

# Brands aren't the only ones becoming publishers and doing journalism — advocacy groups are too

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Anyone who has been following the evolution of the media for the past few years knows that everyone is now a publisher, and that includes brands like Red Bull and Coca-Cola, both of whom act more like digital-media entities than some mainstream journalistic outlets. As media theorist and author Clay Shirky has said, publishing is no longer an industry — it's a button.

But it's not just advertisers who are becoming media entities: advocacy groups and non-profits are as well, as Dan Gillmor pointed out in a recent post at Slate.

As Gillmor notes, the recent report on the future of the media industry from the Pew Research Center talked a lot about the decline of traditional media like newspapers and magazines, and also talked about the rise of new entities like Vox Media and First Look Media. But it didn't really dwell on either the explosion of "citizen journalism," or on the rise of advocacy journalism.

## Going deep on topics they care about

In particular, groups like Human Rights Watch, the American Civil Liberties Union and the Cato Institute are engaging more directly in producing their own journalism of sorts, putting them in a group that Gillmor calls the "almost journalists."

"I'm not saying they're doing journalism of the type that rose to prominence in American newspapers in the second half of the 20th century — the by-the-numbers, "objective" coverage that still can serve a valuable purpose. Rather, they're going deeper than anyone else on topics that they care about that are vital for the public to understand, but which traditional journalists have either ignored or treated shallowly."

Human Rights Watch in particular recently partnered with Upworthy and a number of other organizations, including ProPublica and Climate Nexus, on a journalistic effort to bring more credibility to topics like human rights and climate change.

I've been thinking a lot about how groups like Human Rights Watch are evolving to become media entities in their own right — and what they can offer to journalism — ever since HRW hired a friend of mine last year: Steve Northfield, the former deputy managing editor for digital at the Globe and Mail in Toronto, joined Human Rights Watch as digital director and has been helping the agency rethink its media strategy.

## **A global network of experts**

On the plus side, entities like Human Rights Watch have hundreds of staffers and volunteers who could potentially supply important information and viewpoints from dozens of different countries and regions around the world, thanks to its global network of lawyers, academics and other specialists who work on human-rights advocacy. It's like having thousands of foreign correspondents, each of whom is an expert in the political and cultural structure of a country.

At the same time, however, organizations like HRW have to be careful that they don't damage their ability to fulfil their mandate, which of course isn't to commit acts of journalism but to help those in need and in some cases work with local governments or agencies. And they must also be circumspect in some cases for legal reasons, which might get in the way of their ability to report on breaking news from a human-rights perspective.

That said, groups like Human Rights Watch and the ACLU now have the same ability to write, film and publish to a potential audience as any media company, thanks to the internet and the social web. As Gillmor notes in his Slate piece, partnering with entities like Upworthy makes a lot of sense as a part of their growing media strategy.