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Guest opinion: Lighting a candle for humanity online

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For an off-year election, turnout at the polls this week was high. But the lack of a decisive victory for one side or the other portends at least two more years of hyperbolic rhetoric, demonization of our opponents and a lot of partisan loathing.

The one thing we can probably all agree on, though, is that our major news outlets perpetuate this cycle of loathing. When future generations examine our contemporary media to learn about us — who we were, what we cared about, what we aspired to do and to become — they will conclude that ours was an uncivil, corrupt and scandal-ridden society.

Future reviewers of our media may also conclude that we were a society that lived in fear. Our news stories tell us a lot about the threats we face — for example, the danger of terrorism. We know that we need to fight against extremism, violence and oppression of individuals.

People from nations across the world have boarded planes to join forces with ISIS — ranging from ordinary men to young teenage girls. These people report feeling isolated from their communities and alienated from the societies in which they live. ISIS offers these disenfranchised people a sense of belonging and a feeling of being part of something greater than themselves.

Wouldn't it be better if our future archaeologists would encounter in our media a celebration of what we have in common — the values that unite us and draw us together? In light of this, we need to emphasize the truly universal ideals and values that are the birthright of all humanity.

As the Independent noted: “Where ISIS offer something to die for, we must offer them something to live for. The world must offer a positive call to action — a clear articulation of a shared identity and sense of belonging.”

As a realization of this vision, ordinary people around the world have been using digital and social media to reach out across boundaries of geography and culture (among others) to promote those universal rights without which no person can ever hope to fulfill their human potential.

In Saudi Arabia, videos of women driving posted on social media helped give a revolution momentum. Women were able to harness the power of the internet to rally together to overturn Saudi Arabia's de facto ban on women driving.

In Iran, a young girl named Maedeh Hojabri was arrested in Iran after posting a video of herself dancing on Instagram. In response, women in Iran and across the world rallied again to support Maedeh and take a firm stance against state controls. They posted videos of themselves dancing on social media, as well as messages of support, using the hashtag #Dancingisnotacrime.

There are universal values that transcend race, religion and nationality — and they are universally admired for their essential role in allowing for the development of civilization. Our challenge now is ensuring that our media is capable of portraying these values in a way that draws the world in, and ensures that people feel they have something to live and work for every day.

Although they don't feature prominently in our media, there are heroes and heroines around the world who are using the internet's power of connection to improve the situation of women, expose sex trafficking, match blood donors with recipients and much more. Instead of cursing the darkness, let's follow these inspiring examples and be remembered as a generation that used the tools of the digital age to light a candle.

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