



# BLACK LIVES MATTER:

BLM's Use of Media and Digital Platforms Analyzed  
through Works by Merlyna Lim, Todd Wolfson, and  
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## Abstract

Social media has become a dominant tool for social movements to connect, grow, and organize. This literature review analyzes studies relating to how social and digital media is used by social movements. Work by scholars and researchers such as Merlyna Lim, Sasha Costanza-Chock, and Todd Wolfson are the main focus. Contemporary social movements, such as Black Lives Matter, effectively utilizes today's social media tools to inform the public about issues affecting the black community, as well as uses social media tools to transform digital activism into physical activism.

## Key Words:

Black Lives Matter

Cyber Left

Social Movement

Institutionalized Stage

## Introduction

Several notable scholars and researchers, such as Merlyna Lim, Sasha Costanza-Chock, and Todd Wolfson, have spent a considerable amount of time studying, establishing, or creating frameworks, and publishing about social movements and the use of social and digital media within them. In recent years, social media has become a common way for political groups and social movements to organize, making it a prominent as well as a necessary area of study. Since the Arab Spring, which originated in 2010, there have been thousands of protests relating to social movements emerging in various places around the world (Lim, 2016).

Lim writes that a social movement focuses on establishing and expanding networks of resistance involving diverse publics, as networks of people brought together by common goals or interests (Lim,

2016; Lim, 2012). Social media has become embedded in everyday routines, creating a perpetual connectedness, and in turn, has caused political conversations and actions to become entangled within the digital world (Lim, 2016). Due to this entanglement, social media often plays an important role in furthering the networks and interests related to the social movement, and the role of digital media is becoming more apparent in protests and social movements (Lim, 2016). However, social media by itself does not advance or detract from a movement; it requires a person, a group, or a community to utilize it in a specific way to achieve a goal. Black Lives Matter (BLM) utilizes social and digital media to further its goals of drawing attention to its platform, drawing attention to issues it deems important, and encouraging individuals to take a stand and become physical activists, rather than only digital activists.

As Lim writes, “People and social media are not detached from each other” (Lim 2012). Lim explains how social media represents “tools and spaces” in which communication networks that make up social movements “emerge, connect, collapse, and expand” (Lim, 2012). Wolfson furthers this idea by describing how activists’ use of information communication technologies (ICTs) has “created new possibilities for organizations, democratic governance, and media strategy” within movements (Wolfson, 2014). BLM is one such social movements that is utilizing digital media to help further its goals. Its use of digital media relating to its movement can be looked at through the lens of works by Lim, Costanza-Chock, and Wolfson.

Created in 2013, BLM is a chapter-based, member-led organization (“Black Lives Matter,” 2017). In an interview between journalist, Dipka Bhambhani, and Shanelle Matthews, lead communications strategist for BLM, Matthews describes part of BLM’s mission as “working to rebuild the black liberation movement and affirm the lives of all black people - specifically black women, queer and trans people, people who are differently abled, and those who are undocumented and formerly incarcerated” (“Black Lives Matter,” 2017; Bhambhani, 2016). According to BLM’s website, the creation of BLM is a necessary “ideological and political intervention” because of the way that “Black

lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise” (“Black Lives Matter,” 2017). In the interview, Matthew describes the rest of BLM’s mission as “imposing a call to action and response to state-sanctioned violence against black people, as well as the virulent anti-black racism that permeates society” (Bhambhani, 2016). This demonstrates how BLM utilizes its tools, such as digital and social media, to create physical action and demonstrations to advocate for change.

### The Inception of Black Lives Matter

BLM first showed up in a Facebook post in July, 2013, by Alicia Garza, a California-based activist, after she heard about George Zimmerman’s acquittal regarding the shooting and subsequent death of Trayvon Martin (Anderson & Hitlin, 2016). Her friend, Patrisse Cullors, a community organizer working in prison reform, read Garza’s post, put a hashtag in front of it and posted it to Twitter (Chuck, 2015). The following day, Garza and Cullors discussed how they could organize a campaign around these sentiments because, as Garza stated, they wanted to create “a call to action” (Chuck, 2015). This led to them reaching out to Opal Tometi, another activist whose focus is in the field of immigrant rights (Chuck, 2015). Together, Garza, Cullors, and Tometi then created and began BLM by setting up Tumblr and Twitter accounts and encouraging users to share stories of why #blacklivesmatter (Day, 2015).

### How Black Lives Matter Broke through Mainstream Media Blackouts

Emily Parker and Charlton Mcilwain draw parallels between how BLM uses social media tools and tactics and how activists living under authoritarian regimes use it (Parker & Mcilwain, 2016). Emily Parker spent over 10 years interviewing Internet activists in China, Cuba, and Russia, and Charlton Mcilwain now researches BLM’s digital footprint in the US (Parker & Mcilwain, 2016). Parker and Mcilwain explain how the Internet lets ordinary citizens tell their own stories, helping to prevent

‘erasure’ which, according to BLM activist DeRay Mckesson, is when the story is never told or when the story is told by individuals rather than those affected or involved (2016). He mentions Ferguson and explains how “in Ferguson, we became unerased and that was solely because of social media” (Parker & Mcilwain, 2016).

After the shooting of Michael Brown in 2014, BLM activist Ashley Yates explained how BLM, “started to use Twitter and Facebook and Instagram as a way to just get the word out, to contrast the stark mainstream media blackout that was occurring” (Parker & Mcilwain, 2016). Activists involved in the BLM movement spoke at the 2016 Social Good Summit in New York City, and writer and activist, Luvvie Ajayi, explained how online hashtivism contributes to physical action because it “forced mainstream media to cover things that they've previously ignored, and things that they previously thought weren't worth their time...” (Dupere, 2016). Yates further supported this idea when she described how the media previously only relied on the police narrative, but now “social media has given people on the ground a voice and a validation as a trusted source” (Parker & Mcilwain, 2016). Lim corroborates this by describing how “mobile phones and the Internet enhance a movement’s capacity to coordinate activity, respond to challenges, and allow the movement to become less dependent to mainstream media in reaching the public” thus giving groups like BLM the opportunity to disseminate their own messages and viewpoints (Lim, 2012).

### Evolution of a Movement

In her 2016 conference paper, Lim outlines her belief that social movements have a life cycle, which incorporates four phases; the preliminary stage, the coalescence stage, the institutionalization stage, and the decline stage (Lim, 2016). The preliminary stage involves individuals becoming aware of an issue, with leadership emerging (Lim, 2016). The coalescence stage involves the collectivization and mobilization of individuals, where resistance is publicly displayed (Lim, 2016). The institutionalization

stage demonstrates the transition of a movement from relying on grassroots volunteerism to becoming an established organization (Lim, 2016). Finally, the decline stage occurs when participants of said movement leave, when the movement has successfully brought about its sought changes, or when the public no longer supports or takes the movement seriously (Lim, 2016). The preliminary stage of BLM occurred with the acquittal of Zimmerman, which was the catalyst for BLM to form and for BLM to start the life cycle of a social movement. Individuals became aware of an issue; in this case, the belief that justice was not served regarding the killing of a black teenager, which caused leaders Garza, Cullors, and Tometi, to emerge (Lim, 2016).

Initially, over the following year after its creation, #blacklivesmatter only showed up on Twitter sporadically (Chokshi, 2016). Now, however; according to a Pew Research Center analysis on race and social media released in 2016, it is a regular occurrence (Chokshi, 2016). Lee Rainie, Director of Internet, Science, and Technology research at Pew, stated how #BLM is “a very powerful example of how a hashtag now is attached to a movement, and a movement, in some ways, has grown around a hashtag — and a series of really painful and really powerful conversations are taking place in a brand-new space” (Chokshi, 2016). This is an example of BLM going through the coalescence stage of a social movement, which, according to Lim, is where and how people collectivize, mobilize, and publicly display their resistance (Lim, 2016).

Following the phases a social movement goes through, as outlined by Lim, BLM is currently in the institutionalized stage, which is the most crucial stage to social movements’ pursuit for societal reform and transformation for social change (Lim, 2016). Lim explains how this stage is characterized by higher levels of organization and coalition-based strategies (Lim, 2016). Even though BLM has chapters in different states, Matthews, BLM’s lead communications strategist, explains how BLM’s “strategy is to organize and mobilize people...” which occurs both online and in the streets, with demonstrations, protests, and actions, promoted and organized through social media tools (Bhambhani,

2016). Matthews also describes how BLM utilizes their digital platform to further their communications strategy, which is comprised of three things, “a blueprint for creating visibility for our work; a manifestation of our goals and vision; and our approach to maintaining dialogue about what ending state-sanctioned violence against black people looks like” (Bhambhani, 2016). BLM effectively uses their digital platform to inform individuals about and encourage involvement in their demonstrations.

### Digital Platforms and Networking

As Matthews describes, BLM is able to work together with chapters in different states and different organizations that have similar objectives because of its digital platform (Bhambhani, 2016). Lim describes how during the movements she studied, the Internet-based communication networks allowed organizers to reach vast and dispersed constituencies and audiences, making it easier to establish a network of resistance, which is also how BLM established its network of resistance (Lim, 2016). This assertion connects to Todd Wolfson’s definition of cyber, which he uses as a descriptive term for the “new technologies (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.) that have created a new possibility for scale, structure, strategy, and governance of social movements in 21st century” (Wolfson, 2014). It also connects to the strategy of Indymedia and Cyber Left movements, which is to create platforms and processes where different fragmented struggles can be networked together, “not in an effort to become one singular struggle but to become stronger together as a complex of struggles” (Wolfson, 2014). BLM is able to scale and strategize among its different parts (Bhambhani, 2016). Additionally, BLM’s use of its digital platforms demonstrates how BLM is part of the black liberation movement, which is comprised of many other organizations (Bhambhani, 2016). #Blacklivesmatter was the original call to action, but since its inception, other organizations have been created due to a shared sense of discontent (Day, 2015). Several examples of this are the Coalition Against Police Violence, which is run by two female activists, and the Black Youth Project 100, which has chapters all across the country and

campaigns against the use of racially motivated force (Day, 2015). All of these activists communicate, link up online, and collaborate, creating solidarity through social media that gives their separate voices mass focus and power (Day, 2015) (“Black Lives Matter,” 2017).

### Digital Activism and Hashtivism to Physical Activism

Since its inception, BLM has utilized its digital platforms to organize and participate in thousands of physical protests and demonstrations. Social movements claim their power through the public performance of resistance by occupying public spaces (Lim 2016). By using digital media and promoting hashtag activism, connected individuals can publicly perform resistance in an online space (Lim, 2016). This was the case with the Black Lives Matter movement. Organizers of Black Lives Matter made social media, specifically the hashtag #blacklivesmatter, the centerpiece of their strategy (“Black Lives Matter,” 2017). Activist Ajayi stated “this evolution from momentary hashtag to full-blown force has created immeasurable change for the black community” (Dupere, 2016). Ajayi describes how it all stemmed from something often labeled by society as non-impactful: "hashtivism" (Dupere, 2016). This is something generally innocuous; however, certain groups or organizations, like BLM, have the ability to make it impactful (Dupere, 2016). BLM practices hashtivism when it puts a # in front of a message, which is often related to a specific action (Dupere, 2016). For example, on BLM’s website, it is promoting #BuildBlackCommunities, which advocates boycotting White capitalism and not spending at White corporations from Thanksgiving until January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018 (“Black Lives Matter,” 2017). This is one of the ways BLM demonstrates its resistance and BLM often uses its digital platforms and social media platforms to further one of its goals of creating online activists who then demonstrate in person.

An example of this is what occurred after the death of Mike Brown by police officer Darren Wilson. BLM members Darnell Moore and Patrisse Cullors organized the Black Life Matters Ride



("Black Lives Matter," 2017). They travelled to Ferguson and St. Louis, where over 600 individuals gathered to support the protestors who were being met with police brutality and media criticism ("Black Lives Matter," 2017). From August 2014 to August 2015, BLM groups around the world utilized their various tools and organized more than 950 protest demonstrations, with the goal of drawing attention to unjust killings of black individuals (Ruffin, 2017).

On November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014, BLM joined other grassroots organizations, such as Oakland's BlackOutCollective to successfully disrupt holiday season shopping in San Francisco-Bay Area malls and Walmart stores, as well as supported and took part in similar disruptions which occurred in Boston, Chicago, Memphis, New York, Seattle, and Washington, D.C. (Ruffin, 2017). The goal of these disruptions, these physical actions, was to alert and inform individuals and communities about several issues, some of which were police brutality and racial disparities in median wealth (Ruffin, 2017). These groups believe that these issues need to be addressed by the entire nation (Ruffin, 2017). BLM not only utilizes social media to disseminate messages, but also uses social media to create physical actions to generate conversations and to drive change.

In 2015, BLM began to publicly challenge politicians, notably the 2016 presidential candidates, and demanded they state their positions on BLM issues and how their specific policies will lead to the improvement of black communities (Ruffin, 2017). On July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016, BLM organized a demonstration of about 150 individuals, protesting violence by police in South Memphis, with the goal of demanding justice for black lives taken by law enforcement, with a specific emphasis on the deaths of Alton Sterling, Ronnie Shumpert, and Philando Castile (Fretland & Connolly, 2016). BLM continues to utilize its digital platforms to organize demonstrations with the goal of informing the public about issues and attempting to create social change surrounding the issues.

## Reasons for Decentralization

BLM is a decentralized movement, following the idea of Cyber Left and Indymedia expressed by Todd Wolfson. Indymedia has no formally expressed hierarchy, there are no elections, and there is no president or executive director of the network because everyone is considered a leader (Wolfson, 2014). This is how BLM organizes its structure and disseminates its messages via digital media. Everyone has a voice, everyone uses the platform, and everyone spreads the word. As Garza, one of BLM's founders, said, "We have a lot of leaders" (Day, 2015). BLM uses Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr as digital platforms to send out messages and information, but it also uses individual's social media accounts who 'retweet' or 'repost' or who use the hashtags associated with the movement ("Black Lives Matter," 2017). Additionally, members and activists associated with the movement give interviews as well as write articles and books that have been featured in *Time*, *Mic*, *The Guardian*, *Democracy Now!*, and the *New York Times*, which document their experiences and further the goals of the movement, while linking it to BLM with the hashtag or a mention ("Black Lives Matter," 2017).

There is also a historical reason for decentralization regarding what has been coined as the new black liberation campaign. BLM activist, Ashley Yates, explains how decentralization helps ensure that killing the leaders will not kill the movement (Parker & Mcilwain, 2016). Yates describes the old style of organization as "the singular-figure model of black liberation—which was often a man in a suit, at the top, and having him be the microphone for people" (Parker & Mcilwain, 2016). She explained that previously, when there was a leader, "we didn't realize it didn't work until we saw what happened, and they repeatedly killed that leader. It took the wind out from under a movement" (Parker & Mcilwain, 2016). BLM's digital platforms provide everyone with a voice and a leadership position by providing them with the means and ability to send out information or a message about an issue, when they want.

## Contemporary Social Movement's Connections to Historical Trauma

Lim asserts that social movements do not suddenly come about due to one instance and writes how “every moment has a history” (Lim, 2012). To support this point, she describes how the “Arab uprisings were built on years of civil society movements in the region, online and offline” (Lim 2012). She further supports this assertion when she argues that it is necessary to “step back” and go beyond the individual moments, and “start looking at the various processes preceding them” (Lim, 2016). On the BLM website, it states that BLM, at its essence, “is a response to the persistent and historical trauma Black people have endured at the hands of the state” demonstrating how BLM did not come into being based off of one perceived injustice (“Black Lives Matter,” 2017). As mentioned previously, the founders of BLM had prolonged experiences relating to activist work and community organizing around issues such as class, race, immigrant rights, and prison reform, which created common ground among them and spurred them to form BLM (Anderson & Hitlin, 2016; Chuck, 2015; Day, 2015).

Wolfson also looks at social movements and how contemporary social movements are historically rooted (Wolfson, 2014). Wolfson writes “historical and socio-cultural patterns connect different periods of political protest” and “contemporary social movements” are “in dialogue with the history of resistance that has preceded it” (Wolfson, 2014). BLM activist, DeRay Mckesson, agrees with both Lim and Wolfson’s research and explains how BLM is an extension or continuation of the previous black liberation movement. Mckesson describes how BLM now uses digital media to further their movement, which is different than how previous movements disseminated messages and recruited activists by explaining, “We didn’t invent resistance, we didn’t discover injustice...The only thing that is different about this movement is our ability to story tell it and to use the power of storytelling as actual power” (Parker & Mcilwain, 2016).

## Black Lives Matter Defies the Cyber Left

One of Wolfson's critiques of the Cyber Left relates to a lack of focus on leadership training that he finds often occurs with a decentralized movement (Wolfson, 2014). Wolfson contends that with a lack of centralized leadership comes a lack of focus on leadership training, which then causes the movements to favor individuals with more social and cultural capital, akin to 'college degrees' (Wolfson, 2014). It is assumed they have more aptitude to organize than poor working-class individuals or women etc. (Wolfson, 2014). However, even as a decentralized movement, BLM is using its digital platforms to provide leadership training to organizers, activists, and spokespeople, through Channel Black ("Black Lives Matter," 2017). In January of 2017, the Black Lives Matter Global Network committed to a "rigorous approach to diversifying the faces and voices in media" and created Channel Black, which BLM promotes on its website, various social media, and through members who give interviews ("Black Lives Matter," 2017). Channel Black is an immersive training program that prepares the next generation of Black leaders to construct, optimize and implement strategic interventions through the media (Matthews, 2017). As Matthews writes, part of Channel Black's mission is to "train and nurture new leaders so that we can move toward a more just society and ensure that democracy includes all Americans, not just a select few" (Matthews, 2017).

Another critique of the Cyber Left describes how these kinds of movements are often unable to build long-term powerful social-movement organizations and how the organizations often do not ask, "what do we want to achieve?" (Wolfson, 2014). However, once again, BLM is diverting from Wolfson's findings. BLM has coincided with the longest, sustained, national attention to racial issues since the early 1970s and has become a global movement, with a global network, as well as connecting and collaborating with individual state chapters through their different media platforms (Parker & Mcilwain, 2016). Additionally, BLM knows exactly what it wants to achieve. Shanelle Matthews, lead communications strategist for BLM, describes how BLM's communication strategy is "...largely long

term. Shifting culture, changing the way people think and behave toward one another requires significant investment of time” (Bhambhani, 2016). Matthews also describes how BLM has short term goals that they are fulfilling, such as “inserting ourselves and our analysis into current events impacting black communities, participating in meaningful dialogue with our base and allies on social media, and having one-on-one conversations with people who value our political aspirations...” thus tying together their digital activism and physical activism to generate change and conversation (Bhambhani, 2016).

Wolfson believes that current activists who fall under the Cyber Left designation prioritize technology over organizing and developing social relationships, and do not create a connection to local communities (Wolfson, 2014). However, BLM is combatting this by continuing to form more state chapters, reaching out to similar organizations or movements, as well as maintaining a global BLM movement (“Black Lives Matter,” 2017). BLM also organizes in-person events through different media platforms, like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram and invites and incorporates feedback from its members (“Black Lives Matter,” 2017). Matthews explains how they “listen to and solicit feedback from people who are at the center of the oppression we work every day to eradicate. They know best whether or not we’re doing what we need to be doing” and BLM then adjusts its communications, strategy, or actions accordingly (Bhambhani, 2016). This coincides with Sasha Costanza-Chock, when she writes that when it comes to effective appropriation of digital media for social change, rather than looking “to outside digital media professionals or ‘experts’ for advice on how to use ICTs for civic engagement in marginalized communities, it may be more fruitful to begin by listening to voices from those communities themselves” (Costanza-Chock, 2012). By routinely incorporating feedback from its members and those involved in the movement, BLM demonstrates how everyone has a voice and how they keep their relationships among their members and those in the community strong.

## Social Media as a Bridge

On Twitter's 10-year anniversary, the site published a list of the most used hashtags related to social causes, and according to Twitter, #Ferguson was the most used social-issue hashtag, while #blacklivesmatter was third (Anderson & Hitlin, 2016). Mark Anthony Neal, a professor of African and African-American studies at Duke University, said that when BLM added #blacklivesmatter, it attached a brand to black social protests (Chuck, 2015). Since 2013, when #blacklivesmatter first became a hashtag, it has become the "banner under which dozens of different organizations, new and old, made up of millions of individuals, loosely and tightly related, press for change" showcasing the power that digital media platforms have to link and connect individuals with common causes and goals, and thus give them a common platform and voice (Stephen, 2017). BLM currently uses social media in this way, and Matthews explains how BLM "collaborates with lots of organizations that share our vision" and is working on creating a communication infrastructure for the larger Movement for Black Lives, which will incorporate social media among different groups, thus reaching more people and providing additional avenues for organizing physical acts among a larger group of people (Bhambhani, 2016).

Lim writes how social media can "allow individuals and groups to converse over political debates and concerns" and potentially can "transform these conversations into collective resistance" and BLM continually demonstrates the truth to this statement (Lim, 2016). Mckesson, BLM activist, agrees and says that regarding movement building, "We didn't need institutions to do it," because social media could summon people to the streets, coordinate movements in real time, and dispel false media narratives, which is why BLM is so active on sites such as Twitter (Stephen, 2017).

## Social Media as an Organizational Tool for Physical Activism

Mckesson believes that the digital platform and social media interactions that BLM first had were vital to the building of a community which revolves around common experiences and trust (Parker

& Mcilwain, 2016). Trust is necessary for face-to-face interactions, which are necessary to create change. Wolfson agrees that for social movements to effectively utilize social media, trust needs to be present (Wolfson, 2014). Mckesson and other BLM activists, such as Ashley Yates, have stated that they “... trusted each other because of a digital space first and that trust manifested in physical ways, it manifested in offline work” and that these digital forums allowed people to “craft empowering black communities online” (Stephen, 2017; Parker & Mcilwain, 2016). However, the digital platform is not enough to create change by itself, as Wolfson outlines in his book. He concedes that movements have moved online, however, he writes how they are not solely reliant on Facebook, Twitter, or other online services for survival (Wolfson, 2014). Movements still need face-to-face relationships, trust, analysis, and an understanding of local concerns to survive and thrive (Wolfson, 2014). Several BLM activists who were interviewed in the various publications used in this literature review, like Yates, Carruthers, and Mckesson, agree that effective protests combine online and offline actions. Social media allows for storytelling and can create a sense of solidarity (Parker & Mcilwain, 2016). It can raise awareness of what is happening on the ground, but people still need to show up because social media alone is not enough. Tweeting about protests helps raise awareness, but if no one actually protests, change will not happen.

Back in 2012, Lim described how social media are “not simply neutral tools to be used or adopted by social movements, but rather influence how activists form and shape the social movements” (Lim, 2012). She further expands upon that in 2016, when she writes “digital media is not neither a revolutionary driver nor a cause of the protests” (Lim, 2016). Lim explains how digital media does not create collective actions, protests, or social movements, but instead enables different ways of participating in collectivized social activities (Lim, 2016). Wolfson agrees with Lim in that “technological tools are not neutral, as they are produced and reproduced with social intention by those with power...technological tools can be utilized to create social change” (Wolfson, 2014). BLM has

successfully figured out how to exploit today's tools, like social media, in order to incentivize action. BLM helped secure the removal of the Confederate flag from the South Carolina capitol building; it helped pressure the federal government to investigate police practices in Ferguson and Baltimore; and it has successfully pushed Democratic presidential contenders to come forward with policy proposals on the issues that specifically concern black people in America (Stephen, 2017).

### Triggers of Social Movements

Lim describes how social movements are often 'triggered' and for protests to break out in certain places at certain moments, they need triggers, which are often local events, highly symbolic, and visually dramatic (Lim, 2012). Regarding BLM, there have been numerous local events or triggers. Specifically, deaths of black individuals, often at the hands of law enforcement. BLM disseminates information about these events via their digital network, which helps to keep the movement alive and continue the conversation surrounding the issues ("Black Lives Matter," 2017). BLM members and activists will send tweets with messages or pictures, sometimes video, which as BLM activist Charlene Carruthers says, "is different from just reading about something" (Parker & Mcilwain, 2016). For example, police violence against African-Americans have been captured on film and the dissemination of the videos via various platforms, drew attention to the brutal deaths of Eric Garner, Philando Castile, Alfred Olango, Paul O'Neal, and Keith Lamont Scott, which in turn incentivized people to action (Parker & Mcilwain, 2016). Social networks help BLM disseminate its message and organize actions for people to take. Sreberny also contends that triggers are necessary and writes that "social networks are crucial for mobilization, but injustices that provoke shared resentment and anger are often necessary to overcome barriers of fear and trigger actual participation in collective action and social movements" (Sreberny, 2011). As outlined in the article, the death of Khaled Said as a martyr was such a trigger for the Egyptian uprisings, as were the 'stolen votes' during the 2009 election in Iran (Sreberny, 2011). For



BLM, it was the communal anger felt and shared among various mediums and platforms towards the acquittal of Zimmerman after Trayvon Martin's death, and the subsequent deaths of black individuals by law enforcement that triggered actual participation in collective action.

### Digital Media Fostering Collective Action

Digital media provided a forum for individuals to share their anger toward the verdict and other events that took place, and by using BLM as a hashtag, linked individuals with common feelings. Digital media, “especially social media, facilitate exchanges among citizens, enabling them to collectivize around shared grievances rooted in long-term conditions as well as short-term causes” (Lim, 2016). This ties into what Lim discussed when she wrote that digital media works to create the identification necessary for collective action participation because identification grows out of communication between individuals (Lim, 2012). BLM has used its media platforms to foster and promote collective action, and attribute successes like ousting “anti-Black politicians” and winning “critical legislation to benefit Black lives,” to the movement and relationship building that has come about due to the connectedness of the Black Lives Matter network (“Black Lives Matter,” 2017).

### Framing

Lim explains how social movements need to go through ‘framing,’ which refers to the way that meaning is constructed to legitimize collective activities and actions (Lim, 2016). This process also helps foster a collective identity by allowing shared grievances to emerge through the framing process, which is instrumental to social movement mobilization (Lim, 2016). Once this is done, digital media is used to disseminate the resistance and the narratives that the activists create, which are often generated symbols and icons that resonate with the larger public (Lim, 2016). For example, the creation of an injustice frame “emboldens the sense of injustice, evokes shared emotion and rage, incites public outcry,

and mobilizes antagonism against the common enemy” (Lim, 2016). In Tunisia, the framing process took place when activists transformed Muhammed Bouazizi, a poor, desperate street vendor, into a symbolic figure of the Tunisian uprisings (Lim, 2016). Bouazizi was ‘framed’ as an unemployed university graduate who self-immolated himself after being publicly humiliated by a female police officer (Lim, 2016). This crafted a story that culturally and politically resonated with the entire population and incited public outrage against President Ben Ali (Lim, 2016).

BLM uses its digital platforms to create a ‘frame’ of injustice centered, at first, on police brutality, which resonated with the black community and incited public outrage against law enforcement and the justice system. The first notable framing was when George Zimmerman was acquitted in the shooting death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, which is also where the BLM hashtag came from. Mainstream media attempted to depict him one way, using certain images with negative connotations, while BLM activists framed him as a 17-year-old child, out to get a snack. This occurred again when Michael Brown was killed. When Brown was killed, the initial photo selected depicted him in a negative light. Half his face was in shadow, he was not smiling, and he was making a V sign, widely interpreted as a gang sign (Day, 2015). There were other pictures to choose from, such as one of Brown as a “chubby-cheeked teenager in headphones and a Varsity jacket,” but these were believed to have been intentionally disregarded (Day, 2015). This picture is the one which BLM activists began posting on social media in order to garner support, as well as to legitimize why BLM needed to exist. In reaction to this disparity, thousands of people posted contrasting images of themselves on Twitter, and asked which would be chosen if they became the subject of a news report under the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown (Day, 2015). BLM framed the deaths of several Black individuals, like Eric Garner, Philando Castile, Alfred Olango, and Paul O’Neal, all of whom were killed by law enforcement, using social media to describe them as fathers, brothers, sons, and hard-working individuals who were murdered by law enforcement officials who used unnecessary force (Anderson & Hitlin, 2016).

## Social Media Showing Patterns

Before social media, people had a more difficult time seeing patterns in incidents. For example, the public might have been more likely to perceive a string of police shootings as isolated events, but as Mckesson has said, hashtags can serve as a kind of ‘paperclip’ that links events together and enables individuals to see a pattern (Parker & Mcilwain, 2016). Travis Gosa, an assistant professor of Africana studies at Cornell University, explained that "Before the hashtag, you knew these things were occurring, but you thought it was just an isolated event...It's really showed people that there is a continued pattern of segregation and racism all around the country"(Chuck, 2015). Another professor, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, a professor in African American studies at Princeton University, agreed with these findings and explained how "Before, these incidents were depicted as isolated and individual. Social media platforms have shown how they are part of a generalized and pervasive pattern of police abuse"(Safdar, 2016). BLM continually uses hashtags to link events and injustices together, to draw attention to the patterns, to advocate for change, and to encourage protests and actions.

## Conclusion

In the age of Web 2.0 and the 21<sup>st</sup> century, social media and digital platforms are an integral part of everyday life. They continue to connect individuals, communities, and causes on a global scale. Everything is more interconnected now than ever before and harnessing social media for social change is a step that social movements need to take in order to create sustainable movements that can transition into collective action. Now, racism in America has ignited a hashtag that allows residents all over the world to view, connect with, and comment on a cause or issue. Social media highlights and expands on previously isolated, disconnected issues that affect everyone everywhere. Social media allows social movements to be felt and seen and joined by individuals all over the world. BLM’s use of social media

to create collective action can be analyzed through the work of notable scholars like Todd Wolfson, Sasha Costanza-Chock, and Merlyna Lim, and will allow for one to better understand how BLM uses it effectively. As evidenced by its continual growth and recognition, BLM is effectively utilizing its digital platforms to further its social movement and to create actual change by disseminating information and its message, which in turn, works to organize physical events such as protests and collective action that force people who otherwise may not be involved or knowledgeable about such issues, to pay attention.

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