Social Media as a Mechanism for Social Justice and Change

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Social Justice is a topic of dissension that has been highly contested over the course of history. As advancements in technology and education have become more widespread, so has the push for equality and justice for people all around the world. Social Justice, as defined by Paul George, executive director of the Peninsula Peace and Justice Center, “means complete and genuine equality of all people.” This definition’s simplicity speaks magnitudes. When Social Justice is over defined, it leaves room to exclude certain people from the definition. However, a broad and vague definition allows for more inclusion. The goal of Social Justice should be all encompassing, giving justice to people of every and all backgrounds. So long as injustice occurs in any one place, that means there is opportunity for it to happen in others as well. Social media has been fundamental in the progression of Social Justice and has allowed it a platform to proliferate and spread through the documentation of underrepresented perspectives and voices.

Social Justice, as it pertains to a relational approach, benefits from the same concepts that Nancy Baym applies to social media. These concepts are interactivity, temporal structure, social cues, storage, replicability, reach, and mobility (Baym 2015). A perfect example of these concepts in action can be visualized through the Black Lives Matter movement. Interactivity allows users of the platforms to convey their individual opinions and experiences on a collective issue. By allowing for a multitude of expressions over the same grievances, Social Justice can take on a multifaceted approach that enables more comprehensive coverage for everyone impacted or involved. Learning the nuances of an issue like police brutality and the demonization of Black people by the media industry informs people of the subtle ways in which these issues manifest in daily life. In previous forms of media, even coverage of social justice issues could be manipulated so that they still only impacted certain individuals in marginalized groups, rather than the way social media allows for intersectional identities to express the over arching impacts of the issue at hand. The ability to connect with people in similar situations, as well as those of differing backgrounds, accentuates dialogue on pervasive discourse, allowing for exposure to opinions that have previously been silenced through traditional media. This type of comradery is clearly apparent in platforms like twitter, where terms like “Black Twitter” are coined to describe the use of the platform as a way for Black people to share stories, ideas, and to openly communicate free from the oppression of physical places and mass media pressures.

The storage capacities and temporal structures of social media allow society the ability to reference past events to inform the current media environment. Society can look back to previous instances of injustice, such as the atrocities committed against Rodney King to draw parallels to the current political climate, as well as to recognize patterns of abuse and oppression. Additionally, these capabilities allow for people around the world to communicate regardless of time zone and delays in the spread of information through mass media sources, such as the global protests that broke out in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. However, there are downsides to this ability. Due to the sheer volume of interaction that occurs on social media, combined with the “24 hour” news cycle, many injustices and grievances do not reach the mainstream. Furthermore, if you miss the events in the moment, they are easily replaced by future events as new injustices occur continuously. This leads to the prominence of some injustices over others, as they happen more consistently and affect wider ranges of people. Lesser-known injustices are lost, as the amount of time it would take to go back and filter through the same depth information can be overwhelming. Replicability and reach work hand in hand to enlighten the masses on the injustices that happen to minorities. On twitter, injustices can be shared with a simple retweet and when circulated on timelines, can reach exponentially more people than what sharing between individuals can. Though, this also means misinformation can be spread at rates far faster than fact checkers can manage which puts pressure on the individual to sort through the information and determine what should be accepted or rejected.

Social cues are also less apparent in social media than they are in real life, but this can be both advantageous and detrimental to Social Justice causes. By removing them, it allows marginalized groups more freedom of expression, rather than giving the oppressor more cues to enforce the current hegemonic norms. In battles of power relations, it can be beneficial to mask some of the physical attributes of communication. Regardless, those cues can still be portrayed for the purpose of emotional connection through video sharing, which still limits blowback from the oppressor seeing the oppressed in a vulnerable state, as the producer of the content can limit their interaction with comments, whether it be through a live stream or asynchronous mediums. The anonymity of social media makes for a unique system of identity portrayal which can be manifested in various ways. On one hand, it allows fear-free posting and interaction from minorities. Though their race is assumed depending on which stance they take, it cannot be ascertained easily. Finally, the mobility of social media allows for Social Justice to be interacted with at all times from anywhere, rather than only in public spaces or between members of tight knit communities. If a person is connected to the internet, they are always able to interact with others and take part in the ongoing Social Justice debates, regardless of any physical location. One is no longer required to be positioned in front of a T.V. or a near a radio to hear what is currently happening, nor do they have to be in a physical space to voice their opinion. They can just pop on twitter and go to the trending page to see what is currently circulating through the media environment and add their own voice and perspective to it.

The culmination of these concepts, as they coincide with both social media and justice, has allowed for the creation of a new public sphere. As Castells states, there is a shift from a public sphere anchored around the national institutions of territorially bound societies to a public sphere constituted around the media system (Castells 2008 p.90). A clear example of this shift is through the humanization of Black people as a fight against their dehumanization by mass media outlets. The portrayal of Black men and women as inherently violent beings is a portrayal that has lasted through the tests of time and has had pernicious effects on the interactions between Black people and others in public. Michael Brown’s physical size was used as justification for his murder, claiming that his size made him a threat to the officers and to anyone in the vicinity. Mass media perpetuates this narrative by portraying Black men as “thugs” (Smiley 2016). Social media is used as a platform to fight against these ideologies and promote Black people as being just as human as anyone else. Since Social Justice is rooted in equality, it is beneficial to have these representations of Black people as liking the same things as everyone else, rather than the media’s portrayal as fascination with guns, drugs, sex, and aggression.

In conclusion, autoethnographic approaches to Social Justice are made possible by social media and are the main driver behind it. The platforms give these approaches a means to bypass the traditional barriers to publication and allows for instantaneous commentary on events that transpire in real time. This is unique to social media as one can document the entirety of a Social Justice movement in real time, as well as return to it later. In the case of George Floyd, the first-hand accounts and videos served as fundamental in the trial for prosecuting Derek Chauvin, where the rapid spread of the event had reached an innumerable amount of people globally. As Nelson Mandela says, “education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” Social media is the platform that allows for the education, while Social Justice is the resulting change. Society must use both in an intertwined way to produce change for those whose voices have been traditionally silenced by the hegemonic powers at play in the political climate.

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