

# pick up the

# Slack



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*“Black Lives Matter. Anti-racist. Systemic change. Inequity.”*

On May 5, 2020, I had not only seen, but also used these words more in a 24 hour span than I had in my entire life. All of a sudden, these phrases seemed to be at the forefront of everyone’s vocabulary. Throughout the day, millions of people across the globe were responding in outrage and advocating for change through social media. Petition links were passed around, educational videos were shared and informative graphics were posted on nearly everyone’s Instagram story. But what was so unique about May 5 that sparked this widespread fury?

On this day, footage depicting the murder of Ahmaud Arbery was released to the public; it showed the innocent runner being brutally chased down and murdered by two white men. The video spread like a wildfire. Almost overnight, everyone seemed to have been exposed to what had happened. Unfortunately, in the United States, the news of a Black man being wrongfully killed is nothing new. Yet, what was notably different was the response. Social media was wielded as a tool to mass circulate petitions calling for the police department to hold the men responsible for Arbery’s death accountable. While the footage was released nearly four months after the murder, the men were arrested in nearly two days. The collective voices across social media platforms were unable to be drowned out or ignored. Online efforts for justice have existed in the past, but this one took over the news and delivered results.

This was, I believe, a critical moment in 2020 that reignited the flurry of social media activism. Infographics detailing social justice issues, petitions urging concrete action and links to educate people were found all over Instagram stories and Snapchat filters. Caught up in the frenzied nature of everything, I found myself among these people, avidly sharing posts I found meaningful or placing a petition link in my bio.

Months later, though the movement is still as crucial as ever and there are still countless issues that need to be addressed; I find myself wondering how much reliance we should place on social media to educate ourselves and find ways to take action.

Activism has taken many forms over the years. We have witnessed mass protests, sit-ins and numerous activist campaigns advocating for change. More recently, social media activism has started to become a more prominent means of enacting change, specifically amongst younger generations. This was notably

witnessed during the spring and summer of 2020 with the wrongful murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, as well as throughout the evolution of the Black Lives Matter movement.

The easiest benefit of social media activism is the awareness it brings to issues that have gone largely unaddressed or unnoticed for too long. Hyejoon Rim, assistant professor of journalism and mass communication at University of Minnesota, and Keon Youngpark, PhD candidate of public communication at Syracuse University, describe how social media is particularly important for reaching “inactive publics,” otherwise known as those who have a low level of knowledge or involvement in a particular issue. People in these groups gain exposure and a better understanding of social justice issues or current advocacy efforts through the simple act of scrolling through their social media feed. Without social media, many would have likely gone unaware of these issues.

Moreover, BBC journalist Richard Fisher finds social media activism serves as an avenue for people to demonstrate support through liking, commenting, sharing or accessing a link of a particular post. Through these means, action can be taken by millions almost instantaneously: a feat impossible to achieve without utilizing social media.

Viewing social media activism as a stepping stone for educating oneself can also be beneficial. Topics like redlining, school system funding, felony disenfranchisement and mass incarceration can be difficult to understand but, with the influx of social media infographics, they can be explored by anyone with a social media account. This was prominently seen last summer with the viral Instagram account @soyouwanttotalkabout, which provides condensed explanations of multiple social justice topics in a 10-slide post. Vox News’s Terry Nguyen details how this format is an easy way for anyone to learn about a variety of issues with the simple tap of their fingers, leading the account to go from a few thousand followers to surpassing a million.

The unfortunate truth, however, is that many people’s activism ends when they turn off their phone. When the hype of posting has died down, thoughts of advocating for long term change die along with them. When the phrase “Black Lives Matter” (BLM) was coined nearly seven years ago by Alicia Garza, Parriske Cullors and Opal Tometi, it was extremely controversial. Priya Elan, editor for The Guardian, details how L’OREAL Paris

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dropped their spokeswoman Munroe Bergdorf for her outspoken support of BLM, yet in 2020, L'OREAL posted a statement in solidarity with the movement. Here we see the pitfalls of social media activism: when fear of being called out or “cancelled” overrides genuine support or understanding for the cause. What we see here is “slacktivism,” a term so increasingly ubiquitous that the Oxford Dictionary has a definition for it: “the practice of supporting a political or social cause by means such as social media or online petitions, characterized as involving very little effort or commitment.”

Similarly, we see this on the individual level. Over 28 million black squares were posted by Instagram users on what was known as “Blackout Tuesday,” according to Paul Monckton, senior editor for Forbes. The eagerness to show that, like everyone else, they supported BLM pushed many to post. Like with larger corporations, the fear of being criticized or left out drove several to participate in “Blackout Tuesday.” Predictably, these posts did not end racism, rather drowned out Black voices, resources and posts by flooding the BLM hashtag with black squares. If 28 million people were advocating for BLM on a consistent basis beyond the black squares, we could be living in a new world. But unfortunately, that just is not the case.

In *The Journal of Consumer Science*, Kirk Kristofferson, Katherine White and John Peloza explain how the method an individual uses to support an organization can indicate if they are likely to provide subsequent, more meaningful support in the future. When an individual’s token of support for a cause is largely public, it can lead to a lesser chance of agreeing to provide meaningful support for the cause when requested by the organization. If an individual’s first interaction with activism involves making a very public online demonstration of support for a cause—such as liking or retweeting a post—they are less likely to respond to sustained calls for support from the organization.

Awareness only goes so far; it must be supplemented with a drive to create genuine change. We eagerly post the most recent infographic, but tend to shy away from seeking the work required to create the change and end these injustices. Signing the latest petition circulating is only the first step in a long journey to inciting change.

Jason Del Gandio, professor of communication and social movements at Temple University, explains how signing

petitions needs to be coupled with further action to enact major change. This involves, among other methods, protests, phone calls and letters to representatives. Awareness must be paired with action. The drawback from having everything accessible through social media, is that anything that cannot be accessed quickly is not as popular. However, these types of actions—concrete steps beyond awareness—are exactly what need more attention and have the most potential to truly change the story of injustice in our country.

I can do better with my engagement with activism. When I look to my engagement in social causes over the summer compared to now, it is embarrassing how stark the contrast is. Books I planned to read, documentaries I intended to watch and organizations I wanted to get involved with have slowly turned into a list for “someday.” My urgency rises and falls in sync as the newest injustices come to light. The point is not to chastise or call out people. The truth is we all want to see our world be and do better when it comes to instilling equity. We just need to be willing to educate ourselves and be more intentional with the actions we take. Poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou summed it up best by saying; “When you know better, you do better.”

Our society cannot afford to become reactive; we must remain proactive. We seek change and express our disappointment, but only after a tragedy has already occurred. We must have patience and productivity in mind, as we resist blaming ourselves and begin searching for better ways to evoke change. Carrying the momentum of a movement to enact sustainable change is challenging, but essential. The year 2020 has taught us that unification and a desire for change can do wonders, but the effect of concrete actions cannot be overstated. We have potential to make strides that have never before been made if we take our activism beyond screens and bring it to the outside world.

