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Black Lives Matter has shown hashtags matter, too
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After George Zimmerman was acquitted in the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin in 2013, members of the black community and activists everywhere needed an outlet for their frustration, as well as a platform where they could call for change.

They found one: social media and the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, which has become emblematic of modern racial injustices.

Five years later, the Black Lives Matter movement is a quintessential example of a movement that has found amplification through social media. According to a new Pew study, the hashtag has been used nearly 30 million times on Twitter - an average of 17,003 times a day.

"The main thing that stuck out is really the consistent presence since it became popular," said Monica Anderson, one of the study's authors.

Anderson said the hashtag tends to spike after major news events: During the short period of time in 2016 during which Alton Sterling and Philando Castile as well as five Dallas police officers were killed, the hashtag was at an all-time high.

"It said what it needed to say so succinctly," said Mark Anthony Neal, a professor of African and African American studies at Duke University. "In a moment where black folks are getting killed, just this simple sentiment that black lives matter was important."

#BlackLivesMatter is emblematic of a wider trend: the blossoming role social media plays in all kinds of activist movements. #MeToo, which roared through social media as powerful men in a number of industries were accused of sexual misconduct, is a key example, as are #LoveWins, #JeSuisCharlie and #MAGA (Make America Great Again).

"What's so interesting and so meaningful about social media and social movements is just how quickly people can mobilize through social media," said Rachel Einwohner, a sociology professor at Purdue University.

The Pew study found that 69 percent of Americans believe social media is useful in bringing issues to politicians' attention, and an additional 67 percent see it as effective for creating sustained movements.

On the other hand, 77 percent believe social networks can distract from issues that are really important, and 71 percent agree that "social media makes people believe they're making a difference when they really aren't" - a phenomenon more commonly known as "slacktivism."

Slacktivism relates to a major criticism of social media engagement: Posting a status or sharing an article isn't a viable form of political action. But Einwohner said that's a misguided notion.

"People who are tweeting or liking things on Facebook are also participating in marches," she said. "They're also having face-to-face conversations with neighbors, and they're also calling their congressmen."

One key finding of the Pew study reveals that black and Hispanic social media users are more likely than white social media users to see social media as an effective tool for political engagement. That trend, experts say, is likely because those groups don't feel that their views are represented elsewhere - by political institutions or the mainstream media.

"Traditionally, people of color in our society have felt that our political institutions do not represent them, for obvious reasons," Einwohner said. "When we have social media, people can have a voice."

Five years after the hashtag appeared, Black Lives Matter has become an influential movement and a key aspect of today's larger conversation about race. But, Neal said, social media was only the beginning.

Since the movement began, activists have developed specific policy recommendations, and combating police violence against people of color is a key part of the progressive agenda.

"It had to move beyond the hashtag," he said. "It had to move beyond this symbolic coming together - and many of these organizations, national or local, had to begin do work that would have impact in terms of policy."

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