Power to The People: How Online Networks was a powerful weapon in the generating social change in the wake of George Floyd Death

Abstract:

The year 2020 was a year like no other with events that people will remember and talk about for years to come. One such incident was the death of African American civilian George Floyd who was killed whilst being placed under arrest. The reaction from the world is one which no one would expect with worldwide rallies being held for George Floyd's death as well as many other deaths that came at the hands of racism and injustices. This paper will look at the extent to which social online networks played a crucial role in moving towards change against those oppressed. The paper will look at certain issues key to generating change such as the power of uploading and sharing media through online networking sites, how the networks create a place for communities to evolve as well as a platform in which mobilisation for demonstrating can occur almost instantly with people from all over the world. These topics that will be looked at will demonstrate the true power of online networking sites in times of social change.

In a year that was like no other, two stand out moments defined the year of 2020; the Covid-19 pandemic and the death of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis Police Department. On 25th May 2020, George Floyd was killed by police officer Derrick Chauvin after Chauvin cut off Mr. Floyd's breathing in an attempted arrest over a fake $20 bill (Deliso, 2021). The aftermath of this death caught on mobile phone footage from a bystander led to Mr. Chauvin charged with murder along with other officers on the scene charged, and a worldwide uproar seeking justice over equality, police brutality and systematic racism around the world. Police brutality against coloured civilians in America is nothing new to the people of America along with people from around the world with countless stories of deaths at the hands of Police over petty crimes such as minor thefts to deaths over mistaken identities or false assumption where calls for action have gone unheard or have been dealt with in very minor ways.

While the death of Floyd wasn't the sole factor in the online outcry and explosion to seek justice, Floyd's death was the tipping point in a frustrating year for people all over the

world where millions have had their lives cut short. The modern-day social/online movement in people seeking justice over police brutality in particular dates back to 2014 where Eric Garner was killed over an "illegal chokehold and uttered the devastating refrain "I can't breathe" (Dreyer, et al., 2020). The main reasons these deaths have been widely reported on and protested against is due to the raw, uncensored media available to people all around the world from bystanders witnessing these deaths and recording or photographing these incidents on their phones, where in previous times police brutality was a 'my word against your word' situation with police holding the advantage due to the unavailability of social networks/ network features, and poor-quality image/video capture devices. In this paper, I will be discussing the impact of social online networks and how these networks have been able to create accountability and information asymmetry, mobilise protests/rallies online and finally how social media has allowed communities and networks to be established and grown online. Throughout this paper I will be referencing from scholarly sources that were written before and during the event such as Hensby, Boulianne and Plant to build the framework and aid my argument, that online networks are one of the most powerful weapons in fighting for justice and social change in the wake of Floyd's death.

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Traditional media such as television, radio and print media has been a one-way format with those in power such as police, politicians and high-profile figures who have had the money and power to transmit messages and media to people. This loophole has meant previous occasions has resulted in injustices and have meant that those in power could alter media or send out a message that has defended their actions. Today with the ease of access and availability for the public to social online networks the playing field has almost become level with people using their phones like police use when they are performing an arrest; as body cameras capturing what we as the bystander or person protesting are viewing and then allowing that content for the whole world to potentially see. The availability and access to these technological media formats has allowed for people to not just transmit media but to convey the users own message "When used effectively, social media aligns well with the principles of community psychology by

enabling individuals to participate in dialogue about social issues, collaborate on change efforts, and establish a sense of community" (Lane, 2019). Numerous cases have been reviewed in which the footage available and the transmission of this footage to social online networks has been the reason in the past have ultimately been the reason why changes were made such as Arab Spring, Occupy Wallstreet to even Rodney King's violent arrest in 1991 which led to arrests of officers which was caught on camera by a camcorder and then spread has made social online networks a powerful tool in protesting for and creating social change (Sastry & Bates, 2017). Using Floyd as a prime example the importance of the footage captured was not just capturing what was being seen but what was being heard. The chilling sentence said by Floyd of "I can't breathe" and the police officer seemingly unwilling to acknowledge Floyd's desperation ultimately gave people the ammunition that police are still as careless as they once were. The power of smartphones and the ease of being able to distribute content almost instantly gave protesters a sense of confidence and security when going out to protest knowing that whatever they endure from law enforcement or officials, it will be seen by not just their families and friends but by potentially millions around the world.

The impact of smartphones (being a phone with similar functions to a computer such as access internet and online networks etc), played a huge role in the Arab Spring with the use of smartphones being a huge advantage over the government at the time "Smartphones with their cameras became citizens' weapons in the information war that allowed almost everyone to bear witness, and to organise, in a trend that has been dubbed "mass mobile-isation"' (Maine, 2020). Through the Arab Spring protests and the ultimate revolution the people created through having a seemingly big advantage over law officials, we can see this being a prime example in the Floyd/BLM protests with people being able to record their support and also being able to capture further miscarriages of justice that occurred during these protests which The Guardian reported as over one thousand violations occurring which without the ability to record and disseminate the footage could have gone unnoticed or undealt with by officials (Thomas, Gabbatt and Barr., 2020).

The availability of online networking accessories such as smartphones has created a greater advantage for the people protesting, once this media is shared and seen by people it allows for groups to mobilise almost instantly. People have been protesting for equality and police brutality for many years, but last year's protests were like no others with The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project reporting that "The US has long been home to a vibrant protest environment, demonstrations surged to new levels in 2020. Between 24 May and 22 August, ACLED records more than 10,600 demonstration events across the country… ACLED records an increase of 42% from the 1,400 demonstrations recorded in July 2019… Well over 80% of all demonstrations are connected to the Black Lives Matter movement or the COVID-19 pandemic" (Kishi and Jones, 2020). While these statistics relate to America only, looking around the world we can still see that after Floyd's death there was a huge increase in rallies, and the reason why so many rallies occurred nationwide in America and worldwide is due to the ease of mobilisation through online networks. While writing on such a recent topic it is hard to find information on the exact impact social networks had on the mobilisation of the particular protests, however, we can see through social media, "[Social Networks] enables large audiences to be engaged and mobilised at short notice and for very little cost. Facebook and Twitter, in particular, are commonly used for this purpose, functioning as 'stitching technologies' to quickly assemble networks, share information and recruit actors for political participation" (Hensby, 2015). In the case of George Floyd, we can see that protests from his arrest and consequential death started almost instantly after the arrest was made as social networking was able to create that due to the capabilities of devices such as phones which the overall ease of uploading, sharing and commenting capabilities these networks have with Boulianne, Koc-Michalska and Bimber discussing that media broadcasted on traditional forms of media such as television "creates an audience of spectators, but not an audience of mobilised citizens" (Boulianne, Koc-Michalska and Bimber 2019). Furthermore, the freedom of speech and minimal restrictions on worldwide media networks contributes heavily to the immediate response and mobilisation where the networks have no content editors and a very relaxed gatekeeping system especially when it comes to social issues which in contrast, was not the case before online networking was an issue with traditional media.

With the internet being used by billions around the world and with a large selection of different social online networking sites and applications, there is an endless amount of room for communities to be formed and for people to come together over shared thoughts on views on minor things such as which sporting team they follow to very topical issues which plague society such as racism and inequality. Since the worldwide protests and rallies following George Floyd's death, online communities all around the world have been established and grown with people being able to show support for the African American community and their struggles in America, as well as all the other communities around the world who have been and still are being oppressed within their country. The strength of online networks is that these communities that have been generated online can have many people showing support regardless of who they are and where they come from. The user can also choose to remain anonymous or publicly show their support. Robert Plant from the University of Miami discusses that the internet and online networks are such a powerful way for people to come together due to the internet being a perfect middle ground of low costs and a 'deregulated platform' "The combination of low-cost access to increasingly powerful computing and networking capabilities combined with a deregulated internet has facilitated the rapid development of a new social phenomena, that of the online community" (Plant, 2004). A prime example of solidarity in people coming together after Floyd's death was the Blackout Tuesday campaign which consisted of social media users, and companies taking to the time to post a blank black picture with the hashtag #BlackoutTuesday. This simple yet powerful gesture was done by over 28 million users, including business heavyweights such as Apple and Spotify (Sinan, 2020). Online networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram for example, further create the ability for users to be apart as well as show their support towards communities where users have the option to share, like and comment on posts further showing their support and showing their followers important news which can ultimately help raise awareness and help mobilise users to take action whether that be in a physical or online sense. We can see through online networks that celebrities such as sports players, actors and influencers have shown their support much like Apple and Spotify did with the Blackout Tuesday campaign which further strengthens the online communities with people coming together regardless of occupation or background.

The fight to end racism and police brutality will always be an ongoing battle within different countries around the world due to governments, officials, and people within a role of power who have been brought up in certain ways. Through the George Floyd case, however, we can see that a big step towards standing up against those who have abused their power has been taken not just within America but also around the world. These actions being taken have been shown in both a physical sense and especially through the online sense with online networks being shown as a powerful weapon during times of protests with the ability for people to use online networking platforms in a way to disseminate information, to come together both in an anonymous or public way as well as online networks being able to allow people to quickly mobilise when organising certain protests/rallies. The case of George Floyd is still a relatively new topic and thus there is minimal scholarly information on the topic. Going forward future research on the impact that online networks had on the George Floyd case would be interesting to see as previous protests such as the Arab Spring has shown how critical online networks have been in creating change.

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