Online Activism as a Tool for Anti-Racist Social Change

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to study the way in which virtual communities, specifically racialized communities, seize the online world to strengthen their racial identities. An analysis of past and present heroes will also be explored and illustrated through memes to better understand the relation between modern social constructs and online activism in shaping racial identity.

Introduction

Given the vast reach of social media communication, a crucial shift seems to be taking place in the distribution of media power. Activists have become much less dependent on television and mainstream newspapers to influence public communication. As Lewis, Gray and Meierhenrich have noted, "The ability to connect instantly with friends, family, and strangers alike has transformed the way relationships are created and maintained and altered the very structure of our social fabric".[1] Mainstream media are no longer the only available option to reach large audiences. The examples of Black Lives Matter, the Arab Spring, and Indigenous online movements show that social media allow activists to directly communicate with very large publics.

Activism is typically described as grassroots organizing and social movements that seek to change formal political processes and policies.[2] Social media activism involves the use of social network technology to organize and coordinate real-world action, which shapes how people engage in political protest and how researchers come to understand social movements. The online practice of calling out culture, publicly identifying and shaming

[1] Kevin Lewis, Kurt Gray & Jens Meierhenrich. "The Structure of Online Activism." (2014) 1 *Sociological Science* 1.
[2] *Ibid* at 6.

individuals for offensive statements or actions, is harsh while providing an avenue for social change. Successful maneuvering of social media platforms creates significant changes in society through the impact of an individual who cultivates awareness and makes knowledge accessible to millions. In the past, those with the loudest voices and the most opinions were those with the most power and money, and the proper connections to global media. Today, the advancement of social media has favored the voices of the marginalized minority groups that are being heard globally by millions when they have been silenced for centuries.[3]

This paper highlights the importance of social media in allowing racialized minorities to express and empower themselves in a global political and social community of shared similar and contrasting ideas as they advocate for justice. Firstly, Black, Arab and Indigenous online activism will be explored. Secondly, the construction of virtual communities through social media will be used to understand its importance in shaping racial identity. Thirdly, past and present public figures will be studied to understand how social media amplify historical heroes while developing new ones. Lastly, the modern phenomenon of the meme will be used to highlight the intersection between past and present social justice leaders that empower racialized communities and encourage online activism.

1. Activism in Action

Racial discrimination is a chronic stressor, which, for many, precipitates the need for an adaptive coping strategy. Activism functions as an adaptive coping strategy by providing racialized minorities with opportunities to take an active role in changing the very sociopolitical conditions that put them at risk. A common argument against online political

[3] Paolo Gerbaudo & Emiliano Treré, "In Search of the 'We' of Social Media Activism: Introduction to the Special Issue on Social Media and Protest Identities." (2015) 18(8) *Information, Communication & Society* 865–871.

discourse labels online activism as "slacktivism," a way for people to have the illusion that they are enacting political and social change via social media, while they have no impact.[4] This is sometimes true, but there is no denying the effects of social and political movements, such as those by Black, Arab, and Indigenous peoples, that gain attention online, particularly through Twitter and Facebook.

1.1 Black Identity

Research on technology use has indicated that communities of Color participate on social media at higher levels than Whites, raising questions about the impact of such use on how people of Color experience race and the resulting effect on their racial identities. Scholarship that has explored the relationship between race and online spaces has demonstrated that the virtual nature of the internet has not erased the lived experience of race and racism in the offline world.[5] Studies have found that creating social media content such as status updates can be a means of racial self-expression for students of Color, and these explicit assertions of racial identity can also signal racial group belonging and solidarity[6]. Such findings suggest racial identity may figure centrally in the social media experiences of students of Color. As interactive, participatory, and social platforms, social media are more prone to generating racial interactions than other types of websites.[7]

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[4] Mary Butler, "Clicktivism, slacktivism, or 'real' activism: Cultural codes of American activism in the Internet era" (Master of Arts, University of Colorado, 2011) [non-punlished] <http://individual.utoronto.ca/christine/sources/clicktivism.pdf>.
[5] Jessie Daniels, "Race and racism in Internet studies: A review and critique" (2013) 15(5) *New Media & Society* 705.
[6] Teresa Correa & Sun Ho Jeong, "Race and online content creation: Why minorities are actively participating in the web." (2011) 14(5) *Information, Communication & Society* 638-659.
[7] *Supra* note 4 at 8, 10.

Twitter use by people of colour has given rise to a space known as 'Black Twitter' that has emerged as a prominent force in activism. First appearing during the shooting death of unarmed Black teen Trayvon Martin in Florida in 2012, Black Twitter serves as a space where people could not only express their anger, disappointment and grief, but also work together to organize grassroots rallies and protests. Since then, Black Twitter posts and hashtags, such as #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, #HandsUpDontShoot, and #BlackLivesMatter, have helped mobilize protesters around other instances of racial injustice and police brutality.[8] Thus, Black Twitter is conceived of as a space for articulating racial identity that facilitates construction of a sense of community and solidarity, leading to citizen mobilization and action.

Politically active hip-hop celebrities have taken on leadership roles within the Black community by exerting influence over their own personal network via social support and social pressure. Opinion leaders tend to be more politically aware and active than the average citizen, promoting political discussion by serving as a link between the media and the public.[9] Harlow and Benbrook revealed qualitatively analyzed posts written by hip-hop celebrities to look for common themes and patterns related to the creation of Black identity and found four prominent themes: speaking to Whites, solidarity, Black is beautiful, and equality.[10]

[8] Yarimar Bonilla & Jonathan Rosa, "#Ferguson: Digital protest, hashtag ethnography, and the racial politics of social media in the United States" (2015) 42(1) *American Ethnologist* 5-10.
[9] *Ibid* at 14.
[10] Summer Harlow & Anna Benbrook, "Race and online content creation: Why minorities are actively participating in the web." (2019) 22(3) *Information, Communication & Society* 360.

The speaking to Whites theme was characterized by tweets that explicitly and implicitly were directed at White people, and that sought to explain the Black experience as related to racism, discrimination, and marginalization. Within this speaking to Whites' theme, three specific subthemes emerged: white supremacy, white inaction, and us vs. them. The white supremacy theme highlighted systemic racism and the structural and institutionalized advantages that whites receive and deny, particularly when it comes to media coverage of blacks. For example a retweet, '2 ALL the white supremacy deniers this is the pictures of 2 Americas,' included a drawing of the white Columbine shooter who killed 13 people labeled as a 'misunderstood teenager' next to an image of unarmed Mike Brown who was labeled as a 'man accused of theft.'[11]

The second subtheme, white inaction, called out whites for remaining silent in the face of racial injustice, and for seeing police brutality and racism as a problem with and for Blacks, rather than something society should fight. For example, one tweet noted that '"White Silence = White Consent" #BlackLivesMatter #ICantBreathe' showing that by ignoring, even denying, the injustice occurring, whites were allowing it to continue and implying it was okay.[12]

The final subtheme, us vs. them, called attention to the lack of understanding between Blacks and whites, with Blacks seen as an inferior 'other' as whites fight to uphold the status quo and their cultural dominance. One retweet illustrated this idea: 'Damn … everybody is afraid of us.'[13]

[11] *Ibid* at 361.
[12] *Supra* note 10 à 363.
[13] *Ibid* at 364.

The second major theme to surface was that of the need for solidarity within the Black community in order to overcome racism. Numerous tweets exemplified this, using phrases like 'Stand together to end police brutality now,' and 'We are one.' One user attached the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter to an image of a Black man, with tape over his mouth, holding a sign with the hashtag on it.[14]

The third theme, Black is beautiful, is its own cultural movement that came out of the Black Power Movement in the 1960s and has since been intertwined with #BlackLivesMatter. Historian Tricia Rose saw the concept of 'Black is beautiful' as a way to change the way white supremacy constructed black bodies as not as intelligent, human, beautiful, or valued as white bodies. This idea was evidenced among the hip-hop celebrities' tweets, in which positive images of Black people were portrayed to counter typical negative stereotypes. For example, an author tweeted a photo of a modelesque Black woman, donned only in gold jewelry and makeup, with her hands up in a defensive boxing stance with the hashtags '#iamtheblackgoldofthesun #blackisbeautiful #blackexcellence #blacklivesmatter #blackpower.'[15]

The final theme to emerge was that of a demand for equality. Tweets revealed that, when looking through a lens of police brutality, Black people realized they were not seen as equal to the dominant white group. For example, one user tweeted, 'There is no way that any of the black citizens of #Ferguson can even think they are being treated equally by their police. #BlackLivesMatter.' Similarly, a user tweeted a photo of a little boy holding a sign that read 'we will not forget,' and the accompanying tweet said, 'He told Ferguson Police tonight that he matters too #FergusonOctober #blacklivesmatter.' Tweets also critiqued the

[14] *Supra* note 10 at 365.
[15] *Ibid* at 366.

way #BlackLivesMatter was co-opted by whites tweeting #AllLivesMatter, thus discounting the unequal experiences of Blacks. As one user tweeted, 'Obviously #AllLivesMatter but, if all lives were treated with equal importance the phrase #BlackLivesMatter wouldn't even exist.'[16]

Black Twitter can be used as part of a social change strategy to create a sense of Black identity manifested online and offline, enhancing a group's image and increasing individuals' identification, and thus solidarity, with the group, ultimately using that group identification to encourage resistance and collective action. Black Lives Matter has always been more of a human rights movement rather than a civil rights movement. Its focus has been less about changing specific laws and more about fighting for a fundamental reordering of society wherein Black lives are free from systematic dehumanization. Still, the movement's measurable impact on the political and legal landscape is undeniable.[17]

Many have suggested, erroneously, that the Black Lives Matter movement has "quieted" down in the age of Trump. Nothing could be further from the truth. If anything, the opposite is true. The movement is stronger, larger, and more global now than ever before. Instead, what is true is that American mainstream media has been much less willing to cover the concerns of the movement in part because it has been consumed by the daily catastrophes of the Trump presidency. Ironically, many of the debates that have come to define the age of Trump, such as the immigration debate, are arguably indirectly influenced by Black Lives Matter movement. For example, recently, some congressional Democrats have called for the

[16] *Supra* note 10 at 366.
[17] *Supra* note 8 at 11-14.

abolition of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which has been violating the rights of undocumented immigrants.[18]

Collectively, since 2013, online organizers have effected significant change locally and nationally, including the ousting of high-profile corrupt prosecutors, compelling Democrats to restructure their national platform to include issues such as criminal justice reform, and contributing to the election of Black leftist organizers to public office. By using the tools of social media, the Black Lives Matter movement was the first social movement in history to successfully use the internet as a mass mobilization device.[19] The recent successes of other movements would be inconceivable had it not been for the groundwork that #BlackLivesMatter laid.

1.2 The Arab Spring

In January and February 2011, the opposition against the dictatorial regimes in Tunisia and Egypt especially used Facebook and text messaging to share reports on the events in the streets, while Twitter played a vital role in the transnational communication on these revolutions. Inspired by the Arab Spring, large protests, subsequently, erupted in Spain, the US, Italy, and many other countries during the summer and fall of 2011. Again, major social platforms were used for mobilization and communication purposes.[20]

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[18] Caitlin Dicketson, "Immigration Arrests Rise Sharply as Trump Mandate Is Carried Out" *New York Times* (17 Mai 2017), online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/17/us/immigration-enforcement-ice-arrests.html>.
[19] Vanessa Williamson, "Kris-Stella Trump and Katherine L Einstein. Black Lives Matter: Evidence that Police-Caused Deaths Predict Protest Activity" (2018) 16(2) *Perspectives on Politics* 402-403.
[20] Gilad Lotan, Erhardt Graeff, Mike Ananny, Devin Gaffney, & Ian Pearce, "The Arab Spring| the revolutions were tweeted: Information flows during the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions" (2011) 5 *International Journal of Communication* 1376-1377.

The Arab Spring is defined as a series of demonstrations and democratic uprisings that arose independently and spread across the Arab world from Tunisia and Egypt to Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, and Syria in 2010-2011 and beyond. In the 20 years leading to the Arab Spring, the Arab world lagged behind the rest of the world on most if not all indices of freedom and democracy. Most Arab countries scored poorly on indices of freedom of expression including: press and academic freedoms; freedom of assembly, demonstration, and open public discussion; freedom of association and civil society organizations; the rule of law, including independent judiciary, fair trials, and freedom from exile and torture; and personal social freedoms, including gender and minority equalities.[21]

Research on the Arab Spring revolutions shows that hundreds of thousands and occasionally millions of people could be reached through Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. For example, during the Egyptian uprising in 2011, in the week preceding president Mubarak's resignation, the rate of tweets about the protests grew to 230 000 per day.[22] To get a sense of the size of the overall public that was reached through these Twitter and Facebook activities, it is important to keep in mind that contributing users each have their own networks of followers or friends, which may include thousands of people. Thus, the actual reach of the social media protest communication was many times larger than the number of people posting, tweeting, or commenting on these protests.

The Arab Uprisings did not take the shape of traditional protest movements. Initially, the uprisings lacked any visible leadership, charismatic individuals, or vanguard groups in any of the grass roots movements in Tunisia and Egypt.[23] As Howard notes, social media

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[21] Manuel Castells, *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the Internet age* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2012) at 105-109.
[22] Philip N. Howard, *Opening Closed Regimes: What was the Role of Social Media During the Arab Spring?* (PITPI, Research Memo. Seattle, University of Washington, 2011) at 4.
[23] *Supra* note 20 à 1377.

allowed many individuals the opportunity to participate in these uprisings to create change. These revolutions did not begin nor were they sustained by any international forces or opposition political parties. They came into being and continued by grassroots mobilization of dissatisfied citizens. Traditional political ideologies and political parties were in fact absent from many of the Arab protests, at least in their early stages.[24]

The uprisings began as non-violent forms of contentious politics. They reflected acts of desperation highlighted the public's frustration over inadequate living standards, police brutality, high unemployment, and human rights violations. In the absence of known individual leaders or well-structured group leadership in the early stages, the goals of the Arab Spring were mostly implicit and evolving over the life span of each uprising. These goals ranged from improved economic conditions to regime change, advancing human rights, and free and fair elections.[25]

During the uprisings, shared Arabic language facilitated cross-use of the same slogans and tactics of contentious politics in multiple Arab Spring countries. Having multiple related goals, revolutionaries in each Arab country used many of the same slogans and tactics as Arab citizens in other countries, learning from the successes of revolutionary movements in these Arab countries. For example, during the Egyptian revolution, young Tunisian revolutionaries were sharing their experiences with their fellow Egyptians.[26] One of these exchanges was a piece of advice posted on Facebook to protesters in Tahrir Square during

[24] *Supra* note 22 at 9-10.
[25] Wael Ghonim, *Inside the Eygptian Revolution* (New York City: TED Talks, 2011).
[26] *Supra* note 22 at 6-7.

their face off with pro-Mubarak forces. It read, "Advice to the youth of Egypt: Put vinegar or onion under your scarf for tear gas".[27]

The initial international reaction to the Arab Spring was a surprise. After all, these popular uprisings were happening in places and people who had often been represented within Western democracies through Orientalist tropes, as either indifferent to democracy or a threat to it. The fact that these citizens had opinions or the courage to act on them seemed revolutionary. The world was also surprised that the revolutionaries who created these uprisings made effective use of social media in countries that had been described as relatively slow to embrace new technologies. Even more remarkable was the depth of the young Arab women's participation in the public sphere, be it online or on the street during the Arab Spring. In states where women traditionally played less of a role in the public sphere, these high levels of female participation were unexpected. Social media opened the online public sphere to Arab women and made it easier, and in some cases, possible for them to participate in the uprisings without breaking any of their societies' social codes. Arab women began using social media to impact the uprisings and became leading news sources for the protesters who took to the streets and people online demanding that their corrupt leaders step down. [28]

The effective use of social media in the Arab uprisings had a global snowball effect that carried both the organizing methods and the vocabulary of protest in the Arab Spring to every region of the world. With Twitter, young revolutionaries in the Arab world were able

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[27] David D Kirkpatrick & David E Sanger, "A Tunisian-Egyptian Link That Shook Arab History" *New York Times* (13 Février 2011), online : <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/14/world/middleeast/14egypt-tunisia-protests.html>.
[28] Victoria A Newsom & Lara Lengel, "Arab Women, Social Media, and the Arab Spring: Applying the framework of digital reflexivity to analyze gender and online activism" (2012) 13(5) *Journal of International Women's Studies* 33-37.

to organize their actions and quickly communicate news updates to their people who would not be able to get this information from their country's state-controlled media. Facebook remains one of the most central nodes in Egyptian networks of political information.[29] According to Henrik, the Arab world has one of the highest proportions in the world of young people among the general population. From Tunisia to Egypt, and Bahrain to Libya, Yemen, and Syria, youth have been the face of dissent against longstanding autocratic regimes in the Arab world. These young people, frustrated with lack of jobs, have been at the forefront of anti-government protests and other forms of contentious politics.[30]

Social media analysts have claimed that the narrative in Arab media regarding the Tunisian street vender Mohamed Bouazizi setting himself on fire on December 17, 2010, was the first trigger not just for the Tunisian revolution. Uprisings in neighboring Egypt, as well as the domino effect that followed throughout the Arab world, are often traced back to this singular event. However, another social media narrative had been developing in Egypt, and with it a protest movement had been growing and gathering momentum. That narrative flowed from the "We Are All Khaled Saeed" story.[31]

Khaled Saeed was a 28-year-old Egyptian blogger who accidentally revealed the corruption of Alexandria police in a video he had taken in 2010. In the video that Khaled Saeed posted online was a group of Alexandria police officers sharing confiscated drugs among themselves. Once the Alexandria police learned of the online video, they sent two officers who pulled Khaled Saeed from an Internet cafe in Alexandria in June 2010 and beat him to death in the lobby of a residential building. Human rights advocates worldwide

[29] *Supra* note 21 at 107.
[30] Urdal Henrik, "A clash of generations? Youth bulges and political violence" (2006) 50 *International Studies Quarterly* 611-612.
[31] Kara Alaimo, "How the Facebook Arabic Page "We Are All Khaled Said" Helped Promote the Egyptian Revolution" (2015) *Social Media and Society* 1-2.

claimed that Khaled was killed because he exposed evidence of police corruption.[32] Within five days of Khaled Saeed's death, an anonymous online activist, whose identity was later revealed as Wael Ghoneim, a Dubai-based Google marketing director, created a Facebook page titled "We Are All Khaled Saeed". On the page, he posted cellphone photos from the morgue of Khaled's battered and bloody face. By mid-June 2010, 130,000 people joined the page to view and share updates about the case.[33]

The Khaled Saeed movement provided an alternative media pathway to information and collaboration. The government media had claimed Khaled Saeed choked to death on a packet of drugs. The digital images of Khaled on the Facebook page showed that his face had clearly been struck repeatedly and that the official drug story could not be trusted. These images were quickly shared by hundreds of thousands of mobile phone users and members of the Facebook page that carried his name. This alternative medium presented young Egyptians, along with other Arab followers, with a platform where they could not just get the facts about a case of police brutality and corruption, but also express their outrage. The movement offered an alternative forum for citizens and reinforced beliefs that traditional media were propaganda mouthpieces for the government.[34]

1.3 Indigenous Protests: Idle No More and the Dakota Access Pipeline

Indigenous peoples regularly lack a direct means of political participation via local and state or provincial government agencies, for example, through voting, lobbying in competitive numbers, and campaign donations. Social media provides opportunities for

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[32] *Ibid* at 2-4.
[33] Jennifer Preston, "Movement began with outrage and a Facebook page that gave it an outlet" *New York Times* (February 5 2011), online: < http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/06/world/middleeast /06face.html?pagewanted=all>.
[34] *Supra* note 31 at 4,7.

Indigenous people to feel a sense of power and control over their own identities and communities.[35] One reason why many Indigenous young people have embraced social media is its self-directed nature where users can produce their own unregulated content. Indigenous young people can participate and use social media without any control or input from adults or from the non-Indigenous community that controls the larger, more conventional media forms. This self-directed nature also means that Indigenous young people can seek out information for themselves, enabling new forms of agency.[36]

The history of American Indians advocating for environmental justice and tribal sovereignty is not new. Since colonialism, American Indians have fought for their rights, whether environmental, cultural, religious, or self-determination, against the United States government. Treaties brokered and oftentimes broken have sullied the relationship that American Indians hold with the government. Embedded within indigenous teachings is the strong belief in the sacredness and importance of the environment as a life source that must be respected and protected.[37]

In 2011, the then Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper drafted a series of bills and amendments divesting First Nations sovereign command of lands and waterways. The party's goal was to support the extraction of oil from various tribal lands and border zones, including the environmentally detrimental installation of pipelines, highway expansion, and associated infrastructural projects. Bill C-45, introduced by Stephen Harper's Conservative

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[35] Michel Tousignant & Nibisha Sioui, "Resilience and Aboriginal communities in crises: Theories and Interventions" (2009) 5(1) *Journal of Aboriginal Health* 43-45.
[36] Katherine Hill, "Building Bridges Online: Young Indigenous Women Using Social Media for Community Building and Identity Representation". (Masters thesis, Concordia University, 2016) [non-publié] <https://spectrum.library.concordia.ca/981799/1/Hill_MA_F2016.pdf>.
[37] Heather Molyneaux, Susan O'Donnell, Crytal Kakekaspan, Brian Walmark, Philipp Budka & Kerri Gibson, "Social Media in Remote First Nation Communities" (2014) 39(2) *Canadian Journal of Communication* 277-278.

government in mid-October 2012, made significant changes to the Indian Act and environmental legislation with few to no consultations with members of Indigenous communities.[38]

In the autumn of 2011, three Native women activists and a non-Native feminist environmental justice activist began the Idle No More movement that appealed to Indigenous activists and environmental justice supporters. Facebook groups and Twitter hashtags were used to allow activists around the world to re-post, share and re-tweet Idle No More. The rapid and widespread dissemination of information and summaries about happenings around Idle No More, including legislative changes and lobbying groups, allowed educators and journalists in many places to write independent media stories.[39]

Furthermore, beginning in early 2016, the actions undertaken by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe in defense of their traditional lands against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline garnered significant media attention. The proposed route of this pipeline, intended to carry shale oil from northern North Dakota to central Illinois, runs underneath the Missouri River just outside of the boundaries of the Standing Rock reservation. This route is understood to be a threat to the community's drinking water as well as their traditional lands and history. Moreover, the project leaders were accused of undermining consultation processes with Indigenous peoples and avoiding in-depth environmental assessments. By April of 2016 several protest camps had formed in areas to be affected by the pipeline, and an online petition campaign called "Rezpect our water" was launched, followed shortly by

[38] Derek Inman, Stefaan Smis & Dorothee Cambou, "We will remain idle No more: The shortcomings of Canada's duty to consult Indigenous peoples" (2013) 5(1) *Goettingen Journal of International Law* 253-257, 285.
[39] Jennifer Tupper, "Social Media and the Idle No More Movement: Citizenship, Activism and Dissent in Canada" (2014) 13(4) *Journal of Social Science Education* 87-94.

the #NoDAPL movement on Twitter. [40] Through the remainder of 2016 and into early 2017, the dramatic events of the anti-pipeline protests would play out on social media, frequently employing visual imagery to represent both the actions of protesters and those of police and military responses on the newsfeeds of social media users around the world.

A pivotal event that occurred during the pipeline protests illustrates the power of social media and its ability to change public perception. On November 20, 2016, water protectors at Standing Rock were sprayed with water cannons in below-freezing temperatures by the North Dakota State Police and the Morton County Sheriff's Department. Initially, the Morton County Sheriff's Department released a statement that water cannons were being used to put out fires and to control the rioting of the protestors. Videos from the scene quickly emerged on social media to rebuke that assertion; the sheriff's department updated their statement to reflect that the water cannons were being used as a crowd control mechanism. Without access to social media platforms, citizens across the country and world would not have had access to those first-hand accounts that changed the tone of the protests and the perception of the police response.[41]

2. Virtual communities

Social media has constructed virtual communities, allowing people who have never met to coordinate activist movements over great geographical distances outside of lived experiences and connection. Facebook and Twitter have become public avenues for direct

[40] Rebecca Hersher, *Key Moments In The Dakota Access Pipeline Fight* (America: NPR, 2017).
[41] Joshua Barajas, "Police deploy water hoses, tear gas against Standing Rock protesters" *PBS News Hour* (November 21 2016), online : <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/police-deploy-water-hoses-tear-gas-against-standing-rock-protesters>.

participation with live streams, real-time tweets and posts, hashtag campaigns, and virtual petitions as various ways to feel involved and engaged with people from all geographic areas.

Facebook and Twitter help connect distant family and friends, even those who have never met in person or who lost touch at some point in the past. These platforms help racialized minorities who have reconnect with their identities through groups and pages where people can share their ideas, thoughts, events, music and photos and through connecting with friends and family.[42] The sense of support, connection, and community experienced by racialized minorities may help reinforce their mental health and wellbeing.[43]

The interactive nature of social media allows users to easily connect with others of the same racial background. These online communities serve a range of purposes, from fostering a safe space for expressing and exploring racial identity, to facilitating discussions and advocacy on racial issues. Since social media platforms are typically open to any online user, they invite wider public participation in the process of constructing online identities.[44] Facebook and Twitter have been used in organizing and implementing collective activities, promoting a sense of community and collective identity among dissatisfied youth groups, creating less-confined political spaces, establishing connections with other activist groups, and publicizing their grievances, causes, and demands to gain support from the regional and global communities.[45]

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[42] *Supra* note 3 at 867-868.
[43] *Supra* note 4 at 65.
[44] Jason Chan, "Racial Identity in Online Spaces: Social Media's Impact on Students of Color" (2017) 54(2) Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice 164-170.
[45] Ian A Paul & David Zlutnick, "Networking Rebellion: Digital Policing and Revolt in the Arab Uprisings" The Abolitionist (September 13 2012), online: <https://truthout.org/articles/networking-rebellion-digital-policing-and-revolt-in-the-arab-uprisings/>.

As noted by Sweet, Pearson and Dudgeon, racialized minority activists can embrace the ambiguity offered by social media to challenge mainstream imagery and to strengthen their sense of belonging. Groups on social media can be collections of individuals to form a community, such as a Facebook Group, or group accounts that portray a certain identity. For example, a Twitter account called @IndigenousX aims to provide a media space for Indigenous people to share their stories by featuring a different Indigenous person tweeting every week. The account shares Indigenous knowledge and stories, challenges stereotypes, and reflects the diversity of Indigenous peoples.[46] While the individual users of the Twitter account may not know each other in real life, they form an online community through their group participation on social media.

Twitter emerged as an important platform of discourse and reflection for many individuals, allowing them to share stories, find common ground and agitate for police and government reform around racial issues. Continued participation by racialized minorities is associated with lowered negativity and anger, with collective racial identity and with reduced psychological distancing over time. This indicates people's desire to organize collective action and to socially connect, support, cope and engage with each other as a community, as though they have experienced collective abuse that transcends the specific incidents of police brutality.[47]

The importance of different movements in recognizing and supporting one another is paramount. Supporting similar social and environmental justice movements expands support and visibility for all movements. For example, the #BlackLivesMatter movement

[46] Melissa Sweet, Luke Pearson & Pat Dudgeon. "IndigenousX: a case study of community-led innovation in digital media" (2013) 149 *Media international Australia. Inc Culture Policy* 104-108.
[47] *Supra* note 4 at 67.

has recognized the importance of the work being done by the American Indian community and supports the efforts of these tribal nations in advocating for clean water and the preservation of their cultural sites. In 2016, the Black Lives Matter Network released a statement in support of Standing Rock.[48] Movements of marginalized groups recognize the need to support one another via the social media communities they have established as their struggles mirror one another. This recognition and support can help a movement's audience grow both in number of participants and increased understanding through additional exposure.

3. Virtual Heroes

People all over the world are now able to project ideas onto present celebrities and past figures, virtually constructing their own heroes and further strengthening their sense of racial identity.

3.1. Present Heroes

Celebrities play an important role in social identity theory, serving as reference groups that individuals can aspire to be like. Studies suggest positive exposure to minority celebrities could positively influence social identity and increase self-esteem among minority group members. Social media can create virtual in-groups, providing a sense of belonging and support that can increase the likelihood of participation in collective action on behalf of the group. Furthermore, these stars, with whom fans think they have personal relationships, can serve mobilizing functions to encourage their audiences to act.[49]

[48] Sandra Rodriguez. "Making Sense of Social Change: Observing Collective Action in Networked Cultures." (2013) 7(12) *Sociology Compass* 1053-1064.
[49] Dorothy L Schmalz, Craig M Colistra & Katherine E Evans, "Social media sites as a means of coping with a threatened social identity" (2015) 37(1) *Leisure Sciences* 24-26.

Politics remains a traditionally male-dominated realm, although female representation is slowly increasing. This has led women to explore political activism through other outlets to make their voices heard. Examples include Emma Watson's #HeForShe campaign for women's rights as a United Nations Ambassador, or Shailene Woodley's crusade against the Dakota Access Pipeline and its negative impact on indigenous communities and the environment. Political activism by female film figures has been met with both positive and negative response. Criticism has largely centered around their inability to accurately represent political causes associated with minorities and underprivileged groups. Privileged Hollywood stars are accused of being undereducated on political issues, while their activism is labelled as a publicity stunt. For example, Woodley has been criticized for inaccurately advocating for indigenous issues because of her privilege as a white woman in Hollywood. There is no denying her privilege in comparison to the indigenous communities, but it must be noted Woodley has never claimed to speak for indigenous communities, nor intentionally overshadowed their own activist efforts.[50]

In modern American politics, Hollywood film stars, musicians and sportsmen and women have continued to endorse political candidates. Indeed, such a form of celebrity engagement reached a crescendo during the Democratic presidencies of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. In 2008, Obama utilized the US entertainment-politics nexus to enhance his status in the Presidential elections which he won in 2008 and 2012. Consequently, he received endorsements from film and music stars producing videos and online posts to support him, which were widely shared across Facebook and Twitter.[51]

[50] *Ibid* at 34-38.
[51] Douglas D Kellner "Barack Obama and celebrity spectacle" (2009) 3(1) *International Journal of Communication* 715-719.

The perceived credibility of celebrities has been altered by social media since there are now stars from other social media platforms such as YouTube, reality television, and Instagram who have achieved comparable levels of fame. While the motivations of celebrities and their ability to honestly advocate for political causes is hotly debated, there is no such thing as bad publicity. Regardless of their qualifications, motivations, or identity, if their activism brings even a small amount of additional attention to a political cause by the public, it is better than nothing at all.[52]

3.2. Past Heroes: Malcolm X and Martin Luther King

A half-century after their deaths, Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X remain two of the world's most revered political activists. They were both respected leaders of the American Civil Rights movement, struggling for racial equality and freedom. But at the start of the 1960s, the media were constructing a conflict that stirred the civil rights debate: Malcolm X versus Reverend Martin Luther King.[53]

While King advocated non-violent direct action and passive resistance to achieve equal civil rights, Malcolm X was the spokesman for the Nation of Islam, the black Muslim movement which violently rejected white America and its Christian values and preached the supremacy of blacks over whites. Malcolm X promoted a segregationist approach that sought to instil in blacks a pride in their African heritage, whereas Martin Luther King believed that self-respect would come through integration.[54]

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[52] *Supra* note 49 at 28-31.
[53] Clayborne Carson, "Between Contending Forces: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the African American Freedom Struggle." (2005) 19(1) *OAH Magazine of History* 17-21.
[54] James Cone, "Martin and Malcolm on Nonviolence and Violence." (2001) 49(3) *Phylon (1960)* 173-178.

King proved to be one of the most important national political mobilizers of the civil rights movement. Over the course of a dozen tumultuous years, King helped to reimagine America's collective moral and political imagination, successfully arguing in "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in April 1963 that racial justice comprised one of the fundamental principles of American democracy. He amplified this argument four months later at the March on Washington in a speech whose more radical impulses were quickly overshadowed by an extemporaneous detailing of the "dream" he envisioned for the American nation-state.[55]

By 1968 King's was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize and an international reputation as a human rights activist. In the year before his death, King denounced the Vietnam War and began an anti-poverty crusade that linked race, class and gender struggles in creative ways. Near the end of his life the preacher listened more intently to fellow activists than ever, forging alliances with welfare rights activists, farmworkers, Native Americans and poor whites to transform American democracy.[56]

Malcolm X regularly criticized King, accusing him of bowing to whites and subjugating blacks to the very culture that had historically denigrated and abused them. Malcolm X always wanted to meet King, but King never responded to Malcolm's repeated requests for debate. After a hearing about the Civil Rights Act in Washington in 1964, they finally met face to face. Their meeting only lasted a minute, but the images that captured them side by side, both men smiling, became a strong symbol of reconciliation between two stridently different visions of the black cause.[57]

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[55] *Ibid* at 177-183.
[56] Martin Luther Jr. King, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr* (New York: Warner Books, Inc, 1998).
[57] *Supra* note 53.

On February 21, 1965, Malcolm X was assassinated in New York, bringing an end to one of the most famous political debates in the history of black Americans. Three years after the violent death of Malcolm X, on April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis. The black community mourned the two dreams that shaped the history of African Americans.[58]

Malcolm's and King's civil rights campaign played a pivotal role in ending racial segregation and the denial of voting rights to African Americans. It also created a cultural shift in attitudes on race issues in much, but not all, of the US. However, half a century after the end of racially discriminatory statutes in the US, we see the limitations of equality. The informal segregation of black and white communities in some parts of the US is almost as great as it was back in Dr King's day. While the black middle class has grown since the 1960s, millions of poor black people are just as locked out of economic upliftment as they were prior to the start of the civil rights era. Many black districts of major cities and rural communities remain blighted by slum housing, unemployment and sub-standard education and healthcare.[59] Social media has enabled a platform to speak out about these issues using Malcolm X and King as heroes to inspire their advocacy.

One of the least-quoted lines from King's "I Have a Dream" speech remains one of its most prescient. "With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to go

[58] Daniel Cruden, "A Comparison of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X in the Black and Mainstream Press, 1955-2011". (Master of Arts in History thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2014) [non-published] <https://researcharchive.vuw.ac.nz/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10063/3309/thesis.pdf?sequence=2>.
[59] *Ibid* at 30-48.

to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day."[60] That sentiment remains the inspiration for contemporary social justice movements.

4. The Modern Phenomenon of the Meme

Memes are a modern phenomenon of humorous or thought-provoking online images, videos and pieces of text that serve as a tool of expression. People, especially teens, often use memes to demonstrate their political anxieties online by ridiculing public figures. Most people interact with these images in fleeting ways as they scroll through their social media feeds, but creating or consuming political memes that align with one's point of view can be therapeutic. Memes have many advantages: they reflect what's happening in society; they help justify feelings of rage and fear while helping people feel less alone; they can connect people around the world to a common feeling; they spread far more quickly than the songs or art projects of previous generations; anyone can make them; they can go viral in a matter of minutes; they have the power to better express an idea than a whole page of text; and they bring attention to issues of injustices.[61]

Social media users are constantly using memes to make powerful connections. For example, two such memes, which circulated across various social media platforms, make visual connections between the brutality faced by civil rights activists in the 1960s and the methods of intimidation used to counter nonviolent protests in 2016 at Standing Rock. Both movements hinged upon the same demand for equal treatment and rights regardless of race or ethnicity, and both pursued a nonviolent direct-action method to advocate for their rights. While most of society believes that brutality against individuals fighting for equality ended

[60] "I Have a Dream." Discours. (Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D. C. 28 Aug. 1963).
[61] Stacey B Steinberg "#Advocacy: Social Media Activism's Power to Transform Law" (2016) 105(3) *Kentucky Law Journal* 417-418.

when civil rights were granted, the images of dogs and water hoses being used against nonviolent protestors proves that society's response to change and resistance has not evolved.[62]

Memes have also been employed to show how the struggle American Indians faced during colonialism is similar to the struggles they still face today. For example, a meme of an American Indian with a modern gas mask on his face shows the juxtaposition between history and the modern world. While the methods used to attack American Indians have evolved from disease to forms of modern weaponry as the meme suggests, the battle continues over the same issues that remain at the heart of indigenous struggles. The struggle for self-determination and environmental, cultural, and land rights all still exist in our modern world.[63]

Memes don't always include words and may not cater to humour. One of the most intriguing effects of memes is their ability to connect past and present figures who, having never met and without their consent, are now being associated with each other. The following 2 memes illustrate this phenomenon:

[62] *Supra* note 41.
[63] *Supra* note 40.

Figure 1: Malcolm X and Obama[64]

Figure 2: Martin Luther King and Obama[65]

[64] Retrieved from < https://thegrio.com/2013/08/28/would-martin-luther-king-support- obamas-foreign-policies/>.
[65] Retrieved from < https://thenaturalfestival.com/phil-valentine-more-proof-barack-obama- is-malcolm-x-son/>.

The depth of meaning conveyed from these two simple pictures is apparent. We see two social justice figures, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, who have been championed as historical social justice leaders. Images of Obama are placed side-by-side with similar hand gestures to emphasize their similarities. The efforts of Malcolm X and King in advocating for the equality of African Americans is immediately projected onto Obama, who is portrayed as a modern hero. This parallel between past and present reform is a driving force for online users who feel hopeful as they continue their social media advocacy. As these memes are shared, American voters who identify with either of the past social justice leaders immediately trust Obama and are more likely to vote for him. Research suggests that amongst tweets and posts shared across social media, memes were a huge contributor to Obama's election in 2008 and his re-election in 2012.[66]

Another meme includes all three public figures:

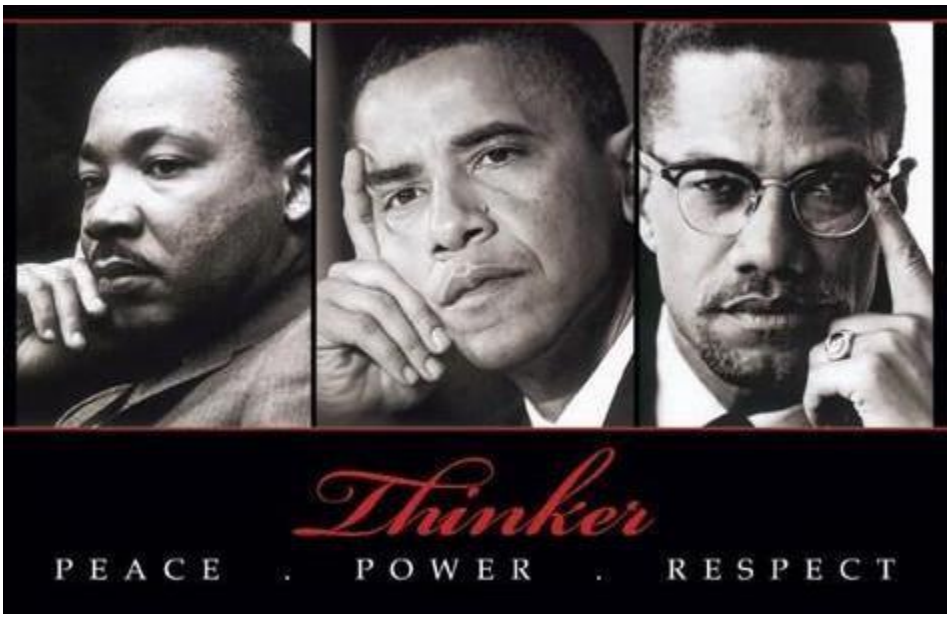

Figure 3: Martin Luther King, Obama, and Malcolm X identified as "thinkers" and promoters of peace, power, and respect

[66] Bruce Bimber, "Digital Media in the Obama Campaigns of 2008 and 2012: Adaptation to the Personalized Political Communication Environment" (2014) 11(2) *Journal of Information Technology and Politics* 131-132.

While rejecting the representation of two myopic heteronormative male narratives of liberation, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King offer a recognizable context to begin a critical conversation about what the Black liberation past has inspired, and what popular culture can diminish. As each of those two giants engaged with the world, they grew in understanding that the problem of Black people worldwide could not be solved merely through U.S. legislative or political remedies, nor through a single ideological approach. They understood that the reforms of their earlier days would not be enough in ridding the U.S. or the world of white supremacy which lay at its very foundation; a revolution would be needed for true emancipation on a Global, diasporic scale.[67] Through memes, Obama was made to be the new face for the Black revolution, who would be represented as the new carrier of peace, power, and respect.

Conclusion

Social media, particularly Twitter and Facebook, have allowed people all over the world to support one another in the fight for justice and equality for racialized communities. Black, Arab, and Indigenous communities feel a sense of belonging as they find public figures with whom they can relate and positive aspects to their identity to counter typical negative stereotypes. In doing so, they enhance their self-esteem and collectively work to redefine and improve group perception.

There is much debate about what makes for effective and transformative change on a global scale. A revolutionary nonviolent global movement will require mass organising between social, economic, political and environmental movements. Through social media, grassroots constructive programs can seek to build new societies and alternative institutions

[67] *Supra* note 58 at 87-88.

that invest in racialized communities and other historically oppressed nations. We must find intersections and opportunities that exist in these new online spaces, building unity where our ancestors could not.

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