

Activism in the Age of Social Media

By Alayna Thomas

This year has been exceptionally tough. COVID-19 has completely changed our lives. We went through restrictions, lockdowns, and for the past few months, we have seen waves of protests calling for police reform and abolition. In the midst of the protests for George Floyd and Black Lives Matter, I've seen my Instagram and Twitter feeds active in a way that I have never seen before.

Almost any time I log onto social media, there is a constant stream of posts explaining the meaning behind BLM, diving into the complexities of systemic racism, and offering arguments for the abolishment of police. During all of this, I found myself in a dilemma. While I appreciated seeing people sharing information and discussing these difficult topics, I wondered to myself: how much of this is genuine?

Take #BlackOutTuesday for instance. In an attempt to show solidarity with BLM, many people posted blank, black squares on Instagram, usually tagged with #BlackOutTuesday and #BlackLivesMatter. Instead of empowering the movement, there was a cleansing of the BLM tag on Instagram. Users were met with rows and rows of black squares with absolutely no information on them, instead of finding resources for the movement, hotlines for Black mental health, and information about nationwide and worldwide protests. Days' worth of information was effectively scrubbed away. #BlackOutTuesday was a complete shitshow of virtue signaling.

The Cambridge English Dictionary defines virtue-signaling as "an attempt to show other people that you are a good person, for example by expressing opinions that will be acceptable to them, especially on social media." Grasping this idea of virtue signaling is integral to activism, and it's a tricky thing to handle. There is no exact right or wrong way to approach it. However, the first step you should take is to look inward and ask yourself — why?

Why are you posting about this specific issue? Are you posting because you've done your research on the topic and feel deeply about it? Do you want to inform others? Or are you posting because you want to seem "woke" and informed? In order to answer these questions, we need to look at activism as a whole.

Here's the thing about activism — it's a lifestyle. You must incorporate it into your daily life. Once all of the over-simplified infographics have been shared, what's next? With the recent Breonna Taylor ruling, there has been a resurgence of posts about BLM, but after that, how will you help the Black community? What are some tangible steps you can take?

Let me preface this with: I do not dislike social media. In fact, I've seen great mobilization through social media. For example, @justiceforgeorgenyc is a localized information account based in New York City. The owners of the account post updates about fundraisers, protests, and other events related to BLM in and around the city. That

account, and other accounts like it, shows the role of social media in promoting the movement. Without this account, my friends and I wouldn't have been able to find many of the resources that we had access to. That being said, it is also beneficial to see how steps taken online can be translated offline.

After questioning "why," thinking about the words "how" and "what" are great ways to proceed. Think about the most effective ways for you to learn about a topic. Think about what you can do to help support those around you, especially those who are a part of the community that you are trying to support. For example, you can speak up in a situation where someone else can't. Or, if you have a friend that is affected by police brutality, listen to them and be a shoulder to lean on.

One obvious route is to go to demonstrations and to donate. Across the nation, there have been protests happening daily and GoFundMe links being shared. If you have the resources to, then donate. If you have the time and are not in a high-risk group for contracting COVID-19, go out and protest. These are two of the most immediate ways to help enact change.

There are also many ways to get engaged on campus. Taking courses related to social justice is an amazing way to get educated and have structured discussions around the topic. Likewise, joining clubs centered around social justice is a great way to help — Northeastern has everything from a prison reform club to those centered around women's empowerment. Additionally, college campuses everywhere are holding seminars and conferences centered around racial literacy and activism. Attending these is another great way to learn from people who have dedicated their lives and careers to activism.

All these problems of systemic racism did not pop up overnight. There are books, such as *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. DuBois, that can provide insight into the historical treatment of Black people and other POC in the United States. Fiction books also delve deep into topics of racial injustice and provide amazing allegories for today — a favorite of mine is *Beloved* by Toni Morrison.

One thing you need to be considerate of is to initiate learning on your own as much as possible — it's important to check yourself and make sure you aren't burdening those around you. It is a tough time for all, and sometimes people do not want to rehash the trauma that they are going through. There is a difference between someone volunteering their time and information to you on their own terms and demanding that someone takes time out to teach you about the trauma that their community goes through. The latter can turn people off and make you seem uncompromising, even if it's not intentional.

Also, be sure to check in on yourself. It is not possible to know everything about all the issues in the world at once. Don't bite off more than you can chew. Just try to continuously better yourself, gain more knowledge, and acknowledge the biases that you encounter on a daily basis.

Social media is a great way to get started on your journey to activism. However, it is important to incorporate it into your daily life in any way possible — being an activist is a continuous process. You might slip up, you might not know what to do, but that's okay. As long as you sincerely care about equality, improving the world, and are willing to put in the work, you are on the right track.