**How technology and social media spawned a new civil rights movement**

**Opinion**

**by** [**David A. Love**](http://thegrio.com/author/davidlove123/) **|** [**May 4, 2015 at 6:40 AM**](http://thegrio.com/2015/05/04/technology-social-media-new-civil-rights/)

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DECEMBER 6: People aim cell phones at a speaker in front of the TCL Chinese Theatre as they march on Hollywood Boulevard to protest the decision in New York not to indict a police officer involved in the chokehold death of Eric Garner (Photo by David McNew/Getty Images)

The revolution will not only be televised but apparently it will also be uploaded, downloaded, streamed, posted and tweeted as well.

What America has been witnessing — from the killing of Trayvon Martin in Florida and Mike Brown in Ferguson to Eric Garner in Staten Island, Walter Scott in North Charleston and Freddie Gray in Baltimore — is the birth of a new civil rights movement. But this movement is a little different from your parents’ or your grandparents’ civil rights movement.

Social struggles for freedom, justice and equality have their similarities, to be sure. And to some extent, it seems we are still fighting for some of the same things, because the more things change, the more they remain the same. Racism and brutality are still around and apparently have no intention of leaving quietly. But the techniques and structures of organizing and movement building have met twenty-first century sensibilities. This new movement is online. It is on social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram, in your inbox and in a video on your cellphone.

Technology has helped give birth to the new civil rights movement.

[#BlackLivesMatter](http://blacklivesmatter.com/) was founded by three black women — Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi — by way of social media. When a jury found George Zimmerman not guilty for the [murder](http://thegrio.com/2013/08/30/tamron-hall-talks-deadline-crime-and-opens-up-about-her-sisters-murder/) of Trayvon Martin, Garza, enraged and filled with of grief, [took to Facebook](http://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2015/03/04/alicia-garza-black-lives-matter/24341593/). “I posted on Facebook in that moment that it wasn’t OK for us to not be surprised that someone could not be held accountable for the murder of an unarmed, black teenager,” Garza told [NPR](http://www.npr.org/2014/12/04/368408247/black-lives-matter-slogan-becomes-a-bigger-movement). “And so I think the note was something like, black people, I love you, I love us, we got us and our lives matter.” Cullors added a hashtag, and the rest is history.

The women wanted to create a movement “that could firmly stand on the shoulders of movements that have come before us, such as the civil rights movement, while innovating on its strategies, practices and approaches to finally centralize the [leadership](http://thegrio.com/2011/01/17/slideshow-the-top-25-most-influential-black-american-leaders-of-all-time/#s:malcolm-x-and-martin-luther-king-jpg-2) of those existing at the margins of our economy and our society,” as [Opal Tometi](http://isreview.org/issue/96/black-lives-matter) noted.

In some ways reminiscent of the Black Power Movement, #BlackLivesMatter has not only been associated with the violence waged against black bodies but has also encompassed [numerous socioeconomic issues](http://dailyprincetonian.com/news/2015/02/garza-talks-creation-of-black-lives-matter-movement/) such as advocating for full employment, quality housing and education and an end to racial profiling and mass incarceration. Cullors recently discussed [#BlackSpring](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/01/black-lives-matter-patrisse-cullors-baltimore-protests_n_7187954.html) — the latest outgrowth of #BlackLivesMatter with echoes of the Arab Spring — with the [*HuffPost Show*](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/01/black-lives-matter-patrisse-cullors-baltimore-protests_n_7187954.html)*:*

*Black Spring is about really looking at this moment, as not these isolated incidences.… Black people are not a monolithic group, but what we are facing is something that’s extreme — and that’s poverty, that’s homelessness, that’s higher rates of joblessness, that’s law enforcement invading our communities day in and day out — and we are uprising. And so this Black Spring is about really talking about a national uprising. We should be honored to talk about this moment.*

Last year, a panel of scholars from around the country selected #BlackLivesMatter as the [2014 Digital Trend of the Year](http://english.usu.edu/htm/digital-folklore-project/news/articleID=27296) as part of the [Digital Folklore Project](http://news.hjnews.com/allaccess/usu-s-digital-folklore-project-chooses-blacklivesmatter-as-digital-trend/article_7549741c-864e-11e4-962c-53a03d39a76d.html) at Utah State University.

This new movement has demonstrated how digital technology can become an effective tool for social change, not to replace face-to-face human contact but hopefully to facilitate the people-to-people organizing that is both necessary and irreplaceable. #BlackLivesMatter is able to learn from the successes, as well as the failures, of other digitally-focused movements.

[Todd Wolfson](http://www.toddwolfson.org/), Assistant Professor of Journalism and Media Studies at the Rutgers University School of Communication and Information, is the author of [*Digital Rebellion: The Birth of the Cyber Left*](http://www.press.uillinois.edu/books/catalog/89cmd2yt9780252038846.html)*.* In his book, Wolfson examines the history of a new media-oriented social movements he calls the [“Cyber Left,”](http://live.huffingtonpost.com/r/archive/segment/54861fb302a76028dd0003b8) from their early days of the Indymedia movement and the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle in 1999, up to #OccupyWallStreet.

There are three characteristics which have set the Cyber Left apart, including the use of new technologies and strategies to build a social movement, a decentralized network structure, and governance through the use of participatory democracy.

As opposed to old school social movements, which were based on organizations, unions or political parties, the newer movements are global but with decentralized, local and autonomous power. In addition, while media and communications once served as the mouthpiece of a social movement back in the day, Wolfson notes that now, in the information age, “communications acts more like the network of a network-based social movement, transmitting signals to different parts of the movement and thus coordinating its actions.”

However, Wolfson also notes the Cyber Left — which up to the Occupy movement was led by young college-educated, middle-class white men — has had its drawbacks, such as “a lack of leadership from those most oppressed,” and an “inability to make proactive decisions and build long-term powerful social movement organizations.” Further, “technology, and new-media tools specifically, have become more important than social relationships, organizing and movement building.” A final characteristic of these movements is “lack of a shared strategy and political-education program to build clear and committed leaders.”

These Cyber Left movements that came before #BlackLivesMatter were able to grow up to a point but were unable to build long-term infrastructure and ultimately were limited in their effectiveness and viability.

Although it is too early to say where #BlackLivesMatter is headed, you can believe it is far more than a hashtag. And while the movement is very much social media, it is also very human, on the ground, connecting people and organizations and empowering the grassroots. They are not going anywhere yet.

Fol*low David A. Love on Twitter at* [*@davidalove*](https://twitter.com/davidalove)