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Social activism in the United States

Digital collection and primary sources

The United States is currently going through a time of increasing political and social activism, from the Black Lives Matter movement to health care activism. This has brought on a renewed interest in the history of social activism to both learn lessons from the successful movements of the past, as well as gain a deeper understanding of the forces that have shaped our current environment. Studying the history of activism and social movements is essential to understanding how once radical ideas like women's suffrage and civil rights have been able to move increasingly into the mainstream.¹

Teaching and researching the history of social movements can be particularly complex as these movements emerge out of tumultuous eras and often involve controversial subject matter. When teaching these subjects, using primary source materials can help educators incorporate both mainstream and marginal views into a more complete picture of the era as it was lived, and thereby help break free of some of the clichés that can come to dominate discussions of these eras.²

This article outlines some of the high-quality digital collections and primary source materials available online on the history of activism in the United States. This list is not exhaustive, but focuses on strong multimedia collections that can have applications as both resources for original research and use as educational materials for classroom instruction and discussion.

General history of activism

- **American Friends Service Committee Archives (AFSC).** AFSC is a Quaker organization that works on many areas of justice and peace. The archive features materials from both the organization's history as well as documents from the many organizations they have worked with throughout the 20th century. The website includes articles highlighting major projects and movements AFSC has worked on, accompanied by a well-curated selection of digitized documents, photographs, and videos from their collection. The collection highlights AFSC's work with some less discussed aspects of American activism, including conscientious objectors during World War I and World War II, Japanese internment, and work in post-depression Appalachia. *Access:* <https://www.afsc.org/project/archives>.

- **Digital Public Library of America (DPLA): Activism in the United States.** This exhibit from DPLA offers a high-level overview of the history of activism in the United States, using items from the University of Georgia Libraries. There are concise sections on topics such as the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King Jr., women's movements

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and LGBT activism, which are accompanied by photographs, video clips, and other materials. This site is a great place for starting a classroom discussion of social activism as well as a good starting point for introducing the use of archival materials in expanding on and illustrating the history of these controversial eras. *Access:* <https://dp.la/exhibitions/exhibits/show/activism>.

- **Radicalism Collection: MSU Libraries.** The Radicalism Collection from the Michigan State University Libraries collects books, pamphlets, and ephemera produced by and about radical groups within the United States. The website provides access to digitized materials on a variety of groups and movements, from the Ku Klux Klan to the International Workers of the World. A strength of this collection is the inclusion of materials from both what would be considered right- and left-wing groups, although a bulk of the materials are from the 1960s left wing. While the materials are excellent for illustration or research purposes, a deeper dive into the context of the materials and subject matter would have to be supplemented from other sources. *Access:* <http://www.lib.msu.edu/spc/collections/radicalism/>.

- **The Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project.** This project is based at the University of Washington and is a collaboration between the university and community groups. The focus of the collection is on the unique civil rights and activist history of Seattle and Pacific Northwest, but the items are of interest to any large discussion of social movements in the United States. The digital collections include oral histories with 80 civil rights activists, essays and information on specific organizations, and the larger context of activism in the area, as well as portals gathering together articles, documents, and multimedia related to some of the large organizations and movements represented in the collection. The collection also represents how archive projects can engage with the more troubling aspects of history, by including materials relating to the Ku Klux Klan in Seattle and the history of

segregation in Seattle. *Access:* <http://depts.washington.edu/civilr/>.

Civil rights

- **The Civil Rights Digital Library.** The Civil Rights Digital Library is a comprehensive meta-archive, bringing together primary source materials from the collections of many libraries, museums, public broadcasters, and other organizations. The collection is well cataloged and easily searchable and browsable. There is a particularly strong collection of unedited news footage, which could be of particular interest for classroom instructors. There is also a large collection of links to secondary educational materials, including lesson plans, instructional materials, and bibliographies. *Access:* <http://crdl.usg.edu/>.

- **Voices from the Southern Civil Rights Movement.** This archive provides access to digital files of noncommercial radio programs from the 1950s and 1960s, documenting the experiences of activists in the Civil Rights Movement. Programs include interviews with well-known civil rights figures and unknown participants, and documents activities such as sit-ins and boycotts. Ideological issues such as nonviolence, the development of the Black Power movement, and reactions to white resistance are explored through first-person accounts. This archive illustrates how journalism produced during historic events can be valuable source material for later research. *Access:* <http://americanarchive.org/exhibits/civil-rights>.

- **Wisconsin Historical Society: Freedom Summer Collection.** The Wisconsin Historical Society Collection is a valuable digital archive of civil rights material related to the Freedom Summer of 1964. These include photographs, posters, and visual materials that are free for nonprofit educational use. There are records from major organizations, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and personal papers from major movement leaders, as well as letters and first-person accounts of the everyday students involved. The collection is a deep dive into a particularly interesting time in the civil rights

struggle and offers many opportunities for primary source research. *Access:* <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/p15932coll2>.

Labor movements

- **Drawing on Labor History.** This unique collection from the University of Pittsburgh features of the cartoons of labor activists and cartoonists for the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America. This series of 177 cartoons on labor history were published in the *UE News*. The collection provides digitized versions of all the cartoons presented both chronologically and organized into thematic collections. These items offer an unusual glimpse into the labor struggles of the first part of the 20th century, as told by and to those involved and affected by the movement. *Access:* <http://images.library.pitt.edu/f/fredwright/index.html>.

- **Farmworker Movement Documentation Project.** This site provides a strong collection of primary sources related to Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers grape strike. These include essays written by the movement's participants, digitized documents and archival materials, and curated exhibits on topics such as art and design within the movement. This site is a great resource for discussion of the farmworkers movement—the only downside of the archive is its age, which results in some resources, particularly video files, being no longer accessible. *Access:* <https://libraries.ucsd.edu/farmworkermovement/>.

LGBT activism

- **ACT-UP Oral History Project.** ACT-UP has been one of the most influential social activist organizations in the late 20th century—its techniques and methods have informed many later movements. This project collects oral histories from many of the original members of ACT-UP/New York. These activists participated in some of the most influential actions of the 20th century and their insights into both the work of organizing and

the personal struggles they faced make this an excellent resource. *Access:* <http://www.actuporalhistory.org/>.

- **Digital Transgender Archive (DTA).** DTA is a meta-archive collecting materials from more than 30 institutions pertaining to the history of the experiences of transgender and gender nonconforming individuals around the world. The archive includes digitized and born digital materials, as well as finding guides to physical collections. This is an excellent resource for highlighting the specific and rich history of transgender activism, both as a part of larger LGBT+ history and as its own area of study. *Access:* <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net>.

- **Herstories: Audio/Visual Collections.** The Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) is one of the largest and oldest archives dedicated to preserving items related to the lesbian community. The digital collections represent only a small fraction of the total collection, but they contain valuable audio/visual artifacts, including a digitized audio recording of Audre Lorde and a comprehensive history of the Daughters of Bilitis, including a large selection of digitized video clips documenting the influential organization's history. LHA is an excellent illustration of how an all-volunteer archive created by and for the community it documents and the materials and project in general are a great starting point for classroom discussion and research. *Access:* <http://herstories.prattinfoschool.nyc/omeka/>.

Women's movements

- **The Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America.** The Schlesinger Library has an unparalleled physical collection of items related to the history of women in America and its digital collections are equally impressive. Highlights include a fully digitized collection of the diaries, correspondence, and other memorabilia from Susan B. Anthony, the

(continues on page 470)

Retirements

Marvin Bielawski, deputy university librarian, has retired after 43 years at the Princeton University Library.

Mark Darby has retired as head of cataloging and database management at Temple University Libraries. He has held the position since 2008. Darby's career has included training as a Medieval Studies scholar to stints as a research assistant and cataloger/archivist for the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. He began his work at Temple as a special collections cataloger in 1994, and in 2001 became a database management librarian.

Carol Fagundus, leader of the Invoicing and Approvals Coordination Team, has retired after 39 years at the Princeton University Library.

Deborah Follansbee, Western Languages cataloging librarian, retired in October 2016 after 39 years at the Princeton University Library.

Nancy Pressman Levy, head of Donald E. Stokes Library for Public and International Affairs, has retired after 37 years at the Princeton University Library.

Sandra Rosenstock, librarian for Women and Gender Studies, retired in February 2017 after 29 years at the Princeton University Library.

Iping Wei, librarian, East Asian Languages Team, retired in January 2017 after 47 years at the Princeton University Library. ♪

("Social activism in the United States," continues from page 420)

digitized papers of the Beecher-Stowe family, and the papers of Dorothy West. The site also provides informative articles about the physical collections, illustrated with sample digitized items. This would be an excellent source of primary research material relating to the suffragette movement as well as a great source of visual materials on a variety of women's movement-related topics. *Access:* <https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/schlesinger-library>.

• **Women's Liberation Movement Print Culture.** This collection focuses on the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, focusing on feminist print culture. The digital collection includes manifestos, flyers, articles, and photographs encompassing many aspects of the Women's Movement. Particularly interesting are the materials related to the 1968 protest of the Miss America pageant, a seminal action in the course of the women's movement. *Access:* <http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/wlmpc/>.

• **Women of Protest: Photographs from the Records of the National Woman's Party (NWP).** NWP was a highly influ-

ential organization that brought the techniques of the militant British suffrage movement to the United States. This collection is made up of photographs from the NWP records and include many photographs of the group's picketing and other actions. Suffragists' protest strategies would become a model for the civil disobedience and actions of later groups and this collection provides an excellent visual record of their activities. The site also include articles and essays outline the history of the organization, their tactics and their place in the larger context of women's movements. *Access:* <https://www.loc.gov/collections/women-of-protest>.

Notes

1. Peter Dreier, "Social Movements: How People Make History," *Mobilizing Ideas*, August 1, 2012, <https://mobilizingideas.wordpress.com/2012/08/01/social-movements-how-people-make-history/>.

2. Peter B. Levy, "Teaching the 1960s with Primary Sources," *The History Teacher* 38, no. 1 (2004): 9–20, <https://doi.org.10.2307/1555623>. ♪