

Debate alone can't extinguish human-rights abuses, Sen says.

Elizabeth Titus, Stanford Daily, May 3, 2011.

In the 21st century, not even revered Nobel laureates are exempt from a little of the Facebook intrigue usually reserved for college students; Amartya Sen knows firsthand, he told a Stanford audience on Monday.

Checking into a hotel last summer, he met a hotel concierge who said he had been following Sen on Facebook. The 77-year-old Harvard professor told the concierge he didn't have an account on the social networking site.

"Yes, you do," the concierge said. Moreover, he added, "I've been following how your views have changed."

As Sen discovered in a story he later took to [The Hindustan Times](#), a stranger with views "way to the right" of the real economist had made a Facebook account in his name — and found an eager audience online.

Sen recounted the story to a capacity audience at Cubberley Auditorium on Monday as he took questions on human rights, public debate in the Internet age and social-choice theory, an undercurrent of his research for the last five decades. For that work, Sen was awarded the 1998 Nobel Prize in economics.

Digital forums weighed on the audience's mind a day after news that U.S. forces killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan spread blindingly through online networks. An audience member approaching the microphone told Sen his question was only tangentially related to the scholar's talk entitled "Social Choice and Human Rights."

"I hope it's not about Osama bin Laden," Sen quipped.

Later, a man from Qatar asked Sen to explain why human rights violations persist in Qatar despite the existence of a relatively free press.

"There are a lot of human rights violations in this country" and in India, said Sen, whose work on Indian famine is renowned. Public discussion helps human rights prevail, he said, but it cannot be a society's sole response to oppression.

"Would I like China to have more debates about liberty? Yes," Sen added. "But that doesn't mean that I think the moment you introduce them [debates], the violations will go away."

Stanford professor Debra Satz, director of the McCoy Family Center for Ethics in Society, lauded the economist as "perhaps the most powerful voice for restoring an ethical dimension to economics."

"If you think the GDP doesn't get at all the things we ought to care about when we're thinking about the measure of America or the measure of India, he's done an enormous amount to call attention to how people's lives really go that isn't visible simply by looking at a GDP point of view," Satz said.

Sen's talk was the second of two lectures in the Ethics in Society program's annual Arrow Lecture Series for 2010-11. The series is named after Stanford economist Kenneth Arrow, Sen's fellow Nobel laureate in economics, whose "'stunning' impossibility theorem" Sen [first encountered](#) in 1952. The first Arrow lecture of the year was delivered in February by Jonathan Glover of King's College, who spoke on war and human nature.