first 132,000 blog mentions and second, more than

---

<sup>43</sup> Belk and Tumbat "The Cult of Macintosh," *Consumption, Markets, and Culture*, 8.3 (2005): 205-217.

27 million unique visitors to its website each month, making it the 42<sup>nd</sup> most popular website on the Web.

With fewer stores than the other brands reviewed in this paper, Apple's success depends heavily on the number of people that visit its website to purchase products. Apple does nearly everything right in terms of marketing to the digital consumer in order to drive that site traffic. It targets identity through a transmedia approach that combines traditional and digital efforts by providing a sense of belonging to those who own its products and by helping its customers feel empowered, trendy, and elite. It resists the temptation to broadcast direct marketing messages through social media channels, something that most online communities shun. It leverages online influencers by giving them access to information about new products before anyone else, knowing that they will share the information with their audience. Finally, the secrecy that surrounds the announcement of each new product inspires hundreds of speculative blog posts that serve as launching points for online discussion on sites like Twitter and Facebook.

## Starbucks

Starbucks						
Klout Score	Blog References	Page Rank	Alexa Rank	Reach	Strength	Website Traffic
78	na	7	2863	43%	25%	2.1mil

Figure 2

Starbucks ranked fourth on Sociagility's Top 50 list, making it one of the most social brands in the world. While Apple takes a more discreet approach to social media marketing, Starbucks is the best example of a brand that invests heavily in customer interaction and its numbers in Figure 2 demonstrate that. Its Klout score is 78, significantly higher than most brands and the highest of any brand mentioned in this paper; its Reach is at 43%, which is also a relatively high number among the most elite brands. While its Alexa Rank is much higher than Apple (meaning that it is a less popular site), that is not the primary destination aim of its digital presence. While Apple wants to get people to its website to make a purchase, Starbucks wants to get customers offline and into a nearby store. Its website does serve as a hub for its loyalty program which also leverages social media heavily, its primary goal is not to drive website traffic.

Starbucks invests heavily in Facebook and Twitter as its primary platforms for social media marketing, and the two are used differently. Facebook, because it is more visual, is used by the brand to create experiences. Figure 3 shows that Starbucks has converted their Facebook page to the new Timeline format, and it is using the large featured image at the top not as a direct advertisement, but as a means of conveying a

feeling. Also notable about Figure 3 are the interaction statistics located just below the brand name. Nearly 30 million people have associated themselves with the brand on Facebook, an action, as discussed earlier, that is a part of the identity recasting process. Starbucks has created a brand that consumers want others to associate with them.

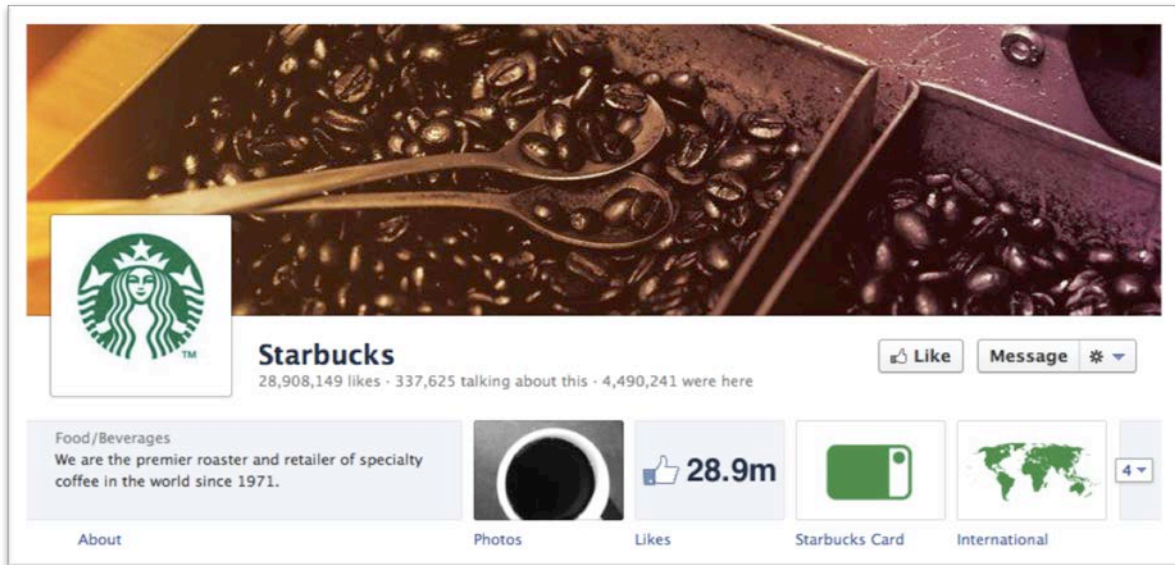


Figure 3

An example of how the brand uses Facebook to create an experience can be seen in Figure 4. Starbucks posted a beautiful image of a man drinking Starbucks coffee while looking out over snow-capped mountains, conveying the idea of a product that pairs well with beautiful experiences. With the image, the brand asks its customers to fill in the blank: “Coffee and snow go together like \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.” Over 19,000 Facebook users “liked” the image (which then broadcasts that action to their connections), and nearly 11,000 people commented on the post with responses to the fill-in-the-blank.

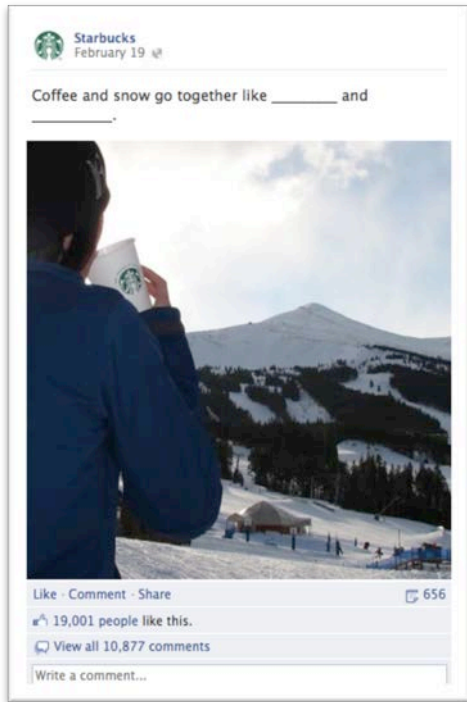


Figure 4

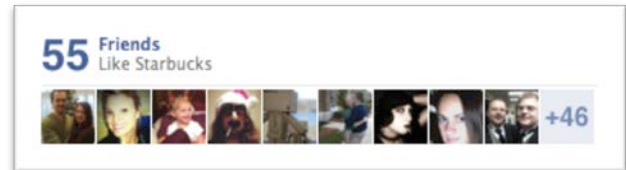


Figure 5

Figure 5 is perhaps one of the most strategic placements of subconscious identity targeting. This feature is new with Facebook’s release of the Timeline layout of its profiles and pages, but its implementation other places around the Web is not. What the image shows is that when I clicked onto the Starbucks Facebook page, near the top it alerted me that 55 of my connections had “liked” the Starbucks page. It shows me the face of a few of them to draw my attention, also giving me to option to click through to see the rest. This feature is also available to brands to incorporate into their websites so that when a consumer clicks on a product, she/he sees all of her/his connections who have also either purchased or otherwise interacted with it.

Hill et. al. find that “consumers linked to a prior customer adopt the service at a rate 3-5 times greater than baseline groups selected by the best practices of the firm’s

marketing team.”<sup>44</sup> Before the introduction of social media, no one would know if one of their acquaintances purchased an item unless that individual told them personally. In the age of the Open Graph, the images of online connections can be surfaced next to products. For example, if one of my connections recently purchased a television online and left a review or “liked” the page, when I perform a search for a television, I am going to see that friend’s activity and recommendation. It should follow then that a brand will not only get more referrals, but potentially see a 3-5 times higher conversion rate by facilitating this automatic referral process through Facebook’s Open Graph. On Facebook, the placement of friends who have liked a page at the top is strategic because it increases the likelihood that I will want to also like the page.

While Starbuck’s use of Facebook to create digital experiences for their customers is innovative, the brand’s use of Twitter is equally as interesting. Figure 6 is a recent screenshot of their Twitter feed showing the brand’s 8 most recent tweets (at the time of writing). Most notably is that every tweet was direct communication with a single Twitter user. The “@” in front of a user name links a message to that user specifically. Futher, when a tweet begins with another username, that tweet is withheld from the Twitter feeds of each of the content creators followers. Typically a tweet would be sent by a user and would display across the feeds of Twitter users without having to go to the specific page of a user to see what he/she posted. However, the “@” represents a direct communication to a single user and only that users is alerted.

While Starbucks does of course broadcast messages to all of its followers, it is primarily using Twitter for customer service. Online community managers are

---

<sup>44</sup> S. Hill et. al, “Network-Based Marketing: Identifying Likely Adopters via Consumer Networks,” *Statistical Science*, 21.2. (2006): 256.



monitoring the conversation on Twitter about the Starbucks brand, so that they can respond quickly and directly to that person. That serves two purposes: first, it allows the brand to quickly extinguish negative sentiments in an effort to keep them from spreading. Second, it makes the brand personal to its customers. An individual message from the brand is almost always received well by users as it creates a sense of belonging to the community.



Figure 6

Another innovative way that Starbucks is leveraging social media marketing is “My Starbucks Idea,” a campaign (Fig. 7) that allows its customers to publish ideas to a dedicated webpage and then vote on the best ones. This is innovative because it

empowers the consumer, it allows them to directly communicate with the brand to make it exactly what they want (which is mutually beneficial), and then see those ideas implemented in stores across the country.

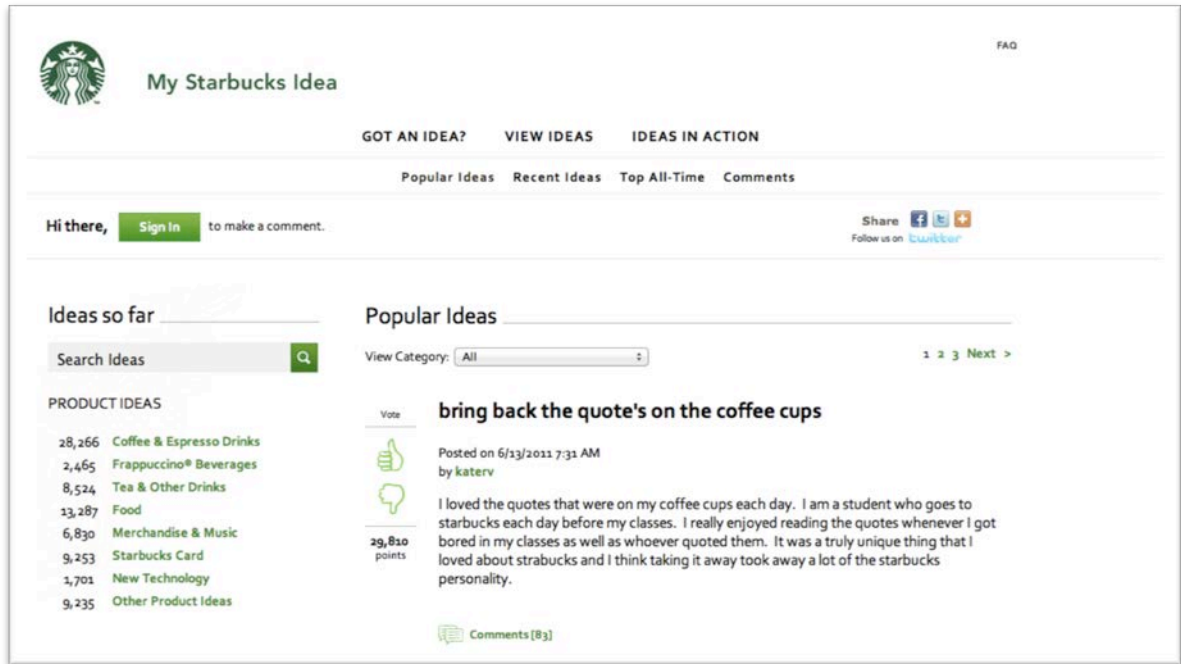


Figure 7

Starbucks' approach to social media is very different than Apple's because the two companies objectives are different. Apple sells an expensive product through its website while Starbucks aims to get users offline and into its stores to purchase a comparatively low cost product. Despite their tactical differences, however, both organizations understand the value of selling experiences rather than simply highlighting the benefits of their respective products. These experiences allow social media users the opportunity to participate with the brand in shaping the culture of the brand's online community and provides opportunities for users to attach their identity to the brand through that participation.

Another key lesson to take away from Starbucks' social media presence is their understanding of platforms. The brand recognized the visual opportunity of Facebook and leveraged that functionality. It understands how Twitter is being used primarily as a communication tool, and it invested its time there in providing customer service that gives consumers direct personal interaction with the brand. It is clear that Starbucks understands the space and the users that make it up.

## Disney

Disney						
Klout Score	Blog References	Page Rank	Alexa Rank	Reach	Strength	Website Traffic
71	8	8	46	26%	25%	44.1mil

Figure 8

Disney is Sociagility's 2<sup>nd</sup> most influential and valuable brand in social media. Its Klout Score is significantly higher than most while its blog references are abnormally low. This discrepancy, like it did with Apple, demonstrates the brand's social media marketing strategy. With over 44 million unique website visitors each month and an Alexa Rank of 46, Disney.go.com is obviously an enormously popular destination on the web. Again similar to Apple, it takes a somewhat different path to drive its business objective of getting consumers to its website.

Combining traditional advertising with social media marketing to create the feeling of magical experiences that result in direct on and offline conversions, the brand decentralizes its online presence by participating on platforms in dozens of ways. Figure 9 shows, for example, just a few of the dozens of Facebook pages associated with the brand. While there is a central Facebook account, these decentralized accounts allow for the creation of niche communities around Disney's many offerings. This strategic approach is necessary because the definition of conversion for Disney varies according to the product. Converting a consumer into a vacationer at Disneyland is quite different than funneling a consumer into a DVD purchase.



Figure 9

The Disneyland Facebook page is a great example of innovative social media marketing. While Figure 10 shows similar interaction to what Starbucks is doing, creating experiences that allow users to participate, the Disneyland brand goes even further by providing several tools on Facebook that help them to plan vacations with the Facebook community (Fig. 11) and relive memories from past vacations. There is also a tool to create a stick-figure family (Fig. 12), a clear tactic to target individual identity that is sutured to the brand.



Figure 10

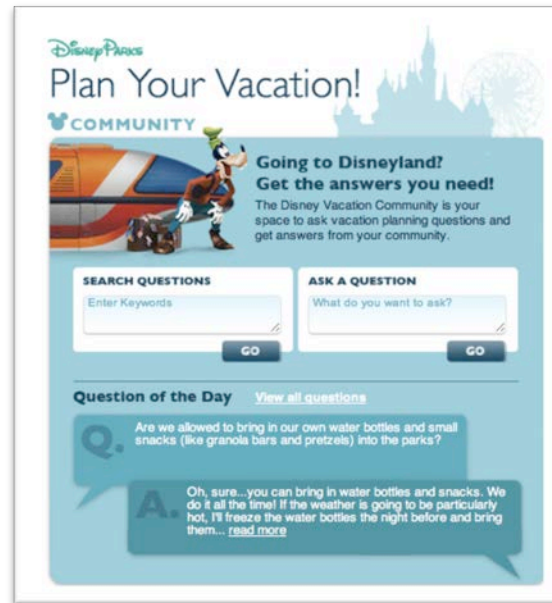


Figure 11

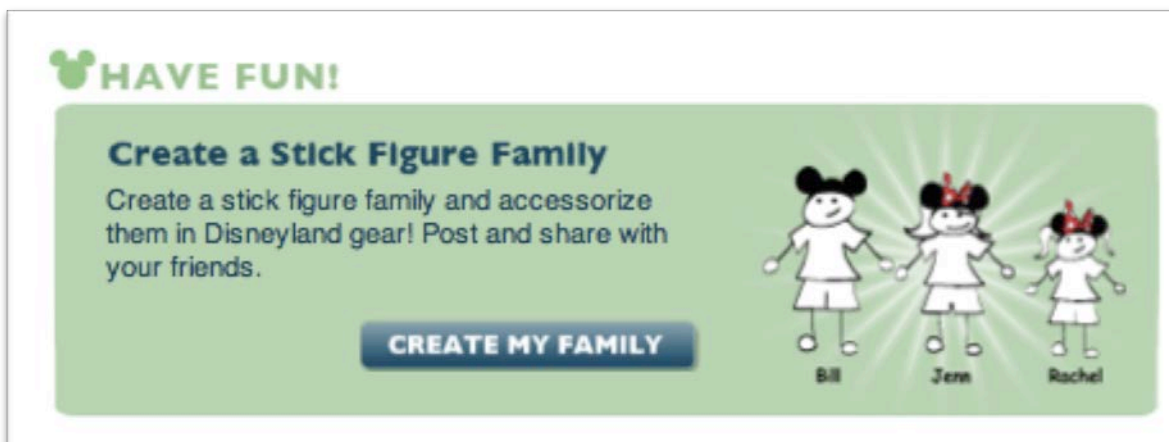


Figure 12

Just as it does with its Facebook presence, Disney’s Twitter presence is also decentralized. Figure 13 shows just a few of the many Twitter accounts that are associated with the brand. Unlike Starbucks, Disney does not use Twitter primarily as a mean of interacting with consumers. Instead, it continues its efforts on Facebook, by translating messages to fit the confined space of Twitter’s 140 character tweets. While this is not a revolutionary approach to social media marketing, it does demonstrate an

awareness of each platform's culture and an ability to convey consistent messages across multiple platforms.

The key to Disney's success in social media is its ability to appeal to the identity of consumers by providing innovative technology that encourages participation with others around the brand. It stimulates the imagination of consumers by offering magical and dreamlike online experiences through creative messaging, imagery, and technology, resulting in the recasting of identity that includes one of the many Disney brands.

## Human Rights NGOs

### *Amnesty International*

Amnesty International						
Klout Score	Blog		Alexa Rank	Reach	Strength	Website Traffic
	References	Page Rank				
76	2,287	7	59185	34%	13%	200K

A cursory look at Amnesty International USA's social media accounts might lead one to believe that the organization is highly successful in the digital space. Certainly, they have amassed a large Facebook following of close to 400,000 and a Twitter following of close to the same number. The organization's Klout Score is very high with a respectable number of blog mentions. While these numbers are impressive, it seems that the organization is not driving their connections effectively to a specific point. Despite the organization's sole effort being to move individuals to action from their website by signing petitions or writing letters, Amnesty's website traffic remains unusually low considering the size of its membership. With nearly 2 million members, only 10% are visiting the website monthly.

Amnesty International's efforts mostly remain boxed into a twentieth century marketing model. It sends out monthly direct mail letters with the occasional pen or set of address labels asking for donations, presumably a fundraising model that has been wildly successful since its start. With the proliferation of the Web in the United States, the organization undoubtedly recognized the cost-saving opportunity to reach members in a new way, and it seems that has been the organization's objective. Posts on Twitter and



Facebook are almost always links back to the Amnesty website, either a promotion for a new product or blog post. There is little interaction with fans/followers. There is little attempt at creating digital experiences through Facebook or Twitter that allow users to participate in actions that would provide an opportunity to attach their identity.

Figures 13 and 14 show standard posts on the Amnesty International Facebook page. There is nothing wrong with these posts in terms of utilizing the basic features of a Facebook page – they contain a (somewhat) brief summary, a compelling image, and they are getting some interaction. What is lacking from their strategy is something inherently social. Where Starbucks posted items on Facebook just to provide an opportunity to interact and Disney provided tools that facilitated conversation, Amnesty is skipping the community building in an effort to move right to conversion. Their goal is to publish content and get people to click it, and that does happen for them. However, it does not take advantage of the power of social media.



Figure 13



Figure 14

Figure 15 is a screenshot of Amnesty’s most recent tweets (at the time of writing) from its primary Twitter account. Like its efforts on Facebook, the platform is being used

to publish content in an effort to get people to click through to the website. Figure 16 is a screenshot of Amnesty's Pinterest account. The organization has garnered media coverage for jumping into the trendy Pinterest community, where users create themed digital collage boards by saving images and videos from around the web. However, despite the opportunity to take advantage of a very visual platform where truths can be communicated in a way that creates what Alison Landsberg referred to as "sutured memories," experiences of consuming media that creates a feeling of living through an event that happened in the past, Amnesty has basically built advertisements for the products they sell on their website.



Figure 15

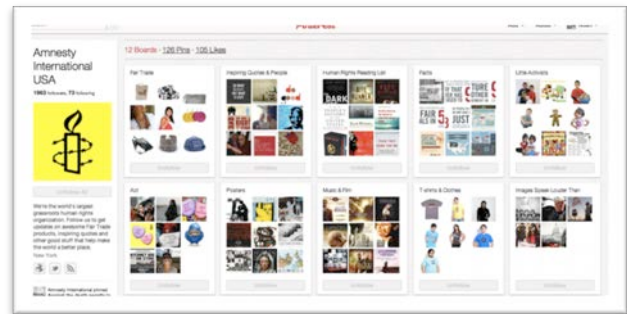


Figure 16

Although Amnesty International is inadequately participating within the online communities it is building, it has shown great potential for creating innovative campaigns

that, if leveraged effectively, could begin to target identity. Each of the following projects are well-produced and creative. Combined with the day-to-day efforts of participatory and experience-driven interaction online, Amnesty has the potential to change the United States culturally in a way that normalizes social and economic rights.

Amnesty International Portugal created the Freedom Dictionary Project in early 2012 in an effort to raise awareness of the Syrian government's censorship of Syrian protestors.<sup>45</sup> AI created an online dictionary with words that could only be made available if an Internet user unlocked the word by clicking on it. The unlocked words were shared on Facebook and the Amnesty International website, and at the end of the campaign printed dictionaries were sent to the governments where protests are still active.

The Freedom Dictionary Project is creative and leverages Facebook in order to spread awareness of the censorship issues taking place in the Middle East. What it fails to do is give users anything in return. Disney created similar applications built especially for Facebook integration, but each of them provided something valuable for users. Users can create travel plans by crowdsourcing information from other Facebook users in one application. In another, users can create interactive photo albums. The Freedom Dictionary Project allows users to participate, but there is no experience for them. The application serves the purpose of raising awareness by essentially asking users to fill out a form that is then shared around the Web, but users leave, forgetting about the cause. This is evidenced by the comments on the project description page on Ads of the World (Figure 17), where users express a lack of understanding toward how the campaign helps Syrians. The value of the campaign is lost on those it is trying to reach.

---

<sup>45</sup> "Amnesty International Portugal: Freedom Dictionary," Ads of the World, accessed on April 1, 2012, [http://adsoftheworld.com/media/online/amnesty\\_international\\_portugal\\_freedom\\_dictionary](http://adsoftheworld.com/media/online/amnesty_international_portugal_freedom_dictionary).

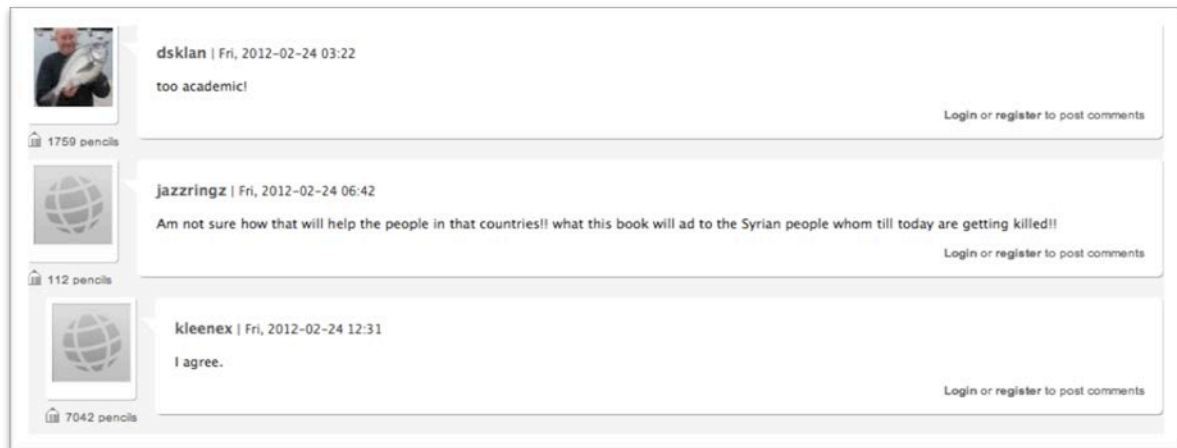


Figure 17

Another highly innovative, and in my opinion AI's most interesting social media campaign to date, is called Stones of Sakineh.<sup>46</sup> This campaign asks users to sign a petition and add personal messages on digital stones that are then added to a mosaic of the face of Sakineh Asthiani, a woman who was sentenced under Sharia Law to death by stoning after being accused of infidelity. As more signatures are added to the petition, more stones are added to the mosaic, making the image of Sakineh clearer. In addition to this online campaign, laptops were set up in high traffic locations around the world in an effort to get more people to participate.

Like the Freedom Dictionary Project, Stones for Sakineh was innovative in that it drew the attention of Internet users because it was innovative in the sense that it was a departure from what most Internet users see from non-profit organizations. However, also like the Freedom Dictionary Project, the campaign served Amnesty International's agenda of getting petition signatures, but it failed to give value back to the user. AI did realize that in the competitive marketplace of Internet user attention, it must do

---

<sup>46</sup> "Amnesty International: Stones for Sakineh," Ads of the World, accessed on April 1, 2012, [http://adsoftheworld.com/media/online/amnesty\\_international\\_stones\\_for\\_sakineh](http://adsoftheworld.com/media/online/amnesty_international_stones_for_sakineh).

something to drive action that separates it from the thousands of other brands vying for their attention. By that standard, the campaign was successful. In creating a meaningful experience for United States citizens that encourages the suturing of identities to AI or human rights generally, however, it failed.

There are other campaigns that demonstrate a recognition of the fact that Americans are evolving in the digital age. AI created a branded plugin for the video game Call of Duty that allows players to hunt down human rights abusers in an effort to free prisoners of conscience. According to the promotional video, Call of Duty is the most played video game of all time, with 7 million people playing everyday.<sup>47</sup> The often overlooked social gaming communities are an excellent target for brands seeking to create identity campaigns because it allows users to interact with the brand in ways that social networking sites do not. However, it seems hypocritical for a human rights organization to actively promote a game that asks users to simulate murder in order to free prisoners.

TyrannyBook is another interesting campaign from Amnesty International Portugal that replicated the user interface of Facebook on a dedicated website that allowed users to interact with the accounts of human rights abusers.<sup>48</sup> The site posted historical and/or new information about what the abusers were doing to threaten the rights of others on behalf of the tyrants as if they were posting it themselves. By building a site that imitates Facebook, AI created a place for people to learn about human rights in

---

<sup>47</sup> "Amnesty International: Amnesty Rescue, Call Of Duty MOD," Ads of the World, accessed on April 1, 2012, [http://adsoftheworld.com/media/online/amnesty\\_international\\_amnesty\\_rescue\\_call\\_of\\_duty\\_mod](http://adsoftheworld.com/media/online/amnesty_international_amnesty_rescue_call_of_duty_mod).

<sup>48</sup> "Amnesty International: Tyrannybook," Ads of the World, accessed on April 1, 2012, [http://adsoftheworld.com/media/online/amnesty\\_international\\_tyrannybook](http://adsoftheworld.com/media/online/amnesty_international_tyrannybook).

an instantly familiar way. It offered an opportunity for users to interact with abusers in a way that would create sutured memories and begin the process of encouraging identity formation around human rights. Where this campaign failed was in separating itself from Facebook in the first place. The website was ultimately shut down because Amnesty International decided not to continue funding it, but the idea could have just as easily been implemented on Facebook with each human rights abuser getting a page for users to follow.

Amnesty International continues to innovate in a way that pushes people back to their website to donate and/or sign petitions. In that regard, the organization is wildly successful. However, if it defines success not by the activity of its members, but by the acceptance of human rights as legitimate legal obligations in the United States and ultimately around the world, it would find that its campaigns are failing.

Human Rights Watch						
Klout Score	Blog References	Page Rank	Alexa Rank	Reach	Strength	Website Traffic
69	na	8	51243	29%	23%	83.6K

In a telephone interview with Emma Daly, Communication Director, and Jim Murphy, Online Editor, at Human Rights Watch (HRW) I learned a great deal about how the organization approaches social media. Comprised of 300 staff members around the world, most of whom have a background in journalism, Human Rights Watch aims to “investigate and expose human rights violations and hold abusers accountable”<sup>49</sup> by digitally publishing regular reports and distributing those through email and social channels. Daly and Murphy admit that the organization is not effectively using social media due to a lack of resources, but they do express a desire, and see a need, for greater investment. Currently, they have 35 staff members on Twitter, including the executive director, along with branded accounts on Twitter and Facebook that are managed by Murphy.

The strategy of Human Rights Watch differs considerably from that of Amnesty International. Where AI seeks to raise awareness of issues through grass roots movements, HRW seeks to target policy makers and government leaders directly, bypassing lay individuals. This important difference in strategy is reflected in the organizations commitment to social media; there is less need for it because it does not

---

<sup>49</sup> "Human Rights Watch | About," Human Rights Watch, accessed on April 1, 2012, <http://www.hrw.org/about>.

help the organization reach their target. Perhaps that is why its numbers are so low. With no blog mentions and a relatively low Klout Score for an international organization, the brand is driving less than half of the traffic of Amnesty International to its website.

Despite the watchdog approach that HRW takes to human rights, it does run awareness campaigns. The Burma Installation,<sup>50</sup> though not a social media campaign, sought to raise awareness of the injustice surrounding the imprisonment of 2100 Burmese political dissidents. HRW set up a wall of prison cells stack on top of each other in Grand Central Station in New York City. The bars of each cell were pens that the exhibit encouraged passerbys to take. As they removed the pens and used them to sign a petition, the prisoners became freed, a powerful image of the impact of people uniting around a single cause. Thousands of signatures were collected from 86 countries around the world, and the petition was delivered to the United Nations Secretary General.

In our interview, Daly and Murphy explained that, due to limited financial resources, HRW chose typically to forgo running campaigns and opted, rather, to participate in the campaigns of other human rights organizations. An example cited was the 2010 #CloseGitmo campaign that was a joint effort between Human Rights First, HRW, AI, and the ACLU. Mostly taking place on Twitter, the campaign sought to encourage Twitter users to tweet using the hashtag #closegitmo in order to raise awareness of the fact that the prison is still open and potentially innocent people who have never been tried are still imprisoned there.

Despite its size and the revenue that it generates annually, Human Rights Watch is largely ignoring social media. It has a presence, but it ends there. Outside of using social

---

<sup>50</sup> "Human Rights Watch: Burma installation," Ads of the World, accessed on April 1, 2012, [http://adsoftheworld.com/media/outdoor/human\\_rights\\_watch\\_burma\\_installation](http://adsoftheworld.com/media/outdoor/human_rights_watch_burma_installation).



platforms to disseminate reports and blog posts, there is very little participation, and that is a disservice obviously to those who believe that the information its investigations uncover could begin to breakdown society's resistance to social and economic human rights, but also to Human Rights Watch itself, which could benefit greatly by leveraging social media. Similar to petitions, page views are endorsements, likes are generally approvals, and retweets and sharing can perpetuate both of these. It is not enough to remain in a 20<sup>th</sup> Century, top-down newspaper publishing model in the digital age. Human Rights Watch must adapt to remain relevant by investing in social media seriously in a way that leverages its capabilities not just to drive traffic to its site, but to educate citizens of the necessity of human rights legislation.

## Conclusion

I began this study nearly 2 years ago, just before protests erupted around the Middle East, with the goal of defending human rights social media from naysayers like Malcolm Gladwell who argued convincingly in *The New Yorker* that online connections are merely weak ties that are not capable of organizing game-changing protests like those of the Civil Rights Movement. At his time of writing, many people thought he was right. Then came the Arab Spring, which first erupted on social media sites like Twitter and Facebook to normalize the movement before rallying supporters to move to the streets. Gladwell's thesis, though important to the conversation about advancing social media use of social movements, was proved inadequate as weak connections turned strong when united by a common need for radical change.

As I watched the Arab Spring unfold from my desk on the other side of the world (see the image below), I felt both a sense of validation and disappointment - validation because social media proved to be an effective mobilizer, and disappointment because Americans were largely disengaged and uninformed. For them, the protests were the result of an unstable area, not revolutionary demands for human rights. It was at that point that this project was born. I realized that there is a disconnect between what human rights NGOs are fighting for and how they are communicating it to the general public.

Americans have changed, and largely human rights NGOs have not. The ubiquitous adoption of computers and the rise of social media has empowered consumers in ways never before imaginable. Corporations have evolved in response, leveraging digital media to reach the new consumer. Meanwhile, human rights NGOs are still reliant on one-way communication strategies, they are still wedded to campaigns that ignore

supporters' desire to make change, and they largely refuse to embrace for-profit marketing models because they do not know or will not accept that American citizens have been transformed into prosumers, consumers needing to proactively participate in consumption through shared production.

The conclusion of this project is simple: if human rights NGOs are serious about normalizing human rights in the United States, they must adapt their strategies to reach the twenty-first century consumer. It is not as simple as implementing clever campaigns, but rather a fundamental change in organizational structure – everything from corporate communications to employee relations to project management. Without this change, these large organizations will watch membership and resulting donations decrease as Millennials continue to enter adulthood.



This is a photo of myself watching a livestream of protests on Al Jazeera's YouTube channel.

Photo Credit: Clay Duda

This paper has explored the theoretical underpinnings of what makes social media marketing so effective. It has also examined the efforts of highly successful for-profit brands in an effort to glean insights into how those theories are implemented. It is my hope that the result of this project is the start of a conversation among human rights supporters about how to leverage digital cultural trends, specifically through social

media, to normalize and ultimately legislate social and economic human rights.

To do that, we must first reframe human rights in such a way that they are perceived as vital to American citizens. We must make them applicable to daily life, referring not to vague rights, but practical values and needs like equality, privacy, shelter, and food. To ensure that they are reframed in a palatable way, we should embed social and economic human rights into American popular culture through social media campaigns that leverage identity recasting. These campaigns should acknowledge even the smallest efforts by rewarding users for participation. Doing so provides a valuable experience and ensures that the user leaves the effort with a feeling of meaningful contribution. Campaigns should appeal to empathy through visually engaging media to which users can relate. In doing so, we build memories around the experience that sutures our identity to the cause. Further, by providing the means for users to remix, share, or otherwise participate in the media consumption, we provide an exercise in identity formation.

In taking these steps, led by the organizations with the financial means to effectively implement meaningful campaigns, we begin the process of incrementally normalizing human rights. The way forward is not likely an Arab Spring-like revolution, but rather a Civil Rights Movement-like process that takes years of organizing to win popular support. The longer we continue to operate in 20<sup>th</sup> century, hierarchical models that ignore the changing individual's habits, the more we prolong the process.

Despite this urgency, however, there are important issues that this study does not address. Though it has started, there is work to be done around the ethics of social media human rights. Questions about how much information needs to be shared, how human

rights NGOs spend donated funds, how we depict suffering in a remix culture, and how Western human rights NGOs can help combat human rights abuses without imposing Western values all need to be explored quickly.

Another shortcoming of this paper is the lack of time available for collecting data. A more expansive study is needed in order to more fully gauge users' reactions to campaigns in digital spaces in order to more fully understand them. Also, this paper would benefit from an examination of organizational culture and how it has changed over the past decade as corporations have been forced to dramatically change their structure to meet the evolving needs to the prosumer. This includes adding new positions like Online Community Managers and Digital Anthropologists as well as the adaption of responsibilities of each employee all the way up to the CEO to engage with consumers online.

The most significant shortcoming of this project is the speed at which digital culture moves. Indeed, at printing, the best practices detailed in this paper are likely to be obsolete. It is, therefore, necessary to build an online forum for resources, discussion, and research where this conversation can evolve more quickly than it could through academic publishing. In the coming months I will reach out to human rights NGOs, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch specifically, along with academics studying human rights, in an effort to build momentum for creating such a forum for the exchange of ideas.

## Bibliography

- "About PhotoVoice," PhotoVoice, accessed December 8, 2011,  
<http://www.photovoice.org/about/>.
- Amir Hatem Ali, "The Power of Social Media in Developing Nations: New Tools for Closing the Global Digital Divide and Beyond," *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 24 (2011): 185-219.
- "Amnesty International: Amnesty Rescue, Call Of Duty MOD," Ads of the World, accessed April 1, 2012,  
[http://adsoftheworld.com/media/online/amnesty\\_international\\_amnesty\\_rescue\\_call\\_of\\_duty\\_mod](http://adsoftheworld.com/media/online/amnesty_international_amnesty_rescue_call_of_duty_mod).
- "Amnesty International Portugal: Freedom Dictionary," Ads of the World, accessed April 1, 2012,  
[http://adsoftheworld.com/media/online/amnesty\\_international\\_portugal\\_freedom\\_dictionary](http://adsoftheworld.com/media/online/amnesty_international_portugal_freedom_dictionary).
- "Amnesty International: Stones for Sakineh | Ads of the World." Ads of the World.  
[http://adsoftheworld.com/media/online/amnesty\\_international\\_stones\\_for\\_sakineh](http://adsoftheworld.com/media/online/amnesty_international_stones_for_sakineh)  
(accessed April 1, 2012).
- "Amnesty International: Tyrannybook," Ads of the World, accessed April 1, 2012,  
[http://adsoftheworld.com/media/online/amnesty\\_international\\_tyrannybook](http://adsoftheworld.com/media/online/amnesty_international_tyrannybook).
- Arthur, P. (2009). Digital Biography: Capturing Lives Online. *Auto/biography Studies*,24(1), 74-92.
- Belk, R. W., & Tumbat, G. (2005). The Cult of Macintosh. *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, 8(3), 205-217.
- Chilton, M., Rabinowich, J., Council, C., & Breaux, J. (2009). Witnesses to Hunger: Participation through Photovoice to Ensure the Right to Food. *Health and Human Rights*,11(1), 73-85.
- Chong, Daniel. "Five Challenges to Legalizing Economic and Social Rights." *Human Rights Review* 10 (2009): 183-204.
- Christensen, Henrik. "Political Activities on the Internet: Slacktivism or Political Participation by Other Means?." *First Monday*.  
<http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3336/2767>  
(accessed December 8, 2011).
- Dalsgaard, S. (2008). Facework on Facebook: The presentation of self in virtual life and its role in the US elections. *Anthropology Today*, 24(6), 8-12.

- Diamond, L. (2010). Liberation Technology. *Journal of Democracy*, 21(3), 69-83.
- Douglas, S. J. (2006). The Turn Within: The Irony of Technology in a Globalized World. *American Quarterly*, 58(3), 619-638.
- Etling, B., Faris, R., & Palfrey, J. (2002). Political Change in the Digital Age: The Fragility and Promise of Online Organizing. *SAIS Review*, 30(2), 37-49.
- Evans, W. Douglas. (2008). "Social Marketing Campaigns and Children's Media Use." *The Future of Children*, 18(1), 181-203.
- G. Ritzer and N. Jurgenson, "Production, Consumption, Prosumption: The Nature of Capitalism in the age of the Digital 'Prosumer,'" *Journal of Consumer Culture* 10, no. 1 (2010): 13-36.
- Gladwell, Malcolm. "Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted." *The New Yorker* 4 Oct. 2010: 42-49. Web.
- Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York [N.Y.: Doubleday, 1990. Print.
- Gregory, S., & Zimmerman, P. (2010, November 22). The Ethical Engagements of Human Rights Social Media : Video For Change. *Witness: Video For Change*. Retrieved September 2, 2011, from <http://blog.witness.org/2010/11/the-ethical-engagements-of-human-rights-social-media/>
- Hesford, W. S., & Shuman, A. (2011). Emergent Human Rights Contexts: Greg Constantine's "Nowhere People" . *Humanity* , 2(2), 315-326.
- Hill, S., Provost, F., & Volinsky, C. (2006). Network-Based Marketing: Identifying Likely Adopters via Consumer Networks. *Statistical Science*, 21(2), 256-276.
- Hon, L., & Grunig, J. (1999). *Guidelines for Measuring Relationships in Public Relations*. Maryland: Institute for Public Relations.
- "Human Rights Watch | About." Human Rights Watch . <http://www.hrw.org/about> (accessed April 1, 2012).
- "Human Rights Watch: Burma installation | Ads of the World." Ads of the World. [http://adsoftheworld.com/media/outdoor/human\\_rights\\_watch\\_burma\\_installation](http://adsoftheworld.com/media/outdoor/human_rights_watch_burma_installation) (accessed April 1, 2012).
- "The Klout Debate: Should You Stay or Should You Go and Does It Matter?" BlogWorld & New Media Expo Blog. <http://www.blogworld.com/2011/12/07/the-klout-debate-should-you-stay-or-should-you-go-and-does-it-matter/> (accessed April 1, 2012).

- Landsberg, Alison. *Prosthetic Memory: the Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. New York: Columbia UP, 2004. Print.
- Lotan, Gilad, Erhardt Graeff, Mike Ananny, Devin Gaffney, Ian Pearce, and danah boyd. "The Arab Spring| The Revolutions Were Tweeted: Information Flows during the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions." *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 1375-1405.
- Manovich, L. (2009). The Practice of Everyday (Media) Life: From Mass Consumption to Mass Cultural Production?. *Critical Inquiry*, 35(2), 33-44.
- Marwick, A. and boyd, d. (2010). "I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience." *New Media and Society*. Published online before print, July 7, 2010.
- McLuhan, M. (1994). *Understanding media: the extensions of man*. Michigan: MIT Press.
- Miller, N. (2008). Projecting Hope and Making Reel Change in Africa. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 30(3), 827-838.
- Mittal, Anuradha, and Peter Rosset. *America needs human rights*. Oakland, Calif.: Food First Books, 1999.
- Passy, F., & Giugni, M. (2001). Social Networks and Individual Perceptions: Explaining Differential Participation in Social Movements. *Sociological Forum*, 16(1), 123-153.
- Qualman, Erik. *Socialnomics: How Social Media Transforms the Way We Live and Do Business*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2011. Print.
- Roberts, Donald F., and Ulla G. Foehr. "Trends in Media Use." *The Future of Children* 18.1 (2008): 11-37. Print.
- Rodgers, Kathleen. "When do opportunities become trade-offs for social movement organizations? assessing media impact in the global human rights movement." *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 34, no. 4 (2009): 1087-1114.
- Shirky, Clay. *Here Comes Everybody: the Power of Organizing without Organizations*. New York: Penguin, 2008. Print.
- Subrahmanyam, Kaveri, and Patricia Greenfield. "Online Communication and Adolescent Relationships." *The Future of Children* 18.1 (2008): 119-46. *JSTOR*. Web. 31 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20053122>>.
- "The Sociagility Top 50." Sociagility. <http://www.sociagility.com/top50/> (accessed December 9, 2011).



Turkle, Sherry. *Alone together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less From Each Other*. New York: Basic Books, 2011.

Westlake, E.J. "Friend Me If You Facebook: Generation Y and Performative Surveillance." *TDR/The Drama Review* 52.4 (2008): 21-40. *California State University*. 2010. Web. 23 Nov. 2010.  
<<http://www.csun.edu/~vcspc00g/301/facebook.pdf>>.