TECHNOLIBERAL PARTICIPATION: BLACK LIVES MATTER AND INSTAGRAM SLIDESHOWS

Matthew Salzano
University of Maryland

After the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, Black Lives Matter protests surged around the globe. Amid COVID-19, activism on social media flourished (Rosenblatt, 2020). On Instagram, use of the ten-image carousel as an informative slideshow akin to a PowerPoint presentation gained significant attention: *The New York Times* highlighted their "effort to democratize access to information" (Guerrero, 2020). In this paper, I rhetorically analyze case studies to illustrate how Instagram slideshows facilitated deliberation about participation. I argue that these posts reveal a tension in platformed digital activism: as digital templates broaden access to participation, technoliberal ideology constrains activist judgment.

Digital participation on Instagram

Studying Instagram slideshows within this specific context reveals how users of digital media navigate the ethics of participation. My rhetorical analysis performs a close reading of representative anecdotes to show how Instagram slideshows prompted deliberation *about* participation in activism. This study highlights how questions about participation are at the center of political life, a "longstanding problem of the relation between persons and collectives" (Kelty, 2019, p. 42) and builds on previous studies on digital media and participatory culture (Jackson et al., 2020; Steele, 2013). I collected posts that commented on the ethics of participation from my feed and from news articles about the phenomenon. I analyzed their visual and textual components in their mediated, political context.

Prior to the slideshow phenomenon, Leaver et al. (2020) suggested that aesthetics on Instagram are readily repeated by users to make their content appealing and recognizable to others in a logic they term *templatability*. Templatability makes

participation in social life on Instagram possible. The authors register, however, that templatability poses a problem to user agency and activism as it "may well diminish the feeling of … individual contributions to Instagram, and with that a sense of being able to meaningfully communicate aesthetically, or contribute to change," senses they consider essential to Instagram (ch.7). In the case of Summer 2020, the templatability of the slideshow itself offered a simple pathway for users to format their participation for Instagram. Instagram slideshows "[co-opt] popular design aesthetics from brands" to please Instagram's algorithm (Nguyen, 2020, para. 6) and are easily created with free design software like Canva and its pre-made design templates (Ables, 2020).

Creating room for templates of activism and agency

Instagram slideshows offered necessary and accessible space for individuals to contribute to change. @sa.liine's (2020) tie-dye themed "Virtual Protesting 101" provided a guide for how to use Instagram to protest. The first slide offered: "Black people do not need reminders that Black lives matter. Let's target our posts towards the people that need to see and hear it. Time to use the algorithm to our advantage." The next slide offered hashtags to use to disrupt anti-Black Lives Matter content, such as #blueline, #buildthewall, #womenfortrump. The last slides offered guidance on how to do so safely, without identifying people who could be targeted by "the oppressors" who see the images. This marks a departure from earlier conversations about activism and slacktivism which focused on going from online *to* the streets—these focused specifically on online-only praxis. When many were unable to safely complete 'tangible action' because of viral community spread of COVID-19, Instagram slideshows reflected an openness to many different forms of participation.

Transcending Technoliberalism?

As I appreciate the invitational quality of the slideshow phenomenon, I am also concerned about latent references to technoliberalism in the posts. By technoliberalism, I mean neoliberalism intensified by the belief that "digital technology can address liberalism's shortcomings with an attenuated form of togetherness mediated by corporate platforms and focused on individual empowerment through software and hardware upgrades" (Pfister & Yang, 2018, p. 249). Technoliberalism names the ideology that centers Instagram as a site for political participation and provides the terms for assessment.

Technoliberal participation prioritizes 'posting' as a valued metric for participation. Posting is cast as anti-racist in @ghostdump's (2020) slideshow, "Why the refusal to post online is often inherently racist: an explanation of why something as simple as an Instagram story, can mean so much," which has received more than 400,000 likes. Set in a black and white theme, the post explains that "the absolute least you can do is repost the millions of Instagram posts helping people spread the message on how to help, donate, protest, and converse. … A refusal to post is, at its core, a refusal to give up your comfort." The post is right to call out the hypocrisy of people who wish for change but are silent and unwilling to call out injustice and risk being uncomfortable in their communities. But its moral nexus is on posts—sharing Instagram slideshows.

Another post further reveals the technoliberal implications of focusing on posting. @norajmaxwell's (2020) post titled "your solidarity shouldn't follow the news cycle," featured a slide with dots in a calendar grid representing the days between the killings of George Floyd and Walter Wallace Jr. The slideshow used dark blue dots to represent days where people were practicing their best allyship. The author claimed these days lined up with news coverage, ultimately arguing: "your solidarity shouldn't require the witnessing of another viral video of a Black person being injured or murdered." @norajmaxwell is right that solidarity should not follow the news cycle. But like closing 'move rings' on an Apple Watch, participation is assessed in this slideshow via technoliberal methods of tracking. But just as high-calorie burning exercise that quickly closes move rings may not accurately reflect long term health, the Instagram solidarity calendar valorizes public displays of activism, despite social justice work requiring reckonings with self and communities that may not be readily tracked or posted.

Conclusion

Inviting participation via Instagram slideshows includes more people and circulates information to a broader network—but this practice also facilitates the use of technoliberal heuristics in deliberating about ethical participation. These ethical queries may be a task too nuanced for slideshow templates to serve as the guide for our answers.

References

Ables, K. (2020, August 15). Selfies and sunsets be gone. *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/08/15/instagram-race-activism-slideshow-graphics/

@ghostdumps. (2020, May 30). *"Hello. A lot is going on, and I felt the need to say something. Again I wish to reiterate, people aren't obligated to post on their social…."* Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CA0zhFzFjLf/

Guerrero, M. (2020, August 19). Swipe-Through Activist Guides Are the New Zines. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/19/style/instagram-activism-graphics-zines.html

Jackson, S. J., Bailey, M., & Welles, B. F. (2020). *#hashtagactivism: Networks of race and gender justice*. The MIT Press.

Kelty, C. M. (2019). *The participant: A century of participation in four stories*. The University of Chicago Press.

Leaver, T., Highfield, T., & Abidin, C. (2020). *Instagram: Visual social media cultures*. Polity.

@norajmaxwell. (2020, October 28). *Your solidarity shouldn't follow the news cycle.* Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CG5WhxZrOXm/?igshid=1vizdg4ln7m3u

Pfister, D. S., & Yang, M. (2018). Five theses on technoliberalism and the networked public sphere. *Communication and the Public*, *3*(3), 247–262. https://doi.org/10.1177/2057047318794963

Rosenblatt, K. (2020, September 26). A summer of digital protest. *NBC News*. https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/summer-digital-protest-how-2020-became-summer-activism-both-online-n1241001

@sa.liine. (2020, May 29). *Virtual Protesting 101.* Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CAyFgY6jdE0/

Steele, C. K. (2013). Shaking off the 'Other': Appropriation of marginalized cultures and the 'Harlem Shake.' *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*, *3*(0). https://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/spir/article/view/8849