Social Media and Social Movements

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Social media understood broadly as on-line communication sharing user-generated content has been interpreted as responsible for the rise and reach of diverse social movements, from the Arab Spring (2010–2012) and the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong (2014) to contemporary white supremacists and also the mass resistance to racist police violence in the US (2014–2020). However, despite the hopeful assertions of social media power, the actual impact of social media has been more difficult to verify. The promise of increased democracy has been limited by corporate and government control over public access to social media, while recent criticisms of social media generated "fake news" and disinformation have rubbed some of the gloss off the promise of technological solutions to political problems.

While social media continue to affect public discourse both positively and negatively, corporate ownership of social media platforms determines the structure, function, and even the use of social media. Over four billion people globally use social media, but corporate-owned sites still control, restrict, and manipulate access and use for their own profit and interest, even as they accommodate government demands on surveillance and access. Meanwhile, social media remain more about entertainment and advertising than about news, information, or activism (Anderson & Caumont 2014, Green 2021). Moreover, social media primarily aggregate news and information from commercial news media and global news agencies (Gold 2020), further limiting its democratic potential.

In unpacking the development of social protest, it seems that social media per se do not determine or even primarily impact political outcomes. Rather, as demonstrated by the Egyptian movement that overthrew Hosni Mubarak, social media are only one means of communication for political organization

and mobilization. In fact, in Egypt, social media supplemented more power-ful commercial media, especially Al-Jazeera's agenda-setting focus. Individual mobile phone use also was crucial for organizing protest. Perhaps most impor-tantly, the media environment was not primarily technological but "drew from and contributed to offline political activity following years of activism, blog-ging, training, conferences, and key platforms… [with] a community of `tweeps' who knew each other, had often met in person, and trusted each other." These physical networks profoundly transformed the Arab public sphere by "increas-ing citizens' ability to document and share, by greatly increasing the odds that misconduct by authorities will become widely known, and by overcoming barriers to individual political participation and the coordination of collective action" (Tufekci & Wilson 2012).

In contrast, the history and operation of protests against police violence against Black citizens in the US reveal the astounding political weakness of social media activism that lacks a democratically-coordinated and organ-ized political leadership. To get from clicking and liking on social media to effective political protest takes more than transitory communication. "Social media played a key role in the sharing of information," with hashtag #BlackLivesMatter" averaging 20 million views a day in summer 2020 on TikTok (Mediakix 2021). Nonetheless, "hashtag activism" by entertainment industry insiders such as #BlackOutTuesday and #Sharethemicnow did not stop the killings by police or build a potent protest movement. While social media can raise awareness of an urgent, chronic social problem, social justice (or social regression) requires mass participation in physical actions that politically can transform existing power. The 26 million protestors responding to the police killing of George Floyd in May 2020 directly challenged political power locally and nationally, while the absence of a democratic-led, organized movement left a vacuum of leadership and strategy. In fact, social media conversations could not withstand the commercial media re-framing of legitimate protests as looting and rioting. Although the final outcome of resistance to police power and its political and economic underpinnings is still undetermined, it is clear that an important bulwark for existing capitalist power is corporate control over media, including social media.

Thus, this essay begins with an overview of the structure, social relations, and practices of social media within the larger stratified and privatized social order. The second part turns to one example of social media use that actually subverted the potential power of protest: a descriptive history of Black Lives Matter that includes its conflation with the larger movement against police violence and the diversionary social media activity emphasizing electoral pol-itics over mass action against racism and inequality. In closing, an outline of

effective practices drawn from more successful social movements concludes that social media can be an important means of communication to the extent that its content expresses the politics and strategies necessary for building protest towards social change. While social media on its own does not assure movement success, surely social media can be no better than its political content.

Social Media Structure and Practice

Leading social media in the US and Europe include Facebook/Instagram (2.6 billion) Google/YouTube (2.3 billion), Microsoft/LinkedIn, Twitter, Pinterest, and Snap Chat. In Asia, Facebook is prominent, while seven hundred million use WeChat (China), fifty million use Line (Japan), and forty million turn to KakaoTalk (Korea). Globally, eight hundred million use TikTok. Everywhere social media are primarily used for entertainment, sports, and personal messaging, rather than news and information. In fact, according to the Pew Research Center, only about 17% of Facebook users get their news online (Anderson & Caumont 2014). Notably, according to Statista.com, news stories from Reuters, *New York Times*, BBC, *Washington Post*, and *Guardian* are linked to some three million social media posts each month. In other words, despite the widespread use of social media, very few users engage with news and (despite the prevalence of "like" clicks) even fewer discuss their political views on social media (Hampton et al. 2014).

Ⅰ One important critique of social media addresses the social and psychological effects on heavy users who often suffer depression, anxiety and isolation (Karim et al. 2020). Yet, despite the amplified negative health effects of social media, it is difficult to single out technology. In fact, over the last several decades (before social media) economic austerity and political power atomized and alienated communities into isolated individuals (Goldberg 2021). A March 2020 report by Cigna Health found the 61% of Americans felt lonely and this is not just in the US, but also in Europe, Canada, Japan, China, Australia, South America and Africa—regardless of race, class, culture, religion (Kokkeler 2021) and social media use. Lacking social services and social connections, humanity has been reduced to producers and consumers of commodities sold for profit.

Ⅰ Impacting these and other social consequences are the structures of social media designed to attract and hold our attention. Digital technology per se can be structured and used in many ways, but currently they are designed by corporate engineers to maintain attention and induce users to remain on line—either

on the site visited or to a linked site. Companies search for profits by using algorithms to attract customers and organizing practices to maintain interaction and surveille user behavior. In short, because social media comprise structured commercial operations that impact the their use, social media practices cannot be independent media freely available for democratic discourse and protest organizing,. Technology, applications, and media platforms are privately held and controlled. Twitter limits the number of characters, Google ranks search requests, TikTok and YouTube set time restrictions on videos, and even Webinar meetings depend on options set by site owners. Thus, social media use is often confined to short posts, emojis, and brief comments. As a means for actual democratic discussion, social media limited structures cannot replicate or enhance public communication. While social media can immediately announce actions to a wide audience, as a means for movement planning and strategizing social media are severely handicapped. Indeed, as currently structured, public access, promotion, and social media use depend on ownership of technology (Hern 2021). Four billion users spend several hours each day exchanging videos, posts, and clicks in seemingly participatory social relations—but all are dependent on the limited structures and processes determined by a handful of internet corporations. The social relations of owners and users symbolically recreate the social relations between corporate owners and working employees—we work under the terms set by management decisions.

Techniques for Attraction and Control

Web pages integrate software to engage visitors with attractive and attracting experiences. It's a bit like the difference between talking at someone and having a conversation. Websites do this by presenting spectacles of humor, outrage, and clever memes. Websites ask individuals to take trivial or more complex actions to continue "experiencing" the website. These actions may be as simple as pressing play, sharing, clicking, using a simple tool (like a budget calculator), or making a selection, like the post, "What kind of animal am I?" These practices allow corporations, advertisers, and even the government to monitor user activity. Meanwhile, algorithms promote (and monitor) social media activity that engages users with suggestions for further internet activity through links and advertisements.

More complex monitoring techniques include cookies, beacons, and fingerprints. From capturing login details, preferences, and clicking history to third party surveillance of browser activity, advertisers and political groups can create a data profile without user knowledge or awareness. Indeed, there are very few secure blockers against these techniques available to individual users.

The technological structure of internet sites, blogs, messaging services, and social media is determined and designed to benefit corporations owning the platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, Google, Apple, Samsung, Microsoft, Amazon, Baidu, WeChat, TikTok, Alibaba, Tencent, Mail.ru, and a few others. Importantly, every social media application is still dependent on one or more corporate-owned platforms, despite whatever affiliations may exist among users. When the conspiracy group QAnon was banned by Facebook and Twitter, it moved to the Parler application. But Apple, Google and Amazon—which host the Parler application on their platforms—denied the group access there, too. Social media may live in a cloud, but they only run on the grounds of corporate control—and corporate control favors a business model with algorithms pushing spectacle that "exploits the social divide" for profit (Horwitz 2021).

Corporate owners of internet platforms and sites can favor, restrict, or censor sites and even shut down access completely. In 2020, global internet providers complied with government requests to turn off internet access in Bangladesh, the Congo, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Myanmar, and Zimbabwe. Private internet providers also blocked messaging applications in Chad, Kazakhstan, Ethiopia, China, and Sri Lanka (Editorial, 2020). Internationally, Amazon, Apple, Facebook/Instagram, Google/YouTube, and Twitter shut down applications and curtailed server access.

Moreover, under the guise of curtailing hate speech and violence, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media shut down progressive sites. Google, for instance, used its algorithms to remove socialist, antiwar, and progressive websites from previously prominent positions in Google searches, essentially burying them from view (Damon 2017). CounterPunch, Democracy Now, the American Civil Liberties Union, and Wikileaks are just a few of the websites which noticed reduced returns from Google searches. African-American, labor, and anti-capitalist groups also experienced similar blocking from the tech giants—who effectively announced that private owners determine public debate. Ironically, most social media users remain unaware of such corporate decisions and actions. After all, who reads the user agreement required by websites, phone companies, and device makers?

Hopes for democratic discussions about local, national, and global policies further faded as Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced plans to increase entertainment and "de- emphasize political content," while COO Sheryl Sandberg applauded Facebook's $28 billion quarterly earnings, "the fastest growth rate in over two years" (Frenkel & Kang 2021). Similar algorithms and corporate practices by Apple, Microsoft, WeChat, Google, and others, including mobile phone producers, streaming services, ISPs, search engines,

and traditional commercial media exhibit the same corporate consolidation, profit-driven entertainment, and amoral social positions which respond to the winds of power and protest, dependent on their best public relations options.

For several years in US, Hong Kong, France, UK, India, and Pakistan, among other nations, there has been concern about well-organized, well-financed political networks that use social media to promote narrow partisan interests, including false, fabricated stories without evidence or validity. In the US the focus was on "fake" news from QAnon, Brietbart, and InfoWars. But social media did not invent "fake" news. Commercial media and politicians have roundly charged social media as the problem, obscuring and ignoring the long history of fake news by traditional commercial media.

Social media have no singular purchase on "fake" news or stirring rabid political disruption and violence. William Randolph Hearst used print to promote US intervention in Cuba in 1898, Father Coughlin used the radio to foment anti-immigrant violence in the 1930s, the Ku Klux Klan used paint, crosses, and fire to organize and recruit after the Civil War and during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s; Jean Marie Le Pen used mass rallies and public speeches to foment race hatred in France. There are multiple other verifiable instances of a variety of communication means, including traditional commercial media, that expressed and agitated for public support for illegal and indefensible mass actions based on "fake" news.

More recent instances of politically-orchestrated and media promoted "fake" news, include: ABC news reports about Iraqi soldiers toppling incubators and leaving babies on the cold floor to die—lies justifying the 1990 US invasion; the hyped 2011 Associated Press accounts of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's claims about "Viagra-fueled rapes" in Libya that were dismissed as lies by Amnesty International and the United Nations; the 2017 US television broadcasts of USAID and National Endowment for Democracy-financed videos by students in Venezuela claiming government brutality which the UN investigator dismissed as fabricated; and the network television videos showing atrocities in Aleppo and chemical weapons attacks by the Syrian Air Force, which were revealed by the German newspaper *Die Welt* in 2017 to be filmed in Egypt and known by the US to be untrue.

Thus, arguably, traditional commercial news media pose a greater danger of fake news and misinformation, in part, because social media are primarily aggregators and distributors of news reported by other media. Google made $4.7 billion by "scraping" content from news media sites (Staff 2019). Eighty percent of Yahoo! News comes from the Associated Press. AP has its own global reach with 100 national bureaus, 2000 stories, and over 1 billion readers daily. Almost 60% of US gets their news from TV networks (which have their own

websites) and 16% of citizens read the daily paper. The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post are not just print—they all have websites with millions of readers. Seven and one half million read the New York Times on line daily. Meanwhile, for conservative, evangelical, and anti-democratic populism, talk radio—not social media—is the primary medium for informing and organizing. Close to 100 million tune in daily to conservative radio hosts like Mike Savage, Glenn Beck, Chris Plante, Dana Loesch, and others. And radio is supplemented by FOX television news.

While most internet users rely on websites of TV and print commercial media, active followers of explicitly fake news social media sites are relatively few: even at its peak before being removed from most internet platforms, Alex Jones' Info Wars had only 500,000 weekly viewers; Brietbart drew half that audience; and QAnon averaged less than 25,000 which ranks it at #13,500 among the world's social media sites. For conservative and white supremacist groups, both the use and political impact of social media depend largely its connections with other means of communication.

Print and television news in other countries follow and express historically traditional journalistic standards—selected official sources, balanced reporting, inverted pyramid of who, what, where, when, and timeliness with a general lack of context—bending towards ideological and political support for their current governments. Thus globally, citizens read the same media frames reporting cause and value: White Helmets in Syria; the temporary occupation of US Congress; the farmers protest in Delhi, the coronavirus pandemic by the numbers. Likewise, everywhere, leading commercial media bolster social media by promoting national identity and patriotism, opposing challenges and critiques of the existing social order, and occasionally reluctantly accepting the need for some symbolic reform—as the response to the mass protests against the police killing of George Floyd in May 2020 demonstrated.

In terms of social media, three important observations can be made. First, social media and the internet in general are designed and controlled by global media corporations. Second, to maximize profits, internet and social media companies have embedded interaction within the structure of their applications and platforms to hold attention, capture information, deliver advertisements—and legitimize dominant social relations. Finally, social media mostly repost stories published by traditional news media.

One key concern for those interested in democracy and building social movements capable of transforming society is the consequence of commercial media framing that defends a social system based on private profit from wage labor. Stories portrayed in print, on television, and encouraged via social

media are never value neutral. Each story contains explicit and implicit messages about what is preferred, what is right, what is just—overlaid with ethnicity, national, religious, and social class perspectives. Leading social media (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter) do not facilitate or even allow serious challenges to the structural practices and social values of consumerist individualism and deference to hierarchy and authority. Social media owners and content managers emphasize entertainment, spectacle, sensation, and controversy as the means to hold user attention and turn a profit. Interactions among users are constrained by social media owners and their profit-based structures. Only a conscious political strategy that understands social media as a means, not a solution, can fully benefit.

Moreover, the record shows that well-funded conservative forces dominate social media. Movements for social justice and democracy, in general, lack the resources and expertise to maintain active social media operations. Data from CrowdTangle, Facebook's monitoring system, revealed that the top performing posts on Facebook in September 2020 were all conservative pages, including Fox News, Trump, Ben Shapiro, Blue Lives Matter, Sean Hannity, and the evangelical Franklin Graham (Roose 2021). This followed the 2020 summer of historically-large protests against the George Floyd murder and the peak of social media activity by Black Lives Matter sites. Notably, no Black Lives Matter social media activity came close to the level of communication organized and disseminated by well-funded conservative Facebook pages.

Black Lives Matter and Social Media

Following the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the killing of black teen Trayvon Martin in July 2013, Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opai Tometi launched a Twitter hashtag #BlackLivesMatter that quickly became a nationally-recognized slogan. Importantly, as Cullors admits, "we didn't start a movement, we started a network" (Khan-Cullors 2016). Long before the Black Lives Matter protests erupted following the George Floyd killing, Black Lives Matter became a popular slogan providing symbolic meaning to a variety of actions, "serving as a political rallying cry or referring to the activist organization... or a fuzzily applied label used to describe a wide range of protests and conversations focused on racial inequality" (Pearce 2015). As more black Americans, including Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Frederick Gray, and Breonna Taylor were killed by police, the slogan resonated with millions.

First on Twitter and then in public protests, the slogan was adopted across the nation and then around the world.

Still, "Black Lives Matter" can refer to a Twitter hashtag, a social media site, a political slogan, or a larger decentralized social movement for social justice and racial equality. More notably, given their administrative control over the Black Lives Matter Global Network (BLMGM) and affiliation with the Movement for Black Lives Matter (M4BL), Garza, Cullors, and Tometi appeared as standard bearers of Black Lives Matter. However, the larger social movement actually has many diverse and vibrant organizations, perspectives, and activities. In fact, no central leadership directs the myriad anti-racist protest actions locally or nationally. Indeed, many leading local groups, such as in Minneapolis, Portland, Seattle, Baltimore, and elsewhere, are not affiliated with BLMGN. Moreover, the loose structure of what passes as BLM confuses supporters, activists, and the media. Nonetheless, Black Lives Matter appears in the public consciousness as a social movement challenging racial inequality. The Garza-Cullors- Tometi BLM group has engineered its position to become a definer of the larger social movement, attracting media interviews, politician overtures, and millions in donations from corporate donors purchasing public cover for racist practices by espousing "Black Lives Matter" on their websites, in their headquarters, and in press releases.

On balance, Black Lives Matter the movement exemplifies social media activism with all its positive effect on public awareness and—under the assumed leadership of BLMGN/M4BL—its limited impact on social and political change. Without any doubt, social media were instrumental in publicizing police killings of blacks. Citizen recordings and video posts of police killings of Michael Brown (2013), Eric Garner (2014), Laquan MacDonald (2014), Walter Scott (2015), Jamar Clark (2015), Terence Crutcher (2016), Alton Sterling (2016), Philando Castile (2017), Stephon Clark (2018), Ronald Greene (2019), Ahmaud Arbery (2020), and Breonna Taylor (2020) resulted in spontaneous public outrage and public protests—yet, unfortunately, having little effect on ending the killing of black Americans by police. Unsurprisingly, social media use spiked following each killing.

The George Floyd killing had a more dramatic impact on the US culture for several reasons. Floyd's killing happened during the height of the pandemic, when social media use had already increased by 32% (Mediakix 2021). Millions viewed the 9-minute video of the callous and casual killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. The increased social stress of the pandemic, the duration of the video, and the graphic clarity of the murder combined with 1600 black Americans killed by police in five years and the very recent 2020 killings of

Arbery and Taylor reignited the smoldering opposition to racism and contributed to the massive public response. In Minneapolis-St. Paul, given the local organizing and protesting activity of the Twin Cities Coalition for Justice for Jamar (Clark), the local BLM group, and the Black Visions Collective, mass marches edged towards urban rebellion. Nationally, up to 26 million protested police violence in thousands of US cities and towns—the largest protests in US history (Buchanan, Bui, & Patel, 2020), spreading worldwide to more than 60 countries.

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In early June 2020, the Pew Research Center found that 67% of US citizens supported the Black Lives Matter movement (Parker, Horowitz & Anderson 2020). A Monmouth University poll discovered that 70% agreed that Black Lives Matter had brought attention to "real racialdisparities," but 70% did not think the movement had improved race relations (Hoonhout 2020). At the very moment when an organized, coordinated mass movement could have moved public support into political power, the Black Lives Matter Global Network retreated to social media and symbolic expressions of support. For example, in 2015, when mass protests needed strategies and tactics for coherent demands, music execs Jamila Thomas and Brianna Agyeman called for #BlackoutTuesday, "a day to disconnect from work and reconnect with community" (Mediakix 2021). As Erica Caines (2020) wrote in *Black Agenda Report*, "instead of addressing the innate nature of police on full display, Black businesses (small and big, alike), entertainers, models, politicians, and the proudly apolitical all made the (un)conscious decision to honor Black lives with empty symbolism...[interrupting] all of the necessary online organizing information." Likewise, another entertainment industry led hashtag, #sharethemicnow, gave 46 black women activists three days of access to the accounts of 46 white women celebrities, such as Julia Roberts, Elizabeth Warren, and Kourtney Kardashian. #sharethemicnow provided no word on how black women's voices will be heard the other 362 days. What critics see as empty symbolic acts not only replaced real political action, they disguised detrimental policies. Thus, despite her record of supporting and expanding policing, after Washington, D.C. Mayor Murial Bowser renamed an intersection Black Lives Matter Plaza, she became the new face of #BlackGirlMagic, a social media concept recognizing black female power. Meanwhile, Congressional Democrats wearing African Kente cloth took a knee on behalf of black lives, but soon supported newly elected President Joe Biden's American Rescue Plan that provided $350 billion for cities to increase policing.

Social media companies responded as expected—YouTube pledged $100 million to develop black creators, Amazon and Facebook offered $10 million

each (not to be confused with Facebook's $1 billion fund for influencers). Many companies released self-serving statements pledging support to the black community, some through their own projects and most without providing details. Amazon, Spotify, Snap, Netflix, Microsoft, Zillow and Disney were among those who spoke out, but provided little in the way of specific actions.

Still, apparently having determined that the politics of Cullors, Garza, and Tometi are non-threatening to political and economic power, in 2020 corporate American gave $90 million in donations to Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, prompting BLMGN to boast that it is "no longer a small, scrappy movement. We are an institution" (Brown, 2021). And like a respectable status quo institution, here's what the official BLM website advises for action: "signing up for updates, supporting our work, checking out our resources, following us on social media, or wearing our dope, official gear" (see https://blacklivesmatter.com/). In short, buy a cool t-shirt, send us money, and read our posts (which provide bromides tending to electioneering for progressive candidates). Clearly, nationally coordinated protests are not part of BLMGN strategy.

But behind its public façade, BLMGN had problems. After repeated requests for independent political action and more transparency from the national BLM, many affiliates and other local organizations concluded that BLMGN and M4BL were not providing adequate leadership or sufficient processes for democratic decisions. As early as 2018, the Cincinnati chapter, which changed its name to Mass Action for Black Liberation, charged the national group with perverting the BLM name and "pushing it to a brand," noting that no chapter of BLM existed in Ferguson, although media falsely reported the broad coalition there was "under a BLM umbrella." BLMGN and M4BL did not "create or build this new grassroots movement against police brutality and racism; they capitalized off a nameless groundswell of resistance sweeping the nation, branded it as their own, and profited from the deaths of Black men and women around the country, without seriously engaging, as a national formation, in getting justice" but "raking in hundreds of thousands of dollars from high-end speaking engagements and donations… and have accepted numerous awards and accolades as so-called founders of the movement" but "when the reporters leave and the bright lights are gone, so are they (BLMGN)" (Mass Action 2018).

Others echoed the Cincinnati critique. Nyota Uhura, a St. Louis black rights activist who launched handsupdontshoot.com in August 2014, charged BLMGN and NetRoots Nation with "methodically coopting the genuine protest energy while ignoring or even obstructing those protestors' demands" and leveraging black activism towards the Democratic party (Buyniski 2020). Uhura, who participated in the mass protests following the police killing of Michael Brown, claims that BLMGN raised $33 million from donations arising

from publicity about the killing—but the money never reached Ferguson. An audit by Thousand Currents, a non-profit administrative and financial support organization, seems to support her claim. In 2019, before the large corporate donations began, BLMGN spent much of its money on salaries, consultants, and travel (Funke 2020). More importantly, BLMGN, Cullors, Garza, DeRay McKesson and other avowed leaders, "overshadow the work of the grassroots, then they insert themselves as leaders and they go out in the media and claim to be leading these movements," said Uhura. Their primary function is to derail the movement and "march us back into the voting booth" (Buyinksi 2020).

BLMGN has only held two national conferences since the 2014 Ferguson protests—once in Cleveland in July 2015 and a virtual gathering in August 2020. In both cases, democratic discussions and decisions were circumvented, as policies and activities were pre-determined in advance of the actual conference discussions. Cincinnati Black Lives Matter charged that the 2015 conference centered on "Black trans rights issues almost exclusively and buried families fighting police brutality into obscurity... without consulting any participants." Although gender sovereignty could have been an "organic and meaningful discussion" at the conference, the heavy handed bureaucracy "caused a veneer of resentment" among families and activists (Mass Action 2018).

Aiming to direct the larger black lives matter social movement towards electoral politics, Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) and its Electoral Justice Project organized a virtual convention in August 2020. The convention was intended to influence the anticipated new Democratic administration and "model state and local legislation" (Morrison, 2020). No plans for national protests were included. As with the first BLM convention, the central leadership obstructed open discussion and debate. Participants were presented with a program that was already written by a smaller group of delegates from Color for Change, Black Voters Matter, and BLMGN. To further emphasize the primacy of its electoral focus, Patrisse Cullors announced a BLM political action committee (PAC) in October 2020. Flush with $90 million in corporate donations, the new BLM PAC endorsed a slate of candidates with plans to put more candidates in office who "align with Black Lives Matter's [Global Network] goals" (M King 2020).

In February 2021, another chapter moved on. Black Lives Matter Inland Empire (in Los Angeles) called for "broader conversations of transparency, collective organizing, and accountability" (Leftoutmag 2021). The chapter, which decided to rename as Black Power Collective, wrote that "the use of the BLM name, which we believed was intended to unify our struggle, has been commodified and debased. It is now being used to sell products, acquire book deals, TV deals, and speaking engagements. We have no interest in these pursuits, and we are opposed to the movement to substitute Black capitalism for white

capitalism. It has become clear that the Global Network and certain figures have platformed our struggles with the sole purpose of exploiting our labor." The issue of greatest concern for the chapter "is the relationship between the [BLM] Global Network and the Democratic Party. This is hypocritical at best, as the Democratic Party has historically rejected and ignored BLM's demands and has made it clear that they are pro-police, pro-prison, and committed to capitalism" (Leftoutmag 2021).

Perhaps the most startling and damning assessment of BLMGN appears in the public statement released in June 2021 by more than a dozen former BLM chapters. The BLM10Plus release notes that "liberalism and capitalism have manifested in BLMGN... co-opting and deradicalizing this critical historic moment of revolutionary possibility" (BLM10Plus 2020). The collectively-written release noted the lack of organizational accountability, financial transparency, and the self-interest of BLMGN officials. Offering an alternative for the social movement, the BLM10Plus advocate "a radical vision, objectives, and strategies created through a transparent, democratic decision making process and a solid foundation of shared governance and political alignment."

Following her public assurances of more open discussion, Patrisse Cullors became Executive Director of a newly formed BLMGN Foundation (controlling the millions donated during 2020) and also established BLM Grassroots as an organization with a paid staff unaccountable to local chapters. (She has since resigned as Executive Director: source.) In the aftermath of that most recent snub to democracy and accountability, a dozen chapters comprising BLM-10Plus decided it was time to challenge what they saw as false narrative of BLM origins. Quoting pan-Africanist and Guinea-Bissau leader Amilcar Cabral to "tell no lies," they presented an unvarnished and more experiential history of the social movement for racial justice. Here is part of their account:

> The only reason BLMGN has been able to amass millions of dollars from grants and donations is because of the pain of families who have lost loved ones to state violence and the grassroots campaigns we as local chapters and organizers have waged across the country...
>
> While BLMGN acted as a convening space for local chapters engaged in on-the- ground organizing and resistance against capitalist, white supremacist and patriarchal violence, it was not where the organizing work people associate with BLM was happening. Chapters were created by organizers not BLMGN...
>
> Because BLMGN was not engaged in direct organizing, it had resources available to do other things, such as engage with media, foundations and power brokers of the systems we are fighting against to present our local

work as their own...

Our local campaigns were co-opted under the BLMGN banner, which assumed credit for our work, and consolidated credibility, power, and resources into an opaque institution... the primary "liberation" operations of BLMGN are currently social media campaigns and corporate partnerships, not on ground organizing, campaigns or protests (BLM-10PLUS 2021).

BLMGN, Cullors, Garza, and Tometi were not pleased with such a public critique by so many prominent BLM groups. Following the release, all signing chapters were removed from the BLMGN website—prompting another dozen chapters to support the BLM10Plus statement. The loose structure of BLMGN allows such subterfuge. Over the years, BLMGN leaders have referred to chapters as official, unofficial, unaffiliated, and even rogue. In fact, BLMGN has never had a clear chapter structure—no application process, eligibility requirements, approved structures, or national coordination exists—so replacing local chapters in Chicago, Boston, DC, Houston, Cleveland, and many other cities with more amenable formations posed no problem. Notably, commercial media have not reported the political division, preferring to maintain BLMGN as the legitimate voice of the movement, while corporate donations will likely sustain its ongoing electioneering, consulting, and branding—and social media activities devoid of meaningful political action.

Politics, Strategy, and Social Media

Two issues become paramount in the disparate approaches to building a social movement for racial justice and its protests: the role and effect of social media as a means of communication and the politics and strategy of the social movement. These issues are intertwined because if social media becomes the strategy, only modest reforms are realizable, then organizing mass protests for fundamental social change becomes unnecessary and non- existent. If, however, the social movement seeks mass participation and forceful demands of resistance, then social media provide one tactical means of communication as part of a larger political communication campaign. In the words and actions of BLMGN administrators, their politics, strategy and social media goals are clear: Cullors and Garza plan to control and use social media and the #BlackLivesMatter brand to help elect Democratic Party candidates. The question then is reframed: will a strategy of using social media to recruit black support for Democratic candidates secure racial justice and equality? Or at least help build a mass movement capable of ending inequality and racism?

One of the most cogent questions about BLM's politics was posed by former *Black Agenda Report* (BAR) managing editor Bruce Dixon in 2015: why doesn't #BlackLivesMatter "have any critique of the black political class, almost all Democrats, who have been key stakeholders in the building of the prison state, in gentrification and school privatization from New Orleans to Detroit and beyond, and who helped peddle the subprime mortgages to black families...and cut black family wealth by nine-tenths?" He added, "It's appropriate to wonder what a `movement' is these days. Maybe movements nowadays are really brands, to be evoked and stoked by marketers," but "it's hard to imagine a brand being accountable to its membership ... or building a new world after capitalism" (Dixon 2015).

Former BAR editor Glen Ford sharpened this critique, writing, if the only demand is that "candidates for president declare and recognize black lives matter, so what if they do? What after that? What is the real demand? Are you going to vote for these same criminals just because they said the magic words, yes, black lives matter? Movements are defined by their demands" (Ball 2015).

In other words, for Dixon and Ford, social media posts were insufficient and even disabling without clarity and participatory collaboration on the movement's political direction. Dixon deemed #BlackLivesMatter founder Alicia Garza a "brand-savvy Democrat," whose main focus is to "help select Democratic" candidates. He suggested that what BLMGN needs is "some internal discussion that's public among the members" a "lively public back and forth about what they represent" to better build a program and strategy beyond social media posts and electoral politics (Ball 2015). Unfortunately, instead of pursuing democratic discussions and collaborative decision-making, BLMGN primarily uses its social media brand as a means to advocate for their preferred Democratic Party candidates—which has not changed the policies and practices that oppress black communities across the US.

In fact, after five years of BLMGN social media posts and electoral activities, reforms "trotted out by local and national Democrats do not alter—but rather, enhance and make culturally more palatable—the police mission to contain, control, and politically neutralize Black America" (Ford 2020). Undoubtedly, the video of the George Floyd's murder resulted in mass protests by millions, which influenced public perceptions—with overwhelming majorities of Americans opposing police racist practices and supporting mass peaceful protest. So social media drew public attention to racism, which helped local coalitions and committees to mobilize millions in protest. Unfortunately, although the larger movement grew, #BlackLivesMatter reverted to a brand and now appears as a commodity. "By purchasing books we will never read, the hoodie we will never wear, the meal from a [black-owned] restaurant we will soon

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forget, the selfie at a BLM march," the #brand provides a "comfortable alternative to the destruction of systemic racism, an alternative which posits that the system can still exist in the same form if we just be a bit kinder, a bit nicer, a bit more inclusive, a bit more woke" (Fowler 2020).

Moreover, social media encourages users to hone in on "blatant, overt individual acts which we can share, post, report, comment on, obsess over and follow up on [such that] we persist in allowing this system, bloated and groaning with hate, to get stoked with the fuel of our rabid outrage, leaving little left" to actually participate in protests, strikes, marches, boycotts, and other more powerful political activities (Fowler 2020).

As noted above, dozens of BLM10Plus chapters, as well as other black-led organizations, such as the Coalition for Justice for Jamal, Mass Action for Black Liberation, and Black is Back Coalition (see https://blackisbackcoalition.org) have criticized the politics and social media practices of BLMGN. Echoing those experiences and observations, *Black Agenda Report* noted that if a movement "does not build independent nexuses of people's power," it will be "asphyxiated by the ubiquitous fingers of the Democratic Party…`defunding the police' may result in some reshuffling of local budget funds to social services, but does not in itself transfer power over those services—or the police—to the people… cutting police budgets does not alter the anti-Black nature of the police mission, and neither does adding Black cops to the blue ranks" (Ford, 2021). Glen Ford posited that "community control of the police is a project in democracy and Black self-determination, while defunding the police—inevitably, in practice—is an immersion in Democratic Party budgetary dickering that legitimizes the imposition of the police upon the people. It will suck the righteous energy out of the movement, while failing to transform any power relationships of any importance" (Ford 2021).

Certainly, social media raises awareness, often accompanied by a "woke" graphic like #Blackout Tuesday or #BlackLivesMatter that presumably incrementally chips away at centuries of racism and its contemporary refined survival. Then, a Democrat is elected president! And, "the system creaks on, panic mode is over, order is restored, more people are shot, more inequities discovered, more snappy slogans painted on Amazon boxes" (Fowler 2020). In short, raising awareness is not enough. This is true for all social movements from racial justice, to labor and women's rights, to the environment. Social media activism needs the actual physical and political power of protest.

Of course, social media is much easier than building a democratically-organized, politically-conscious social movement. Social media largely avoid confrontations with state power. Virtual protests challenge little. In contrast, reigning economic and political power will always intervene and instigate

a political backlash against actual public protests and movements. In the 1960s, for example, conversations about strategies for the civil rights movement were disrupted by "police repression" against civil rights protestors, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Black Panthers, the Nation of Islam, and other groups—underscored by the murders of King, Malcolm, Fred Hampton, and many others. Additionally, in Glen Ford's critique, a "black misleadership class" emerged to disorient and stifle independent black political activity (Ball 2015). Today, those same forces exist on steroids—even before US President Joe Biden's $350 billion gift to local departments, police budgets and forces have expanded with increased impunity—and the killings continue. Meanwhile, in the last 50 years, black representatives in Congress have increased from 13 to 57, providing more voices urging tolerance and moderation—without fundamental gains for racial equality in education (Frankenberg et al. 2019), employment (Weller & Fields 2011), housing (da Costa 2019), or health care (Young 2020).

With their dedication to electoral politics and innocuous legislative reform, might it be possible to conclude that BLMGN/M4BL and their multiple committees function as an effective ideological cover for sustaining the politics of inequality? Corporations donate millions to burnish their own woke credibility. Patronizing politicians kneel under Kente cloth and offer platitudes confirming "Black Lives Matter." Meanwhile, BLMGN positions itself as the black activism group, whilemedia ignore or obscure local protests and the larger social movement. In sum, BLMGN, M4BL, and Netroots Nation offer activists and supporters an ineffectual and romanticized view of activism reduced to hashtags and social media posts, disconnected from mass protests and independent political action for justice.

Communication and Strategies for Change

The extended unpacking of BLMGN as the leading social media component of the larger black lives matter social movement has important lessons for other social movements and their pro-democracy communication strategies. Environmental, women's rights, labor, and immigrant rights groups in the US, EU, Hong Kong, and Latin America that comprise part of larger social movements often have similar characteristics: reliance on social media at the expense of physical political protest, dysfunctional organizational structures and norms, illusions and attachments to "progressive" politicians, and a pragmatic presumption of the efficacy of limited reform. Fortunately, other social movements—such as US anti-Vietnam war movement, the Yellow Vests

in France, the Sikh farmers in India, and some indigenous and working class formations across Latin America—illustrate political programs, democratic organizational structures, and more effective strategies for building and exerting the power of collective action. The collective experiences of successful mass protest social movements have recorded several characteristics for effective social movements, including: 1) democratic structures and organization processes; 2) strategic orientation to mass actions; and 3) independence from existing economic and political power, especially including its political parties.

Democratic Decision-Making

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Fred Halstead's Out Now (1979) provides a participant's account of the anti-Vietnam war movement and the debates over independent mass protest or reliance on liberal politicians. Halstead emphasized the necessity of inclusive discussions and decisions by the social movement. Strategies, tactics, and coordinated national actions were debated and voted on by hundreds of members from diverse antiwar groups. Debates occurred between advocates of a negotiated peace, supporters of liberal antiwar candidates, and those who presented immediate US withdrawal as the central demand. Ultimately, the antiwar movement and its mass peaceful protests for "US Out Now!"—decided at public national conventions of students, organized labor, and civil rights participants—curtailed US military options in Vietnam.

In the Portuguese revolution of 1974–1975, democratic decisions and actions by the organized working class were key to the overthrow of the Salazar dictatorship. "Urban workers took control of their workplaces and farm workers took control of their farms and organized production themselves... When demands were ignored by management, workers would occupy their places of employment and in many cases set up systems of self-management... It is estimated that about 380 factories self-managed and 500 co-ops were in operation by the summer of 1975. Workers' councils and co-ops were not explicitly revolutionary, but by enacting democracy they propelled the mass movement. "While the working population used the situation to improve social conditions in their communities and workplaces through new autonomous organizations" based on democratic participation, reformist parties used the situation to gain political power in the government (Ed 2006). The dictatorship was removed, but as democratic structures were replaced with parliamentary institutions the movement subsided.

The Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela following the election of Hugo Chavez in 1998 successfully overcame government bureaucracy and private subterfuge through mass participation of thousands in democratically-organized "parallel" institutions of citizen-led missions in education, health,

housing, and nutrition (Artz 2012). Broad participation in community media and the labor movement rescued Chavez from the 2002 coup and established one of the most vibrant democracies in Latin America even when faced with the Obama-Trump- Biden sanctions that undercut production and international trade. Likewise, the widespread success and survival of the progressive "pink tide" in Latin America has depended on democratically-based protests, blockades, strikes, and the formation of independent, indigenous and working class political parties (Dangl 2019)—with social movements recently returning to power in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru.

In contrast, after the death of founder Nelson Mandela in 2013, the African National Congress quickened its drift away from its democratic roots (Darracq 2008) towards "the negation of liberation through self-interest and self-enrichment" (Sosibo 2013). Bureaucracy replaced democracy and the ANC leadership became quite corrupt, pushing the larger anti- apartheid liberation movement towards electioneering. As the ANC became less democratic and more politically distant from its members, the working class sought more democratic forms through their unions (e.g., the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa) (Jim 2014) and community-based mass organizations.

Overall, given the experiences of varied movements, one ingredient for building effective social movements seems clear—as advocated by the BLM10 Plus perspective: a *democratic* participatory process for discussing and deciding central demands and strategies must be paramount.

Mass Participation and Mass Action

The mass protests against police killings of blacks since Ferguson 2014 stirred a lingering debate over strategy and tactics for both BLM and the previous US civil rights movement, with arguments erupting over the efficacy of non-violence as a political strategy (Ciccariello-Maher 2015; Chait 2015; Coates 2015; Raymond 2015). Although those discussions provided some insightful historical and empirical perspectives, their observations obscured a more relevant component of movement power and political strategy: The efficacy of both non-violence and violence comes down to the extent of mass participation. Despite the mythic belief in non-violent civil disobedience by Ghandi and King, the essential ingredient for their political impact resulted largely from mass participation in protest. At least until social media and its wide distribution, individual non-violent protest was easily ignored, hidden from public view, and coercively punished. Likewise, violence by individuals puts them at great risk. They can be treated as criminals and muted from public debate. In contrast, mass peaceful protests (legal or illegal), such as demonstrations, marches, rallies, and even mass pickets cannot be easily ignored, nor

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easily dispersed without considerable public backlash to excessive state force. While spontaneous, sustained community-based rioting cannot be a strategic response by any social movement organization, the underlying historic, material conditions suggest such mass violence will frequently arise.

Much more importantly, in both manifestations, shared experiences, common social positions, and the collective confidence built through mass actions create social movements that cannot be ignored or easily co-opted by state authorities. Notably, as participants join mass actions, consciousness of their collective power develops. Here then is another key ingredient for an effective social movement strategy: mass actions are essential for expressing, developing, and exerting power.

Independent Class Politics

A most important element for social movement success relates to how capitalist economic and political forces secure consent from the majority of citizens. Antonio Gramsci developed the concept of hegemony (Frogacs 1989), which expresses the means and ways that dominant social forces lead allies by providing material, political, and cultural benefits to diverse social groups (Artz & Murphy 2000). While force may be the final arbiter of power, politicians and administrators find building and relying on mass consent a more effective means of control. Thus, whenever social movements become too large to ignore or dismiss, and physical force might create more unrest and opposition, effective political leaderships offer negotiation and reform. They propose to study the problem, to implement modest changes that appear to alleviate the issue. The entire institutional structure of contemporary society opposes protest and encourages civil discourse, litigation, legislation, and academic study. Such measured responses are intended to postpone, diffuse, and redirect social movement protest. Importantly, recruiting acquiescent representatives from social movements is a most effective means for winning consent or at least muting criticism of existing social relations and practices.

For example, after the Democratic Party leadership was unable to silence the Freedom Democratic Party at the 1964 convention, the party and its legislators passed several civil rights laws and opened its doors to black candidates. As the number of local and national black elected officials increased and voting rights legislation allowed more black electoral participation, it seemed to many that progress was on the horizon, and independent mass protests for civil rights receded. In fact by the early 1970s, although school segregation, housing discrimination, and inequality in employment remained, well-publicized modest reforms and increased black representation (what BAR editor Glen Ford called the "misleadership class") subverted the civil rights movement. Protests

declined, the movement became dormant. Elizabeth Martinez (2008) provided a similar account of the Chicano movement's "failure to achieve clarity about its goals and strategies" (Seelye 2021), naively expecting elected Democratic candidates to support social reform and racial equality.

This is not a new problem, although each election cycle, new believers and spokespeople emerge who advocate "lesser evil" electioneering, undercutting mass movements and protests. Since the American Federation of Labor stifled the nascent movement for a labor party in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Democratic Party has ostensibly been the party for workers (Blest 2020). However, now almost 60% of Americans favor a third-political party, so it would seem that social movements would be well-advised to adopt a strategy disconnected from the two-party electoral charade. Additionally, in a much-cited Princeton study on electoral democracy, Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page (2014) demonstrated that "economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while mass-based interest groups and average citizens have little or no independent influence" through the electoral system. In fact, history shows that every major advance for working people, blacks, women, and others has always been the result of organized mass protest—from the Bill of Rights, public education, and the 8-hour work day, to women's reproductive and employment rights, affirmative action, desegregation, civil rights, and even the modest reforms protecting the environment. Such gains all occurred following mass movements that circumvented the two-party system and threatened the economic and political status quo—a point featured in the BLM10 Plus statement.

Organizational democracy, mass action, and movement political independence appear in every successful campaign for social change and justice, whether in the US, Latin America, or elsewhere. As these essential components are produced by vibrant protest movements, they often move to more substantial manifestations, including political parties and mass social movements capable of achieving some social justice—from electoral success to more direct actions that transform and revolutionize a social order. Hugo Chavez was elected president in Venezuela, which launched a widespread, mass participation social movement of workers, indigenous, Afro-Venezuelan, women, youth, and broad sections of the middle class that began the reorganization of class society to provide housing, employment, nutrition, health care, and media access with democratic decision-making outside of the previous, bureaucratic elite government institutions. A similar process occurred following the Cochabamba water and El Alto gas "wars" in Bolivia that led to the popular Movement Towards Socialism (MAS). Evo Morales became president and

Bolivians collectively wrote their new "pluri-national" constitution enshrining indigenous rights, environmental protections, and expansive democratic processes by citizens.

Progress has been made whenever and wherever organized social movements implemented participatory democracy, mass action, and political independence from establishment parties. Too often these gains are partial, as leaders of diverse movements have undermined one or more component—subverting democracy, leading the movement away from action and towards electioneering only, or making alliances with elite formations. Such was the case with Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, the Worker's Party in Brazil, and as outlined above, the Black Lives Matter Global Network—respected leaders drifted to become administrators who arbitrarily decided the political trajectory and structure of their organization that accommodated capitalist power—without democratic participation by members and citizens.

Communication and Change

Historically, every protest that became a mass movement found its own means of communication from materials at hand. Martin Luther commissioned Lucas Cranach to make derogatory woodcuts of the papacy as part of the propaganda for the Protestant Reformation (D King 2014). Even as the Catholic Church was using print to sell indulgences to finance the Crusade against Turkey, print became the primary means for spreading the Lutheran gospel. In the 1920's, Marcus Garvey's *Negro World* was essential to distributing African and African-American writing, poetry, and culture during the Harlem Renaissance. "The binding agent for the common front" of black workers challenging colonialism in the West Indies, was the *Negro World*, which was so powerful a medium that most governments tried to ban the paper (Elkins 1972). Dockworkers in Panama went on strike when the paper was not delivered (Vincent 1972). In the late 1970s, the Sandinistas (Frente Sandinista Liberación Nacional) used spray paint, graffiti, and wall slogans to educate and organize resistance to the Somoza dictatorship (Weber 1981). One of the central revolutionary leaders, Humberto Ortega claimed that shortwave radio was essential to the insurrection that removed dictator Anastasio Somoza (Mattelart 1986).

Orality, print, radio, and then video have periodically "revolutionized" the world and social interaction. However, contrary to Marshall McLuhan (1964), the medium is not message. Light bulbs may brighten a room and cars move quickly through a landscape, changing perceptions of our surroundings. Nonetheless, neither light nor speed change the content of the room or the

environment. Likewise, the bombing of Baghdad does not change meaning from print to visual, even if readers or viewers have differing sensations. Either way, thousands died.

Print did not make the Reformation which had been brewing for centuries, it only accelerated the evangelical process. Likewise, print did not start the Garvey movement or the American and Portuguese revolution, although newspapers helped spread their radical appeals. Graffiti did not create the French student revolts in 1968. Radio did not make the Nicaraguan revolution. And social media did not unleash the Arab Spring. In each case, the means of communication allowed, indeed contributed to, the exchange of information and political protest. Also in each case, authorities have closed, censored, and restricted public access to the means of communication. Abolitionist printing presses were destroyed and their publishers killed by pro- slavery mobs in the 1830s. Since the 1930s, the last time radio was still widely available to amateur broadcasters in the US, the Federal Communications Commission has licensed radio and television broadcasting, effectively enforcing commercial control of a primary means of communication. Now, as mentioned at the opening of this essay, owners of on-line communication systems restrict or allow use of social media at their whim or at the request of governments.

In short, although authorities may attempt to control public access to and use of communication technologies, movements always find ways to communicate their concerns and demands. Movements must also always find ways to provide participants with the best means for democratic decision-making. And, importantly, as movements build on their democratic structures and practices, creating strategies and programs for change, they must find and use the most effective means of communication to educate, attract, and organize participants and supporters into protests, actions, and activities capable of advancing their interests and demands. The hegemonic response of corporations and government officials will include calls for dialogue, offers of incremental reforms, and invitations to join their institutions. Social movements must find ways to dissect, unpack, and critique every attempt to undermine their democratic processes, strategies for change, and political independence from the existing order. Social movements can employ multiple communication forms, from educational teach-ins, panels, debates, fora, and conferences, to theater, buttons, flyers, banners, posters, and mailings. Protest movements have used any and all means available to disseminate their messages and persuasion. In the 21st century that must include employing social media—as well as other technologies, such as print, radio, and oral communication—to provide opportunities for participants and supporters to exchange views, suggest

and argue over strategies and tactics, and to debate how and why the organized movement should not sacrifice its political independence as it works with allies.

When social media becomes a means for an organization to simply announce its positions or seek financial contributions, it misses its political potential—it becomes a wall between participants and the organization. If used only as a megaphone for administrators, social media fails to provide an opportunity for interaction, connection, and increased understanding and confidence. On the other hand, social media, used by democratically-led mass movements, can be more than a means to announce an event or action. Social media, even as it is structured for commercial gain, can still be used in a rudimentary fashion to reveal participant concerns and discuss preferences and ideas. Social media can become an important means to engage members and to vote on proposals central to a movement's strategy—or to decide specific tactics, such as deciding to hold teach-ins, zoom seminars, marches, rallies, pickets, boycotts, etc. Additionally, social media can educate, recruit, publicize, and mobilize participation in democratically- determined actions advancing and demonstrating the movement's power, intent, and demands.

As multiple social movements from farmers in India to coca growers in Bolivia have shown, even without social media, an organization can express the will of its members, recruit others, express its demands and exert political power. Even so, it would be a mistake not to use all the available means of persuasion and organization including social media. Although, ultimately, as the BLMGN indicates, social media can only be as instrumental for social justice and change as an organization's structure and goals allow and inspire.

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AQ10

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