

The Positive Effect of Social Media on Social Justice Movements in America

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Abstract

This paper will concentrate on the effects of social media on social justice movements in recent American history. Social media is at the forefront of modern-day communication, making it highly influential in how people communicate, broadcast their ideas, and form opinions; social media also makes the distribution and communication of information, whether fact or fiction, extremely easy and accessible to anyone. Social media gives everyone a platform to share and express whatever they want; from recipes to political rants, social media has quite literally every idea, view, and belief on the planet represented in one way or another from platform to platform. Although social media can lead to a more idealistically diverse population, as users can see the content from various accounts they follow, this can also lead to media literacy issues. In only following accounts that express the same opinions, the other side of the equation is not being seen at all. Whatever side of the spectrum an idea may fall on, it can be detrimental to only see ideas that align with one's preexisting beliefs; by following a wide range of accounts, one can challenge what they already believe in hopes of becoming more media literate and truly finding what they believe in.

Social media allows like-minded people to discuss their ideas and without social media, many of the modern-day social justice movements, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, would not have been able to become widespread; these movements were organized via social media and have continued to keep momentum through social media accounts that create content people agree with and want to share. However, it can be argued that social media turned these movements into a social symbol rather than actually bringing about change. This can result in performative activism, which is the response to a social-political event only for social status or to

follow a trend, and disenfranchises these movements and allows others, especially those that may disagree with the movement, to undermine the achievements of these movements by focusing on the performative activism that went along with them. Although social media has the potential to be a fantastic tool to share opinions, motivate change, and help organize social justice movements, it can also sabotage the very same movements and create more opinion-blind individuals.

The Current Impact of Social Media

Social media has become one of the most popular pastimes of people all over the world, as it allows users to share original content and ideas, as well as reshare the content and ideas of other users. Facebook and Instagram are the most popular posting-centered social media apps- in comparison to messaging-centered apps like WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger or video-centered apps like YouTube- with Facebook having 2.740 million users and Instagram having 1.221 million users worldwide as of January 2021 (Tankovska, 2021). The majority of Instagram users are aged 18 to 34, with 29.8% being aged 18 to 24 and 33% ages 25 to 34; Facebook users are mostly ages 25 to 44, with 25.5% falling between 25 and 34 and 18.2% between 35 and 44 (Tankovska, 2021). The age spread of Facebook users is more even than users of Instagram.

What's attractive to many social media users is how unregulated the platforms seem to be; freedom of speech and information is generally enforced and upheld on social media platforms, allowing anyone and everyone to express their views. This allure has caused social media platforms to become, “relevant venues for the distribution and circulation of information and news about political and civic events” (Segado-Boj & Diaz-Campo, 2020). Although the freedom of speech on social media platforms is undeniably a good thing for democracy and individuality, the deregulation and free-for-all nature of social media can and does allow for hate speech and misinformation to spread, especially because, “Since 2012, social media has served as a primary source of news and information for many individuals... 20% of social media users sought out information by following news or journalism organizations on Facebook” (Asher, Caylor & Neigel, 2018). People believe that whatever they see on social media must be real, which is unfortunately not the case at all. For every positive aspect of social media- content

sharing, community and international connections, individuality- there is a negative -attempted censorship, misinformation, exaggerated stories, and unreliable articles (Segado-Boj & Diaz-Campo, 2020). This makes social media an incredibly tricky climate to navigate, where it is hard to discern what is fact and what is fiction, and harder to identify if social media has more of a positive or negative environment.

For this reason, media literacy is an extremely important concept to learn and to apply to the content found on social media platforms. Media literacy is defined as, “the ability to access, understand, analyze, evaluate, and create media in a variety of forms... the idea of media literacy is that we are actively involved in how we perceive, discuss, or consider the media we consume and the media we use in our lives” (De Abreu, 2018). In order to discern what content on social media may be fact and what may be fiction, all forms of media must be analyzed by the consumer, regardless of if the analysis challenges personal beliefs or opinions. The concept of media literacy is vital in the role social media plays in modern-day activism and social justice movements, as it enables fact-based opinion forming and helps discern truth within social media content.

Activism and Social Justice

Activism is defined by Anderson and Herr (2007) as, “action on behalf of a cause, action that goes beyond what is conventional or routine.” Activism and activist movements protest unfair, unjust, and inequitable situations in hopes of sparking widespread change for the betterment of the demographics or groups being unfairly treated. Some examples of activist movements include the Women’s Rights movement, Abolitionist movements, and most recently, the movements for racial equality in America, the Black Lives Matter movement.

Social justice is referred to as, “the equitable processes and outcomes that result from efforts to close the gap between what we espouse in our social contract and how we actually enact such a mission” (Davis & Harrison, 2013). If activism is the event, social justice is the end goal in which equitable circumstances are hopefully achieved. Social justice “[bridges] the gap between mission statement and action” (Davis & Harrison, 2013); for example, the social justice goal of the Women’s Rights Movement was to provide equal rights and opportunities to women, and the social justice goal of the Abolitionist movement was to abolish slavery. The goal of the Black Lives Matter movement is to end police brutality against Black Indigenous people of color.

Activism and Social Justice on Social Media

Activist movements with social justice goals take many forms, using a variety of mediums to enhance their cause. With technology and social media still on the rise and remaining ever-popular, social media platforms have proven themselves to be a great tool for inspiring activism and motivating others to pay attention and form opinions on these movements. Since social media is so easily accessible, it, “provides an efficient vehicle for the rapid transmission of information about planned events and political developments, thereby facilitating the organization of protest activity” (Jost, Barberá, Bonneau, Langer, Metzger, Nagler, Sterling, & Tucker, 2018). Not only can activists spread information on events or topics faster and easier on social media, but those who are not necessarily experts on a topic can also learn, form opinions, and reshare content to their followers as well. This flow of information from source to source is a highly democratic practice, allowing people to form their own opinions on current relevant topics they might have missed had it not be for social media. Social justice movements,

“are not just about protesting— they are about educating the public. Technology allows for distributing educational tools beyond pamphlets and physical materials that circulate at protests, rallies, and marches” (Lamphere, 2020). The Black Lives Matter movement is arguably as successful as it is because of its use of and reliance on social media to assist with outreach, education, and overall impact.

Since the process of uploading media or searching topics, and additionally posting or reposting content is so instant, it allows the spread of information and resources in such a way that is incomparable to any other methods prior to social media. This is especially vital to how movements occur on social media, as those interested can read, share, and interact with more content in a shorter amount of time. Additionally, it allows more timely events, such as scheduled protests or breaking news, to gain leverage and coverage even quicker than they normally would. Activists, “rely heavily on social media to share information related to their causes and protests. Social media informs individuals of the logistics of protests, links them to petitions to sign, houses information about how to support activist organizations, and provides resources about how to be an ally to fight racism” (Lamphere, 2020). Social media, depending on how it is used, can make or break a movement.

Features associated with social media, such as hashtags, make the distribution of information even easier. Interested persons can see all posts tagged with keywords with only a few clicks or taps. Additionally, users have the ability to follow hashtags on certain platforms, such as Instagram, so that all posts associated or tagged with the hashtags appear in the news feeds of the interested parties. This feature is helpful for activists and social justice movements. The utilization of hashtags to disrupt counter-movements does occur quite often on social media.

While this can be seen as beneficial to one side, it disrupts democracy by completely censoring out an opinion group. To quote Lamphere (2020);

“Hashtags play an important role in linking information across platforms such as Facebook and Instagram and disrupting the prominence of posts of counter-groups such as white supremacists. Many hate groups began to utilize the #whitelivesmatter hashtag to counter the impact of the #blacklivesmatter hashtag. In response, millions of K-POP (Korean Pop) fans flooded the #whitelivesmatter hashtag with K-POP music videos and images to help bury their message. While in this case the disruption of the #whitelivesmatter hashtag worked for social justice movements, hashtags can be problematic for the very same reason.”

While it has its positives, social media can easily censor entire groups of people, giving it the potential to become a very one-sided space. Furthermore, since social media heavily caters to the user- the user follows only what they want to see and therefore sees little to no variation in opinions- modern social media goes against the principles of media literacy. Media consumers could be influenced by, “a number of internal constituents that affect opinion formation, such as social media usage and behaviors, or tendency toward liberal or conservative decision-making in the presence of social media information” (Asher, Caylor, & Neigel, 2018). Following only what one agrees with and never challenging their beliefs by viewing a different opinion causes radicalization of all sides of the belief spectrum, driving thoughts and opinions farther and farther from each other as more people never challenge the media they see.

Moreover, fake news and disinformation run rampant on social media due to its lack of regulation; disinformation on social media platforms does get taken down, but unfortunately, it is difficult to completely remove all fake news and disinformation across all platforms as there is a

constant never-ending stream of new content and news stories being posted. To quote von der Weth, Vachery, and Kankanhalli, 2020;

“While disinformation has long been used to shape people’s thoughts and behavior, social media has amplified its adverse effects significantly. Firstly, never has it been so easy to access, publish, and share information, including the deployment of so-called social bots, i.e., software-controlled user accounts. Secondly, journalistic norms such as objectivity and balance are often forgotten, ignored, or purposefully dismissed. And lastly, besides bots, users often share content without fact-checking, especially when it contains controversial or emotionally charged content”.

When disinformation is spread regarding protests, activists, social justice movements, movement backgrounds, and related events, the movements themselves can be delegitimized. People, especially those that disagree with the message of a movement, use fake news to attack the movements, spreading fake stories that make the movements look harmful rather than helpful. Disinformation is everywhere, and since sharing and reposting on social media is instantaneous, it can be extremely hard to discern what is fact and what is fiction.

Speaking further on the negative relationship between social media and activism, there have been cases within social justice movements of violence that can be accredited to being facilitated over social media platforms. Generally, claims state that, “social media organised, coordinated, fuelled, orchestrated and planned criminality, riots, looting, violence and attacks” (Fuchs, 2020). The Black Lives Matter movement, notably, had many instances of this, with peaceful protests organized on social media turning violent in practice. Not only does this undermine the positives of the movement, but it also makes the overall effort easily scrutinizable by its critics. However, tensions rising between sides do have the power to motivate further action; studies show that, “social psychological factors—moral outrage, social identification, and

group efficacy—affect the individual's *desire* or *motivation* to participate in protest. It is important to keep in mind that they may be subject to nonrational (as well as rational) influences, such as the denial of injustice or wishful thinking about group efficacy” (Jost, Barberá, Bonneau, Langer, Metzger, Nagler, Sterling, & Tucker, 2018).

In addition, performative activism, which is the participation and facade of interest in activism and social justice movements just to follow a social media trend, is extremely harmful to the message and progress of social justice movements. Performative activism is defined by Koch, 2020, as, “done purely for personal gain, and it often unintentionally silences actual activists seeking to spread information and awareness” and by Clapinski, 2020, as, “activism as a usage for someone's own personal gain or image”. When social media users participate in activist movements just for show and personal gain, it leads the motive of the movement to be seen as commonplace, boring, and not something worth causing a stir over. Performative activism gives the facade of a large number of supporters and allies when the opposite is the case- when people pretend to care and don't actually help the cause, it not only undermines the goals of a movement, often to increase awareness and participation in the movement, it also skews the data when analyzing movements over social media. Performative activism is tremendously harmful, because, “self-proclaimed allies know how to do everything besides listen. When engaging in activism as an ally, one must actually understand what that group is asking of them and follow through with it” (Koch, 2020). The facade of allyship does not lead to any positive change for marginalized communities.

Social media and the content posted and found on social media platforms are influenced immensely by emotion and the response to emotion. For every positive aspect of social media on activism and social justice- education, range, influence, connectivity, etc.- there are negatives-

performative activism, counter-movements, censorship, fake news, etc.- making the social media world a Catch-22; for this reason, it is extremely difficult to determine whether social media's overarching influence helps or harms more in making activism and social justice movements possible.

The Black Lives Matter Movement on Social Media

The Black Lives Matter movement began in 2013 after the trial and exoneration of George Zimmerman, who wrongfully shot and killed teenager Trayvon Martin. The first instances of the #blacklivesmatter hashtag on social media occurred after this incident, but the hashtag itself did not become mainstream until 2014, a year later, when more African Americans, including Michael Brown, fell victim to police brutality and unjustly had their lives cut short. After Michael Brown's death, "many Americans on social media outlets began using the hashtag as a cry for racial justice" (Ince, J., Rojas, F., & Davis, C. A., 2017). Since 2014, the #blacklivesmatter hashtag has skyrocketed in use on social media, most notably on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. This has helped the movement grow, as, "For a number of BLM groups, social media was referenced as a tool for building direct, personal ties within the community of BLM activists... social media served as a tool for mobilizing resources in the form of support networks" (Mundt, M., Ross, K., & Burnett, C., 2018). In the months following the death of Michael Brown, "BLM was mentioned over 660,000 times during our eleven-month search period" (Ince, J., Rojas, F., & Davis, C. A., 2017).

Placing such a large emphasis on social media allowed for the Black Lives Matter movement to form a collective identity amongst interested parties; social media sites allow users to follow hashtags, meaning they will see all content posted with that hashtag. Therefore, those

that follow #blacklivesmatter would be privy to news, updates, activism tips, and other related content constantly through their social media feeds. Social media worked as a community building tool, and, “For a number of BLM groups, social media was referenced as a tool for building direct, personal ties within the community of BLM activists” (Koch, 2020). Social media has given this social justice movement, and many others like it, a platform for building comradery, for educating newly interested peoples, and for fighting against injustice.

Many studies have been conducted examining the overall reach and influence of the #blacklivesmatter hashtag. In a 2014 data collection by Ince, Rojas, and Davis, it was found that;

“At the beginning of 2014 to capture the genesis of the #BLM meme, and ends after November 2014 in order to capture reaction from the non-indictment of Darren Wilson in the killing of Michael Brown... Our search yielded 66,159 messages. This suggests, overall, that BLM was mentioned over 660,000 times during our eleven-month search period”.

This data shows that the social media response to the 2014 racial injustices, and those that have followed, “catapulted the movement to national consciousness” (Ince, J., Rojas, F., & Davis, C. A., 2017).

Tweets and posts linked with the #blacklivesmatter hashtag represent a very diverse range of content; although the hashtag is mostly used along with posts speaking on police brutality against the black community, the #blacklivesmatter hashtag and the greater Black Lives Matter movement has diversified over social media to represent and speak for many social justice issues. One research study found seven main themes that evolved from the #blacklivesmatter hashtag;

“Representing 43.24 per cent of the sample, the theme “Blacks Killed with Impunity and Whites Not” characterizes tweets that juxtapose the treatment that blacks experience by

police versus whites... Representing 34.36 per cent of tweets using #BlackLivesMatter, the second most used theme is “Displays of Solidarity and Activism”. This theme characterizes tweets that show acts of support for #BlackLivesMatter or images of various forms of activism and protests. (Ray, R., Brown, M., Fraistat, N., & Summers, E., 2017).

Another study found that a, “review of the most recent posts on the official BLM Twitter page... clearly shows that BLM supports many other social concerns, such as women’s abortion rights, the recent fight against the Dakota Access Pipeline, immigrant rights, and transgender equality” (Cox, 2017). This diversification not only makes the movement more attractive to a wider audience over social media, but also gives the movement and organization more credibility as well-rounded, educated, and just.

Since the initial creation of the #blacklivesmatter hashtag in 2014, the movement has only grown, both on social media and in person, and the in-person growth of the movement can be accredited to social media. “Several group administrators talked about the immense value of having other BLM group leaders online to talk with about personal highs and lows as movement organizers, share ideas, and informally coordinate efforts locally and nationally. For them, social media served as a tool for mobilizing resources in the form of support networks” (Koch, 2020). There is no argument against the ability of social media to connect, and in the case of the Black Lives Matter movement, to create a collective identity between interested parties and motivate more people to act; “The most obvious and intuitive link between social media and scaling is its potential for mobilizing new activists” (Mundt, Ross & Burnett, 2018). By informing, sharing stories, and manifesting activism by recounting instances of injustice through social media, a movement, such as Black Lives Matter, becomes global.

Although the Black Lives Matter movement has utilized social media in a way to gain credibility, popularity, and relevance, it has been undermined time and time again by performative activism. As social media users see their friends, family, peers, acquaintances, etc. re-posting condolences for police brutality victims it can become a trend to re-share rather than stand in solidarity with the black community. Performative allyship was on full display during the Black Lives Matter protests of last summer as, “Instagram influencers were caught using the march as a photo opportunity. They used streets, protesters and destruction as a background for their newest post. It is insane to think someone would use the death of a human being to bring attention to their feed” (“Black Voices”, 2020). By appearing “woke” or “in-tune” with the current climate and issues but not actually doing anything for the benefit of the black community or Black Lives Matter movement, such as being an active ally or donating to social justice charities, is the epitome of performative activism and is the reason why movements, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, can fail.

Maybe the most evident example of this is the June 2nd, 2020 “Blackout Tuesday” social media event which occurred in the wake of the death of George Floyd. During this event, “More than 29 million people shared a black square on their pages while posting hashtags with names of victims of police brutality. There were more than 29 million blackout Tuesday posts but fewer than 20 million signatures on the petition to bring justice to George Floyd” (“Black Voices”, 2020). The problem with social media is that anything and everything turns into a trend, including content as serious as this. If everything is viewed as the next-best trend, there is no sense of compassion, no real

empathy or action for the hurt communities; if everything becomes a trend, little to nothing posted, shared, or re-posted on social media is genuine.

While its original intent was forward-thinking- social media campaigns have the ability to reach and impact an incredible amount of people- “Blackout Tuesday was originally meant to be a day to uplift Black creators and show solidarity with BLM. Unfortunately, the perhaps well-intentioned nature of Blackout Tuesday backfired, as posts with helpful information in BLM tags got silenced in favor of black squares with millions of likes. Because black squares were getting the most likes, posts with information about petitions or donation links were pushed down in users' algorithms as well” (Koch, 2020). The performative activism brought on by social media has undermined the goals and achievements of the Black Lives Matter movement. “When the concept of activism is seen through the lens of social media, that activism becomes nothing but surface level” (Coulter, 2021). It has made the movement partially synonymous with black squares on Instagram, empty thoughts and prayers shared on Facebook, and should-be meaningful hashtags turned meaningless on Twitter, rather than a movement dedicated towards racial justice and ending unjust and unfair institutions.

Conclusion

Using the Black Lives Matter movement as the primary example, keeping in mind both the “nature of social media as informational sources in a similar manner as more traditional media – places where individuals consume information that is then absorbed into their knowledge base as subjective or objective “fact” – which then informs opinions and ideology” (Cox, 2017) and the fact that “Activism posts are less about raising

awareness of the issue and more for calling the user's stance into attention” (DePunte, 2021), it can be concluded that social media does make a positive impact on social justice movements.

To quote Clapinski, 2020, “There are years of injustices done onto those of color by white people that are cemented into history; a simple Instagram post will not change or affect that. This is where performative activism can be harmful to such movements. It creates a sense of action and togetherness that people of color have been asking for for years”. To ensure that activism can actually help people of color, there needs to be action off of social media; empty words on social media will not help make an equitable country for the Black community, but authentic action will. Although social media causes a paradox of superficiality, its ability to create a community, to form a collective identity, and to educate people all around the world is comparatively more influential, therefore having an overwhelmingly positive impact on how movements, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, progress and leave a lasting impact.

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