Avi Benlolo
President and CEO, Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center, Canada

Could the Internet Have Stopped the Holocaust?

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As the world readies for the 67th commemoration of Yom Hashoah this week, we reflect on whether humanity has really learned anything. Yom Hashoah is the Hebrew word for Day of Catastrophe, also known as Holocaust Remembrance Day.

It is a day of reflection to remember the more than six million Jews and millions more who were murdered by the Nazis and their often eager helpers.

What can we as individuals do to make our world a better place? We know that acts of kindness and compassion in everyday life have resounding effects on the world around us.

To counter hate and intolerance, modern civilization has built a lexicon of concepts, tools and beliefs to ward off evil and to help individuals understand their place in the world. In educating people to perform "random acts of kindness" or to "pay it forward," millions now understand they too have a voice in shaping humanity's destiny.

Theories like the "butterfly effect" or the "ripple effect" dictate that a single action can elicit a reaction somewhere other than the epicentre of the original action, magnifying our influence on our world. With the advent of the internet and social networking, social change has become a phenomenon of masses of people who feel marginalized, disenfranchised and oppressed.

Where once ordinary people lived in fear of their tyrannical leaders, now tyrannical leaders live in fear of their subjects who can rise up against them. What better illustration

can be offered than the "Twitter revolution" which saw rulers forced from power in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen? Meanwhile, civil uprisings have erupted in Bahrain and Syria, accompanied by protests in Jordan, Morocco, Oman, Algeria, Iraq and Kuwait.

Social protest in the digital age can also impact western democracies like American and Canada -- as in the case of the Occupy Wall Street movement, which managed to "occupy" nearly every major North American city last summer (although the movement was not widely embraced for lack of interest in undermining the current social order).

People are forcing change all around them, often for the betterment of their own lives, but also out of compassion for people on the other side of the planet. Imagine: over 87 million people to date have viewed a YouTube video called "Kony 2012" meant to expose Joseph Kony, a war lord in the Congo who is committing crimes against humanity. The architects of Kony 2012 intend to make him and his crimes known around the world.

At no other time in history have ordinary people with minimal resources at their fingertips had the opportunity to shape the course of world events in such a dramatic way. While governments knew about the Holocaust, many kept the details hidden from their citizens and refused to act against Germany to save the millions of people who were murdered. Had the digital age existed and had enough individuals been encouraged by mass social activism, one hopes the outcome would have been different.

Still, there are limitations to simply creating awareness to stop genocide. It took allied intervention to stop Hitler and Germany from expanding their campaign -- but it was too little and too late for millions of people. Sadly, nearly a million Rwandans were murdered because the world refused to forcefully intervene, as was the case in the Sudan over the genocide in Darfur. It took a powerful reaction including a bombing campaign to end the Bosnian genocide.

As individuals, we can make the world a better place by pressuring governments and civil society to act responsibly when necessary, and not only as a matter of national interest. The interconnectivity of our world easily identifies tyrants, makes them personae non gratae and can bring help and hope to their victims.

But the greatest impact we can have for the betterment of humanity is to care a little more about one another.