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Stewardship and Global Social Media

Gary Panetta

Abstract

Social media gives local citizens global reach. How can we learn to behave responsibly as global citizens of a new digital order? The concept of stewardship can help us as we struggle to discover what it means to accomplish the common good in an ever more interconnected world.

For better or worse, we all have access to a universal megaphone. It's called social media. Thanks to everything from Facebook and You Tube to blogs to smart phones, acts by single individuals suddenly have global consequences. Sounds, words, and images created by groups and individuals in one part of the world can pop up in another at any time. How will we use our new global megaphone? How will we act as global citizens?¹

The concept of stewardship can help us. Stewardship is the idea that whatever resources or powers we possess—personal and collective—are not our own, but are entrusted to us for the common good. Stewardship of social media implies that these new technologies are gifts we are responsible for using well, especially when we use them to affect the lives of others by attempting to shape public policy or to pursue a political agenda. The concept of stewardship implies an underlying character or

disposition: an “ethical mind” that guides the choices we make (Gardner 127-151, 158).

In what follows, I will examine two uses of social media for political ends in light of stewardship and the ethical orientation required by stewardship. The first example describes how a left-wing French weekly, *Charlie Hebdo*, used Facebook and old-fashioned print technology to distribute a satirical cartoon spoofing Islam in the midst of an inflammatory international situation in 2012.² The second example consists of efforts by a human rights activist, Ory Okolloh, to fight for civil society and democracy in her homeland of Kenya using blog technology. Okolloh’s efforts led to the creation in 2008 of the Ushahidi map, a social media tool that now figures prominently in disaster relief and in other humanitarian endeavors (Thompson 45-46, 61-63).

However, before discussing these two cases, I want to consider briefly the concept of stewardship.

Stewardship

Imagine a good friend leaves on vacation. For one month, you are responsible for taking care of your friend’s exotic fish aquarium. Your duties include feeding the fish daily and cleaning the aquarium weekly. Your friend expects the fish to be happy and healthy when she returns.

Since you value your friendship, you take extra efforts in caring for the fish. Certainly, you feed the fish and clean the tank on schedule. But you also observe the fish carefully, looking for signs of illness and are ready to call the vet if needed. In addition, you pay attention to factors that your friend didn’t mention, such as room and water temperature. In short, you treat your friend’s fish aquarium as if it were your own. You want the fish not only to survive, but to flourish under your care.

This exemplifies practicing stewardship. Stewardship involves managing or taking care of something that has been entrusted to us, as if we ourselves were the owner—with the kind of involvement the actual owner might demonstrate.

The concept of stewardship applies whenever we take care of what belongs to others—aquariums, houses, cars. But stewardship also applies to larger, more intangible things. For example, a CEO or an executive director newly appointed to lead a business or a nonprofit might exercise stewardship by considering her post as something other than an occasion for following the technicalities of what is expected. Decisions would be guided by a lively sense of what is in the best long-term interests of the organization.

The concept of stewardship could be extended still further. In the Reformed Protestant tradition, for instance, stewardship is a corollary of God's act of creation. God originates and preserves creation, and human beings are meant to participate in God's work. Creation is held in trust by human beings, who are intended to use the resources of creation responsibly to bring about peace, health, order, and beauty in ways that express God's love for all (Book of Order 148-149).

Belief in God, however, is not necessarily a precondition for stewardship. The concept—if not the term—naturally suggests itself when we consider to what extent we rely on the resources, institutions, and discoveries of previous generations as we go about our daily lives. We often pride ourselves on being self-made people. But our very ability to be self-made depends on a larger society that educates us, provides opportunities, safeguards our property, and ensures our well-being.

The concept of stewardship also suggests itself when we consider how much power we can exercise over the surrounding world upon which we depend for survival. A classic example is the

power we wield over the natural environment. What we dump upstream eventually reaches those who live downstream: the fact of ecological interdependencies mocks the notion that we can simply treat nature as personal property.

The upstream-downstream problem also has an ethical counterpart – especially in the case of social media, which bring us into a web of digital relationships that potentially span the globe. Social media’s power to send information at will across cultures multiplies the possibilities for strife and misunderstanding, as well as for cooperation and mutual enlightenment. What we communicate and how we communicate matters more than ever. We need to pay attention to what we say and how we say it. Stewardship is about paying attention. So what does good stewardship of social media look like?

Rather than a list of rules, I want to make a case for a basic orientation, a way of asking questions in any given context that can help us make good choices—or, at least, avoid disastrous ones.

Given human nature and the “everything goes” character of digital media, I retain no illusions that my suggestions will serve as quick-fix solutions or change others’ opinions. I also acknowledge that, sometimes, ethical decision-making involves difficult trade-offs with no clear-cut answers.

Nevertheless, because of this technology’s vast power, we need to think harder about what it means to cultivate a basic ethical orientation when we use social media. We sometimes believe we are wielding fly-swatters; in reality, each of us has been given a sledge hammer.

What does a basic ethical orientation look like? How can it help us be good stewards of social media?

Facebook and *Charlie Hebdo*

Consider Facebook. Is it always a good idea to post something on Facebook no matter how others might react? Such was the question that faced staff members of *Charlie Hebdo*, a left-wing Paris weekly, during the fall of 2012. The publication was getting ready to release cartoons spoofing Islam and the Prophet Muhammad on Facebook, and in its print edition. The Prophet was not only caricatured and mocked, but also depicted naked in some scenes (Simons).

Spoofing Islam was nothing new for *Charlie Hebdo*; a year earlier, the magazine had been firebombed because it had published deliberately blasphemous cartoons poking fun at sharia law (Willsher).

But this time, the decision about whether to publish could have global ramifications. Riots were already breaking out across the Middle East over a film trailer distributed on YouTube titled “The Innocence of Muslims.” Created by admirers of a California-based, anti-Islamic cleric named Zakaria Botros Heinen, the 15-minute sequence depicted the Prophet Muhammad as a child-molester and as a womanizer (Garrison *et al.*). Publishing additional cartoons might only throw fuel on the fire.

Nevertheless, *Charlie Hebdo* decided to go ahead and publish the cartoon. Editor-in-Chief Stephane Charbonnier explained the reasoning for publication to *Der Spiegel* this way:

Extremists don't need any excuses....We are only criticizing one particular form of extremist Islam, albeit in a peculiar and satirically exaggerated form. We are not responsible for the excesses that happen elsewhere, just because we practice our right to freedom of expression within the legal limits....My job is to provoke laughter or thinking with drawings – for the readers of our magazine. (Simons)

What if some are offended by the drawings? Charbonnier replied:

If they are not amused by our cartoons, they don't need to buy our magazine. Of course they are allowed to demonstrate. The right to protest needs to be protected, so long as one abides by the law and refrains from violence....If the government believes that Muslims have no sense of humor, then that's an insult that turns the faithful into second-class citizens. (Simons)

The United States and French governments weren't so sure. "We have a free press that can express itself right up to the point of caricature," said French prime minister Jean-Marc Ayrault, "But there is also a question of responsibility" (Zaimov). "Obviously we have questions about the judgment of publishing something like this," said White House spokesman Jay Carney. "We know these images will be deeply offensive to many and have the potential be inflammatory" (Zaimov).

Before the entire affair was over, violent protests led to 200 injuries and more than a dozen deaths (Porter), including that of ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans at the U.S. Embassy in Benghazi, Libya (Zaimov); the French government closed embassies and schools in 20 countries (McCormaic); Pakistani soldiers fired tear gas at a stone-throwing mob attempting to break down police defenses (Crilly and Lauter); and President Barak Obama was burned in effigy (McCormaic).

The degree to which rioters responded to the cartoons by *Charlie Hebdo* is unclear. Much of the worst violence, including the deadly attacks in Benghazi—inspired by "The Innocence of Muslims"—had already occurred or was already in progress.

Stewardship as Ethical Orientation

What are we to make of *Charlie Hebdo* and its decision to publish cartoons spoofing Islam? What light does the concept of stewardship throw on this particular example of social media in action? In this case, stewardship helps us reflect on the importance of responsibility and relationships.

Stewardship reminds us that we are responsible to something bigger than ourselves: namely, the collective pool of resources and institutional arrangements that make so many aspects of our lives possible. This includes gifts such as social media, and technology in general. Stewardship also reminds us that we live in relationship with others—even if the “others” in question live on the other side of the globe.

Stewardship, then, implies several consequences in regards to the *Charlie Hebdo* affair. It helps us understand that the magazine—and, by extension, each of us—is not an entity unto itself. True, *Charlie Hebdo* is privately owned and protected by laws that allow its staff members to exercise freedom of speech. Even so, the very ability of *Charlie Hebdo* to publish depends on inherited national and global institutional arrangements. In principle, a global meltdown of law and order would make exercising any sort of freedom impossible. Thoughtful people do not saw off the branch they are sitting on.

Stewardship also helps us understand that human relationships are crucial. Any act of communication brings us into relationship with another person. How we treat one another when we communicate remains no small matter. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul counsels his readers not to place stumbling blocks in front of other people.³ Paul argued that sometimes doing the right thing means limiting our own freedom for the best interests of another person. Indeed, we may be legally entitled to

exercise a freedom; however, this is not the same as being morally entitled to exercise a freedom.

What difference would applying these principles have made at *Charlie Hebdo*? A range of possibilities suggest themselves.

One possibility might be to distribute the cartoons in the name of global good. In this scenario, the rationale for distribution would prove different from that which *Charlie Hebdo*'s editor-in-chief stated to *Der Spiegel*. The rationale would be justified less by simply appealing to a legal right to freedom of speech and more by an appeal to the good of humankind. For instance, an argument could be made that we achieve a great global good when we stand up for freedom of speech—especially in the face of violent international opposition that seeks to hold such freedom hostage by threatening to riot or burn down embassies. In an increasingly interdependent world of many religions and cultures, peoples of diverse backgrounds must learn to express dissent and offense peacefully, without infringing on the rights of others.

However, other arguments are also valid. For instance, it could be argued that the global good requires self-restraint when it comes to distributing certain kinds of information through social media. Self-restraint might especially apply to satirical cartoons, a genre that lends itself to extreme expression in a way that news reports or even written opinions do not (Gardner 119). Such self-restraint might simply consist of delaying publication until a particularly tense international moment has passed. Or it might consist of toning down what might be published. Or it might involve not publishing at all.

The concept of stewardship does not dictate a specific plan of action. But it does require going beyond the kind of black-and-white, fight-or-flight thinking that a narrow insistence on one's individual rights engenders—whether the rights in question

involve freedom of expression or the alleged “right” to be offended when others poke fun at your own religion or culture.

Stewardship requires recognizing that our individual acts—especially when amplified by technology—may have far-flung consequences. We may not even intend these consequences; nevertheless, we must try to anticipate them and take responsibility for them. To do so demands what Howard Gardner, a professor of cognition and education at Harvard, has called “the ethical mind” (Gardner 127-151, 158).

According to Gardner, the ethical mind demands a certain level of abstract thinking. It requires us to see what we do in terms of social roles: for instance, that of worker or citizen. It also requires us to make judgments about these roles. In general terms, what does it mean to be good workers or good citizens? Are we succeeding or failing to measure up to these ideals (Gardner 158)? Gardner describes how the ethical mind works in this way:

. . . The individual must be able to step back from daily life and to conceptualize the nature of work and the nature of community. He or she needs to consider such questions as: What does it mean to be a lawyer/physician/engineer/educator at the present time? What are my rights, obligations, and responsibilities? What does it mean to be a citizen of my community/my region/the planet? What do I owe others, and especially those who—through the circumstances of birth or bad luck—are less fortunate than I am? (Gardner 129)

Still, the ethical mind might pose other questions: “What is the greatest good that can be accomplished in this situation?” “What are the harms that might result—even if unintentionally—from my actions?” To ask such questions is to realize that each action engaged in—each word spoken or transmitted, each click of a mouse or press of button—contributes to the ongoing

construction of a common world. Is this common world which we are building a good one? Is it one we can be proud of?

Obviously, individuals and groups will approach such questions with different preconceptions and commitments. Uniform answers are unlikely. But this is no reason for abandoning the responsibility to discuss and debate the common good and, perhaps, reach a compromise.

As technology ties the globe closer and closer together, the common good will become increasingly identical with the global good; more and more, Gardner's question will be the one we have to ask ourselves as global citizens: "In what kind of a world would we like to live if we knew neither our standing nor our resources in advance?" (Gardner 127).

Developing the ethical mind is a daunting task. What does it look like in practice?

Social Media and the Greater Good

Consider the story of Ory Okolloh and the invention of the Ushahidi map. Okolloh was a young law student in the United States in 2003, when she began using blog technology to criticize corrupt government practices in her native country of Kenya. Okolloh won a sizable following on the Internet (Thompson 45-46).

After Okolloh returned to Kenya, she continued to blog, posting photographs of giant potholes and other images that she considered evidence of incompetent and compromised leadership. In 2007, violence erupted after a rigged election. Thanks to her blog, Okolloh circumvented government-censored media and began documenting human rights abuses based on eye-witness accounts sent to her by e-mail and cell phones (Thompson 45-46).

As the task became overwhelming, Okolloh wondered whether there was a more efficient way—a tool that would allow anyone to post images on a shared map. Okolloh blogged:

Google Earth supposedly shows in great detail where the damage is being done on the ground. It occurs to me that it will be useful to keep a record of this, if one is thinking long-term. For the reconciliation process to occur at the local level the truth of what happened will first have to come out. Guys looking to do something—any techies out there willing to do a mashup of where the violence and destruction is occurring using Google Maps? (Thompson 62)

Okolloh's post was seen by a friend, Erik Hersman, a website developer living in the near-by city of Nairobi. Hersman thought he knew just the person with the expertise to help build such a map: a friend named David Kobia, a Kenyan programmer, who was living in Birmingham, Ala. Although they were dispersed geographically, Hersman, Okolloh, and Kobia were, nevertheless, able to create a map-based tool that anyone could use to document the time, place, and nature of violence carried out by the Kenyan government against its own people. The map was called Ushahidi, Swahili for "testimony," because of its power to allow people to bear witness to the unfolding atrocities in Kenya. Ushahidi attracted the attention of international nonprofit foundations, who then funneled two-hundred-thousand dollars to Hersman, Kobia, and Okolloh so that they could begin tweaking the map to receive reports from Twitter and social media sites, making its information-collecting potential all the more powerful (Thompson 62-63).

The contrast between *Charlie Hebdo* and Ushahidi is striking. Okolloh made enterprising use of the freedom afforded by social media and digital technology, but not for its own sake. Instead, she used her technologically-empowered freedom for the common good: at first, documenting government corruption and,

eventually, documenting human rights abuses. Okolloh's guiding purpose was not freedom for freedom's sake, but freedom in the service of helping to restore civil society and democracy to her troubled country.

Okolloh demonstrates the ethical mind in action. Even when she was a student far from home, Okolloh considered what it meant for her to be a citizen of Kenya, and what obligations she owed her country. Later, back in Kenya, her sense of duty led her to take considerable personal risks to bring about the most good she was capable of in the midst of a grim situation, hoping against hope that democracy would eventually be restored.

Conclusion

Click by click, we are building a common world.

To be good stewards of social media isn't merely to be good caretakers of technology; it is to be caretakers of the world that this technology is creating. In a very real sense, it is to be caretakers of the kinds of selves we are becoming in a world fashioned by technology. We are, after all, communicative creatures. What we say and how we say it shapes who we are and who we become.

To be good stewards means to take responsibility for what we say and how we say it—for who we are and who we become. In short, to be good stewards means to take responsibility for the common world that we are building.

But to take responsibility for a common world requires first recognizing that we share a common world. This recognition requires us to give up our ignorance, our apathy, or our self-interest. It entails our understanding that our actions have consequences—sometimes, far beyond what we predict. We must

not only ponder the good we can bring about, but also the evil that we can unintentionally commit.

To come to all of these realizations is to begin to adopt a general ethical orientation. Through this, we realize that freedom for freedom's sake means little. If freedom means anything at all, it is to discuss and debate the common good, and to strive for it.

Stewardship reminds us of something else, as well: this common world that we are creating, and the technology that makes this common world possible, are not our own. This common world has been entrusted to us by God. We owe our watchfulness and solicitude—our stewardship—to our God who sustains us.

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Notes

¹ The literature on global citizenship is vast. As an object of analysis, “global citizenship” precedes social media and is, in fact, a phenomenon of globalization. Japanese analyst Kenichie Ohamae argued well before the appearance of social media that globalization was creating transnational citizens even as it diminished the significance of the nation state in his 1990 book *The Borderless World: Power and Strategy in the Interlinked Economy*. See also Martin Albrow's *The Global Age: State and Society beyond Modernity*.

The prospect of a global citizen has created a host of questions peripheral yet significant to the question of citizenship. Will citizenship be driven by a sense of the global good or market economics? Carlos Alberto Torres ponders this question in “Globalization, Education, and Citizenship: Solidarity versus Markets?” According to Barry Gills in “Democratizing Globalization and Globalizing Democracy,” how we define citizenship matters because a new definition of citizenship – one that bridges global, regional, national, and local

concerns – is part of a larger effort to retool world political systems to catch up with globalization.

As we rethink global citizenship and its implications, what resources does traditional political thought offer beyond liberal cosmopolitanism and nationalism? Michael Kenny considers these in “Global Civil Society: A Liberal-Republican Argument.”

The challenges of educating students for global citizenship are the concern of Kathleen Knight Abowitz and Jason Harnish in “Contemporary Discourses of Citizenship.” The ethical challenges for business are discussed by Deborah C. Poff in “Ethical Leadership and Global Citizenship: Considerations for a Just and Sustainable Future.”

² On Jan. 7, 2014, in a more recent incident, ten staff members of *Charlie Hebdo* – including the paper’s editor, Stephane Charbonnier – as well as two police officers were assassinated by Islamist gunmen. This horrific act highlights the threat to freedom of speech posed by religious extremism and the need for everyone – religious and nonreligious – to stand against violence and intimidation and for the rule of law.

³ I owe this insight to the Rev. Jim McCrea, pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Galena, IL.

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