

@AIDS

How social media is shaping the way we communicate and what it means for the global AIDS movement.

Hours after the 12 January 2010 earthquake in Haiti, many of the world's leading news outlets were streaming live Twitter feeds. In 140 characters or less (the length of a Twitter message), viewers were getting instantaneous updates on the quake's devastating toll as the media told the stories that survivors were sharing on Twitter and other web sites.

This switch to social media for news demonstrates a shift in the recognition of these platforms—from what has often been described by many commentators as a 'passing trend' to a serious provider of information—so much so that CNN had staff monitoring Twitter to keep on top of the latest developments coming out of Haiti.

Beyond receiving news, the world responded through social media in an unprecedented way. The hashtag "#Haiti" was tagged on Twitter—together with SMS-based fundraising technology it helped the American Red Cross to raise US\$ 32 million for Haiti within one month of the quake. For the American Red Cross, and many other aid organizations, a new fundraising standard was set, and the value of social media to not only generate awareness but build support was demonstrated.

What can the global AIDS response learn from the Haiti example and the role of social media in communicating? Arguably a lot, and according to some social media experts organizations today have to embrace social media. Mr Erik Qualman, author of the book

Socialnomics: how social media transforms the way we live and do business, puts it this way, "We don't have a choice on whether we do social media, the question is how well we do it."

The social media landscape

Defining social media is not an easy task. There are different explanations, depending on who you ask. The entry for social media on Wikipedia states that the term "...is used to describe the type of media that is based on conversation and interaction between people online. Where media means digital words, sounds and pictures which are typically shared via the internet and the value can be cultural, societal or even financial."

Social media can refer to a range of web technologies, from blogs and wikis to social networking sites (e.g. Facebook) and media-sharing sites (i.e. YouTube). While it may be a challenge to capture one cohesive definition, it is difficult to dispute the argument that the world has gone social.

This point was backed by the Head of Strategy and Planning for Facebook's European, Middle East and Africa office at a social media conference in London in March 2010. In his presentation, Social Changes Everything, Mr Trevor Johnson shared some statistics that demonstrate social media's broad reach: Facebook alone has 400 million active users, who upload five billion pieces of content every week and two million photos per

second and spend six billion minutes online every day. In 2009, Facebook added 200 million new users, and if the site was a country and its members citizens, Facebook would be the world's third largest country—only behind China and India. Add in other sites, such as LinkedIn, Bebo, Orkut, Renren and a multitude of regional platforms, and it is clear that social media has attracted the interest of hundreds of million people worldwide.

Given the apparent popularity of social media, and the AIDS community's long history of engagement in people-centred campaigns and grassroots activism, many organizations are now looking at ways to bring their advocacy efforts online.

Some organizations are already leading the way. One example comes from the public-private partnership between (RED) and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (Global Fund). The (RED) campaign teams up with partner companies to produce (RED) products. When a product is sold, a percentage goes to the Global Fund, which, in turn, disperses the funds to support HIV programmes. Leveraging a network of celebrities as spokespeople, (RED) has been able to reach some 550 000 people on Facebook and a million followers on Twitter, providing supporters of (RED) an opportunity to keep track of the campaign and to share their individual experiences when buying a (RED) product.

Another illustration of social media's ability to spur greater awareness about HIV was demonstrated on World AIDS Day 2009, when Google, Twitter and Facebook 'turned red'. Twitter and Facebook encouraged its users to show solidarity for the AIDS movement by undertaking a series of red-themed modifications to their pages, and Google placed a red ribbon on its home page and had links to encourage its visitors to 'learn, act and support' the featured organizations working on HIV issues.

A grassroots initiative goes global

Before such larger, structured HIV awareness initiatives took hold, a group

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”

of individuals decided to leverage their own personal networks to show support and solidarity with the millions of people living with HIV.

On 5 November 2008, a Facebook group called World AIDS Day 2008: Wear A Red Ribbon on Facebook! was created with the simple premise of spreading awareness about HIV. The group encouraged Facebook users to post a red ribbon as a profile picture for World AIDS Day. In less than four weeks nearly a quarter of a million people had joined.

“It was amazing to see the sea of red ribbons rippling across Facebook, with people changing their profile pictures and telling their friends about the page,” said Mr Gilles Denizot, co-administrator of what is now the Red Ribbon Army fan page (<http://www.facebook.com/TheRedRibbonArmy>).

The group’s aim has since evolved, and they now want to share information on the global AIDS response with its 500 000 plus members. They see their Facebook page and presence on other social media sites as a way to share important information with their fans and followers, such as human rights abuses against people living with and affected by HIV. Mr Denizot, an AIDS activist since 1992, has moved from street-level action—handing out leaflets and organizing petitions—to the social media environment. “Back then, we did not have social media, so obviously it has changed the way people raise awareness and the way people learn about facts,” he said. “But when you see something that you feel you cannot keep your eyes closed to, you feel that you have to do something.”

Activism or slacktivism?

Nevertheless, Gilles Denizot admits social media has its downsides. He experienced this when posting a request to the Red Ribbon Army to sign a petition against the antihomosexuality bill in Uganda. Despite its 500 000 membership, only 7000 members rallied around the effort.

He said the petition shows the need to better understand how social media works and what makes people engage. He said he has yet to figure out the equation. “What makes a Facebook user go from passively being part of a group to actively signing a petition?” Gilles asks. For the sake of an argument, can it be said that online activism is nothing more than slacktivism? This term combines the words slacker and activism and

UNAIDS + social media

01 [@UNAIDS](https://twitter.com/UNAIDS)

02 slideshare.com/UNAIDS

03 facebook.com/UNAIDS

04 youtube.com/UNAIDS

05 flickr.com/UNAIDS

06 AIDSspace.org

posits that people who support a cause by performing simple measures are not truly engaged or devoted to making a change.

Mr Rupert Daniels, head of content for the 1 Goal education campaign, does not agree. “Interaction on social media leads to something. If you ask someone to contribute and they do—by signing a petition or retweeting a message—we can’t let those people down. We have to show results. They believe in it and so do we. Every contribution matters,” said Mr Daniels.

1 Goal aims to get global leaders to honour their promise of providing education to 72 million children by 2015—one of the eight Millennium Development Goals. Since the campaign’s launch, over 7 million people have signed a pledge on its web site and 50 000 people have joined the campaign’s Facebook fan page.

Mr Daniels underlines that success looks different, depending on the social media channel used—and, importantly, how it is used. Even though 1 Goal has around 6000 followers on Twitter, the campaign’s social media team has focused on building relationships with key influencers on Twitter.

“Our philosophy is not necessarily to get everybody to come onto our Twitter site or even our Facebook site. We like the fact that people like Shakira and Queen Rania [of Jordan] are talking about their engagement on the campaign on their own Twitter page,” said Mr Daniels. “When you add all these things up, it equates to a very large awareness of our campaign on the social networks.”

When asked how the 1 Goal campaign did it, Mr Daniels shares three pieces of advice for any organization, small or large, that wants to embark on a social media initiative.

First, leverage your own networks: if you are on Facebook and have friends, use your connection to your friends to engage your friend’s friends. Soon enough, by this first- and second-degree network, you will have thousands of people behind you. Second, collaboration is vital: find organizations with a similar mandate or goal and partner to

share resources and campaign messages. Third, keep your network informed: once you have a network established, share results and keep your fans and followers up to date on the campaign’s success. Especially important is highlighting how their contribution has helped the campaign to achieve its goals.

For small organizations, Mr Daniels concludes that social media is the most cost-effective approach to reach a wide audience.

What is in store for social media?

What is the next big thing for social media? In 2008, it was Facebook. Last year Twitter. While many industry experts prefer not to speculate, it appears that social media’s future is bright.

“Social media is in its infancy, and we will see a lot of development, especially in the integration of social features into a variety of products and platforms,” said Mr Matthias Graf, Head of Product and Engineering at Google’s Europe, Middle East and Africa office. The merging of mobile technology and social media is also an exciting development that Mr Graf believes will open up new communication opportunities.

For the global AIDS movement, the main challenge is to use social media tools in an effective way and to build opportunities to mobilize people interested and already engaged in the AIDS response.

As the Red Ribbon Army example highlights, an organic, low-cost approach to using social media can yield powerful results. And at the other end of the spectrum, a high-profile campaign, such as 1 Goal, demonstrates the possibilities of mass awareness of a single issue.

The AIDS community is at the early stages of taking its activism—and the vibrancy around it—to the online world. And while there appears to be no set formula for unlocking the potential of social media as a force for change, what is clear is that the possibilities for it are immense. ●



AIDSspace.org

Connecting the global AIDS response

AIDSspace.org is an online community for the 33.4 million people living with HIV and the millions who are part of the AIDS response. AIDSspace.org was created to expand both informal and established networks in order to help maximize resources for a stronger response to the epidemic.

The site is built on three key principles: connect, share and access. Through AIDSspace members can meet and connect with other members to: learn from their work; exchange ideas and discover new networks; post and share key policies, best practices, multimedia materials, reports and other essential resources; and access and post jobs, consultancies and requests for proposals and become a service provider.