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### The Digital Revolution of Activism: How Media Expands Influence

The advancement of media has significantly amplified the influence of activists, enabling them to reach wider audiences and push for meaningful change. The media plays a big role in history. If there was no form of media, our world would be a very different place. Without the media, activists such as Martin Luther, Thomas Paine, Nathaniel Bowditch, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Little Rock Nine would not have been able to make the change in the world that they all did. This paper explores how different forms of media, from the printing press to the television, have shaped historical activism and sped up the progress of major social movements, and also the possible negative effects that the media can have.

From the drawings on the walls of caves, all the way to the internet, humans have had various ways of communicating with each other throughout history, and have used those methods to speak up for what they believe in and reach out towards the people they want to influence.

First I'll be talking about the printing press, and the revolutionary change that it brought to the world. Before the printing press was widespread, news, trends, anything that was being talked about, and anything that wanted to be heard by others was spread by word of mouth or by the few copies of written documents on paper. And that written information was typically just circulated between the wealthy, and the people that could afford any of the few handwritten documents or by people who were in positions that were able to obtain them. Books at the time were rare and expensive, often hand-copied by scribes, typically in monasteries. And if you

thought paper being rare was bad enough, before paper, messages were carved into clay tablets, or were carved into tree bark, and were even harder to come by and had to be carried around everywhere by messengers.

In 1517 Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the Wittenberg church doors in Germany in order to make a statement about how the indulgences in the Catholic Church were a misuse of the Christian faith. While he actually wasn't able to print his theses, the printing press played a crucial role in the rapid spread of Luther's ideas and the following Protestant Reformation. It enabled the mass production and distribution of his writings, making them accessible to a wider audience than ever before. And that helped him become one of the most influential and controversial figures in the history of Christianity.

Just 259 years later in 1776, after the printing press' use was already widespread, Thomas Paine published "Common Sense", a pamphlet that was trying to win over the people who still felt it was necessary to be under British rule. That same pamphlet was able to change the opinions of the majority of the colonies, and help spark the American Revolution. Along with how it was written, and what was said, with the help of the printing press "Common Sense" was able to reach so many people, including Britain. Many government officials and citizens in Britain read the pamphlet as well. If Thomas Paine didn't take advantage of the printing press, then who knows what the American Revolution would be like, or how, if, or when it would've started. The opinions of the people might not have changed, and it would've changed the course of history.

Another figure in history, Nathaniel Bowditch wrote a revolutionizing book on maritime navigation called *The New American Practical Navigator*. That book is still published today and is a staple of the navy and sailors. If that book was never published or widespread, and without

the help of the printing press, not only would our navigation and sailing be less accurate and efficient, but think about how that alone could change history. Who knows how long it would've taken for expeditions, trips, and battles on the water to catch up and start using this newfound knowledge? The printing press was able to help the book be able to reach mariners, captains of ships, and sailors alike.

Next, one of the most important figures in American history, and a different Martin Luther who lived much later, Martin Luther King Jr., led the Civil Rights Movement and fundamentally reshaped the nation's laws, values, and understanding of justice and equality. Dr. King challenged deeply rooted systems of segregation and racism, pushing the country closer to its founding ideals, and also showed how important it is for our nation to be unified and to come together. He wasn't just a civil rights leader, he modeled Jesus, speaking about our faith and loving our enemies (Matthew 5:44), turning the other cheek when we have been wronged by others (Matthew 5:39), and our nation inheriting the promised land (mentioned throughout the old testament).

The Media helped Martin Luther King Jr. in a few different ways, the first way showing the American people, and people across the world, the injustice that was actually taking place within our country. That's why a lot of people didn't see the need to stick up against the racism going on at the time. They just didn't think it was as egregious as it truly was. But with the help of the radio, the newspaper, and the rising popularity of the TV, the media was able to enlighten the citizens of our wonderful country.

The radio helped King's sermons and speeches by being broadcasted on many different radio stations, but especially by Black radio stations, which helped energize and unify the movement across different cities, bringing thousands of African-Americans together for marches,

rallies, and sit-ins. And even the people who couldn't attend those could still hear his voice and message and stay updated on what Martin Luther King Jr. was continuing to accomplish.

Next, newspaper outlets like *The New York Times*, *Life*, *Time*, and *Newsweek* covered King's speeches, marches, and arrests. In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" he defended non-violent direct action, and addressed many other things, including the importance of non-violent protest, criticism towards him, and his justification for civil disobedience. King also compared the stance he was making to that of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and how they refused to obey Nebuchadnezzar's unjust laws. The letter was originally a response to local clergy, but the letter gained national attention after being published in major papers.

Another facet of the media that helped Dr. King was the international attention he got. At the time King was fighting for equality and human rights, our country was in the heat of the Cold War. The reports from international news stations embarrassed the U.S. in front of the world. This international pressure added to the urgency for the U.S. government to address civil rights abuses.

And to conclude how the media aided Dr. King, and arguably the most helpful piece of technology for media, especially at the time, the revolutionary Television helped him the most. The first TV was released around 1930, and started to become a staple in American homes around the 50s and 60s. So, at the time that Martin Luther King Jr. was being recognized all over the country and the world for his stance, speeches, and marches, for the first time, Americans were witnessing real-time images of racism and violence, peaceful protesters being beaten, attacked by dogs, or blasted with fire hoses. That's what helped people realize that there was a lot that had been going on but had been covered up by the media, and by the people that didn't want King to win.

The Television was bringing injustice to the living rooms of American citizens. That's one of the big takeaways from this section, not only were the media and the TV specifically drawing more people to his cause, but it was also turning people away from bad organizations and the cycle or tradition of not saying anything and not getting involved.

In conclusion, Martin Luther King Jr. knew the power of the media, and used it to his advantage to show not just the people of our country but the people around the world to stick up for what is right, and to show the importance of unification within a body of people. Without the media, our country would've looked a lot different then and now. Would we have gotten to the place where we are today without the media? I think so, but it would've taken us as a country way longer. The media helped progress the civil-rights movement much faster, but it can't bring change by itself. The power of the media paired with a strong and determined group of people or an individual, that brings change.

A group who played a big role in the civil rights movement and integration within schools, The Little Rock Nine would not have gotten very far without the help of the media. The Little Rock Nine was a group of African American students who integrated Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957. And without the attention and pressure created by national news coverage, their historic stand against segregation would have been overlooked and suppressed. Instead, the media turned their experience into a powerful symbol of the civil rights struggle and helped encourage federal action to enforce the rule of law and protect the students.

When the Little Rock Nine first attempted to enter Central High School on September 4, 1957, television cameras and newspaper reporters captured dramatic and disturbing scenes. In one of the most famous pictures, Elizabeth Eckford, one of the nine students, was photographed walking alone while being harassed and screamed at by an angry white mob. That image, printed

in newspapers across the country and abroad, became an iconic moment in American civil rights history. It captured the brutal resistance African American students faced simply for exercising their constitutional rights to an equal education.

This kind of media coverage did more than shock the people of our nation. It built public pressure on the federal government. When Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus ordered the National Guard to block the students from entering the school, the story made national headlines. Americans who had previously ignored or been unaware of segregation in the South were forced to confront its daunting reality. As the crisis grew and grew, media attention made it clear that the state of Arkansas was defying the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which declared school segregation unconstitutional.

The ongoing media focus on Little Rock eventually compelled President Dwight D. Eisenhower to act. And what's really cool is that there are photographs and videos of him watching the broadcasts on a small television in his oval office. In response to the growing national outrage and lawlessness being broadcasted to the world, Eisenhower sent the 101st Airborne Division to Little Rock to protect the students and enforce their right to attend Central High. This marked one of the first major federal interventions in the Civil Rights Movement and demonstrated the power of the media to influence political decisions. The statement that was made to the people in the area, and the country, really spoke to the Little Rock Nine. The president wasn't just sending any federal troops to see them into the school, he sent the 101st airborne. Which was and is one of the U.S. Army's finest groups of soldiers. That showed everyone that this was a big and important issue, and that The Little Rock Nine were being directly supported by the president of the United States of America.

Additionally, media coverage turned the Little Rock Nine into symbols of bravery and dignity. Although they were teenagers, their courage under constant harassment and violence got the public's attention and inspired others across the country to demand equal rights for themselves as well. The daily abuse they endured was being documented in newspapers, on television, and through photographs which helped generate national and international sympathy, as well as support for the broader Civil Rights Movement.

The media's impact extended beyond U.S. borders. During the Cold War, Soviet propaganda used images of American racism to embarrass the U.S. on the global stage. American leaders, aware of this, felt increased pressure to live up to the nation's democratic ideals. Thus, the Little Rock Nine, through the lens of the media, became both heroes at home and international symbols in the struggle against racial injustice.

In summary, The media didn't just report the story, it shaped it. The visibility it gave to the Little Rock Nine turned them into national heroes and forced the federal government to act. Their bravery, captured on film and in headlines, became one of the early turning points of the modern Civil Rights Movement.

While the media has played a powerful and often positive role in amplifying voices for justice and change, as seen with Martin Luther King Jr., the Little Rock Nine, and many others. It's important to recognize that the same influence can be used for harm. Just as the media can expose truth, unite people, and fight injustice, it can also be manipulated to spread lies, divide communities, and maintain control. The tools that bring people together for good can also be used to silence, deceive, and manipulate. Understanding both sides of the media's power is very important if we want to use it responsibly and recognize when it's being used for wrong-doing.

While the media has been a powerful force for activism and positive social change, it is important to recognize that its power can also be used for manipulation, suppression, and harm. In many cases throughout history, and even today, the media has been used to spread misinformation, reinforce harmful doctrines, and silence voices. When controlled by those in power, the media can distort the truth, influence public opinion unfairly, and maintain systems of oppression.

A major example of media being used in a dangerous way is during times of war and authoritarian rule. In Nazi Germany, for instance, propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels used films, posters, newspapers, and radio to spread antisemitic ideas and rally support for Hitler's army. The media was strictly controlled and turned into a tool to spread lies, dehumanize the Jewish people, and justify horrific actions. Because Hitler was controlling all of the media, citizens had limited access to alternative sources of information, and many people ended up accepting the state's narrative as truth. I'm reminded of a quote that goes something like, "if all you have is a hammer, everything will begin to look like a nail". In context, if all that the German people were seeing when they were walking down the street were posters of Jews being tortured, and billboards saying "you hate your country if you don't join the nazis", they are most-likely going to start listening to what the Nazis are pushing for, and will begin to start being desensitized by it.

Similarly, in *1984* by George Orwell, the fictional government controls every form of media to rewrite history and influence what people are thinking. The Ministry of Truth doesn't just report facts, it destroys them by creating a reality where the government can never be wrong, and the past can be changed at will. This manipulation keeps citizens obedient and confused, robbing

them of the ability to resist or even think independently. Orwell's warning is that when media is used only to serve power, truth becomes meaningless, and freedom disappears.

In modern times, social media platforms have become breeding grounds for misinformation, especially when used to spread conspiracy theories or false political narratives. Algorithms often amplify the most emotional or extreme content, not necessarily what is accurate. This has led to division, and even violence. For example, the spread of false information online has majorly influenced political elections, encouraged vaccine hesitancy, and fueled hate speech and harassment.

The danger of the media lies in its influence. Just as it can build movements and bring truth to light, it can also shape lies, imply hate, and protect the powerful. That is why media literacy, the ability to evaluate what we see and hear, is more important than ever. A free and responsible press is essential for democracy, but when that power is abused, the consequences can be devastating.

To wrap things up, throughout history, media has proven to be one of the most powerful tools in shaping activism, influencing public opinion, and driving social and political change. From the printing press that amplified Martin Luther's theses to the television screens that broadcasted the Civil Rights Movement into American homes, media has continuously given voice to the unheard and visibility to the unseen. Figures like Thomas Paine, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Little Rock Nine relied on the media not just to tell their stories, but to create a real path towards justice. However, as much as the media can uplift and unite, it also holds the potential to deceive and divide. Whether in Nazi Germany's propaganda machine or modern social media's spread of disinformation, the misuse of media can be just as impactful, and

dangerous, as its responsible use. That's why media literacy, and critical thinking are more crucial now than ever. As we move forward in this digital age, understanding both powers of the media is essential. When paired with truth and courage, the media can fuel revolutions; when paired with manipulation and fear, it can suppress them. The choice of how we use that power, and how we respond to it belongs to all of us.

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