

Media Across the African Diaspora

Content, Audiences, and Global Influence

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Chapter 11

Social Media and Social Justice Movements after the Diminution of Black-Owned Media in the United States

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Freedom begins the moment you realize someone else has been writing your story, and it's time you took the pen from his hand and started writing it yourself.

— Bill Moyers keynote address to the National Conference for Media Reform in Memphis, TN (2007)

Today, everyone can be a storyteller as social media and mobile streaming applications have flattened the communicative landscape. Moreover, social media platforms have the potential to change the relationship between news media and the public in significant ways, as virtually everyone now has the ability to document and live-stream events to a global audience. To say the least, social media has become a primary venue for public commentary about current events, disrupting the gate-keeping power once held by national news outlets and talk radio.

The most poignant examples of this restructuring of communicative power can be seen in social justice movements and the instant release of imagery and commentary in the wake of multiple shootings of Black men by police officers across the U.S. in recent years. For instance, Diamond Reynolds live-streamed the moments following the shooting of her fiancé, Philando Castille, when they were pulled over by police for a broken taillight in Falcon Heights, a suburb of the St. Paul and Minneapolis twin cities in Minnesota. Videos were posted online when police in Baton Rouge, Louisiana shot Alton Sterling, prompting an investigation from the U.S. Justice Department. Civil unrest followed the shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager in the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson, Missouri in the summer of 2014. As the hashtag #Ferguson trended on Twitter, national and international news outlets followed social media activity in covering the protests, looting, and militarized police response. And in Cincinnati, Ohio during the summer of 2015, Sam DuBose, an unarmed Black motorist, was shot and killed during a traffic stop by Ray Tensing, a University of Cincinnati police officer. Afterwards, local community groups led by @BlackLivesCincy and @theIRATE8 quickly mobilized on social media to decry the incident and confront competing narratives that it was justified.

A primary goal of this chapter is to understand how social justice groups and the public use social media to provide a more diverse array of commentary about the meaning and implications of civic activity, and it will show how historically marginalized groups have exercised their First Amendment rights in ways that have disrupted the gatekeeping power once held by national news outlets and networks. For Black social justice advocates, this is a significant moment, especially after Roberts Broadcasting (an African-American owned media company) announced the sale of its few television stations, as African-Americans owned the same number of full-power U.S. broadcast television stations in 2014 as they did in 1974—none (see Torres & Turner, 2013). Passage of the Telecommunications Act has hastened the diminution of minority-owned broadcast stations in the U.S. as 40 percent of minority-owned television stations were sold to nonminority entities between 1998 and 2007 (Blevins & Martinez, 2010, p. 225). As such, social media has become a vital platform for free expression for Blacks in the United States, especially on matters of social justice.

This chapter will discern specific lessons about the power and utility that social media can play in civil discourse about social justice. Understanding the impact that social media channels have on the power of voices can improve the informational, communicational, and relational livelihood of social justice movements. In today's media-saturated world, social justice efforts are necessarily linked to media access, and social media in particular, especially as ownership and control of legacy media outlets has become increasingly concentrated under neoliberal economic policy in the United States.

Additionally, this chapter applies a political economic perspective to the significance of social media platforms in social justice movements in the face of dwindling ownership of television and radio outlets by Blacks and the growth of hate speech in talk radio programming. The political economy of communication focuses on social relations organized around power and forms of control in the production, distribution, and consumption of media activities, including the use of "social networking sites to resist the concentration of power in business and government" (Mosco, 2009, p. 24). As McChesney (2016, p. ix) noted, "media and communication have significant power and influence in society, and the systems are the result of government policies." One of the primary endeavors of political economic studies of U.S. media since the late 20th century has been to understand the ways in which media systems may help advance the principles of a democratic society or reflect the more narrow interests of big business and government elites (see Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 2008; Mosco, 2009). This analysis will show that Internet-based communication and social media have provided an important opportunity to counterbalance the lack of Black voices and influence in traditional media outlets, while also recognizing

how telecommunication providers and social media mobs may temper some of this newfound success, and urge social justice movements to include media reform as part of their cause.

The Media Blackout: Minority Ownership Diminution and Hate Radio

The Federal Communication Commission's (FCC) media ownership report in November 2012 revealed a lack of diversity and demonstrated an ongoing dismal state of affairs for minority owners over the past 60 years (see FCC, 2012). Media ownership consolidation, which has been justified by the popularity of neoliberal economic philosophy, has been the most formidable factor in the diminution of minority ownership of broadcast television and radio properties, as well as the decline of diversity in media.

Neoliberal media policy emerged most notably in a famous law review article by former FCC Chairperson Mark Fowler and his chief legal advisor when they argued that the mechanisms of the marketplace would best determine the public interest, rather than any definition of the public interest created by the FCC (see Fowler & Brenner, 1982). For over three decades, neoliberal thinking has not only been prominent in media policy, but has become a dominant ideology among policymakers in Washington, DC. In general, neoliberal economic philosophy sees government rules as the problem and the marketplace as the solution, and its three primary goals include privatization of institutions, liberalization of markets, and deregulation of businesses. This kind of thinking has been evident in the FCC's review of media ownership rules, as the agency tends to reduce its knowledge base about media to matters that are primarily economic in nature, thus privileging the economic interests of commercial broadcasters over other principles, such as diversity and the concerns of racial minorities and women (Blevins & Brown, 2010).

The diversity principle is also one of the most complex, as it may involve several areas of media policy, including minority ownership and representation, consumer choice, content regulation, and ownership regulation. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 (TCA) significantly relaxed media ownership and required a biennial (now quadrennial) review of ownership rules under Title II, Section 202(h) to determine "whether any such rules are necessary in the public interest as a result of competition." The presumption of the 1996 law seemed to be that limits on broadcast ownership are no longer necessary to serve the public interest. However, the TCA did not address the impact of deregulation on diversity, or even the need for diversity.

After commencing its 2002 biennial review of media ownership rules, the FCC voted in 2003 to remove the ban on owning a television station and newspaper in the same market, as well as limitations on how many

television stations a single entity could own in a given market, and raised the cap on the proportion of television households that could be reached via the owned-and-operated stations of a single entity. The rule changes were challenged and remanded back to the FCC in *Prometheus Radio Project v. FCC* (2004). In *Prometheus Radio Project v. FCC* (2011), a federal court dismissed the proposed newspaper/broadcast cross-ownership rule and challenged the FCC to consider the impact of its proposed rule changes on minorities and women.

As part of its 2010 quadrennial review, the FCC addressed the state of media ownership for minorities and women. The FCC's (2012) report showed that women collectively or individually hold a majority of the voting interests in only 6.8 percent of full power commercial broadcast television stations; 7.8 percent of commercially licensed AM radio stations; and 5.8 percent of commercially licensed FM radio stations. Racial minorities collectively or individually held a majority of the voting interests in 2.2 percent of full power commercial broadcast television stations; 6.2 percent of commercially licensed AM radio stations; and 3.5 percent of commercially licensed FM radio stations. The bleak report led to the recharter of the FCC's Diversity Committee in March 2013 and drew attention within the agency to the lack of minority ownership.

During this time the Howard Media Group, based in Howard University (a historically Black university), began challenging the empirical basis of FCC research on media ownership and argued for the agency to employ specific research methods, such as ethnography, which may help provide a much broader array of evidence than methodologies that only aim to assess economic efficiency (see Howard Media Group, 2013, 2017). The inclusion of expert knowledge and research about culture and content would better inform the FCC's decision-making about media ownership and counter the dominant neoliberal economic paradigm. FCC Commissioner Mignon Clyburn, the first and (to date) only African-American woman to ever serve as a commissioner on the FCC, has continued to push the agency to promote the principle of diversity (Radio Ink, 2017, January 26). Moreover, Clyburn (2017, p. 3) has expressed dismay that despite the acute lack of ownership diversity and financial barriers for women and minorities to own and operate broadcast facilities, "the only advocacy of many is for the elimination of rules that were created to prevent the concentration of station ownership into the hands of a few large media conglomerates." The concern is that ownership matters; and one should look no further than the dominance of politically conservative talk radio programming and the absence of other voices as an example of the impact of radio ownership consolidation.

Clear Channel (now iHeartMedia) amassed over 1,200 radio stations in the decade following the TCA and along with Cumulus and Citadel owned the bulk of U.S. stations by 2009 (Pew, 2009). During this time, right-wing talk show hosts Rush Limbaugh, Michael Savage, Michael

Reagan, Glenn Beck, Neal Boortz, and similar syndicated programs saturated the U.S. airwaves, as conservatives commanded over 90 percent of the weekday news/talk programming among the top five radio owners. Such right-wing radio jocks impressed neoconservative political and social ideals, and neoliberal economic philosophy upon their audiences, and at worst, deteriorated into “hate speech” as program hosts routinely demonized political opponents through sophistic discourse (see Bill Moyers Journal, 2008, September 12). Research by Noriega and Iribarren (2012) also documented the systematic use of hate speech in widely broadcast conservative talk-radio programming.

While there is a correlation between the consolidation of radio ownership and the growth of right-wing radio, it is not necessarily the cause. Rather, the expansion of white male conservative talk shows since mid-1990s was part and parcel of the so-called “Republican Revolution” after the 1994 midterm congressional elections, and its growth has been fostered by media ownership consolidation that allowed a handful of powerful radio operators to leverage syndicated programs across their networks featuring hosts that advocated neoliberal economic policies and cultural politics consistent with their world view. For instance, shortly after Mark Lloyd was appointed as Chief Diversity Officer of the FCC in 2009, radio hosts Glenn Beck and Michael Savage dismissed him as a “Marxist” and “Communist vermin” that would threaten broadcasting (Bogado, 2009, November 1). A study of the 10,506 commercially licensed U.S. radio stations found that outlets owned by racial minorities and women were less likely to air conservative talk programming, while group-owned stations were more likely to air conservative-oriented programming (Center for American Progress & Free Press, 2007). The lack of minority ownership in radio broadcasting intensifies the problem, as targeted minority groups do not have equal access to the medium to present opposing views (see Blevins & Martinez, 2010, p. 232). Stimulating more diverse broadcast ownership is one way to counterbalance the plethora right-wing voices on the radio. Utilizing online media platforms, including social media, is another.

The Battle for Broadband

The Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) was part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) and provided over \$4 billion in federal grants to be administered by the U.S. Department of Commerce and National Telecommunications and Information Administration to help facilitate broadband Internet access and adoption in unserved and underserved areas of the United States, including rural and urban regions. BTOP presented an opportunity for media reformers to connect their digital justice efforts to the broader social justice movement. For instance, the Detroit-based Allied

Media Projects and Philadelphia's Media Mobilizing Project used the occasion to build coalitions among media reformers and social justice groups focused on an array of concerns, including urban housing, workers' rights, and environmental issues, among other causes (see Breitbart, 2016). However, long-term efforts to sustain broadband access and media diversity in the FCC were cut short by Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives in 2011 when they passed an amendment to their spending bill defunding Chief Diversity Officer Lloyd's salary at a time when he was working to spread broadband Internet access to low-income people (Egerton, 2011, February 17). The BTOP funding was a one-time occasion, but as Breitbart (2016, p. 113) observed:

it provided an opportunity for an enduring impact on broadband in the United States. In Philadelphia and Detroit, we were able to use the grant-seeking process as a vehicle for visioning and organizing, and for bringing new voices and audiences into the conversation about our shared digital future.

Long-term social justice movements playing out on social media should take note that their efforts should not be divorced from the media reform movement. As Freedman and Obar (2016, p. 7) recognized:

[W]e cannot rely on mainstream media to adequately represent our lives as they are lived, to hold power to account and to reflect honestly on the media's own interconnections with established power; we are forced to make our own media.

In today's media-saturated world, social justice depends on communication platforms that allows for access by all and to all.

Social Media Power in St. Louis and Cincinnati

The power of social media to help drive social justice movements was, perhaps, first recognized in Guatemala in 2009 after the killing of Rodrigo Rosenberg, as social media provided a forum for Guatemalans to organize and mobilize while expressing their concerns about violence in their country (see Harlow, 2012). Two years later, social media helped bring the 2011 Arab Spring to the global stage as waves of protests against repressive regimes swept across parts of the Middle East and North Africa (see Howard et al., 2011).

In the United States, the role of social media in social justice efforts was first noticed in the Occupy Wall Street movement (see DeLuca, Lawson, & Sun, 2012), but became prominent in the development of the Black Lives Matter phenomenon after George Zimmerman was acquitted in 2013 for the murder of Trayvon Martin, and then in the events

following the shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson during the summer of 2014 (see Freelon, McIlwain, & Clark, 2016). Social media provided instantaneous imagery and commentary in the civil unrest that followed. As the hashtag #Ferguson trended on Twitter, national news outlets followed social media activity in covering the protests, looting, and militarized police response.

Similar disturbances occurred in Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine neighborhood in 2001 after an unarmed Black teenager, Timothy Thomas, was shot and killed by Stephen Roach, a white police officer. Despite the similarity, the turmoil in Cincinnati lasted four days, while disquiet in Ferguson went on for weeks. However, Facebook and Twitter were not in existence then, and the use of mobile technology and social media platforms seems to have been a significant factor in drawing attention to more recent events. Social media appeared to change the relationship between news media and the public, as tweets and posts did more than just reiterate the images and messages from traditional news outlets about the events in Ferguson. Rather, social media was the platform for people in Ferguson to document what was happening to a global audience and the primary venue for public commentary.

Using the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, individuals juxtaposed two dissimilar images of themselves: one, a wholesome picture of the individual, perhaps attired in cap and gown at a high school graduation; the other, the same person in street attire, maybe holding an alcoholic beverage or cigarette. The question being: if the police killed me, which picture would be in the news—the wholesome high school graduate or the menace to society? By featuring two contrasting images of the same person, these posts demonstrated that one picture alone doesn't tell the whole story of a person, and questioned the tendency of news media to focus on the one image that contributes to the 'menace to society' narrative.

In reaction to eyewitness accounts that Brown was surrendering with his "hands up" before being shot, several posts on Twitter using the hashtag #HandsUpDontShoot featured images of people holding their hands up. One of the most potent was a video of kids on a school bus chanting: "hands up, don't shoot." The message suggested that Michael Brown "could have been me" and engages concern about police officers overestimating the threat posed by Black suspects and too quickly responding with deadly force.

Social media provided a forum for a community in Ferguson, and the public at large, to tell its own stories in the aftermath of the shooting and challenge the images that tend to pervade national news. In a mediated world dominated by national outlets, social media allowed the public to exercise its First Amendment rights in a way that changed the balance of communicative power and enhanced everyone's ability to relate the meaning of the events in Ferguson to their own personal lives.

Papacharissi (2015, p. 309) explained this kind of phenomenon as affective expression in the form of networked publics that “want to tell their story collaboratively and on their own terms.” Moreover, these “affective publics” tend to “produce disruptions... of dominant political narratives by presencing [sic] underrepresented viewpoints” (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 19). For social justice movements, social media has presented significant opportunities for the disturbance and redirection of dominant and oppressive narratives.

Making Affective Social Justice Movements Effective Media Reformers

Social media appeared to change the relationship between mainstream news media and the public, as tweets and posts didn’t just reiterate the images and messages from traditional news outlets about the events in Ferguson. Rather, social media was the platform for people in Ferguson to document what was happening to a global audience and the primary venue for public commentary. For instance, the conversation from (and about) Ferguson reached as far as the Middle East, where Palestinians tweeted in solidarity about racial injustice (see Goldstein, 2014, August 15). Several players for the then St. Louis Rams attracted international attention when they came on to the field before a National Football League game imitating the #HandsUpDontShoot thread on Twitter (McCormack, 2014, November 30). Social justice advocates were able to help drive the local, national, and international conversation through social media.

Similarly, in Cincinnati, social justice organizations @BlackLivesCincy and @theIRATE8 utilized multiple social media platforms in a sustained effort that involved a broader array of social justice issues beyond the Sam DuBose shooting. For instance, “theIRATE8” group name refers to the percent of University of Cincinnati’s student body that are Black. The organization launched a website (www.theirate8.com/) and social media accounts on Twitter (@theIRATE8) and Facebook (www.facebook.com/theirate8/). Although, the shooting death of an unarmed Black man during a traffic stop by a white university police officer was the initial focusing event for the group, their scope of concern quickly broadened to include reforming policies on University of Cincinnati’s campus, including retention of Black students and increasing faculty diversity. TheIRATE8 keeps a log of media coverage of the organization by legacy news outlets (see www.theirate8.com/in-the-media.html), which also provides a record of their impact on civil discourse about social justice issues. The DuBose shooting was also a focusing event for @BlackLivesCincy, but the group has also addressed a much broader range of social justice issues on its Twitter account and Facebook page (www.facebook.com/BlackLivesMatterCincinnati/), including transgender

rights, support for rape survivors, refugee and immigration policy, poverty, healthcare, environmental justice, and many others. Certainly, the organizational acumen of these groups was a primary reason for their successes, but their engagement with social media and utilization of digital media resources to tell their own stories was also an instrumental factor.

The use of mobile streaming video technology (MSVT), such as Facebook Live and Periscope, which can be used with Twitter, have also emerged as important tools for broadcasting and documenting events of interest to social justice movements.

In sum, MSVTs are best understood as something akin to live broadcast television with two major differences. First, their use of mobile phones to capture and stream good, quality video means that anyone, anywhere, has the ability to become a live video broadcaster so long as they have a capable smartphone, and this represents a significant change in the barriers for entry to live streaming. Second, dissemination of this video is highly decentralized along social network lines, meaning the power to capture audience attention for events such as news has shifted away from the singular format of the television channel such that it now includes distribution along social networks.

(Stewart & Littau, 2016, p. 316)

The development of MSVTs on social media networks represent an important shift away from an audience-based media model, such as television broadcasting in which a limited number of stations distribute programming for mass consumption, to a user-created content model where everyday citizens are their own storytellers. These citizen-storytellers are not only generating their own content, but they are also reframing stories that used to be in the more exclusive domain of professional media.

While social media have proven to be valuable platforms for social justice movements, it is important to keep in mind that these outlets and MSVTs depend upon broadband telecommunication networks that are subject to the same forces of neoliberal economic philosophy and cultural politics that affected broadcasting. Just as broadcast ownership deregulation limited program diversity, there could be a similar effect upon free expression taking place on Internet platforms as the FCC repeal of its network neutrality rules take effect on April 23, 2018. This alters the model that previously classified Internet Service Providers (ISPs) as common carriers, so that Comcast, Verizon, AT&T, and other providers do not block or degrade access to specific sites and services or charge customers extra fees for using sites and services that may compete with their own. Doing away with these important consumer protections

allows ISPs to act as an editor of our online experiences and potentially limit the interconnectivity of user-centric platforms and services that have proven useful in social justice activism.

Access to mobile consumer technologies and high-speed broadband services may already be constrained based upon one's financial wherewithal; and, because Blacks and other racial minorities are more likely than whites to rely on mobile broadband services for access to social media applications, they are also more prone to discriminatory marketing practices based upon predictive analytics of their personal data through pay-for privacy plans or service tiers required by their broadband providers (see Blevins, 2016, p. 26). Consequently, social justice efforts toward media reform must encompass the principle of network neutrality to provide better access to information and call for greater privacy protection online to help ensure that social justice advocates are not sanctioned for their choice of online activities or left on the wrong side of the digital divide.

Social justice groups in St. Louis, Cincinnati, and elsewhere should include media reform in their broader agendas for social justice following the examples set out in Detroit and Philadelphia. Those committed to media reform for social justice will also need to bear in mind that they will face "formidable challenges," including

entrenched commercial interests and media conglomerates;... neo-liberal governments; a general public often disenfranchised, digitally illiterate and not focused on issues of media reform; and always, the uphill battle of organization, mobilization, and influence.

(Freedman & Obar, 2016, p. 3)

Still, the "struggles for communication rights are part of a wider challenge to social and economic inequalities and an essential component of a vision for a just and democratic society" (Freedman & Obar, 2016, p. 5). Free expression and the means of free expression are worth struggling for, and they are an essential component of social justice in the digital age. As Bill Moyers said in his keynote address to the 2007 Media Reform Conference in Memphis: "freedom begins the moment you realize someone else has been writing your story, and it's time you took the pen from his hand and started writing it yourself."

Freedom of expression is essential to the pursuit of social justice, and social media has proven to be a valuable platform to raise concerns and represent underrepresented voices. However, it does not galvanize action in and of itself. In each of the cases discussed in this chapter, from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter, it took boots-on-the-ground activism to keep the social justice narrative alive.

While social media is an important part of empowering social justice advocates as storytellers, we would do well to remember that as a

medium of expression, it also empowers hate groups and others who use these digital tools as form of intimidation through trolling, cyberbullying, and social media mobbing (see Blevins, 2016, August 28). Social media mobs relentlessly barrage their targets with insults, threats, and vulgar memes intending to drown out more respectful voices in the process.

Although social media may provide a venue for civic disruption for both the advocates and detractors of social justice, it is nonetheless a more equal platform for individual expression and public discussion. Furthermore, as this political economic analysis has shown, social media has demonstrated its usefulness in advancing the cause of social justice and has potential for further application in future efforts, so long as mobile telecommunication networks remain neutral carriers of content and services.

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