

The Role of Communication in Civil Rights Movements

Asuman Banywana

Humanities Education Kampala International University Uganda

Email asuman.banywana@studmc.kiu.ac.ug

ABSTRACT

Communication has been a driving force behind civil rights movements, shaping public perception, mobilizing supporters, and influencing policy changes. This paper examines the role of communication in historical and contemporary civil rights movements, including the African American Civil Rights Movement and the 2017 Women's March. It explores different communication strategies such as speeches, visual media, grassroots activism, and digital platforms, analyzing their effectiveness through a semiotic and historical lens. Additionally, the paper discusses the impact of media coverage, the power of nonviolent communication, and the role of technology in amplifying social justice messages. While effective communication has contributed to the success of many movements, challenges such as misinformation, censorship, and media framing persist. The paper concludes that adaptive and inclusive communication strategies remain essential in advancing civil rights and ensuring lasting social change.

Keywords: Civil Rights Movements, Communication Strategies, Media Framing, Social Change, Nonviolent Communication.

INTRODUCTION

Effective communication is essential for successful mobilization and advocacy in civil rights movements, utilizing various forms such as speeches, interviews, and ads. This paper explores the role of communication strategies in fostering social change, specifically within the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's March in 2017. It assesses different communication methods, including posters, public speeches, and social media, and situates these strategies within the movements' goals and historical contexts. The analysis employs semiotic frameworks to examine the rhetoric of visual and verbal communication alongside historical context, highlighting the dynamic nature of communication in social movements and the variability of communication strategies. The paper posits that effective communication has historically been a key factor in the success of social movements. Successful movements align their image with their audience, respond strategically to media, manage public framing of issues, and validate common knowledge. However, it also highlights challenges in controlling media portrayals, indicating the inherent tension in political protest. Official power must always counteract dissent; otherwise, it risks losing authority. [1, 2].

Historical Overview of Civil Rights Movements

Civil rights movements are a persistent undercurrent running through the annals of all nations. This resistance takes many forms and generally pits marginalized or oppressed parties against larger, more powerful parties in often violent bouts affecting the majority of the public. Historically, there have been radical movements, in both their ideological approach and varied forms of protest, from acts of public terrorism to rebellions against public institutions and broad-scale social change through the press. Politically, it has led to new political parties coming into power, and in terms of legislation, significant freedoms and rights have been granted to previously marginalized groups. The first such major movement would perhaps be the abolitionist movement that began in the early 19th century, viewed as an

eccentric cause, was seized upon by religious groups to be taken into the collective conscience of the public as any abolitionist movement would hope to do. Following on the heels of the end of slavery, women's suffragette movements started to be portrayed in mass media outlets around the world. This resistance continued throughout the Victorian and Edwardian periods, up to and indeed after the suffragettes met with success at the end of World War. Although not represented as fully perhaps as others, these movements would catalyze for new civil rights movements to grow in the 20th century. In the United States, the 20th century would see the rise of the African American civil rights movement, beginning with the suffragette movement in the first half of the century and expanding to a much broader movement in the latter half of the century. In contrast to previous civil rights movements, the 20th century would also see interest groups and civil service organizations come to the fore in their struggle first for desegregation and later for full equality under the law. Statistically, this modern civil rights struggle would be met with the most success, but the broad focus is placed on the latter half of the 20th century. Key events during this period will be the focus of this discussion in terms of chronological events, but also what brought about the successful catalysis of civil rights movements. The growth of the civil rights movement occurred due mainly to a conscious image of disenfranchisement within the black community leading to many peaceful demonstrations and sit-ins. Starting with the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955, the movement through violations of the now famous Jim Crow laws spread to political activism through educational means like Freedom Riders, public protests involving up to half a million people, and endless lawsuits that came to a head in the 1960s. It ultimately ended in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which finally banned racial segregation [3, 4].

Key Figures in Civil Rights Communication

Since the 1960s, civil rights movements have led to various policies addressing societal inequalities. Essential to these movements were communication strategies that included speeches, rallies, legislation, and public awareness campaigns. Communication is fundamentally an exchange of information, often manipulated to influence larger audiences. Politicians utilize media to convey policies nationally, while writers reach global audiences. Leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X utilized their communication skills to engage both national and local audiences effectively. The success of mass communication hinges on factors like education and social networks, allowing certain individuals to reach large audiences. Most people associate the civil rights movements with prominent figures like King, Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks, who could elicit significant audience responses. Unfortunately, many lesser-known activists, who also made important contributions, often go unrecognized due to limited media exposure. Therefore, this paper will use eyewitness accounts from local incidents to explore broader relationships between civil rights movements and local communication efforts [5, 6].

Media Coverage of Civil Rights Movements

Civil rights movements have always been firmly rooted in communication processes. Scholars of historical and contemporary social movements have analyzed the framing tactics of activists as they communicate discrepant messages, the role of the media as they depict activists, events, and issues, and how activists and their opponents interact. Not surprisingly, communication scholarship on movement issues has largely juxtaposed the coverage of activists, events, and issues by mainstream media with alternative or movement media coverage. However, this dichotomy alone does not do justice to the multileveled communication strategies that social movement organizations use to communicate with their members, with elites, with possible converts, and with themselves. Communication processes in civil rights movements have been affected by governmental repression, by the enactment and application of laws regulating the limits of dissent because civil rights movements in various times have demonstrated contrasts regarding the type of regulation in place. During the 1950s, they operated in a cultural climate in which freedom of expression was the most influential norm for media coverage. Television, radio, and print journalism grew in importance as a cover for civil rights movements, whereas the 1960s became an era of intense surveillance of civil rights activists, and considerable communication between reporters, movement organizations, and governmental bodies. Communication scholarship on civil rights movements has largely focused on how mainstream media frames the issue events and activists in terms of the frames preferred by, or most salient to, the powerful groups. One of the results of the study was that it highlighted some of the spectacular moments of protest and demonstrations that occurred during the movement, and found how national media coverage of these events enhanced the visibility of the movement. Movements attempting to win civil rights have always had a difficult time gaining positive attention for their cause in the mainstream media, so when they seize on opportunities to influence news

coverage, they do whatever they can to take advantage of them. On some significant occasions, alternative media do have opportunities to communicate their message to a mass audience. Aware of the opportunity, they make strategic choices about whether, how, and when to take advantage of the chance of media access [7, 8].

Role of Nonviolent Communication Strategies

There is a power in civil rights movements that, once awakened, is unquenchable. Like a roaring river, it flows with inexhaustible strength. This power comes from people united by their experiences of injustice who courageously confront their shared enemy and speak their truth. When effectively harnessed, any passionate group's goals can become unstoppable. Nonviolent communication strategies have been central to many civil rights actions throughout history, from Nelson Mandela's Anti-Apartheid Movement to Alice Paul's Suffragettes and Harvey Milk's Gay Rights demonstrations. A crucial principle remains the potential for dialogue and empathy amid conflict. Historically, the pursuit of understanding between opposing sides has proven to be the most powerful means of resolution. Peaceful protests evolve into intricate dialogues, where bodies serve as the medium of message. The strength of nonviolent activism lies beyond arms; it exposes the harsh realities of injustice to oppressors and the public, often leading to further division and violence. Violence can transform protests into stories of martyrdom, with a broad, transformative power. Small acts of violence can quickly escalate into widespread chaos, impacting entire nations [9, 10].

Use of Technology in Civil Rights Movements

During the Civil War, telegraphs and the communications field created by the United States—appreciative, dispatch printing, and the mass media—formed the first integration of communication and civil rights. The history of this era has recently found that telegraphs greatly contributed to the integration of railway traffic, created the transcontinental railway, and eventually led to the whole U.S.'s standardization of time. While the transcontinental telegraph accompanied by telegraph and Ansonia watches was utilized in successful command and fortune of civil force, partisans of the South picketed telegraphy to express the succession pulse (so that the telegraph error caused incorrect results). By the time the Second World War broke out, the opposite phenomenon, controlled radio and its monologue, mass media that did not match the nature of the sound, had worked as a military weapon, however, the technique of secret encryption was established, TV and recording tape were newly released, and electronic music which was a novelty of the noise of a machine was completed. The combination of these events caused the appearance of a network society with real communication and a society where noise was more valuable than signals. Demonstrating liberation and obstacles, it could be that technology such as net radio, audio chat, and P2P had significantly influenced speech and movement. Movements also took the grassroots approach for better application and decentralization as a result of the obstacle. Here, from the life of Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela to the case of auto, aesthetic, and social movements, critics of this era are considered at length [11, 12].

Impact of Communication on Policy Change

Effective communication can be the cornerstone of any successful social good campaign or viewpoint advocacy effort. Many policy and governmental issues simply will not change without a national group of voices standing up and saying that change is imperative. offers several strategies, that through the application of social media, can be used to promote change in the legislative process. It also highlights the importance of the treatment of communities of voices and the inclusion of narratives in this outreach. Just as feminism has grown as a social movement, so too has advocacy methods, offering a more strategic approach to gaining civil rights policy objectives. Through campaigns coordinated across the country, civil rights activists have strategically chosen vulnerable political moments to push for specific legislative policy reforms. Similarly, civil rights reformists often bring forward petitions signed by thousands of concerned supporters. These petitions are sparked by a key moment of advocacy. Key moments were especially tailored, painting a powerful image to evoke an emotional response from the public and lawmakers alike. It would be then spread across all communication channels and platforms, paper petitions and online alike, to forward momentum in the push for legislative change. There would also be dedicated lobbying efforts to ensure lawmakers were left in no doubt about the issue. Campaigns changed the tide of the discussion. This can be seen in successful case studies where campaigns resulted in sweeping changes to the law [13, 14].

Intersectionality In Civil Rights Communication

Intersectional struggles have existed in the United States prior to nationhood, yet the communicative strategies of marginalized peoples have remained largely outside of the airtime and mainstream documents. Social workers and similarly aligned activists, especially those sponsored by local or federal governments, do not always see the full humanity of the individuals they seek to aid. This 'othering' results in a well-intentioned, but nonetheless oppressive communication strategy that fails to see the overlapping identities (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, class) in those they seek to help. In contrast, people's movements in the United States rely on an intersectional lens for building solidarity, given the necessity of this approach from its onset in the 18th century. By analyzing the communicative strategies of caretakers and aligned activists, this study argues that an intersectional focus in civil rights movement communication not only helps to understand how marginalized activists navigate oppressive systems but also enriches historical interpretations of movements, adding the potential for broader, future coalitional support. In times of social division, either in the 18th century or in the present, dialogue centered on equity and understanding is paramount. In broadening the lens through which the history of these movements has previously been understood, current activists and caretakers may benefit from a heightened awareness of the complexities and plurality of experiences that have historically driven activism. With a more inclusive understanding of history, opportunities for more inclusive dialogue may manifest, fostering a stronger unity amongst those who fight to uphold the civil rights of the oppressed. Such unity is essential if meaningful social change is to be enacted [15, 16].

Challenges and Limitations of Communication in Civil Rights Movements

Communication isn't enough to create change; it must be combined with sensible policy-making, political acumen, and intellectual enlightenment on all sides. There are numerous challenges and limitations that activists face in communication during civil rights movements. Just in terms of the presentation of information, the presence of censorship encourages the dissemination of misinformation. In some cases, malicious forces may intentionally circulate news in underprivileged communities, which can increase anger, panic, and resentment towards minority groups. Often it is those who work to suppress dissent that are best positioned to benefit from these strategies, with the result that the state holds almost complete control over the flow of communication in a crisis. Societal inequalities are quickly reflected in the information landscape: those with more educational opportunities are generally in a better position to access and properly engage with verified sources. This is only exacerbated by language barriers for students whose primary language is different than the form in which the 'official truth' is expressed. Furthermore, it is difficult to organize and coordinate actions against the state due to the surveillance and execution of opposition leaders who could transmit their beliefs to others. As social movements evolve, it becomes harder and harder to sustain the same basic ideology, resulting in fragmentation. Then, the motion risks losing momentum, as supporters start to focus on their own goals, or it becomes the target of internal sabotage by groups sympathetic to the authorities [17, 18].

Future Directions and Innovations in Civil Rights Communication

As we move further into the 21st century, innovative and emerging avenues of civil rights communication are continually evolving. Broad-brush technological landscapes have changed immensely over the years, with long-term implications for the social movements made. Communication technologies have advanced at a whiplash pace, enabling a variety of dissemination channels that were previously nonexistent. Yet, certain elements will always remain foundational. Regardless of the latest evolution in technology or strategy, adaptability and creativity will always remain essential in crafting and implementing effective outreach strategies. As time moves on, grassroots and digitally active movements will likely provide some of the most fertile grounds. More critical attention to the ways they are working towards and achieving change, and even their successes and failures, is needed for broader engagement. Popular concerns around communication technologies, such as "slacktivism" and the homogenization or isolation of cultural filters, can seem dismissively reductive at best. Democratically speaking, both movements and their broader critiques are valid in some right. The most pressing issue in civil rights communication is arguably dealing with hoaxes, conspiracy theories, and misinformation. Information is no longer merely mediated by gatekeeping professionals; citizen commentary, blogs, Tweets, and User-Generated Content have further decentralized and diversified available perspectives. Yet, conclusions are as often as not drawn and broadcast with a startling gut-punching finality. In a landscape as fractured and fractious as the digital one, many argue difficult solidarities are needed. This paper believes that the most fruitful engagement with all these interconnected and concurrent dialogues is the necessity of diversely integrating various

communication strategies, voices, and traditions, constructing a comprehensive and potentially transnational civil rights communication paradigm. An empowered, more interconnected, and better-informed dialogue of social justice envisages, and attempts to lay out the strategies and provide valuable theoretical and practical grounding for its implementation [19, 20, 21].

CONCLUSION

Throughout history, civil rights movements have depended on effective communication to challenge oppression, inspire collective action, and bring about legislative and societal transformations. From Martin Luther King Jr.'s speeches to the modern-day digital activism of social movements, communication has proven to be a double-edged sword—capable of mobilizing support but also vulnerable to misrepresentation and suppression. The increasing role of technology, coupled with the intersectional nature of activism, requires a strategic, adaptive approach to communication that engages diverse audiences while countering misinformation. As future movements continue to navigate evolving communication landscapes, the ability to craft compelling narratives and effectively engage with the public will remain at the heart of social justice efforts.

REFERENCES

1. Roth S. Intersectionality and coalitions in social movement research—A survey and outlook. *Sociology Compass*. 2021 Jul;15(7):e12885.
2. Montoya C. Intersectionality and social movements: Intersectional challenges and imperatives in the study of social movements. *Sociology Compass*. 2021 Aug;15(8):e12905.
3. de Mueller GG, Ruiz I. Race, Silence, and Writing Program Administration: A Qualitative Study of US College Writing Programs. *WPA: Writing Program Administration-Journal of the Council of Writing Program Administrators*. 2017 Mar 1;40(2).
4. Helmke G, Kroeger M, Paine J. Democracy by deterrence: Norms, constitutions, and electoral tilting. *American Journal of Political Science*. 2022 Apr;66(2):434–50. gretchenhelmke.com
5. Chenoweth E. Can nonviolent resistance survive COVID-19?. In *Rights at Stake and the COVID-19 Pandemic* 2023 Feb 28 (pp. 134–146). Routledge.
6. Chenoweth E, Stephan MJ. Drop your weapons: When and why civil resistance works. *Foreign Aff.*. 2014;93:94.
7. Sanger KL. When the Spirit Says Sing!: The Role of Freedom Songs in the Civil Rights Movement. Routledge; 1995 Dec 1.
8. Näsström S. Democratic representation beyond election. *Constellations*. 2015 Mar;22(1):1–2.
9. Cunningham KG. Choosing tactics: The efficacy of violence and nonviolence in self-determination disputes. *Journal of Peace Research*. 2023 Jan;60(1):124–40.
10. Obuyi RZ. Enhancing capacities in nonviolent communication to change perceptions and addressing root, proximate and tertiary causes of Ethiopia's Tigray crisis. *International and Public Affairs*. 2021;5(1):2021.
11. Wincott A. Nigeria's Untold Stories at a Moment of Change. *RadioDoc Review*. 2024 Apr 23;9(1).
12. John RR. Debating New Media: Rewriting Communications History. *Technology and Culture*. 2023;64(2):308–58.
13. Romero-Luis J, Carbonell-Alcocer A, Gertrudix M, Gertrudis Casado MD, Giardullo P, Wuebben D. Recommendations to improve communication effectiveness in social marketing campaigns: Boosting behavior change to foster a circular economy. *Cogent Social Sciences*. 2022 Dec 31;8(1):2147265. tandfonline.com
14. Durbin E, Filer J. Evaluating the Impact of Public Awareness Campaigns on Sustainable Practices. *Journal of Energy and Environmental Policy Options*. 2021 Dec 1;4(4):32–7. resdojournals.com
15. Özbilgin MF, Erbil C. Social movements and wellbeing in organizations from multilevel and intersectional perspectives: The case of the #blacklivesmatter movement. *The SAGE handbook of organizational wellbeing*. 2021:119–38.
16. Fisher DR, Rouse SM. Intersectionality within the racial justice movement in the summer of 2020. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. 2022 Jul 26;119(30):e2118525119.
17. Huang TC. Private censorship, disinformation and the first amendment: Rethinking online platforms regulation in the era of a global pandemic. *Mich. Tech. L. Rev.*. 2022;29:137.

18. Earl J, Maher TV, Pan J. The digital repression of social movements, protest, and activism: A synthetic review. *Science Advances*. 2022 Mar 9;8(10):eabl8198.
19. Young A, Selander L, Vaast E. Digital organizing for social impact: Current insights and future research avenues on collective action, social movements, and digital technologies. *Information and Organization*. 2019 Sep 1;29(3):100257.
20. Raja Santhi A, Muthuswamy P. Pandemic, war, natural calamities, and sustainability: Industry 4.0 technologies to overcome traditional and contemporary supply chain challenges. *Logistics*. 2022 Nov 30;6(4):81.
21. Bergman T. "Old-New" Directions in Political Communication: Taking Michael Parenti's Media Criticism as a Guide. *Frontiers in Communication*. 2019 May 29;4:23.

CITE AS: Asuman Banywana (2025). The Role of Communication in Civil Rights Movements. EURASIAN EXPERIMENT JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES, 6(3):82-87
--