

#FreeSpeechMatters: The Positive Political Implications of Free Speech on Social Media

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The evolution of social media has given people the ability to express themselves at any given moment. The statuses, tweets, and filter captions individuals use on these platforms are mere extensions of their thoughts, personalities, and opinions. Because of this, there has been a tremendous growth of social media campaigns. The movement #BlackLivesMatter burst onto the national scene about three years ago. This campaign attracted national attention after a Florida jury acquitted George Zimmerman of second-degree murder in the shooting death of the Black teenager Trayvon Martin (Mineo, 2015). Many critics said this movement would fail to gain traction, implode from lackluster leadership, and eventually disappear from the national headlines. However, the Black Lives Matter movement had something movements of earlier generations did not have: the growth of free speech on social media. Outraged Americans were able to take to social media to express their disgust in police brutality and unite online, maintaining a campaign altering the landscape of American politics and society as a whole.

#BlackLivesMatter, although not the first social media campaign to go “viral,” is arguably one of the most visible. This level of visibility may be in part due to the campaign leaders making themselves a physical presence at several political rallies of prominent presidential candidates (Sidner & Simon, 2015). Nonetheless, the movement has changed conversations across the nation. According to the Pew Research Center (2015), 65% of American adults now use social networking sites, and 90% of younger adults (ages 18 to 29) use social media. With the ability for hashtags and posts to trend, it is feasible to believe many of those on social media have had some exposure to the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

Free speech has sparked heated conversations both on and offline, one of the most prominent being: Do #BlackLivesMatter or do #AllLivesMatter? It is important to acknowledge bigotry has reared its head at times in these conversations. This is how many associate freedom of speech and social media: comment trolls, bigots, and name callers. However, there are so many more positives coming from the #BlackLivesMatter campaign and social media in general. For the first time in modern American history, people are able to instantly tell their stories of societal and systemic oppression to a large audience. People can articulate the concept of white privilege in a comment thread, which can have a limitless impact on many who read it, even if it does not change the intended party. People have greater access to events and news across America by staying connected with the campaign, thus providing a tool for citizens to challenge the systems in place that continue to oppress.

I would argue these positive advances have only been confirmed by the changing political landscape. Political candidates have had to embrace social media to connect with younger populations. As the millennial generation continues to mature into registered voters, the demographics shift, and so must the candidates. Donald Trump tweets constantly, Ben Carson answers questions on Facebook nearly every night, #feeltheBern was one of the top hashtags of the year, and numerous candidates have released policy proposals through social media. Free

speech allows Americans to converse about political ideas and opinions in real time and unite against ideas they oppose.

Critics argue these actions are merely to appease younger voters and offer millennial voters the instant gratification and moderately informed feeling they desire. While this may have been true for the early stages of social media, freedom of speech has now significantly changed the way candidates interact with voters, and has given campaigns such as #BlackLivesMatter a prominent political stage. This first came to fruition in the October 13, 2015 Democratic Presidential Debate. Candidates were asked the question, “Do black lives matter or do all lives matter?” (Flores, 2015). However, the way in which this question was asked is just as important as the debate itself. An average American citizen recorded a video clip of himself asking the question which was featured during the Facebook sponsored portion of the debate. It was not asked by a moderator, who is often seen someone more influential, but by an everyday social media user who was directly able to spark political change in the process. However, this question did not come from one individual’s ideals. The question gained importance over time and through the work of many activists. This was a significant acknowledgement of the influence of younger generations, their activism, and the ability to enact change as regular Americans.

Secondly, the question asked during the debate illuminates the newly discovered ability for social media and free speech to set the political agenda, and this influence comes in all shapes and forms: Political candidates have started to meet with leaders of Black Lives Matter to gain a better understanding of the movement; Twitter users reprimanded Hillary Clinton’s new logo during Kwanzaa; broadcast stations hosting debates now allow people to submit questions via social media; global climate change is again a topic of discussion; and the wage gap is a well-known concept for nearly everyone in America (whether or not they agree). All this is possible through free speech and campaigns on social media. As the election season heats up, free speech on social media will continue to have a newfound impact on politics.

We are experiencing just the beginning of the free speech movement via social media. The 2016 election cycle brings a new wave of communication between political candidates and voters. #BlackLivesMatter is a driving force behind opening dialogue on social media and enacting social change. Stay motivated America, we can make a difference.
#FreeSpeechMatters

Update: Alicia Garza, one of three female founders of the Black Lives Matter was invited by Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA) to attend President Obama’s last State of the Union on Jan 12, 2016, furthering the idea that a new wave of political activism is among us.

References

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