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**The Value of Black Lives:
The Effect of the Digital Age on
African American Identity and Political Participation**

Lauren M. Grimes

The advent and vigorous progression of social media during the digital age, which began in the mid 1940s, has had a monumental effect on the African American community.¹ During this period in history, there was a major shift from industrialization to computerization. Despite its creation in 1969, it was not until the 1990s that the Internet was truly established as a public domain.² Soon after, social media platforms arrived and ever since then, they have evolved into quite the reckoning force. Not only have social media proven to be relevant and important within the realm of technology but also within the frameworks of personal and sociocultural identity. Often referred to as social network sites (SNS), the purpose of these online platforms is to create a space in which social and cultural exchange can take place in a virtual setting. As these platforms have increased in complexity and diversification, they have transformed into an opportunity to provide information-sharing options with individuals that users know personally and those they meet virtually.

One distinctive revelation that occurred in the late 1990s and has been prevalent with SNS ever since is the inclusion of user-derived personal data. On social media platforms, users are allowed to create profiles in order to digitally characterize their personal identity. In the 1950s, psychologist Erik Erikson formulated the idea of individual identity involving three components: ego identity (self); personal identity (the personal idiosyncrasies that distinguish a person from another); and sociocultural identity (the collection of social roles a person might play).³ Over time, the idea of society's impact on one's identity has expanded. According to James Fearon, professor of political science at Stanford University, personal identity contemporarily refers to: (a) a social category, defined by membership rules and (alleged) characteristic attributes or expected behaviors; (b) socially distinguishing features that a person takes a special pride in or views as unchangeable yet socially consequential; or (a) and (b). In the latter sense, "identity" is modern formulation of dignity, pride, or honor."⁴ Both the traditional and modern explanations of identity confirm one crucial point—personal identity is a social and cultural construct.

Due to social and cultural experiences, individuals are generally recognized by their group identity. African American or black identity in particular refers to the collective identity of individuals who embrace an African American or black ethnicity,

¹ Stephen Levy, "The Brief History of the ENIAC Computer," (*Smithsonian Magazine*, 2013) accessed October 2016, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-brief-history-of-the-eniac-computer-3889120/#pWoPbuUMUpqJFIwq.99>

² Evan Andrews, "Who Invented the Internet?" (*History*, 2013) accessed October 2016, <http://www.history.com/news/ask-history/who-invented-the-internet>

³ Erik Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995).

⁴ James Fearon, "What Is Identity (As We Now Use The Word)?" (Stanford, University, 1999), accessed October 2016, <https://web.stanford.edu/group/fearon-research/cgi-bin/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/What-is-Identity-as-we-now-use-the-word-.pdf>.

nationality, or culture. The development and acceptance of a black identity across the African American community has very important cultural, political, and social implications, as was experienced during the U.S. civil rights movement in the 1960s. On one hand, the civil rights movement was organized as a very political call to end racism and segregation, which was reflected by its focus on creating federal regulations and protections for African American human and civil rights. On the other, the movement was a social declaration of unity and power, resilience, and determination. Overall, black identity, and its political and social aspects, was at its epicenter.

As a purposefully publicized campaign, the movement was constantly bombarded by overzealous media antics, which subjected it to mass consumerism. According to associate professor of media studies and author Aniko Bodroghkozy, in the early 1960s most television news sources:

“...seemed to have solidified a general script for its civil rights coverage: search for worthy black victims of racial discrimination who could be individualized or, if in groups, kept largely silent, and have either Martin Luther King or a white reporter speak for them.”⁵

Vast print, television, and radio media coverage provided the public with the perfect opportunity to experience the black identity. As outsiders, this media coverage granted the public firsthand accounts of the inhumanities that African Americans experienced in the United States as a result of discrimination, and allowed them the chance to provide support for the movement. However, it also allowed for public domination of the idea of black identity, and the misinterpretation of values, beliefs, and views of African Americans. After all, the media—designed to be fueled by negative images and conflict—were largely in control of broadcasting the rhetoric surrounding the injustices happening to people of color, and their responses to it.

A voice for the voiceless

With the overall advancement of African Americans after the civil rights movement, one would likely expect continued, increased participation in politics. Historically, we have witnessed the opposite occur. In 1965, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law, which intended to remove any barriers existing as a result of the Fifteenth Amendment. After the great increase in African American voters in 1964, which led to the election of President Johnson, and the passing of the Voting Rights Act, the African American voter turnout rate in presidential (and midterm) elections decreased, and then flattened. Astonishingly, there was not any significant increase for over 40 years, until the historic 2008 presidential election.

Arnold Kaufman would describe the phenomenon of the movement as one that exemplifies political democracy at its best. The concept of “political democracy” encourages the idea that when constituents gain political power, it leads them to increased “thought, feeling, and action.”⁶ Unfortunately, the concept also includes an interesting caveat. Although the participation in political democracy typically helps to increase

⁵ Aniko Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time: Television and the Civil Rights Movement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

⁶ Archon Fung and Erik Wright, *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance* (New York: Verso, 2003).

constituents' capacities for inclusion in politics, the people that would benefit most from participation are often unable to do so. This undesirable political paradox enforces the importance of SNS. Despite the honorable achievements of African Americans during the civil rights movement, the opportunity to express the First Amendment has largely been dictated by racist and methodical blockades preventing uninhabited participation in government.

These preventions have been observed even in the twenty-first century and include, for example, discriminatory voter suppression laws that mandate acquiring particular forms of identification in order to practice the right to vote. Advancements during the digital age have decreased barriers preventing groups like African Americans from actively playing a role in the political process. Social media have provided platforms in which African Americans have a voice, collectively and individually. They create other opportunities for African Americans to engage in politics aside from traditional venues such as voting and protesting.

Social media provide spaces for marginalized groups to voice opinions and raise awareness without depending on media and political figures to do so. In the twenty-first century, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram—three of the most popular SNS worldwide—were created. Since then, African American users have dominated the world of SNS. In 2009, Facebook—the most popular social media site in the world and among African Americans—compared user surnames with U.S. Census Bureau data to evaluate the diversity of its platform. African Americans are still the largest proportion of minorities on Facebook in the United States.^{7 8} According to the Pew Research Center, Instagram is the second most popular social media platform among African Americans and Latinos in the U.S. A whopping 34 percent of Instagram users are black. Twitter follows the same statistical trend, coming out third with one in four users identifying as African American.

By sheer numbers alone, it is evident that African Americans are dominating SNS platforms. The collective use of social media has allowed the group the freedom to continue to virtually shape its identity. As social spaces, social media have become tools to help African Americans share stories and pictures, and learn history from one another. By creating exclusive conversations and passing on information, albeit electronically, records are being formed and relationships are being built. Black identity is being molded, strengthened, and reinforced.

Social network sites also provide space where African Americans can ponder their place in politics and the implications it has on their lives. The MacArthur Research Network on Youth and Political Participation (YPP) has been conducting research on the impact social media has on voters. In one particular study, researchers determined that although most young people, regardless of race, use traditional media (e.g., newspapers and television) to acquire political information, youth of color are more likely to use new forms of media to do so. According to YPP research, the less socioeconomic resources are available to youth, the less likely they are to use traditional sources.⁹

⁷ Cameron Marlow, "How Diverse Is Facebook?" (Facebook, Inc., 2009), accessed October 15, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/facebook-data-science/how-diverse-is-facebook/205925658858/>.

⁸ African Americans were compared to self-identified Asian/Pacific Islanders and Hispanics adult Facebook users. Facebook does not require users to record their race or ethnicity.

⁹ Those with low socioeconomic resources included African Americans, and also Latinos/Hispanics and Asian Americans.

Regardless of this newfound sense of political independence, thus far it has not had a significant effect on voting behavior within the African American community, and the place of politics within black identity has remained stagnant. Since the late 1960s, black voters have overwhelmingly voted for a Democratic president. However, there is no clear delineation between black political ideology and the black vote. A stark example of this occurred during the time of President Barack Obama's second election. At that time, although 47 percent of blacks identified as liberals, and 45 percent identified as conservatives, 93 percent of African Americans voted for President Obama's reelection.¹⁰ In this instance, a clear indication of political diversity within the black community can be seen; however, perhaps due to the solidarity of black identity, most voters swung their vote in the direction of the majority—and in the direction of the black presidential nominee. The idea of racial unity can be expected as members of the community focus on unified interests related to civil rights, educational opportunities, and job prospects but more specifically in this case, collective political thought. Arguably, because of issues prioritized by black voters, their voting options are narrowed so significantly that “they have no viable alternative to the Democratic Party.”¹¹

During the 2016 presidential election, there was evidence that African Americans challenged presidential contenders via social media and otherwise. However, true to form, support for Democratic Party nominee State Secretary Hillary Rodham Clinton followed the historic trend and earned approximately 88 percent of the black vote.¹² Although members of the African American community may have been concerned with the possibility of Hillary Clinton winning the presidency and not living up to her campaign promises to embody politics as usual, they still largely supported her candidacy. This is because despite the benefit social media have had in helping blacks remain constant, relevant, dominant, and active figures of the 2016 presidential race, one important factor was still missing: accountability.

Malcolm X, a social activist and prominent leader of the black community, noticed how members of the community voted in tandem but without educating themselves first. In 1965 during a speech at a church in Cleveland, he encouraged African Americans to be “re-educated into the science of politics” and warned them to not waste votes on undeserving politicians because “a ballot is like a bullet. You don't throw your ballots until you see a target, and if that target is not within your reach, keep your ballot in your pocket.”¹³

Black technological separatism

Not only did Malcolm X support the idea of blacks becoming more politically knowledgeable before voting, but he also encouraged the idea of Black Nationalism. Black Nationalism, a term first coined in the late nineteenth century, supports the idea

¹⁰ Matthew Luttig and Cathy Cohen, “How Social Media Helps Young People — Especially Minorities and the Poor — Get Politically Engaged,” *The Washington Post*, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/09/28/can-trump-win-black-votes-what-we-know-from-5-decades-of-black-voting-data/>.

¹¹ Luttig, “How Social Media Helps Young People.”

¹² Alec Tyson and Shiva Maniam, “Behind Trump's Victory, Divisions by Race, Gender, Education,” Pew Research Center, 2016, accessed October 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/behind-trumps-victory-divisions-by-race-gender-education/>

¹³ Eddie Glaude and Fredrick Harris, “The Black Vote: History Demands a Strategy for Change,” *Time Magazine*, 2016, accessed October 15, 2016, <http://time.com/4504138/black-vote-blank-out/>.

that African Americans must celebrate their heritage and vow to unify with the purpose of taking a stand and ceasing all destruction of their people. In this way, African Americans will have a legitimate chance at surviving and thriving.

Marcus Garvey was another prominent figure early in the movement who was especially responsible for rallying members of the African diaspora. His goal was to migrate African Americans out of America, and out of the controls of those of European descent. Thus, a vital position within the movement was also the concept of separatism. The idea of separating the black race from those who actively and passively attempted to annihilate it was deemed the only alternative to the deteriorating situation.

However, despite the creation of the group being a direct response to racism in America, today the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), a national non-profit legal advocacy group, considers black separatist groups to be a hate groups.¹⁴ Ironically, SPLC compares it to groups that incite the hate of certain races and ethnic groups, such as neo-Nazis and the Klu Klux Klan. Their categorization comes with reasoning. Most black nationalist groups such as the Nation of Islam (NOI) and the New Black Panther Party institute the principles of educating black Americans, fighting for justice, and becoming an independent people as their primary focus. Although a review of their professed principles does not explicitly encourage negative views of others, there have been recorded instances of racist comments from some groups. Louis Farrakhan, the current leader of the NOI, has stated on multiple occasions that white (Caucasian) people are “blue-eyed devils.”¹⁵ Still, it is important to note that the negative views of one individual ought not to diminish the importance of the positive unified platform of a group.

As the digital age continues to evolve over time, Internet users have become increasingly innovative with the uses of SNS. As SNS are public platforms by nature, it is quite remarkable that users have found ways to create exclusive spaces within them. In 2009, writer Chris Wilson identified a cluster of African American-related hashtags that occurred naturally and were growing in popularity on the microblogging SNS called Twitter.^{16 17} Hashtags such as “#uknowufromqueens” (a reference to the Queens borough of New York City) and “#uknowurblackwhen” were used to begin a conversation for and by members of the black community. These hashtags followed the conjecture that the individuals associated with them were the only ones that could relate to their implications and complete the applicable statement. Regarding the latter hashtag, the specific assumption is that many black Americans would be able to relate to the various ways the statement could be completed, due to the fact that they shared a mutual identity based on race and, therefore, experiences inimitable to their race. Ashley Weatherspoon, Twitter user and creator of “#uknowurblackwhen,” stated that her intention was to create a conversation piece for African Americans and encourage them to “laugh at ourselves [sic].”¹⁸ For the record, the first time she used the hashtag it was

¹⁴ “Black Separatist,” Southern Poverty Law Center, last modified 2016, accessed October 15, 2016, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/black-separatist>.

¹⁵ “Black Separatist,” Southern Poverty Law Center, last modified 2016, accessed October 15, 2016, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/black-separatist>.

¹⁶ Chris Wilson, “Uknowurblack,” *The Root*. September 09, 2009, accessed October 2016, http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2009/09/how_uknowurblackwhen_became_popular_on_twitter/.

¹⁷ Hashtags are compilations of continuous words (e.g., tags) that follow hash signs, are often utilized on SNS as a means to highlight ideas and attract interest to particular subjects of discussion.

¹⁸ Wilson, “Uknowurblack.”

followed by the statement, “You cancel plans when it’s raining.” Chris Wilson commented on Twitter, “The presence of trends like this one...suggest a strong, connected black community.”¹⁹ Thus was the creation of “Black Twitter.”

The hashtags used by African Americans on SNS do not always explicitly express their place in black social spaces. Nevertheless, members of those spaces inherently understand them. Further examples would be “#CNNbelike,” which was a response to CNN’s tendency to focus on negative images of African Americans, despite their innocence in certain cases, and “#askRachel,” which was a response to the backlash that former Spokane, Washington NAACP President Rachel Dolezal received as a result of her racial identity.²⁰ In the latter case, Dolezal—a woman of mixed European descent—was asked a question about her race by a reporter, which she refused to answer. At that time it had already been broadcasted on various forms of media that Dolezal considered herself black.

“Black Twitter,” as it is affectionately known, is an online social and cultural dynamic created by self-identified members of the black community. There is no certified admission to “Black Twitter” space. All you need to do to become a part of it, or be “on” it, is to simply utilize hashtags related to African Americans exclusively while posting on Twitter. As “Black Twitter” has no specified characteristics or blockades to prevent intrusion from those who are not black or African American, the assumption is that most who utilize the space are “legitimate” members of this particular race and ethnicity. Despite the unification implied by the assumed members of that particular online space, that does not indicate that the many views and beliefs communicated in that space strictly belong to the African American community. The community within itself is rich and full of diversity, as is mirrored on Twitter at-large.

As a parallel or continuation of black separatist theory, “Black Twitter” focuses on creating intimate conversations without being overly exclusionary. Since it is a public space, technically anyone can participate. However, members have craftily constructed “Black Twitter” in such a way that the participation of non-blacks and non-minorities in general in some cases may be difficult. Members, who are a part of a black, minority, and greatly disenfranchised group, are expected to easily maintain conversations and trains of thought that occur in the space due to “cultural knowledge and insider access.”²¹ Therefore, the group uses “signifiers”—defined by sociologist Sarah Florini as linguistic techniques with deep, sometimes covert, and indirect language—to frame conversation around events, images, ideas, and circumstances only members would be able to narrate and relate to.²² Being able to participate in the use of signifiers within black SNS spaces further reinforces one’s “Blackness.”

From the server to the streets

In recent years participation in black social media spaces has imploded and actually transitioned from online conversations to ground action. Social activism events during the civil rights revolution became the nation’s first major domestic news stories to

¹⁹ Wilson, “Uknowurblack.”

²⁰ Zume Fumudoh, “The 14 Funniest Hashtags Black Twitter Gave Us in 2015,” *The Daily Dot*, December 15, 2015, accessed October 2016, <http://www.dailydot.com/unclick/best-black-twitter-hashtags-2015/>.

²¹ Apryl Williams, “#Blacktwitter: A Networked Cultural Identity,” Blog, Harmony Institute, 2013.

²² Sarah Florini, “Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin’: Communication and Cultural Performance on ‘Black Twitter.’” *Television & New Media* 15, no. 3 (2013).

be televised.²³ During the current phase of the digital age, a reverse phenomenon occurs. Conversations among black Internet users have often been used to create a physical presence. From this perspective, revolutions are increasingly beginning in a virtual media space, and subsequently being carried out in the streets. “Black Twitter” is the virtual space in which the hashtag “#BlackLivesMatter” was created. According to Pew, the hashtag was first used on July 13, 2013 in response to the murder of a young black male. According to one of the originators, Alicia Garza:

“I created ‘#BlackLivesMatter’ with Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, two of my sisters, as a call to action for black people after 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was posthumously placed on trial for his own murder and the killer, George Zimmerman, was not held accountable for the crime he committed. It was a response to the anti-black racism that permeates our society and also, unfortunately, our movements. Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise...”²⁴

Using the hashtag “#BlackLivesMatter” has proven to be an effective strategy. In the spring of 2016, Twitter celebrated its 10-year anniversary. As a part of that celebration, it published the top ten hashtags used in its history of existence. The hashtag “#BlackLivesMatter” was listed as number three.²⁵ The most frequently used hashtag was also related to issues concerning the black community.

Aside from it being effective at gaining the attention of the world, it was the first among many online media campaigns that encouraged African Americans to unite around issues of race and violence. Black SNS spaces have increasingly been used to leverage issues in the black community. As black virtual identity is strengthened, it is becoming more powerful and successful at vocalizing collective black thoughts related to those issues.

Not long after Trayvon Martin was killed, another tragic incident rocked the black community. On August 9, 2014, an 18-year-old black man named Michael Brown was fatally shot by Darren Wilson, a 28-year-old police officer, in Ferguson, Missouri. According to Twitter, “#Ferguson” was the most used social-issue hashtag in the 10-year history of the platform. The hashtag was incredibly monumental in this case because “unrest in Ferguson, Mo., hit Americans’ Twitter timelines before the story seized cable news’ attention.”²⁶

²³ Zume Fumudoh, “The 14 Funniest Hashtags Black Twitter Gave us in 2015,” *UVAToday*. March 16, 2012, accessed October 2016, <https://news.virginia.edu/content/new-book-examines-role-television-civil-rights-movement>.

²⁴ Alicia Garza, “Her Story,” *Black Lives Matter*, accessed October 2016, <http://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/>.

²⁵ Monica Anderson and Paul Hitlin, “Social Media Conversations About Race” (Pew Research Center, 2016), accessed October 15, 2016, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/08/15/social-media-conversations-about-race/>.

²⁶ Rubina Fillion, “The 5 Biggest Social Media Movements of 2014,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 2015. Accessed October 2016. <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2014/12/03/the-5-biggest-social-media-movements-of-2014/>.

In both tragic cases, the victims were black men and the shooters were not held accountable for the deaths of these victims. In both cases, the killings were viewed by many members of the black community and Americans at-large as unwarranted and immoral. As a nod of solidarity and to create a national conversation around the tragic incidents, Black Lives Matter supporters used social media as major platforms during and after these high-profile cases involving African American men. They were able to broadcast invitations to demonstrations, protests, and, at times, even looting events that occurred in resistance to the atrocities happening to men in black communities.

Participating in the “#BlackLivesMatter,” “#Ferguson,” and other such campaigns helped to provide solace to those in the black SNS spaces, for it allowed members to visually see their group identity coming to play in a major way. They were able to take control of the political rhetoric surrounding the unfortunate events while linking forces with peers who looked like them and shared similar experiences with the fallen black men that were murdered.

Conclusion

As the black community grows and develops, many external sources will attempt to have a direct effect on the internal identity of the group. Virtual platforms have proven to be resources that provide African Americans—a historically marginalized group—the opportunity to use the media to their advantage. They have granted African Americans the ability to move past the idea of political, social, and cultural inclusion, and instead cultivate ways to invent and dictate their own spaces within a society typically controlled by others. Most importantly, not only have they provided black people ingenious occasions to trade thoughts and create a more solid and unified voice, but they have also encouraged blacks to take action and make tangible change in their communities. Although we have not begun to see the full extent of what the new information gathering and calls for action will have on the black community, we can suspect that this is only the beginning of a new phase of the ongoing development of black identity in America.