

# *the* POWER *of* SOCIAL MEDIA

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# CHAPTER ONE

## Raising Awareness

In May 2020 George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, died after a Minneapolis police officer knelt on his neck for nearly nine minutes during an arrest. A viral video of Floyd's death, taken by a bystander, touched off the largest protest movement in American history. Wherever people gathered, they held signs with the phrase *Black Lives Matter*. Although the phrase speaks for itself, its origins can be traced to social media. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) hashtag motivated social justice protesters who saw it on Twitter and Facebook. Millions rallied under the BLM banner to protest police killings in Kentucky, Colorado, Georgia, California, New York, and other states. And the movement quickly spread to nations throughout the world; BLM signs could be seen in the hands of protesters in Asia, South America, Africa, and the Middle East.

Black Lives Matter might be one of the best examples of social media being used to organize protests and inspire positive change. The movement began as a simple hashtag after the killing of a young Black man in Sanford, Florida. In 2011, seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by

George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch coordinator. Zimmerman was acquitted of murder in 2013. Community activist Alicia Garza learned of Zimmerman's acquittal while watching the news in a bar in Oakland, California. Garza said she felt like she had been punched in the gut, and later, woke up crying in the middle of the night. Garza channeled her pain into what she called a love note to Black people: "Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter. Black Lives Matter."<sup>6</sup> Garza posted her love letter on Facebook, and it attracted immediate attention. In Southern California one of Garza's close friends, Patrisse Cullors, shared the message and included a hashtag: *#BlackLivesMatter*. In New York City another friend, immigration rights organizer Opal Tometi, called Garza and offered to create a social media platform called Black Lives Matter that would utilize the slogan to launch a new civil rights movement.

In 2014 the phrase *Black Lives Matter* rose to prominence when a White police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, shot a young Black man named Michael Brown. Images of Brown's body lying in the street for more than four hours in the summer heat quickly went viral on Twitter. BLM hashtags, including *#HandsUpDontShoot* and *#NoJusticeNoPeace*, drove protesters into the streets. One of the most popular slogans, *Black Lives Matter*, was seen on dozens of protest signs. Few people had seen or heard that expression at the time, but in a matter of weeks the phrase provided a unifying message wherever social justice protests were held.

## From Facebook to the Streets

Although some changes were instituted after the Ferguson protests, Black people were still too often the victims of police shootings. And social media continued to play an important role in highlighting these tragedies. In July 2016 a police officer shot and killed a thirty-two-year-old Black man named Philando Castile in the St. Paul, Minnesota, suburb of Falcon Heights. Castile was accompanied by his girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds, who livestreamed the en-

counter on Facebook. The graphic video shows Castile slumped in the car, dying from chest wounds. Reynolds later explained why she livestreamed the event. “I did it so that the world knows that these police are not here to protect and serve us,” she claimed. “They are here to assassinate us. They are here to kill us because we are black.”<sup>7</sup>

The Facebook post triggered large local protests within hours. Black Lives Matter activists and others throughout the country took to social media to protest Castile’s shooting. Within days, 112 demonstrations were held in eighty-eight American cities. In Oakland, over one thousand protesters shut down Interstate 880 for several hours. In Minneapolis, activists blocked Interstate 94.

The BLM movement celebrated its fifth anniversary in 2018. By that time the BLM hashtag had been used 30 million times on Twitter alone. And the ongoing protests created a new generation of activists who utilized social media to call attention to ongoing racial injustice and bring about change. After Floyd’s killing, teenage organizers spearheaded protests across the United States and in countries throughout the world. Singer Alicia Keys credits the



*On March 12, 2015, marchers take to the streets to protest the police killing of Tony Robinson, a young Black man. Their Black Lives Matter banner references the now-famous movement, then just two years old.*

“Imagine if Martin Luther King and Malcolm X had Instagram. It would have been a whole other power network.”<sup>8</sup>

—Alicia Keys, singer

deft use of social media for BLM’s success. “Imagine if Martin Luther King and Malcolm X had Instagram. It would have been a whole other power network,”<sup>8</sup> she notes.

This new power network seemed to have changed public opinion about BLM nearly overnight.

In a 2016 Pew poll of US voters, 43 percent of Americans said they supported the movement, and 18 percent said they strongly supported it. After the 2020 Floyd protests, Pew reported that 67 percent of Americans said they supported BLM, and the number of those who strongly supported it more than doubled. Support for BLM trended downward to around 55 percent in 2021. But the BLM hashtag remains active and is used by organizers to get out the vote, direct activists to lobby politicians, and organize protests whenever necessary. And the phrase *Black Lives Matter* has become embedded in American culture, appearing on bumper stickers, T-shirts, and yards signs years after the Floyd protests.

## Changing the Conversation on Climate

In 2020 Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg said the BLM protests and the climate action movement were both driven by the same forces: “There are signs of change, of awakening. . . . The world has passed a social tipping point where it becomes impossible to look away. We cannot keep sweep-

ing these things under the carpet, these injustices. People are starting to find their voice, to sort of understand that they can actually have an impact.”<sup>9</sup>

Thunberg found her voice through the use of social media in 2018, when she was a fifteen-year-old student. She had little interest

“People are starting to find their voice, to sort of understand that they can actually have an impact.”<sup>9</sup>

—Greta Thunberg, climate activist

in the environmental movement until she discovered a climate justice group called Zero Hour on Instagram. The group is dedicated to slowing climate change while focusing on environmental justice for poor people who experience the greatest harm as the planet warms. Zero Hour was cofounded in Seattle in 2017 by a sixteen-year-old Colombian-born student named Jamie Margolin.

Like most successful activists, Margolin was a tech savvy organizer who used social media to recruit supporters, organize rallies, and lobby politicians. Thunberg participated in a Zero Hour demonstration in Stockholm in 2018. This was part of a worldwide protest that was organized through social media in about twenty-five other cities, including London; Washington, DC; and Nairobi, Kenya. After the protests, Thunberg and Margolin became friends through

## The Trayvon Generation

Social media clearly changed the dynamics of the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests. Some of the young activists leading the BLM marches are referred to as “the Trayvon generation”; they came of age between the shooting death of Black teenager Trayvon Martin by a vigilante in 2012 and the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in 2020. These activists learned about systemic racism and organized protests through Twitter, Facebook, and other sites.

In the wake of Floyd’s death, six Nashville high school students, who met in a group text chat on Twitter, started a group called Teens 4 Equality. The students, who did not previously know one another, used free graphics, petitions, and educational materials available on the BLM website to spread their message of racial justice. They made a flyer and shared it on social media; ten thousand people showed up to their protest rally. One of the organizers, Emma Rose Smith, described how anyone can organize a demonstration: “If you want to make a protest, you can make a protest. . . . We are a lot more aware than our ancestors because of social media and I don’t think we’re going to make the same mistakes.”

Quoted in Katie Kindelan, “6 Teen Girls Were the Organizers Behind Nashville’s Massive Black Lives Matter Protests,” *Good Morning America*, June 9, 2020. [www.goodmorningamerica.com](http://www.goodmorningamerica.com).

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# ORGANIZATIONS AND WEBSITES

## **Black Lives Matter (BLM)**

<https://blacklivesmatter.com>

The BLM website features news about the movement and information about the latest protests and other actions. Users can download tool kits with learning materials about conflict resolution, race relations, and COVID-19.

## **Centre for Information Resilience (CIR)**

[www.info-res.org](http://www.info-res.org)

This British organization exposes and counters individuals and groups that use social media to spread disinformation. CIR works with a global network to counter these threats to democracy.

## **Girls Leading Others Wisely (GLOW)**

[www.glowprogram.com](http://www.glowprogram.com)

GLOW was founded to help girls develop skills to enhance their self-confidence and resist peer pressure on social media. The website features over 12 hours of curriculum meant to empower girls by increasing their strengths and abilities.

## **News Literacy Project**

<https://newslit.org>

The News Literacy Project is a nonpartisan organization founded by educators to teach young people ways to become smart, active consumers of news and information. The site offers an online learning platform, a free app, podcasts, and shareable tips, tools, and quizzes aimed at increasing media literacy.

## **Teens for Press Freedom (TPF)**

[www.teensforpressfreedom.org](http://www.teensforpressfreedom.org)

This youth-led organization was founded to promote media literacy among high school students. The group hosts twice-weekly online workshops about news consumption and misinformation and disinformation on social media.

# FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

## Books

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Lori Getz and Mitch Prinstein, *Like Ability: The Truth About Popularity*. Washington, DC: Magination, 2022.

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