E Pluribus Burning:

Igniting Positive Energy and Spreading Solidarity in the Polarized American Social Media Landscape.

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Introduction

Have you logged into Facebook today? According to the near-incomprehensibly successful company, an average of 1.09 billion unique users obsessively login to their Facebook accounts on any given day. A recent study conducted by Pew Research Center estimates that domestically, nearly two-thirds (~65%) of *all* American adults use some form of social networking site - with an overwhelming 90% usage rate amongst those under 30 years of age. Furthermore, Pew's studies inclusively account for the roughly 15% of adults who do not have internet access. Looking at these numbers, perhaps it is more appropriate to ask if anyone is still reading after mentioning checking your Facebook profile in the first sentence. Nevertheless, I must forge ahead for the dedicated few still with me (most likely those with dead batteries and no internet connectivity) because social media is much more than a place to *LOL* about cat memes and *like* pictures of your *BFF's* dinner.

Social media, in its very existence, establishes a global forum for interpersonal communication. A worldwide connection facilitates both a rapid sharing of ideas and information, as well as an exposure to firsthand accounts of global events and their cultural impact. Ideas and desires can organize and evolve into grassroots movements successfully defeating social injustices. Policies can be changed, oppressive regimes overthrown, and cultural identities transformed with the fundamental power inherent in mass communication. Unlike traditional forms of mass media, however, social media allows us to go beyond simple acknowledgement of global issues by offering an opportunity to interact with those directly affected by them. Solidarity can be created with a few clicks of a mouse or swipes of a finger. Supporting this assertion, sociologist and author, Shanshan Du, recently noticed a shift in Chinese national identity which she directly attributes to the phenomenon of widespread social media solidarity (and proverbial #hashtags).

Igniting Positive Energy

In the 2012 Olympic games, several Chinese community leaders and local heroes were asked to represent China in the ceremonial torch relay, an honor usually reserved exclusively for the country's most elite and popular athletes. Contrasting traditional choices for torchbearers, these local heroes were not chosen for their public recognition or their athletic prowess. Instead, they were chosen for performing routine acts of charity, generosity, and selflessness in their communities. Cancer survivors turned awareness activists; relentlessly determined blood donors; "grassroots philanthropists", living only with basic necessities after donating nearly

all of their income. The humanitarian torchbearers became a symbol of national unity as Chinese citizens flocked to social media to rally behind them with overwhelming support. Within the first few days of the torch relay, a simple phrase, translated as "ignite positive energy", was used nearly 500,000 times on popular Chinese microblogs (think Twitter). Within the next year, nearly 105 million more *original* usages of this phrase appeared on China's most popular microblogging site, Sina Weibo, alone. Coupled with millions of further reposts across other popular Chinese social media platforms, "ignite positive energy" turned into a grassroots ideology embracing principles of "kindness, love of humanity, value of truth, and beauty in life." Gaining traction in everyday vernacular, "ignite positive energy" eventually found a way into the Chinese president's vocabulary, effectively demonstrating the widespread desire for a new "China Dream" - one glorifying national community and solidarity. Using social media, a simple ideological phrase helped usher in a new Chinese identity honoring achievements of harmony and solidarity.

Similarly, Americans must spark and nurture a twin flame engulfing our own identity. Thanks to astronomical advances in technology over the past twenty years, sharing our voices and opinions with one another has never been easier. We are now able to intimately interact with a global community without leaving our homes. Therefore, the presence we build online not only shapes perceptions of us as individuals, it also shapes the perception of us as a community; as Americans. Being one of the most influential nations in the Free World, it is our sovereign duty to harness the power found in social media responsibly. We must use social media to fight injustice by spreading positive ideas of solidarity, rather than magnify our differences and promote division. We must expose ourselves to different viewpoints and cultural enlightenment, rather than seek exclusively self-affirming outlets for information (known as "ideological silos"). We must speak and act with decency and poise as we strive to ignite positive energy, for our presence on social media is little more than a direct reflection of our national identity.

Social Media Defined

Before moving forward, let us clarify a few key terms as they have been (and will continue to be) used throughout this writing. If you are like me, the phrase 'social media' conjures up images of blue thumbs and little birds. While Facebook and Twitter are undeniably the two most predominant social media platforms throughout the Western Hemisphere and Europe, it is important to note that their usage is limited (and in some cases, censored) amongst several Asian nations. Taking this into consideration, the term social media will pertain to the overall landscape of all digital platforms propelled by user-generated content. Any and every digital platform providing users with abilities to post, comment, share, like, or otherwise interact with content uploaded by themselves or other users, is social media. As all forms of social media are intrinsically

interconnected via the Internet, ideas and trending topics flow amongst the differing platforms with relative ease. With some governments, China for example, engaging in active Internet censorship, proprietary social media platforms exist in these countries as alternatives to Facebook, Twitter, and other censored social media platforms. Battling active attempts of censorship, more often than not, viral events and ideas find a way to spread throughout many different channels of social media, regardless of opposition. Following this reasoning, the term social media will be used as a broad and abstract way of referencing the dozens of platforms for user-generated content found throughout the world.

Scope of Use

Having a clear definition of social media, we can begin to quantify the dramatic increase in use throughout the past decade. According to the aforementioned study from Pew Research Center, only 7% of all American adults used social networking sites in 2005. Social media usage rate has grown a staggering 825% over the past decade (for all American adults), providing sufficient evidence supporting the claim that as the Internet becomes increasingly accessible, we favor using it to connect with one another via social media. Currently, smartphones are undergoing a transition from luxury items to commodities; providing internet access to new people in even newer places. With the opportunity to connect in our literal pockets, we have again chosen to use this ability for social media. Going back to numbers provided by Facebook itself, of their 1.09 billion daily users, 989 million of them connected with mobile devices. With growing affordability, smartphones are beginning to overcome the only obstacle separating us from social media: accessibility. Our current level of interpersonal connection would have seemed no more than a fairy tale to the leaders of every political movement prior to Alan Turing's theories of computation.

Mass Media Throughout History

Historians routinely study the role technological advancements play in the success of political and social movements. Historical media scholar, Clay Shirky, likens the power of social media to that of the printing press and US Postal Service,

> Just as Luther adopted the newly practical printing press to protest against the Catholic Church, and the American revolutionaries synchronized their beliefs using the postal service that Benjamin Franklin had designed, today's dissident movements will use any means possible to frame their views and coordinate their actions. It would be impossible to describe the Moldovan Communist Party's

loss of Parliament after the 2009 elections without discussing the use
of cell phones and online tools by its opponents to mobilize.

Forget "any means possible"; with the near-omnipresence of the Internet, and therefore social media, nearly *all* means are possible. Imagine telling Benjamin Franklin that he could pull a small piece of parchment from his pocket, quill some ink, and then post a message made available to millions of followers within seconds. I'm sure Franklin would ponder the potential (and ultimate dangers) of this power briefly, before laughing himself out of his bar stool. The current level of interpersonal connection provided by social media, understandably, may once have seemed inconceivable. However, this overwhelming scale of unity is now a routine part of our reality. Similar to other major historical advancements in communication, social media has demonstrated an ability to turn fairy tales of social justice into truth; playing a defining role in numerous, successful grassroots political movements in the recent decade.

Social Media & Grassroots Movements

One of the earliest examples of social media's role in promoting social justice, as explored by Shirky, took place in 2001 during the impeachment trial of Philippine President Joseph Estrada. When a corrupt congress voted to suppress incriminating evidence against him, over a million Filipinos gathered in downtown Manila protesting the decision in the following days. Organized with cell phones and text messages, this public demonstration forced legislators to reverse their decision and permit the inclusion of the stricken evidence. Soon afterwards, Estrada was removed from office marking "the first time that social media had helped force out a national leader. Estrada himself blamed 'the text-messaging generation' for his downfall" (Shirky). Upon influencing its first tangible political uprising, social media demonstrated an unrivaled ability to promote positive change - one beginning during social media's infancy, while still in its most primitive form.

Further examples of the ability for social media to organize grassroots movements and political change have been seen during the Arab Spring uprisings and recent Egyptian revolution. As frustrations concerning poverty and unemployment in Egypt and Tunisia fueled flames of discontent to new heights, social activist, Mohamed Bouazizi, burned himself alive in front of a government building. Sparking a wave of protests, sociologist Susannah Vila noted the important role social media played in helping Bouazizi ignite his own figurative flame throughout the rest of the region,

It didn't matter that Bouazizi himself wasn't a frequent internet user,
much less an online activist. What mattered was that news of his action

spread rapidly from rural Tunisia into the cities, infuriating a bulging

youth population that was already on the verge of fury.

Coordinated by social media, Bouazizi's demonstration sparked dozens of protests and served as a battle-cry for a neglected people. By the time the government attempted to quell protests by shutting down the Internet and social media, it was too late. A now motivated generation, accustomed to the immediacy and availability of social media, were only further motivated when faced with new techniques of government oppression. In 2011, both Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak were ousted from power by a series of demonstrations organized, in large part, with social media. Serving as examples of the unrivaled influence social media has on our current global society, it is now nearly impossible to deny the power widespread communication can wield in fighting injustice by promoting political change.

Ideological Polarization

Acknowledging an inherent beauty found in human solidarity, a recent report has found Americans using social media in disheartening ways. In a 2014 study of just over 10,000 Americans, Pew Research Center determined that our nation is more ideologically polarized now, than at any point in the past 30 years. With an increasing number of viewpoints moving towards the political left and right extremes, sentiments of distrust for the opposing side have skyrocketed. Roughly 30% on either side (both liberal and conservative) view their opponents as "a threat to the nation's well-being." We aren't talking about a cordial disagreement here; a fully-fledged war between ideological extremists is taking place within our borders. In spite of advancements facilitating solidarity, Americans have, instead, chosen to use social media to connect only with like-minded individuals in a self-affirming effort to validate their own opinions. These "ideological silos" are becoming increasingly common in our nation, directly hindering the unsurpassed potential for social media to promote human solidarity. No longer can we further division and harbor feelings of distrust towards our fellow countrymen by using social media for biased self-affirmation.

Conclusion

The potential power social media has to ignite positive energy and positive social change is the greatest wonder of the technological world we are likely to see in our lifetimes. Never before in the history of humankind has a global opportunity for interpersonal connection and solidarity been so readily available. As seen throughout history, widespread communication often single-handedly determines the success or failure of righteous social movements. It is up to us, as Americans, to ignite positive energy and promote responsible social media usage before we are engulfed by the flames of polarized intolerance. We must not use social media to interact

exclusively with like-minded individuals. Rather, we must use social media as a global forum for civil conversation between all viewpoints. We must not glorify what separates us as a nation. Instead, we must remember the same traits that make us different also make us stronger. We must use social media to ignite positive energy and spread solidarity. We must unite to promote understanding and positive social change, for using social media in any other manner, is simply un-American.

E Pluribus Unum - "Out of many, one."

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