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Black Lives Matter: From Mantra to Movement

While it may seem like just a hashtag, Black Lives Matter is a movement about much more than that. Its roots as a movement can be traced back to a social media post, but its message and cause are rooted deep in American history. The movement has evolved over the last few years to include a variety of issues advocating for a spectrum of people. Despite its growth, the movement is not without problems. The Black Lives Matter activists gained traction and support in the wake of recent American tragedies as an extension of the 1960s' civil rights movement, but are struggling to become a continuing movement with a defined goal.

The movement can be traced back to a single post on Facebook made in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, who was on trial for murdering black teenager Trayvon Martin, in 2013. Alicia Garza posted on her Facebook wall "Black people ... our lives matter" (Altman, 23). The status itself did not contain the hashtag so it was actually one of the commenters, Garza's friend Patrice Cullors, who used the hashtag "#blacklivesmatter" for the first time (Altman, 23). So began the Black Lives Matter movement as the hashtag picked up momentum and supporters. It was in response to another shooting, in Ferguson, Missouri, when the activist movement truly garnered national attention and response. When a grand jury failed to indict a Ferguson police officer for murdering a black suspect, the hashtag was used over 200,000 times in one day (Altman, 23). It is those shootings and the perceived failures of the United States justice system that has fueled the Black Lives Matter movement so far.

Black Lives Matter has become a movement about ideological and political intervention where black lives are unfairly targeted (Wellington, 21). Based on that goal, the activists are targeting two separate audiences in their rallies. First, to change the ideological problems, activists are attempting to persuade the general public and particularly the white majority that “black lives matter” and should be treated fairly. Using the untimely deaths of black citizens, the movement relies on strong pathos appeals to get the attention of the mass public. They rally in the streets for days to get the national media on the scene and use that metaphorical stage to literally show America what is happening to black people in this country. Unlike in past examples of black hate crime, the public is now able to watch live as tragedies occur via breaking news reports and constantly updated twitter streams (Harris, 35). These pathos appeals work extremely well for the cause and is only possible because of social media. Beyond appealing to the public for ideological reasons, the movement is also appealing to the political powers to change the system it finds unjust for the community.

Black Lives Matter activists use logos appeals to persuade the United States’ government to change the justice system and fix the flaws within it. Following the movement’s rallies in Ferguson, the Department of Justice released a report on policing and the court system. That report showed that, particularly in Ferguson, African Americans were singled out for a variety of punitive crimes (Shor, 30). The movement uses this report to back up their claims that the system is unfair and laws need to be changed. This tactic is particularly helpful because it uses the government’s own report to persuade the government so there can be no question of the authenticity of the document’s information. These appeals are not all the movement has within it, however, because it has history to learn from as well.

When looking at the issues tied to the Black Lives Matter movement, one could easily draw a connection to previous battles for black equality – specifically the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Even movements that do not specifically relate to black communities have been traced back to what is called the “golden age” of social movements (Harris, 35). It makes sense then to connect Black Lives Matter to the cries of the 1960s even more so. One of the areas where the 1960s failed to reach and the Black Lives Matter is attempting to capitalize on is moving the “moral compass of racism to the right direction” (Harris, 34). While the civil rights movement did achieve many things in terms of both political action and social awareness, it left a lot to be desired in black communities. By building off the past movement, Black Lives Matter establishes a powerful kairos appeal. They use the historical context of black oppression to finally take a stand on injustice. Current activists are quick to remind the country, however, that they are different than 1960s activists in key ways. This is “not your grand-mamma’s civil rights movement,” they say (Harris, 35). One way the current movement differs is the way it is being led.

While the past civil rights movement operated on a model of charismatic leadership that brought us Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Black Lives Matter is rejecting that idea. They recognize today that granting decision-making power to a single person or small group puts the movement at risk (Harris, 36). They would rather have a “group-centered model of leadership” where everyone can participate (Harris, 37). They are not all talk on this front either; they have actively rejected those who would hope to become a leader of the movement. When eccentric and well-known speaker Rev. Al Sharpton was in in Washington, D.C. in December 2014, young Black Lives Matter activists charged the stage he was speaking on to protest him speaking on their behalf (Shor, 29). While this lack of leadership can have benefits such as allowing the

movement to easily spread across the country in various formats, it also creates a credibility problem. The movement is led by “bottom-up insurgency” by average people, so it does not have the credibility it would have if it allowed someone like Sharpton to be its face and voice (Harris, 37). While the movement has good pathos and logos appeals, it lacks a strong ethos appeal by failing to have a centralized leadership that can be known nationwide. Despite that, the movement has nonetheless grown massively due in large part to social media.

Black Lives Matter has gone from a single Facebook status to a nationally recognized movement in only two years. In a time where Facebook is criticized for halting productivity on social movements and being an idle millennial pastime, it is remarkable that Black Lives Matter not only originated on social media but is continuing to use it as a driving force for its cause (Wellington, 22). Social media activism has organized thousands of marchers in the Black Lives Matter protests against police and the justice system (Wellington, 22). Even something as simple as changing a profile picture or cover photo to that of the movement’s can be beneficial. In 2014, thousands of people on Facebook changed their cover photo to a black-and-white image reading “BLACK LIVES MATTER” to show unity (Wellington, 23). While that may not seem like much, this shows the movement has support and is working together despite the issues it faces regarding a lack of leadership and credibility. Continuing to do simple acts like that will help the movement to survive its growing pains.

As the movement gains support and attention from the public and politicians alike, more issues with the cause are being exposed. One of those problems is lacking a clear focus and agenda. In August 2015, a group of Black Lives Matter activists had the opportunity to meet with presidential candidate Hillary Clinton (Williams). When asked to outline their agenda for political reforms, the activists struggled to come up with anything (Williams). Activists have

said that because the movement is based on a number of different causes, they refuse to create a hierarchy of issues (Altman, 23). The growth of Black Lives Matter has led to activists who are not black being included in it. Women, the gay community, and other minorities are using the movement's broad banner to seek their own equality (Altman, 23). In another meeting, a separate group of activists had a meeting with President Barack Obama in November 2014 and managed to outline several points of an agenda for reform ideas (Wellington, 22). Those ideas included requiring the federal government to prosecute police officers who kill or abuse citizens and appointing independent prosecutors and review boards to handle cases involving police (Wellington, 22). This shows that perhaps the issue is not entirely based on lacking an agenda but on not communicating the agenda, which falls back on the movement's lack of leadership.

The lack of organization within the movement is affecting how the activists are perceived. While it was not something necessary in the beginning, needing more organization is part of the "growing pains" of becoming a larger movement (Williams). The movement, critics say, could benefit from establishing a multi-point platform, even though activists have said they do not want to create a defined list of issues (Williams). Blaming it on the millennial rebellion of tradition, critics within and outside the movement are pushing for something to be adopted as the movement's agenda (Williams). As a result, a faction of Black Lives Matter has created Campaign Zero, which defines ten points on a platform of issues (Friedersdorf). Those points include limiting the use of force by police, body cameras on police officers, demilitarization, and ending for-profit policing (Friedersdorf). While kept simple, these Campaign Zero points can provide the basic organization needed to keep Black Lives Matter on track and growing.

Despite its problems, the movement has made some progress since it began. First, the activists have made political progress. The White House created a new task force on policing,

criminal justice reform bills have been introduced in Congress and gained bipartisan support, and each of the major Democratic campaigns have held meetings with activists to discuss ideas (Altman, 22). The movement has also made progress with changing American perceptions. In August 2015, 59% of survey respondents said the United States “must do more to achieve racial equality,” which was a 13-point jump in a single year (Altman, 22). This change in public opinion will help to make further changes in political reforms as the 2016 presidential election approaches. With the help of Black Lives Matter activists, the country can achieve even more results.

Going from a mantra to a movement has not been an easy task for Black Lives Matter. With the help of social media, activists have done what was previously considered impossible. They have built a movement based on grass roots while also using the 1960s’ civil rights movement as a foundation. While the lack of leadership and undefined platform goals are starting to hold the movement back, steps are being taken to resolve the issues. Positive results are already being seen only two years after the movement began and will likely continue to be seen as the movement grows larger. The activists hope one day to not have to say black lives matter and it will be naturally recognized.

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