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Txt Msgs 4 Afrca: Social Justice Communities in a Digital World

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As promoters of social justice movements adopt digital technologies in order to communicate with their members, it is necessary to interrogate the rhetorical and ethical effects of these new technologies. If connection to a justice movement is as easy as typing and reading a few key phrases, can that connection be expected to prompt the kind of action required for social change to occur? Using student produced writing and responses to websites promoting social justice causes, this essay discusses emerging digital and cultural literacies that demand a re-imagining of rhetorical appeals for both membership in and action by social justice organizations. Although at first glance the electronic environment seems antagonistic to the goals of uniting people toward a cause, once one begins to closely examine what the new platforms for electronic communications are and how they are being used to form interpersonal connections, one finds that they are ideal for the kind of community building past voices of social justice deemed necessary for successful social transformation. Despite any perceived fragility of virtual awareness, digital technology is an extremely beneficial tool for civic engagement, capable of fostering conversation and writing about justice issues in a meaningful and rhetorically sophisticated manner, and individuals can learn to use their voices to shape the kind of inclusive communities they desire socially into those that also seek justice.

Digital technology has completely revised the way we access and interpret information, making it necessary to learn new literacy skills in order to keep up with, organize, and react to multiple forms



of data that are not necessarily linear in presentation or comprehension. One has to wonder to what extent this evolution of technology affects how messages of social justice are constructed and received. Although there are many social justice organizations, particularly at the grass roots level, that still rely primarily on print media to spread their message, an electronic presence of some sort, even if it is just an e-mail address, is a necessary feature of any successful organization's informational material. As promoters of social justice movements adopt digital, social media technologies such as tweeting, texting, blogging, and Facebook in order to communicate with their members, it is necessary to interrogate the rhetorical and ethical effects of these new technologies. If making a connection to a justice movement is as easy as typing in or reading a few key phrases, can that connection be expected to prompt the kind of action required for social change to occur?

One of the key points of entry into this inquiry is to examine an essential facet of all social justice campaigns, building community. Social justice movements have always relied on pinpointing individuals dedicated not only to identifying with an issue, but also taking action toward the resolution of a problem. More often than not in traditional, large scale social justice campaigns the "problem" is falsely represented as the people who have fallen victim to political oppression, poverty, disease, and/or famine. They exist as marginalized others (objectified subjects) in the process, sponsored by a community of kind strangers with limited interaction between the two. One of the reasons these movements often fail to produce lasting change is because of the lack of interaction of the parties involved. Without dialogue, without a truly interactive community, the root of the issues causing the injustices these people endure is rarely fully exposed, let alone addressed. This sort of approach is heavy on emotional appeal as it must continually motivate individuals to donate their name, time, and /or money to something beyond their usual circle of community. However, an enduring and older model of social justice insists that the site of action is in the community itself. Social change occurs as individuals interact in a community of equals



and reoccurs as the community then interacts with the society in which it exists, bringing more individuals into relationship with each other and prompting a further sense of mutual responsibility toward the self and others as members of the same community.¹ There is a shift in emphasis of the rhetoric from reliance on the individual's emotional connection toward members of an outside group, to a sense of credibility, or ethos, of the individual member of a community toward the community as a whole and of the community towards its individual members. Although it may seem counter-intuitive for those who view the internet as an isolating medium and question the strength of electronic bonds, the ability to connect digitally is triggering a resurgence of that older model of community and justice, especially among the digitized generation.

If we want to capture the potential of what this re-emergence of the communal model means, we need to examine its historic root and how it is being re-envisioned through our engagement with ever evolving digital technologies. What specifically sparked this connection for me is a *New York Times* article which uses the term “ambient awareness” to describe a type of virtual “co-presence of others” that develops over time through multiple text messages and “tweeting.” The awareness is developed not by any one tweet, but by the presence of the person that materializes over time (Thompson).² This idea of bringing a person into being, into personhood, is fascinating, and it forges a connection between today's social networking with the justice rhetoric of the past.

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- 1 An example of a larger organization that uses this approach, at least in part, is Habitat for Humanity. Those receiving aid interact with those providing it by participating in the building of their own home. However, the organization also hosts a massive fund raising campaign and many of its supporters never meet the families they are helping.
 - 2 The article, written in the fall of 2008, was the first I had heard of Twitter. I took the article to my college classes, and none of them had heard of it either. By the next term, everyone knew what it was, and by the next fall, my students were absolutely incredulous at the thought that it was an unknown just a year prior. Testament to how quickly a technology can change even our own sense of how we communicate.



“Personhood” is a term one of the champions of social justice from the beginning of the 20th century cherished – and she was very savvy in using the technology of her time.

I am referring to Dorothy Day, an accomplished journalist and well known pacifist. From being jailed for supporting the suffragettes and participating in anti-war movements to marching with Cesar Chavez, Day’s lifelong engagement with social justice causes reads like a chronicle of the history of twentieth century social activism. Having worked on several papers supporting various labor and political movements, she was well prepared in 1932 to use that form of literacy to co-create with Peter Maurin a newspaper, *The Catholic Worker*, to spread the message of peace, voluntary poverty, and what is most important for this discussion, the absolute necessity of community in the formation and realization of the individual. Her rhetoric is grounded by the need to create community and a steadfast adherence to respecting the individual, no matter his/her belief system, class, gender, or race. She claimed the community was the “basis for man’s mutual aid” and in providing for the needs of the individual, one was practicing the works of peace. Indeed, she asserted, it was “the *only* way to obtain peace” (“Cornell-Day”).

Day embraced the philosophy of Personalism as developed by French Catholic philosophers Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) and Emmanuel Mounier (1905-1950). Personalism celebrates the dignity, wonder, and complexity of each person as a created being, and opposes any system that diminishes the individual.³ Maritain believed that “the individual, that is man considered in the material aspect, was at the service of the community, which was in turn at the service of the person” (Kelly 46).

3 There is also a Protestant American form of Personalism developed and promoted by the work of Brightman and de Wolfe at Boston University. Although both schools of thought agree on this point, the American version is more theological in nature, revolving around a discussion about the personality of God and how this personality is expressed in human beings. That form of the philosophy/theology, in addition to the African American sermonic tradition, was crucial to the development of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr’s rhetoric.



Mounier's *Personalist Manifesto* lays out a series of reforms toward the development of communities that would be based on a lifestyle of simplicity and voluntary poverty. The authentic “person” is one who through adherence to the Christ given mandate to love others as you do yourself would abandon him or herself—his or her sense of individuality, or material self—in order to serve others (Bokenkotter 359).

Day was able to promote these challenging ideas and create a sense of community through the newspaper and the establishment of Catholic Worker houses – physical locations where like minded people could gather to build community within the structure of a house or farm while also providing much needed aid to those around them. Despising the act of impersonal charity, Day insisted that to help others you had to become like them, live with them, and create community that would then affect the larger society that the community existed in by its presence and expansion. Considering the dedication it took to build and maintain this still existent and vibrant network of real world locations and comparing it to the kind of digital networking now available, one could easily become convinced that things have drastically deteriorated and that mere blogging, texting, and tweeting is not sufficient to build the kind of momentum needed to start, let alone sustain, a movement. However, once one begins to closely examine not only what the new platforms for electronic communications are and more importantly, how they are being used to form interpersonal connections, one finds that they offer a new incarnation and application of Personalism which is ideal for the kind of community building necessary for successful social transformation.

As the functionality of the Internet advances, we find what James Porter has referred to as an “interactivity continuum” that runs from passive interaction with information—based on older models of text which offer only access to data, whatever that data might be—to critical engagement and co-production of knowledge with the designers of the website (222). It is the ability to critically engage with information through writing and the ability to upload sound and video—activities that blur the distinction



between audience, speaker, and even subject—that moves the Internet from being just another medium for consumerism to having the potential to create something more, what Porter terms “a gift-exchange economy” (225). Instead of being motivated by capitalism and the urge to make money, this economy is based on an innately human desire to share resources that are valuable with perceived members of the individual’s community; as the community becomes enriched by the individual’s contribution, the individual also receives the benefit of being in the community. As evidence of this gift-exchange economy, Porter points to numerous websites created by academics to compile shared information, as well as the massive presence of Wikipedia (225).

YouTube and Facebook work in much the same way. Although eventually their initial designers made a great deal of money from those sites, they were first conceived as systems to stay connected with other people and share data, be it informative, personal, or just entertaining, with networked “friends” or those who because of mutual interest may want to view someone else’s creativity. Although there are exceptions, the majority of the users of these sites are not accessing them for primarily financial reasons. Interestingly, this potential to create an interactive community based on a re-imagined economic system where everyone shares resources is not all that different from the basic ideas of Dorothy Day and other icons of social justice who have called for similar communal and economic reforms. The sharing is not centered on a faith based mandate of course, (although that is present in some cases as well) but rather the impulse to trade ideas and laughter, to find some sort of connection with others, to make your mark as a member of some sort of community.

There may be a hesitation to conflate virtual forms of community and the potential for reformation of economic ideas with what is possible in the real world; however, there are already examples of this crossover occurring. Although it is not without its critics, one of the largest, most successful examples of an organization that is willing to



forge ahead into the electronic frontier is the ONE Campaign – a non-partisan, global online and real-world presence in efforts to end extreme poverty and disease. Introduced in 2005, the wrinkle in the rhetoric of the ONE campaign is that it is not operating to collect donations, but rather voices – individuals who through technology such as texting, blogging, e-mail, and the quaint act of making phone calls, unite to put pressure on legislative bodies to support and pass promised policies concerning foreign aid (One.org). However, technologically advanced forms of petitioning are only one aspect of the campaign, its strength and its viability rely on the organization’s ability to create an interactive community involved in numerous layers of communication and activity.

Since its introduction, over 2 million people have signed the ONE proclamation and electronically joined the effort to “Make Poverty History.” In addition to its own particular focus on Africa and the worldwide HIV/AIDS crisis, ONE.org has become a hub of over fifty linked partner organizations working together toward the goal of ending extreme poverty and providing medical aid, clean water, and food to those around the globe. The web pages are always in motion featuring scrolling headlines, roll over informational links, and other forms of animation/video to highlight the newest campaign. The current push is “No child born with HIV by 2015” and is presented as writing on the very pregnant bellies of three young women of different ethnic backgrounds, Caucasian, Asian, and African, who have pulled their plain black tee shirts up to reveal the message. The message of this image is that this is an issue that affects all people, not just a marginalized “other,” and in working together we can meet a seemingly impossible goal. Next to them is a link to watch the video and sign the petition (Hot Topics). This is common on the site; for each visual bit of rhetoric there is linked information and a way to instantly respond to the appeal, a means for the community to instantly connect to affect change. The site, continually updated with text, graphics, news-feeds, videos, Blogs, and Twitter posts is highly developed along Porter’s “interactivity continuum” allowing multiple points of connectivity between the organization, the audience,



and most importantly, those receiving aid, the ones who in a traditional campaign would be objectified subjects.

Because of its use of technology, the website is an excellent example of the tremendous flexibility inherent to digital media and so I clicked to it during sessions of my freshmen writing classes to demonstrate a few issues with technology and visual rhetoric, asking them what struck them the most about the ONE campaign's presentation. To my surprise, the fact that you can link the site to Facebook was the first thing commented on in every discussion. While I was looking at the structure of the site and how it linked to the blogs and the videos, searching for evidence in a very textual way for the typical restatement of all social justice rhetoric, the power of one voice – your voice – my students immediately saw and reacted to the little icon that allows them to join this community to their own. It became clear to me at that moment that I had found myself on the other side of the generation gap, failing to understand a key shift in the way the virtual world is being read and reconstructed by its users. I realized I needed my students' help to truly understand how the use of the pronouns "you/your" shifted from the singular to the plural.

When I asked why it was so important to be able to link the site to their own personal web presence, one of my students replied, "The internet is all about community. Without my communities, I wouldn't be able to navigate the web. It's too big, too much garbage." Another replied, "I need to connect to a group to care. Really, what can I do on my own?" These 48 young adults (18 – 24 yrs old) were extremely resistant to appeals for money because they A) don't have any to give and B) have grown up in a culture where throwing money at a problem is still common, though it rarely works. Even the most casual classroom discussion about these issues revealed that interactive elements are key to attracting a digitally literate audience to a cause. Students uniformly indicated the desire for a voice in the process through the ability to comment on blogs, to view and post videos, to link the organization to their Facebook pages, or join a texting community. These comments were thought provoking. Although



these students were not surrendering their own sense of agency, it became clear that they preferred to join their individual interests to those with similar interests. Motivation for action was grounded in connection with others. Although anecdotal, these conversations support the reemergence of the communal model and the preference for egalitarian leadership and team building that are noted traits of millennial learners.⁴

In order to go beyond these initial conversations, students formed small groups that selected one organization and did an in-depth analysis of that organization's digital presence, including a discussion of what appealed to them as audience and what seemed dated or ineffective. Although there was quite a bit of variety in the types of organizations students chose to analyze—exploring everything from groups dedicated to environmental issues and immigrant rights to health related cancer and AIDS research foundations, and more traditional organizations like Feed the Children, World Vision, Make a Wish, and Habitat for Humanity—the consensus of their primary inquiry was that the continuous electronic presence of a social cause communicated via texting, Facebook news feeds, and e-mail alerts, can lead to a strengthened awareness of the “other” and increase the effectiveness of rhetoric in moving the individual toward initial action; however, all the groups conceded that there needs to be a consideration of strategies that move the audience beyond the first urge to align themselves with a cause.

Through further writing, research, and discussion, we found that social justice appeals, particularly those which seek hunger or medical relief, have always relied on empowering the individual and prompting her toward action to provide aid to the “other.” The primary issue many students raised in their analysis of several online sites is that although

4 For information on the millennial generation see Michael D. Coomes and Richard DeBard, eds., *Serving the Millennial Generation: New Directions for Student Services*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.
Neil Howe, “Understanding the millennial generation,” *Independent*, (2003).



the most successful organizations effectively merge the idea of speaker (organization) and audience, far too often the subjects, those receiving aid, are still presented as existing outside of the community. Although drawn by the pathos of stories and images of the ravages of extreme poverty or illness, students are much more interested in the organizations, like the ONE campaign, that allow them to virtually link to everyone involved in the rhetorical situation. Sites that demonstrate positive outcomes for everyone in the community - the individual, the organizers of local and national events, those in the field, and those receiving aid - were ranked as most effective.

Application of this (re)emerging communal ideal is best demonstrated through the direct comparison of two organizations, World Vision and The Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS foundation as they both work in part with the same populations, AIDS patients in Africa. Founded in 1950, World Vision is the older of the two and has a broader reach. A faith based organization, it employs over 40,000 people around the globe, 97 percent of whom work in their home countries so that local needs can be better understood and met. Whereas many Evangelical Missionary efforts are motivated by the impulse to share the gospel first and work second, their motivation is to reflect their belief in Christianity through work and service, and they have been very successful at it, claiming to be in at least a hundred countries worldwide and affecting millions of people (Who We Are – WV). During the last two years they have overhauled their website to bring in more interactive elements and movement.⁵ Their homepage features a scrolling banner of different images and links within the site, and icons linking them to social media sites are prominently displayed. Even with these updated features, its primary way to fund its projects continues to be prompting individuals to

5 One of the challenges of this project is that websites are rarely the same place twice. The first group that did this comparison in March of 2009, worked with a very different presentation that included no scrolling banners and a basic table set-up for text. However, the primary appeal, sponsor a child, remains the same.



sponsor a child in need – a classic appeal that relies heavily on the idea that there is a marginalized other that you can help for very little money.

Although a new child appears each time you return to the homepage, it is always the first appeal on the page, and a link to “sponsor a child” information appears on every page on the site. You can choose your child based on region, country, gender, or birthday by picking up an informational card, either in the real world or on their website, about a specific child and how much a month will be necessary to sponsor this child (between \$35 and \$50 depending on region). In addition to the statistics, there is a picture of a sometimes smiling, sometimes not, child of color standing against a concrete wall or agricultural greenery with a short statement such as: “This is [name]. She is 10 years old and lives in India. Like many children in this country, she needs love and support to have access to such things as clean water, nutritious food, and an education so she can grow up to be a healthy, and productive adult” (“Sponsor”). Underneath this is a note that this child has been “reserved” just for you and you have five minutes to click on the “sponsor now” button. (One has to wonder what happens to her after your five minutes are up, and it is a little disturbing to think of a child as being “reserved.”) The appeal to pathos is a little heavy handed, and don’t all children need love, clean water, nutritious food and an education? The result of your “love,” meaning money in this case, is equally vague. The child remains in the margins of the sponsor’s daily life and community. It could be argued that World Vision does try to pull him or her out of the margins by having the child contact their sponsors through the occasional letter, but those who participate are always sponsors - kind outsiders from afar.

In addition to the distribution of the cards, another online method of attracting sponsors is through videos. The appeal to pathos is unending as we see image after image of children, some of whom are in distress, some of whom are smiling and dancing because of “friends like you” who have answered their prayers, sent food, and made a way for them to get clean water (“my story”). One particular video that really pulls on



all the emotional strings is found in their multi-media showcase and is called “Rhythm.” It begins with the sound of a desolate wind blowing as words appear: “By this time tomorrow, 6000 children will be orphaned by AIDS.” As the wind dies down, the image of a rising African sun fills the screen and the sound of a mournful song sung in what is assumed to be an African language begins. Images of children working fields, sitting in unfinished houses, and holding their heads in their hands is followed by a close up of a young man playing the drum and the overlay of the word “listen” as his beat becomes louder. The mournful music fades and another series of images begins of adults working either at sewing machines or in the field joining the rhythm of the drum, but these happy moments are interspersed with images of death; people building coffins, digging graves, carrying multiple bodies to the cemetery. We are told that in Africa “because of HIV/AIDS, death rules the rhythm.” The images flash between smiling faces and shots of people who are dying of the disease and others who show personal snapshots and speak briefly about the people they have lost because of the disease. The background rhythm picks up a child whispering “do something” as a young girl wearing a head covering reminds us we all have just one life. An adult male Western speaker/narrator asks, “Where will your one life take you? Do something.” There is a quick cut back to the girl who proclaims, “One life can help me grow!” This begins a series of quick cuts of smiling children eating rice and bread, old women and children dancing around a properly functioning well, women harvesting crops, and eager-to-learn boys and girls in an overcrowded but energetic classroom. All these joyful images are accompanied by the sound of the drum, and the repeated phrases, “One life can make a difference. Do something.” The final image is a return to the mournful song and sound of wind with the written words “6000 children – orphaned by AIDS” as those words fade they are replaced by the question, “Who will care for them?” The screen clears again with a final “Sponsor a child.” As that screen fades, the World Vision logo comes into focus as one final child whispers “Do something.”



There is no denying the emotional draw of this kind of rhetorical appeal. It is a highly effective means of prompting the individual to join a cause, but there is no attempt to build a real community with the people featured in the digital short. Even though we are asked “Where will [our] one life take [us]?” there is no option to actually go, either in the physical or virtual world, to this place. As moving as this presentation is, we wondered if sending money is really a way to care for a child? Dorothy Day might ask, “Have you brought this child into your community? Have you brought this child, these children, into true personhood?” The answer and our conclusion was no, regardless of good intentions, these people remain objectified subjects.

Although there is a lot of evidence in the form of stories and slideshows of World Vision workers as part of the other’s communities, there is no way to interact directly with the site or the organization except through e-mail – an increasingly antiquated form of communication for those used to instantaneous connection, or telephone – which most of my students felt would probably just result in another appeal for donations through the sponsor a child campaign. The site ranks on the lower to mid range of Porter’s “interactivity continuum” and so although students found the organization’s goals admirable, they felt they were not the audience for the site. This was not said to condemn organizations like World Vision. They do provide much needed support in some of the world’s most impoverished areas, and because of their age and reputation have access into areas that other groups may not be allowed to enter. Any action is better than empty words or criticism that offers no solution; however, if World Vision wants to continue its work with the next generation, it will need to reassess how its message is delivered.

In comparison to World Vision, The Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation’s presentation is inviting and communal, including elements designed to engage and inform everyone involved in the organization including those receiving aid. The site is bordered by a soft pink background that complements their logo, a child’s finger painting



of a bouquet of flowers complete with a heart and sun – perfect for an organization founded by a mother for the sake of her children and concern for other women and children around the globe. The home page includes an updated blog and a section called “What we’re reading” that highlights articles of interest about pediatric AIDS and other healthcare issues. Most impressive is the map of Africa that allows you to click on any country they are involved in and get extraordinarily detailed information about the crisis in that country, a message from the team that is onsite, and highlights of the programs they are running.

As you read about each country, you discover that an important facet of this organization is that members of the communities who are receiving aid are not passive recipients. They are responsible for educating others in their local area about AIDS and other medical issues, and they are given the tools and the means to do both. In the Democratic Republic of Congo and countries like it which have challenges due to political stresses, this education is a vital means of getting to the root of a problem that the government is unable to address. In more stable areas like Kenya, they are able to go beyond education to fund on-site research projects in universities that have US counterparts – thus fostering a global solution to the problem (“Where we’re working”). My students were highly interested in this part of the website because of the tremendous amount and superior quality of the information that is available and the fact that occasionally the foundation offers opportunities to have online chats with staff and community members in the field.

The organization’s photographic elements highlight success stories that stress the effect the delivery of medication can have on individuals in need and to their entire community. Their stories are place specific, mentioning city and country as compared to the vague incantation of “Africa” and show people in modern buildings learning to use modern technology. It’s not that they don’t talk about or show the tremendous toll disease and poverty have taken, but it is not the sole focus. In the video gallery there is an entire catalog of images called “Malawi: Celebrating



a call to action” documenting the conclusion of a million dollar, five year project to decrease the occurrence of mother to child transmission of HIV. These photographs feature community members involved in every step of the process from receiving aid to running the center to teaching others about the disease and how to prevent it. (“About Us”).

The premier video of the site tells the story of the foundation. It begins with Elizabeth Glaser giving a speech relating the tragic circumstance of her receiving a tainted blood transfusion during her pregnancy in the early 80s, a time when very little was known about HIV/AIDS. This led to her contracting HIV and passing it to her two children, Ariel, who died of AIDS in 1988, and Jake, who through the research the organization funded is a survivor and one of the foundation’s most active spokespersons. We are told via a screen shot of Elizabeth that she lost her battle in 1994 and fought for children with HIV until her last breath. During that moment we hear a final quote from her, a kind of challenge: “People say they care, but it is actions that save lives.” Although Elizabeth losing her battle with the disease and the loss of Ariel are emotional moments in the video, it does not dwell in those moments of sorrow, but moves forward, making it clear that the daughter did not die in vain. Elizabeth, “one resourceful and determined mother,” started a movement that has gone global.

The rest of the video gives details as to what the actions of the foundation have been and what the future vision for the foundation is. One of the important pieces of information that bridge the two sections is that because of efforts made in AIDS research fewer than 200 babies in the US are born with the disease each year – still too high of a number, but a huge triumph considering how desperate the situation was when Glaser began her movement. As wonderful as that is, we are reminded of the global crisis that exists because of HIV/AIDs and the work that remains. The music in the video is uplifting, mostly piano with vocals about hope and healing that coincide with images of smiling African women receiving treatment for the disease in health centers that are



brightly painted and full of light. Other shots are of children playing and enjoying life. Across each picture is a small statement of fact about how many cases of AIDs are reported annually, how much medical aid has been provided, and what the results of the foundation's efforts have been. Interspersed in the presentation are sound bites from the current director of operations in the United States, the co-director of the operation in South Africa, and Jake Glaser all assuring the audience that the time is now to eliminate pediatric AIDS and it is absolutely possible to do so. There is still an appeal to emotion, but overall the tone is hopeful and the message is one that allows interested individuals to decide for themselves if they want to join with this effort. This particular video, and the site in general, create an awareness of shared responsibility for all involved in working to resolve this global crisis. Although the majority of the foundation's supporters will probably never visit an African country to work physically in the community, there is still a sense of the communal model that has characteristics of Personalism. This is made possible through their use of digital technology.

Although it is not quite as far along the interactivity continuum as ONE.org, this website does allow for connection and inclusion in projects and the options to “donate, advocate, or participate.” This includes the “Generation Free Campaign” which targets young people and was a particularly notable element for my students.⁶ They were impressed that the organization offers several viable suggestions for how they could get involved on their end, providing a means to communicate with others who have organized fund raisers and have taken the step from being an observant audience member to an active participant in the community created by the organization (“Get Involved”). Once this feature was brought to the attention of the class, it became an important point of comparison among organizations. Group discussion was always favorable toward organizations that combined their virtual involvement and interest in the service and justice issues with the potential for real

6 The ONE campaign has a similar initiative called Campus ONE challenge.



world action—any activity beyond becoming financial contributors—that would benefit the community.

“Ambient awareness” implies there are no marginalized others, only fellow members of the community who exist in a state of virtual co-presence with the individual. Although the hook of these appeals—you can make a difference—remains the same, digital social justice appeals must emphasize that “you” are connected to all members of this community, including those who are in need of aid. In a well constructed virtual community, the boundaries between those providing aid and those receiving aid begin to blur. In providing help to others in the community, the individual and the community are strengthened because the communication between its members is one of equals. This is the basic idea of Personalism – creating communities that overcome the systematic oppression of others through their inclusion in a mutually sustaining community. Not that this philosophy is fully realized even in the most innovative of platforms, but there is a real potential to develop it in a digital form that goes beyond what Personalism’s creators and Dorothy Day could have imagined. Because of the sense of virtual personhood afforded by interactive technology, physical distance becomes less of an issue, and it is possible for people who live in completely different locations to understand how their actions affect each other.

Although early research into networking platforms like Twitter indicated that language and culture do play a part in the number of reciprocal interactions within a community and that there is likely to be more intra-continent links than across continents (Java et al 59), micro-blogging continues to develop as a global phenomenon. As evidenced by the use of Twitter to report and record the unrest surrounding the Iranian elections in the spring and summer of 2009, social media often trumps established media outlets in its ability to instantly send images and news as it happens. This virtual awareness, based on a sense of mutual and ambient awareness of shared interests has been proven to support social groups in the real world as well (Java et al 57).



There is a growing body of research examining digitally mediated forms of community and how it affects those who rely on it for their informational and social needs. A recent study by the International Center for Media and the Public Agenda conducted at the University of Maryland found that “most college students are not just unwilling, but functionally unable to be without their media links to the world.” In support of an earlier Pew study on social media, it concluded that developing and maintaining “minute to minute connections” with their social groups and family is a priority, and the inability to do so can cause “extremely high anxiety.” Additionally, the information that flows through this medium determines “their social, and arguably, moral decisions” (A Day without Media). Although the tone of this study is rather alarmist, it is evidence of how vital this technology has become to an important segment of our population. This is not to say that social justice organizations should only focus on the virtual community or that physical communities are somehow no longer necessary; but, as we continue to evolve into a culture that blurs the boundary between virtual and physical, it is imperative to harness the impulse to build community, which is so evident in social media, toward the purpose of social justice. Digital literacy can deepen the understanding of and encourage engagement with very complicated social issues, and service and justice organizations at all levels need to pay attention to how the upcoming generation reads and reacts to digital technology if they want to be successful in the future.

The demand to establish community has echoes of Dorothy Day’s philosophy and provides an interesting link between the beginnings of the 20th century and that of the 21st. Although the call to personal sacrifice for the digital community is not as overt or demanding as those made by Day, if one chooses to get involved, being willing to sacrifice part of yourself for the good of the whole becomes part of the process. For my students and most young people, time and energy are the greatest assets they have to offer. If they are spending more of both, even if it is in the



virtual world, toward becoming more aware and involved in issues and situations that demand remedy, I am optimistic that eventually this will equal change in the physical world as well.

Of course it would be naive to pretend that this optimism is unchallenged. There are many issues with this intersection of digital literacy and social action that still need to be addressed. Access has always been and remains a tremendous barrier to overcome. However, when the question of access was raised, one of my students pointed out that it is no longer necessary to have a computer in order to participate in online activities; a cell phone can do just as much, is less expensive, and is easier to carry. As digital technology becomes more ubiquitous and thus less expensive, access issues change as well. Nevertheless it is problematic both logistically and ethically, particularly when an organization is working in an underdeveloped area or one that has been ravaged by poverty. Although larger organizations may be able to close the digital gap a bit by providing equipment and training, smaller and local organizations often need to set different priorities. After all, you cannot fill an empty belly with a laptop computer, dig a well with an iPhone, or pay your operating expenses with a “tweet” – although you could put out an alert that funds are running low with one.

Local organizations also can face the challenge of community bias. For example, it is troubling that my students, in Detroit, often turn a blind eye to local issues of poverty and social justice, preferring to talk about national and international efforts. This is partially because local organizations do not have the funding to create the kind of websites that would attract the digitally literate. Because of the mission associated with my university, which is purposefully urban and considers service to the local community to be a priority, a number of us are working with the digital media studies programs to try and remedy some of the issues that arise due to lack of funds. However, it is really too simplistic to suggest that all it will take to attract interest in local issues is a flashy banner and a blog. There is a long history of racial tensions, political shenanigans, and



personal family mythologies that play into their resistance to addressing the need in their own region.

The students who did analyze and present on local organizations did so because of a personal connection to their identity as a group. One student revealed that her family had been homeless and her parents addicted to drugs before finding a new hope through the Detroit Rescue Mission, a well-established organization that provides traditional soup kitchen services along with temporary housing, job training, and counseling. Her brave revelation resulted in her peers' respect and an outpouring of interest in volunteering for an organization that most of them had heard of their entire lives but had not really thought that much about. Students were also interested in the local Covenant House, one of a national network of shelters specifically for teenagers and young adults. They reported being drawn to it because these were local kids who in a different set of circumstances could be them. In both of these cases, local bias was negated by mutual awareness of and connection to a member of their classroom community or the potential to make a connection with someone who could be in their community. Understanding this insistence on building inclusive communities is an incredibly important element if social justice organizations want to tap into the energy of the digitized generation.

Digital technology is an extremely beneficial tool for civic engagement, capable of fostering conversation and writing about these issues in a meaningful and rhetorically sophisticated manner. Negative elements of real world culture do exist in the electronic world; but, if we are frustrated by evidence of economic and social abuse in the electronic environment, then it is up to us to gain virtual ground by understanding how it works, how it is read by today's audience, and from that learn how to create our own interactive and engaging sites as alternatives. After all, creating alternatives to the status quo is at the heart of justice messages. If we are to follow in the footsteps of those who spoke and worked before us, we must enter in and create positive options. Because all humans desire



connection and the ability to speak and be heard, the medium is already being used to construct communities in ways never before imagined. Instead of continuing to contribute to the stream of babble that seems to dominate most of these communities, we must construct opportunities for individuals to use their voice to shape the kind of inclusive communities they desire socially into those that also seek justice.



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