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## Citizen Journalist to Activist: the Language Behind Black Lives Matter

Valeriana Colon

*Virginia Commonwealth University*, [colonv@vcu.edu](mailto:colonv@vcu.edu)

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Citizen Journalist to Activist: the Language Behind Black Lives Matter

Valeriana Colon

Virginia Commonwealth University

Author Note

Valeriana Colon, Urban Services Leadership, Virginia Commonwealth University.

Valeriana Colon is now a graduate student in Urban Services Leadership.

Contact: [colonv@vcu.edu](mailto:colonv@vcu.edu)

### Abstract

This study explores the discourse surrounding an event in the social movement, *Black Lives Matter*, to gain insights into how digital literacy practices influence and mediate participation in the 21st century civil rights movement for a new generation of activist. This study examines three points of engagement, (1) the experience of the event as it is initially interpreted and shared online, (2) the intermingling of consciousness through social media, and (3) the post social media interpretation and action. Data was collected from Twitter analyzed using discourse analysis.

*Keywords:* black lives matter, Ferguson, social media, identity. digital literacy,

### Citizen Journalist to Activist: the Language Behind Black Lives Matter

The transition from analog to digital technologies marked an important time in history. In 1983, *Time Magazine* featured the personal computer as the “Machine of The Year”, as it revolutionized how people communicate (Polsson, 2007). Although many speculated about the impact of new technologies, its use in social movements went relatively unstudied until 2010 (Levy & Bononno, 1998; Howard-Jones, 2011). *Radical media*, the use of media to express alternative views of predominate policies and perspectives to give voice to the underrepresented, (Downing , 2000, p. V) has had a transformative influence over public opinion. Some argue the power of social media was demonstrated during the 2008 presidential elections (Katz, 2013; Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011). With present-day technology, people have the ability to share their individual experiences with the world through the lens of a camera phone and the reach of social media. The civil rights movement, *Black Lives Matter*, is an example of harnessing radical media to provoke an emotional response, disseminate information, and organize people to take action. This study explores digital literacy practices in social movements, using discourse surrounding the events at Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 as a case study.

### Research Goals

The goal of this study is to gain an understanding of how literary events are situated within social and cultural practices by examining how individuals use social media as a tool to identify with or reject ideals surrounding a social movement and how the tensions between opposing views influence the meta-discourse surrounding the movement. Digital technologies, as a mode of communication, have made it easier to access and share a greater amount of information in a shorter amount of time to a larger audience. In examining the use of social media and digital technologies as a literacy practice [means of sharing one’s values and beliefs]

one can begin to understand the construction of an online identity as a reflection of group membership; interactions between online identities; dynamics of the narrative (whose voice(s) are being heard); and role of social media in social change. Used as a tool of reflection, this research provides individuals with the opportunity to examine their role in online communities and the perpetuation of ideals that impede others from living a full life. In conceptualizing the impact of digital literacies on the metanarrative of social movements, one can begin to understand how to leverage social media to encourage social change.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The methods of the study explores the role of digital literacies practices in social movements to understand: (1) the experience of the event as it is initially interpreted and shared online, (2) the intermingling of consciousness through social media, and (3) the resulting social media interpretation that leads to action. The conceptualization of this phenomenon begins with a look at how one uses an electronic device, like a smartphone or an online application, to capture an experience in the physical or digital environment. Durkheim (1995) contends a strong emotional reaction, tied to deeply held values and beliefs, triggers a move to action; the key to the success or failure of a social movement relates to the degree to which emotional transformation takes place (as cited by Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta, 2009, p. 29). An emotional response leads people to video record their experiences or gather representative artifacts with the intent to share or spread that feeling with like-minded individuals. The collective response of the like-minded then amplifies the initial emotional reaction- if the emotion is fear or pity for a victim, a sense of despair and/or anger against an enemy spreads (Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta, 2009, p. 29). Digital technology aids in this reproduction of emotion as it provides a rendering of the event in real-time and in an arguably less bias manner than an oral or written account.

These citizen journalists may frame their footage with commentary to prime their intended audience and encourage others to contribute to the narrative of the event. Successful activists have gone through “interaction ritual chains in their lives that have produced an emotional orientation similar to that of the social movement” (Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta, 2009, p. 31), giving them distinct skills to leverage their community. Langer (2009) describes this ability to draw on prior knowledge to dialogue with others as *literate thinking*. Movements with a sustained presence are able to harness their *ritualistic activities* to mobilize an increasing amount of support (Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta, 2009, p. 31).

The same kind of process that amplifies emotional responses in like-minded individuals, creates an aversive reaction from others with opposing orientations. This contributes to and further sparks dialogue on the subject matter. The dialogue is mediated by the means in which the individual uses to share the media. *Mediatization* theory contends that the media frames the discourse and influences society (Lilleker, 2008; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999) facilitating the process of subordinating prevailing ideals (Hjarvard, 2008). For example, the use of a hashtag on Twitter would yield greater impressions or visibility by others. Conversely, an unpopular opinion could be buried by a borage of comments from the opposing camp. Through digitally connected interlocking chains of communication, discourse builds and people express their personal values and beliefs. Individual social media users survey and gather the outputs of others drawing on regulatory skills (Coiro, 2003), which then inform future action or inaction. The power of social media is not to necessarily create a metanarrative of the sides of a social movement, as it creates a virtual space for people to debate their viewpoint and form individual identities (Lindlof, Shatzer, 1998). The technological advancement of social media is the ability to quickly organize and mobilize like-minded people (Maznevski, Chudoba, 2000).

### **Research Questions**

- (1) How are digital literacy practices used in negotiating social movements?
- (2) How is the literacy event experienced and understood by people occupying various positions in society?

### **Twitter Key Terms**

Twitter is a micro-blogging platform that allows users to send and receive messages, called tweets, using a computer or mobile device (Joyce, 2010). Videos, photos, articles, and blogs can be incorporated into tweets using tweeter features and supported applications (e.g. bit.ly) (Joyce, 2010). Users post comments up to 140 characters in length to their Twitter page (Joyce, 2010), which are visible to the page's "followers". By clicking on the "follow" button on Twitter pages, users can receive an aggregation of tweets from people they have selected to be in their social network (Joyce, 2010). The more followers a user has, the more times his/her tweets will be seen by others. Followers can indicate they enjoy a tweet by clicking the "like" button on the tweet, which tallies the number of likes.

Another means of making tweets visible is through "re-tweets", using the @username, and employing "hashtags". The retweet Twitter function allows a user to repost a comment from another user to his/her Twitter page and add a caption to the tweet, generally with a header (e.g. RT @deray) (Joyce, 2010). In addition to being visible on the user's Twitter page, the retweet is visible on the page of the user that originated the tweet, along with any replies. Retweeting can lead to additional social connections by identifying the retweeter with the ideals of another network (Joyce, 2010). The reply feature on a tweet uses the @ symbol to tweet directly to the feed of another user regardless of social connections (Joyce, 2010). Hashtags are a means of aggregating tweets on specific topic. When a user adds the # symbol before a topic (e.g.

#MikeBrown) the tweet is connected to other tweets containing the same hashtags. Users can employ the search function to look up the hashtag and aggregate all tweets on that topic (Joyce, 2010). From the aggregation, users can reply to tweets from other users in and out of their social connection. Frequently referenced hashtags are highlighted on Twitter as a “trending topic” (Joyce, 2010).

### **Site and Participant Selection**

The *Black Lives Matter* social movement was selected for this study because the civil rights movement has been one of the most important issues of the 21st century (Dorling & Dorling, 2015). Alicia Garcia, Opal Tometi and Patrisse Cullors lay claim to the creation of the movement “after 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was post-humously placed on trial for his own murder and the killer, George Zimmerman, was not held accountable for the crime he committed” (Garcia, Tometi & Cullors, 2014). The movement gained momentum after an unarmed eighteen-year-old Michael Brown was killed on August 9, 2014 by a white police officer, Darren Wilson, in Ferguson, Missouri (Buchanan, 2014). The death of Michael Brown is regarded by some as emblematic of the racial issues in the United States (Garcia, Tometi & Cullors, 2014), making the discourse surrounding Ferguson ideal for this study. The research begins with an August 9, 2015 tweet from activist, DeRay McKesson recapping Twitter coverage of Ferguson on August 9-11 2014. McKesson is ranked number 11, along with Johnetta Elzie, on Fortune.com list “world’s greatest leaders... transforming business, government, philanthropy and more” (Murray, 2015) and received the Howard Zinn Freedom to Write Award in 2015 for activism. In addition to his notoriety as an activist, McKesson was selected as a participant in this study for the noted negative reactions to his activism. During a protest of the shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South



Carolina, McKesson was the subject of a Twitter campaign #GoHomeDeray demanding McKesson leave the city (Walters, 2015). Using McKesson's Twitter feed as a pivot point, the study then expands to include dialogue from other users presenting both affirmative and dissenting views. Although twitter is a public platform, pseudonyms have been used for these other users.

At the time of this writing a keyhole.co analytic report of McKesson's Twitter page indicates the top sites people use to view or post his tweets are twitter.com, joincampaignzero.org, wired.com, thefader.com, rawstory.com, and snappytv.com. 49.5% of tweets are original posts, 40.9% are replies, and 9.5% are retweets. 75% of McKesson's audience is male and 25% is female. 37.7% of users access the tweets using an iPhone, 25.9% an android phone, 23.6% a desktop, and 12.8% use other devices. McKesson's tweets are accessed across 25 states and 15 countries. Frequently used keywords include: black, people, officer, cops, police, white, human, assault, arrest, and violence. Frequently used hashtags include: blacklivesmatter, blackprivilege, ferguson, and libertyandjustice. At the time of this writing a hashtracking.com analytic report indicates 30.6% of tweets using the hashtag #blacklivesmatter are original, 62.67% are retweets, and 6.73% are @message tweets. The top sites people use to view or post the hashtag include twitter.com, facebook.com, thegatewaypundit.com, youtube.com, msnbc.com, and fxn.ws. 64% of the hashtag's audience is male and 36% is female. 28.4% of users access the hashtag using an iPhone, 24.3% an android phone, 30.1% a desktop, and 17.2% use other devices. The hashtag is accessed across 16 countries. Hashtags used with #BlackLivesMatter include: blacktwitter, AllLivesMatter, racism, policebrutality, and ferguson.

The stakeholders engaged in the discourse surrounding Ferguson are the black community, protesters, law enforcement, broadcasters, and policymakers. Within the last decade, the black community in Ferguson went from a minority to a majority as white families moved out of the city to neighboring suburbs (Buchanan, 2014). The shooting of Michael Brown pitted the predominantly black community against the mostly white police force (Buchanan, 2014). In the recounting of Brown's death, some witnesses and Officer Wilson stated Brown charged at the officer, while others stated Brown had his hands in the air (Buchanan, 2014). When a grand jury, consisting of nine white and three black jurors, decided not to indict Officer Wilson in Brown's death, protests erupted throughout the city (Buchanan, 2014). Depictions of the protests by broadcasters varied from characterizing the protestors as out-of-control rioters to peaceful activists. In March, federal investigators issued a report implicating the city in numerous constitutional violations and urging city officials to overhaul the criminal justice system (Buchanan, 2014).

### **Data Collection**

Using qualitative research methods, data was collected from Twitter and analyzed through a discourse analysis. Data collection began with a review of tweets from McKesson (user name @deray) between November 7, 2015 and August 1, 2014 to identify a tweet on Ferguson with a significant amount of retweets and likes (referred to as the *literacy event* or *initial* tweet). The date range allowed the researcher to gain an overview of McKesson's Twitter contributions from present day to before the 2014 gathering at Ferguson. The literacy event needed a significant amount of activity by others to collect enough data to conduct a discourse analysis, given that tweets are limited to 140 letter characters. In addition to reviewing tweets from @deray, the hashtags #ferguson, #blacklivesmatter, and #mikebrown were reviewed within

the same date range. The Twitter search function was used to identify tweets from McKesson that used any of the listed hashtags. A McKesson tweet from the 2015 anniversary of the protests in Ferguson was selected for this study because tweets from the initial 2014 protest were incomplete. This was discovered when the researcher cross-references individual tweets between @deray twitter page and the hashtags #ferguson, #blacklivesmatter, and #mikebrown. Several hashtagged tweets from McKesson were not represented on the corresponding hashtag aggregation and the hashtag included tweets that were not represented in the scrolled view of McKesson's twitter page.

The initial tweet, “#Ferguson tweets from Aug 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> Remember the beginning Remember why we fights #MikeBrown bit.ly/FergStorify”, includes a link to a blog in which McKesson summarizes tweets from the Ferguson protest. At the time of this writing, the blog, originally posted in 2014, received 23,459 views—112 from Twitter. The blog includes over 100 tweets from 54 users. The users, whose tweets were selected for the blog, includes 23 users identified as male, 22 female, five did not identify their gender and four are organizations. 31 of the users identified as Black, ten as White, one as Hispanic, one as Asian, seven did not identify their race and four users were organizations. Seven of the users had over 100,000 followers; ten had between 81,000 and 30,000, twelve had between 29,999 and 11,000; nine had between 9,500 and 4,000; twelve had between 3,999 and 1,000; and four users had between 350 and 50 followers.

After identifying the literacy event from McKesson's tweets, the data collection process moved to tweeted responses from other users. At the time of this writing, the literacy event was retweeted by 707 users and liked by 400. The initial tweet received 32 comments by 20 users. Of these 20 users, thirteen identified themselves as male, six female and one did not identify

his/her gender (see table 1). Nine of the users identified as Black, six as White, and five did not identify their race. Twitter profiles are limited making it difficult to decipher group affiliation.

A discourse analysis of the responses was conducted, from the stance of discourse that positions, to identify the user's orientation.

Table 1

User Name	Position	Race	Gender	# of Followers
@ejax1712	BlackLives	Black	Female	24
@Amstead	BlackLives	Black	Female	329
@RuninngIn	BlackLives	Black	Female	922
@FortheFifth	BlackLives	Black	Male	125
@newquik	BlackLives	Black	Male	264
@BetheBest	BlackLives	Black	Male	252
@2_Knew_	BlackLives	Black	Male	272
@JonnBebo	BlackLives	Black	Male	2,742
@UnderDakota	BlackLives	Ukn	Male	1,285
@nueveea	BlackLives	White	Female	2,406
@ChiTwnCit	BlackLives	Ukn	Female	767
@FullyMight	BlackLives	Ukn	Female	159
@SeadsNSight	BlackLives	White	Male	45
@tychose	BlackLives	White	Male	115
@GregMKelly	AllLives	White	Male	1,309
@timingair	AllLives	White	Male	474
@andyhanson63	AllLives	White	Male	276
@DenCym	AllLives	Ukn	Male	2
@blueintake4	Ukn	Black	Male	141
@ceari	Ukn	Ukn	Ukn	345

## Results and Discussion

### Digital literacy practices in social movements

The use of Twitter in social movements has extended the circulation of information. Activists can use Twitter to chronical protests and incidences of violence, send and receive information, and organize activities. Users can receive real-time tweets of events from around the world, beyond the information presented by traditional media outlets. Activists can track the movements of other protesters in coordinated efforts. On August 10, 2015 at 2:23 p.m.,

McKesson tweeted a Vine video of Johnetta Elize being arrested. Within moments the video was liked and retweeted. At the time of this writing, the post received 2,335 retweets and 1,059 on Twitter; 104 likes, 65 Revines, 2 comments, and 2,119,819 loops on Vine. This was in addition to the real-time tweets of other users witnessing the event. At 2:28 p.m., Rick Reynolds reported both McKesson and Elize were arrested, which received 2,873 retweets and 899 likes.

Although Twitter has been employed to benefit social movements, the platform also has disadvantages. The technology only works in areas with mobile coverage. Twitter's open accessibility enables government agencies, law enforcement, and corporations to monitor the posts of average citizens. The openness of the platform without peer review and with minimal censorship can lead to misleading and inaccurate information. Using Twitter in social movement takes knowledge of Twitter's functionality and the skill to use it. Without the use of hashtags, tweets are not very visible to others outside of the user's followers. Even with skillful use of hashtags and a carefully constructed message, tweets can become degraded by spam and the conversation entangled just as the tweet becomes a trending topic. With no limits on participation, a popular tweet is often met with a burst of retweets, replies, and spam, which makes it difficult for a reader to follow the conversation and understand the specifics of the intended message. McKesson tweeted the literacy event at 11:49 a.m. The first response to the tweet was @GaryKeller's negative tweet at 12:13 p.m. @Amstead sent a supportive tweet at 12:21 p.m., which was followed by @AndrewHall92 negative response at 12:27 p.m. While supportive tweets were posted later that evening, the negative tweets sparked discussions, which overshadowed the overall positive response. Without an intervention, a disjointed or unfocused discussion can make motivating others to real-world action difficult. When the purpose of tweeting is mobilization, tweets have to move beyond encouraging discussion and promote one

message above others. Successful activists incorporate ways of filtering and promoting their message in an overall strategy to draw attention to relevant information and sustain attention. An example of this can be seen in the blog post McKesson linked in the literacy event. The Storify blog's arrogation of tweets surrounding the 2014 Ferguson protest highlights certain tweets over others constructing a narrative of the protest. By embedding the blog, written a year ago, into a tweet on the anniversary of the protest, McKesson brings the narrative back to life in the minds of readers.

The popularity of a user, as expressed through the number of active followers, acts as a broadcast channel for tweets similar to traditional media outlets. Users, whose tweets are represented in McKesson's summary of the Ferguson protest, had an average of 32,000 followers. Increased followers can lead to a greater online presence and influence over the social network. A tweet from an influential user can generate a mixture of retweets, replies, and likes from the user's audience in a concentrated burst. The tweets in the blog received 23,524 retweets and 14,242 likes, at the time of this writing. The reach and engagement surrounding a tweet depends on the unique blend of the content of the tweet, timing, the audience of the topic (when using a hashtag), and author.

### **The literacy event as experienced by others**

A discourse analysis of the responses to the literacy event demonstrates multiple examples of users positioning themselves in the context of the *Black Lives Matter* social movement. In response to the initial post, “#Ferguson tweets from Aug 9<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> Remember the beginning. Remember why we fight”, sixteen responses were positive or in support of the *Black Lives Matter* movement, ten were negative or against the movement, three were natural discussing McKesson's background, and the orientation of two tweets were difficult to define.

@newquik tweet has a legitimizing and unifying quality. By saying “thank you”, @newquik identifies with and reinforces McKesson’s message. His inclusion of the superlative *always* in stating, “for always reminding us of why we are here” reifies McKesson’s role in the movement, while the inclusive pronoun *we* acts as a symbol of unity.

@GaryKeller tweet, “are you serious? Or just mocking @deray for ratings. Mike Brown was a thug #AllLivesMatter”, expresses an opposing position. The statement, “Mike Brown was a thug” is a sharp fragmentation from the supportive narrative. The use of the hashtag #AllLivesMatter signifies membership to the opposing camp. This tweets sparked responses from three others users in support of McKesson and the movement, and one user in support of @GaryKeller. @BetheBest response, “are you serious? You clearly don’t belong in this conversation, gtfoh”, is a strong othering statement telling @GaryKeller that he and his opinions are not welcomed in the conversation. @GaryKeller dismisses the comment by saying, “little late, Flex Just wake?”. @FortheFifth and @ChiTwnCit come to @BetheBest defense and responds to @GaryKeller. @FortheFifth employs a metaphor stating, “#AllLivesMatter is like showing up to a breast cancer fundraiser and saying ‘what about the other cancers’ #BlackLivesMatter”, which was a popular response receiving two retweets and six likes. @ChiTwnCit shift the focus from Mike Brown’s actions by foregrounding the actions of police officers in saying, “The only ‘thugs’ R the cops who’ve killed countless unarmed blacks”. The use of *countless unarmed blacks* conflates the identifies and actions of individuals and positions the black community as victims. @GaryKeller differentiates Mike Brown from other incidences stating, “Yes there are awful examples of excessive force by police however #MikeBrown isn’t one of them”. @ChiTwnCit dismisses his assertion, tweeting, “I’ve carefully considered all evidence available to the public, & I disagree.” The tweet implies that @GaryKeller is ill

informed and has not *carefully* considered the facts. @timingair comes to @GaryKeller defense in a unifying tweet stating, “Actually, the number is under 30. & that’s an example (your claim=countless) as to why u don’t have cred”. @timingair picked-up on @ChiTwnCit’s use of the word *countless* and others her by questioning her credibility. @ChiTwnCit dismisses @timingair tweet, “You’ve studiously ignored the point” and challenges him to cite his source “but please feel free to cite your source”. In employing the word, *studiously* @ChiTwnCit implies @timingair deliberately avoided acknowledging the validity of her point. @timingair has a short two word response, “Washington Post” signifying the end of the conversation. @DenCym contributes with a late response in line with @GaryKeller tweeting, “mike was indeed a thug and his actions caused his end.” @DenCym uses a straightforward cause and effect in his response. His use of only Mike Brown’s first name gives the perceptions of some kind of personal knowledge of Brown’s actions.

@AndrewHall92 responds to the initial tweet saying, “So when does the looting and fires start?”, using sarcasm to separate himself from the rhetoric of *Black Lives Matter*. @RuninngIn defends his position by offering a similar example from the white community, “what about the riot over the hockey game? no one talks about that enough.” @AndrewHall92 challenges @RuninngIn’s example by saying, “They were dirty hockey hooligans, so?”. Here, the use of the word *hooligans* in reference to the white community is an interesting contrast to the use of *thugs* in reference to the black community. Hooligan is defined as, a ruffian or hoodlum, versus thug which is defined as cruel or *vicious* ruffian, robber, or murderer (dictionary.com). The use of the terms suggests a difference in degree of violence between black and white communities. @RuninngIn reasserts the sameness of the behavior by tweeting, “yeah. They were thugs.” @AndrewHall92 affirms @RuninngIn point and then articulates an overarching value, “Yes they



where rioting and looting hard working people businesses is never acceptable”. @SeadsNSight also responds to @AndrewHall92 tweet in support of @RuninngIn and legitimizes the looting stating, “if it is like last year: After the police intimidation and occupation. Like Baltimore, police mishandling came b4 destruction”. @AndrewHall92 dismisses the tweet with sarcasm saying, “Great excuse to burn down and loot other people’s things.” The word *excuse* implies that the looting was not related to the movement, but people being opportunistic.

@Amstead, @UnderDakota, @tychose, @JonnBebo, @2\_Knew\_, @ejax, and @FullyMight individually voice their support for Black Lives Matter and express symbols of unity against a common enemy. @Amstead uses emotional language in a personalized tweet, “that was hard. So much pain, suffering and for what? RIP Michael Brown Jr. Thank you Deray for reminding me”. @UnderDakota simply says, “never forget!!” as if his fist was in the air in moment of solidarity. @tychose affirms McKesson’s message and expresses appreciation with, “Thank you for storifying this”. @FullyMight also says, “Thanks”. @2\_Knew\_ shows his support through a call to action in the form of an image. @ejax1712 offers McKesson emotional support and an opportunity to commiserate tweeting, “how do you keep your sanity when you deal with so many idiots?”.

### **Conclusions**

While some users interpret the literacy event as a call to, never forget what they are fighting for, members from the opposing position view the tweet as propaganda. These different reactions speak to the user’s interpretation of the events at Ferguson, values, and sympathies. The discourse entered into on Twitter brings light to varying ideas, values and beliefs- challenging commonly held notions. However, for social movements to shift the perceptions of

others, people need to be open to reflecting on their deeply held values and belief to determine how new information impacts their understanding of society.

### **Limitations**

The results of this study are emblematic of the moment in time in which the study took place and caution should be taken when generalizing the results to future dynamics. Data collection from social media is a relatively new process, which warrants further experimentation and formalization of processes. The social media platform, Twitter allows a user to scroll back in time to a certain extent before offering no further information. This makes it necessary to use third-party applications, and take additional steps to record and track tweet more than twelve month old (e.g. [hashtracking.com](http://hashtracking.com), [keyhole.co](http://keyhole.co), [tweetbinder.com](http://tweetbinder.com)). Each third-party application reports information differently, requiring researchers to be aware of the features of the applications and the data needed to conduct the study. The retweet, likes and reply values discussed in this study are subject to change with the passing of time, as users are able to change their preferences and delete tweets at any times. Future research is needed to examine digital literacy practices in the context of social movements. It is problematic at best to seek a recipe solution to social issues. Motivating people to change is a complex process. Twitter offers both an opportunity and a challenge to promulgating social movements.

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