

How Twitter Has Spiked the Black Lives Matter Movement

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to review the effectiveness of social media as a platform to social mobilization (mainly Twitter) and to show how it influences the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the United States. It also answers questions on the uses of social media in American social movements and offers practical data about social media's role in raising awareness, creating movements, influencing policy decisions, and changing Americans' minds. This article builds on several meta-analysis studies, it reviews and discusses previous literature, and it uses data from the Pew Research Center, which offers critical facts relating to the research topic. Its findings show that Twitter successfully facilitates Americans to engage in political discussions and participation, particularly in the BLM movement. Twitter is an alternative space to social mobilization, and it has positively impacted BLM.

Keywords: African Americans, BLM, Social movements, Twitter.

Introduction

We are here to say to the white men that we no longer will let them use clubs on us in the dark corners. We're going to make them do it in the glaring light of television.

–Martin Luther King Jr.¹

Television helped the Civil Rights movement progress in the United States significantly. Without having to follow the radio and newspapers with a biased slant to hear about the speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., people in the United States saw for themselves his appeal and cry to end discrimination on their own television sets. With the advent of new media such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, it is not just Martin Luther who opposes racism, but any American can influence other American's views on social or political issues such as violence against African Americans. For instance, Instagram application has more than 24 million stories with the #blacklivesmatter slogan, and on TikTok there were more than 18.8 billion views generated with the #blacklivesmatter statement.²

Twitter's head of news, government, and elections, Adam Sharp, states that "it was less Twitter coming to politics, and more politics coming to Twitter and finding it as a platform to communicate and to organize effectively without a lot of the costs."³ The rise of social media has created a change in American politics as profound as the one which occurred when President Kennedy proved the effectiveness of television as a political campaign tool in 1960. According to historians, President Kennedy significantly secured the presidency of 1961 due to his campaign's successful use of mass media and his appeal to young Americans. President Obama, 48 years later, followed Kennedy's style and was the first to use social media during his presidential campaign in 2007.⁴

¹ Aniko Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time: Television and the Civil Rights Movement* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 607–10.

² Nolan Michaels, "Posting about BLM Made It a Movement Pushing for Real Change," *Pop Culture Intersections* 53 (2020): 2, https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/engl_176/53/.

³ Luca Buccoliero et al., "Twitter and Politics: Evidence from the US Presidential Elections 2016," *Journal of Marketing Communications* 26, no. 1 (2020): 92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527266.2018.1504228>.

⁴ G. Wolfsfeld, M. Yarchi, and T. Samuel-Azran, "Political Information Repertoires and Political Participation," *New Media & Society* 18, no. 9 (2016): 45, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815580413>.

This phenomenon has been observed in several disciplines, such as information communication studies, sociology information systems, linguistics, and political science. Many scholars developed their theories by examining the phenomenon of social media and political participation. Many of them argue that a society's reliance on social media can positively influence political engagement, increase citizens' turnout, and reduce information costs. Those researchers believe that social media helps young people engage in important national and international issues, as they are more comfortable with the new technologies. A few such examples include the Black Lives Matter movement, the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, Iran's Green Movement, and the Keystone XL pipeline movement.⁵

However, other scholars highlight also negative effects related to the rapid use of social media in politics. They argue that social media users spend much time communicating remotely with people rather than face-to-face, a manner that would inhibit people's individual social skills. Also, they believe that on social media, people express more negative views and sometimes attack others under the cover of anonymity. Moreover, those writers indicate that social media encourages users to isolate themselves politically rather than to participate.⁶

This study investigates the role of Twitter in a new and an ongoing social movement in the United States: BLM. It argues that regardless of social media's controversial influence on individuals' behavior, it is an alternative platform to political movements in the United States. As a case study, Twitter presents an exciting venue of opportunity for BLM activists to not only broadcast their messages but also to engage in dialogue with Americans and the world about their political ideas and ideologies. This article presupposes that Twitter successfully encourages Americans to engage in the BLM movement. It seeks to answer the question of how Twitter has

⁵ K Ranney, "Social Media Use and Collective Identity within the Occupy Movement" (University of Hawaii at Manoa, 2014), https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/bitstream/10125/101130/1/Ranney_Kathryn_r.pdf; Somayeh Moghanizadeh, "The Role of Social Media in Iran's Green Movement" (University of Gothenburg, 2013), https://gupea.ub.gu.se/bitstream/2077/34206/1/gupea_2077_34206_1.pdf; Heather E. Hodges and Galen Stocking, "A Pipeline of Tweets: Environmental Movements' Use of Twitter in Response to the Keystone XL Pipeline," *Environmental Politics* 25, no. 2 (2016): 223–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2015.1105177>.

⁶ W. Zhang et al., "The Revolution Will Be Networked. The Influence of Social Networking Sites on Political Attitudes and Behavior," *Social Science Computer Review* 28, no. 1 (2010): 75–92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439309335162>; V. Pandey, S. Gupta, and M. Chattopadhyay, "A Framework for Understanding Citizens' Political Participation in Social Media," *Information Technology & People* 33, no. 4 (2019): 1053–75, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1108/ITP-03-2018-0140>; W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, "The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics," *Information, Communication & Society* 15, no. 5 (2012): 739–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661>.

spiked the BLM movement. It offers practical data about social media's role in raising awareness, creating movements, influencing policy decisions, and changing Americans' minds.

This article builds on several meta-analysis studies, and it reviews and discusses previous literature results. It also uses data from the Pew Research Center which offer critical facts regarding the research topic. The first section reviews related literature regarding social media and political participation in the United States and is followed by an illustration about social movements and Twitter in the same country and an explanation and tracing of the Black Lives Matter Movement on Twitter. Finally, this article ends with a concluding summary and an outlook for future research.

Social Movements and Twitter in the United States

One of the biggest promises of social media is the possibility for individuals, grassroots organizations, and all citizens to overcome authority censorship, and old media gatekeepers to engage directly with potential specific groups, activists, and the public.⁷ The case of the Zapatista National Liberation Army overcoming the Mexican Authority's censorship to contact directly foreign journalists and the use of mailing lists and websites in anti-globalization mobilities in the 1990s are two known early cases of the use of the Internet in social movements.⁸

In the United States, social media has been a very effective tool in mobilizing many social movements. The Black Lives Matter movement is one of these movements that grew out of social media posts about discrimination against African Americans.⁹ Social media platforms influence political, cultural, economic, and social activists in the American society. The majority of Americans believe that these sites are a useful tool for raising awareness, creating sustained movements, getting elected officials to pay attention to issues, influencing policy decisions, and changing people's minds about political and social issues (see Figure 1).

⁷ Ayman Sharafat, "The Role of Social Media during Arab Protests 2010-2014," *AL-Manara for Research and Studies* 23, no. 1 b (2017): 20, <https://doi.org/https://repository.aabu.edu.jo/jspui/handle/123456789/1156>.

⁸ Ranney, "Social Media Use and Collective Identity within the Occupy Movement."

⁹ Jelani Ince, Fabio Rojas, and Clayton A. Davis, "The Social Media Response to Black Lives Matter: How Twitter Users Interact with Black Lives Matter through Hashtag Use," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 11 (2017): 1814–1430, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1334931>.

Figure 1 shows what people in the United States think about social media and its effectiveness of building social movements. It also presents Americans' outlook on whether social media helps in raising awareness, getting elected officials to pay attention to issues, influencing policy decisions, and changing people's minds about political and social issues. As the figure illustrates, Americans tend to have a very positive thinking about the societal role of social media platforms.

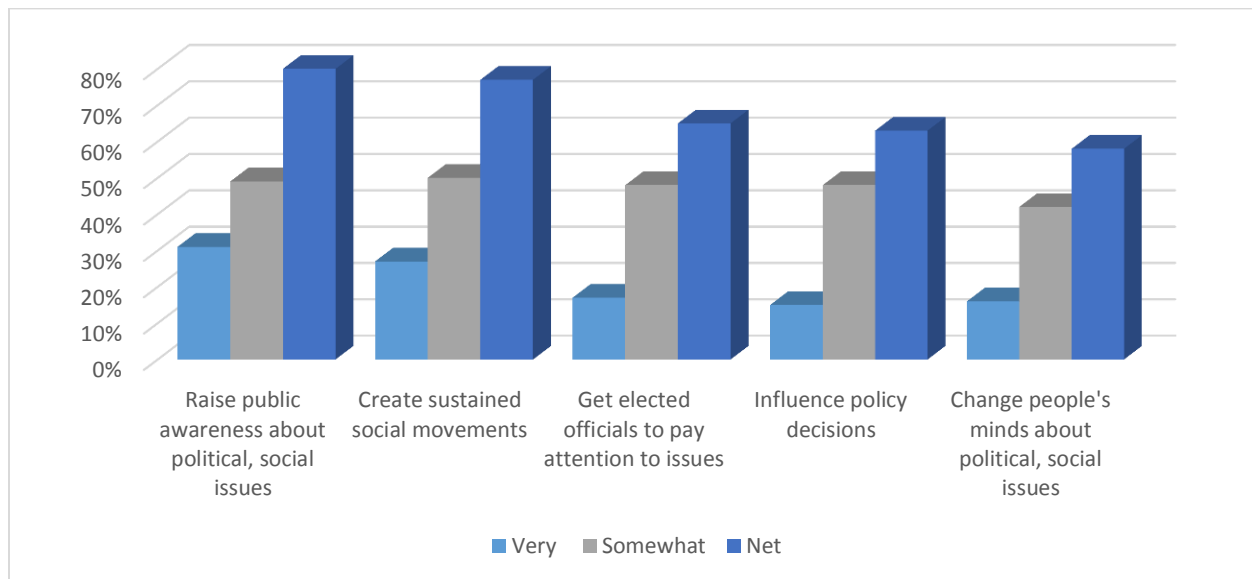


Figure 1: Percentages of Americans who say that social media is an effective tool in some chosen social indicators. Data source: The Pew Research Center.¹⁰

Figure 1 indicates that about eight-in-ten Americans consider social media sites as effective tools for raising public awareness about political or social issues. Also, about 77% of them think that social media is an important space for creating sustained social movements; 65% of Americans indicate that social media platforms are effective tools in getting elected officials to pay attention to issues. Furthermore, 63% of them say that it influences policy decisions. A smaller share (58%) thinks that social media is helping in changing people's minds about political or social issues.

¹⁰ Brooke Auxier and Colleen McClain, "Americans Think Social Media Can Help Build Movements, but Can Also Be a Distraction" (Washington, September 9, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/09/americans-think-social-media-can-help-build-movements-but-can-also-be-a-distraction/>.

Twitter, for instance, is a very attractive social media application visited by users all over the world. It allows people to publish up to 280 characters with their followers, and to follow stories, news, events, and information through their Twitter feeds; the application's front page declares "see what's happening in the world right now." As the statement suggests, one of the features of Twitter is its up-to-dateness.¹¹ Nowadays, many breaking news stories are posted first on Twitter by journalists or non-journalist users. Professional journalists also "report using Twitter to find story leads, follow politicians, and equate Twitter content with other information subsidies such as campaign press releases."¹² Jungherr explains that "social media services have become areas of political communication. Politicians integrate them in their campaigns, journalists use them as sources and topics, and the public uses them for the discussion of politics."¹³ The website of Twitter could be argued to have become really intertwined with politics in and outside the United States.

The hashtag feature is portrayed by Tombleson & Wolf as the "act of fighting for or supporting a cause with the use of hashtags as the primary channel to raise awareness of an issue and encourage debate via social media."¹⁴ In addition to spreading news and events about social topics and inciting debate among users, the hashtag feature has been described to be an active tool in promoting democracy and attitude changes.¹⁵ That means that, although the hashtag feature is usually argued as limited to the digital tools, it can promote changes in real life as well. Because this activism is relatively new, the phrase has not yet become part of the real world's lexicon; there are well-known terms such as internet activism, online activism, or digital activism in the cyberspace, but the hashtag feature is specific to Twitter. In fact, in the political activism, the activism of hashtag is superb for many reasons: "The introduction of Twitter hashtags was a

¹¹ Anna Lampinen, "Tweeting for Change: How Twitter Users Practice Hashtag Activism Through #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo" (University of Oulu, 2020), 3.

¹² B.A Conway, K. Kenski, and D. Wang, "The Rise of Twitter in the Political Campaign: Searching for Intermedia Agenda-Setting Effects in the Presidential Primary," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 20 (2015): 366, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12124>.

¹³ A. Jungherr, "The Logic of Political Coverage on Twitter: Temporal Dynamics and Content," *Journal of Communication* 64, no. 2 (2014): 239, <https://doi.org/https://doi-org.pc124152.oulu.fi:9443/10.1111/jcom.12087>.

¹⁴ B. Tombleson and K. Wolf, "Rethinking the Circuit of Culture: How Participatory Culture Has Transformed Cross-Cultural Communication," *Public Relations Review* 43, no. 1 (2017): 15, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2016.10.017>.

¹⁵ Y. Xiong, M. Cho, and B. Boatwright, "Hashtag Activism and Message Frames among Social Movement Organizations: Semantic Network Analysis and Thematic Analysis of Twitter during the #MeToo Movement," *Public Relations Review* 45, no. 1 (2019): 10–23, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2018.10.014>; Lampinen, "Tweeting for Change: How Twitter Users Practice Hashtag Activism Through #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo."

watershed moment for social activism. By repurposing the hashtag (conceived by its developers as a tool for interpersonal communication) as a vehicle for disruptive acts of political resistance, hashtag activists offered a new idea: that the sharing of ideas in digital spaces might itself be a form of radical resistance.”¹⁶ Therefore, the hashtag activism is a key technique to spread news, information, and movements that makes the content more visible and searchable for other users. It is true that hashtag movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter are not really leaderless: their ideologies and narratives stem from the hashtag involvements of the American public on Twitter. This is called as the co-creational nature of the hashtag feature.¹⁷

Another key technique is the “mention” option which is used by activists to make the content directly reach out to politicians and other elites.¹⁸ When elite actors such as bureaucrats, political leaders, human rights activists, writers, and other social influencers themselves join the movement by posting content, sharing a photo, tweeting, or retweeting, it sparks widespread response as they have a large number of followers and friends on social media. Elites can initiate new networks and join existing networks encouraging other users to join the movement. Therefore, activists’ and elites’ involvement draws the attention of the authority. Their engagement in ongoing movements creates massive mobilization and, consequently, enhances the movements to reach their goals.¹⁹

Overall, Twitter has become remarkably effective in social movements.²⁰ Along with being a platform of collective ideas and actions, it builds transparency, privacy, security, and interpersonal trust among the users.²¹ Although some researchers have questioned the effectiveness of Twitter in social movements,²² others have found that it is a very potent tool for

¹⁶ J. Fang, “In Defense of Hashtag Activism,” *Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs* 2, no. 1 (2015): 139, <https://doi.org/https://ecommons.luc.edu/jcshesa/vol2/iss1/10>.

¹⁷ Xiong, Cho, and Boatwright, “Hashtag Activism and Message Frames among Social Movement Organizations: Semantic Network Analysis and Thematic Analysis of Twitter during the #MeToo Movement.”

¹⁸ Hodges and Stocking, “A Pipeline of Tweets: Environmental Movements’ Use of Twitter in Response to the Keystone XL Pipeline.”

¹⁹ Shelley Boulianne, “Revolution in the Making? Social Media Effects across the Globe,” *Information, Communication & Society* 22, no. 1 (2019): 64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1353641>.

²⁰ Gainous and Wagner, *Tweeting to Power: The Social Media Revolution in American Politics*; Jonathan M. Cox, “The Source of a Movement: Making the Case for Socialmedia as an Informational Source Using Black LivesMatte,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 11 (2017): 1847–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1334935>.

²¹ Bennett and Segerberg, “The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics,” 753.

²² Bennett and Livingston, “The Disinformation Order: Disruptive Communication and the Decline of Democratic Institutions.”

dissemination of news and information.²³ Because Twitter is an open, free platform, news spreads rapidly on the application allowing actors to take quick actions that drive prompt mobilization.²⁴

Finally, it is important to mention that Twitter allows critics of the ideas of social movements the chance to define the movement narratives by voicing their dissenting positions and introduce alternative narratives to social issues.²⁵ For instance, the hashtag of #AllLivesMatter was criticized for focusing on only violence against Black Americans and ignoring other Americans. Hence, it is the collective narratives of both the supporters and critics that give a Twitter movement its final formation. In order to get more knowledge about the role and the uses of Twitter in the BLM movement, the next section is allocated to discuss how Twitter helps BLM prosper.

The Black Lives Matter Movement on Twitter

Ince, Rojas, and Davis argue that the most significant thing social movements do is to introduce social or political issues in a certain way; they call this a “process of meaning construction” through which people form their attitudes on political or social issues according to the information presented by a social movement.²⁶ To explain how social activists present their stories, Snow in 1986 initiated the phrase movement frame: “framing allows activists to depict some policy, or state of affairs, as morally suspect or illegitimate.”²⁷ Penney and Dadas in their study on the #OccupyWallStreet movement illustrate that people these days use Twitter to offer narratives from several points of view: “by writing new headlines, activists could not only help their followers quickly understand and easily index the articles, but also reframe the material in their own terms.”²⁸

²³ Gainous and Wagner, *Tweeting to Power: The Social Media Revolution in American Politics*; Penney, “Motivations for Participating in ‘Viral Politics’ a Qualitative Case Study of Twitter Users and the 2012 US Presidential Election.”

²⁴ Boulianne, “Revolution in the Making? Social Media Effects across the Globe,” 65.

²⁵ Ince, Rojas, and Davis, “The Social Media Response to Black Lives Matter: How Twitter Users Interact with Black Lives Matter through Hashtag Use.”

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁷ Lampinen, “Tweeting for Change: How Twitter Users Practice Hashtag Activism Through #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo,” 18.

²⁸ J. Penney and C. Dadas, “(Re)Tweeting in the Service of Activism: Digital Composition and Circulation in the Occupy Wall Street Movement,” *New Media and Society* 15, no. 3 (2013): 8, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813479593>.

The development of ideologies, sentiments, and beliefs of Americans about an issue significantly depends on how the media describe the issue. This process of public opinion formation depends on media sources because people's understanding of social, economic, cultural, or political issues is mediated by the presentation and the selection of content by the media.²⁹ The media forms how citizens understand and perceive national and international issues and the formation of public opinion by stressing a specific aspect of a broader topic matter. For example, Americans' opinion about the Ku Klux Klan issue may depend on whether American media has presented the issue as a free-speech matter or a disruption of public security.³⁰

Therefore, opinion adoption is influenced by specific representations over others in national media materials in one of two ways: by stressing existing belief in an issue or by highlighting a new belief, which is initiated by the recipient accepting the new interpretation.³¹ In other words, the media's consideration modifies or activates the people's existing worldviews or, if there is no belief about the issue, media news creates such schemata and public opinion can be formed.³² Journalists' and editors' presentation and selection of information and news in a certain way to cover the events significantly influence their followers' ideas of the events. This formation is defined as frame-setting by Scheufele and Scheufele,³³ namely, it forwards some aspects of a particular issue to the center stage or hides them out of audiences' view and influences public considerations and public opinion about the issue.³⁴

However, the process of opinion changing on Twitter is influenced by the type of content that users receive and how they interact. Engagements and consumptions of Twitter's users of information influence their opinions and position towards the local and international issues.³⁵ Public opinion on Twitter is guided by the users' construction and their crystallization of

²⁹ S. Lecheler and C. H. de Vreese, "Framing Serbia: The Effects of News Framing on Public Support for EU Enlargement," *European Political Science Review* 2, no. 1 (2010): 79, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773909990233>.

³⁰ T. E. Nelson, Z. M. Oxley, and R. A. Clawson, "Toward a Psychology of Framing Effects," *Political Behavior* 19, no. 3 (1997): 233, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1024834831093>.

³¹ Samuel Mochona Gabore and Deng Xiujun, "Opinion Formation in Social Media: The Influence of Online News Dissemination on Facebook Posts," *Communicatio* 44, no. 2 (2018): 20–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02500167.2018.1504097>.

³² B. Scheufele and D. Scheufele, "Of Spreading Activation, Applicability, and Schemas: Conceptual Distinctions and Their Operational Implications for Measuring Frames and Framing Effects," in *Doing News Framing Analysis: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives*, ed. P. D'Angelo J. and A. Kuypers (New York: Routledge, 2010), 110–34.

³³ *Ibid.*, 51.

³⁴ Gabore and Xiujun, "Opinion Formation in Social Media: The Influence of Online News Dissemination on Facebook Posts."

³⁵ Lawrence et al., "Tweeting Conventions: Political Journalists' Use of Twitter to Cover the 2012 Presidential Campaign," 11.

meaning. In the public opinion formation process, Twitter content influences the formal evaluative direction of interpretations which result in changes in people's judgment about issues.³⁶

Twitter is not distributed and consumed without effect on people's opinion adoption.³⁷ Lu, Heatherly, and Lee argue that news stories of events, that are shared among members of the Twitter, influence public opinion and form how people think about social events. Twitter becomes a suitable platform for Americans to express opinions and ideas formed or influenced by online information dissemination.³⁸ Twitter dissemination of news, information, and events exerts a remarkable influence in shaping American public opinion through frame tone, composition, and repetition.³⁹ People who use Twitter in the United States reflect those views repeatedly ignored by organized media stations; in most cases, the tone of view is echoed by the engagement of the other users of Twitter.⁴⁰

Ironically the first cases of online movements were organized by citizens of color. According to a scientific study, citizens of color are more likely to consume new media than white citizens.⁴¹ A scientific survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2014 also found that African Americans use Twitter much more than white Americans. Fang argues that "People of color are the internet's earliest adopters, and digital spaces have become their primary gathering place."⁴² He summarizes that Twitter offers racial minorities the opportunity to gather, interact, and discuss their social issues, unlike traditional media organizations, such as television and newspapers, all Americans can use Twitter as a place to voice their ideas. Thus, Twitter websites empowers traditionally excluded minorities with the tools to orchestrate their own world for movement-building, self-expression, and grassroots-organizing."⁴³ Ethnic groups including Black Americans and young Americans activists have rejected the traditional politics that guided

³⁶ Cox, "The Source of a Movement: Making the Case for Socialmedia as an Informational Source Using Black LivesMatte."

³⁷ Ranney, "Social Media Use and Collective Identity within the Occupy Movement," 2.

³⁸ Y. Lu, K. A. Heatherly, and J. K. Lee, "Cross-Cutting Exposure on Social Networking Sites: The Effects of SNS Discussion Disagreement on Political Participation," *Computers in Human Behavior* 59 (2016): 33–35, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.01.030>.

³⁹ Gabore and Xiujun, "Opinion Formation in Social Media: The Influence of Online News Dissemination on Facebook Posts," 13.

⁴⁰ Shelley Boulianne, "Online News, Civic Awareness, and Engagement in Civic and Political Life," *New Media & Society* 18, no. 9 (2016): 88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815616222>.

⁴¹ Lampinen, "Tweeting for Change: How Twitter Users Practice Hashtag Activism Through #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo," 16.

⁴² Fang, "In Defense of Hashtag Activism," 139.

⁴³ Fang, 139.

the civil rights movement in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s and have chosen new technologies as a way for the solidification and promulgation of nurturing a counter public group that centers the opinions of those most of the time at the margins.”⁴⁴

The #BlackLivesMatter movement began in 2013, in the aftermath of the acquittal of George Zimmerman who was on trial for the murder of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African American teenager he had shot to death in a physical struggle. Several civilian African Americans were killed by American police including the Michael Brown on 9 August 2014, John Crawford, on 5 August 2014, Ezell Ford on 11 August 2014, and Eric Garner on 17 July 2014; then, the movement trickled into national discourse.⁴⁵

The phrase of #BlackLivesMatter specifically began to appear on Twitter during demonstrations launched in the remembrance of Trayvon Martin. Although the “Black Lives Matter” slogan is rather significantly broad, it was initiated proposed as a challenge against American police brutality. Alicia Garza in an article describes the BLM as a “response to the anti-Black racism that permeates our society:” “Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.”⁴⁶ Later, the statement of Garza was adopted by a big part of Americans.

In the BLM case, Twitter increases awareness, promotes the movement, and serves as the main informational source for the movement. Thereafter, it leads to more investigation and discussion about BLM. For instance, American students in 70 colleges were interviewed, and they were asked from where they got their information about the BLM movement. More than two-thirds of them answered that they received information on BLM from social media websites such as Twitter and not traditional media such as *Washington Post* or CNN.⁴⁷ Moreover, Twitter enables a diverse backing of the BLM movement, which opens the door for different kinds of people and voices to influence the process of strengthening the movement.

⁴⁴ J. S. Jackson, “(Re)Imagining Intersectional Democracy from Black Feminism to Hashtag Activism,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 39, no. 4 (2016): 375, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2016.1226654>.

⁴⁵ Lampinen, “Tweeting for Change: How Twitter Users Practice Hashtag Activism Through #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo.”

⁴⁶ Alicia Garza, “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement,” *The Feminist Wire*, October 7, 2014, <https://thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>.

⁴⁷ Jonathan Cox, “The Source of a Movement: Making the Case for Socialmedia as an Informational Source Using Black LivesMatte.”

Twitter also increases involvement with the BLM movement by encouraging not only African Americans but many people inside and outside the United States to protest and voice their cases. Therefore, Twitter led to the process of remarkably scaling up the BLM movement worldwide. It helps the proponents of the movement with coalition building. Twitter brought African Americans and their supporters together against the common enemy and it facilitates strong ties with like-minded people worldwide.⁴⁸

Twitter has allowed the stories of African Americans and the demands of the movement to be distributed across the United States without relying on traditional media.⁴⁹ Twitter has been critical in distributing the cases of American police violence against African Americans and the cases of American police reactions to the BLM activists. It has also been a main source of news and information about the BLM movement for the public, and the behavior, language, and affect associated with the movement on Twitter can predict the street protest participation.⁵⁰ According to the Twitter annual review of 2020, which releases the most popular trends on the site throughout the year, the second most popular hashtag was #BlackLivesMatter after the hashtag of #COVID19. George Floyd was also the third most tweeted-about person in the world.⁵¹

Therefore, a variety of groups and individuals interact, communicate with, and contribute to conversations about BLM on the Twitter site, including people who oppose the movement, deploying and appropriating the BLM movement phraseology for their own advantages.⁵² For instance, the hashtags #AllLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter have been distributed by people who have criticized or have opposed the BLM movement, and are used to deny violence against African Americans and to argue there is a lack of attention to the American police safety by BLM movement supporters.⁵³ During the early age of the movement in 2014, researchers found that debate on Twitter which use the slogans of BLM fell into five groups: discussion of actions

⁴⁸ Marcia Mundt, Karen Ross, and Charla M Burnett, "Scaling Social Movement Through Social Media: The Case of Black Lives Matter," *Social Media + Society* 4, no. 4 (October 2018): 1–11, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118807911>.

⁴⁹ Deen Freelon, Charlton D. McIlwain, and Meredith Clark, "Beyond the Hashtags: #Ferguson, #Blacklivesmatter, and the Online Struggle for Offline Justice" (Washington, 2016), <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2747066>.

⁵⁰ Cox, "The Source of a Movement: Making the Case for Socialmedia as an Informational Source Using Black LivesMatte."

⁵¹ Alex Berry, "Twitter Trends 2020: COVID and BlackLivesMatter Dominate" (Germany: Deutsche Welle (DW), 2020), <https://www.dw.com/en/twitter-trends-2020-covid-and-blacklivesmatter-dominate/a-55859738>.

⁵² Ince, Rojas, and Davis, "The Social Media Response to Black Lives Matter: How Twitter Users Interact with Black Lives Matter through Hashtag Use," 68.

⁵³ Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark, "Beyond the Hashtags: #Ferguson, #Blacklivesmatter, and the Online Struggle for Offline Justice," 14–16.

and tactics of the movement; affirmations of the goals of the BLM and expressions of solidarity; documentation, reactions, and reports to American police violence; counter-protest expressions blocking the tactics, ideology, and goals of the BLM movement; and calls to protests in Missouri following the killing of Michael Brown.⁵⁴

In fact, the riots and protests that started following the killing of Brown in 2014 shocked the country. Photos of military-grade weapons being used on civilians, tear gas, the shooting with wooden pellets, and the arrest of journalists legally reporting these actions sparked discussions about the militarization of the American police and excessive use of force by the police not just against African Americans but also against people protesting in these actions.⁵⁵ These tactics and demands have been repeated in the 2020 riots following the death of George Floyd.

However, the ongoing coronavirus pandemic added a new complication to this issue. If protests continue in the American streets, its conditions, the use of tear gas, crowd control, and containment tactics by American police would definitely facilitate the spread of the coronavirus.⁵⁶ Activists, supporters, and allies of the BLM movement faced an unprecedented situation of balancing the threat of the pandemic against the threat of systemic racism in the United States, further complicated by the intersectionality of these dangers that has left ethnic groups disproportionately affected by the pandemic as well as national control restrictions that target regions in which the virus is quickly spreading. Even so, protesters all over the United States have intensified their movement on social media along with their activities on the ground. During only 13 days, from 26 May to 7 June 2020, the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag was used in more than 47.8 million posts or conversations on Twitter – an average of 3.7 million times per day.⁵⁷

Finally, it is worth mentioning that even though Twitter encourages Americans and other people all over the world to engage in protesting, Alvin B. Tillery in “What Kind of Movement

⁵⁴ Ince, Rojas, and Davis, “The Social Media Response to Black Lives Matter: How Twitter Users Interact with Black Lives Matter through Hashtag Use,” 9.

⁵⁵ Cox, “The Source of a Movement: Making the Case for Socialmedia as an Informational Source Using Black LivesMatte.”

⁵⁶ Gillian Bolsover, “Black Lives Matter Discourse on US Social Media during COVID: Polarised Positions Enacted in a New Event” (Leeds, UK, 2020), 94, <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3688909>.

⁵⁷ Monica Anderson, Michael Barthel, and Andrew Perrin, “BlackLivesMatter Surges on Twitter after George Floyd’s Death” (Washington, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/10/blacklivesmatter-surges-on-twitter-after-george-floyds-death/>.

Is Black Lives Matter? The View from Twitter?” argues that Twitter is used for expressive opinions.⁵⁸ Thus, billions of Twitter visitors posting #BlackLivesMatter hashtags are usually posting about their opinions; therefore, there are many voices representing the movement.

Conclusion

Research studies have shown, in the last decades, that social media has become a remarkable political communication channel, not only in the United States, but all over the world. It enables individuals, activists, policymakers, and elites to directly interact with each other. Therefore, political and social activities have started to gain more mobilization and transparency, and Americans might be more involved in societal issues.

In the public opinion formation process, social media content influences the formal evaluative direction of interpretations, which results in changes in people’s judgment about issues. The BLM movement is evidence of how Americans have changed their attitude toward the issue because of social media content. Twitter has increased engagement with the BLM movement and has contributed to more people posting and protesting, which has led to nuanced perspectives on BLM. Consequently, it has brought tangible changes to the movement.

Future research is needed in the political behavior of social media users. The unique data of social media allows investigators to document and trace political adaptation and orientations of social media users, and these results could be combined with questionnaires and surveys.

⁵⁸ Alvin B. Tillery, “What Kind of Movement Is Black Lives Matter? The View from Twitter,” *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and Politics* 4, no. 2 (2019): 14, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2019.17>.

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