

LGBT HUMAN RIGHTS:

How Social Media and Israel are making global impacts

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Section I: A Brief look at Modern LGBT Human Rights

Issues regarding the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people -or the LGBT community - can be found on newspaper headlines around the world. The idea of LGBT rights or “gay rights” is a relatively new idea in the long history of the struggle of LGBT peoples. In the United States, many of the first LGBT organizations of the early 1970’s only centered their demands on the ideas of liberation and equality. The idea of LGBT human rights as a global issue did not come about until the 1990’s (Kollman & Waites, 2009). The LGBT human rights movement is important because, as of today, there are eight countries which enforce the death penalty for homosexuality. Being expressly gay is illegal in about 50 countries, and for men especially, there are another 50 countries. Even in countries where homosexuality has been decriminalized, the LGBT community is still subjected to harassment, discrimination, and violence (Mackey, 2001). Although these statistics are grim, LGBT human rights around the world are progressively improving; impacted by, and consequently impacting societies politically and culturally.

After World War II, countries began to recognize the LGBT rights movement legislatively. The decriminalization of homosexual activity began in countries such as France, Belgium, The Netherlands, Luxembourg, Italy, and Greece by the early 1950’s. The hitch to this decriminalization was that it did not protect LGBT people from discrimination and did not acknowledge same-sex families, which created a catalyst for

the immediate formation of slow but steady legal reforms (Kollman & Waites, 2009). Presently, the European Union is at the forefront of LGBT human rights legislation and has banned discrimination based on sexual orientation, and in many cases, people have elected openly gay politicians into office. The progressiveness in legislation begins to diminish in some of the 27 countries of the Union when it comes to certain laws such as same-sex marriage and adoption (Geitner, 2012).

One of the most notable of recent global campaigns for LGBT rights is the Yogyakarta Principles on the Application of International Human Rights Law in Relation to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. The Yogyakarta Principles penned in Indonesia in 2006 presents a statement of global human rights in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity. The document has been introduced into courts in several countries, taking hold especially in Nepal, and presents a stride in the right direction (Kollman & Waites, 2009). Ideas soon spread, and in 2009, India decriminalized homosexuality, which finds its roots in laws dating back to the colonial era. The law in modern times was hardly used to ever prosecute someone, but often found used in situations regarding harassment, blackmail, and jailing people (Timmons, 2009).

With the progression of decriminalization of homosexuality in many nations, LGBT organizations push to further their rights through same-sex marriage. Many countries have passed legislation regarding same-sex marriage. In Canada specifically, Manitoba and Nova Scotia ruled that a ban between same-sex partners was unconsti-

tutional. Six of Canada's provinces and territories allow same-sex marriage, and half of the country's people support the Prime Minister's hope to legalize it throughout Canada (Lloyd, 2004). Canada shares with Spain similar ideals on same-sex marriage legislation. They both garner attention for the strength of their laws. While Canada has not seen gay marriage throughout its borders, Spain recognizes the union nationally, and is the first country to eliminate all legal distinctions between same-sex and heterosexual unions. (McLean, 2005)

While not all activity can be an inspiring leap forward, around the world there are global set backs to LGBT rights. Uganda passed legislation that would sentence homosexuals to life in prison or even death for serial offenses or being H.I.V. positive (Gettleman, 2010). The east African country is caught between two worlds when it comes to the legislation; the evangelical church and funding from western donors are at odds with one another. Gay sex is recognized as criminal activity, and the legislation further pushes the LGBT community in a corner by prohibiting the "promotion" of, or anyone who "funds or sponsors homosexuality" or "abets homosexuality". This legislation vilifies homosexuals in Uganda and has left much of the LGBT community in hiding. Many of the arguments in support of the legislation are tangled in a web of religious reasoning. Internationally, however, many world leaders have spoken out against the legislation, such as U.S. President Barack Obama and British Prime Minister David Cameron (Edwards, 2012). In Russia, legislation was passed that hopes to eliminate

what is to be considered homosexual “propaganda”, which is defined as “the targeted and uncontrolled dissemination of generally accessible information capable of harming the health and moral and spiritual development of minors”. Similar to Uganda’s legislation, religious motivations are behind the drafting of the law. In Russia’s case, the religious power is held by a prominent figure in the Orthodox Church (Schwartz, 2012). The fallout from Russia’s vilifying law condemning homosexual “propaganda” has created incidents such as the one in Moscow during October of 2012. Twelve masked men stormed into a popular gay bar which was hosting a “Coming Out Day” and proceeded to beat the patrons; most of whom were women. Several of those attacked likened it to Pogrom or a mob attack against Jews (Roth, 2012).

Although Russia and Uganda are both experiencing what may seem major set backs in LGBT rights, they are opening a discussion. In Russia, open discussion of homosexuality was completely taboo up until a few years ago. In 1993, a Soviet era law was overturned which punished men in same-sex relations with prison time (Schwartz, 2012). All progress begins with a discussion and the branching out of ideas regardless of the issue. Vilifying homosexuals through laws does create many shockwaves for the LGBT community, but it is those shockwaves that have the power to strengthen the push for LGBT rights. When a large community is pushed into a corner, it will find new devices and tools in which to express itself and generate a dialogue.

Section II: LGBT Communities Leveraging Social Networks

The LGBT Community globally, more and more, is leveraging the internet to help campaign for LGBT human rights. One of the most revolutionary recent trends in the web is the idea of a social network. A social network is the idea that content is purely user generated rather than simply just providing the content. Social networks are increasingly on the rise and are definitely a buzz word in the world of digital design. Social networks come in various forms and have the power to reach large audiences and are increasingly being used for LGBT rights campaigns around the world.

In several countries, unfortunately, a global connection through the internet can be severed, most notably in China, due to firewalls which filter out webpages that the government sees as unfit for its citizens to view. In the case of China, the highly censored firewall is known as the Great Firewall. China decriminalized homosexuality in 1997 and removed it from a list of mental disorders in 2001 (Mountford, 2010). Being gay in China is largely taboo in mainstream society, and for many, they still succumb to social pressures to get married and end up living a double life. Even with social pressures pressing upon the mind of homosexuals in China, there is a glimmer of hope via the internet.

Many gay Chinese find a haven in chat rooms to air personal conflict and turmoil derived from the pressure of heterosexual marriage or the search of finding a

bride (Rosenthal, 2012). These chat rooms are not limited to complaints about pressures to conform. Many others are seizing the chance to step out of the closet publicly from a recent international influence. On December 12, 2012, Chinese homosexuals are hoping to come out or announce their homosexuality by leveraging the power of the internet. When a Chinese microblogger learned that American CNN news anchor Anderson Cooper announced that he was gay, Sun Yelin-Xiao Hei called for action on one of the most active websites in China; Weibo (Tatlow, 2012). China is not only experiencing a shift in LGBT rights and taboos, but is the largest internet market in the world (Rosenthal, 2012). This large act of coming out of the closet or 'chugui' in China demonstrates a global reach of ideas and influence globally through the use of the internet. While being able to come out of the closet in China is possible, many face discrimination, but it is a step in the right direction to breaking social pressures (Tatlow, 2012). In many countries, however, LGBT populations are leveraging the use of the internet to communicate ideas and even conduct relationships. In other, less progressive countries, unfortunately, gay are finding their situations a matter of life or death, and utility of the internet a beacon of hope.

In Uganda, many LGBT legislation activists are leveraging the power of the internet to access a larger audience to call for reforms. "Call me Kuchu" a documentary film about the struggle homosexuals face in Uganda, is spreading its word through the use of the internet. Most importantly, it follows the story of David Kato, a

prominent gay rights activist for Uganda, who helped to prevent a legislation in 2011 from passing which sought for the execution of gays (Wright & Zouhali-Worrall, 2012). Unfortunately, Kato was beaten to death as a result of the legislation that had passed, but his legacy is living on through the internet (Gettleman, 2012). There are over fifteen well known websites dedicated to actions specifically for the Ugandan LGBT population that continue the legacy of David Kato. Some are social networks and some are just web brochures on how to maintain a low profile (Canavera, 2010). LGBT rights in Uganda is an uphill battle, especially in the case of David Kato, where his picture was printed on a national newspaper as being a homosexual. When the law passed, it encouraged those who knew homosexuals to turn them in to authorities. David Kato's legacy is fortunately living on with the use of the internet, and is grabbing the attention of prominent figures such as UN secretary general Ban Ki-Moon (Wright & Zouhali-Worrall, 2012). LGBT issues are more and more becoming a global argument rather than a nation by nation concern.

There are many organizations that have formed upon the idea of LGBT rights being a global concern. All Out, for example, is a website at the forefront of bringing attention to global LGBT rights issues. It provides access to news from around the world concerning LGBT legislations and news where LGBT people can be involved and educated. Its campaign motto is "Equality. Everywhere" and expresses this through several personas in a brief video where they describe what it is like to be LGBT in their

respective countries. All Out hopes to have a presence in social media-like outlets such as Facebook and Twitter. The organization states that "Together, our tweets, voices and texts will make them pay attention," leveraging heavily the power of the internet to communicate (Elliott, 2010).

Communication is key when reaching an audience that may be existing behind closed doors. Another globally reaching web organization aimed at inviting LGBT people to become involved is Interpride. Interpride lists all LGBT related pride events on a global level. In the year 2007, there were over 2000 pride events happening around the world, and each one was listed on the Interpride site. Interpride has even branched out and declared certain locations as "World Pride" host cities, which help raise funds for various LGBT foundations and draw attention to the city it is hosted in. Interpride has expanded their reach, and helps fund scholarships for LGBT youth around the world through donations (Greenfield, 2007). This kind of networking gives the LGBT community a great communication tool and support system that reaches a global level. Interpride and All Out, however, have only garnered a great deal of attention from within the LGBT community.

Recently, an organization based out of the United States has made a global impact and has involved people who may not be LGBT but could be their relatives or simply people concerned for their rights. The "It Gets Better" web campaign started by Dan Savage in the wake of a large number of teen suicides due to discrimination

and bullying in the United States has attracted people and even companies around the world to become involved. The website takes user submitted video and aggregates or collects them under one hub with a sole message at task, only preaching positivity. Users discuss their own narrative of coming out, the trials and tribulations of love, and how their professional lives came together.

This campaign has been used all over the world attracting celebrities, athletes, and politicians to become involved and to submit videos (Stelter, 2010). While this positivity is being generated, it is not always met so positively from outside of the LGBT community. In Malaysia, a largely Muslim country, Azwan Ismail created his own It Gets Better video and was met with around 3,000 negative comments, some even launching death threats. Many saw the video and Ismail as threatening to the religion of Islam as homosexual relations are strictly forbidden as it is counter to reproduction. The producer of Ismail's video simply responded with the statement "If LGBT Malaysians are given avenues to express ourselves, we are certain the public will be more understanding and realize we are not a threat to society." (Tan, 2010). These sentiments reign very true for the LGBT community; not just for Malaysians, but for LGBT people globally. Ismail's simple 3 minute clip got the attention of the entire Malaysian country. Whether the reception was good or bad, a dialogue had been created and new voices had an opportunity to step forward and speak.

One very large web based company is stepping out and seeking to get the entire world thinking. Google launched "Legalize Love" campaigns in Singapore and Poland partnering with companies and organizations so that they can help grassroots campaigns that aim to improve LGBT rights. Google is planning to further expand upon this campaign by adding focus in every country where the internet giant has an office. Google's Mark Palmer-Edgecumbe sees the initiative "We want our employees who are gay or lesbian or transgender to have the same experience outside the office as they do in the office." (Peirano, 2012). This initiative speaks volumes as a multinational web based corporation launches a stance on a LGBT human rights issue. The LGBT people are a community of people that are often underserved and go unnoticed and often are discriminated against. Social networks have come to aid the group as a whole, whether the content be blogs, youtube videos, or info based submissions. Social networks truly have the power to inform minds regionally and globally to end civil rights injustices and help the LGBT community come closer to equality.

Section III: Israel's Social Discourse Making a Global Impact

Social media obtains power through its user base. There have been hundreds if not thousands of social media startup businesses that fail to get off of the ground due to a lack of involvement or interest. Social media needs an enormous amount of user involvement and submission before it is even considered a substantial social entity. The success of a social media network is measured in the amount of usage it gets. One country in particular has held a social revolution entirely on the internet. In October of 2011, Israel had logged an average of 11.1 hours of social media usage per month. In contrast, that is more than double of the global average of 5.7 hours (Russell, 2011). Access to the internet is key to be involved, but the level of involvement may point to something greater within the Middle Eastern country. Israel has long been wrought with political and religious strife and social media may be among the twenty first century's beginning steps towards bridging clashing communities.

Before looking at how the internet is creating a shockwave through Israeli society, the user base must first be analyzed. The internet can be a spooky place sometimes and user bases are determined by using analytics. Through analytics, a powerful web tool, a users age, gender, interests, and even the amount of time spent reading can be determined. In Israel's case, young people ages 15-24 are active on social me-

dia for hours a day, and Israeli children 12-14 identify social media outlets as their primary way of keeping in touch. The older generation in Israel, one third of those ages 55-64, are connected to social networks daily, as well as are 22% of those over the age of 65 (Shamah, 2012). These numbers are clearly on the rise, and social media is obviously taking hold of Israel in a unique way. Much of how the LGBT human rights movement has become a global phenomenon, Israel is using social media in its own discourse.

Israel, for many, is a touchy discussion depending on what "side" or perspective they hold. Israel has been wrought with conflict over territory since its modern conception after World War II. Israel was a nation founded but founded while another culture had taken up residence. Israel and Palestine have been at odds since the start politically. This political division, with the advent of social media, is creating a hyper connected dialogue. The Israeli military has embraced social media so much so, that they have a YouTube channel that broadcasts clips of surveillance and airstrikes (Ward, 2009). A recent incident where there was confusion over the legitimacy of a photograph led to outrage and a military involvement on twitter. An Israeli press officer even suggested that Israel's military was battling Palestinians "using social media to purposely pass along misinformation, presenting it as breaking news" (Mackey, 2012). Social media has also been leveraged by communities to help keep up to the minute tally of rockets fired in southern Israel and a running count of the Palestinian dead and

wounded, all through the use of the Facebook status (Ward, 2012). It is not surprising in analytics results that Israeli Arabs are the biggest readers and writers of blogs (Shamah, 2012). Israeli Arabs, an obvious minority in Israel, are using social media as a means of expression. Organizations in Israel are taking advantage of this medium, such as the Absorption Ministry, who recruited new immigrants to post on blogs in their native languages offering positive talking points on Israel (Ward, 2012). While politics can be argued ad nauseam, when it comes to Israel there is a hope. The President of Israel, Shimon Peres, created his Facebook page as he believes "the best way to achieve peace is when the people negotiate peace directly by talking to each other" (Geron, 2012). This idea of peace is very powerful and one that coincides with the LGBT human rights struggle.

Homosexuality in Israel is an interesting landscape. Much of Israel is identified as being Jewish while most of the Middle East identifies as Muslim. Israel, being a minority in the Middle East with their religious views, also finds themselves providing, due to their laxer views on homosexuality, to be a thriving haven for gays in the Middle East. This past year, the biggest gay pride parade took place for Tel Aviv. LGBT human rights in Israel are extremely progressive for the Middle East, allowing gays to openly serve in the military and recognizing marriages from other countries. This is not to say that LGBT human rights in Israel are at their most optimal; however, they have been progressively improving (Garcia-Navarro, 2012). The LGBT community, like much

of the rest of the world, has leveraged social media to further push for the LGBT human rights campaign. This push in conjunction with Israel's incredible social media use has created one of the most powerful tools the world over for LGBT human rights.

Social networks have recently found a new outlet: mobile devices. The advent of the smart phone or an internet connected handset has created a new realm for digital designers to explore. The accessibility and utility of the mobile handset means faster connections for people everywhere. Joel Simkhai, born and raised in Tel Aviv, created a mobile application called Grindr, which hosts a social network only accessible through handsets, and is wildly popular. Grindr not only found a huge market in Israel, but recently the application logged 4 million active users worldwide. The catch is that it is designed for gay men. The premise of the network is in conjunction with the use of a profile where a user submits an image and a short tagline. The application then uses the GPS (Global Positioning Service) which aggregates, or gathers, other nearby users, in effect, listing all of the nearby gay men in which to interact with via text chat (Crook, 2012).

This utility especially in Israel is crucial. As gay friendly as Tel Aviv can be, there are many peripheries that still conform to more conservative ideals. While many critics see the application as just a means to a fast hookup, for users in remote and conservative communities it is a glimmer of hope for connection. A user in Israel explains Grindr users as "People of any age and from any background, even those in senior

management positions". This is an incredible range of user base which speaks to its might in ease of use and message. Grindr is now actively a global application that has users logging in all over the world. Users in Israel may log in to see those in Lebanon or Turkey, where for those users homosexuality is not legal and are provided with few other havens other than Grindr (Levin, 2010).

Grindr is leveraging its like minded user base through its seamless design and now Shimkhai has recently launched Grindr into a new campaign "Grindr for Equality", focusing on LGBT human rights. The campaign asks for user submissions regarding any LGBT human rights news. The app itself confronts the user at its launch with a prompt regarding a national or regional rights issue and how the user can be involved. This involvement is not limited to one country, however, but is globally linked. A user in Israel may log in to Grindr and be offered a prompt regarding Proposition 8 legislation in the United States. (Crook, 2012). Most notably, a global campaign through Grindr received 57,000 click throughs on an LGBT human rights issue in Russia regarding "gay propaganda". The power of education worldwide regarding these issues is crucial especially when its founder, Shimkhai, in often places sees these issues as "the difference of life and death for gay people" (Pulos, 2012).

While Israel is battling its own political issues, a subculture within its borders is not only fighting for its rights but also the rights of others on a global scale. The power and effectiveness of intuitive and accessible design for a large audience is limitless. In

the midst of chaos and a political power struggle in Israel, Grindr has created a haven for Muslim gays and Jewish gays to freely communicate, which harkens back to the ideas expressed by the president of Israel. Peace can not always be determined by the government but must be discussed by the people. If enough channels are open to communication, that dialogue can be opened. For gays, Grindr has created a social network through which to access others abroad and within the confines of their circumstances and has broken down a primary barrier that many LGBT community members are faced with; not knowing who else is out there.

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