

**METRA 2014 Michael T. Morrow Memorial
Environmental Scholarship Application**

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"How to Integrate Social Media to Influence Environmental Behavior Change"

We live in a world in which we are more connected than ever. People walk around attached to their mobile devices, seemingly unable to live without their technology and social media apps. Nearly one seventh of the world's population is on Facebook, and one of seven minutes online is spent on Facebook (Chavar, 2014). When researching these statistics, I began to question, "What if just one of those minutes each day were spent viewing material about environmental and social change?"

I decided to take on my own social experiment and created a 40 second PSA demonstrating the realities of plastic waste around the world. (The PSA can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5lrkJcxH_wl). The video includes startling images and facts about plastic waste, and at the end I pose the question, "The next time you see a plastic bottle on the ground- would you recycle it? "Like" this video if you say yes." A simple test: I decided to post my video to Facebook once a day for five days with a caption that read "Please watch this short video to help me with a project I'm working on" to see how many people I could get to "like" the video.

While I currently have almost 900 Facebook friends, at the end of Day 1 my post only had two "likes." The second day yielded similar results, with only a few "likes" from a couple of family members and friends. By Day 3, I decided to take a more direct approach and sent the video link to a small group of friends via a private message on Facebook, asking them for their help. The outcome from this attempt was slightly better; five of the six friends "liked" the video. During Day 4 and 5, I posted the video as normal and continued to receive similar results- a couple of "likes"- on Day 4 no "likes" at all. Much to my surprise, the experiment was not quite as successful as I had imagined. During the five days I struggled to receive only a few "likes" from close family and friends. Although some people may have viewed the video and opted out of "liking" it, I felt the greater struggle was attracting attention to the video at all.

The experiment reveals an overwhelming reality; the internet- and moreover, the world- is noisier than ever. Nearly 100,000 tweets are shared every minute, and over one hour of video is uploaded to Youtube every second (Bennett, 2013). With so much activity online, it's nearly impossible to review every post a friend makes. Even if you are a social media addict, while

perusing the Internet, you are likely to only run into posts that are most popular online- or most relevant to your life. During the experiment, I found my statuses about the World Cup received more "likes" than my posts about the Plastic PSA. So how do you make issues such as recycling as relevant to people as soccer, to the point where it influences behavior change? Moreover, how do you use your voice to inspire and educate in such a noisy social media world?

The 2011 Egyptian uprising was in part spurred by a simple Facebook page created by 29-year-old Wael Ghonim, who was horrified when he found a photo of a young man named Khaled Mohamed Said who had been beaten to death by the Egyptian police. He immediately created a Facebook page and wrote, "Today they killed Khaled... If I don't act for his sake, tomorrow they will kill me." He named the page, "Kullena Khaled Said" — "We Are All Khaled Said" (Vargas, 2012). Ghonim did something incredibly important which contributed to the success of his page: he personalized the issue- he made it relevant to everyone. He told a simple story that people could relate to on a personal level.

I wish I could say my Plastic PSA received thousands of hits, went viral, and now people are picking up plastic bottles in the streets everywhere they go. My experiment proved that unfortunately, it is not that simple, even when utilizing popular tools such as social media. There is certainly a lot more work to be done when it comes to changing people's behavior towards environmental issues. But we shouldn't give up. This past semester during my study abroad experience in Ecuador, one of my professors said something very powerful that has stuck with me: "Activism means staying active." We can all be activists by tweeting with a purpose and sharing videos that contain important messages. In doing so, we may one day gain enough momentum to begin a movement. The most important method for change is persistent action.

As Derek Sivers suggests in his famous TED Talk on leadership, it is actually the first follower- not the leader- that is most important in creating movements of change (TED, 2010). The first few followers often legitimize the intentions of the leader, and, as Sivers puts it "turn a lone nut into a leader." Going into my senior year as an environmental studies student, my goal is to strive to find ways I can incorporate innovative methods to help solve the environmental problems we face. Even in such a noisy world, I hope to discover ways I can combine art, technology, digital story telling, and other unconventional methods to make issues relevant to everyday people in order to create the positive change we need in our world.

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