

# The Impact of Social Media on Social Activism

## Taking Black Lives Matter on Twitter as an Example

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### ABSTRACT

The emerge of social media like Twitter takes the traditional storytelling to a new level. The existence of it impacts greatly on various social movements, including Black Lives Matter. It changes how the movement is created, distributed and discussed. This research, through methods of specific case studies and secondary data research, focuses on these changes by specifically studying the case of how Twitter's distinctive features, functions and algorithms are involved in Black Lives Matter. The result of the study indicates that Twitter's features and algorithms changed the way media and individual users behave. It impacts on characteristics of the news being distributed, enlarges mass discussion of these information, and gives more chances for individuals to speak out. Accordingly, all of these aspects significantly stimulated, strengthened and sped up the formation of the Black Lives Matter movement.

**Keywords:** Black Lives Matter, Twitter, Social media, Algorithms

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Black Lives Matter is a civil movement originally started to protest against police brutality on African Americans. The movement was started online after the case of shooting of Trayvon Martin in 2013. Social Media, like Twitter, plays a significant part on this movement throughout the whole process. From the report of the news and information, to the actual movement online and offline, Twitter helps to drive this movement to get bigger and bigger. Thus, it is important to study why and how social media platforms can have such an impact on these social movements. In several previous researches, the focuses were on the hashtag use of #BlackLivesMatter on Twitter and the data collection of different categories on twitter during the happening of the movement, without any relevant research on the reason of this kind of event. In this way, this essay aims to explore and summarize how social media, in particularly Twitter, influences the Black Lives Matter social movement. The research itself will focus on different aspects such as the functions and the algorithms of Twitter and how these aspects influence the movement respectively. The research is expected to help explore the reasons why social media can have a massive impact on social movements, and also help understand what is driving these movements growing significantly online. It would also help the users to be mindful of how

their behavior is being greatly affected by social media, as well as help them to understand how they can form more effective and massive discussions on these platforms.

## 2. OVERVIEW OF TWITTER

### 2.1 The advantages of Twitter

From Trayvon Martin in 2012 to Alton Sterling in 2016, then to George Floyd in 2020, the death of African Americans in the U.S is usually what evokes the discussion of Black Lives Matter. News plays a significant role in the early stage. They help to spread the news of these incidents, and they later on develop into further discussion online and offline. Twitter is changing the news, including in this case of Black Lives Matter movement where the special characteristics of news on Twitter helps to deliver the news in a different way.

One of the most significant changes that Twitter has on news is the amount of news and information that is able to be posted on Twitter. Journalists are now having more power on what to be posted on Twitter as the amount is unlimited, comparing to traditional media like newspaper which may only publish daily [2].

An important point to be noted on how Twitter gives the journalists more power is that Twitter gives

journalists a platform that they can write and post their own stories. Journalists are establishing their own brand by tweeting and reporting with accounts bearing their own name. Besides, twitter gives journalists the opportunity of having this freelance gigs. This in part greatly increase the source of the related news as news are not just coming from the news agency or organization, but also they are from individual journalists and reporters.

**2.2 Features of Twitter**

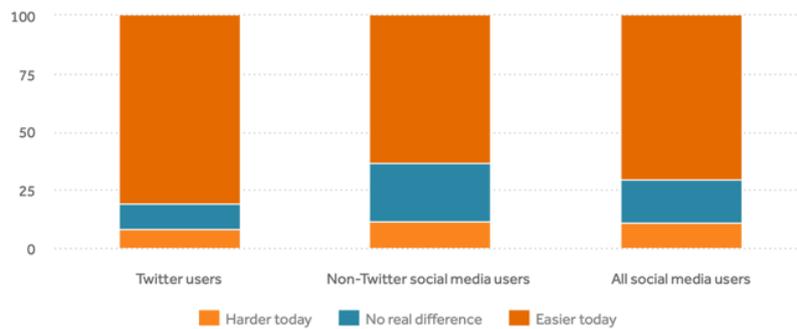
Twitter also surpassed traditional media with more immediacy. Immediacy is an important feature of news on Twitter. As the tweets can post real-time news, there won't be much delay between the time of an event happening and the time users receive information about the event.

Because of the threshold of news release which is gradually become lower, the news media have to

improve the immediacy of news reports. The main structure of news on twitter is "headline + abstract." [9] The main information is not in the tweet, instead, it is usually given a link to the main article. This structure transmits news information to the user faster than the traditional media, as the user does not need to take much time to receive and digest the information.

It is important to notice that during Twitter's lightning quick update, there could actually be "unverified tweets filtered by journalists." [6] Compared to traditional media like newspaper and television broadcast, Twitter focuses on distributing information in the quickest way. The point is the platform's emphasis on getting information fast rather than getting it right. From a research done by the American Press Institute, it is clear to see that these features of Twitter help the users to catch up on news easier than those without Twitter [8].

**Ease of keeping up with news compared to 5 years ago**



**Figure 1** Ease of keeping up with news compared to 5 years ago

**3. THE FUNCTION OF TWITTER**

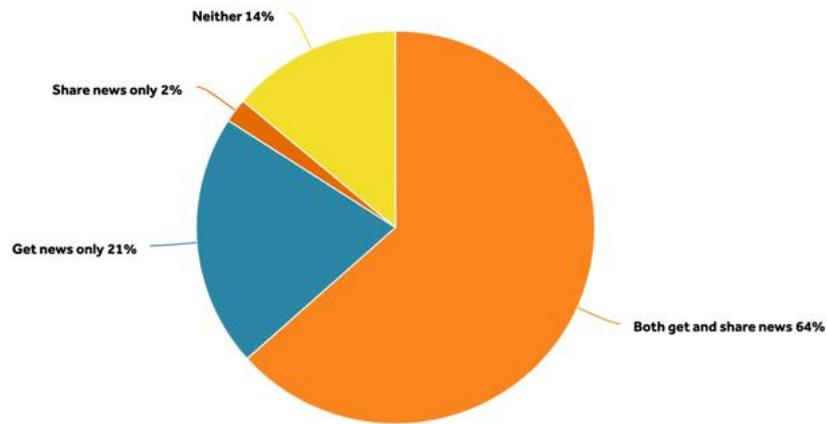
Twitter not only changes the way news agency is able to distribute news, it also have a great impact on how social media change audience's action after they view the news and information. In a way it largely stimulate the attention and awareness in the case of Black Lives Matter.

**3.1 Like, Comment, Retweet and Tweet**

There are three basic ways of how a twitter user can interact with the tweets—like, comment and retweet.

These functions give the users chances to spread and also give their own opinions. For instance, they can express their supports on a post by like or leave a comment, or they are also able to retweet a post to spread the message. This can be seen from a research done by American Press Institute [8]. In figure 2, it is found that there are about 64% of the users both getting and sharing news on the platform. This, in turn, speeds up the spread of the news and also the discussion of it.

## Do Twitter users get or share news on the platform?



**Figure 2** The rate of Twitter users getting or sharing news on the platform

However, one of the most important aspects of spreading message is how users are becoming authors on Twitter. They have the freedom and are able to share their own ideas and thoughts on Twitter. During that process, the users have the choice of being anonymous, and the public is not able to know the person behind that post. That’s why the platform is often being described as a “safe space” and also “a type of public commons for free speech” when involving these kinds of protests. This opportunity for anonymous messaging can provide individual users in repressive environments with a safe space to promote dissent. While the discussion is increasing, the people involved are gradually being bounded together and being recognized as a group with collective effort, even though this group is very unsteady and volatile [3].

Normal user’s post plays a huge role in this movement. In the case of George Floyd’s death, Darnella Frazier’s 10 minute video showing Derek Chauvin pressing his knee on George Floyd’s neck shocked the whole Internet.

### 3.2 Post with Hashtag

Twitter is a platform that can create “weak ties” that draw together protesters with different identities, but who come together against a common enemy [4]. One of the ways that it can do it is by using hashtags.

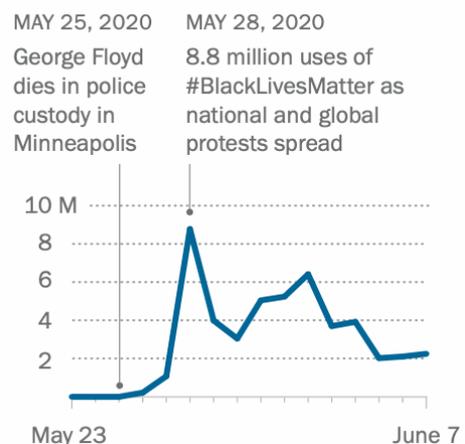
The same as the name of the movement, the tag #BlackLivesMatter was originally created by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi in response to the killing of African American teenager Trayvon Martin in 2012, the purpose of which is to stop the racism and violence against the African American [5].

The user is able to use the hashtag on a tweet, and it will be a part of the tweets of that hashtag. The idea is to

tag the tweets in order to identify the topic of them. Therefore, when searching, Twitter can group and show the results that include this hashtag. Notably, using a hashtag right now is not as basic as simply grouping, but it also turns into a movement.

The key of making this a movement is the amount of people actually using this hashtag. From a research done on the use of hashtag after the murder of George Floyd. It is seen that 8.8 million tweets include the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter is used within the week after the event happened [7].

Just as mentioned above, when the hashtag is used in a large margin, a single tag starts to become a movement and protest, and using it on Twitter becomes a way of online protesting or marching.



**Figure 3** Change of number of tweets compared to the events

#### 4. THE IMPACT OF THE TWITTER ALGORITHM ON USERS

Social media all has its own algorithms to manage the distribution of information to different users. In the mainstream social media platforms, Facebook has the Affinity, Weight, Decay formula. Affinity analyzes the interaction between content creator and audience. Weight analyzes the audience’s engagement on the information by measuring amount of likes, comments and repost, while decay measures the time.

In a similar way, Twitter’s timeline algorithm works to get the audience to see the message. It could be based on several dimensions, including the prominence of the creator, recency of an event, rich media, relationship between users, and user behavior.

Prominence of the creator can be seen on what user’s content Twitter would be more likely to distribute to other users, which more often is the verified users such as news agency. With the twitter storm of related news such as the case of Alton Sterling or George Floyd delivered by multiple news account, users are going to get large amount of information at the same period of time.

Recency can be easily seen in this case. It is not just about the recency of the post, but also the recency of a specific event linked to the activism. From a research done by Pew Research Center from 2015 to 2016, it is able to see the increase of the amount of each hashtag use compared to the recent events.

The increase of #BlackLivesMatter posts started from the event that a 37-year-old black man Alton Sterling was killed by the police on July 5. The research shows an increase of related posts surpassed 0.2 million posts within the day. Until the event of killing of Philando Castile happened on the day after, the number of posts drastically increase to over 1 million on July 8 [7]. It is also notable that after events of the Dallas shooting and Baton Rouge shooting which involves 8 police officers killed in total, the #BlackLivesMatter posts started to show a decrease trend.

According the data, Twitter’s user behavior algorithm also shows a biased distribution of related information to related user groups or the related race in this case.

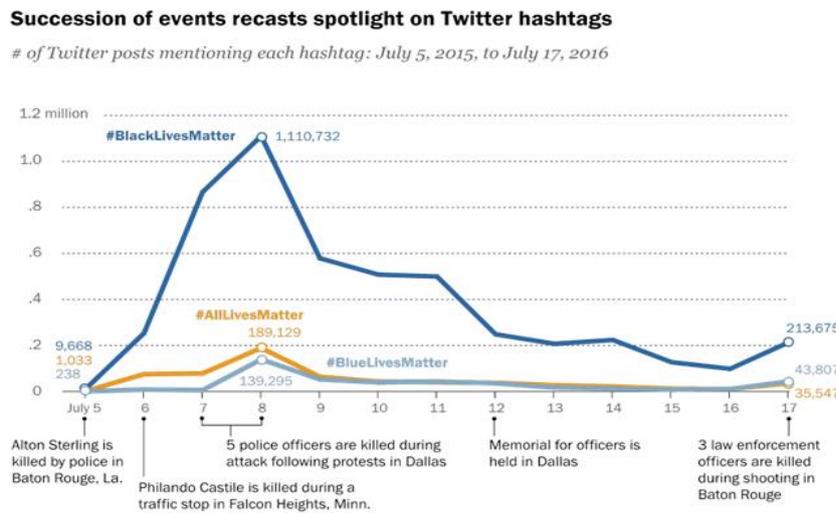


Figure 4 Succession of events recasts spotlight on Twitter hashtag

According to the figure 5, 6% of the white social media users have seen most of the posts about race. In comparison, there are 24% of black users have seen large amounts of posts about race. There are 68% of the black users have seen some or most posts that are about race related topics, while only 35% of white users have seen these posts. What can be deduced is how Twitter’s algorithm distributes more posts including information of African American Activism to the Black social media community.

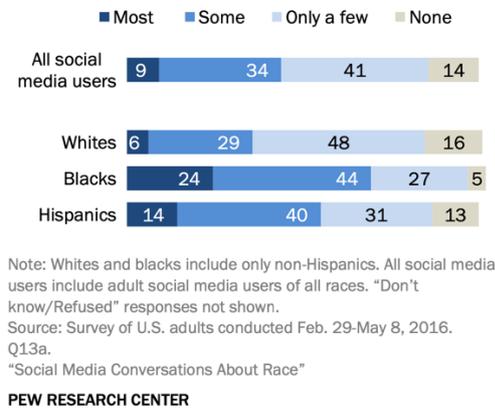
Black social media users are easier to get access to the information about the activism than other racial group users. This increasingly large amount of

information about race would presumably stimulate the growth of the #BlackLivesMatter movement around the African American community and beyond.

What can be concluded from the research is that, after specific events happens and information of the events are posted on Twitter, the Twitter algorithm can help to trigger and stimulate the discussion of it by giving out more related information to the Black social media users.

**Black social media users are much more likely than whites to see posts about race**

*% of social media users who say that \_\_\_\_ of the posts they see on social networking sites are about race or race relations*



**Figure 5** Likelihood of different racial groups to see posts about race

**5. CONCLUSION**

Twitter, as a platform that dominates the social media, plays a huge part in Black Lives Matter movement. What it brings is not just a hashtag. From the beginning when the news spread out, to the discussion and the people starting to speak out later on, it is certain that the existence of twitter has all influenced a lot on this movement. The functions and design that Twitter provides changed how the news works, making it faster to distribute the news to large amounts of users. In addition, Twitter speeds up and stimulates the break out of the discussion and movement Black Lives Matter. More importantly, with the in-built algorithms, Twitter stimulates the related topic and movement with specific targets. For the future, with Twitter and other social media continuously improving its functions and user experience to make it more interactive, the public will react more quickly to these spontaneous events. At the same time, these discussions will become larger and individual voices will be heard more easily. For now, the existing research focuses on the entire movement of Black Lives Matter which has been existed for almost 10 years. There is room for a more focused and detailed research in the future, such as on one specific event that triggered the mass discussion, for example, the case of Alton Aterling in 2016 or George Floyd in 2020.

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