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Chapter 11

SOCIAL MEDIA

From Digital Divide to Empowerment

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From Digital Divide to Empowerment

Gina Masullo Chen

Social media erupted after the death of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager shot by a white police officer in suburban St. Louis in August 2014 (Southall 2014; Deutsch and Lee 2014). Within days, 6 million tweets were posted (Axelrod 2014) about the shooting and its turbulent aftermath, which included protests, the National Guard being called in, and reporters being arrested (Davey, Eligon, and Blinder 2014). Photographs, videos, and often misinformation about the case rocketed through Twitter, Facebook, Vine, Snapchat, and other social media channels (Bilton 2014). In many ways, this frenzy was nothing new. Other high-profile news stories, from Hurricane Irene in 2011 to the Boston Marathon bombing two years later, have played out in real time over social media (Davis, Alves, and Sklansky 2014; Frebert, Saling, Vidoloff, and Eosco 2013). However, what sets the shooting in Ferguson, MO, apart is that it offers a vivid example of the potential for civic engagement and empowerment through social media for people of color. As Jim Axelrod wrote in a piece for CBS news online: “But what is new about Ferguson is the role of social media in spreading the message wider and more quickly, particularly for African Americans” (2014: 1). Social media in the Ferguson case played a galvanizing role: It united people of color and gave them a voice heard around the world. In a way, this experience was similar to how social media introduced speed and interactivity into traditional forms of social mobilization in the 2011 Egyptian Revolution (Eltantawy and Wiest 2011). As such, it demonstrates the interplay between social media and race and how technology offers new avenues of communication for people who may have lacked a means to express themselves in more traditional media channels.

This chapter will examine social media and race, drawing on Critical Race Theory and exploring the role of the Internet in the lives of people of color. First, I will discuss how traditional media and the digital divide historically have left people of color with less of a voice. Then I will propose how social media have—perhaps in a small way—changed that experience in some cases, providing a means for civic engagement and empowerment for people of color. Finally, I will conclude with what the future may hold for the intersection of social media and race. For this discussion, social media are defined as websites where people create profiles about themselves and converse with others (boyd and Ellison 2007; Thelwall 2008). The definition includes platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

Historically, traditional media, including television, newspapers, and movies, have offered two avenues for people of color—invisibility or marginalization. Critical Race Theory argues that the reason for this is that racism is not an aberration but is embedded in our culture as a means of reinforcing the power structure of the dominant white group (Delgado and Stefanic 2012). Stuart Hall (1998) argues persuasively that this point of view was bolstered in part when the media became mass in an effort to appeal to the growing audience at the close of the nineteenth century. Hall (1992) further posits that the media do not merely inaccurately portray race, but construct and distort race to create a “media-mediated” (14) version that does not reflect reality. Some argue that this so-called “old-fashioned” (Sears, Hetts, Sidanius, and Bobo 2000: 18) or overt racism has been eradicated. However, studies of news reports, newspapers, television shows, and movies suggest that is not the case (e.g., Campbell 1995; Campbell, LeDuff, Jenkins, and Brown 2012; Johnson, Dolan, and Sonnett 2011; Liebler 2010; Merskin 1998; Ono and Pham 2009). For example, the stereotypical “mammy” character that has plagued media depictions of African-American women for decades (Collins 2000) has gained new energy as male actors don dresses and re-create this portrayal in movie characters, such as Madea in Tyler Perry’s films, Rasputia in Eddie Murphy’s *Norbit*, and Martin Lawrence as Big Momma (G. Chen, Williams, Hendrickson, and L. Chen 2012). Similarly, time has done little to diffuse the media overrepresentation of African Americans and Latinos as law-breakers (Dixon and Linz 2000; Campbell et al. 2012), Asian women as exotic and Asian men as asexual and nerdy (Ono and Pham 2009), or Latinas as maids (Soto 2008). Even reality shows and YouTube videos perpetuate these stereotypical depictions (Tyree 2011; Guo and Harlow 2014).

In other cases, people of color are symbolically annihilated (Strinati 2004) in the media by not being represented at all (Campbell et al. 2012; Johnson et al. 2011; Liebler 2010; Merskin 1998; Ono and Pham 2009). This further marginalizes these groups by giving them no voice. In addition a *myth of marginality* persists, as people of color are portrayed as the “other” to the dominant white society (Chuang 2012; Liebler 2010). Hall (2000) notes that this *inferential racism* is “more widespread—and in many ways, more insidious—because it is largely *invisible* even to those who formulate the world in its terms” (274). Adding to this problem is the fact that journalists and other media professionals historically have not been racially diverse, and efforts to dismantle this reality have largely failed (Melinger 2013). This norm has fostered media that perpetuate a more subtle racism that reflects the “preferred meaning of a still dominant white society” (Jenkins 2012: 24) in such aspects as news story source and topic selection (Owens 2008). Discussions of race end up as problems that need to be solved (Hall 2000), and journalistic routine practices reinforce a “mediated reality” (Shoemaker and Reese 2014: 39) that promotes the dominant society, rather than an accurate view.

Internet as “Great Equalizer”?

In the early days of the World Wide Web, some trumpeted the Internet as a solution to the divisions between the races and other groups. It was thought that the Web offered a way for people to connect across boundaries in virtual communities (Rheingold 2000). Many hoped the Internet would diminish hierarchies between groups, giving the Web the power to “redefine dominant relationship patterns that are culturally instigated” (Ebo 1998: 3). Online communication fosters *weak ties* (Granovetter 1973; Chen 2011) between people, and these weak ties were thought to encourage diverse relationships

(Rheingold 2000). The relative anonymity of the Internet suggested the potential for cohesion among divergent groups that had been traditionally separated, paving the way, proponents argued, for a more egalitarian society. In addition, the Web can de-emphasize visual identities, so the characteristics of a person may be less apparent (Ebo 1998). Certainly, in some cases, this proved true. For example, Mehra, Merkel, and Bishop (2004) found the Internet could be empowering for marginalized groups including African-American women, low-income families, and sexual minorities. Blogging in particular promised a digital democracy because almost anyone could do it, for free (Gilmer 2004; Schradie 2012). However, another viewpoint proposed that virtual communities would mimic the biases of race, class, and gender in the offline world. This “cyberghetto” perspective suggested that hegemonic powers that fostered inequitable divisions offline would hold sway online, creating a hierarchical virtual world (Ebo 1998). Differences in access to computers and the Internet furthered this view, leading to a digital divide between those who have technology and those who do not. These differences break down on various overlapping social categories, including race, class, geographic location, and education (Schradie 2012; Warren 2007). The result was a digital inequality that mirrored the inequities perpetuated by the norms of society as a whole.

Against this backdrop, social media’s invention offered a glimmer of hope for greater equanimity in media. Whites initially dominated social media, much as they had other forms of media. Early on, racial differences were found in which platforms people used (Hargittai 2008). However, shifts began to take place as the smartphone—rather than a laptop or desktop computer—became the tool of choice for social media use. For example, a Pew Research survey of 6,010 American adults found that African Americans continue to be less likely than whites to use the Internet and have high-speed broadband access at home, but these differences have largely disappeared when it comes to mobile platforms (Smith 2014). In fact, African Americans are the most active mobile Internet users, and their numbers are growing faster than any other group (Horriagan 2009). Among Internet users, social media adoption rates are nearly identical for whites (72 percent) and blacks (73 percent), and almost ubiquitous for those in the 18–29-year-old category of both racial groups (Smith 2014). African-American rates of Twitter use (22 percent) exceed those of whites (16 percent), and younger blacks have particularly high Twitter user rates (40 percent; Smith 2014). Similarly, 68 percent of Latino Internet users say they use social media, compared with 58 percent of all Americans online, and this percentage climbs to 84 percent for 18–29-year-old Latinos (Lopez, Gonzalez-Barrera, and Patten 2013). Conversely, Asian Americans have always been the most wired segment of the U.S. population, exceeding all other racial groups in terms of percentage of Internet users (Spooner 2001). Of course, it is important to note that people of color using social media still comprise a small percentage of the overall population of that group. However, as social media usage grows among people of all racial groups, these platforms offer some opportunities for expression that were missing in earlier media forms.

Social Media Offers Public Voice

In the Ferguson shooting of an unarmed black man, for example, social media gave African Americans a channel to challenge or add to the discourse about the incident that traditional news outlets were reporting. Citizens were able to shift the discussion from the shooting itself to a dialogue about how law enforcement responds to unarmed black men. To make this point, one young black man posted two pictures of himself on

Twitter (Vega 2014). One picture showed him dressed in a tuxedo with a saxophone around his neck, and the other depicted him wearing a black T-shirt and a bandana with his finger pointing toward the camera. The *New York Times* reported on the pictures and interviewed the man, Tyler Atkins. Atkins noted in the article that he felt Brown's identity in the Ferguson case was distorted by negative stereotypes, and the same would have happened to Atkins if he had been wearing the T-shirt versus the tuxedo (Vega 2014). This example is instructive because without social media Atkins would not have had the power to communicate about the shooting in a way that shifted the discourse and garnered him coverage from arguably the most powerful newspaper in America. Twitter gave him a platform to express his views that led to coverage of this issue. Certainly, Atkins was not unique in his argument that stereotypes about race may have played a role in the shooting. However, his viewpoint became part of a drumbeat of sentiments on social media and "helped propel and transform a local shooting into a national cause" (Vega 2014: 1).

In many ways, the Brown shooting mirrors how social media played a role in the 2012 Trayvon Martin case. In that case, George Zimmerman, a Hispanic neighborhood watch volunteer, was accused of shooting Martin, an unarmed black teenager, as Martin walked to a Florida house where he was staying as a guest (Alvarez 2012). Zimmerman reported he shot Martin in self-defense and was later acquitted of second-degree murder, sparking a furor on social media about whether the verdict was fair (Ehrlich 2013; Williams-Harris 2013). People used their Facebook feeds to comment on the case. Some replaced their profile pictures with a black square or a silhouette depicting Martin in a hoodie, the garment he had been wearing when he was shot (Williams-Harris 2013). Protestors used social media to express their views on the case—in support of both Zimmerman and Martin. Traditional media sources then covered these online protests, tweets, and Facebook posts, adding legitimacy to the discourse and extending their reach. In a very real way, these examples show how African Americans were able to disrupt the "distorting mirror" that Hall (1992: 14) argues traditional media hold up to reality and replace that mirror with messages they felt needed to be added to the public debate. Certainly, it would be misguided to attribute to a tweet or a status update the power to overturn decades of inferential or overt racism. Yet clearly social media offered a new avenue to proclaim concerns for those who previously had few options.

Power of the #Hashtag

Another means by which social media may offer a voice to people of color is through the use of the *hashtag*, a hash or pound symbol that is used to label tweets on Twitter (Brock 2012; Chang 2010; Small 2011). Hashtags began as a means to help sort information on Twitter, but they have morphed into a "user-created meta-discourse convention" (Brock 2012: 534) that allows people to imbue emotion in their tweets. Papacharissi and Oliveira (2012) note that hashtags point to Twitter's role as a stream of social awareness and present a way for users to highlight what they think is news. On Twitter and other forms of social media, people imagine an audience in their heads (Marwick and boyd 2011), and then they target that audience with their messages. As a result, the hashtag can provide a powerful means for people of color to highlight their messages as a way to engage with their imagined audience and share what they see as valuable. For example, in both the Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown shootings, hashtags developed organically around specific content related to the topic. After Martin's death, #JusticeForTrayvon

gained traction on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook (Williams–Harris 2013). In addition, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown and #DontShoot were used to raise concerns about police officers’ use of force against people of color after Brown died (Deutsch and Lee 2014).

In a more global sense, the hashtag #BlackTwitter has gained prominence as a rallying virtual place for African–American Twitter users (Florini 2014; Brock 2012). #BlackTwitter is used for a variety of topics, but its power is how it creates a “social public” (Brock 2012: 530) as users generate culturally relevant content and disseminate it to their imagined audience, the online black community. As such, #BlackTwitter—and more recently #BlackLivesMatter—has become a means of *signifyin’*—a term Florini defines as a “marker of black racial identity that indexes black popular culture” (2014: 227). Brock (2012) suggests that using this hashtag can be “understood as a discursive, public performance of black identity” (537). Brock (2012: 539) explains further:

The signifyin’ hashtag invites an audience, even more so than the publication of a Tweet to one’s followers, by setting the parameters of the discourse to follow. It’s also a signal that the Twitterer is part of a larger community and displays her knowledge of the practice, the discourse, and the group’s worldview.

Much of the power of social media to give people of color a voice is because it costs nothing, and ideas can rapidly gain currency across a large group of people. For example, when a soccer play at Syracuse University in Upstate New York was videotaped using racial slurs, students at that university responded on Twitter by creating the hashtag #ITooAmSU to share their stories of inequity and stereotypes (Polino 2014). The effort began as a form of self-expression, but it has grown to an effort to bring people together and even organize formal events to combat racism (Polino 2014). As such, social media has provided a technological method for people of color from across the world to unite virtually and share ideas with the larger public. The technology itself provides a wider audience than any individual could have captured alone.

Social Media and an Informed Electorate

Social media may also have an influence on giving people of color a say in politics. Research has shown that the Internet and other technologies have the power to invigorate political discourse (Papacharissi 2004). Social media became a hallmark of the campaign for President Obama’s election to his first term in 2008 (Katz, Barris, and Jain 2013; Garcia–Castañon, Rank, and Barreto 2011). President Obama’s use of digital media is credited in part with attracting African Americans and Latinos to register and vote, particularly in Southern states (Stern and Rookey 2013). It also illustrated a means by which candidates could spread a message without the filter of traditional media, offering, perhaps, a more level playing field for future candidates of color (Ford, Johnson, and Maxwell 2010).

At the same time, online participation in politics skyrocketed in 2008, as more than half of American adults turned to the Internet to learn about the campaign or the political process, including 66 percent of black Internet users and 64 percent of Hispanic Internet users (Smith 2009). Garcia–Castañon and colleagues’ (2011) analysis of telephone survey data from 4,563 registered voters found that across all racial groups, people who used the Internet to gain political information were more likely to participate politically, but the effect was strongest for African Americans. Certainly, it would be myopic to attribute too much power to social media. Other research suggests (e.g., Yamamoto and Kushin 2014)

that turning to social media for campaign information is also positively related to cynicism and apathy, at least among college students. However, clearly from the 2008 presidential election onward, social media has offered a means by which anybody—and particularly groups historically left out of the media conversation—can join and become more informed members of the electorate.

Conclusion

In summary, social media provides some form of technological solution to the lack of voice that people of color have encountered in traditional media for decades. Because social media are not tied to broadband access or desktop and laptop computers, they offer a means to bridge—in a small way—the digital divide. Those who cannot afford or gain access to a computer can still disseminate their opinions using social media on smartphones. This provides a new opportunity for those previously left out of the public debate by traditional media to both spread their messages and gain a larger audience through the virality of social media that was unheard a mere decade ago. Linguistic tools that have developed on social media, such as the hashtag, offer a means for people of color to gather together virtually, providing a stronger outlet through sheer numbers. In particular, virtual communities that have developed around specific hashtags, such as #BlackTwitter and #BlackLivesMatter, offer a promise of civic engagement through social media. However, despite these positives, clearly much of the societal racial division offline is apparent online as well. The “cybertopia” (Ebo 1998: 2) dreamed of in the early days of the Internet has not transpired, but social media offers fertile ground for a more egalitarian media reality in the future. Whether that will happen will depend on how much people seize the opportunity that social media offers for providing a voice and how strongly social media can resist falling prey to the social norms that led to the traditional inequities based on race in society.

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