Social Media and Social Movements:
Strengths, Challenges, and Implications for the Future

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INTRODUCTION

Collective action to advance social change is part of cultural tradition in the United States. Throughout American history, many Americans have advocated for both structural and cultural changes through charismatic leadership and collective action. Regardless if the goal has been for women's right to vote, free lunches for all students, or access to clean water for all Americans, having the freedom to protest and assemble are important components for any democratic society (Carroll & Hackett, 2006). Additionally, the creation of social movements has an underlying goal to incorporate new actors in the political process (Garrett, 2007).

Because of the increasing importance of the link between social media and social movements, recent research attempts to bridge the gap between media studies and sociological research on social movements. For example, Gerbaudo (2012) explores the culture of social movements in his book "Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism" arguing that the media provides a channel through which social movements are organized and further developed. He also argues that social media allows individuals to develop connections to others who may have similar interests and causes. However, Morozov (2011) points out that social media facilitates "slacktivism", that is activism for "slackers." Morozov argues that individuals may perceive they are fighting injustice by joining a Facebook group or retweeting, but their actions may have little to no political or social impact.

Therefore, questions remain unanswered. Does social media help facilitate activism that leads to social change? What are the strengths and limitations of social media in creating and maintaining a social movement? We explore these questions and others in our article paying particular attention to the #Blackslivesmatter (BLM) social movement, which according to Lebron (2017) is a powerful force demanding social change in America. The hashtag #Blacklivesmatter was created in July 2013 in response to George Zimmerman's acquittal for the second-degree murder of an African American teenager, Trayvon Martin (Freelon, Mcilwain, & Clark, 2016). The watershed moment for this social movement was the fatal police shooting of African American youth, Michael Brown who was shot by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014 (Anderson & Hitlin, 2016). The authors of this article focus on this social movement because both scholars and activists suggest that BLM is responsible for increasing social awareness regarding police brutality towards Black Americans (Garrett, 2007).

BACKGROUND

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On February 1, 1960, four freshmen students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College went into a store in Greensboro, NC and sat down at a lunch counter that had been deemed for whites only. The four students were not served but remained seated at the whites-only counter until the store closed. Although the student sit-ins appeared to be an unplanned event, there was a great amount of planning that took place before the sit-ins occurred. All four of the students were members of an NAACP Youth Council and had been in contact with other activists who had participated in sit-ins in the late 1950s (Polletta, 2006). The actions of the four students—Ezell Blair Jr., David Richmond, Franklin McCain, and Joseph McNeil—suggested a spontaneous, impulsive form of resistance, rather than a planned social movement. Consequently, Polletta (2006) argued that the spontaneous nature of the sit-ins suggested a powerful moment when a group of individuals suddenly become a *collective force* undertaking social injustice. Yet, these events were part of a much larger, powerful, and historically significant form of collection action in the United States: The Civil Rights Movement.

What is a Social Movement?

Social movements are the collective action of individuals who come together for the purpose of achieving a goal that challenges society's cultural or structural beliefs. Goodwill and Jasper (2009) describe social movements as "being conscious, concerted, and sustained efforts by ordinary people to change some aspect of their society by using extra-institutional means" (p. 5). Formal organizations are created because of social movement while others rely on the informal networks. Therefore, using a rigorous definition for social movements may exclude the work of less mainstream causes.

Scholars identify four stages of social movements, including emergence, coalescence, bureaucratization, and decline (Jones-Eversley et al., 2017). Jones-Eversley and colleagues (2017) argued that these four stages can be applied to both the Civil Rights Movement and BLM. The first stage, *emergence* refers to when the social movement has little organization for how to redress their dislike for a certain policy or social condition. During this stage, people are acting as individual agents not as a collective unit. For example, a person may send a letter or email a representative to voice his or her opinion or they may post their view on a popular social media site. Once in the second stage, *coalescence*, like-minded individuals gather together to focus their message. The movement is more organized to state grievances as a group towards a person, policy, or social standard. In the online context, this stage may have a hashtag (i.e., #metoo, #occuywallstreet) that gains the public's attention. The next stage, *bureaucratization*—the foundation of the social movement—is organized with political power. Now the social movement has moved away from demonstrations of awareness to having a formal organization working towards their collective goals. The final stage is *decline*. Decline occurs due to success, failure, or a disinterest in the movement. Applying these stages to one of the most significant social movements in American history, the Civil Rights Movement progressed through these stages from Rosa Parks refusal to give up her seat, the boycott of the Montgomery bus station, NAACP legal involvement, and finally the case Browder v. Gayle to end racial segregation on Alabama buses (Browder v Gayle).

What is Social Media?

Social media is an umbrella term used to explain the networking of communication and collaboration online (Friedland, 2013). The general formats rely on individuals connecting and networking with others

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