

Social Media, Mobilization, and Polarization in the Context of Race

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Social movements across the US have been channels for change. For example, the Abolitionist Movement that began in the 1800s ended slavery, the Women's Rights Movement is still underway, and the Labor Movement produced laws on the 40-hour work week as well as minimum wages (Lamar University). Today, "social movements, protest actions and, more generally, political organizations unaligned with major political parties or trade unions have become a permanent component of Western democracies" (Della Porta, 2). Social movements within the context of this paper will be "how ideas, individuals, events, and organizations are linked to each other in broader processes of collective actions, with some continuity over time," as Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani explain in their book *Social Movements: An Introduction*.

The topic of race related movements and activism garnered greater attention in 2020, due in large measure to the widespread reporting of the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the hands of police. Participation in protests increased as support for the Black Lives Matter movement and anti-police brutality demonstrations increased throughout the country. The increase and pace of protests have been fostered by the ubiquitous nature of smart technology and related social media channels where photo, video and written communication are quickly disseminated by individuals. Previous movements had been limited to media interest, being captured primarily through photos and accounts of journalists, or through organizing. For example, lynchings across the South in the early 20th century remained publicized while in 1965 the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma reached the general population because ABC News interrupted a prime-time broadcast of "Judgement and Nuremberg" which 48 million

people were estimated to have been watching (Bodroghkozy). The irony between the prime time show and the interruption became readily apparent and promoted a solidarity with the marchers, as individual citizens mobilized across racial groups to join the protesters.

The origins of the struggle for racial equality have their origins in slavery and colonialism, but those that directly mirror today's race related movements can be traced back to three waves starting in 1919. In the second decade of the 20th century, clashes erupted throughout the country due to the combination of struggles from the war, lack of jobs for African Americans, and anti-immigrant sentiment due to the Spanish Flu. This wave included white mobs torching Tulsa's black business district which left nearly all the city's black population homeless. Throughout this first wave in the 1920s and 1930s, many civil rights organizations were established, including the expansion of the National Association for Advancement of Colored People (Sugre, 2020). The second wave was fueled by "the hypocrisy of racism in a country that was fighting a world war for democracy" (Sugre, 2020) and unleashed intense black political organizing and white opposition. Those that feared that African Americans would increase competition for jobs attacked them and destroyed black majority neighborhoods. The third wave grew out of several organizing movements against racial segregation in employment, housing, transportation, and commerce, and is identified with Martin Luther King, Jr. marching in 1963 to demand desegregation. Protests and unrests continued beyond the third wave but involved more isolated events rather than a nationwide movement. In 2020, with several shootings of African Americans, a pandemic, significant levels of unemployment, and an election, protests erupted across the country (Sugre, 2020). But the nature of these protests weren't like the previous waves – they also consisted of a digital component that allowed millions of people to interact from their devices. Specifically, social media increased political

engagement. According to the Pew Research Center (2009) “half of Americans ...[were engaged] in some form of political or social-minded activity on social media” in 2018.

This paper will explore how the digital age, and the subsequent rise of various social media channels, affected social movements related to race. What this paper will not do is explain the history and how social media has been used for race related activism. *It will attempt to create a methodology on how virtual mobilization can be explored or tracked after linking and explaining it with polarization and how the value-action gap between social media activism and real-life activism (protests, movements) can be measured.* This can enable us to answer the question whether new technology is really enhancing social justice or providing a non-participatory channel for emotional satisfaction. Sections that follow will cover social media, polarization due to social media, a theoretical model to explore virtual mobilization and the value-action gap, and a conclusion that social media, while it can be a virtual mobilization tool, may be a limiting tool instead of promoting meaningful engagement.

Social Media

Social media was derived out of the digital age through a process to enhance overall communication between individuals. In the 1970s – 1980s, the Bulletin Board System (BBS), was created in order to share information between friends through a dial up modem. Subsequently, AOL was started in 1985 and became one of the largest groups on the internet, reaching “30 million years by 2000”. It introduced a mail suite as well as a messenger service to its users. As web designing tools such as HTML developed, tools such as AOL messenger were enhanced, and new tools such as Blackboard and Blogger were created. In regard to political action related to blogs, “political blogs can exert the same influential role, if not more, than blogs on other topics, by also providing an additional cognitive bias which connects online

environments with the offline, real world” (Sánchez-Villar, J, 110) which shows that there is a connection between blog usage and political involvement and activism.

As the internet developed, so did tools to enhance communication. Facebook, initially a dating site, was created by Mark Zuckerberg and friends so users could share status updates, photos, links, and videos to friends and even the public. It was actively used in the 2008 US elections – for the first-time campaigns could market themselves to users on the web at such a large scale. According to Pew Research “three quarters of internet users went online during the 2008 election to take part in, or get news and information about the 2008 campaign” (Smith). The same Pew article explained that politically active internet users, especially younger voters, were moving away from news sites with no point of view, to sites that match their political view.

Tools such as Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn, TikTok, and others have been developed to distribute user content using algorithms. User actions are recorded by the platform’s algorithms to indicate user preferences by making predictions on what content the user might like based on other user’s behaviors. This maximizes the chance of the user engaging with future content – the more the user engages with the platform the better the algorithm will predict content further into the future (Kim, 2017). Moreover, user’s interactions with advertising can also allow advertisers to target what kinds of users view their content. Both scenarios of regular content engagement and advertising engagement have had serious consequences and changed how individuals interact with issues surrounding race and social movements over the past decade.

Polarization

Because algorithms are used to engage users of social media, the flow of news “is not selected by the information value but rather by popularity, by ‘likes’” (Sirbu, 2), as opposed to traditional media such as radio, general TV, and newspapers. A user’s original narrative will only

be solidified on the social media platform, creating a chain reaction in which the user likes, what they want to see, and the platform shows the user what they like to see. Even share functions mostly lead to those with similar views (friends, coworkers, family) to see the shared content in the first place, leading to *echo chambers* of misinformation that are highly resistant to correction. Moreover, users tend to “aggregate in communities of interest, which causes reinforcement and fosters confirmation bias, segregation, and polarization. This comes at the expense of the quality of the information and leads to proliferation of biased narratives fomented by unsubstantiated rumors, mistrust, and paranoia” (Vicario, 558).

This polarization has spilled over to many political issues in the wake of the 2020 presidential election. As Ashley Jardina, a political scientist at Duke University shared in a media briefing, “for many mainstream white Americans tired of being responsible for anti-racism their strategy was to talk about violence and upheaval as if the protests were the problem not as if the protests were a response to the problem.” This shows one side protesting the problems themselves, while the other side, threatened by the blame it is receiving, arguing that the protestors should not be protesting at all. Connecting this to the context of this paper, Nobel laureates Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo explained the connection of political polarization and social networks in their book *Good Economics for Hard Times* – “Democrats pass on information produced by Democratic candidates, and Republicans do the same for Republicans.” (Banerjee and Duflo, 143) They explained four concerns related to the internet and social media: (1) “producing fake news is of course very cheap and very rewarding economically since, unconstrained by reality, it is easy to serve to your readership exactly what they want to read” (Banerjee and Duflo, 146), (2) the internet allows endless repetition, through likes and shares. (3) the internet encouraged directness and abbreviation, which contributes to the

erosion of the norms of civic discourse, and (4) the internet has automatic customization in which users don't even have to choose what they consume. In the same section the authors go on to explain that democracy becomes less meaningful for sub-groups that are polarized, since they vote based on their sub-groups and not necessarily their priorities. Therefore, according to them, "there is an expanding circle of violence – against blacks, women, and Jews in the United States" (Banerjee and Duflo, 148). Naturally, the polarization introduces volatility in issues related to race causing those on one side to protest while those on the other side blame the protesters instead of opening up to the issues that are causing the protests to happen in the first place.

Virtual Mobilization

Virtual mobilization is the act of organizing online, whether it is a collective of people creating groups or multiple people posting about an issue individually. In a paper written by Nils Gustafsson and Mattias Wahlstrom, "instead of enrolling in political parties and other formal organizations, citizens are now to a greater extent canalizing their engagement through various types of protest, such as boycotts and buycotts, civil disobedience, internet activism and through the means of informal networks" (Gustafsson, 2). Virtual mobilization has brought changes in communities. This finding was supported by Frontiers in Education with respect to a test refusal movement organized its members who "engaged in protest in physical space (through personal relationships, local events and organizations, and traditional forms of protest) as well as virtual space (through social media, electronic sharing of information, online petitions and campaigns, and other virtual tactics)" (McKeon12). Social media is used to recruit members, spread information, and organize in-person types of protest. However, the same study also concluded that in-person mobilization was not even across affluent and non-affluent districts as testing refusal was high in affluent districts and low in poor districts. Explanation of the difference

included poor parents' lack of time and inherent sense of marginalization. Specific to the latter, they perceived that their ideas were more likely to be suppressed by the affluent. The lack of inclusion and bias in favor of those having means for participation: access to internet, and availability of time that the affluent had, created a polarization on the issue based on socio-economic stratification, which given the racial history of the United States equated to racial marginalization as well.

Could the value action-gap observed between the affluent and non-affluent districts also be related to the polarization effect of social media? If parties to an issue only hear their own perspective (similar to how the affluent districts were shown what they would act on, but the non-affluent communities would see a completely different issue) due to both explicit and algorithmic opt-out of other viewpoints, is social media destined to only be a tool that promotes polarization? From this perspective, since more sub-communities based on race and wealth will be shown what they want to see, will mass protests fostered by social media mimic this polarization on a greater scale? This begs the question outside the scope of this paper – *if virtual mobilization is so uneven across different districts, would a nationwide virtual mobilization on any issue polarize the country as a whole, and ultimately make every issue a political issue, since politics is also polarized because of social media?*

A Theoretical Model

To measure whether virtually mobilizing is effective (if it leads to in-person activism) or not and explore if it will polarize the country further, a viable method of measuring virtual movement participation needs to exist. The assessment would be different across platforms, since many user's interactions can be private and only seen within their friend groups. What is available publicly can be used to gauge the total level of participation in a virtual movement – it

is safe to assume that the ratio between private and public posts on any given topic will be around the same across all topics. An Application Programming Interface (API) is a tool that allows different applications to interact with each other. Using a social media's publicly available API, or through external applications that track the change in hashtag trends between dates, trends in public virtual engagement can be tracked. To determine which social movements are popular, and on the rise, it would be important to determine the most popular terms on the platforms at that given week. To access a particular topic's rise in general on the internet, however, Google's Google Trends tool can be used.

The virtual mobilization that is being explored, such as the Black Lives Matter Movement, must be compared to real life actions. Real life public actions by a collective of people are generally reflected better on non-social media related news sources – a rise in the mention of the topic within those websites or that media organization's other news sources (such as newspapers) would indicate that the topic is not only being mentioned virtually but also in real life. Specific actions, such as protests or government actions, as well as their significance can be traced within news websites and newspapers to collect more information on real life actions. One problem that arises with this method is a feedback loop: virtual mobilization measures may be more inflated by the real-life events happening around that topic. To explore deeper into whether any change is being made or not due to the virtual mobilization requires intervention of local governments, the federal government, politicians, community leaders, business-leaders. Governments can and have the best position to track the relationship between social media communication, virtual mobilization and real-life activism. The discussion on ethics related to government data collection and the ability to silence protests exists but is beyond the scope of this paper.

The model of evaluation proposed here is based on an assessment between social media participation and customer frequency at a store. In an empirical study published in *Information Systems Research* (Rishika), a treatment group composed of customers who received social media outreach and a control group composed of customers that did not were evaluated to determine the effect of social media on customer behavior. The results indicated that mean frequency of visits were much higher for the treatment group, those that did participate on social media (Rishika). Real-life actions resulting from virtual mobilization, and data/estimates on protest participation, can be compared to in a similar way.

However, there is also a competing rationale for the relationship between observed social media activity and protests. Is it possible that social media could be used as a substitute for action? If protest participation does not change between the control group and treatment group, or even decreases, there is an indication of social media being used as such. There are also other theories that suggest so. In explaining social media usage as performance spaces, Abigail De Kosnik argues in her paper that people use social media to be seen and heard (Abigail, 30). Because social media is about performance to be seen or heard, there may not be an observable in-person reaction. Similarly, Erika Pearson, a media, film, and communication researcher shares the perspective that a metaphorical wall separating private and public life in social media is made of glass and see-through, echoing that intimate moments would appear more exposed but large-scale events would appear more intimate. The latter is of concern here – if users are seeing larger issues as more intimate on social media while also presenting themselves on platforms just to be seen and known in society, there is no evidence that those users will present their actual “selves” in the same way, and attend protests, and other activities that demonstrate commitment.

This evidence shows that social media might be being used as a substitute for action, and the question of how it is valued in order to bring about positive change has to be explored further.

A question that arises here is how can we measure society's polarization exacerbated by virtual mobilization? One way is to track the counts of hashtags or other parameters from the opposite point of view during the same timespan as the dominating engagement. If there is massive real-life mobilization such as the racial justice protests in 2020, individual district by district behavior can be explored and compared with other issues or topics in which social media has led to polarization, such as politics (majority party voted for, etc.), but including individual political alignment in models.

Conclusion

Social media has increased public knowledge of events but the perspective of that knowledge is dependent on the disseminating agent. Social media has polarized information, and this phenomenon has had an impact on events that happen outside of social media platforms, such as public policy. The accuracy and bias of social media are an issue that provides any viewer the opportunity to discount what is shared on its various platforms, as is captured in the newly coined term "fake news."

Though it is possible that social media could be used as a social mobilization tool, both the questioning of the informational validity compounded by the opt out feature of the platform may limit involvement. In addition, the satisfaction gained from social media participation by those aligned to the need for action has potential to further limit needed social involvement. Individuals could simply equate their participation/action to the social media platform and not take any further action on an issue. As a result, social media may be limiting rather than promoting meaningful engagement. There is a need to have an ongoing assessment of social

media to better understand how it may be affecting social norms, and more specifically racial issues that still strain various relationships between different communities and stakeholders.

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