

# Social Activism in the ‘Blackosphere’: The Jena 6 Case

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## **ABSTRACT**

Using Denning’s model of Internet activism as a sensitizing framework, this chapter describes the manner in which Black bloggers (referred to as the ‘Blackosphere’) express and negotiate their ethnic identity online. We analyze discussions in the Blackosphere in response to the Jena 6 case to illustrate how the Internet has empowered Black people, changed media publicity, and served as a means of collaborative activities that support social activism. It is our hope that this chapter will encourage researchers to explore further how and why historically underserved groups engage in social activism on the Internet, and the various technologies and social practices they use to do so.

## **INTRODUCTION**

*Personally, I’m interested in what made the plight of the Jena 6 so compelling that it moved Black students across this country to turn off BET, pull up their pants, reach into their wallets, and travel to Jena to defend six of their own.<sup>i</sup>*

In this chapter, we examine how and why Black<sup>ii</sup> bloggers (the Blackosphere) express ethnic identity through an analysis of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) that supported social activism in response to the Jena 6 case. The Jena 6 case began in August 2006 when Black students at the local high school in Jena, Louisiana sat under a tree that was known to be a place where White students usually congregated. White students took offense and responded by hanging three nooses in the tree. In following months, racial tensions escalated. There were confrontations between Black and White students, and there was a fire that destroyed the central wing of the Jena High School. On December 4, 2006, Black students heard a White student (Justin Barker, 17) bragging about a racial assault his friend had made. Six Black students (Robert Bailey, 17; Mychal Bell, 16; Carwin Jones, 18; Bryant Purvis, 17; Jesse Ray Beard, 14; and Theo Shaw, 17) responded by assaulting Barker. Barker was treated in the local emergency room. The injuries were minor as he was able to attend a party later that same evening.

The White local officials responsible for handling the incident judged the nooses as a youthful prank, and punished the White offenders with a few brief school suspensions. The six Black

juvenile offenders, however, were expelled from school, arrested and charged as adults with felony offenses, including attempted murder and aggravated assault (Robinson, 2007). Later, the charges were reduced to battery for all but one the offenders, Mychal Bell. “Civil rights advocates, who have called the punishment of the arrested youths disproportionate, say the case has raised the questions of how much race still plays a part in the workings of the legal system in the South” (Newman, 2007).

On September 22, 2007, fifteen to twenty thousand people from across the nation traveled to Jena to attend peaceful rallies to protest this disparity in the justice system and show their support for the six Black defendants known as the Jena 6. According to Younge (2007), “These incidents have turned Jena into a national symbol of racial injustice. As such, it is both a potent emblem... because it shines a spotlight on how race and class conspire to deny black people equality before the law...and a convenient whipping boy because it allows the rest of the nation to dismiss the incidents as the work of Southern redneck backwoodsmen without addressing the systemic national failures it showcases”.

In what follows, we briefly describe the Blackosphere and Denning’s five modes of using the Internet for activism. Our conceptualization of the Blackosphere as well as the five modes of Internet activism will be used to inform a textual analysis of how ethnic identity emerged in the blog entries and comments that helped to bring the Jena 6 case to the attention of the mainstream media. While the events in Jena happened in 2006, they were not reported nationally until 2007. As Robinson (2007, p. A19) notes, “We still might not know about what was happening in Jena if the case hadn’t been noticed by bloggers, who sounded the alarm”. As African Americans increasingly use social media, such as blogs and social networks, to produce their own content and foster virtual communities that serve their collective interests, there is potential for new modes of social activism to materialize.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Ethnic Identity and Computer-Mediated Communication**

African Americans are not a monolithic group; they are distinguishable along gender, class, age, regional, and socio-economic lines. However, ethnic identity acts as a “tie that binds” this group cohesively. Identity development has been described as a cognitive process by which an individual establishes a relationship with a reference group, with the group being capable of influencing the individual’s worldview through the adoption of group values and goals (Greenwald, 1988; Thompson & Akbar, 2003). For African Americans, ethnic identity is developed from a longstanding struggle against white domination marked by slavery, segregation, the great migration, the civil rights movement, and the black power movement. Throughout this history, African Americans became aware of their oppression within US society, and their attitudes towards themselves, their ethnic group, and members of other ethnic groups crystallized to form a core sense of identity (Crawford, Allison, Zamboni, & Soto, 2002; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998).

It has been said that “computer-mediated communication (CMC) and the Internet provide new opportunities for using Discourse and text to discursively construct and enact achieved identities in online environments” (Black, 2006, p.171). Conversing via CMC provides a distinct

experience from what would be permitted during face-to-face interaction. Therefore, online conversations provide a unique opportunity to examine how the African American community uses language to express its position as subjects in Jena 6 discourse.

CMC offers a number of different affordances that make the study of ethnic identity and language in online communication interesting. However, the relationships among ethnic identity, language, and CMC are not always straightforward. On the one hand, ethnic identity is often deemed to be more performative and discursive on the Web due to the anonymity, freedoms of time and space, and reduced physical and social cues afforded by this communication channel. These characteristics of online conversations may provide a level of comfort to the participant as it makes the interaction non-threatening and non-intrusive (Boase & Wellman, 2006); “Given the physical and psychological distance created by lack of visual and perhaps aural information, the initiator is somewhat insulated from the potentially negative reactions of the receiver that may be conveyed through the receiver’s facial expression and intonation” (Byrne & Findlay, 2004, p.51). Therefore, the discussant is more likely to be open, honest, and true to self during his/her expression. On the other hand, group communication in asynchronous online environments is often aligned to real world topics and tends to maintain traditional, hegemonic identities, roles, and other ties to physical embodiment (Herring & Martinson 2004). In addition, contributors to online discussions have been said to conform and behave in a fashion that is in support of hegemonic group norms due to the anonymity CMC affords. In other words, these individuals may become less aware of their individual identity and instead imitate the behavior and beliefs of the group (Pauley & Emmers-Sommer, 2007). To make sense of how identity is expressed in online settings, empirical studies of particular online communities are needed.

### **The Blackosphere**

Black-oriented online communities are playing an increasingly important role in the construction of Black identity and the advancement of Black interests. According to Poster (1995), mass media like radio “are interpreted by individuals who are interpellated by them, but these readers and viewers are not addressed directly, only as a generalized audience and, of course, they respond in fully articulated linguistic acts”. However, on the Internet, “individuals read and interpret communications to themselves and to others and also respond by shaping sentences and transmitting them...The magic of the Internet is that it is a technology that puts cultural acts, symbolizations in all forms, in the hands of all participants; it radically decentralizes the positions of speech, publishing, filmmaking, radio and television broadcasting, in short the apparatuses of cultural production”.

The “Blackosphere”, an informal group of Black cultural producers, is described by Francis Holland (2007) as follows:

*These blogs are by and principally for Black people, focusing not only upon Black people but upon people and issues deemed relevant to the Black people who write these blogs and post comments. At Black blogs, we comment on the issues of the day raised in white newspapers and blogs, but we also highlight issues that whites mostly ignore, such as the unfair criminal prosecution of individual humble and unknown Blacks. Our commentary and the relative importance that we give news are informed by our unique historical perspective on and position in America.*

*From our vantage point, we share with each other a distinct perspective and critique that white people, including white progressives, cannot have and generally do not want.*

The Blackosphere represents the collective efforts of individuals creating small public spaces to circulate information, create and rearticulate oppositional frameworks for expressing Black identity without censorship from non-Blacks, and provides opportunities for community interaction that fosters social activism. *The Chicago Tribune* reports that the Blackosphere has developed into a formidable grassroots organization that “within a matter of a few weeks collected 220,000 petition signatures—and more than \$130,000 in donations for legal fees—in support of six black Jena teenagers who are being prosecuted on felony battery charges for beating a white student” (Witt, 2007). This “viral civil rights movement” was literally conjured out of the ether of cyberspace and spread via blogs, email, message boards and talk radio.

### **Internet Activism**

Early efforts of the civil rights movement have centered on key institutions: the Black church and the Black media. According to Jeffries (2005, p. 338), “At the height of the Civil Rights Movement, radio, more so than television or print media, served as African Americans' main source of news and entertainment. Scholars, however, have generally overlooked this essential element of African-American life”. Though centralized in the positions of speech and highly reliant on “deejays” who embodied the roles of political activist, community informant and entertainer, benevolent broadcasters used radio to support and report on southern Black activism. Such activism empowered the collective among the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Black Panther Party, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. By the 1950s and 1960s, the binding ties of these and other Black social activism groups were characterized by coded, though shared, sociolinguistics on relevant topics. These topics ranged from social activism regarding the Vietnam War, civil and economic rights, educational equity and racial identity.

Unlike these examples of early social activism in the Black community, which were often guided by central figures and spearheaded by national organizations, today’s social activists are piloted by Internet interactions based on grass-root causes. Because the community interactions are logged in their entirety, the data are complete and unmediated by interview, participant observation or survey methodologies. Researchers assume the role of lurkers who unobtrusively observe community engagement, which preserves the purity of the data.

According to Denning (2001), activism refers to normal, nondisruptive use of the Internet in support of an agenda or cause. This use typically includes browsing the web for information, constructing web sites and posting materials on them, transmitting electronic publications and letters through email, and using the Net to discuss issues, form coalitions, and coordinate activities. Denning provides a conceptual framework that includes five modes of online activism: collection, publication, dialogue, coordination of action, and lobbying decision makers.

In *collection* mode, the Internet is viewed as a vast digital library that houses factual information, as well as guides for effective Internet use for activities such as outreach, membership and

fundraising, organizing, and advocacy. Search tools are often included on websites to improve users' ability to locate and extract useful information.

The Internet can also be used for *publication* to advance the authors' mission and policy objectives. Advocacy groups and individuals send information through email listservs, post to newsgroups or message boards, create posts on blogs or create entire websites, which can serve as a gathering place and source of information for supporters, potential supporters, and other audiences. Publication on the Internet is typically less costly than radio, newspaper, telephone, fax, television or other media distribution channels. By publishing their own content, authors retain control of the message, which can be presented and distributed to a global audience.

In addition, the Internet serves as a social space for public or private *dialogue* on issues of concern. Dialogue can be used to debate or comment on the latest issues, to influence the actions of others, or to answer questions. Discussion can be open to the public or can be limited to subscribers to an email list or weblog, or editors of a wiki. The dialogue taking place on interactive forums may help to shape policy decision and influence public opinion.

*Coordination of action* is another way in which groups use the Internet. The Internet aids in the decision making process by enabling individuals to post or distribute plans for mobilizing the actions of the group, coordinate schedules, and vote amongst alternative courses of action. Advocacy groups can coordinate action without regard to the constraints of time and geography.

Finally, the Internet is used for *lobbying decision makers* by asking individuals to write, phone, email, or fax their concerns to influence change by institutions of authority. Online petitions are used to protest against the actions of more powerful groups, while online reporting of local stories can garner the attention of mainstream media. According to Denning (2001, p. 62), "The most successful advocacy groups are likely to be those that use the Internet to augment traditional lobbying methods, including personal visits to decision makers and use of broadcast media to reach the public. These operations can be time consuming and expensive, favoring groups that are well-funded".

## **INTERNET ACTIVISM AND THE JENA 6 CASE**

To frame our textual analysis of how and why the Blackosphere led in the call for collective action in response to the Jena 6 case, we use Denning's (2001) five modes of Internet activism.

### **Collection**

ColorOfChange is an Internet-based civil rights organization whose goal is "to empower our members – Black Americans and their allies - to make government more responsive to the concerns of Black Americans and to bring about positive political and social change for everyone". The organization was created in the wake of Hurricane Katrina to harness the organizing power of the Internet to give Black Americans a strengthened political voice. ColorOfChange and its 400,000 members advocated on behalf of the Jena 6 and served as the primary website for factual information, fundraising, organizing, and advocacy for the Jena 6. The online petition received 320,860 signatures, which is 106% of the goal for 300,000 signatures.

Black political blogs Oliver Willis and Pam's House Blend primarily linked to and commented on Jena 6 news articles. The audience at these blogs is more diverse, so discussions on race can get emotionally heated as black readers attempt to help white readers understand their standpoint. For instance, Willis published a short post that garnered much discussion: "*The thousands of people in Jena today show to me that the anti-war movement has lots to learn and that nobody is as organized on the left as civil rights organizations. Period.*" Commenters problematized this comparison. For instance, Joe wrote:

*It kills me that people are actually comparing this to Selma. 6 kids beat the shit out of one kid and yet somehow there's an injustice going on because the perps were black and the victim was white. What kind of crazy freaking world do we live in?" Spider J agrees when he wrote, "I gotta agree with Jay on this one. I doubt King would be proud to defend the Jena 6, who did exactly what King refused to do when confronted with ugly racism—reacted with violence, and on somebody possibly innocent of any wrongdoing. How are the actions of the Jena 6 a victory for civil rights and a blow against racism? I'll bet you double or nothing that this just confirmed, in the minds of some people, that blacks are dangerous and violent and would kill all the whites if given the chance.*

From the discussion that takes place, we infer that Jay and Spider J are white males who regularly read and comment at the website. A black commenter responded:

*Jay: Now that you've heard, understood and been insulted by (: Tom :), I repeat: Attempted murder for a school brawl when there was no punishment for threatening the Black students with a shotgun, or beating up the Black student who showed up at an all-white party. THAT is what is being protested. The Constitution guarantees equal protection under the law, and against cruel and unusual punishment. THAT is what is being demanded. No one says there weren't issues to be addressed. And I said you have an incomplete picture because I've seen the CNN's coverage and Fox hasn't covered it at all, so you likely just heard of it yesterday. You and Spider J assumed the worst motivations, right off the top. And it's good you both heard the comments here...but it's bad that you had to.*

A post at Pam's House Blend provided a scathing critique on the silence of the progressive media on the Jena 6 case.

*Chris Kromm of the Institute for Southern Studies and its blog Facing South, is appalled, rightfully so, at the sparse coverage of the historic march for justice in Jena, Louisiana. It's not to say that it isn't being covered in the blogosphere at all -- black bloggers have largely been responsible for the high profile of this case, picking up the ball where the melanin-challenged blogs of influence have dropped it. You'd think that the events today, which are being covered by the MSM, would mean that the story is now mainstream blogworthy, but you would be wrong. "Progressive blogs including the Daily Kos, FireDogLake, ThinkProgress, TalkLeft, and TalkingPointsMemo had largely ignored the Jena 6 case. At the same time," as Pam pointed out, "many of these blogs are eagerly pointing to*

*news stories which suggest the Republican candidates don't care about black issues... It's disappointing, but not surprising to see this blindness. As you all know I try mightily to make the Blend a safe space to discuss race, and even then, threads on the topic, save the Imus debacle, garner few comments. The progressive community still has a long way to go on race when it comes to the rubber hitting the road.*

## Publication

ColorOfChange was the primary advocacy group promoting social justice for the Jena 6. At this website, visitors could sign petitions, purchase tee shirts, send correspondences to Louisiana Governor, Bobby Jindal, and District Attorney, Reed Walters, as well as access links to news reports from blogs and newspapers from around the world.

The NAACP<sup>iii</sup>, a venerable civil rights organization, posted “The Message” which outlines a series of actions that should be taken to redress the racial injustices enacted by the legal system in Jena.

- As Chairman Julian Bond stated, *"This is an American outrage that demonstrates the continuing shame of racial division in our country. Join us in making it one of the last."*
- In light of the circumstances surrounding Mychal Bell's case, we urge all concerned citizens to support the call for a new trial.
- It is unacceptable to selectively enforce the law based on race. Prosecutorial discretion should be used in a fair and equitable manner.
- The Jena Six should be tried by juries that reflect the racial and ethnic demographics of Jena, Louisiana.
- The hanging of nooses is not a "youthful stunt" or "prank." It is a hate crime. Such hate crimes should not be tolerated at any school. Jena High School must establish a curriculum which promotes cultural sensitivity and understanding.
- The NAACP calls on Louisiana Governor, Kathleen B. Blanco and Louisiana Attorney General, Charles C. Foti to thoroughly investigate and monitor the trials of Mychal Bell, Robert Bailey, Jr., Theo Shaw, Carwin Jones, Bryant Purvis and John Doe. The Governor and State Attorney General should do everything in their power to ensure that these young men's constitutional rights are protected.

## Dialogue

Just weeks after some thousands of demonstrators protested what they decried as unequal justice aimed at six black teenagers in Jena, controversy arose over the accounting and disbursing of at least \$500,000 donated to pay for the teenagers' legal defense. In one instance, Marcus Jones, the father of Jena 6 defendant Mychal Bell, called the fundraising efforts of ColorOfChange into question. While on Michael Baisden's syndicated radio show, Mr. Jones and Mr. Baisden made misleading statements about the ColorOfChange and the management of contributions to the Jena 6 funds. An account of the facts related to these false statements was posted on the ColorOfChange website<sup>iv</sup>. After much public debate and disclosure of financial records, Mr. Baisden issued an apology to ColorOfChange<sup>v</sup>.

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Bloggers, who had closely followed the Jena 6 case, came to the defense of ColorOfChange. What About Our Daughters, for instance, published the following:

*Before Baisden ever knew who they were, black bloggers were working the Jena 6. The families have now decided to cling to Bad Boy Baisden, I say LET 'Em! Let them cling to a man whose claim to fame is that he writes smutty books. Maybe he can get them on a few more red carpets or help them produce some more myspace videos. Sometimes, you really do need to pack up your toys and head back to the crib. Especially when folks start kicking sand in your face. You have done what you could for these families. The kids aren't facing attempted murder charges. There is no coalition to be shattered or broken. You did the work you set out to do. Eventually, the old media will get a clue and realize that the internet can magnify their power and is not a threat to it. They'll figure out that there are SOME activists that actually use donations for the intended purpose instead of buying houses, furs, cars, and, paying off paramours, and paying child support. YEAH I SAID IT! The folks at Color of Change have given me no indication that they are anything other than what they are: decent honorable people trying to do the right thing.<sup>vi</sup>*

Bossip, a popular black entertainment blog, chronicled and critiqued the Jena 6 case. For instance, two members of the Jena 6 walked the red carpet at the 2007 Black Entertainment Television (BET) Hip Hop awards. “*Bryant Purvis and Carwin Jones of the Jena 6 were stuntin<sup>vii</sup> it up on the red carpet this weekend at the BET Hip Hop Awards. Look at them rollin up to the hip hop awards and kickin it at after parties like the Jena 6 is a rap group or something*”. Comments in response to this blog post were diverse. While some agreed that the youths were misusing their newfound celebrity (“*Wow..that’s some ghetto ass shit..black people, we gotta do better..there’s really no excuse for this coonery..*”), others supported their presence at the BET awards (“*They have opened everyone’s eyes to an old movement that still exists, Racisim. They should be any and everywhere they can as a reminder of what is still taking place in the world today. I just hope they are repping properly, or it will all be a waste*”).

There were also bloggers who rejected the “free the Jena 6” message. At Bossip.com, a commenter notes:

*Jena 6 repulses me. Dumb ass people were marching to “Free Jena 6” when they committed a serious crime. It should have been “Justice for Jena 6”, and that would entail punishment for the crime they committed. These kids have been involved with numerous criminal activities, and need to be held responsible, not made into heroes. And this doesn’t excuse the noose at the tree, they should be dealt with as well, but WE need to stop making excuses for black kids acting like violent idiots, and try raising them to know what is right and acceptable and what is just plain wrong. But I have a feeling they will be back in the criminal justice system again REAL soon.*

Bossip was also a leading Black website for discussion about the misuse of funds. One post centered on a controversial YouTube video in which a Jena 6 defendant is shown laying on a bed covered in money.

*This is why the smart folks over here at Bossip don't support Negro causes "just because" we are told to. Here is a picture of Robert Bailey Jr., a member of the Jena 6. According to a video on Youtube, he was braggin' about thuggin' on his Myspace and was caught showing off what looks to be Jena 6 Defense Fund stacks. SMH.*

The dialogue about this incident was overwhelmingly one of disapproval, “*First those two fools go to the BET<sup>viii</sup> awards now this one is on YouTube basically making every single black person who supported the Jena 6 look like fucking fools*”. Some responses used sarcasm to express their outrage, “*I GUESS IT PAYS TO BE A BLACK CRIMINAL IN AMERICA. AND TO THINK THAT WE HAVE NOT MADE ANY PROGRESS.....I'M IN THE WRONG LINE OF WORK.I'M FIXING TO GO BEAT UP SOME WHITE PEOPLE SO I CAN GET STACKS OF CASH AND DIAMOND CHAINS. IT WORKED FOR THEM SO WHY NOT ME?*”. A few community members noted that the irresponsible actions of the youths should not cloud the central issue – racial injustice in the legal system, “*Come on ppl! Just becuz these kids are acting a fool doesn't mean we agree they should go to jail. As I recall we were fighting against the unfair bargain these kids were getting from the justice system, a fact which still remains true!!!!*”.

At the ConcreteLoop.com, a black music and entertainment blog, community members also expressed outrage.

*The Jena 6 deserve to be punished for jumping on that 1 person, but I don't think they need to be charged with attempted murder and sent to prison. Some jail time should do it. Why'd it take 6 of them to whoop on 1 person anyway? That's cowardly! And the way they paraded around flaunting donations and acting like they were superstars was ridiculous. They basically made a mockery of all the things black leaders and the community were trying to do for them. It's sad really!*

## Coordination of action

Since the 1950s, planning and participating in protest marches have been an important Black rite of passage into American political life. However, those who organized and marched in Jena were among the first to mobilize an Internet driven Black youth protest in American history.

The NAACP included the following actions:

- **Support the Jena 6:** Continue to monitor the NAACP's website for announcements.

- **Sign the "Justice for Jena" petition:** Join over 175,000 other individuals who have expressed their concern. The petition will be presented to Louisiana Gov. Kathleen B. Blanco by the NAACP on September 19.
- **Make a contribution:** Contribute to support the NAACP's advocacy efforts and initiatives.
- **Donate online to the: Jena 6 Defense Fund or mail donations to. Jena 6 Defense Committee, P. O. Box 2798, Jena, LA 71342**
- **Advocate in your community:** Mobilize your community and local government to have a voice and unite on equality within the United States criminal justice system.
- **Send a letter to the Louisiana Governor and the Louisiana Attorney General:** Urge your local officials to investigate this matter to ensure that these young men's constitutional rights are safeguarded.
- **Register to vote:** Make your vote count.
- **Join the NAACP:** Become a member of the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization and help make a difference.

While people are asked "to take action and come together to achieve racial healing and unbiased justice for the Jena 6", some actions make direct appeals to support the NAACP. It should also be noted that donations to the Jena 6 fund are directed to the ColorOfChange organization. There is, however, an online document that informs website visitors how the Jena 6 funds were obtained and spent.<sup>ix</sup>

## Lobbying decision makers

While the Jena 6 demonstration benefited from well known civil rights leaders, including the Reverends Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton and the mainstream media, the viral civil rights movement did not depend on them due, in part, to its organic character and speedy momentum. Instead, the mainstream media and prominent black leaders had to scramble to catch up to the Blackosphere movement. The Jena 6 demonstration showed that a new generation of civil rights activists learned about the Jena case from black political, entertainment, gossip, and hip-hop music blogs that featured the story, or popular black entertainers who have turned it into a crusade. The presence of Sharpton, Jackson and the mainstream media was contested in the Blackosphere. As the halffricanrevolution blogger notes:

*The relationship between Sharpton, Jackson, and the media is as consensual as sex on a conjugal visit. As long as Sharpton and Jackson stayed away from the Jena Six controversy, the mainstream media ignored it almost entirely. The reason is that Sharpton and Jackson provide convenient targets for white resentment. The media has until now ignored the racist injustice in Louisiana, but the moment Sharpton or Jackson makes an appearance, all that will change. The issue will no longer be the preposterous charge of attempted murder against six black boys for a school fight, or DA Reed Walter's menacing words to a group of black students who dared to protest the violently enforced segregated conditions in their local school. No, as soon as one of them shows up, the media will change the subject, and the conversation will center around whether Sharpton and Jackson are "hustlers" or "hypocrites" who are simply seeking attention. No, it is*

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*the media, who has shown little interest in uncovering the injustices in Jena, Louisiana, who will soon chase the ratings and attention coverage of Sharpton and Jackson will bring.<sup>x</sup>*

The NAACP, the civil rights organization that has historically played a prominent role in leading social activism in support of disenfranchised African Americans, was also relegated to a supportive role in the Jena 6 case. The NAACP website hosted petitions and solicited contributions for the teens' legal defense, but it was the Color of Change, an Internet-based civil rights group with more than 280,000 subscribers, that led in the lobbying efforts to raise the public profile of the Jena 6 case.

### **Solutions and Recommendations**

Based on our study of Internet activism in the Jena 6 case, we recommend that the success of online social activism not be judged solely on whether or not it generates obvious political effects. Rather, online social activism should be seen as expanding the notion of what the Internet is and how it can be used in everyday life to increase the realm of freedom, community and empowerment (Kahn & Kellner, 2004). In the Jena 6 case, the Web serves as a new narrative space for representing a uniquely African American identity where black selfhood is constituted through opposition to both "whiteness" and a totalizing "black" discourse. In the Blackosphere, there were diverse discourses. For instance, BlackPerspectives.net posts an article written by Hotep (2007) that critiques the effectiveness of protest demonstrations for social change in the modern movement:

*The Jena March, like all one-day mobilizations including the "historic" March on Washington in 1963 and the Million Man March in 1995, is at best symbolic and at worst diversionary. We know that it takes constant, long-term pressure by those, like Blacks, who lack the organized wealth and high level influence to make even the smallest change in the American political system. We also know that nothing of lasting value can be achieved in American politics by a one-day protest regardless of the numbers involved, except that it dupes us into believing that we have accomplished something concrete and tangible. And that's the hidden danger of protest politics.*

However, other posts at BlackPerspectives.net were supportive and asked readers to contact media outlets to increase coverage of the Jena 6 case.

*Again, with this in mind, **I hope YOU will step up to the challenge of contacting at least just five national media outlets.** What is it for you to put some email addresses in a send box, type up or copy a few words, and hit send? Better yet though, if you have a printer it would be great to print those same letters off, sign your name, and drop them in the mail. I think it's easier for a large news company to ignore an in box full of emails, but not to ignore mail bends full of letters staring them in the face in their office. A flood of calls would be great too. Maybe you could do this every week until they get the message. Just take whatever little time you have to do your part. **If we all just do a little, a whole lot will get accomplished.***

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In the Jena 6 case, the widespread use of the Internet for information sharing, organizing, fundraising, communication, and many other activities suggests that African Americans have become increasingly savvy users. African Americans have a rich history of social activism for civil rights, Denning provides a useful framework for examining how social activism is enacted online. While the Internet played a central role in the Jena 6 organizing, traditional communication channels such as radio, TV, newspapers, and Black neighborhood institutions like churches, barbershops and hair salons were also involved. With only 64% of African Americans online (Pew Internet, 2008), these traditional communication channels remain salient.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

Future research on online social activism should take two directions. First, there is a need for studies that examine non-traditional Internet users and groups. While much of the literature on online social activism tends to focus on well resourced and technically adept specialist groups, the Blackosphere's response to the Jena 6 demonstrates how social groups that have been historically afforded fewer resources can successfully organize on the Internet. Black blogging communities are important because they provide an alternative venue for information dissemination and social action to promote economic, social, judicial and educational equity. Although social activists are increasingly using the Internet as a communication medium, the principles guiding these efforts are rooted in the tradition of the civil rights movement.

Black blogging communities also perform identity online through a number of commonly used CMC techniques. For instance, Kvasny and Igwe (2008) observed how members of a Black blogging community used signification, kinesics and side conversations to suggest playfulness and provide levity when discussing HIV/AIDS. Co-signing simulated turn-taking by citing previous exchanges and creating the appearance of dialogue that suggests temporal immediacy. This bolstered coherence, improved addressability among participants, and provided a mechanism for offering evaluative feedback. Community members created identifiable personalities through screen names and avatars, small images used in blogs and chat forums that enable users to personalize their identity. Participants also created a sense of presence and intimacy through the use of language to express action, inner state or emotion, and place. Research on Black blogs and bloggers is noticeably absent from the published literature, with the exception of Poole's (2005) study of African American political bloggers and Brock's (2007) study of African American bloggers' response to mainstream media reports on Hurricane Katrina. Intensive studies of identity performance in computer-mediated environments can provide additional insights into how and why African Americans organize online.

Second, there is a need for research that examines additional Web 2.0 tools and services, and how they are employed by organizations to support social activism. Blogs, wikis, podcasts, photo and video sharing, and social networking services hosted by new media companies such as Google, Flickr, BitTorrent, MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube provide a low cost, easy to use platform for the delivery of engaging services and experiences. The constellation of Web 2.0 tools and services emphasize user control and content creation, and architectures of participation. Organizations that historically lacked the technical, economic and human capital to effectively harness the Internet can now use these Web 2.0 tools and services as an information and

communication platform for social activism. Useful studies could examine how Web 2.0 technologies are used by organizations collaborating to redress on a social issue.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, Denning's model of Internet activism was used as a sensitizing framework to examine how the Blackosphere effectively used the Internet to raise funds, to increase awareness in the Black community and in the mainstream media, and to coordinate activities to host a rally to protest the Jena 6 case. The online discussions taking place in the Black blogging community provide authentic accounts of African American discursive practices, lived experiences and cultural perspectives.

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## KEY TERMS & DEFINITIONS

1. Civil Rights: the rights belonging to an individual by virtue of citizenship. The 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the US Constitution provide Americans with fundamental freedoms and privileges such as due process, freedom from discrimination, and equal protection of the law. The Jena 6 case is sometimes compared to the civil rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s devoted to securing equal opportunity and treatment for African Americans.
2. Computer mediated communication (CMC): The process by which people create, exchange, and perceive informational messages using information and communication technologies. To be mediated by computers, the communication must be done by participants fully aware of their interaction with the computer technology in the process of creating and delivering messages.
3. Ethnic identity: Ethnicity is a cultural phenomenon that is shared among people who originate from the same geographic area and share language, food, ways of dress, customs and other cultural markers of group identity. Identity is the set of personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group. Ethnic identity is the significance (how important is ethnicity) and qualitative meaning (what does it mean to be a member of this ethnic group) that individuals attribute to their membership within the group.

4. Internet activism: use of Internet communications technologies by citizen-led movements to enable rapid and widespread communications, disseminate information, raise funds, and/or mobilize and coordinate support for causes.
5. Weblog / blog: a website that displays in chronological order the postings by one or more individuals and usually has links to comments on specific postings. Blogs are valued by audiences who opt for news or information that is overlooked, interesting, unexpected, and important. Blogs can also serve as a virtual location for the author and audience to disseminate, interpret, provide additional facts, or alternative views on a subject matter. In this way, blogs are community-like in nature.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.blackperspective.net/index.php/the-jena-march-and-the-debate-over-protest-politics-pt1/>

<sup>ii</sup> In this article, we use “Black” and “African American” interchangeably to reflect people of African descent in the US.

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.naacp.org/get-involved/activism/alerts/110aa-2007-7-20/index.htm>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.colorofchange.org/jena/baisden/>

<sup>v</sup> [http://www.colorofchange.org/baisden/apology/member\\_email.html](http://www.colorofchange.org/baisden/apology/member_email.html)

<sup>vi</sup> <http://whataboutourdaughters.blogspot.com/2007/11/jena-6-families-to-black-blogspherewe.html>

<sup>vii</sup> Flashing excessive jewelry, cars, cash and other symbols of affluence

<sup>viii</sup> Black Entertainment Television (BET)

<sup>ix</sup> <http://www.naacp.org/news/press/2007-07->

[20b/THE.NAACP.ACCOUNTING.OF.FUNDS.COLLECTED.REGARDING.JENA.LOUISIANA.pdf](#)

<sup>x</sup> <http://halfcfricanrevolution.blogspot.com/2007/08/next-talking-head-to-talk-shit-about.html>