

Will the revolution be tweeted?

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Professor Joseph highlighted some of the means by which social media can affect violations of human rights. For example, social media is a facilitator of mass communication, enabling real-time publishing of abuse and brutality on the internet where it can be accessed instantaneously by millions. In addition, the speed by which information can be shared may result in human rights violations immediately being condemned.

Mr McLean offered his view that social media tools are inherently democratic and beneficial to society, however he argued that 'liking' something on Facebook may be a good first step but is not effective enough to promote social change. He explained that GetUp! provides the public with opportunities to take the next step to promote human rights after

Amid the revolutionary fervour sweeping the Arab world, a panel of experts gathered in Melbourne recently to debate the role of social media in promoting change. The event, co-hosted by the Castan Centre and the Human Rights Law Centre, featured Castan Centre Director Professor Sarah Joseph, GetUp! Campaign and Communications Director Sam McLean, Jonathan Green, who edits *The Drum* website, and Amnesty's Refugee Campaign Coordinator, Alex Pagliaro. It was chaired by the Human Rights Law Centre's Phil Lynch.

The panel focussed on three main issues:

1. How social media can be used by the human rights movement;
2. The impact that social media has on the protection of human rights; and
3. Some of the myths and challenges of using social media to promote social action.

Professor Joseph opened the panel with a background on the ways in which social media is used to influence human rights, and outlined various opinions on the effectiveness of this medium. For example, Malcolm Gladwell, writing in the *New Yorker*, argued that real social change is brought about by high risk, meaningful activism like the civil rights movement in the United States in the 1960s. Mr Gladwell says that social media provides weak ties and gives people a false idea that they are making a difference when they 'like' something on Facebook or retweet something. In contrast, Professor of New Media at NYU, Clay Shirky, argues that social media is an unusually effective social tool for promoting human rights, as evidenced by the fact that certain governments are particularly afraid of it, for example, the Chinese government.

expressing an initial interest through social media.

With a more sceptical eye, Jonathan Green expressed his opinion that the experience of social media is more personal than proactive, and that indicating an interest in a human rights issue does little more than publicise an individual's opinion. Discussions about the impact that social media is having on events such as the conflict in Bahrain, according to Mr Green, are only speculative and social media as a general rule is not a sufficient medium to bring about change.

Ms Pagliaro highlighted some of the ways Amnesty uses social media to promote human rights. She used the example that foreign governments take notice when Amnesty uses letter-writing to highlight human rights violations, and that prisoner treatment has been improved as a result of letter-writing campaigns. Ms Pagliaro reasoned that governments are therefore probably noticing when people use social media to protest actions and encourage change, meaning that social media may influence governments to adhere to human rights standards.

On the whole, the panel provided a lively debate which was, of course, documented and analysed on Twitter in real time. As social media is a recent phenomenon that is still picking up steam, it remains to be concluded exactly what role it will have on human rights. However, it appears that generally the panellists were optimistic about the potential of social media.

Video of the event, together with shorter video interviews with the participants, are available via the Castan Centre website (www.law.monash.edu.au/castancentre) and its YouTube channel (www.youtube.com/castancentre).