



Stony Brook
University

Center for Civic Justice

SOCIAL MEDIA'S #AGEOFACTIVISM

COMMUNITY DIALOGUE BACKGROUND GUIDE



RACIAL JUSTICE | ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM | SLACKTIVISM



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INTRODUCTION



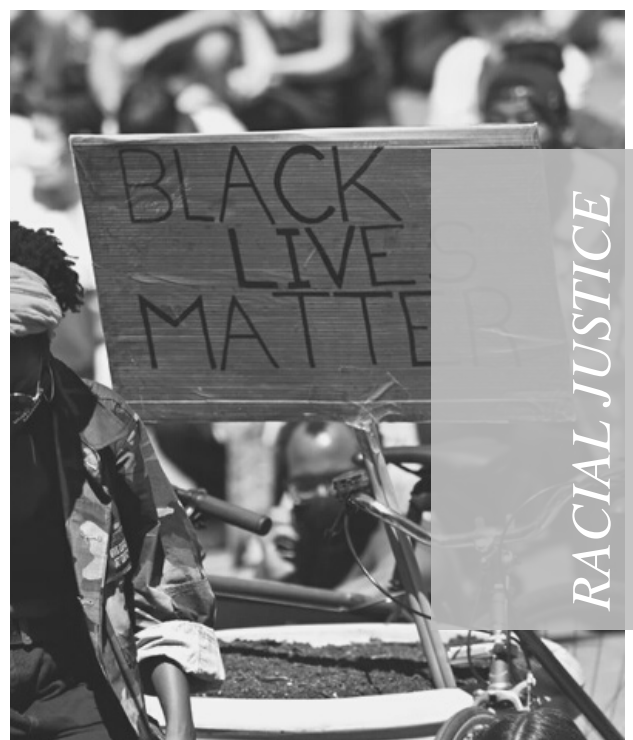
SOCIAL MEDIA CHANGED THE GAME.

From the method of sharing news to arranging protests, making plans of action to holding leadership accountable: social media has left an altering impact on the way social movements carry out. With this Dialogue, we will explore the impact of social media on racial justice movements and environmentalism movements, comparing and contrasting the trajectory of protests, laws, and the spreading of news with and without the interjection of social media platforms.

WHAT DOES SOCIAL MEDIA REALLY DO?

You shared a post, signed a protest, and commented on that TikTok to boost engagement. What happens next? In this Dialogue, we will explore the aftermath of common social-media based activism engagements and the extent of their lasting effects.

We will explore the term and concept of slacktivism, and the costs of performative activism.



PROGRESSIVE ERA

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT



KEY WORDS

CLIMATE CHANGE

The long-term shift in temperature and weather patterns.

CLEAN WATER ACT OF 1972

Establishes the basic structure for regulating discharges of pollutants into the waters of the US and regulating surface waters.

CLEAN AIR ACT

Authorized the development of comprehensive federal and state regulations to limit emissions from both stationary sources and mobile sources.

EARTH DAY

A day created in the United States to help educate people about the Earth and the dangers to the environment created by human activity, military and industry.

SIERRA CLUB

One of the oldest and largest grassroots environmental organization with thousands of members across the United States.

SILENT SPRING

An environmental science book by Rachel Carson published in 1962, discussing the irreversible effects of pesticides.

NOTABLE FIGURES



Theodore Roosevelt
(Presidential Term: 1901-1909)



William Howard Taft
(Presidential Term: 1909-1913)



Woodrow Wilson
(Presidential Term: 1913-1921)



Jane Adams
(1860-1935)



Grace Abbott
(1878-1939)



Ida Tarbell
(1857-1944)

US Environmentalism

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Sierra Club, established in 1892

Based out of Oakland, CA the organization founded by John Muir has fought for a myriad of issues involving US natural lands and resources. The club grew steadily over the 20th century, with national outreach leading to many more conservationist victories, gaining public support and political influence.

Clean Water Act (1972)

Established the basic structure for regulating discharges of pollutants into the waters of the US and regulating surface waters

April 22, 1970

20 million people took to the streets across the United States to protest environmental destruction. The nation had recently witnessed the devastating impacts of the Santa Barbara oil spill and seen the first photographs of the Earth taken by astronauts.



The Origins of Environmentalism

An Era of Progressive Reform
(1890 – 1980)

"In the mid to late 19th century, natural resources were heavily exploited, especially in the West. Land speculators and developers took over large tracts of forests and grazing land. Acreage important to waterpower was seized by private concerns. Mining companies practiced improper and wasteful mining practices" (LOC.gov). Conservationists, alarmed by environmental degradation, called for federal supervision of the nation's resources and the preservation of those resources for future generations.

President Theodore Roosevelt was known for his conservationist beliefs and principles. In the major achievements of Roosevelt's presidential term, conservation of the nation's resources and putting an end to wasteful uses of raw materials were certainly a few of them.

Between 1890-1920, the Progressive Movement was making rounds around the United States. Coined the Progressive movement, followers of this movement were seeking a more "progressive" United States... This movement brought on increased criticisms for the effects on industrialization in major cities. The more issues that arose from industrialization, the more people became aware of its effects including lack of tenable housing conditions, increased spread of diseases, pollution, etc.

Progressive reformers pressed for the protection of natural forests outside of major cities, and worked to set aside underdeveloped land for parks and recreational activities. Furthermore, this movement worked to expose the failures of society such as child labor, with kids as young as six working long hours with little pay.

During the Progressive Era, the profound social and political change and reactions that occurred were unprecedented, and journalists and writers began publishing writing to bring social issues to the American public. The term “muckraker” was used to characterize American journalists who strived for reform. In modern day, we call this journalism “investigative.”

Similar to how investigative journalists work now, Progressive Era journalists relied on their own reporting and oftentimes worked undercover to expose social ills and injustices in corporate or political areas. Some of the most successful muckrakers were women such as Ida Tarbell, who wrote about the horrors of lynch law in the South. Other well-known names include Jane Adams and Grace Abbot.

In the decades leading up to the first Earth Day, Americans were consuming vast amounts of leaded gas through massive and inefficient automobiles. Industry belched out smoke and sludge with little fear of the consequences from either the law or bad press. Air pollution was commonly accepted as the smell of prosperity.

Furthermore, until this point, mainstream America remained largely oblivious to environmental concerns and how a polluted environment threatens human health. The stage was set for change with the publication of Rachel Carson’s New York Times bestseller *Silent Spring* in 1962., which raised public awareness and concern for living organisms, the environment, and the link between pollution and public health.

"The was the remarkable thing about Earth Day, it organized itself." - Gaylord Nelson, former U.S. Senator from Wisconsin



While Earth Day was far from the first environmental action, what made the movement different was its mass scale and coherence. The first Earth Day events took place at tens of thousands of locations across the US. Even a stretch of New York’s Fifth Avenue was closed to traffic. Congress was adjourned, as so many politicians were participating in the day’s events. Earth Day created, for the first time, an environmental movement, as local and specific concerns around clean air, water and pesticides coalesced into a broad awareness of the crisis facing the planet as a whole.

#ClimateChange

NOTABLE FIGURES



Leonardo DiCaprio
(1974-present)



Greta Thunberg
(2003-present)



Mari Copeny
(2007-present)



Irsa Hirsi
(2003-present)



Autumn Peltier
(2004-present)



Al Gore
(VP Term: 1993-2001)

US Environmentalism

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

● Sierra Club, established in 1892

Based out of Oakland, CA the organization founded by John Muir has fought for a myriad of issues involving US natural lands and resources. The club grew steadily over the 20th century, with national outreach leading to many more conservationist victories, gaining public support and political influence.

Clean Water Act (1972)

● **Established the basic structure for regulating discharges of pollutants into the waters of the US and regulating surface waters**

● April 22, 1970

20 million people took to the streets across the United States to protest environmental destruction. The nation had recently witnessed the devastating impacts of the Santa Barbara oil spill and seen the first photographs of the Earth taken by astronauts.

2015

● **Amendments to the Clean Water Act**

● August 2018

Greta Thunberg protests in front of the Swedish Parliament



The Issue with Climate Change

The idea of climate is oftentimes mistaken for weather, however, climate is weather measured over a long period of time. The term climate change is the concept of long-term alteration of temperature and the weather patterns on a global scale. The biggest cause of the current climate change crisis is human activity, such as burning fossil fuels such as natural gas, coal, etc.

Furthermore, greenhouse gases are thought to be the biggest contributor to the effects of climate change after the burning of fossil fuels. Coined the Greenhouse Effect, the gases radiate heat back into the Earth's surface which is where scientists' concerns stems from.

An Era of Climate Reform (2000-Present)

In August 2018, Swedish teenager and climate activist Greta Thunberg began protesting in front of Swedish Parliament with a sign: "School Strike for Climate." Her protest to raise awareness for global warming caught the world by storm and by November 2018, over 17,000 students in 24 countries were participating in climate strikes.

By March 2019, Thunberg was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. She participated in the United Nations Climate Summit in New York City in August of 2019, famously taking a boat across the Atlantic instead of flying to reduce her carbon footprint.

THE HASHTAGS

#FridaysForFuture – A hashtag and movement that gained popularity in Sweden when a 16 year old schoolgirl protested the Swedish government's inaction on climate change by sitting outside of the parliament building every weekday for three weeks. The hashtag has since gained popularity across Europe and advocates for school "walkouts" to protest activities or policies every Friday that contribute to or prevent the mitigation of climate change.

#ClimateChange is a well publicized movement, so climate activists have used nearly every popular social media platform to advocate for their cause. Twitter and Facebook are the most popular, due to their large user base. The ability of both of these platforms to spread video, images, and text increases their usability with respect to activism, compared to, Instagram, where text can only be posted in the form of a screenshot, or a caption where it blends seamlessly in with any comments made by other users.



THE INFLUENCE

As previously established, social media continues to play a significant role in various social movements. This includes the climate change movement. Social media is slowly replacing news outlets by producing and promoting infographics, discussion, and more. One of the biggest symbols associated with this movement is the starving polar bear used to attract sympathy from the public. Although attractive, this method was criticized for only focusing on the biodiversity aspect of climate change, and not focusing on larger aspects of climate change such as fossil fuel usage.

In contrast to the Black Lives Matter Movement, climate change is an issue that affects everyone. Therefore, unity is essential to successfully combating it. Through social media, there is more education about climate change, rather than change because it's an issue that is reliant upon stricter legislation so that everyone is required to be more conscious of their carbon footprint. However, the influence of discourse cannot be underestimated.

In the field of climate change, there are some prominent influencers who are creating campaigns against global warming. Take, for example, Mr. Beast's campaign of #TeamTrees whose main goal is to plant 20 million trees around the world. Started back in October 2019, the campaign has already passed its initial goal. It also received support from other prominent climate influencers such as Destin Sandler from Smarter Every Day Channel, and Elon Musk the CEO of Tesla.

Guided Questions: Environmental Justice Movement

- 1- How does social media add to the feeling of "impending doom" of global warming?
- 2- How has social media broadened the gap between climate change acceptance and conspiracy?
- 3- There is a lot of criticism over notable climate change activists over an apparent lack of action on their part. How can they further their action off of social media?
- 4- Do you think that changing individual actions, such as posting and signing petitions, or enacting large-scale legislation would have a greater effect on reducing climate change?
- 5- How can we further our use of social media in the public sphere?

CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

BLM



KEY WORDS

SYSTEMIC RACISM

Racism exists through policies and laws throughout a society that perpetuates inequities for racial minorities and continues for generations. Found in areas of wealth, incarceration, political representation, and education

PERFORMATIVE ACTIVISM

Supporting a cause or issue to increase social prestige rather than because of one's true support/interest in the cause itself

JIM CROW LAWS

A collection of state and local laws that legalized racial segregation originating in the South during the reconstruction era. It marginalized Black Americans by denying them the right to vote, employment, education, and other opportunities.

LITERACY TEST

A legal preventive measure to ensure that Black Americans could not register to vote. The test examined the applicant's ability to read to ensure they were educated enough to vote. However this disqualified immigrants, the poor, and Black people because of the lack of education they received.

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Standards set in place to abolish discrimination against applicants applying for positions in education programs and employment, for example. It tries to alleviate discrimination on the basis of, but not limited to, race, color, sex, and national origin.

Civil Rights Movement

NOTABLE FIGURES



Emmett Till
(1941-1955)



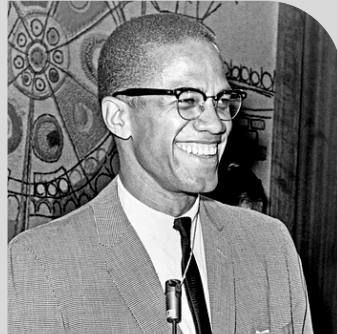
Rosa Parks
(1913-2005)



Ruby Bridges
(1954-present)



Martin Luther King Jr
(1929-1968)



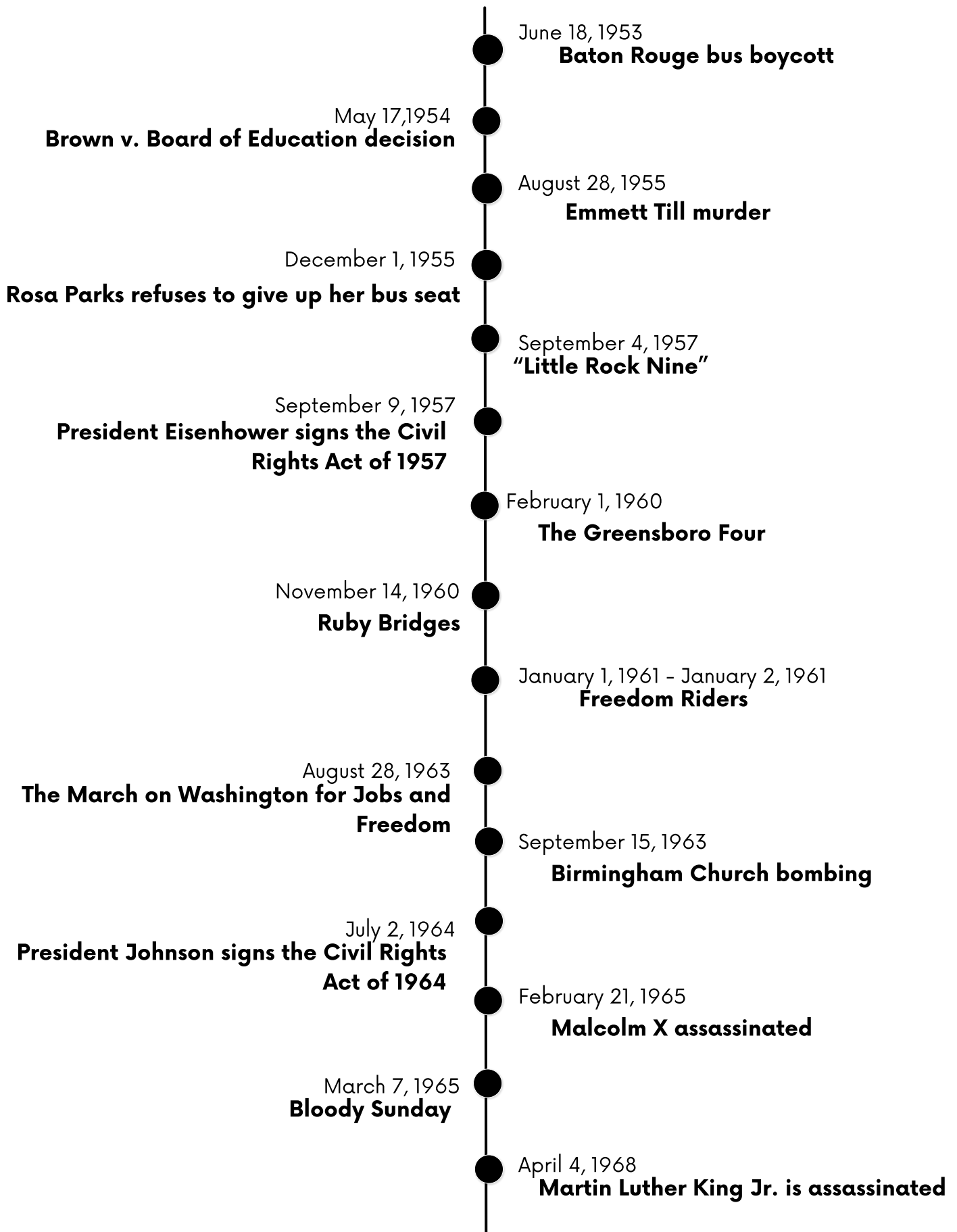
Malcolm X
(1925-1965)



Lyndon B. Johnson
(Presidential Term:
1963-1969)

Civil Rights Movement

TIMELINE OF EVENTS





The Civil Rights Movement: An Era of Social Justice Reform (1950 – 1968)

What is the Civil Rights Movement?

The Civil Rights movement is known as one of the biggest and most influential movements in American history, which invoked action on local, state, and federal levels. The passage of two Civil Rights Acts, military enforcement, and Presidential executive orders culminated the success of this movement. The Declaration of Independence declared that “all men are created equal” and that all men had “unalienable rights” of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” but this statement only applied to white men, and not women, Indian tribes, or Black men.

When President Lincoln abolished slavery with the 13th Amendment, Black Americans still weren't given rights. However, in 1868, the 14th Amendment to the Constitution gave Black people equal protection. Following that, in 1954, the monumental *Brown v. Board of Education* case ended segregation in public schools across the nation, claiming that segregation in schools violated the 14th Amendment.

This ended the concept of “separate but equal” facilities which was created so that white Americans wouldn't have to mix with Black Americans. This was done to pacify Black protesters and activists. However, there was still segregation on a fundamental level because white Americans still looked at colored people as uncivilized. Although the 13th and 14th Amendments worked to establish equality, there was still segregation in schools, bathrooms, public transport, and even voting offices.

There was significant backlash against the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, and many white Americans stopped their kids from going to school in fear of “intermixing.” Shortly after, President Eisenhower signed the Civil Rights Act of 1957 which established protections for voting rights. The purpose of the bill was to increase the number of registered black voters, particularly in the South.

Key results of the movement

“On 2 January 1965 King and Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) joined Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Dallas County Voters League, and other local African American activists in a voting rights campaign in Selma where, in spite of repeated registration attempts by local blacks, only two percent were on the voting rolls. SCLC had chosen to focus its efforts in Selma because they anticipated that the notorious brutality of local law enforcement under Sheriff Jim Clark would attract national attention and pressure President Lyndon B. Johnson and Congress to enact new national voting rights legislation” (Stanford). President Johnson had signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which outlawed discrimination on the basis of race, religion, sex, or natural origin, required equal access for all public places, and emphasized the desegregation of public schools. Although, this didn't end all discrimination, it was the first step in that direction.

The impact of mass media on the movement

During the Civil Rights Movement, news spread through word of mouth, television, and written publications such as books or newspapers. These sources served as a mirror to the public so they themselves could see what was going on in society. There was a distinct increase in the use of televisions in America, which is significant to the spread of this movement. The visuals in newspapers and television programs served as a major catalyst since those in the northern states could see what was taking place in the south and vice versa. Americans were able to witness the violence up-close like never before.

However, the truth about racial equality wasn't presented. In the beginning of the movement, most Southern media contributed to the rhetoric that Blacks were inferior and produced media that reinforced this concept. Furthermore, the media emphasized the violence that occurred instead of the daily struggles that many Blacks faced. This reinforced the idea that Black Americans were inherently violent and weren't safe to co-exist with. But those who were aware of the struggles that Blacks faced on the daily were able to see the media for what it was meant to be showing.



#BLM

NOTABLE FIGURES



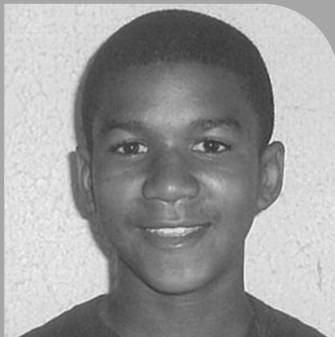
Alicia Garza
(1981-present)



Patrisse Cullors
(1983-present)



Opal Tometi
(1984-present)



Trayvon Martin
(1995-2012)



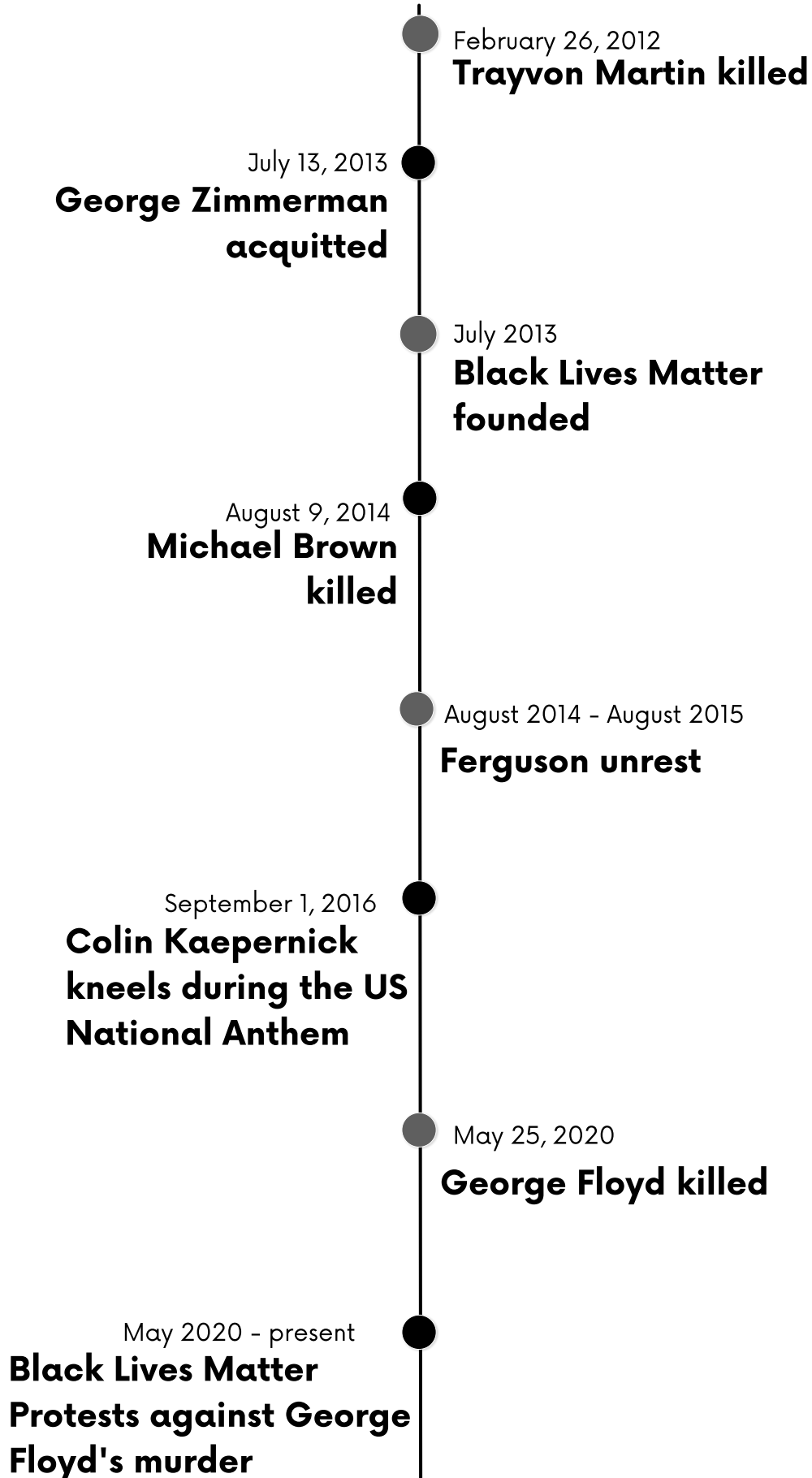
Michael Brown
(1996-2014)



George Floyd
(1973-2020)

BLM

TIMELINE OF EVENTS





What is Black Lives Matter?

Eric Garner. Michael Brown. Tamir Rice. Walter Scott. Alton Sterling. Breonna Taylor. All names of Black lives lost due to racial prejudice and police brutality. The popularity of these names did not grow initially because of each individual's character or work in society, but rather of the increased activism made by social media through the Black Lives Matter campaign.

After the killing of Trayvon Martin in the debate on racial profiling and self-defense laws, the term "Black Lives Matter" arose in response to protest against racial injustice. The Black Lives Matter movement was organized by a woman named Alicia Garza in 2013. The protest became widespread as millions of people participated in the movement. In June 2020, the Black Lives Matter protests became one of the largest movements in U.S. History. According to the New York Times, half a million people in different places across the country showed up to participate in the protests. This movement is still very popular today.

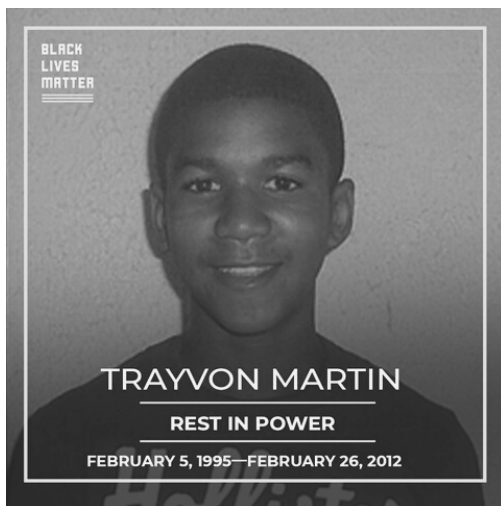
The Black Lives Matter Movement 2013-Present

The popularity of this movement is heavily due to the accessibility to social media. #BlackLivesMatter is one of the top trending hashtags on media platforms. The use of social media has made spreading information such as violent acts inflicted on Black communities, protests, and promoting spaces for Black pride and creativity has allowed this movement to expand from just a national level to a global level.

The Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, Inc. is a global organization in the US, the United Kingdom, and Canada. This organization strives to affirm the intersectional lives within the Black community, work against systemic oppression against Black individuals, and to affirm humanity and resiliency in the face of society.

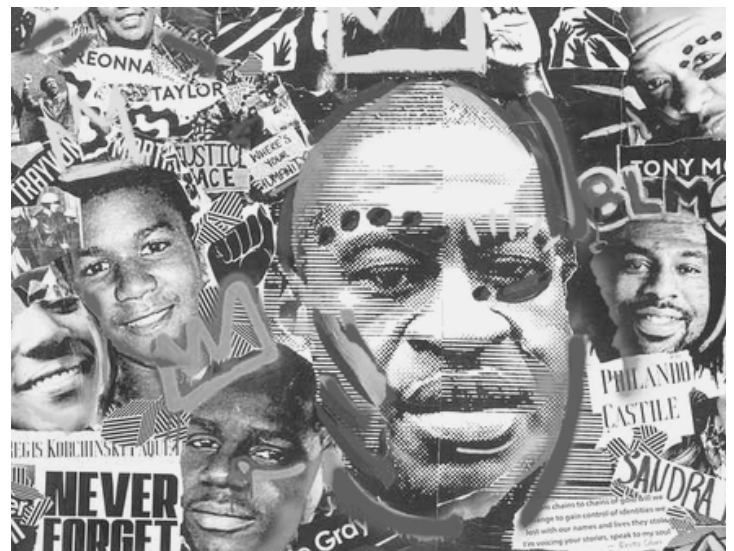
On social media, thousands of people share stories and solidarity with this movement and bring to light the justice that needs to occur--evident advantage of the digital age on activism.

It is undeniable that social media plays a role in influencing people, and the same can be said for the Black Lives Matter movement. From early 2013 to current day, the Black Lives Matter movement has gained tremendous traction on social media and has educated hundreds. However, the polarization of COVID-19, as well as an increase in police brutality resulted in the culmination of this social change. The Black Lives Matter movement was founded in response to the case of Trayvon Martin. Trayvon was a 17-year old who was shot in a Florida-gated community by a white individual, who was later acquitted for the crime. Many were angered by this case, and took to social media to speak out.



A study done stated, "Our results demonstrate that while notable events may have triggered many individuals to engage in cursory or one-time discourse on the various issues of the Black Lives Matter activist movement, some individuals remained involved in the social media conversations over a long period and across temporally spread-out events. This indicated that 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."

In May of 2020, the viral video of George Floyd's death was rapidly spread and outrage occurred. Social media has been integral in distributing documentation of violence and injustice of Black individuals, as well as, documentation of support. During the call for justice for George Floyd and others, the discussion switched to politics and focused on President Trump and other politicians' response to these events. In a study that, "...examined a random selection of 250 tweets from within top political trending topics in the week-long period after Floyd's death.... Of these 250 posts, 187 were about politics in the US and 148 were about the BLM movement. Only 13 of the 250 posts were about the coronavirus." Furthermore, according to a July Pew Research Center survey, "roughly a quarter (23%) of adult social media users in the United States – and 17% of adults overall – say they have changed their views about a political or social issue because of something they saw on social media in [2019-2020]." The ubiquity of social media allowed for countries overseas to reflect on the systematic racism in their own countries, and pledge allegiance to the Black Lives Matter Movement through protests in their respective countries.



Guided Questions: Racial Justice Movements

- 1- Do judges and juries feel pressure from social media? Should judges and juries feel pressure from social media?
- 2- What are the benefits and drawbacks of social media as a method of activism? Does social media increase performative activism? How do we alleviate this problem?
- 3- How has the rapid sharing of photos and videos exposed systemic bias within our society?
- 4- What is the overall purpose of canceling culture? How can cancel culture impact change in racial injustices?
- 5- How does the reposting of racial hate crimes and events impact the mental health of the targeted racial groups? Is this the best method for solidarity and raising awareness?
- 6- "How has mass media culture failed American democracy?"- Morgan, Edward P. 2010

SLACKTIVISM



KEY WORDS

SLACKTIVISM

The act of spreading awareness through media communications, such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, which sometimes leads to action.

ACTIVISM

Efforts are made to promote, direct, or intervene in social, economical, racial, mental, political, or environmental reform .

FILTER BUBBLES

The process in which algorithms inadvertently promote hyper-polarization by categorizing information based on an individual's engagement with certain posts or topics on their timeline. This is an example of self-selected personalization.

PRE-SELECTED PERSONALISATIONS

Personalization driven by websites, advertisers, or sponsors, without the user's deliberate knowledge or consent. The biggest concern is the lack of transparency with users.

SELF-SELECTED PERSONALIZATIONS

Situations where people choose to interact with similar opinions exclusively. The social media algorithm will detect a commonality in your content and be sure to reproduce the information related to this.

SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM



The Digital Age

What is "Slacktivism"?

"Slacktivism" or "clicktivism" is also known as social media activism. Social media activism is the act of spreading awareness through media communications which sometimes leads to action. It could be through, but not limited to, the development of hashtags, fundraising initiatives, and sharing and signing petitions. A wide range of social media platforms has been used to perform activism such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and Twitter. There are polarizing views on the effectiveness of the use of slacktivism.

Story Algorithm

The accessibility of information through the use of social media is what attracts people to share and post information. The more shares, likes, and comments you get the more it can be shared with others on they can view it on their timeline. What you engage with the most is what you will oftentimes see on your timeline as well.

Once the user opens the app, for example, Instagram, the social media site's design will comb through the following information:

- Which posts go to the top of the newsfeed
- Which posts are featured on the Explore tab
- In which order are stories, Live videos, and Reels showing up

Information such as your relationship with your followers (eg. mutual following, how often do you search their name), how many devices you use this social media platform on and what the photo will increase popularity, and the timelines of your posts. to carefully manipulate what you *want* to see.

Public Opinions

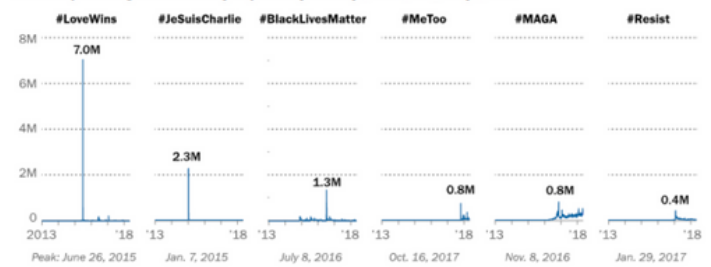
There are a lot of contradictory views on the topic of slacktivism. While it may be viewed as a "lazier" method to promote prominent causes and the algorithm can create information bias, some find that it allows a space for different voices to be heard and help increase the causes' attraction.

About 69% of Americans view hashtags as important to gaining politicians' attention to the issues at hand. Certain groups of social media users, such as Blacks and Hispanic users, view these platforms to be significant to their civic engagement and staying up to date about the political climate. Many believe social media is a great platform to express their political views or get involved in important issues.

Based on surveys conducted in America, there are many polarizing views on the use of slactivism. About 64% of the participants believe that social media amplifies the voices of underrepresented groups. 77% of Americans believe these social media platforms actually distract people from the core significance of the issues. On the other hand, 71% of participants said social media falsely convinces people they are making a difference when in reality they are not. While oftentimes these efforts can help lead to petitions being signed or increase acknowledgment of the issue, to begin with, some people believe that activism is more than sharing a post or changing one's profile picture. If we do not go out and make the change, nothing will happen.

A comparison of Twitter hashtags organized around political causes, social issues, or events

Number of Twitter posts mentioning the following hashtags, Jan. 1, 2013-May 1, 2018



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of publicly available tweets using Crimson Hexagon. "Activism in the Social Media Age"

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It is very common for young adults to participate in these campaigns as well. Another study focused on engagement based on different ages. Americans between the ages 18 and 49 were more likely to:

- Change their profile picture to show support for a cause
- Look for information on social media about local protests
- Use hashtags related to a political or social issue

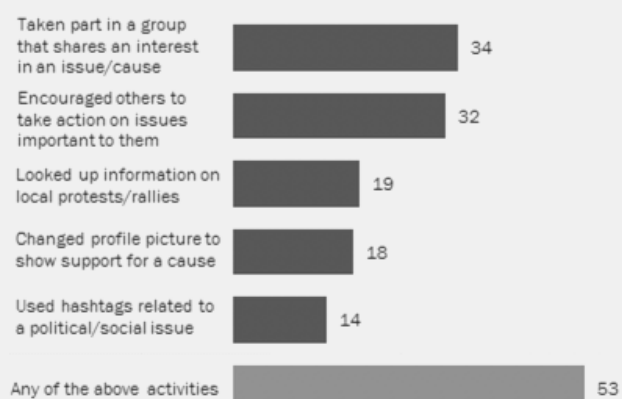
This was more common in this age group than in those who were 50 years old or older.

Popular Hashtags

- **#MeToo**- Raise awareness for sexual harassment and give victims a space to openly reflect on their experience
- **#BlackLivesMatter**- Rose after the death of Trayvon Martin to stand in solidarity with victims who died or were oppressed due to racial unrest that is common in the Black community
- **#StopAAIHate**- Raise awareness of the Asian hate crimes occurring around the country
- **#BreakTheBias**- The celebration of Women's History Month and to highlight the necessity to abolish gender bias in all spaces.
- **#FightFor15**- Movement to support hospitality workers.

Roughly half of Americans have been civically active on social media in the past year

% of U.S. adults who say they have done the following activities on social media in the past year



Note: Respondents who gave other responses or did not give an answer are not shown. Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted May 29-June 11, 2018. "Activism in the Social Media Age"

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Guided Questions: Slacktivism

- 1- Is it ethical for social media to use filter bubbles?
- 2- Is activism on social media helpful or counterintuitive?
- 3- Did social media posts about big movements influence/educate you? If so, how did you participate in these movements?
- 4- Why do minority groups feel that social media is a better platform for their voices to be heard? What does this say about our society today and political system?
- 5- How have social media campaigns added to or taken away from accountability from corporations and celebrities?

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