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## Twitter and YouTube: Positive Developments for Human Rights Protection?

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## Twitter and YouTube: Positive Developments for Human Rights Protection?

### Abstract

A number of statements have been made regarding the benefit to human rights protection of advances in technology. However, can these advances also have a negative impact?

Focusing on instant messaging and social network services such as Twitter and YouTube, the positives are quickly apparent. They can draw immediate attention to human rights violations that may otherwise go unnoticed, allow interested parties to stay abreast of developments in the protection of human rights, and create strength and courage in numbers for action that may not be anticipated by the perpetrator. These services also enable human rights activists to tweet their movements to family and friends confirming that they are alive and well.

### Keywords

Human rights, Social media, Dissemination of information, Propaganda

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## Twitter and YouTube: Positive Developments for Human Rights Protection?

by Nicola Colbran

A number of [statements](#) have been made regarding the benefit to human rights protection of advances in technology. However, can these advances also have a negative impact?

Focusing on instant messaging and social network services such as Twitter and YouTube, the positives are quickly apparent. They can draw immediate attention to human rights violations that may otherwise go unnoticed, allow interested parties to stay abreast of developments in the protection of human rights, and create strength and courage in numbers for action that may not be anticipated by the perpetrator. These services also enable human rights activists to [tweet](#) their movements to family and friends confirming that they are alive and well.

Instant messaging and social network services can communicate human rights violations as they unfold in a succinct manner to a wide audience, both domestic and international. An example is the information sent via Twitter and YouTube indicating violence, arbitrary detentions and killings following the elections in Iran. This function is particularly important where traditional media is unable to, or fails to, report on the violations. CNN's lack of coverage of the demonstrations in Iran was heavily criticized with blogs headlining such as "[Dear CNN, Please Check Twitter for News About Iran.](#)"

The use of instant messaging and social network services to communicate human rights violations is also a strong indication of a lack of [freedom of expression and association](#) in the relevant country. Communication via Twitter and YouTube becomes necessary because of the censoring of news, the arrest of journalists, the shutting down of satellite transmissions, and the prohibition of television coverage of rallies.

The function of allowing interested parties to stay abreast of developments in the protection of human rights plays an equally important role. An example of this is the recent [announcement](#) by the Human Rights Campaign, America's largest lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender civil rights organization, of the #FightHateNow hashtag for Twitter users to contribute to and stay abreast of developments in relation to the federal hate crimes bill, the Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act (LLEHCPA).

However in his article, Darrell West also raises the question of whether instant messaging and social network services may present problems for human rights protection and promotion. West's article refers to the ability of authoritarian governments to collect lists of dissidents through Internet cookies and other tracking devices in order to identify and track them down. He continues "what authoritarian governments need more than anything else in a crackdown is lists of people sympathetic to opposition leaders."

But are the risks of using instant messaging and social network services any greater than using more traditional methods of communication? Tracking down opponents and dissidents is not a new phenomenon. For example, in Indonesia in 1965, it has been widely [reported](#) that the US government played a significant role in one of the worst massacres of the twentieth century by supplying the names of thousands of Communist Party leaders to the Indonesian army, which

hunted them down and killed them. The US government has [acknowledged](#) that in 1965 it systematically compiled comprehensive lists of Communist operatives, provided them to the Indonesian army, and later checked off the names of those who had been killed or captured. “No one cared, as long as they were Communists, that they were being butchered.” An interesting question is whether the existence of instant messaging and social network services would have made any difference. Would they, for example, have drawn attention to the massacres that even today many people are unaware of? Or would they in fact have facilitated the massacre, making the compilation of leaders, followers and sympathizers even easier?

Either way, as developments in technology continue, the advantages offered by instant messaging and social network services to the human rights movement should be acknowledged. Many risks do exist, including the detection of authors and followers, the interception of messages and the misuse of technology to further violate human rights. Authors and followers also need to put context and meaning to the flood of data that can ensue from the use of such services. Ultimately however, “[we can complain because the rose bush has thorns, or rejoice because thorn bushes have roses.](#)”

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