No Longer Strangers

The Potential of Social Media As A Tool For Cultivating Cross-Cultural Understanding

Abstract

It has been well acknowledged that social media has the power to foster the interaction and organization of people despite space and time. What seems like such an impersonal way to communicate has in fact proven itself to be a tool for making meaningful connections based on mutual trust. This trust has been essential to the success of online communities, from the private sector, with notable examples like Facebook, Wikipedia, and Couchsurfing.org, to the public sector, such as the United States Patent and Trademark Office's Peer to Patent project. These social media platforms demonstrate how society has taken social media, a platform of limitless connections, and used it to create meaningful, trusting relationships with complete strangers. Because of the ability of social media to connect strangers despite possibly invincible obstacles of space and time, it can be a powerful tool in breaking down stigmas and stereotypes, negotiating cultural diplomacy, and fostering cross-cultural understanding.

Keywords: social media, cultural diplomacy, cross-cultural understanding

Introduction

Jonathan Zittrain, Harvard Law Professor and co-founder of Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, addressed the issue of trust on the Internet during a TED talk in 2009 titled "The Web as Random Acts of Kindness." He argued that the Internet is the catalyst to a cultural phenomenon surrounding trust and kindness that is changing the way people interact in virtual and real worlds (Zittrain, 2009). "What we see in this phenomenon is...that sometimes if you remove some of the external rules...you can actually end up with a safer environment in which people can function, and one in which they are more human with each other, they're realizing that they have to take responsibility for what they do" (Zittrain, 2009). This online exchange that fosters such trust among strangers is widely known as social media. Social media is a platform that uses web-based technologies that allow for the creation and sharing of content and information by users and between individuals and communities (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Popular social media platforms include Facebook and Twitter, but there are myriad others. This kind of borderless interaction has already changed the way that people relate to each other and its potential has yet to be exhausted. By bringing us into contact with people with whom we would have never otherwise interacted, it is creating a more trusting society and in fact changing our whole concept of "the stranger." By doing so, it demonstrates its potential as a tool in breaking down stigmas and stereotypes and fostering meaningful relationships, despite physical closeness or real time communication. Through its ability to build meaningful relationships across space and time, social media is a powerful tool for bringing people together and building cross-cultural understanding.

Social media has been both praised and criticized for its role in human connectivity. Some people, like New York University professor and author of *Here Comes Everybody*, Clay Shirky, argue that it opens doors for human organization that can bypass the obstacles of space and time and bring people together in efficient and meaningful ways (Shirky, 2008). Others, such as MIT professor and author of *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle, argue that social media in fact contributes to the isolation of humanity, cutting us off from meaningful human interactions (Turkle, 2011). While both seem like possible consequences of social media use, it is clear that social media has the potential to connect people who would otherwise not interact, due to such obstacles as physical distance, lack of interest in or negative feelings about the other person. For individuals or groups of people with an adverse history, social media might offer a way for them to become more familiar with each other and each other's stories without having to physically meet or communicate in real time, which they may not initially be willing to do. Due to social media's ability to cultivate trust, build relationships, and erode echo chambers, it has the potential to bring unlike minds together, and act as a diplomacy tool between cultures.

Social Media, Trust, and Relationship Building

Most of us have experienced the familiarity-liking phenomenon, which is based on the theory that as we become more familiar with something or someone we tend to increase our liking of that thing or person. This idea, also known as the mere-exposure phenomenon, has been used as a successful technique in advertising (Rindfleisch, 1998). Advertisers know that

the more familiar you become with their product, the more you will consciously or subconsciously like it. And that is why they try to make sure that everywhere you go, their product goes too. So how can this idea be applied to cross-cultural understanding? And how can it be applied to groups of people that are not close enough to each other to physically connect in the same space and time?

Social media allows people to jump the hurdles of space and time, and make them irrelevant. It allows us to be in separate locations while still making meaningful connections. In a preliminary survey I conducted in 2011, 68.9 percent of respondents replied that they felt they could make a meaningful connection with someone through social media (Koué, 2011). Of course, what constitutes a meaningful connection may be different for each person, but a majority of respondents perceive social media as a sufficient medium through which to make a connection that they would deem as meaningful. They trust the medium of social media enough to believe that the connections they can make with other people can be significant in some way. It is this trust of the medium that makes it a potential relationship builder between individuals who would not otherwise connect. This social trust can be defined as "the perception that other people are, in general, fair, trustworthy, and helpful" (Cappella, 2002, p. 230). While it is hard for some to believe that people can build any sort of meaningful relationship with someone they have not physically met, this kind of social trust in the virtual world is prevalent.

In his TED talk, Zittrain (2009) offers up couchsurfing.com, which is now couchsurfing.org, as the ultimate example of online trust. Couchsurfing.org is a website that people use to find a free couch to sleep on while traveling all over the world. A person can sign up in order to offer their couch, free of charge, to cash-strapped travelers, and cash-strapped travelers can sign up to sleep on these couches, the goal being to both save money and meet new people. This popular website has more than five million members (Couchsurfing.org, 2013), and what is most profound about the whole Couchsurfing.org phenomenon is the trust that naturally exists between strangers.

An article written on Time.com by couchsurfer Cody Kittle (2011) explains it like this, "Even though Jess and Jin are as much strangers to me as anyone else in the bar, I trust them. It seems as natural as being set up by a mutual friend, and, in a sense, that is exactly what is happening." The mutual friend that he is referring to is Couchsurfing.org and Jess and Jin are the two women Kittle just met in a bar at one in the morning in Hong Kong, set up through Couchsurfing.org, and whose couch he will be sleeping on for the next few nights. Kittle immediately trusts his new friends, and they trust him too, handing over a key to their apartment upon arrival. This trust phenomenon surrounding couchsurfing.org is so fascinating that researchers at Stanford University are conducting a study on it (Update, 2011; Welcome, 2011).

Another example of social trust in new media is Wikipedia. In his article "The Hive," Marshall Poe (2011) addresses the concerns of an open source encyclopedia, one to which anyone and everyone can contribute. One of the main concerns he explores is how to deal with the vandalism that is inevitable. The answer to this problem, he explains, is that the Wikipedia community - made up almost entirely of public volunteers - polices itself. "Watchful members of the huge Wikipedia community usually swoop down to stop the malfeasance shortly after it begins" (Poe, 2011). There are so many more people correcting problems than making them, that this system works. The self-policing of Wikipedia over what constitutes worthy content and

the swift correction of vandalism works so well that Wikipedia is widely considered to be on par with the Encyclopedia of Britannica (Poe, 2011).

Peer To Patent has also been a successful use of amassing both public knowledge and public trust. Peer To Patent was launched by the United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) in 2007 in order to aggregate public expertise for the purpose of helping patent examiners gather all the necessary information they need to make decisions on granting patents, (Noveck, 2008; peertopatent.org, 2013). Beth Simone Noveck, author of "Peer To Patent: A Modest Proposal," the initial proposal of the Peer To Patent project, explains that the project "…allows the public to research and upload publications–known in patent law as 'prior art'–that will inform the patent examiner about the novelty and obviousness of the invention and enable her to decide whether it deserves a patent" (Noveck, 2008, p. 37). The USPTO trusts the public volunteers that make up the members of this community to conduct thorough and helpful research and to comment critically on the research presented by other members of the team, in order to narrow down the prior art to the most relevant and helpful for the patent examiner. The Peer To Patent volunteers have "tools to 'filter' comments in the discussion, identifying those that are most important..." (Noveck, 2008, p. 38). Noveck (2008) points out that "Private-sector websites–from the book reviews on Amazon to the movie reviews on IMDb to the news postings on Slashdot, the technology news site–have shown that these community ratings can be aggregated with surprisingly accurate results to sort and filter discussion" (p. 38). The successfulness of these ratings systems illustrate that people in these online communities are not only trustworthy and helpful, but also fair.

In 2011, Facebook added an application called "Ask Questions," which is a prime example of people's motivation to capitalize on the trustworthiness and helpfulness that they expect from other social media users. The Ask Questions application allows Facebook users to pose questions to the general Facbook public, rather than just your Facebook friends (Miller, 2010; Paul, 2011). As Blake Ross (2010), a director of product management at Facebook, wrote, "With this new [Ask Questions] application, you can get a broader set of answers and learn valuable information from people knowledgeable on a range of topics." Facebook obviously recognized a need among their users to be able to aggregate the general Facebook public's knowledge, and this need would not exist if their members did not trust the general Facebook public to give helpful answers.

In *Here Comes Everybody*, Shirky (2008) writes about Howard Chui, a man with a blog about cell phones. So many people would write to Chui with cell phone related questions that he decided to create Howard Forums because "he reasoned that putting his readers in touch with one another would be easier than trying to answer all their questions himself. The intuition proved correct" (Shirky, 2008, p. 229). Shirky (2008) continues by describing the success of Howard Forums, "...less than five years after its founding, the site gets half a billion page-views a year on incredibly detailed subjects...The information produced is so good that engineers at mobile phone companies will sometimes refer customers to it..." (p. 229). Numerous systems, applications, and networks like Wikipedia, Peer To Patent, Ask Questions, and Howard Forums, are being created to take advantage of the helpfulness, trustworthiness, and fairness that people express online.

In 2011, A study done of Facebook's effect on social capital among college students found "that there were positive relationships between intensity of Facebook use and Facebook

Groups use and students' life satisfaction, social trust, civic and political participation" (Venezuala, 2011, p. 31). Another study, presented at the 2003 International Communication Association annual meeting, showed that personality and individual patterns of Internet use affect the correlation between Internet use and trust, but that "overall Internet use slightly increased social trust, and also slightly but positively mediated the indirect effects of personality on social trust" (Tian, 2011, p. 18). The Internet and social media have become mediums that people not only believe in as trustworthy relationship builders, but many times seek out as such. We have a degree of trust in other people that rolls over into our virtual worlds and the need to be in the same room or to communicate in real time is no longer a prerequisite for doing what, Shirky (2008) argues, people do naturally, form relationships. "Human beings are social creatures – not occasionally or by accident but always" (Shirky, 2008, p. 14).

Shirky (2008) argues that social media has not changed the motivation that people have for communicating and building relationships, but rather it channels this motivation that already exists in us (p. 17). He describes how social media is more or less a response to the rising cost – financial, emotional, physical, time - of social organization. As it has become harder for people to physically get to each other, and maybe more importantly as it has become harder for people to locate each other, social media has provided a way around these cost barriers. Shirky (2008) argues that "modern life has raised transaction costs so high" that coordination of large groups is nearly impossible (p. 281). Social media sites help groups to organize by "taking the burden of coordination off the hands of the potential users" (Shirky, 2008, p. 196) and lowering the cost of organization to levels that people can manage. So what if we could take this motivation to connect, and the low-cost medium of social media through which to connect, and put people from different cultures in contact with each other in order to start building cross-cultural relationships?

Overcoming the Social Media Echo Chamber

Homophily is the term used to describe the tendency of people to group with like people (Shirky, 2008, p. 213). As Shirky (2008) writes, "The effects of homophily touch every social system; technology doesn't free us from social preferences or prejudices" (p. 224). This desire to associate with like people and surround ourselves with ideas that we already accept creates what is known as an echo chamber, an environment in which everything you already think is constantly bouncing off your friends and media and back to you, reinforcing your preexisting beliefs. A 2011 *Washington Post* article titled "Five Myths About Social Media" listed "Social Media Creates A Global Village" as one of the myths (Srinivasan, 2011). The article states that "We've long heard that the Internet was supposed to unite people of different cultural and political persuasions. Yet, despite the explosion of online voices, social media users rarely access opinions that differ from their own" (Srinivasan, 2011).

While the tendency to isolate one's self from new and different ideas is no different online than offline, it is not as easy, especially with the prevalence of hyperlinks. While you may be reading something that reinforces your preexisting beliefs, a hyperlinked reference to the opposition leaves you just a click away from entering a world of different points of view. In fact, it is getting harder to keep yourself isolated from other people and other ideas online. Tagging, content sharing, and GPS location features that have been enacted on many websites

and mobile applications are making it easier to encounter new people and new ideas (Ziv, 2010) and harder to stay isolated. Facebook allows you to tag friends and pages in your posts, Twitter lets you tag ideas using their hashtag function to aggregate content. Most websites and mobile applications now have sharing buttons that allow people to share content via email or social media sites with one click of a button. And many are starting to include location capabilities that allow people to check in online at their current location and see who else is there. With the constant tagging, sharing, linking, and checking in, the Internet is a pretty hard place to isolate oneself in an echo chamber. A person is likely to be exposed to different and unusual things merely by accident.

A BBC article titled "Do Social Networks Make Us Less Human?" explored the issue of whether social networks make people more or less isolated, and asked their Facebook followers to comment with their thoughts. Many respondents gave personal accounts of how social media connects them with family, friends, and strangers alike (Bradshaw, 2011). A respondent named Sheena said that "...it connects people more. Especially for expats like me with friends and relatives all over the world, social media connects us all in a way that wasn't possible a decade ago" (Bradshaw, 2011). Another respondent named Mona wrote that:

> Being from and living in the Mid East, through Facebook, I'm able to go on threads and comment and read comments and communicate with people I would never ever have the opportunity to talk to in the 'real world'. Where in the world or in the real world would I get a chance to listen to the other side, regardless if I agree with other opinions or not; at least I am exposed to them, which didn't exist for me before social networking (Bradshaw, 2011).

It is this possibility of connecting with strangers, of creating a meaningful connection with and hearing the different points of view from someone without having to physically meet, that gives social media the potential to be a powerful tool for cultural diplomacy and cross-cultural understanding. 80 percent of people who responded to my preliminary survey said that they had communicated with someone over social media that they would not have communicated with otherwise (Koué, 2011). As Shirky (2008) points out, in the real world "Our groups...extend beyond family ties to include categories like friends, neighbors, colleagues, and sometimes even strangers" (p. 15). Involving strangers in our personal social groups is not a new idea that only came of age with social media. We have always allowed for strangers to play a part in our social networks in some way, and so extending that to the social media world is natural. Just as face-to-face interactions tend to turn those strangers into acquaintances and hopefully into friends, overtime, so can the interactions we have with people through social media.

Social Media and Cross-Cultural Understanding

Many times, the dislike of a person or a group is due to lack of a personal relationship. Reza Aslan, writer and scholar of religions and founder of Aslan Media, an online news outlet dedicated to informing, educating, and engaging the public on political, social, religious, and cultural issues related to the greater Middle East, gave a TED talk called "Unity in Diversity" in which he explained how he is trying to bridge the cultural divide between Muslims and non-Muslims in America through media-based storytelling (Aslan, 2011). In his speech, Aslan argues that "the greatest determinate to a person's view about Islam, is whether they know a single

Muslim" (Aslan, 2011). He references a study that shows that knowing even one Muslim cut a person's negativity ratings towards Islam in half (Aslan, 2011). A report titled "Religious Perceptions in America" published in 2009 by the Abu Dhabi Gallup Center, backs up this idea. "Respondents who do not happen to personally know a Muslim…are twice as likely to self-report feeling 'a great deal' of prejudice toward Muslims" (Religious Perceptions, 2009, p. 16).

It is relationships, rather than data, that change people's minds about other people. "Education is important, obviously...but let's be honest, it's not enough," Aslan (2011) argues. "Data doesn't change people's minds...relationships change minds. It's about forming the relationships that allow you to recognize that there is something beyond just the symbols that separate us as different religions, different ethnicities, different races, different colors" (Aslan, 2011). Here is where the mere-exposure and familiarity-liking phenomena come into play. As the study on Facebook and social capital among college students posits, "Because trust involves knowledge, it means that it can change through the accumulation of information and experience" (Valenzuela, 2008, p. 9). People's trust of other people is malleable and it can change form over time as new communication breeds new understanding and builds new relationships. The relationships that people build are what can alter opinions, and mere exposure to foreign ideas and people, or increased familiarity to ideas and people that you already have an opinion about, has the likelihood of bridging cultural gaps, building paths for cultural diplomacy, and creating a system through which cross-cultural understanding can grow without the need of physical interaction or real-time communication.

Findings

I identified three organizations that I felt had a strong emphasis on social media and whose use of social media may be aiding in cross-cultural understanding. *The Stream* is an online and television program which airs on Al Jazeera English. It describes itself as a social media community with its own daily television program (stream.aljazeera.com, 2013). First and foremost, *The Stream* sees itself as a social media community, and its main goal is to give a voice to the voiceless (Rami Khater, personal communication, December 6, 2011). The show has been around for fewer than two years, but is already getting noticed for its early pickup of newsworthy items and its social media dissemination of the news. *The Stream* uses social media in every aspect of its programming, from deciding on what content to run, booking and hosting guests, disseminating news, and fostering continued conversations about its news stories (Jennifer Salan, personal communication, December 9, 2011). "As the tremendous growth of these [social] networks moulds and transforms the news agenda, *The Stream* aims to share these possibilities and connect its global audience into a dynamic online dialogue" (aljazeera.com, 2013).

Aslan Media is another news organization that merges social media with news. It focuses on news, art, and culture coming out of the Middle East and is geared specifically for young people. As stated on its website, it aims "to leverage Social Media, Digital Media, and other technology to engage, inform, and educate...," as well as "to foster and promote constructive dialogue and education on interfaith and intercultural issues" (aslanmedia.com, 2013). Aslan Media uses social media to engage their current readers, expand their readership,

and "promote continued, meaningful conversation about events that are happening in the world" (Nathan Lean, personal communication, Dec. 11, 2011).

Votifi is an organization that is merging social media and political discussion in new ways. It is "the first online, mobile and social platform built solely for politics in a wireless world" (votifi.com, 2013). Votifi is actively trying to break people's political echo chambers and uses social media to achieve this. "...we don't just recommend content to you that we know you will agree with. We will bring you content that challenges you to think about things differently. We will introduce you to people of like minds but also those who you don't necessarily agree with" (votifi.com, 2013). Votifi provides articles from the left, right, and center on topics that are important to people and connects users through its social media network to other users who share certain characteristics, but do not necessarily share the same party affiliation or opinions.

I spoke with members of all three of these organizations to get a feel for how social media plays a role in their organization and if they believe their organization's use of social media helps to foster cross-cultural understanding. I received mixed responses. *The Stream*'s Rami Khater, Senior New Media Producer, and Jennifer Salan, Senior Producer, both said that fostering cross-cultural understanding was not a goal of the show, but said that they thought it likely occurred as an unintended consequence of their highly evolved social media platform. Salan told me that "When you feature different perspectives and voices it's naturally going to spark conversation and dialogue" (Jennifer Salan, personal communication, December 9, 2011). She also was unsure to the extent that *The Stream* connected people through their social media who would otherwise probably not be interacting, with the exception of the intersections between their television and online communities. "...I do think this occurs between our traditional TV audience and our online community. In that way we do connect people who probably wouldn't connect otherwise. They connect by sharing in the content of our show" (Jennifer Salan, personal communication, December 9, 2011). Salan said that, though not the intent of *The Stream*, she does see the capabilities of the interactions that take place on *The Stream*'s social media platforms to build "greater understanding of other cultures and communities simply because of the ease in which they can now interact on social media" (Jennifer Salan, personal communication, December 9, 2011). She added that because *The Stream* takes its content to a television platform, which reaches millions of people worldwide, that "*The Stream* can amplify those connections."

Nathan Lean, Editor-In-Chief, and Roshi Pejhan, Executive Director and Editorial Executive, at Aslan Media, both told me that cross-cultural understanding was definitely a goal of the organization's social media content (Roshi Pejhan, personal communication, Nov. 6, 2011; Nathan Lean, personal communication, Dec. 11, 2011). "Social media itself will not lead to increased understanding between cultures but it will foster an environment where interactions between people of different cultures can increase their understanding of one another. And that is our very aim," said Lean (Nathan Lean, personal communication, Dec. 11, 2011). He went on to add that, "Our social media feeds spark conversations, they spark dialogues, and they spark back-and-forths that metastasize and flower into meaningful discourses about a variety of topics that are typically regarded as controversial" (Nathan Lean, personal communication, Dec. 11, 2011). Lean highlighted the power of online content sharing, saying that "While we, like any organization, undoubtedly have a base that regularly follows our work, we grow when those individuals share our content online" (Nathan Lean, personal communication, Dec. 11, 2011).

Lean said that he most certainly believes that Aslan Media is connecting people who otherwise would not be interacting, "That is, in fact the beauty of social media," he told me (Nathan Lean, personal communication, Dec. 11, 2011).

Lou Aronson, Founder and CEO of Votifi, told me that bringing people together is more of a necessity of grassroots organizing than a direct goal of the organization (Lou Aronson, personal communication, Dec. 5, 2011). However, Aronson said that Votifi is "clearly connecting people who otherwise would not be interacting," both across party and geographical lines (Lou Aronson, personal communication, Dec. 5, 2011). Aronson added that "It will be a slow build to get folks from the left and right to communicate on ideas in a civil and open manner but we believe as we have seen from some preliminary activity on the site that the nature of that type of engagement is supportable" (Lou Aronson, personal communication, Dec. 5, 2011). He echoed *The Stream'*s desire to carve out a platform for those who are not usually heard. "The first goal of Votifi is to provide certain core groups (namely Latinos, African- Americans and Millennials) with a channel within which to find their voice. These groups are most often ignored by the political mainstream and we hope to give them the venue to connect and speak freely" (Lou Aronson, personal communication, Dec. 5, 2011).   He also echoed Aslan Media's desire to create an open and honest dialogue that crosses cultural identity boundaries. "We provide the platform and the tools for engagement. By using data, cold, nonpartisan data that allows for an objective visualization of the individual we can enable peer connections that would otherwise be precluded by stereotype. Then, once the initial walls are broken down, dialogue and ensuing exchange of information can take place. Social media is a core component of our strategy as it is essential to facilitating debate" (Lou Aronson, personal communication, Dec. 5, 2011).

All three organizations share a few common threads. They all desire to create a platform for the lesser-known, for people or stories that have been left out of the mainstream media. All three seem to be connecting people who would otherwise not be interacting, whether on purpose, like Aslan Media, as an unintended consequence, like *The Stream*, or as one part of a complex social media plan, like Votifi. The people I talked to from all three organizations seemed optimistic about the ability of social media to bridge cultural gaps and build cross-cultural understanding. Salan said that "The beauty of social media comes when you engage with people from various backgrounds and exchange ideas with them so that everyone gains new perspectives" (Jennifer Salan, personal communication, December 9, 2011). But with that, she expressed worry about the echo chamber. "[Social media] has great potential as long as people do not remain in their comfort zones. If they don't go beyond their usual political and cultural circles then they lose" (Jennifer Salan, personal communication, December 9, 2011). She also touched upon the mere-exposure phenomenon. "They may not agree or change their mind about something but simply seeing where someone else is coming from can do much to foster greater understanding" (Jennifer Salan, personal communication, December 9, 2011).

Lean highlighted the ability of social media to bring people together despite the hurdles of space and time. "Social media has connected people all across the world, people who without it, would likely not be connected" (Nathan Lean, personal communication, Dec. 11, 2011). He also emphasized social media's potential as a tool in cross-cultural understanding based on its ability to foster communication. "It has not only connected them, but has, more importantly, provided them with a space to dialogue" (Nathan Lean, personal communication, Dec. 11, 2011). Aronson seemed the most skeptical, but said that if the trust is there, social

media has potential to start dialogue. "We need to provide the safest, most secure and most informative platform for political engagement that respects and informs. If we accomplish this goal and build the qualities of safety and trust we can then create a laboratory for political experimentation and idea exchange....once the initial walls are broken down, dialogue and ensuing exchange of information can take place" (Lou Aronson, personal communication, Dec. 5, 2011).

There are still questions about social media's impact on human interactions, but the evidence shows that people are indeed using social media as a way to connect with other people in meaningful ways. As the study on Facebook and social capital among college students posits, "This study supports the notion that both a medium's technological capabilities as well as the actual content it transmits influences people's attitudes and behaviors" (Valenzuela, 2011, p. 32-33). The key is influencing how social media is impacting people's attitudes and behaviors. In my preliminary survey, a majority of people that responded said that social media had influenced their opinion about another person or group of people, but 57.8 percent responded that social media had changed their mind about a person or group of people in a positive way, while 62.2 percent said that social media had changed their mind about a person or group of people in a negative way (Koué, 2011). Social media has the power to impact people's opinions, but it takes some purposeful effort to tip the scale in the desired direction. Instead of just leaving it up to people to search out or happen upon social media avenues that present them with ways to build cross-cultural understanding and relationships, there needs to be more pro-social campaigns directed in this manner.

Going forward, pro-social campaigns that focus on diversity acceptance and cross-cultural understanding should throw themselves behind social media because of its ability to cultivate trust and build relationships that impact people's attitudes, without having to get people in the same room. A model to build off of is the It Gets Better Project, started by LGBT activist Dan Savage. The It Gets Better Project was started as a reaction to the increase in LGBT teen suicides around the country and consists almost entirely of YouTube videos made by different people for LGBT teens struggling with self-esteem issues, self-worth issues, depression, and bullying (itgetsbetter.org, 2013). These videos tell stories and offer up support for LGBT teens considering suicide by telling them that their lives will get better and offering up real life examples while also telling them who they can reach out to for help. This social media campaign may have started out as just one YouTube video posted by Savage, but in a little over two years it has inspired more than 50,000 YouTube videos with more than 50 million views, numbers that grow bigger every day (Itgetsbetter.org, 2013). The videos, a number of which have gone viral, have been made by regular people, sports teams, U.S. soldiers, celebrities, religious groups, and politicians including President Obama. And amazingly, in our current political climate and over an issue that involves such a controversial topic as homosexuality, the Project has gained support from both political parties. It has been covered in media from *The Huffington Post* to Fox News and has inspired YouTube videos from both Democrat and Republican politicians, condemning bullying and telling LGBT teens that their lives matter and their situations will improve if they can be strong enough to keep on keeping on.

As Shirky (2008) writes in *Here Comes Everybody*, the capabilities of social media tools "...reverse the old order of group activity, transforming 'gather, then share' into 'share, then gather" (p. 35). What social-media-based cross-cultural understanding needs in order to

succeed is to follow this new social media order. Instead of trying to get people in a room in order to allow for the sharing that will foster understanding and relationships, start the sharing first, create and promote social media avenues for people to discuss and connect over the sharing, and then let the people gather themselves. The It Gets Better videos are made to help LGBT teenagers, but by telling the stories of and showing the support from people all over the world - liberals and conservatives alike, regular people and sports icons, celebrities and politicians - and by receiving the kind of media attention it has from different politically-leaning media outlets, the Project is able to reach out to more than just LGBT teenagers. And with the reposting and sharing of its content, it has likely found its way into the social media worlds of many people who did not and would not search it out.

By merely exposing people to the stories behind the lives of those in the LGBT community, and by exposing them to the support being poured out by all different kinds of people across the country, people's familiarity with the topic and with the struggle could make a profound difference in their attitude formation regarding the LGBT community. What the Project needs to do next is to create better social media ways for people to connect and communicate with each other about these videos. And what needs to happen next in the area of cross-cultural understanding is for the launch of social media focused campaigns. It simply is not enough to harness the potential of social media in order to advertise products. It is time to take a substantial step forward in harnessing social media's ability to expose people to new things and get them interacting with new people. This exposure and interaction can be a catalyst to building meaningful and trusting relationships that improve cross-cultural understanding.

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