

Chapter 7.10

Social Activism in the 'Blackosphere': The Jena 6 Case

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ABSTRACT

Using Denning's model of Internet activism as a sensitizing framework, this chapter describes the manner in which Black bloggers (referred to as the 'Blackosphere') express and negotiate their ethnic identity online. We analyze discussions in the Blackosphere in response to the Jena 6 case to illustrate how the Internet has empowered Black people, changed media publicity, and served as a means of collaborative activities that support

social activism. It is our hope that this chapter will encourage researchers to explore further how and why historically underserved groups engage in social activism on the Internet, and the various technologies and social practices they use to do so.

INTRODUCTION

Personally, I'm interested in what made the plight of the Jena 6 so compelling that it moved Black students across this country to turn off BET, pull

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*up their pants, reach into their wallets, and travel to Jena to defend six of their own.*¹

In this chapter, we examine how and why black² bloggers express ethnic identity through an analysis of computer-mediated communication (CMC) that supported social activism in response to the Jena 6 case. The Jena 6 case began in August 2006 when black students at the local high school in Jena, Louisiana sat under a tree that was known to be a place where white students usually congregated. White students took offense and responded by hanging three nooses in the tree. In following months, racial tensions escalated. There were confrontations between black and white students, and there was a fire that destroyed the central wing of the Jena High School. On December 4, 2006, black students heard a white student (Justin Barker, 17) bragging about a racial assault his friend had made. Six black students (Robert Bailey, 17; Mychal Bell, 16; Carwin Jones, 18; Bryant Purvis, 17; Jesse Ray Beard, 14; and Theo Shaw, 17) responded by assaulting Barker. Barker was treated in the local emergency room. The injuries were minor as he was able to attend a party later that same evening.

The white local officials responsible for handling the incident judged the nooses as a youthful prank, and punished the white offenders with a few brief school suspensions. The six black juvenile offenders, however, were expelled from school, arrested and charged as adults with felony offenses, including attempted murder and aggravated assault (Robinson, 2007). Later, the charges were reduced to battery for all but one the offenders, Mychal Bell. "Civil rights advocates, who have called the punishment of the arrested youths disproportionate, say the case has raised the questions of how much race still plays a part in the workings of the legal system in the South" (Newman, 2007).

On September 22, 2007, fifteen to twenty thousand people from across the nation traveled to Jena to attend peaceful rallies to protest this

disparity in the justice system and show their support for the six black defendants known as the Jena 6. According to Younge (2007), "These incidents have turned Jena into a national symbol of racial injustice. As such, it is both a potent emblem... because it shines a spotlight on how race and class conspire to deny black people equality before the law... and a convenient whipping boy because it allows the rest of the nation to dismiss the incidents as the work of Southern redneck backwoodsmen without addressing the systemic national failures it showcases".

In what follows, we briefly describe the Blackosphere and Denning's five modes of using the Internet for activism. Our conceptualization of the Blackosphere as well as the five modes of Internet activism will be used to inform a textual analysis of how ethnic identity emerged in the blog entries and comments that helped to bring the Jena 6 case to the attention of the mainstream media. While the events in Jena happened in 2006, they were not reported nationally until 2007. As Robinson (2007, p. A19) notes, "We still might not know about what was happening in Jena if the case hadn't been noticed by bloggers, who sounded the alarm". As African Americans increasingly use social media, such as blogs and social networks, to produce their own content and foster virtual communities that serve their collective interests, there is potential for new modes of social activism to materialize.

BACKGROUND

Ethnic Identity and Computer-Mediated Communication

African Americans are not a monolithic group; they are distinguishable along gender, class, age, regional, and socio-economic lines. However, ethnic identity acts as a "tie that binds" this group cohesively. Identity development has been described as a cognitive process by which

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