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A New Age of Activism

One minute I am sitting in the front seat of an Uber, tears welling up in my eyes as we drive to the White House, and two months later I am standing feet away from Angela Davis with tears in my eyes once again, listening as she preaches about unity and hope. I had no idea my first act of activism would take place only four months after moving to Washington, D.C, and nobody had any idea what started as a simple Facebook event, would spark a movement felt across the globe.

With the rise of social media came new ways for individuals to communicate their ideas to each other. It gave non-profit organizations and politicians the power to reach millions of people in 140 characters or less. Social media also established websites like Facebook which allow us to broadly share articles and events with family members, friends, or acquaintances with an instant click. Prior movements, such as the 1997 Million Woman March, relied primarily on word-of-mouth and local grassroots efforts. With the 2008 Obama Campaign, the internet's value in driving political change nationally came more to the forefront. The use of social media platforms and the rise of political or social activism have become intrinsically linked. Nowhere has that been better demonstrated than with individuals resisting the Trump presidency in mass numbers and unprecedented ways. The rise of social media has sparked a new age of American activism. Political and social activism is surrounding us everywhere and as a result getting information is easier and unavoidable. However, instant accessibility to people and causes that

mirror an individual's' own beliefs could result in armchair activism based on the online bubble they tailor for themselves.

The rise of social media wouldn't be possible without the internet. Barack Obama was the first candidate to take advantage of the internet with his outreach to voters. Although candidates prior to him used it, Obama was the first one to utilize the internet successfully to engage with thousands for volunteer opportunities and support. According to Dana R. Fisher, a professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Maryland, "By the time of the general election, the campaign reported that 13 million people were actively working on the campaign through the MyBO site" (Fisher 129). Prior to Obama, no other candidate garnered this much support through the internet, especially from the youth population. He could reach out to millions of people from various locations across the country that he wouldn't have been able to directly contact before. President Obama sparked the online movement, "the 2008 election helped do for the Internet what the 1960 election did for television: legitimize its role and demonstrate its potential" (Heaney qtd. in Fisher 127). The Obama campaign didn't only reach out to millions and raise money, their website also motivated individuals to leave the comfort of their homes and volunteer, and more importantly, vote. While money and assistance through his campaign site were certainly crucial, all of it would be negated if Obama didn't win the election. He used the internet to get his message across in a way that resonated with people. Obama's website was a tool to gain support, volunteers and spread his message of hope – it wasn't, and should not have been, his whole campaign. The potential for the internet has only grown from 2008 and has played a key part in political activism.

With the help of the internet, social media was established. The increased presence and functions of social media are providing individuals with the information they need to be more

aware of the news and events happening around them. People are relying on social media more than ever before and the percentage is rapidly increasing. According to a study completed by journalists Jeffrey Gottfried and Elisa Shearer through the Pew Research Center, in 2012 "49% of U.S. adults reported seeing news on social media" in contrast to a similar question asked by them in 2016 where now "A majority of U.S. adults – 62% – get news on social media, and 18% do so often" (Gottfried et al). People rely on applications such as Twitter and Facebook to keep up with current events and stay politically active. The need for newspapers and television is decreasing; all it takes is a smartphone to stay up-to-date. As a result, it is easier for individuals to get information quickly and constantly. People no longer need to be at home to have access to the news - all they need is service and Wi-Fi. Therefore, individuals have the option to constantly follow what is happening around the world rather than only a couple hours per day. Based on the people you follow or befriend, individuals have the option to be surrounded by news that reflects their own values and interests with options to ignore dissenting views, which could become problematic and discourage constructive conversation. While all social media is rising, the most popular source of news, Facebook, provides it for "44% of the general population" (Gottfried et al). Nearly half of the country rely on Facebook to stay current, making the content they provide more important than ever before.

Facebook is aware of their influence and is capitalizing on their popularity. In a report in *Bustle* from journalist Kerry Flynn, approximately two months after Inauguration Day, "Facebook officially released a tool that lets its users... easily contact their local officials. It's called 'Town Hall,' reminiscent of what Facebook likes to see itself as, especially in political discussion" (Flynn). This feature provides users with the option to find their local representatives' information and future town dates; all it takes is a zip code. Not only is this a

chance for people to become more politically active and associate with the individuals who are meant to represent them and their best interests, but it showcases how social media itself is adapting to the 21st century and the new active political climate. Going even further, Facebook also announced that “it will launch local election reminders — for the first time ever — to get out the vote” (Flynn). While previously people may have used social media to escape politics, it has now become a main source of information. On Election Days in the future, you won’t be able to scroll through your Facebook Newsfeed without seeing a reminder to vote. Politics is unavoidable unless you disconnect from social media altogether. Facebook understands their power on society and they are using it to provide even better resources for its users and make it easier for people to get involved.

Facebook isn’t the only form of social media capitalizing on the new age of activism, Twitter is also taking advantage, and in some cases, sparking the movements. According to the Pew Research Center, “nearly six-in-ten Twitter users (59%) get news on Twitter” making them the second most-used social media site for news (Gottfried et al). While Facebook is often used to provide information concerning resources and events, Twitter gives organizations and people the opportunity to voice their opinions. According to Van Newkirk II, a politics and policy journalist for *The Atlantic*, “Twitter has grown into a force that has bolstered grassroots conversations, disrupted the top-down nature of political leadership and thought, and has given voice to groups long hidden on the political periphery.” With Twitter’s platform, it’s easy for messages to reach millions of people through a simple re-tweet by a celebrity or politician. Additionally, it allows everyone to speak their mind -- not just wealthy, famous people. As Newkirk emphasizes, “This illustrates the key power of Twitter in providing meaningful opportunities to engage and push policy in ways that marginalized groups and minorities simply

did not have in the past.” Every type of person has the power to enforce their own ideas. Twitter only restricts character count, not opinions, making it a platform for every individual. Twitter also makes it easier to spread information in quicker ways than Facebook can. Followers can share their tweets to random people across the globe, rather than just friends in a social circle, and the Tea Party was the first group to realize this.

While Democrats and political-leaning leftists are currently utilizing social media, Republicans and the Tea Party started their own movement in response to the Obama-era. As Newkirk explains, "The Tea Party was one of the first American political structures that could actually be said to owe its existence to Twitter, and it was arguably the first movement to fully harness the power of Twitter to bind and amplify groups of people who were geographically distant but ideologically similar" (Newkirk). They noticed how, unlike Facebook who just connects people to mutual friends or family, Twitter can connect you more broadly to people from all around the globe. They connect ideas. There is no other online platform like Twitter in the way they can spread messages or political events such as protests or rallies. The Tea Party analyzed how successful their opposition, President Obama, utilized social media during his 2008 election and grew on the popularity of using Twitter to talk politics. Now, in 2017, there is a renewed desire for individuals to spark movements through social media. There has never been a quicker way for messages to spread and there have never been more people on social media eager to make a difference.

Since the Tea Party and in reaction to the Trump presidency, there have been several examples of organizers using social media to start protests and political action. In terms of participation, the Women’s March was extremely successful. Despite their initial flaws, in the end, people across the world took part in an event to send a message about the importance of

intersectional feminism. According to journalist Matt Broomfield from *The Independent*, when adding up all the participants across the country, there were “somewhere between 3.3 and 4.6 million marchers,” making it the biggest protest in United States history (Broomfield). The march was publicized almost solely through social media. It started as a Facebook event in Washington, D.C, and reportedly from Perry Stein, Steve Hendrix and Abigail Hauslohner of *The Washington Post*, grew to 670 events worldwide (Stein et al). Coming the day after the inauguration, there was no better way to send a message to politicians across the world in solidarity with women. People traveled for hours to make it into D.C, and it could make people question why and how this event drew such high participation numbers.

Several of these people traveling long hours to Washington, D.C. for the Women’s March were first-time activists. Whether they were first-year college students, teenagers, or middle-aged women, many claim the election was what forced them to show solidarity. Journalist Sarah Friedmann of *Bustle* interviewed individuals from various age groups who became first time activists at the Women's March. Sheryl Frye, a fifty-two-year-old woman, "thought that activism was ‘something she did in college’ and had moved on. But post-Trump's election says, ‘I can't stay still, I can't be quiet anymore; it's time to speak up, gather together, stand up, and do something'" (qtd. in Friedmann). Her, along with friend Kris Consoul, haven't felt the need to protest in twenty or thirty years (qtd. in Friedmann). From thirteen-year-olds inspiring to learn more about the suffrage movement to mothers and fathers marching for their children's' rights, they all came together in solidarity against the rhetoric and comments made during the election. While social media made this event known to millions, it took more than a Facebook event to inspire people to leave their houses. While it is a success that more activists are being born, people need help every day. Renewed activism via smartphones is an easier option now, but

achieving broad and sustained action with social media is the new challenge.

Since the Women's March, there have been multiple examples of constituents continuously their dissatisfaction with politicians on every level of government. Only eight days after Inauguration Day, President Trump came out with an executive order limiting travelers from entering the United States from seven Muslim-majority countries. Immediately after the news broke on Twitter, protests started across the country in John F. Kennedy, Dulles, Chicago O'Hare, Dallas-Fort Worth, and San Francisco National airports (Hautman). Lawyers were working pro-bono in airports, helping individuals with issues crossing the United States border. They sent out their location to their Twitter followers, telling them where to find them if family members needed legal advice. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), a national organization focused on protecting citizens' rights, immediately sued the order, and would later win, temporarily stopping the order. Without the power of social media, it would have been more difficult for protests to spark so quickly and for the ACLU to step up.

The travel ban protests signified that the Women's March wasn't a one-time deal. It sparked a movement. Protests, a more traditional form of advocacy, have always been used, but their popularity has faded in different waves of history. According to a 1995 article analyzing various forms of political participation by Kay Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Henry Brady, political science professors from Boston College, Harvard, and UC Berkeley, they argue that "protest is a political act that requires little in the way of resources, and, therefore, is often characterized as the weapon of the weak" (Schlozman et al 30). This is a vast difference from how protests are used in reaction to the present day and Trump presidency. Instead, they show how strong the protesters' message is, and how passionate they are about change. In opposition to Schlozman, Verba, and Brady, protesters are made of different demographics and

socioeconomic statuses. According to a more recent, 2011 article by sociologists Neal Caren, Raj Ghoshal, and Vanessa Ribas, "protest is no longer dominated by student radicals, ethnic minorities, and union activists, as it purportedly was four decades ago, but it is now a political tool used by actors of many different political orientations and social locations" (Caren et. al 127). With various demographics protesting, social media can bring them all together for common causes. Since Facebook and Twitter are for anyone and everyone, they allow all types of people to connect with similar ideas and passions. Even celebrities with net worths of millions took part in the Women's March and airport protests. The Trump presidency is making protesting cool again.

In addition to protests at the national level, people are becoming more politically active in their own states. Constituents are protesting at town halls against Republicans such as Marco Rubio, and demanding for their voices to be heard concerning issues such as the environment and The Affordable Care Act, otherwise known as Obamacare. Citizens are holding their public officials accountable for not being supportive or providing areas for them to vocalize their wants and needs. Additionally, partially due to the overwhelming amount of phone calls to citizen's state representatives, the Affordable Care Act repeal and replace was pulled. On Twitter and Facebook, individuals were posting information on how to contact state representatives and provided scripts on how to effectively voice your concerns. According to journalist Philip Bump of *The Washington Post*, over 59,337 calls were placed opposing the repeal, versus 1,130 in support of it (Bump). This is another example of people coming out in overwhelming numbers to get their messages across in ways that weren't necessarily well-known in the past. Not only did they voice their concerns, but their concerns succeeded in reaching the intending goal: keeping Obamacare. This showcases how democracy is alive and working, but in different ways than

people may have seen in the past.

The Women's March on Washington was not the first protest sparked by a grassroots movement. Originally, the Women's March on Washington, which started as a Facebook event created the day after election day, was titled, "The Million Woman March," a near-identical title to a predominantly African American march in 1997. Horace Campbell, a professor in the Department of African American Studies and Political Science at Syracuse University, states, "On Saturday October 25th, 1997 'herstory' was made in the United States when over two million women of African descent marched in Philadelphia to demand human rights and to struggle for spiritual renewal" (Campbell 86). Similarly to the 2017 march, both had a focus on human rights and the need for marginalized groups to have representation and support. However, the Million Woman March in 1997 was completely different in terms of how they reached their supporters.

While the Women's March on Washington was entirely through social media, the Million Woman March was focused on word-of-mouth and direct contact between supporters. Campbell asserts, "Through churches, community groups, day care centres, trade unions, neighbourhood associations and in other areas of shared interaction, women created bonds of solidarity for the march" (Campbell 87). African American women were in direct contact with each other. There were no social media or major news organizations covering the event – the main focus was their message. Additionally, in contrast to the Women's March on Washington who, the week before, publicly released a list of their famous activists and celebrity speakers, the Million Woman March "was [an] entirely 'grassroots' affair. No major media, Hollywood or TV personalities were invited, nor were well-known feminists, or activists visible dominating the event" (Campbell 86). Both were extremely successful in getting their message across to the public,

however, this was achieved in vastly different ways. The Women's March on Washington took advantage of their publicity on social media and major television networks, while the Million Woman March relied primarily on the passion of everyday people.

Activism relies on passion. Individuals speak up and make a difference when the groups they care about are threatened. Twitter and Facebook force people to see the problems facing society on their timelines and newsfeeds that they did not actively look for before. Social media has the ability to encourage difficult conversations and opposing opinions, but only if people are willing to accept them. With all the benefits of social media, there are inherent consequences that allow individuals to be stuck in a bubble filled with similar, echoing opinions that don't allow them to see the opposing perspectives. There can be a divide established that is difficult to bridge without understanding the other side's beliefs. Social media can make this divide even bigger if people fill their followers list with only people who think and feel the same way they do.

Furthermore, activism cannot become limited to a Facebook post. Activism cannot become a tweet or a picture shared thirty-thousand times. While providing awareness to causes is crucial to sparking the movement, it cannot continue unless people show up. As shown twenty years ago through the Million Woman March, and now in 2017, grassroots movements can only succeed if people get off the internet and become actively involved. Whether that means calling your representative, going to a town hall, protesting, or, most importantly, voting, change does not start and end with social media; it needs to move into the real world. Social media can ignite a movement, but actions keep the fire going.

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