

# How Social Media Has Changed Civil Rights Protests

Social media allows us “to see a reality that has been entirely visible to some people and invisible to others,” says this Princeton professor.

**By [Shira Ovide](#)**

Published June 18, 2020 Updated Dec. 17, 2020

Omar Wasow is steeped in both social media and the civil rights movement of the 1960s. And he marvels at how the two have melded in the current demonstrations against racial injustice and police brutality.

Wasow, a professor at Princeton University and co-founder of the pioneering social network [BlackPlanet.com](#), said social media was helping publicize police brutality and galvanizing public support for protesters’ goals — a role that his research found [conventional media](#) played a half century ago. And he said he believed that the internet was making it easier to organize social movements today, for good and for ill.

Here are excerpts from our conversation.

**How has social media changed, or not, civil rights protests today compared with the 1960s?**

The 1960s civil rights leaders figured out that images in national media that showed the brutality of Jim Crow forced an often indifferent, white America to take seriously the concerns of black citizens.

There’s a through line today. The video of George Floyd [taken by Darnella Frazier](#) is an echo of the bearing witness of the beating of Rodney King, and before that the images of [Bloody Sunday in Selma](#) [in 1965]. Part of what social media does is allow us to see a reality that has been entirely visible to some people and invisible to others. As those injustices become visible, meaningful change follows.

**But racial inequality or police brutality didn’t end with Selma or Rodney King. Does the internet change that?**

It’s obviously depressing how often excess force by police against African-Americans resulted in protest movements that didn’t ultimately fix the problem. But after Selma, [public opinion on concerns for civil rights spiked dramatically](#). The Voting Rights Act was passed in five months.

The legal scholar [Thomas Stoddard](#) talked about [cultural shifts leading to durable social change](#). I think you’re seeing that now with [broad public support](#) for the goals of the Black Lives Matter movement.

## **Are there ways in which meaningful protests are harder now?**

Social media radically simplified organizing and coordinating large groups. The downside is there isn't a deep well of trust among demonstrators, as there was among people who did the first sit-ins of lunch counters and [all knew each other](#).

But if one way this movement has an impact is by having weaker ties but with broad reach, that is OK in some cases. And social media is enabling new kinds of protests. My wife has been doing activism around a chronic health issue, and many of those people are bed bound. Organizing online has been a way to raise consciousness and call attention to the health system's failures.

---

## **Are there lessons from the social networks you ran 20-plus years ago to make today's online hangouts healthier for the world?**

When we launched what used to be called a bulletin board service in the 1990s, our slogan was "[the mix is the message](#)." We were trying to get the variety of New Yorkers to talk to each other. Today there are places online where people can find others like them, and that's good. But I wonder if there's also more that could be done on sites like Facebook and Twitter to bring people together rather than sorting them into camps.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/18/technology/social-media-protests.html>

Shira Ovide writes the On Tech newsletter, a guide to how technology is reshaping our lives and world. [@ShiraOvide](#)