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Assignment #4

Black Lives Matter: Social Media’s Civil Rights Movement

Police brutality is a major social issue in the United States targeting members from the African-American, Native-American, and Hispanic communities. Technological advancement, primarily in the form of social media, has increased exposure of this nationwide issue. Even with the increased display of racially motivated police brutality on the Internet, police departments across the country have neither developed a successful methodology nor increased police training to confront and change the persistent violence. Although this issue affects various groups, African-Americans have been targeted the most, which has led to movements such as the Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter. Nevertheless, the awareness and political activism appearing on social media is still better than nothing. Hopefully this form of protest will make such violence and brutality harder to ignore by the public and government alike and bring about real progress in the years to come.

Before smart phones were available to everyone, it was harder to acknowledge this issue because people would not be aware of the problem. Police brutality is publicly acknowledged today because witnesses record these events with their phones and post those videos online. Regularly, these videos prove that the victims did not resist arrest but were still brutally shot and killed. Therefore, technology and social media have empowered people to share their opinions and information regarding police brutality. As a result, information is more accessible and has spread much more rapidly to the public.

The videos where police brutality is exposed go viral within a few hours of being posted online. This unprecedented accessibility to information was not available in the past; therefore, people relied on televised news reports and national newspapers to be exposed to these stories, many of which were often not publicized. In contrast, a bystander can record a police shooting or an altercation, post it on YouTube, and spread it massively with our present technology. As a result, the whole world can see the unedited version of the altercation and social media users can make their own opinion of the event. Spreading these types of events on social media creates rapid exposure to issues around the world and within our own communities; moreover, it creates awareness and empathy among the viewers.

According to the Washington Post, there was nine hundred ninety fatal shootings in 2015. More than forty percent of the ninety-three unarmed civilians shot by the police were African-Americans. This is an alarming statistic due to the fact that African-Americans are only thirteen percent of the country’s population. As a result, the Black Lives Matter movement is a response to the disproportional murder of African-Americans by the police force.

In 2012, George Zimmerman assassinated Trayvon Martin with a gun. Zimmerman was a neighborhood watch volunteer. A year later, Zimmerman was acquitted of second-degree murder. Social media users responded by debuting the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on Twitter. Furthermore, this hashtag was used as a symbol during protests. In 2014, Michael Brown was shot by Ferguson, Missouri police officer Darren Wilson. #BlackLivesMatter was widely used in social media to share videos and pictures of the Ferguson’s protests. Unfortunately during a protest in Dallas in the summer of 2016, Micah Xavier Johnson shot police officers. He killed five officers and injured nine officers and two civilians. Johnson, an Army Reserve Afghan War veteran, argued he was seeking revenge for all the shooting of black men (Bloomberg).

Social media, the same technology that empowered the Black Lives Matter movement, lessens the movement’s credibility by the democratization of journalism. Democratization of journalism is a process of making journalism (the work of collecting, writing, and publishing, or broadcasting news and articles) accessible to everyone. Therefore, anyone can currently become a “journalist,” regardless of the accuracy of writing and reporting. After Johnsons’ attack in Texas, the movement became tainted and labeled as an anti-white racist movement by conservatives; however, the Black Lives Matter movement responded by identifying themselves as a non-violent Civil Rights Movement whose goal is to stop Black genocide authorized by institutional racism. Institutional racism is defined as a form of racism expressed in the practice of social and political institutions.

Regrettably, social media exacerbates the issue by giving conservatives a means to express themselves. As a backlash against the Black Lives Matter movement, the hashtag *#AllLivesMatter* was created in social media. This hashtag represents the conservatives’ viewpoint that argues that not only black lives matter, but also their lives matter as well (AJ+). Furthermore, those opposing the movement called Black Lives Matters an overreaction that caused violent protests and riots; moreover, they blamed social media on providing erroneous arguments and facts to the movement because they lacked of educated research on the issue.

This is an unfortunate example on how American society is deeply divided due to racial issues. The response of the African-American population to the All Lives Matter movement has been negative. Black Lives Matter leaders have shared multiple videos in response to this movement where they expose the reason they want people to acknowledge that black lives actually do matter. Their main argument is that “all lives matter” is true, but we cannot say that “all lives matter” when black lives do not matter in the country. Therefore, division in the country based on ethnic groups can be clearly perceived as both movements gain popularity on social media. As a result, the country’s segregation based on skin color adds resentment among the population. Besides, the sole purpose of Black Lives Matter seeks for a way to ensure that Black people are not being unjustly killed. Moreover, Black Lives Matter leaders are avoiding violent protests because they are trying to overthrow the stereotype that exists with designating Black individuals as angry persons.

Even though social media users are more aware of police brutality, there is less engagement in action. Millennials, people who are between their late teenage years and early thirties, assume they become activists by sharing information online, but they do not take action on it. Social media merely helps us to acknowledge police brutality. In contrast to the Black Lives Matter movement, the Civil Rights Movement in the second half of the 20th century engaged active involvement among blacks and whites of many different ages. Demonstrators would go to the streets and make their voice be heard while courageously risking their lives for their beliefs. According to USA Today, during the Selma to Montgomery March in 1965, also known as “Bloody Sunday,” there were sixteen hospitalized and fifty more injured out of six hundred marchers who crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge (Harmon). In contrast, scrolling through and watching violent, racially motivated, police brutality videos on YouTube or Facebook does not harm the user.

Although Black Lives Matter may be less effective due to the lack of engagement, during the Civil Rights Movement United States citizens lacked basic human rights. For example, African-Americans were not allowed to vote, there was segregation in the schools, and Jim Crow laws. Another former issue in the country was job discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Even though minority group members are second-class citizens and police brutality is a major concern in American society, Americans do not lack basic human rights as they did before the Civil Rights Movement. Therefore, the issue is not changing laws or creating new ones, but retraining the police force and holding officers more accountable for their actions against minorities. In addition, education in cultural awareness is needed to change the antiquated perception of different ethnic groups.

Social media might be the best way of educating the audience by creating an environment where different ideas and viewpoints are welcomed. Social media platforms do not discriminate based on politics, religion, gender, or race. Therefore, people have the totally freedom of expressing and do not need approval from anyone to share their beliefs and opinions. Furthermore, a group of like-minded people will always be found on the Internet’s different platforms, so support will always be found regardless of your ideology.

Besides the differences between the 20th century civil rights movement and the Black Lives Matter movement, millennials perceive Black Lives Matters as continuing the fight for human rights and are heavily influenced by former non-violent leaders. One of the most influential leaders of the Civil Rights Movement that is constantly referenced as a role model to this new movement is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Besides from the peaceful demonstrations and the request for educated conversations on racial profiling, Black Lives Matters has a religious component to it, which is often ignored.

According to Mark Oppenheimer from the New York Times, political opinions divide conservative and liberal Christians in the country. Although fundamental Christianity opposes violence, murder, and racial distinctions, much of the conservative sector of this religion in America hesitates to support Black Lives Matter. Despite of their faith, conservatives oppose to the movement because BLM supports liberal political ideology, transgender and gay rights, undocumented immigration, and same-sex marriage. As a result, Republican candidates are uncomfortable embracing the movement due to its political views, often associated with the Democratic Party (Oppenheimer). Even without the support of conservative Christians, BLM has been steadily incremented popularity among Christians. Some liberal Christian magazines have openly supported the movement and, by gaining support from the religious leaders, it is easier to recognize Dr. King’s intergenerational influence.

Dr. King emphasized in his speeches that non-violence was the strongest approach to minimize hate and make the most progress. Furthermore, he believed that organized non-violence resistance is the most powerful weapon that oppressed people can used to unleash from the bondage of oppression (Wolfmanwill). All of his preaching are the core of this movement and can be found on the Black Lives Matter website, which is another example that explains why demonstrations are not vital to the movement. Usually, demonstrations have rallies where leaders share their political views with their supporters. Social media gives the possibility to constantly convey the Black Lives Matter leaders’ viewpoints to the movement’s supporters.

In the 2016 Presidential Elections, Black Lives Matters played an important role in American politics. Donald Trump said “All Lives Matter” in his campaign rally at Radford University in Virginia because he wanted to appeal to white working class voters. Consequently, Trump lost Black Lives Matter supporters’ vote (Mac Donald). Surprisingly, Hillary Clinton did not fully support the movement. According to USA Today, several justice groups, including Black Lives Matter, rallied in North Philadelphia and walked to City Hall, which is located in downtown Philadelphia, with placards and flags while Clinton was visiting the city for campaign purposes. The leaders of the justice groups organized the demonstration because they wanted to send the message to the Democratic Presidential Candidate she was in danger of losing the support of underrepresented minorities and members of the Black Lives Matter movement. This is due to the fact that Clinton had recently pandered to African-Americans in a radio show and some members of this community took it as a patronizing rhetoric (Madhani & Johnson).

In addition to American politics, Black Lives Matter has started to stage rallies in Canada. The movement in both North American countries has the same goals and mission. In Canada, Black Lives Matter started as a response to police brutality that caused the death of a Somali-Canadian who had unspecified mental-health issues. It is evident that American influence in Canadian social media was the catalyst for the movement (Migdal).

Police brutality is an issue that needs to be addressed to provide equality to all citizens. Social media might appear to not have a positive outcome in social issues; however, it has heavily aided the modern day Civil Rights Movement, Black Lives Matter. Furthermore, people might not engage as much as in the 1960’s due to democratization of journalism, but social media transcended borders and pushed the movement beyond the United States to help other communities in similar situations. We, millenials, are responsible to put a halt to police brutality. We are accountable for educating ourselves and having race conversations that will improve our society by respecting and listening to targeted community members. This conversion will unfold on social media and in person because both types of social action need to happen, online and in person, to see social change.

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