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Active Change Happening Through High-risk Activism

Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Making Conversation* and *The Primacy of Practice* and Malcolm Gladwell's *Small Change* both focus their writing on the idea of change and in what ways our societies promote these shifts in cultural ideas and beliefs. Although Appiah and Gladwell each talk about social change, the pathways they take to arrive at these successes are vastly different from one another. Appiah chooses to hone in on a plan that prompts social change through conversation, and communication with others outside of our direct circles and communities. He believes in doing this it will work to eliminate the "us versus them" mentality that is hard wired into many of our minds. On the contrary, Gladwell believes that change is more likely to occur through communities that participate in high-risk activism. Gladwell also introduces social media into the conversation and how detrimental it has been to the kind of activism that has been used throughout history. Through Gladwell's article there is a more compelling argument that high-risk activism is essential to create change within your community rather than Appiah's laid-back cosmopolitan approach.

Bold actions have a greater impact on public views compared to techniques that highlight problems solely through conversation. In Gladwell's *Small Change* he dives into the importance and major impact boycotts and sit-ins had in the civil rights movement in the 1960's, more specifically in the south. Gladwell communicates with his

readers, “The civil-rights movement was high-risk activism. It was also, crucially, strategic activism: a challenge to the establishment mounted with precision and discipline.” (Gladwell 147). The tactics used in the civil rights movement were carefully planned and had a specific target in mind, equality. The participants are all risking jail time, and were often exposed to harassment from the public, but for Gladwell this is what true activism looks like. He believes that there must be that potential danger or threat, and that is what makes these actions so impactful. The hazard associated with participating in activism activities is what shows true dedication. Unlike Appiah’s ideas about social change, Gladwell believes actions speak louder than words. Now that we live in an age where we all have access to some form of social media, it can be easy to get lost behind a screen and lose the meaning of true activism.

Social media provides a digital barrier for all of its users whether it is Twitter, Facebook, or email. It generally creates a lack of participation for all the issues that now plague our modern society. Appiah praises the new technologies, “...radio, television, telephones, the internet- means not only that we affect lives everywhere, but that we can learn about life anywhere, too.” (Appiah 40). He argues that new forms of media will bring us together during a time where society has taught us to isolate ourselves. However, what good does it do us when society also teaches us that our own cultural values are the only correct ways to live? It comes down to Gladwell's idea that true activism needs to involve the element of risk. While narrating the story of the Greensboro sit-in, he includes, “Thousands were arrested and untold thousands more radicalized. These events in the early sixties became a civil-rights war that engulfed the south for the rest of the decade - and it happened without email, texting, Facebook, or

Twitter.” (Gladwell 142). Although he doesn’t disprove Appiah’s point that social media will create change, Gladwell expands on the fact that we don’t need new media to spark change. In fact, we as a society glorify social media for the number of people it is able to reach but what change do we really see when it comes to societal issues? We see online communities posting to show their support on issues such as the Black Lives Matter movement, or the Me-Too movement, but what happens after that post? We don’t see actual change happening because social media is low-risk activism which may have increased participation, but it is countered with a decrease in dedication and effort.

Our actions are influenced by those who surround us and are often determined by if we have strong-ties or weak-ties with the individuals around us. It is obvious that Gladwell and Appiah don’t necessarily see eye to eye on their thoughts concerning what it takes to foster change. Appiah’s argument seems to value the quantity of connections you acquire over the quality or strength of those relationships, while Gladwell values the strong-tie relationships that are reliable when it comes to advocating for a certain issue. “The platforms of social media are built around weak ties.” Gladwell argues, and goes on to say, “That’s why you can have a thousand “friends” on Facebook, as you could never in real life.” (Gladwell 145). Having close connections with people gives you a sense of security, you feel comfortable doing something that may not usually be in your comfort zone. In the shallow relationships you obtain with online “friends” doesn’t give you the same assurance. Therefore, it would be difficult to push yourself to do something risky even if it is for a good cause. Now, would you participate in a sit-with some stranger from the internet, or a friend that you know and trust? Relationships

matter, strong ties are important and are one of the many crucial factors that are needed for what Gladwell would describe as real activism.

Appiah and Gladwell argue that change is essential for a society to grow. Appiah brings to light how communication can bring new ideas and culture into a society. Gladwell makes a stronger argument that high-risk activism will be more effective in changing the ideas that are already established in a particular society. Daring actions grab the attention of the public, and they make an important statement that shows you are serious about the cause you are fighting for. Often people are caught using social media to voice an opinion, but Gladwell offers a perspective that suggests activism through social media is ineffective at changing peoples minds. To truly provoke the change you want to see you need to take a chance and be bold with your actions. This is often most successful when you participate with people in which you have strong ties with.

Works Cited

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