

When we think of social media sites like MySpace or Facebook we usually do not think of resistance movements fighting for justice and an end to conflict. In the mainstream media when we hear of a social media sites it is primarily the very negative aspects of these sites such as sexual predators and cyber bullying that get brought up. Today society is plagued with hyper-individualism that is exasperated by social media sites, but do they have the potential to be more than just spaces that promote consumerism and cultural hegemony? Can these sites reflect the real state of the world not just the constructed veil that blinds us of the ills of society? Can these sites be used to build networks of resistance that can influence the current conflicts of today? Imagine how the past movements of worker's, civil, and women's rights movements would have looked if they had the technological resources that we have today! Just imagine how Dr. Martin Luther King or Cesar Chavez would have utilized Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and YouTube. Can social media sites be used as a tool to build social movements that struggle for conflict resolution and justice?

Society is rife with conflict. War, racism, sexism, and homophobia both here in the United States as well as globally. In a time of such great conflict and with the rise of technology it seems that resistance to these social plagues would be greater now than ever. This is not the case. The Left is in a state of total disarray and our society is in a state of increasing class and cultural conflict and yet social movements seem to be decreasing in size and strength. As the left is rebuilding social media sites will play a part in this process both as an effective organizing/rallying tool as well as an powerful force for dissemination of propaganda.

Social media sites offer a new rejuvenating force that is already making an impact on new social movements today. Nancy Scola demonstrates the new power of social media sites by writing “Facebook is revolutionizing the way collective political and social actions are organized today, blowing the doors off old models of how volunteer lists are amassed, funds raised, and messages honed and delivered ” (Scola). Social media sites are creating new outlets for youth to organize and resist. They have millions of members world wide, “81% of members of online communities use the Internet to participate in social causes, up from 75% in 2007, finds a survey by the Center for the Digital Future at University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication” (Swartz). This is a staggering statistic considering Facebook alone has 400 million accounts worldwide and an estimated 120 million in the US alone (Pearson). This means that not only is there an incredible community of people becoming socially aware and engaged but the number is on the rise. Just because there is high number of people starting to support this new trend of online activism doesn't mean that they are all going to be interested serious organizing or protests. This is actually quite the opposite. Take for example an anti Prop 8 demonstration what was organized on the Internet last March. Over 100,000 people were expected to demonstrate in San Francisco and only 10,000 people actually did (Swartz).

Does this mean that Social media sites are ineffective means of organizing? Absolutely not! Only getting 10 percent of 100,000 thousand people to demonstrate is not a failure by any means. This should be looked at as having a demonstration of 10,000 people with 90,000 people standing in solidarity. It should absolutely not be expected to get everyone who says there going to be at a protest or demonstration. Organizing

protests over social media sites has actually been a very effective tool of mobilization. This is typified by the anti-prop 8 demonstrations that were held around the country after the passage of the ballot measure that banned same-sex marriage even though the California Supreme Court had legalized it earlier in the year. Anti Prop 8 and LGBTQI activism in general has been on the cutting edge of using social media as a tool for organizing. In San Francisco people were outraged by the passage of Prop 8. In just two days a protest that drew over 20,000 people was organized primarily on Facebook and other social media sites (Boyette). It is a truly remarkable feat to organize a protest that draws 20,000 people but to do it in two days is absolutely astounding. This was one of the defining moments of a new era of activism both for LGBTQ rights as well as for all other social movements. In a similar fashion an anti Prop 8 protest in Seattle, which was organized primarily on Facebook, about a month after the one in San Francisco drew close to 10,000 people. The primary organizer had never even been to a protest let alone organized one (Boyette).

Activism on social networks is by no means restricted to the US but is a global phenomenon. In Guatemala in 2009 a movement was started on Facebook to call for the resignation of the President of Guatemala. The campaign was focused on educating people by having links and interviews on their Facebook page. However, this movement did not stay online but moved offline into the streets. This Facebook site “helped organize massive protests demanding justice and an end to violence” (Harlow). There is perhaps no region in the world that as affected by this new phenomenon of social media sites being used as a tool to end conflict and promote peace and justice as the Middle East. According to the New York Times:

“In most countries in the Arab world, Facebook is now one of the 10 most-visited Web sites, and in Egypt it ranks third, after Google and Yahoo. About one in nine Egyptians has Internet access, and around 9 percent of that group are on Facebook — a total of almost 800,000 members” (Shapiro).

Considering the repression of free speech in many countries in the Middle East, like Egypt, the power of social media sites and especially Facebook are having an absolutely tremendous impact on societies as a whole.

Egypt, which has been under the Mubarak dictatorship since the beginning of the 1980’s has limited free speech and freedom of assembly dramatically by declaring a permanent state of emergency,

“An estimated 18,000 Egyptians are imprisoned under the law, which allows the police to arrest people without charges, allows the government to ban political organizations and makes it illegal for more than five people to gather without a license from the government. Newspapers are monitored by the Ministry of Information and generally refrain from directly criticizing Mubarak. And so for young people in Egypt, Facebook, which allows users to speak freely to one another and encourages them to form groups, is irresistible as a platform not only for social interaction but also for dissent” (Shapiro).

Facebook would soon spark the largest social movement that has taken place in Egypt in recent years that would not only challenge the current power structure but actually threaten to tear it down altogether. In 2008 there had been several strikes in Egypt protesting unemployment and inflation, although these strikes were supported by a broad section of the Egyptian population the protests had not been coordinated (Shapiro). There

was another strike being planned in Mahalla al-Kobra, in order to support this two Egyptian activists started the April 6<sup>th</sup> (this was the day of the strike) Facebook page. Soon after starting up the page had 76,000 ‘friends’ and was soon supported by a variety of different Egyptian labor and other civil society groups. What had started as a support for a small strike snow threatened to turn into a general strike and maybe even revolution! On April 6<sup>th</sup> the police severely repressed the protesters killing at least 3, but even in the face of such brutality it did not stop thousands of Egyptians protesting in the streets (Shapiro). The mobilization effort was tremendously successful not just because the Facebook but also because of the organizing that went on by groups outside of the cyber world who risked imprisonment and much worse. (Shapiro)

Social media sites absolutely hold the potential to and are changing the way activists, grass roots organization, and civil society institutions operate and promote peace. One the most effective aspects of social media may be their ability to disseminate propaganda for grass roots organizations and civil society at large. However, it can not be taken for granted that social media sites are always going to work in the benefit of the people. Social media sites are also used by governments, corporations, and other powerful institutions in the dissemination of propaganda and the promotion of cultural hegemony. A clear example of this is how the Israeli Government uses the social media site YouTube. One IDF spokesperson when speaking to Isreali newspaper Ha’Aretz said “The blogosphere and the new media are basically a war zone in a battle for world opinion,” (Allen). The IDF created its own YouTube page at the same time it launched operation cast lead,

“That was when the IDF unveiled its own YouTube channel in late December 2008, at the same time it launched its Operation Cast Lead war on Gaza and began uploading grainy, heavily captioned clips of aerial footage purporting to prove that the destruction visited upon Gaza was directed at legitimate military targets rather than civilian infrastructure” (Allen).

Israel once again used this tool during the massacre of the Gaza Flotilla in 2010 which left 9 activists dead when they attacked the Mavi Marmara. The YouTube video that Israel posted of their assault has well over one million views while the video of raw footage of the Mavi Marmara that was smuggled out by a Cultures of Resistance filmmaker only has around 300,000 views (Allen). There is no monopoly on social media sites. It is available to any person or any entity to use and use effectively. Social media sites absolutely level the playing field in some respects, as has been demonstrated most notoriously by Wiki Leaks, but they also create more challenges. There is absolutely a war being fought over public opinion and social media sites are the new battlefields.

Social media sites have already changed the way activists, grassroots networks, corporations, governments, and individuals talk and organize around issues of peace and conflict and we have only begun to see their full potential. It is going to be fascinating to see how social media sites develop and change over time. Social media sites provide so much for both the forces that wish to change society and promote an end to conflict as well as the traditional power structures that profit from and promote conflict. Social networking sites provide many functions such as the dissemination of propaganda as well as tools for organizing. Within this fight over the direction of social media sites one thing is clear, it is up to those who wish to promote peace to be ever vigilant and ingenious in

creating the direction we wish to go in. Social media sites can build broad networks of activists and build solidarity all over the US and all over the World and in the process play a key role in re-energizing and rebuilding social movements.

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