

How social media has helped to uplift black voices in 2020

By Ariana Whiteford

Performative activism is a prevalent problem online however condescension over resources and routes of learning about social injustice is an unnecessary form of gatekeeping 'wokeness'. Social media played a special role in the emergence of the Black Lives Matter and the #MeToo movement, yet the use of social media to inform is critiqued.

Police brutality and the overall oppressive manner in which black individuals are treated has been an issue that entered conversations worldwide. Discourse on the subject has entered and left mass media headlines for decades but in 2020 Black Lives Matter, or BLM, stuck in the social conscience with 'Black Lives Matter' ranking as one of the most popular searches globally. It would be misguided to claim that social media platforms didn't undoubtedly aid in this.

Black Lives Matter has been a prominent movement since 2013 when the hashtag trended for the first time, after the untimely deaths of Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman. This brought the mistreatment of black individuals by police officers to the public eye. In 2020, it was a video of the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin going viral on Twitter that stoked the flames of the movement. Other deaths including Breonna Taylor continued to enrage the masses while punishments were not dealt to the perpetrating officers. Also, media coverage was met with backlash and many remained complicit as the discourse of such a loaded topic created unease.

But without discourse there is no progress. When discussing matters of race and encounters with racism the best way to learn is to listen to black people. It may sound simple, but it is often overlooked. Black voices have repeatedly been silenced and censored whether it be in music, politics, literature or in everyday scenarios. In literature in particular, critiques of unfair systems and racial injustice have been brought to the forefront of reader's minds. Poets such as Claude McKay and Langston Hughes belonged to the Harlem Renaissance which celebrated African American art. Through literature and other art forms black voices, ideas and protests were heard. Harlem has become an oasis for black artists as other writers such as Alice Walker have written about its significance. In *The Colour Purple*, the character Nettie explains her love for New York as black people 'own a whole section of it, called Harlem'.

It was through literature that I learned the cultural significance of Harlem, however it was through an Instagram infographic that I was educated on the gentrification of Harlem and the subsequent problem this poses to black communities living there. Instagram activism, or social media activism, has been called annoying and performative but, black squares aside, a well written infographic can go a long way. In an age where reluctant readers are rife, quick and colourful slide shows posted on stories are a quick way to share and spread awareness. Any attention that can be drawn to issues of racism that have previously been ignored or deemed uncomfortable to discuss now take center stage and encourage people to go beyond the infographic to study the routes of medical racism or the troubled routes of slurs for example.

BLM

Online activists such as rapper Fatimah Nyeema Warner, known professionally as Noname, continue to engage in this discourse on social media and by recommending books through her online book group that further education on black experiences. As long as we all continue to progress our learning and continue to recognise our privileges, we can better address our own biases. Black voices being heard disrupts the eggshell white echo chamber that surrounds our society, whether this is done through an Instagram post or novel, common ground is found in the content of the words, not the form.