

Victory Ma

Dr. Tcacenco

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A Product of The 21st Century: Black Lives Matter

After the murder of Trayvon Martin on February 26, 2012, major news and media outlets such as CNN and Fox News televised the event and its court proceedings for the entire world to witness. The killer, George Zimmerman, subsequently went to trial for this crime. Due to Florida legislation pertaining to self-defense, Zimmerman was later acquitted of charges in the summer of 2013. This verdict sparked outrage across the nation, as many believed that Zimmerman committed a cold-blooded hate crime. As a part of this outrage, three black females created the Black Lives Matter movement, beginning with a social media post with the hashtag of the now-famous phrase. After the murders of Michael Brown and Eric Garner in the summer of 2014, the movement started to grow exponentially. With the Black Lives Matter movement turning ten within the last year, one may question if the movement has been effective in shedding light on racism and pushing for changes in legislation to protect Black Americans.

The organization has spearheaded many demonstrations and protests, but the subsequent effects of such protests may be difficult to discern or quantify without proper examination. After a comprehensive analysis of the social developments and progress made in Minnesota such as new legislation targeting hate crime and police brutality, it can be recognized that the effectiveness of the Black Lives Matter movement—in bettering the quality of life for Black Americans—can be attributed to massive online engagement working in tandem with its

grassroots protest strategies which allows discussions of racial disparities and systematic problems to spread in an exponential fashion that the world has not seen before.

The following paragraphs will first detail the grassroots strategy that the movement employs in order to change the hearts and minds of America. Afterward, it will then be analyzed how the utilization of social media has allowed the Black Lives Matter organization to differentiate itself from previous political movements. Finally, the potency of the movement will be measured and analyzed by investigating the various legislative steps toward progress for Black Americans (such as changes to police reform and harsher punishments for hate crimes) specifically in Minnesota—one of the many states that experienced considerable change after the Black Lives Matter protests in regards to police brutality victim George Floyd.

The first step toward social change includes changing the mind of the population. Historically, members of political movements would protest and spread the sentiments of their cause, verbally or via placards, while marching down the populated streets of their cities in order to gain attention and illuminate others who may not understand the purpose of their movement. Due to the nature of these protests and marches, organizations would need diligent leaders to plan and recruit participants in advance for a successful demonstration. Now, in the digital age, the organization and preparation of political expression has evolved for efficiency through the utilization of social media and virtual spaces. For instance, according to Morgan Maxwell, in her book titled *Rage and Social Media*, “By replacing the traditional organization hubs of the 1960’s civil rights movement (e.g., churches, schools, and private homes) with [social networking services], the BLM movement not only takes advantage of the anonymity the Internet provides, but it also allows protest leaders to organize and reach thousands without leaving their homes”

(Maxwell 23). This decentralization of the movement is perfect for the grassroots strategy that it aims for, as it allows victims, survivors, and people with personal experience to speak out and stand up—giving more power to ordinary people. Furthermore, while giving power to civilians who just need Internet access for engagement, the grassroots strategy allows the movement to have no need for a leader. As seen during the civil rights movement, individuals who opposed the sentiments of protestors tried to discredit its leaders in order to invalidate the cause of the entire protesting conglomerate. Even more so, enemies of the civil rights movement and its leaders eventually employed lethal force on prominent figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. in order to cause instability within the movement. When writing of the tactics of Black Lives Matter, author Erin Stephens stated that the movement “has discarded the respectability politics of past African-American activists who sought to distance themselves from negative stereotypes associated with the racial group (e.g. delinquent or dangerous), instead presenting themselves in manners amenable to White middle-class values in order to prove themselves worthy of citizenship rights (Stephens 12). Perhaps one of the most difficult tasks for progressive movements like Black Lives Matter would be persuading the White middle class—a crucial, but politically middle-ground, centrist population. Thus, organizers and online activists do not use public figures as representations or promote far-left ideologies in order to keep the support of the general population. Therefore, by allowing victims and their experiences to speak for themselves, the movement garners attention and sustains supporters with the assistance of websites and social media platforms to continually bolster its sentiments and obtain a constant presence in American culture.

It is paramount to understand the effects of online engagement when discussing the development and advancement of Black Lives Matter, as the expeditious growth of the organization is one of distinction—it is one of the very first movements created during an age of social media overconsumption. The movement’s utilization of social media networking has been shown to have instantaneous impacts on American culture and discussions of race throughout the Internet (and therefore throughout the world). For instance, according to Erin Stephens, author of *Making #BlackLivesMatter: A social media ethnography of cultural trauma*, “On November 22, 2014, 12-year-old Tamir Rice was shot by police while he played with a toy gun in a park. The video from the police dash camera was released to the public four days later, yet no national alarm ensued. Instead, it was through the Movement for Black Lives that his name became one among many that were repeated in mourning and brought into claims of social suffering by African-Americans” (Stephens 12). Prior to the emergence of Black Lives Matter in 2012, one could say that there was not a movement focused on bettering the lives of Black individuals in 21st-century modern America. Moreover, large-scale political movements were not as entangled within virtual spaces before the fruition of Black Lives Matter.

The movement’s entanglement with social networking services is a major factor in harboring its growth and the subsequent social and legislative changes that have come out of the potency of its protests. For example, according to journalist Kim Eckart, “Six months after the George Floyd protests in 2020, daily visits to Wikipedia pages for systemic racism were 5.5 times greater compared to the same rates as the year before” (Eckart). Similarly, in the month of April 2015, 10% of all Google searches for the month included the phrase “police brutality”, according to Google Trends. Although the evidence does not display the thoughts or reasonings

as to why the users visited these sites, it can be inferred that the data shows that the protests of Black Lives Matter illuminate the disenfranchisement and oppression of the Black community at a significant scale. Thus, widespread Internet utilization has not only allowed the movement to organize events and spread awareness, but it has also allowed individuals who witness protests to research for themselves the purpose, beliefs, and history of Black Lives Matter. In addition, social networking has allowed the widespread distribution of video and photo evidence of police brutality and unjustified Black death.

After the murder of George Floyd in 2020, the 9-minute video of his last breaths was shared numerous times—a hate crime seen by millions. Furthermore, according to a data analysis from a 2022 written work by Sam Blake, “in a 10-day span after Floyd’s death, BLM-related videos on Twitter were viewed over 1.4 billion times” (Blake). Subsequently, as many Americans now know, the nation erupted with protests, all with the sentiments of Black Lives Matter—a call for police reform, and a call for the end of violence against Black Americans. The largest steps for enacting change through a movement include disseminating information and illuminating the issues that are seldom known. The inception of Black Lives Matter is a product of the digital age, and its growth can be attributed to online activism. After the illumination of such systematic racism, one may question if it has been effective in convincing the lawmakers in changing the oppressive institution. According to a study from the University of Maryland, after the protests regarding George Floyd's death, as of 2022, states have collectively approved nearly 300 police reform bills (Lavoie). What does this mean for the Black community, Black Lives Matter, and law enforcement?

Enacting real change and innovations in law and society is one of the greatest formidable challenges for political movements. To question the institution is one task, but to work against it for the betterment of minority groups is deemed a rigorous and near-impossible process. It can be stated that as of 2023, a large number of individuals question the success of the Black Lives Matter movement. While strides have been made, one can say that activists and protestors have been severely disappointed by the actions of the lawmakers in America. It can be stated that the widespread outrage and nationwide protests following George Floyd's death in Minneapolis were the culmination of years of injustice and frustration with America's treatment of Black lives. Thus, it is believed that Minnesota has enacted a fair amount of changes for the betterment of Black lives. For example, when referring to a newly passed \$2.7 billion public safety bill focused on police reform, house representatives stated "At its core, this bill is about building trust among all of us—By advancing greater police accountability, funding to make reforms possible, and centering equity and the voices of those who've experienced crimes, House DFLers are delivering guidance for a public safety system that reinforces strong and healthy community life for all Minnesotans...This bill makes systemic changes to reduce bias inherent in our current system" (Walker). Despite the small steps toward change, it is clear that lawmakers and Americans alike are now aware of the change that is needed to be made for the betterment of the Black Community. The number of individuals who have changed their minds in regard to Black treatment in America is not a prominent subject of study, nor can the data be optimally analyzed. Although, the Internet has made it possible to find the political battlegrounds of activists fighting for their rights to live. In the digital age, information is easily accessible, and thus, movements such as the one at hand have been able to flourish in a way that has not been seen previously. The

minds of humanity can now discuss of, argue about, and witness the plight of oppressed communities—in the era of mass Internet utilization.

In conclusion, a new form of political activism has arrived in the 21st century, one that thrives on the internet and is able to spread quickly. Recruiting members, disseminating information, and achieving greater awareness for movements like Black Lives Matter is easier than ever with the advent of social media. To tie into the framework seen in class, when looking at what Black Lives Matter has done, one can say that the working class has more of a voice today than in the past. History is able to have more perspectives and more sides to it than before in due part to the internet, which connects the writings of Benjamin. People are able to see the atrocities of the system they live in—of which Foucault has written about. The development of Black Lives Matter as both an online presence and physical power is revolutionary, and may be subject to studies for optimizing political movements in the digital era.

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