

# Has Social Media Made it Easier to Effect Social Change?: Inquiring into Tactics for Change through Primary Sources

Daniel G. Krutka and Marie K. Heath



Figure 1. Tweet from Congressman John Lewis.

When John Lewis sought to change segregation laws in 1960 Nashville, Tennessee, he did so through nonviolent sit-ins.<sup>1</sup> Throughout U.S. history, activists like John Lewis have turned to social change tactics outside of the institutions of democracy from which they have been largely excluded. However, social studies curricula rarely frame these tactics as critical to democratic citizenship; instead, official curricula tend to focus on institutional processes such as voting, constitutional checks and balances, or communicating with elected officials.<sup>2</sup> Even though Lewis has been the U.S. House representative for

Georgia's 5th district for over 30 years, he still promotes activist tactics in his fight for equality. As Figure 1 illustrates, Lewis and other activists today spread their messages and engage in activism with tweets, hashtags, and other social media activities. We believe social studies educators can use historical and contemporary sources to better understand tactics of change that fall outside institutional practices. In this article, we offer an inquiry design model (IDM) lesson with primary sources to investigate the compelling question, *Has social media made it easier to effect social change?*

## Three Aims of Activists

In her recent book, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*, scholar and activist Zeynep Tufekci wrestled with this question by addressing the ways in which social media has facilitated, stunted, or diverted democratic movements across the world.<sup>3</sup> She argued that social movements signal their capacity to those in power by shifting narratives, threatening disruption, or promoting institutional or electoral change. Within these three categories, movements utilize an array of tactics to fuel change, including sit-ins, marches, boycotts, and voter registration drives. Social studies teachers often teach *about* these events, but rarely do they teach the activist aims of such tactics or how to enact them. While we will provide an explanation and examples of the three aims Tufekci outlines, we recommend reading her outstanding book in full to develop deeper understandings of networked activism in a social media era.

## Shifting Narratives

One aim of activists is to *shift narratives* on political issues so as to influence public opinion and attract citizens



Above: A sit-in demonstration at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Jackson, Mississippi.



Above: Instagram post of Women's March postcarding action at restaurant, February 26th, 2017.

to their cause. Civil rights activists famously utilized non-violent principles to expose the racist and violent policies of white institutions. Images of non-violent activists being assaulted during sit-ins, attacked by police dogs, sprayed by powerful water hoses, and beaten by white police officers shocked many and gradually increased white support for the

civil rights struggle.<sup>4</sup> Such shifts in public support can compel institutional change. Today's activist movements often aim to shift public narratives through social media. Tarana Burke began the Me Too movement in 2006 on MySpace to draw attention to sexual assault experienced by women in marginalized communities.<sup>5</sup> In 2017, actress and activist

Alyssa Milano encouraged sexual assault survivors to use the #MeToo hashtag on Twitter to share their stories; this resulted in over 200,000 tweets in one day. The #BlackLivesMatter hashtag has helped garner widespread attention on issues of systemic racism historically neglected by mainstream media outlets. Black feminists in particular have led the way by addressing street harassment (e.g., #YouOkSis), police violence against black girls and women (e.g., #SayHerName), and transgender solidarity (e.g., #girlslikeus) through ingenious uses of hashtags and other means.<sup>6</sup>

### Threatening Disruption

Activists also signal their movement's capacity by *threatening disruption* of economic systems, political processes, or physical spaces. Threats to disrupt can call public attention to inequality while simultaneously signaling a movement's capacity to endure. For instance, while the 1955–1956 bus boycott disrupted the economy of Montgomery, Alabama, it also signaled the enduring commitment of civil rights activists and the black community as a whole. While this economic disruption did not result in municipal changes, increased public support for the activists influenced the U.S. Supreme Court to hear and uphold the *Browder v. Gayle* (1956) district court ruling in favor of NAACP lawyers and their client, activist Aurelia Browder.<sup>7</sup>

Modern movements also threaten, and often amplify, disruption through social media. In 2016, following the lead of elder LaDonna Brave Bull Allard (Standing Rock Sioux), indigenous activists from the Standing Rock Indian Reservation sought to disrupt construction of Energy Transfer Partners' Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). Sioux tribes and their allies say the pipeline is a hazard to clean water and ancient burial grounds. Activists formed a camp at the site to protest pipeline construction, endured physical abuse by security workers, and spread their story via the #NoDAPL hashtag.<sup>8</sup>

As one of our two video sources shows

(see p. 272, IDM Blueprint), Women's March and #MeToo activists used social media to protest, spread awareness, and disrupt the Senate hearings on the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the U.S. Supreme Court. Activists protested outside the Capitol Building, physically occupied space inside, and disrupted the hearings with shouts and chants. In addition to this disruption, social media and email campaigns helped the movement organize quickly and raise money to continue their efforts.

### Producing Institutional Change

The third activist aim is the promotion of *institutional change* in the form of laws, policies, or cultures. Shifting narratives and threatening disruption are means to an end, but activists often pursue more direct routes either prior to, or in association with, their efforts to make institutional change. Civil rights advocates had long pursued institutional change by lobbying white legislators, appealing to governors and presidents, and pursuing legal rulings. NAACP lawyers like Charles Hamilton Houston and then Thurgood Marshall turned to the courts because they believed the legal system offered at least a semblance of a level playing field, and they could apply the equal protection clause of the 14th amendment to change racist policies. Years of efforts and important legal victories laid the groundwork for the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision, yet legal challenges continue to this day in the face of school (re)segregation and continued inequality. Activists also turned to celebrity appeals (see Jackie Robinson's appeal to President Dwight Eisenhower in the compilation of resources at <http://tinyurl.com/tacticsforchange>) to advance passage of civil rights legislation like the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Contemporary activists continue to seek court rulings, executive support and orders, and the passage of just laws and policies. Social media and email campaigns often encourage activists to sign petitions; celebrity tweets appeal to lawmakers and executives (see Alyssa



Above: Aerial Photograph of the Civil Rights March on Washington, D.C., August 28, 1963.



Above: Women's March on Washington, 2017

Mobilus in Mobili (Flickr Account), January 21st, 2017.

Find primary source documents for this inquiry at [tinyurl.com/TacticsForChange](http://tinyurl.com/TacticsForChange), and slides to teach the lesson at [tinyurl.com/TacticsForChangeSlides](http://tinyurl.com/TacticsForChangeSlides).

Figure 2.

Inquiry Design Model (IDM) Blueprint		
Compelling Question	Has social media made it easier to effect social change?	
Standards and Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>D2.His.2.9-12. Analyze change and continuity in historical eras.</li> <li>D2.Civ.14.9-12. Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.</li> </ul>	
Teacher Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tufekci, Z. (2017). <i>Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest</i>. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.</li> </ul>	
Staging the Question	<p>Teachers can elicit prior knowledge by asking the following questions, <i>How can citizens make social change in a democracy? Why might different groups use different tactics? How does a group that lacks political power or voting rights make social change?</i> Teachers can then explain Tufekci's different types of change:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shifting narratives (i.e., change the conversation)</li> <li>Threatening disruption (i.e., getting in the way)</li> <li>Effecting institutional and/or electoral change (i.e., changing laws, policies, representatives).</li> </ul>	
Supporting Question 1	Supporting Question 2	Supporting Question 3
What <i>tactics</i> did activists in the African American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s use to effect social change?	What <i>tactics</i> have activists used in recent movements to effect social change?	How have strategies changed and stayed the same from the African American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s to recent movements?
Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task
<p>Complete the following tasks as you analyze the primary sources.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Timeline:</b> Place the images chronologically on a timeline.</li> <li><b>Movement Aims:</b> Identify ways that the movement tried to shift narratives, threaten disruption, and/or effect institutional/electoral change.</li> <li><b>Overall Strategy:</b> In hindsight, how would you describe their overall strategy for effecting social change?</li> </ul>	<p>Complete the following tasks as you analyze the primary sources.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Timeline:</b> Place the images chronologically on a timeline.</li> <li><b>Movement Aims:</b> Identify ways that the movement tried to shift narratives, threaten disruption, and/or effect institutional/electoral change.</li> <li><b>Overall Strategy:</b> In hindsight, how would you describe their overall strategy for effecting social change?</li> </ul>	<p>Compare the timelines, movement aims, and overall strategies to determine similarities and differences between the civil rights movement and more recent movements.</p>
Featured Sources <a href="http://tinyurl.com/TacticsForChange">http://tinyurl.com/TacticsForChange</a>	Featured Sources <a href="http://tinyurl.com/TacticsForChange">http://tinyurl.com/TacticsForChange</a>	Featured Sources <a href="http://tinyurl.com/TacticsForChange">http://tinyurl.com/TacticsForChange</a>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Opinion from <i>Brown v. Board of Education</i>, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Earl Warren, May 17, 1954.</li> <li>Bus in Montgomery, Alabama, 1956</li> <li>Letter from Jackie Robinson to President Eisenhower, May 13, 1958.</li> <li>Children's March of the Birmingham Campaign (Alabama), May 2, 1963.</li> <li>Sit-in demonstration at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Jackson, Mississippi, Fred Blackwell/<i>Jackson Daily News</i> via AP, May 28, 1963.</li> <li>Official Program for the March on Washington, 10 Civil Rights Organizations, August 28, 1963.</li> <li>Aerial Photograph of the Civil Rights March on Washington, D.C., August 28, 1963.</li> <li>President Lyndon Johnson Signing the Voting Rights Act, August, 6, 1965.</li> <li>Encampments in Resurrection City on the National Mall, June 1968.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Eventbrite, event ticketing website, for 2017 Women's March, Organizer of Women's March on Washington, 2016.</li> <li>Women's March on Washington, Mobilus In Mobili (Flickr Account), January 21, 2017.</li> <li>Women's Marches Around the Nation and World, Kiersten Schmidt and Sarah Almkhtar of the <i>New York Times</i>, January 21, 2017.</li> <li>10 Actions in 100 Days, Women's March Website, n.d.</li> <li>Instagram post of Women's March postcarding action at restaurant, February 26, 2017.</li> <li>Actress Alyssa Milano tweets at Donald Trump during the Women's March 2018, January 20, 2018.</li> <li>Police arrest 70 at first day of Kavanaugh hearings [video], <i>Washington Post</i>, September 4, 2018.</li> <li>Women's March Los Angeles Email, November 1, 2018.</li> </ul>	<p>See documents and evidence from Supporting Questions 1 and 2</p>
Taking Informed Action	Extension	"Take a Stand" by standing along a "Yes/No" continuum in the classroom and then explaining your position in a class deliberation by drawing from primary source evidence and analysis to support claims.
	<p><b>Understand:</b> Identify and research a policy on a social issue of personal and social significance.</p> <p><b>Assess:</b> Examine the benefits and disadvantages of the policy for citizens, particularly groups that may be marginalized.</p> <p><b>Act:</b> Utilize tactics for social change as individuals or a class.</p>	

Milano's tweets at Donald Trump); and online campaigns to raise funds for legal pursuits. From the past to the present, activists seek ways to shift narratives, threaten disruption, or promote institutional and electoral change. The question is whether social media make these efforts easier or perhaps too easy. Our Inquiry Design Model (IDM) lesson provides questions, primary documents, and a general structure to explore continuity and change in tactics for social change.<sup>9</sup>

### An Inquiry Approach to Teaching Tactics for Change

Using the four dimensions of the C3 Framework, our lesson can help teach students democratic tactics for social change (see Figure 2 on p. 272). The compelling question, *Has social media made it easier to effect social change?*, serves to guide and bound the inquiry. When we lead this inquiry, we use this question to provoke interest and to ensure participants don't lose sight of the historical thinking concept of continuity and change.<sup>10</sup> We then quickly move to our first supporting question, *What tactics did activists in the African American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s use to effect social change?* This question narrows our focus to primary sources related to the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision up to the 1968 encampments on the National Mall.<sup>11</sup> (See the Google document at: [tinyurl.com/TacticsForChange](http://tinyurl.com/TacticsForChange)). As students review the documents, we ask them to engage with three formative tasks:

- Place the images chronologically on a timeline.
- Identify ways that the movement tried to shift narratives, threaten disruption, and/or effect institutional/electoral change.
- How would you describe their

overall strategy for effecting social change?

We provide students between 20 to 45 minutes to investigate the documents and then we facilitate whole group discussion for 10 to 15 minutes.

Our second supporting question, *What tactics have activists used in recent movements to effect social change?*, is accompanied by a new set of eight documents from the Women's March movement with the same formative tasks. Students explore documents that range from an event ticketing website that described the aims of the 2017 Women's March and allowed users to reserve their place at the march in Washington, D.C., to a Women's March, Los Angeles, email from November 1, 2018, that suggested ways to effect change. We chose the women's march because of the ways the movement captured both centralized and decentralized efforts, successes and failures, and historical continuity and change.

Instead of explaining the many lessons we learned from Tufekci's book, we often pose questions for students to consider and discuss. For example, in the whole group discussion, we probe students on the effectiveness of the tactics enacted in person (e.g., marches, protest), online (e.g., tweeting), or from home (e.g., postcard writing). For example, students are quick to point to the success of the Women's March movement in organizing massive marches that shift narratives and threaten disruption, but they also question whether the movement has the tactical flexibility and strength to effect institutional change. We also ask participants to consider questions like, How do you think participating in comfortable (e.g., most documents) or uncomfortable (e.g., Kavanaugh hearing protest) spaces affect activ-

## THE CHOICES PROGRAM

BROWN UNIVERSITY

### Address Current Issues with the Choices Program

Our innovative curriculum units use top scholarship to make contested international issues accessible, engaging, and relevant to secondary school audiences. Our Current Issues Series includes 19 units:

**Climate Change**  
**Cuba**  
**Genocide**  
**Human Rights**  
**Immigration**  
**International Trade**  
**The Middle East**  
**Russia's Transformation**  
**U.S. in Afghanistan**  
**and more!**

We also have series in Geography and in U.S. and World History.

Use the promo code NCSS\_20 to save 20 percent off your next order; offer good through November 30, 2019.



FACEBOOK AND TWITTER:  
 @CHOICESPROGRAM

WWW.CHOICES.EDU

ist understandings, skills, and commitments in the short- and long-term?

Our third supporting question, *How have strategies changed and stayed the same from the African American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s to recent movements?*, provides students time to compare the timelines, movement aims, and overall strategies to determine similarities and differences between the civil rights movement and more recent movements. Participants in this inquiry will likely notice, for example, the ways in which the civil rights movement required activists to physically meet together and even use their bodies as disruptions to racist institutions. On the other hand, the Women's March movement encourages online activism, which is sometimes disparaged as "slacktivism" because of the little mental and physical effort required. While we do not believe that online activism is problematic in and of itself, Tufekci points out that the ease with which some components of Women's March activism are accomplished—like swiftly organized marches and online participation—may result in a failure to develop the resilience and tactical flexibility needed for long-term success.

The final dimension of the C3 Framework impels students to communicate conclusions and take informed action. Depending on time and resources, we encourage students to answer the compelling question using evidence from our sources by creating a video or podcast that can be shared beyond class walls. Educators might also assess students' comprehension and evaluation abilities through a written paper or a Yes/No "take a stand" discussion in the classroom. Our compelling question does not result in clear or easy answers, but we have repeatedly facilitated rich and evidence-informed deliberations that lead to continuing interest and inquiry.

Finally, we encourage educators to pinpoint justice-oriented issues about which students are passionate, research

the topic, and identify tactics for change. Such activism might take place on local, national, or global issues immediately following this lesson, over the course of the school year, or even beyond the school year. Engaging in such tactics can, and likely should, be controversial within these communities, but if we seek to help students grow as justice-oriented citizens who might make "good trouble" then they must understand how to make change when institutions fail to respond in democratic and equitable ways.

### Conclusion

While official social studies curricula and standards often implicitly mention tactics activists enacted during the civil rights movement, they often do not do so explicitly (in ways that highlight the importance of such tactics to our democracy). While many Americans venerate the actions of historical civil rights activists, they are less likely to value the work of contemporary civil rights activists. However, the networked activism afforded by social media platforms requires an update to our understandings of available and effective tactics for social change. We used the Women's March as a way to discuss both the successes, but also the failures of such activism to signal capacities to leaders and institutions. We believe this inquiry offers educators an opportunity to critique the ways a primarily middle class and white movement like the Women's March differs not only from the African American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, but also from movements led by people of color (e.g., #BlackLivesMatter), indigenous peoples (#NoDAPL), and other marginalized groups. Citizens cannot claim to live in a democracy when the suppression of the voting rights of people of color,<sup>12</sup> the separation of immigrant families, and a host of other injustices persist. Because elected officials regularly enact such bigoted policies, our democracy requires citizens willing to make "good trouble" if we are to move towards justice. 🌍

### Notes

1. John Lewis and Andrew Aydin, *March: Book Three* (Marietta, Ga.: Top Shelf Productions, 2013).
2. Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne, "What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Educating for Democracy," *American Educational Research Journal* 41, no. 2 (2004): 237–269.
3. Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2017).
4. Taeku Lee, *Mobilizing Public Opinion: Black Insurgency and Racial Attitudes in the Civil Rights Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
5. Michelle Rodino-Colocino, "Me too, #MeToo: Countering Cruelty with Empathy," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 15, no. 1 (2018): 96–100.
6. Feminista Jones, *Reclaiming Our Space: How Black Feminists are Changing the World from the Tweets to the Streets* (Boston, Mass. Beacon, 2019).
7. For a broader discussion of black histories see the 2017 introductory article and *Social Education* issue edited by Dr. LaGarrett King, "The Status of Black History in U.S. Schools and Society," *Social Education* 81, no. 1 (2017): 14–18.
8. For a broader discussion of indigenous topics in schools see: Leilani Sabzalian, *Indigenous Children's Survivance in Public Schools* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2019).
9. See C3Teachers for more on the Inquiry Design Model (IDM): [www.c3teachers.org/inquiry-design-model/](http://www.c3teachers.org/inquiry-design-model/).
10. Peter Seixas, "Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness," *Historical Thinking Project*. Retrieved from <http://historicalthinking.ca/historical-thinking-concepts>.
11. All our primary documents are accessible and print ready from our Google doc: <https://tinyurl.com/TacticsForChange>; Please contact us for requests for additional primary document sets related to this inquiry.
12. R. Zackary Seitz, Daniel G. Krutka, and Prentice T. Chandler, "Are Voter ID Laws Democratic? Teaching Deliberation for Informed Citizens," *Social Education* 82, no. 5 (2018): 291–298.

**DANIEL G. KRUTKA** is Assistant Professor of Social Studies Education at the University of North Texas. His research concerns how democratic citizens might address the ethical, social, and civic effects of social media for a more just world. You can tweet him at @dankrutka on Twitter. **MARIE K. HEATH** is an Assistant Professor of Educational Technology at Loyola University Maryland. Her research centers inquiry on the intersection of civic engagement and technology in order to foster social change. Prior to working in higher education, Dr. Heath taught secondary social studies in Baltimore County Public Schools.