

LEVERAGE SOCIAL MEDIA AND DIGITAL PLATFORMS

“Everyone involved in the field should have an active social media presence and leverage that as much as possible,” declares former White House advisor Joshua DuBois. Indeed, almost all of our interviewees expressed enthusiasm about opportunities to use social media and digital platforms in creative and powerful ways to advance the field of black male achievement. At the same time, even the most active users of social media strike a note of caution, asserting that social media and digital platforms are simply tools in the toolbox and that old-fashioned grassroots organizing and strategy must accompany social media to be effective.

EDUCATING AND ORGANIZING

Many see online platforms as an important tool for educating the field and the general public, as well as organizing for action. For example, the shooting of Trayvon Martin received relatively little attention when it occurred. However, on-the-ground advocacy and organizing efforts brought it to national news, leading to the creation of a Change.org petition. The number of petition signatures surged when a Change.org employee reached out via Twitter to targeted celebrities, asking them to share the petition with their fans. The online petition created a way for millions of citizens to sustain the story and take action. In fact, connecting the story to a specific action may have increased the rate of people sharing the story online, keeping it front and center in an otherwise fickle news cycle.¹²

Race-specific and activist media like ColorOfChange and Black Youth Project also played an important role. They mobilized pressure in the George Zimmerman case,

framing and interpreting the unfolding story in ways that influenced public opinion and perhaps traditional journalism. These organizations are often cited as exemplars of how the Internet can be used to amplify political organizing.

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COLLABORATION AND CONNECTION

Between Google Hangouts and Twitter chats, social media and digital platforms have the power to connect people and catalyze collaboration. The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans has been especially effective in using Twitter chats to elevate issues around education and black male achievement. Shawn Dove of Open Society Foundations describes Twitter as a “digital underground railroad.” Reflecting on a recent Twitter chat, Dove notes there was “lots of discussion, sharing of ideas, and connecting in real time. As a result of that one-hour Twitter chat, I can guarantee that there are two people who didn’t know each other at 11:59 AM that by 12:50 PM were connected, and that something’s going to happen through [that] connection.”

Technology as a tool for collaboration was also apparent in the Black Male Achievement Startup Weekend, a hackathon held in Oakland, CA in February 2014. Built on the question, “Could an

app have saved Trayvon’s life?” the hackathon brought together 40 African-American teenagers who spent two frenetic days alongside engineers and business professionals to design, code, and pitch their apps and business plans before a panel of judges. Their ideas ranged from an app that makes it easy to text close family and friends when an individual is feeling unsafe to a social network for students of color attending private schools.

As one of the largest foundations in the United States, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has been recognized as a philanthropic trailblazer in its use of social media. When the Foundation launched its Forward Promise initiative, it did something unusual for philanthropy: It used social media to solicit ideas

for ways to support young men of color. This “call for ideas” generated more than 500 responses, engaging many who might not have otherwise been connected to the Foundation. While the call was a major success, program officer Maisha Simmons acknowledges that the Foundation is still assessing ways to respond effectively. “We used new-school ways to reach out, but we had an old-school way of cataloguing” the ideas that came in.

COMMUNICATION AND DISSEMINATION

DuBois observes that new media and traditional media can work hand-in-hand by creating a virtuous cycle in which Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and other social networks can help promote and spark discussion about

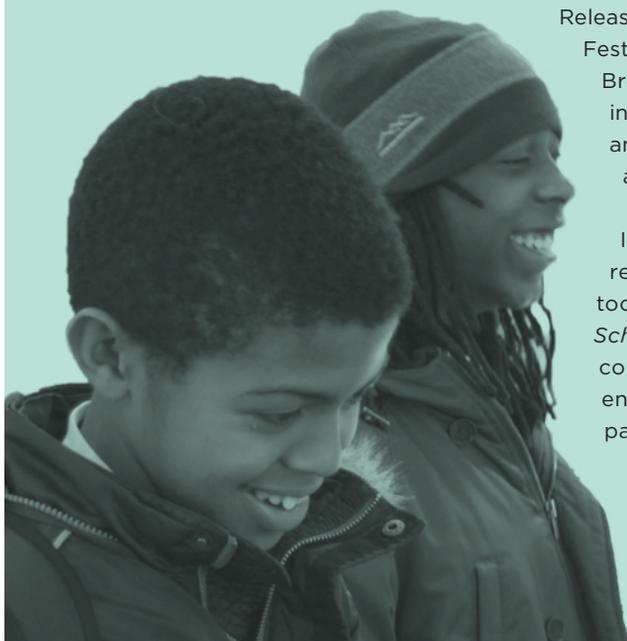
With the release of their documentary, *American Promise*, Joe Brewster and Michèle Stephenson, middle-class African-American parents in Brooklyn, NY, have coupled film with other offline and online communication strategies to generate public dialogue about perceptions of black boys. For 13 years, they filmed their son, Idris, and his best friend, Seun, as they attended Dalton, a prestigious private school. The couple sought initially to document the experience of attending an independent school but quickly realized the experience of the two boys lifted up complicated issues related to race and class. In an NPR interview, Stephenson says she made *American Promise* to address implicit assumptions about black boys—“around their ability to learn, around expectations and impressions of them being, perhaps, a little more dangerous than others.”¹³

AMERICAN PROMISE

Released in 2013, the film won critical acclaim at the Sundance Film Festival and later aired on the PBS series *POV*. While Stephenson and Brewster have made appearances around the country and even internationally at the United Nations in Geneva to promote the film and ignite discussions about supporting black boys, they have also advanced the conversation through other creative means as well.

In collaboration with writer Hillary Beard, they developed resources for parents, educators, and students, including a toolkit called *Promises Kept: Raising Black Boys to Succeed in School and in Life*. The American Promise team has also provoked conversation by sponsoring several Twitter chats and by encouraging “Promise Club” meetups throughout the country so parents can support one another.

Through the power of documentary filmmaking and an arsenal of accompanying tools, Stephenson and Brewster are driving important conversations about perceptions and opportunities among audiences that might not otherwise be reached.



traditional media content, giving it a longer shelf life and potentially reaching larger and more diverse audiences.

While social media can help expand the reach of traditional media, the shifting media landscape requires rethinking the mode of communication itself and figuring out creative, accessible ways of telling a story. John Jackson of the Schott Foundation for Public Education observes, “I don’t think publishing 50- to 60-page reports is going to continue to be effective, especially in a larger society that speaks in 140 characters or less.”

With that realization, in recent years, the Schott Foundation has moved beyond traditional research reports and has used infographics to share the results of their research and advocacy work. For example, the Foundation’s Color of School Closure infographic, which highlights the disproportionate impact of school closings on minority and low-income students, quickly



generated interest on Facebook and Twitter, reaching more than 800,000 people. Similarly, a Foundation-produced video with Internet star Kid President posted on YouTube garnered 50,000 views within a month of its release.

RESOURCES



ColorOfChange

Organization engages in lobbying and public education to strengthen the political voice of black Americans, effectively using social media to rally its members and the public around campaigns.



Harnessing Collaborative Technologies

GrantCraft

Interactive tool finder helps funders work together better by allowing for exploration of collaborative technologies.

For additional resources, visit: bmafunders.org/beloved-community



Photo: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation