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News of Baltimore

Race, Rage and the City

**Edited by Linda Steiner
and Silvio Waisbord**

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To all those who work for a more just world

7 Linked Fates

Social Media as a Framing, Tactical and Witnessing Tool in the Black Lives Matter Movement

Ashley Howard

Introduction

The deaths of numerous black Americans at the hands of law enforcement officers have thrust the issue of police brutality against minorities onto the world's stage. Social media have publicized spectacles of police violence to this global audience. The images of protestors chanting familiar slogans and of groups of disaffected youths engaging in counter-violence against police property recall other times in recent American history. But unlike past protests, the raised hands are not making a closed fist Black Power salute, but are holding cell phones high to capture the moment. Previous protests opened up the possibility of using social media to advance social movements. The use of social media in the wake of Trayvon Martin's death, however, laid the groundwork for movements against police brutality in America and the uprisings that followed in Ferguson and Baltimore.

Media have always been crucial in disseminating black American activists' objectives. In the antebellum period, widely distributed narratives by newly freedmen and women about life under enslavement swayed Northerners to support the abolitionist cause. Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1892/2013) famously dismantled the myth of the black rapist brute, exposing the actual causes of lynching in her 1892 *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*. In the 1960s, Black Freedom Movement organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Black Panther Party wrote and distributed their own printed newsletters framing their freedom agendas for a broader audience (Hilliard, 2007). In so doing, activists replaced pervasive narratives of black victimization with ones of black agency. While white supremacist power structures employed mainstream media to buttress their power, activists utilized alternative outlets as a canvas for radical imagination contesting mainstream narratives. Today, citizen-driven journalism and social media are similarly powerful protest tools.

Black Lives Matter activists and allies employ social media as framing, tactical, and witnessing tools. In so doing they disseminate movement

vocabularies that create a collective consciousness, both locally and globally. This chapter first addresses the limits of mainstream media as evidenced by coverage of the 1960s urban uprisings. Next, it describes how activists use social media for framing, tactical, and witnessing in the aftermath of the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Freddie Gray. I end by discussing the limits of social media as a protest tool.

Mainstream Media and the 1960s Uprisings

On July 27, 1967 President Lyndon Johnson established the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders to investigate the root causes of the urban uprisings the nation had endured that summer. Named for its chair, Illinois governor Otto Kerner, the Kerner Commission addressed three related questions: "What happened? Why did it happen? What could be done to prevent it from happening again?" (p. 2). In searching for answers, Commission investigators investigated a host of issues including ghetto life, unemployment, police-community relations, and mass media. They concluded that racial discrimination, poverty, and lack of educational opportunities contributed to the uprisings, famously declaring that "our nation is moving towards two societies, one black, once white" (Kerner, 1968, p. 1). The Commission discovered what many blacks already knew, that race overdetermined the outcome in every single aspect of American life.

Mainstream media overwhelmingly shaped the understanding and memory of the 1960s revolts. These interpretations were severely flawed, according to the Kerner Commission. While the Commission commended news media attempts to provide a "balanced, factual account," investigators concluded that "an exaggeration of both mood and event" and a failure to report the "causes and consequences of civil disorder" led to skewed perceptions of the uprisings (Simulmatics, 1967, pp. 2-3). The Commission, aware that such an indictment of news media needed extensive documentation, embarked on rigorous research. It gathered its own data; its researchers interviewed 700 individuals to ascertain public opinion of the media's portrayal of the revolts. The Commission paid Simulmatics Corporation \$221,000 to analyze television, radio, and print coverage of the uprising (Hrach, 2008). The Pentagon had previously contracted Simulmatics to determine best practices for indoctrinating Vietnamese citizens with pro-American ideology to reduce the insurgency (Hrach, 2008, p. 146). The resulting forty-eight page report, "News Media Coverage of the 1967 Urban Riots," highlighted many African Americans' dissatisfaction with mainstream media (Hrach, 2008).

Kerner Commission researchers criticized the news media for failing to analyze and report on race relations in America on a consistent, representative basis (Simulmatics, 1967). Local broadcasters had focused on how effectively state and national agencies managed the chaos and had

allowed moderate black leaders, not the rebels in the streets, to frame the events; receiving the least attention were expressions of black grievances (Simulmatics, 1967). Newspaper coverage, in particular, delegitimized these events by not acknowledging them as actual protests. Editors portrayed racial tension as a problem that occurred in other cities, not their own. The study noted that print coverage “tended to characterize and portray last summer’s riots as national rather than local phenomenon ... especially when rioting was taking place in the newspaper’s hometown” (Simulmatics, 1967, p. 18). The study showed that a significant number of articles that appeared in local newspapers in cities that experienced an uprising did not originate locally: over 40% came from wire services (Simulmatics, 1967, p. 18).

The Kerner Commission found two racially separated Americas. The most compelling testimony of this division came from the nearly 700 interviewees. Black citizens believed that mainstream news media contained and distributed negative opinions about them, and “were not telling the true story of life in poor black neighborhoods” (Hrach, 2008, p. 156). African Americans had three interrelated complaints. First, the mainstream media represented “instruments of the white power structure” (Kerner, 1968, p. 207). Second, journalists tended to rely on officials, particularly police officers, as their main source of information. When journalists covered stories in uprising areas, they tended to rely on the police for their protection. While understandable, this created an impression of media bias in favor of the police, with many black residents indicating that the “police and press work together and towards the same ends” (Kerner, 1968, p. 207). Third, black residents claimed that many of the events they witnessed during the uprising were ignored in the mainstream media’s coverage or analysis. That is, African Americans complained that the media obscured or ignored stories of blacks giving aid to the wounded and assisting the police; of instances of police brutality and false arrest; and of the presence of white vigilante groups who were inciting violence in areas where uprising were occurring (Kerner, 1968).

While the Kerner Commission’s criticism contributed to the diversification of mainstream media, some fifty years later many black Americans still distrust the media. In 2014, 38% of African Americans said that the news did not portray their community accurately. Although in the 20th century black Americans could turn to black-owned newspapers, magazines, and radio stations, with the decline in black-centered media, African Americans must seek new alternative places for news (Media Insight Project, 2014). Social media provide not only alternative sources for black news, but also effective tools in mobilizing social movements.

Ranging from the Arab Spring to the Umbrella Movement abroad to Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Party domestically, activists have employed social media in ways that demonstrate both continuity with

and rupture from traditional media as movement tools. Social theorist William Gamson noted that mass media remain “the major site of contests over meaning” because a “change in the media arena both signals and spreads the change” (2007, p. 243). Social media help expedite this process. The limits of traditional media in the mid-20th century—given that these were instruments of the power structure that relied on officials and selective reporting—highlight the possibilities of social media in the 21st century as framing, mobilizing, and witnessing tools.

Social Media as Framing Tool

Social movement theorists David Snow and Scott Byrd distinguish among three types of frames: *diagnostic*—defining the problem and whom to blame; *prognostic*—offering solutions and strategies; and *motivational*—calling people to action (Snow and Bryd, 2007). Activists use social media in all three ways to frame ongoing events, thereby decentralizing dominant narratives that serve the interests of those in power. As with the 1960s uprisings, cognitive liberation, or increased feelings of political efficacy, remains a central element to fomenting revolt. Through social media activists can formulate and quickly disseminate these frames.

In July 2012 activists Alicia Garza and Patrisse Marie Cullors, through their Facebook posts, created the motivational frame to launch a social movement. Following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the murder of Trayvon Martin, Alicia Garza posted: “black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter” (Garza, 2013). Her friend Cullors responded: “declaration: black bodies will no longer be sacrificed for the rest of the world’s enlightenment. i am done. i am so done. trayvon, you are loved infinitely. #blacklivesmatter” (Cullors-Brignac, 2013). The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter has been tweeted over 30 million times in the subsequent four years (Wortham, 2016, p. 21). The phrase captured the deep disillusionment many blacks and their allies felt, but could not articulate. It helped solidify disparate feelings of hopelessness into an assertion that mainstream media did not—or could not—convey with such potent directness: Black American life had value. The employment of that hashtag which “[roars] to life with every police killing of a black citizen,” reasserts African Americans’ right to live and thrive, pushing against dominant narratives and practices that devalue black life in America (Choksi, 2016).

Two days later Garza, Cullors, and Opal Tometi put forth a vision, saying, “#blacklivesmatter is a movement attempting to visiblize [sic] what it means to be black in this country. Provide hope and inspiration for collective action to build collective power to achieve collective transformation. Rooted in grief and rage but pointed towards visions and dreams” (Brown, 2015). In employing this hashtag, Garza and

Cullors-Brignac diagnosed the problem and offered a solution, tying once isolated incidents, unknown except to those in the local community, together into a larger, national tragedy.

In the 21st century, social media expedite this process of unifying people who otherwise are, or feel, isolated. They enable marginalized Americans to understand their oppression not as individual, isolated personal failings, but as part of a larger unjust system. In so doing they identify perpetrators and assist in remedying the threat they pose. Victims are humanized, and as these conversations now take place in the public sphere, the broader audience can personally identify with the deceased. African Americans and the public at large begin to move away from blaming the victim and tie this violence to a larger hierarchy of racial oppression in America. "For the nation as a whole, we have come to learn the names of the victims—Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Tony Robinson, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray—because the [Black Lives Matters] activists have linked their fates together in our minds, despite their separation by many weeks and thousands of miles" (King, 2016). Diagnostically framing each of these disparate events with #BlackLivesMatter, and linking each individual name to his or her own hashtag, connects these incidents. In so doing, activist social media disrupt the mainstream media pattern of portraying police shootings as a local one-time event because bodily harm was imminent. By supplanting this narrative of justified police killings, black-oriented social media interrupt the perceived relationship between mainstream media and hierarchical power structures.

Social media also challenge mainstream media as instruments of the power structure. After the death of unarmed teenager Mike Brown, NBC News posted a photograph of him taken from his personal Facebook page. Dressed in a red tank top with his hand in front of his torso, some interpreted his hand gesture as a gang sign. Others saw a peace sign. Social media users immediately responded to the hypocrisy, posting dual images of themselves captioned #iftheygunnedmedown. In these posts users uploaded side-by-side pictures of themselves dressed as they saw themselves, in their armed services uniform or graduation gown, next to the picture they feared would be used if killed, showing them in a negative light.

This prognostic framing specifically came from what has come to be known as "Black Twitter." Brittney Gault, a student at DePaul University, referred to the informal collective as "a media response team" (Vega, 2014). The users of Black Twitter employ signifying, memes, and hashtags to discuss a range of relevant issues ranging from television shows to humorous responses to oppression (#PaulasBestDishes) to calling attention to police brutality. Yet Black Twitter is not a homogenous mass: "What does exist are millions of black users on Twitter networking, connecting, and engaging with others who have similar concerns, experiences, tastes, and cultural practices" (Florini, 2014, p. 225). Using

the language of Nancy Fraser, Graham and Smith (2016) emphasize that Black Twitter reflects the multivalent perspectives of black Americans but cumulatively constitutes a counterpublic space providing "a training ground for agitational activities" as well as a "parallel discursive arena" (pp. 13–14). Through this venue racially-conscious social media users employ this medium to challenge mainstream norms and narratives.

In 2014, Black Twitter helped to popularize the #iftheygunnedmedown hashtag. Users tweeted this phrase over 168,000 times in just two days; two years later it is still in use (Vega, 2014). The hashtag forced mainstream journalists to choose different images to depict Mike Brown, put media organizations "on notice" that the broader public was monitoring their depictions, and transformed the conversation from Mike Brown's peccadillos to racial disparities in the United States (Watkins, 2014). This diagnostic and prognostic frame criticized media representations of black men, while simultaneously asserting that one's physical depiction is never cause for a death sentence.

Social media are particularly effective in using both form and content for diagnostic framing. By its very nature social media transcend borders to connect anyone with internet access. Hashtags like #FergusonIsEverywhere and #Palestine2Ferguson "connected the violent erasure of Palestinian lives in Gaza to the mistreatment of black people in Ferguson and the US at large" (Khan, 2015). Activists employed the hashtag when Israeli police assaulted a uniformed Israeli-Ethiopian soldier, drawing attention to more widespread racial profiling in the country (Khan, 2015). Black Lives Matter activists also shut-down London's City Airport to protest environmental racism in the United Kingdom (Al Jazeera, 2016). Social media connect global resistance to state oppression.

Social Media as Tactical Tool

Social media's efficacy as a tactical tool reached its highest point of development thus far in its deployment during protest actions in Ferguson and Baltimore. In 2007, it took bloggers almost a year to make the plight of the Jena 6 widespread in mainstream media. By 2012, the use of social media made Trayvon Martin's death headline news in three weeks; Mike Brown's one day (McBride, 2012). Freddie Gray's death became international news overnight. Political scientist Doug McAdam argued that when traditional mechanisms for change are shut off, "ordinary insurgents must bypass routine decision making channels" utilizing noninstitutional tactics (1983, pp. 735–736). The creativity of insurgents in devising new tactical forms is central to challenges to the power structure (p. 736). Conversely, those in favor of the status quo utilize "tactical adaptation" which is the ability of "opponents to neutralize these movements through effective tactical counters" (p. 736). The resulting interplay is known as tactical interaction. Social media have been

instrumental in creating a new social movement through Black Lives Matter, by bringing attention to instances of police brutality and coordinating protest.

The first use of social media as a tactical tool is that it alerts the broader public to a newsworthy event that may have otherwise gone unreported. Rashad Robinson, director of Color of Change, noted “in some ways, the media was not driving the [Trayvon Martin] story, the public was, through social media, and the media was following public cues” (Wolfson, 2014). Howard Law School alumnus Kevin Cunningham, outraged over the murder of Martin, began an online petition at change.org calling for charges to be brought against George Zimmerman. In a few days more than 10,000 people signed the online petition and control of the petition was given over to Martin’s parents (Mennot, 2012). The online petition circulated on social media, making what was initially only a 213-word article in the local newspaper an international news story (Trotta, 2012). As one South Florida blogger wrote, “Social media and the Internet ... make it less likely that people like Trayvon Martin will live and die and vanish away without leaving an imprint” (McBride, 2012). In the end the attention brought by the petition resulted in Florida State Attorney Angela Corey charging George Zimmerman with second-degree murder. Social media allowed concerned citizens to innovate, bypassing traditional media gate keepers. While certainly each subsequent case of a police murder of an unarmed African American garnered more cumulative interest, the real tactical innovation of social media lay with how activists use this medium to mobilize their outrage.

Social media has proven a very useful tactical tool on the ground. Jon Belmar, St. Louis County police chief noted the difficulty in policing demonstrations: “[Protestors] have the ability to understand where they’re all going to be, and they can basically plan where they want to go next. So it’s a really efficient way to communicate” (Wolfson, 2014). Ferguson activists DeRay Mckesson and Johnetta Elzie utilized their Twitter accounts to help coordinate direct actions in Ferguson. In the days prior to a decision of whether or not Darren Wilson would be indicted, on-the-ground activists increased their base by providing real time information regarding the case and protest actions. One Ferguson resident, @TefPoe, tweeted his concern: “Basically martial law is taking place in Ferguson all perimeters blocked coming and going.... National and international friends Help!!” (Taylor, et al., 2015). Mckesson posted on his Twitter three locations where people could demonstrate the day of the announcement regarding the state’s decision about Wilson. When prosecuting attorney Robert McCulloch announced that Wilson would not be indicted for the death of Michael Brown, “a network of hundreds of organizers was already in place, ready to bring thousands of people into the streets with a tweet” (King, 2016). Some of the most visible social media activists in the movement, DeRay Mckesson, Johnetta Elzie,

and Shaun King, each have over 150,000 followers (Mckesson, 2016; Elzie, 2016; King, 2016). The Black Lives Matter movement benefits from social media as an organizing tool through “the swift, morally blunt consensus that can be created by hashtags; the personal connection that a charismatic online persona can make with followers; [and] the broad networks that allow for the easy distribution of documentary photos and videos” (King, 2016). As such activists can rapidly mobilize supporters on the ground and online.

Before the internet and social media, protest organizers would rely on word of mouth, paper flyers, and face-to-face meetings to coordinate actions, but such outreach taxed time and personnel resources. The Council of Federated Organizations, for example, held a week-long training at Western College for their 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer volunteers (Carson, 1995, p. 113). In 2014 Ferguson organizers disseminated extensive rules of engagement via Google doc. In addition to the aforementioned preemptive mobilization, Ferguson activists used a Google map to tally their resources and targets including 43 potential action locations and five sanctuary spaces. Utilizing internet resources, they could potentially mobilize thousands more than could previous activists, as evidenced in the 150,443 views of the map (Fillion, 2014). Organizers used social media to coordinate rides and places to stay for out-of-town activists; advertise nationwide actions; and encourage individuals to purchase or bring items listed for a protestor action supply kit (Fillion, 2014). These innovations expanded the reach and capacity of activists.

One of the most controversial aspects of social media as a mobilizing tool occurred in the aftermath of Freddie Gray’s death, centering around the rumored “Purge” flyer. The flyer, referencing the 2013 film about a night of consequence-less crime, seemed to warn of an action planned to occur at Mondawmin Mall at 3 p.m. The mall, a bus hub, counts 5,000 Baltimore students as passengers daily (Green, 2015). *Baltimore Sun* reporter Carrie Wells shared an image of a flyer allegedly circulated by rebels to recruit others to join in violent protest. Journalists have uncovered no evidence that Baltimore students used social media to coordinate an uprising at the mall. They only found tweets of the flyer as either warning or news (Johnson, 2015). Freelance journalist Adam Johnson tweeted Wells to gather more information “@cwellssun got word from who? I’m just trying to divorce hype from reality. Can u provide a link to any SM [social media] actually sharing it to promote?” (Johnson, 2015). Other tweets employed vague references such as “Downtown Baltimore is like a real life version of the Purge right now” (Vega, 2015). Or “Let the #purge begin in #Baltimore” (Griggs, 2015).

Meg Gibson, a Baltimore teacher, described the scene to Gawker: “The riot police were already at the bus stop on the other side of the mall, turning buses that transport the students away, not allowing students to

board. They were waiting for the kids.... Those kids were set up, they were treated like criminals before the first brick was thrown" (Brodey and McLaughlin, 2015). As Gibson described it, police were responding to "Purge" rumors by shutting down the train station and forcing youth from their buses, essentially stranding the students. Elsewhere in the neighborhood, streets were shut down, making it extremely difficult to leave the mall area. Trapped, frustrated, and scared, the juveniles began throwing bottles and bricks at the police. That is, by circulating a hoax flyer, social media mobilized fear and provoked a police response, not an actual uprising.

In Baltimore, both corporate and municipal entities carefully watched social media to gain on-the-ground intel. The department for Corporate and Information Security Services (CISS) of Exelon, a power company that operates in Baltimore, "monitor[ed] protest activity that has the potential to impact Exelon employees or other company assets" and shared this information with the city of Baltimore. Law enforcement watched several social media users' accounts, flagging 71 tweets. None of these included specific tactical information regarding the uprisings. The most incriminating of these contained vague threats to police without mentioning any specific planned actions (Gosztola, 2015). Other posts flagged by the police debunked police rumors that the Black Guerilla Family, the Bloods, and the Crips had entered into a truce to work together to kill as many police as they could. All of the social media posts collected were, as police described them, "threats" or "chatter" and did not represent credible threat (Broadwater, Wagner, and Duncan, 2016). Despite the concerns of Exelon and the police department, social media users most frequently used the medium to coordinate nonviolent protest and clean-up efforts (Vega, 2015).

Police and celebrities also used social media as a mobilization tool. In addition to the aforementioned monitoring of citizen's social media accounts, the Baltimore Police Department issued curfews and updates on their own account. Patrisse Cullors noted that police used social media to disseminate both information and propaganda (Vega, 2015). Tweets from police used words that framed the protestors as agitators engaging in criminality. The tweets described the protestors as "people w/ no regard for life" (BaltimorePolice, 2015c) and "aggressive and violent" (BaltimorePolice, 2015a). Meanwhile, police portrayed themselves in opposition to these people such as when they tweeted, "Despite having rocks, bricks, and other items thrown at us, officers are using fire extinguishers to put out small fires in the area" (BaltimorePolice, 2015b). Ray Lewis and Carmelo Anthony, professional athletes with Baltimore ties, took to social media to share similar thoughts on the Baltimore uprising. Lewis posted a video tirade on Facebook demanding that protestors "go home" and stop the violence. His video had 30 million views (Rios, 2015). Anthony posted a picture on his Instagram account of a

child shouting into a megaphone at a rally. Taking a more measured approach, Anthony captioned the photo, "We need to protect our city, not destroy it. What happens when we get the answers that we want, and the media attention is not there anymore?" The post received 78,000 likes (Calmont, 2015). In each of these instances, other invested parties utilized social media to share their experiences and frame the events as they saw them, in hopes of mobilizing the public to their view of the uprisings.

In the wake of the Baltimore uprising, social movement organizations continue to use social media to mobilize people, supplies, and legal services. In 2016 Baltimore United organizers mobilized people for their #BaltimoreStillRising protests in Baltimore and Annapolis (KineticsLive, 2016). Tawanda Jones, sister of Tyrone West, who died in 2013 while in Baltimore Police custody, uses the hashtag #WestWednesday to organize weekly protests (BmoreBloc, 2016).¹ Jones continues to coordinate these protests, which have occurred for over 160 consecutive Wednesdays at different locations, to bring attention to her brother's death and call for justice (Expandyourfocus, 2016). In 2016 under the hashtag #AFROMATION activists demonstrated at the Baltimore Hyatt to protest a Fraternal Order of Police conference (Smdadamo, 2016). Organizers used social media to advertise their civil disobedience training (BaltUprising, 2016a), request supplies (BaltUprising, 2016b), mobilize a campaign to demand the release of sixty arrested demonstrators (BaltUprising, 2016c) and tweeted the picture and name of a police officer that activists thought was unnecessarily rough (BmoreBloc, 2016). A #StopFOP activist live streamed on Periscope his departure from the hotel in the event the police harassed him (Bmore2Palestine, 2016). Activists also created a Fundly.com page to crowdsource for the Baltimore Bloc Support Fund. Those within the Baltimore activist collective retweeted the call, mobilizing their own networks. "Please donate to help us and @BALTLegal bailout #Afromation protestors!" (LBSBaltimore, 2016). Through the networking capabilities of social media, distinct yet aligned groups of activists extended social movement networks, tying together disparate people working towards a common goal.

Social Media as Witnessing Tool

In the twenty-first century, everyone with a cell phone can document and disseminate what is happening nearby in real time. Video of Johannes Mehserle shooting Oscar Grant, a young man killed January 1, 2009 at the Bay Area Rapid Transit's Fruitvale Station, shocked people, as it was one of the first times many Americans witnessed with their own eyes an unarmed and prone man shot. Previously, claims of unjustified police shootings were very difficult to prove and rarely played out in the court of popular opinion. The ubiquity of camera phones and social media,

however, makes them vital witnessing tools, because these technologies frame these events as the people themselves see it, unfiltered.

Michael Brown's death first began to be reported on social media. @TheePharoah tweeted "I JUST SAW SOMEONE DIE OMFG" [all caps original] He then wrote to @allovevie "the police just shot someone dead in front of my crib yo" (Taylor, et al., 2016). This was followed by a picture of a police officer standing over Mike Brown's dead body "Fuckfuck fuck" At 2:14p @TheePharoah posted a picture of a law enforcement personnel carrying an assault rifle. "Homie still on the ground tho" (Taylor, et al., 2016). This last point, that Brown's body lay in the street for nearly four hours, caused significant outrage on social media. Almost immediately @TheePharoah and those in his network began witnessing something that previously would have only been discussed through word of mouth and whose credibility would have been limited.

What began as peaceful protests evolved for some into violent uprisings as news of Brown's death spread. The first reports began to trickle through social media. *New York Times* reporter David Carr (2014) wrote: "Twitter has become an early warning service for news organizations, a way to see into stories even when they don't have significant reporting assets on the ground." Both citizen and professional journalists noted that the police escalated the situation. St. Louis City Alderman Antonio French posted a Vine of a tense scene in Ferguson. The crowd chanting "No justice, no peace" is heard on audio. French captioned his video "Ferguson Police have dogs and shotguns. The unarmed crowds is raising their hands" (Taylor, et al., 2016). International journalist Anastasia Churkina posted on her Twitter "saw #riot #police use tear gas in #missouri while local stood out on the street, outside their homes, no violent protesting. #MichaelBrown" (Taylor, et al., 2016). Photojournalist David Carson posted images of protestors with their hands up captioning "tear gas flash bangs deployed #ferguson" (Taylor, et al., 2016). These accounts offer a very important perspective, allowing those who are not on the ground and who are unlikely to experience what is going on, to witness these events practically first hand. They cast doubt on the dominant narratives from both police and legacy journalists, directly countering one of the main issues many African Americans had with the 1960s coverage of the rebellions.

Baltimore activists using social media offered unprecedented access to the uprising. They showed multiple sides of the uprising, including scenes of police mobilization as well as property destruction. DeRay Mckesson uploaded a Vine with the caption "So. Many. Officers. North/Fulton." In the foreground others are also seen filming the scene on their phones (Mckesson, 2015). In addition to offering on the ground, real time reporting, citizen journalists offered counterevidence to who instigated violence. Mckesson included a Vine video of a photographer being

harassed by police, tweeted the video writing: "Yesterday, the police assaulted a photographer. Now, this is violence. Baltimore. #FreddieGray" (Deray, 2015). A year later a fellow marcher captured on Periscope Mckesson's arrest in Baton Rouge (Deray, 2016).

Social media, particularly live streaming programs, document the uprisings and also act as witness in the event something goes wrong. To this end more and more citizens are filming their own and others' interactions with police. The ACLU argues that citizen journalists recording police is "a critical check and balance ... [creating] an independent record of what took place in a particular incident free from accusations of bias, lying, or faulty memory" (ACLU, 2011). Several apps including the ACLU's Mobile Justice app, Hands Up 4 Justice, and CopWatch are all available for download. In particular Hands Up 4 Justice integrates multiple aspects of social media by allowing captured videos to be automatically uploaded to YouTube or Dropbox and interfaces with emergency contacts and GPS. Other programs like "The Swat App," "Five-O" and "Stop and Frisk Watch" allow users to report police misconduct and share their experiences with other users. This type of witnessing activism is not without consequence to the witnesses. A transgender woman filming the Baltimore protest after Freddie Gray's death was arrested and placed in a men's holding cell. Ramsey Orta, the man who filmed Eric Garner's death by police chokehold, has claimed that police have targeted him and close family members since that day (Ram, 2015).

The images and video social media users post drastically challenge mass media depictions of police. Instagram users circulated an image showing protestor Devante Hill, eyes closed tight after being hit with pepper spray, making a heart with his hands. Another social media user, Gaiabirch, records in her short Vimeo documentary activists hugging one another and a megaphoned protestor shouting to the crowd "this is a love movement." In another scene she films a dashiki-wearing man admonishing the milling crowd not to provoke the police because "we've seen what they do" (Gaiabirch, 2015). Each of these disrupts the narratives of thuggery put forth by Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake (Fang, 2015). Devin Allen, the amateur photographer who gained notoriety through his Instagram photographs of the Baltimore uprising, said in a *Time* magazine interview: "Of course, since I'm a black man, I understand the frustration, but at the same time, I'm a photographer. I'm not going to lie to you. I'm going to tell you exactly what happened" (Laurent, 2015). Social media provide the public with an opportunity to narrate the story from many perspectives. Each witness tells his or her truth. In so doing major public events, such as the protests and uprisings that occurred across the nation, are told from multiple perspectives. Top-down or triumphalist depictions are now challenged, offering a more complex interpretation of a complicated situation.

Social media provide an opportunity for the masses to collect and disseminate multiple accounts of a singular event. The preservation of these images is vital as they will serve as the base for future scholarship on this time. Both Washington University in St. Louis and University of Maryland have created digital archives of these events drawing primarily from social media. The Documenting Ferguson and Preserve the Baltimore Uprising 2015 projects mark valuable endeavors to continue to utilize social media in innovative ways. This, too, marks a distinct shift from the 1960s rebellions where, apart from oral history and a few photographs taken by citizen journalists, very few extant documents explicitly frame these events from the perspectives of the people, coloring how we remember the uprisings today.

Conclusion: The Limits of Social Media

In the summer of 2016, the videotaped deaths at the hands of police of Philando Castile in suburban Minnesota and Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge made the rounds on mainstream media. The despair and outrage from these images were compounded by the acquittals of the police officers in Eric Garner and Freddie Gray's cases, both of which had video evidence. So the utility of social media as a framing, mobilizing, and witnessing tool for social protest and unrest does not ensure long-term efficacy and change. Baltimore activist Duane "Shorty" Davis, who regularly records his interactions with police, notes this contradiction: "[the police] control the narrative but in controlling the narrative they have to control social media, because it's our narrative.... To keep our message from getting out, they're going to take [social media] out" (Woods, 2016). Just as protestors tactically innovate, the state tactically adapts.

Recently it came to light that the Baltimore Police Department currently uses an aerial surveillance program to monitor citizens (Rector, 2016). The Persistent Surveillance System company was hired to fly a Cessna plane over the city collecting 300 hours of real-time video. More devastatingly, Baltimore police also obtained stingray devices, tools that surveil calls and track cell phones by impersonating cell towers. This gave Baltimore police access to the very tools that Black Lives Matter activists employed to grow their movement. As an article in *Wired* put it, "Baltimore checks off all the requirements to build a modern American urban panopticon: High crime rates, racially biased policing, strained community-police relations, and lack of police oversight have turned Baltimore into a laboratory of emerging surveillance techniques" (Newman, 2016). In their Federal Communications Commission complaint, the Center for Media Justice, Color of Change.org, and New America's Open Technology Institute noted: "Worse, the harms that stem from the Baltimore Police Department's use of CS simulator

equipment fall disproportionately on Baltimore's black residents" (Newman, 2016). By tactically adapting, the Baltimore Police now can neutralize social media as organizing tools.

The Baltimore Police Department also contracts with the private firm Geofeedia, which "allows users to map out people's posts from Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, and other social media outlets" (Knezevich, 2016a). Police can then analyze the social media chatter in areas as large as city to as small as a single building. A Baltimore Police spokesman was quoted describing social media as "a regular investigative tool that many police officers should use because people talk, and people talk publicly.... If you can glean information from something that's already public, you absolutely should take the opportunity to do so" (Knezevich, 2016a). According to Geofeedia's contract Baltimore police can use the service to continuously monitor and record social media, and set up notifications "triggered by specific keywords, phrases or users" (Knezevich, 2016a). Some of the very people and hashtags discussed here may already be flagged.

Perhaps one of the most frightening tactical adaptations by police involves shutting down individuals' social media accounts. Korryn Gaines was a Baltimore mother who had previously filmed her encounter with police at a traffic stop, instructing her child to "make sure you record everything" (Woods, 2016). In August 2016, when Baltimore County Police came to serve her a warrant for failure to appear in court, Gaines refused to leave; she remained in the house with her five-year-old son and using the live stream function on her Facebook. The Baltimore County police chief James Johnson asked Facebook to suspend her account during the five-hour standoff "in order to preserve the integrity of the negotiation process" (Woods, 2016). Facebook agreed to shut down her page, thereby eliminating Gaines' ability to capture her own experience and leave video evidence, especially as none of the officers was wearing body cameras as they stormed her apartment. The police killed her and wounded her child. As one tweeter noted "what #facebook did in #KorrynGaines case is almost (not exactly) like a #police thug strong-arming a bystander and stealing his/her camera" (Schestowitz, 2016). The police department currently has a warrant for access to all of Gaines' social media accounts (Knezevich, 2016b).

To achieve meaningful change, activists must continue to innovate. These opportunities are limited only by activists' imaginations. Social media can continue to alert the public, mobilize the masses, and facilitate difficult conversations in new and meaningful ways. Pew research found that between January and March of 2016 over 995 million tweets were deemed "race related." Only 35% of white social media users, however, see race-related posts compared to 68% of black social media users (Anderson and Hitlin, 2016). Pew concluded that people are having "significant conversations but they are talking past each other." An

additional 67% of white social media users say nothing they share is race related (Anderson and Hitlin, 2016). In developing new techniques to discuss race-related issues across the color line, activists can continue to innovate. Ultimately though, those who benefit from white privilege must likewise be instrumental in dismantling it, and social media provide a powerful opportunity for them as well.

Social media provide essential tools for activists to tactically adapt, creating frames, mobilizing people, and witnessing these events as they unfold. As with the 1960s rebellions, police killings of black men trigger violent responses to ongoing widespread social, economic, and political woes. While local conditions and events are still the principal catalysts for uprising, social media allow these to be broadcast and tied to national conversations on race and inequality. Social media are effective tools in modern uprisings: they rapidly mobilize people and resources. Finally, social media allow those on the ground to counter dominant narratives provided by mainstream media to show the complexities and nuances present in uprisings. Despite many differences between the 1960s rebellions and the most recent uprisings, the most significant change has been the role of social media. Especially in the wake of tactical adaptations by police, social activists must continually challenge tactical and creative boundaries in their efforts to influence change. As black Americans find themselves in the dawn of a growing social movement, imaginative employment of media again represents African Americans' best chance to combat oppression in solidarity with oppressed people throughout the world.

Note

- 1 West died while handcuffed, having been arrested for a traffic violation. The official autopsy cites "Cardiac Arrhythmia due to Cardiac Conduction System Abnormality complicated by Dehydration during Police Restraint." An independent forensic pathologist said the way that police restrained West caused "positional asphyxia" (Linderman, 2016).

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8 The Black Press and Baltimore

The Continuing Importance of African American Journalism During Urban Uprisings

Sarah J. Jackson

Abstract

In this chapter I consider how members of the black press covered, debated, and made sense of the events in Baltimore following the 2015 arrest and death of 25-year-old Freddie Gray. I illustrate how coverage from black-run and -targeted media outlets extends the work of the historical black press while responding to contemporary challenges and evolutions in journalism. The traditional work of the black public sphere, which has long existed to legitimize the experiences of African Americans and to challenge mainstream narratives about race, violence, and national belonging, continues despite concerns from scholars about the decline of black newspapers after the 1970s. In particular, members of the black public sphere play a crucial role in offering Americans of all backgrounds counternormative ways of interpreting news. By highlighting how the black press reported on and contributed to narratives about Baltimore, I suggest that increased (but certainly not representative) mainstream integration, technology, and the decentering of journalism from elite forms and spaces has brought about a resurgence in the reach and diversity of African American narratives and news.

Introduction

There was a time when African-American stories simply did not appear in the news. Occasionally a story was told in which a black person’s presumably deviant body or behavior was made relevant, but these stories did not reflect black experiences or black forms of collective knowledge. Rather, journalism was dictated, like other American institutions, by the social and cultural hierarchies of white supremacy. When, in 1827, editors Samuel Cornish and John Russworm launched the first black newspaper, they argued for the necessity of *Freedom’s Journal* as follows:

We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentation of things which concern us dearly.... The civil rights of a people being