

BEYOND THE HASHTAGS



#Ferguson, #Blacklivesmatter, and
the online struggle for offline justice



43

Tweet

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Internal photos: [Philip Montgomery](#)

Graphic design and layout: [openbox9](#)

The authors gratefully acknowledge funding support from the Spencer Foundation, without which this project would not have been possible. We also thank Ryan Blocher, Frank Franco, Cate Jackson, and Sedale McCall for transcribing participant interviews; David Proper and Kate Sheppard for copyediting; and Mitra Arthur, Caty Borum Chattoo, Brigid Maher, and Vincent Terlizzi for assisting with the report's web presence and PR.

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First published February 2016



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Baltimore, Maryland - MAY 1, 2015 - Protesters march in support of Baltimore State's Attorney Marilyn Mosby's announcement that charges would be filed against Baltimore police officers in the death of Freddie Gray. Gray died in police custody after being arrested on April 12, 2015.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES / ANDREW BURTON

SUMMARY

Getting something trending on Twitter means that people are talking, they are conscious. And that consciousness can lead to action.

—SHREE





IN 2014, A DEDICATED ACTIVIST MOVEMENT—Black Lives Matter (BLM)—ignited an urgent national conversation about police killings of unarmed Black citizens. Online tools have been anecdotally credited as critical in this effort, but researchers are only beginning to evaluate this claim. This research report examines the movement's uses of online media in 2014 and 2015. To do so, we analyze three types of data: 40.8 million tweets, over 100,000 web links, and 40 interviews of BLM activists and allies. Most of the report is devoted to detailing our findings, which include:

- » Although the #Blacklivesmatter hashtag was created in July 2013, it was rarely used through the summer of 2014 and did not come to signify a movement until the months after the Ferguson protests.
- » Social media posts by activists were essential in spreading Michael Brown's story nationally.
- » Protesters and their supporters were generally able to circulate their own narratives on Twitter without relying on mainstream news outlets.
- » There are six major communities that consistently discussed police brutality on Twitter in 2014 and 2015: Black Lives Matter, Anonymous/Bipartisan Report, Black Entertainers, Conservatives, Mainstream News, and Young Black Twitter.
- » The vast majority of the communities we observed supported justice for the victims and decisively denounced police brutality.
- » Black youth discussed police brutality frequently on Twitter, but in ways that differed substantially from how activists discussed it.
- » Evidence that activists succeeded in educating casual observers on Twitter came in two main forms: expressions of awe and disbelief at the violent police reactions to the Ferguson protests, and conservative admissions of police brutality in the Eric Garner and Walter Scott cases.
- » The primary goals of social media use among our interviewees were education, amplification of marginalized voices, and structural police reform.

In our concluding section, we reflect on the practical importance and implications of our findings. We hope this report contributes to the specific conversation about how Black Lives Matter and related movements have used online tools as well as to broader conversations about the general capacity of such tools to facilitate social and political change.



St. Louis, Missouri - AUGUST 25, 2014 -
At the entrance of Friendly Temple Mis-
sionary Baptist Church, massive crowds
of media and mourners congregated
around the casket of Michael Brown.

PHOTO: PHILIP MONTGOMERY

INTRODUCTION

You want to say “trust the police”
or “call the police”, but we’ve got
all this evidence on social media
whereby that’s gone all wrong
and it can go wrong quickly.

—K. L., 26





BEYOND THE HASHTAGS: #FERGUSON, #BLACKLIVESMATTER, AND THE ONLINE STRUGGLE FOR OFFLINE JUSTICE

In the United States, police violence against people of African descent is nothing new.¹ But widespread public use of mobile phone cameras and social media has recently thrust the issue into the national spotlight like never before. Videos, images, and text narratives of violent encounters between police and unarmed Black people circulated widely through news and social media in the summer of 2014, galvanizing public outrage. This media activism fueled the rise of what we refer to as BLM, a loosely-coordinated, nationwide movement dedicated to ending police brutality.² As we write, BLM participants continue their advocacy work in the mass media, in the streets, through dialogue with elected officials, and online. Although not all American anti-brutality activists align themselves with the movement, its high visibility and success in eliciting elite responses have positioned it at the center of the national conversation on police misconduct.

BLM rose to prominence in the wake of earlier anti-authoritarian protest movements that managed to attract substantial followings and public attention, including the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and the Indignados of Spain. However, BLM differs from these in several important ways. For one, it demands specific forms of redress for one relatively well-defined political/legal/policy issue, whereas other movements focus on diffuse goals and issues such as regime change and dissatisfaction with the financial system. BLM also aims mainly to improve the everyday lives of an oppressed racial minority—Black people in general and Black youth in particular—while other movements advocate on behalf of more broadly-defined social groups (e.g. “the 99%”). In addition, BLM’s members engage with politicians, the press, and the public through both conventional and contentious means, setting it apart from movements that operate exclusively in one mode or the other.

Like most contemporary Western social movements, BLM uses online media extensively. The purpose of this report is to help a general audience understand how digital tools have contributed to the goals of anti-brutality activists in general and BLM in particular. Because not every social movement uses online media in the same ways, it is important to understand each new movement’s digital activities on their own terms. As we’ve seen, BLM differs from others of its genre in significant ways, so we should not expect its uses of the internet to necessarily be the same as its predecessors. Understanding the processes and outcomes of

BLM's high visibility and success in eliciting elite responses have positioned it at the center of the national conversation on police misconduct.

1 Stanley Lieberson and Arnold R. Silverman, “The Precipitants and Underlying Conditions of Race Riots,” *American Sociological Review* 30, no. 6 (1965): 887–98, doi:10.2307/2090967; Kevin P. Jenkins, “Police Use of Deadly Force against Minorities: Ways to Stop the Killing,” *Harvard Blackletter Journal* 9 (1992): 1–25.

2 This report distinguishes between #Blacklivesmatter (the hashtag), Black Lives Matter (the organization), and BLM (the movement); see “#Blacklivesmatter, Black Lives Matter, and BLM: Clarifying our objects of study” below.



BLM's engagement with online media will provide important object lessons for the movement and its successors.

But even more than that, BLM is an apt test case for the idea that social media uniquely benefits oppressed populations.³ The general idea here is that social media helps level a media playing field dominated by pro-corporate, pro-government, and (in the United States) anti-Black ideologies. On Twitter, the platform to which we devote most of our attention in this report, Blacks have long accounted for a disproportionately large share of users.⁴ “Black Twitter” is a widely-discussed cultural phenomenon that overlaps with BLM but remains distinct from it.⁵ It is important to understand whether social media can help Black people pursue social change as effectively as it helps them share jokes and memes, and if so, how.

Our interest in this topic is further motivated by an abiding concern in not only the physical safety, but also the civic prospects of Black youth. Studies have revealed a decades-long decline in youth civic engagement as traditionally defined: that is, interacting with established civic and political institutions such as government, long-established community organizations, and K12 civics classes.⁶ Recent scholarship in this area has observed that 21st-century youth may march to the beat of a different civic drum than earlier generations, preferring individually-motivated, digitally-enabled, cause-based activism to the more top-down, institution-centered, adult-directed civic styles of yesteryear.⁷ However, most of this research is race-neutral and does not explore the distinctive civic experiences of marginalized youth.⁸ This is a particularly problematic omission given that the civic disenchantment often attributed to the Millennial generation as a whole is likely to be far more pronounced among Black youth, who are poorly served by many traditional civic and political institutions. A movement like BLM—which is devoted to issues of literal life and death for Black youth—might succeed in connecting them with civic life where schools and other institutions have failed. This possibility further testifies to the relevance of our project.

3 This is especially the case given that most scholarship on this point focuses on non-Western countries. See for example Philip N. Howard and Malcolm R. Parks, “Social Media and Political Change: Capacity, Constraint, and Consequence,” *Journal of Communication* 62, no. 2 (April 1, 2012): 359–62, doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01626.x; Larry Diamond, “Liberation Technology,” *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 3 (2010): 69–83.

4 André Brock, “From the Blackhand Side: Twitter as a Cultural Conversation,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56, no. 4 (2012): 529–49, doi:10.1080/08838151.2012.732147.

5 Sarah Florini, “Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin’: Communication and Cultural Performance on ‘Black Twitter,’” *Television & New Media*, March 7, 2013, 1527476413480247, doi:10.1177/1527476413480247; Brock, “From the Blackhand Side”; Meredith D. Clark, “To Tweet Our Own Cause: A Mixed-Methods Study of the Online Phenomenon ‘Black Twitter’” (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2014), <http://gradworks.umi.com/36/68/3668450.html>.

6 Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000); Cliff Zukin et al., *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

7 W. Lance Bennett, “Changing Citizenship in the Digital Age,” in *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth*, ed. W. Lance Bennett (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 1–24; Russell J. Dalton, *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation Is Reshaping American Politics* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008).

8 Shawn Ginwright, “Hope, Healing, and Care: Pushing the Boundaries of Civic Engagement for African American Youth,” *Liberal Education* 97, no. 2 (April 15, 2011), <https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/hope-healing-and-care-pushing-boundaries-civic-engagement-african>.



#Blacklivesmatter, Black Lives Matter, and BLM: Clarifying our objects of study

As stated above, “#Blacklivesmatter” and “Black Lives Matter” are not synonyms. The Twitter hashtag was created in July 2013 by activists Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi in the wake of George Zimmerman’s acquittal for second-degree murder of unarmed Black teenager Trayvon Martin. For more than a year, #Blacklivesmatter was only a hashtag, and not a very popular one: it was used in only 48 public tweets in June 2014 and in 398 tweets in July 2014. But by August 2014 that number had skyrocketed to 52,288, partly due to the slogan’s frequent use in the context of the Ferguson protests. Some time later, Garza, Cullors, Tometi, and others debuted Black Lives Matter as a chapter-based activist organization. Chapters must be approved by a centralized authority to be listed on the official webpage, and in this Black Lives Matter has more in common with traditional advocacy institutions like the NAACP than with porous, digital-first activist networks like Anonymous.

Clearly there is some degree of overlap between #Blacklivesmatter and Black Lives Matter: organization members (along with many others) use the hashtag, which in turn almost certainly leads prospective members to the organization. At the same time, the two terms are sometimes used to refer to a third idea: the sum of all organizations, individuals, protests, and digital spaces dedicated to raising awareness about and ultimately ending police brutality against Black people. As activist DeRay Mckesson said in an appearance on the Late Show in early 2016, “the movement is much bigger than any one organization”: it encompasses all who publicly declare that Black lives matter and devote their time and energy accordingly.⁹ To clarify our discussions in the following pages, then, we will use the term “Black Lives Matter” to refer to the official organization; “#Blacklivesmatter” to refer to the hashtag; and “BLM” to refer to the overall movement. We understand that this usage may be somewhat confusing, but we want to avoid creating our own unsanctioned labels when more familiar ones are readily available.

This report is primarily a study of BLM rather than the hashtag or the organization, although some of our analyses specifically address the latter two. We are interested in probing the national online conversation about police brutality, most of whose participants were not affiliated with an official Black Lives Matter chapter. Accordingly, we focus on the anti-brutality activists in this conversation, identifying them in part by the movement’s shared rallying cry.

About this report

In the following paragraphs we will briefly describe the report’s data, methods, and organizational structure. But first, we want to clarify what the report is and is not. It is a data-driven work of social science research aimed at an educated, but not necessarily academic, audience. It adds to a small but growing set of research studies on BLM and the Ferguson

For more than a year, #Blacklivesmatter was only a hashtag, and not a very popular one...

⁹ Jim Hoskinson, “DeRay McKesson Helps Stephen Address His Privilege,” The Late Show with Stephen Colbert (CBS, January 18, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qffCO1b-7Js>.



protests.¹⁰ The report's specific contribution is to draw a set of conclusions about the roles online media played in the movement during a critical time in its history. Aspects of BLM that do not specifically pertain to online media will be addressed briefly if at all. We would also like to stress that this report is not a work of advocacy; that said, all of the authors personally share BLM's core concerns, which directly affect each of us and our respective families. But we do not believe that fundamentally agreeing with BLM compromises this report's rigor or findings any more than agreeing with the Civil Rights Movement or feminism compromises research on those topics. On the contrary, our strong interests in ending police brutality and advancing racial justice more generally inspire us to get the empirical story right, regardless of how it may reflect on the involved parties.

To tell the story of BLM and digital media, we rely on data from three major sources: Twitter, BLM participant interviews, and the open Web. We purchased all public, undeleted tweets from Twitter spanning the year between June 1, 2014 and May 31, 2015 that contained the #Blacklivesmatter hashtag or another of 45 keywords in total pertaining to police killings of unarmed Black people. This dataset includes over 40.8 million tweets, which we analyze using a research software package developed by the report's first author. We also interviewed 40 BLM activists and allies to better understand their thoughts about how social media was and was not useful in their work. And we constructed a network that shows how BLM-related content was shared across the open Web. This network contains 136,587 websites, which we analyze alongside various information about them (including each site's search rank and basic visitor demographics). Additional details about all of this data and how we analyzed it can be found in Appendices A, B, and C.

We begin our study with the Web analysis, which examines how Black Lives Matter-affiliated Web properties are positioned within a broader hyperlink-based network of sites. Much of this ecosystem predates the rise of #Blacklivesmatter on Twitter by many years, and this section thus serves as an effective prologue to our Twitter analysis. Our analytical strategy for the Twitter discussion is tailored to its sporadic character: we divide our discussion into nine periods whose boundaries trace the ebbs and flows of tweet volume over time. Our intent is to discover exactly how Twitter is being used during different periods of the movement's development. We know from studies of other social movements that activists adjust their tactics in response to relevant events such as protests, judicial decisions, police crackdowns, official statements, and the like.¹¹ Examining the data as a series of sequential time periods allows us to capture and describe this adaptive process in greater detail than considering the entire year as a single unit.

10 Sarah J. Jackson and Brooke Foucault Welles, "#Ferguson Is Everywhere: Initiators in Emerging Counterpublic Networks," *Information, Communication & Society* 19, no. 3 (March 3, 2016): 397–418, doi:10.1080/1369118X.2015.1106571; Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa, "#Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography, and the Racial Politics of Social Media in the United States," *American Ethnologist* 42, no. 1 (February 1, 2015): 4–17, doi:10.1111/amet.12112; Robin D. G. Kelley, "Beyond Black Lives Matter," *Kalfou* 2, no. 2 (October 16, 2015), doi:10.15367/kf.v2i2.71; Alexandra Olteanu, Ingmar Weber, and Daniel Gatica-Perez, "Characterizing the Demographics Behind the #BlackLivesMatter Movement," *arXiv:1512.05671 [cs]*, December 17, 2015, <http://arxiv.org/abs/1512.05671>.

11 Frank den Hond, Frank G.A. de Bakker, and Patricia de Haan, "The Sequential Patterning of Tactics: Activism in the Global Sports Apparel Industry, 1988–2002," *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 30, no. 11/12 (October 26, 2010): 648–65, doi:10.1108/01443331011085240; Anna-Britt Coe, "Pushing Back and Stretching: Frame Adjustments Among Reproductive Rights Advocates in Peru," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (December 1, 2011): 495–512, doi:10.17813/maiq.16.4.05520n11615v7m0l.



We did not divide the data into equal time units, but rather set their boundaries at points when the Twitter discussion rose and fell drastically. For example, our first Twitter period is set between June 1, 2014 (the start of our Twitter data collection year) and July 16, 2014, the day before Eric Garner was killed. Table 1 shows the complete breakdown of our nine Twitter time periods, each labeled by its defining event or development(s):

Table 1: Nine periods of Twitter data

PERIOD	DATE RANGE	DEFINING EVENT(S)
1	JUN 1 - JUL 16, 2014	none
2	JUL 17 - AUG 8	Eric Garner
3	AUG 9 - AUG 31	Michael Brown
4	SEP 1 - NOV 23	post-Ferguson protests
5	NOV 24 - DEC 2	Darren Wilson non-indictment
6	DEC 3 - DEC 10	Daniel Pantaleo non-indictment
7	DEC 11 - APR 3, 2015	various BLM protests
8	APR 4 - APR 18	Walter Scott
9	APR 19 - MAY 31	Freddie Gray

We explore each period in its own section. With the exception of the first, we attempt to answer the same set of research questions in each section. These questions address at both a macro level and a micro level *who* was heard most frequently and *what* they said. We use specific kinds of data to answer each question at each level (Table 2):

Table 2: Two research questions, two levels of abstraction, four types of Twitter data

LEVEL OF ABSTRACTION	RESEARCH QUESTION	
	<i>Who is heard most often?</i>	<i>What do these top users say?</i>
Macro	Network communities	Top ten most-used hashtags
Micro	Top five users in each community	Analysis of highly-retweeted tweets

We will explain exactly what network communities are later, but suffice to say now that they will help us discover which kinds of participants attract the most attention within each period. We will also examine the top individual participants within each community to better understand how they contribute to its collective identity. The most-used hashtags will provide macro-level impressions of what participants are discussing most often, while our analyses of specific tweets will offer a more fine-grained sense of the broad topical trends we detect. Throughout this analysis we use our interview data to address most of these questions from the points of view of activists and their supporters. Our concluding section reflects on the importance and key implications of our research.



Before moving to the data-driven sections of the report, we would like to point out that the analyses we conduct here are only a subset of those that could have been conducted. We focus on what we believe are the most relevant initial questions to ask of our data, but we realize some readers may have different priorities. This report is not intended to be the final word on its subject matter—on the contrary, we hope it will serve as a starting point for discussions about how BLM and future movements have used and continue to use online media to pursue their causes. Accordingly, we invite anyone who has specific questions that could be answered with our data to contact us and let us know. Depending on interest, we may release an online addendum to this report that incorporates reader feedback (and of course properly credit the origins of the research ideas).



Newark, New Jersey - JANUARY 26, 2014 - Officer Anthony Maldonado (aka Big Cat) uses a program on his cell phone to confirm the identity of an individual stopped during a “field inquiry” or a stop and frisk while on a night patrol.

PHOTO: PHILIP MONTGOMERY

#FERGUSON, #BLACKLIVESMATTER, AND ONLINE MEDIA

#BlackLivesMatter is a very succinct and awesome way to acknowledge what we’re trying to do...that people treat us like Black Lives Matter socially, politically. We are human and deserve to be treated as such.

—BROOKE, 30





THIS SECTION IS DEVOTED TO ANALYSES of three kinds of data: hyperlinks between Black Lives Matter-relevant websites; tweets about police brutality in 2014 and 2015, and interviews of anti-brutality activists and allies. We present the Web hyperlink analysis first and then proceed to the Twitter analysis, interspersing insights from the interviews wherever relevant.

THE WEB

Twitter has been the predominant hub for BLM online. However, the Web is a vast connective environment: what gets produced in one location has the potential to spread far and wide. Understanding how BLM-related content, activity, and participants connect to the wider internet environment from within and beyond Twitter expands our insight into the significance of the movement within and beyond the Web. Focusing on websites provides an important account of how individuals affiliating with BLM have participated in movement activities, be they online content production and circulation or varying forms of offline action. Ultimately, looking beyond Twitter provides a more complete account of how online media have influenced the social and political discourse around race and criminal justice, both online and off.

There are two broad reasons to try to understand how BLM proliferates beyond the Twitter environment. First, Twitter is intimately connected with the larger Web environment. Official websites are usually extensions of individuals' and organizations' digital identities. Accordingly, individuals and organizations often tether their Twitter and Web accounts to freely circulate content between them. This, in part, enables users to capitalize on their ability to amplify what is being produced at each site.

Consistent with BLM's origin and Twitter activity patterns, the BlackLivesMatter.com website was created on July 17, 2013—just days after George Zimmerman was acquitted for killing Trayvon Martin. However, the site produced only sparse content in the moments following its birth. As an indication of this, the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine did not first crawl the site until October 8, 2014. This falls within Twitter Period 4, which covers the end of the initial Ferguson protests and ends just before Darren Wilson's non-indictment. Despite having been created more than a year earlier, the rapid generation of BlackLivesMatter.com content throughout Fall 2014 indicates, as the Twitter evidence similarly does, that Brown's killing and subsequent media activity and groundswell of grassroots activism propelled BLM from infancy to maturity.

There is a second reason why we focus part of our overall analysis on the networks built by and about BLM across the broader Web context. Google currently indexes all public tweets, rendering them searchable just like any other website. Tweets therefore have the potential to reach audiences who may not even be on Twitter at all through their Google searches. For example, a Google search on January 8, 2016 for "Trayvon Martin," includes the search result: "#trayvonmartin hashtag on Twitter." The description accompanying this result reads, "See Tweets about #trayvonmartin on Twitter. See what people are saying and join the conversation." Many implications follow from this, including the fact that Google's searchable tweet index expands opportunities for the internet public to participate in BLM-related action, both



online and potentially off. It especially expands this opportunity to those who may not wish to use Twitter or are for some reason blocked from using it.

We want to help others better understand both the strategy and potential success that the movement has had in broadly distributing its message across the Web. We also want to help others better understand how BLM-related content spreads from Twitter to the broader Web landscape. Both will help us explain how the online environment has facilitated youth and others' participation in public discourse and civic action around issues of race, criminal justice and civil rights more broadly.

The Black Lives Matter Web Network

To be able to address the two issues described above, we constructed two separate hyperlink networks. Hyperlinks allow users to quickly access content that Web producers believe are relevant to a particular topic. A user making a statement about Michael Brown's killing in Ferguson, Missouri might include a link to a story on [washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com). When a user clicks the link to the Washington Post story, he or she may find another link to a story at [StlToday.com](http://stltoday.com) (the St. Louis Dispatch newspaper), as well as a link to [ThinkProgress.com](http://thinkprogress.com) (the site of a progressive think tank). Links serve as valuable research data even when users do not click on them: for example, they indicate the information sources the webpage's creator(s) believed were relevant to the original page's content.

In this section, we describe the broad structural edifice and connections built over time as sites traffic in BLM-related content. What does this network of connected sites across the Web tell us about BLM's identity? What does it tell us about those who produce and widely distribute anti-brutality content? What does it say about who consumes the content and who is poised to participate in influencing the narrative about BLM and broader issues of race and criminal justice?

BUILDING THE NETWORK

We used VOSON, a Web-based Web crawler and hyperlink analysis software tool, to build our network.¹² VOSON is built to search the Web for links to and from a specified list of seed sites. We used two types of seed sites to form the basis of our crawl. The first include all current websites that include the string "Blacklivesmatter" and several variations thereof in their URL, most of which are affiliated with the Black Lives Matter organization:

- » <http://blacklivesmatter.com/>;
- » <https://www.facebook.com/BlackLivesMatter/>;
- » <https://twitter.com/blklivesmatter?lang=en>;
- » <http://blacklivesmatter.tumblr.com/>;
- » <https://instagram.com/blklivesmatter?hl=en>;
- » <http://www.blacklivesmattersyllabus.com/>;
- » <https://www.facebook.com/BLMSeattle/>;
- » <https://www.facebook.com/BlackLivesMatterNYC/>; and
- » <https://www.facebook.com/groups/CharlestonJusticeForMikeBrown/>¹³

¹² <http://voson.anu.edu.au/>

¹³ Because of its affiliation with Black Lives Matter, the final site was an exception and was included despite not having "blacklivesmatter" in its URL.



The second type of seed included the URLs of high-ranking Google search results for “BlackLivesMatter.” After discarding erroneous or irrelevant search results, the total number of combined seed URLs that formed the basis for the crawl totaled 100 (see Appendix B for the complete list of sites).

The crawl produced 136,587 separate links into and from our 100 seed URLs. These URLs were grouped by site, meaning for example that 20 separate URLs linking to Blacklivesmatter.com from the Huffington Post were grouped together under a single site (huffingtonpost.com). The number of separate links to the same site provides a measure of the strength of the relationship between those two sites, such that 100 links between two sites signals a stronger connection between them than when there are 20. After page grouping and some other data quality measures, the final network consisted of 1,243 separate sites, with 5,115 links between them.

The structure of this network and the character of its member sites yields three primary insights.

The BLM Web Network is a News Network

The network built around Black Lives Matter on the Web is clearly conducive to broadly distributing and circulating information. For one, the network is extremely diffuse, with a graph density of .003. This means that only a tiny fraction of all the links that could exist within the network actually exist. As a comparison, a random network with the same number of nodes has a density of .02, meaning that the network contains two percent of all possible ties. There is little reciprocity between sites (in 97% of cases, sites linking out to another site don’t receive a link in from the latter site). Whether unidirectional or reciprocal, few sites have multiple links to any one site (the average tie weight—the number of times any two sites link to each other—is one, and only 30% of ties have a weight greater than one).

One can imagine a potentially different structure for this network. It could be a dense network with many reciprocal ties—conducive to building trust between connections. Such trust would be necessary if what those trafficking in Black Lives Matter-related content on the Web were trying to do was, say, organize clandestine gatherings, or circulate ideas for how to mobilize, or develop strategic action plans. These kinds of actions require strong ties between network members that mirror those of offline social networks, which tend to be smaller in number and consist of ties between people or groups who are already familiar with and intimately connected to one another.

But we have known since the 1970s that networks consisting of weak ties are valuable for other reasons.¹⁴ Specifically, they are critical for broadly and efficiently distributing information produced by network members. In fact, more recent work shows that on the Web in particular, the presence of weak ties may be even more important than researchers once thought.¹⁵ In the case of the Black Lives Matter Web network, what primarily gets produced and distributed is news, which is meant to be widely distributed.

14 Mark S. Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties,” *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (May 1, 1973): 1360–80.

15 Eytan Bakshy et al., “The Role of Social Networks in Information Diffusion,” in *Proceedings of the 21st International Conference on World Wide Web*, WWW ’12 (New York, NY, USA: ACM, 2012), 519–28, doi:10.1145/2187836.2187907.

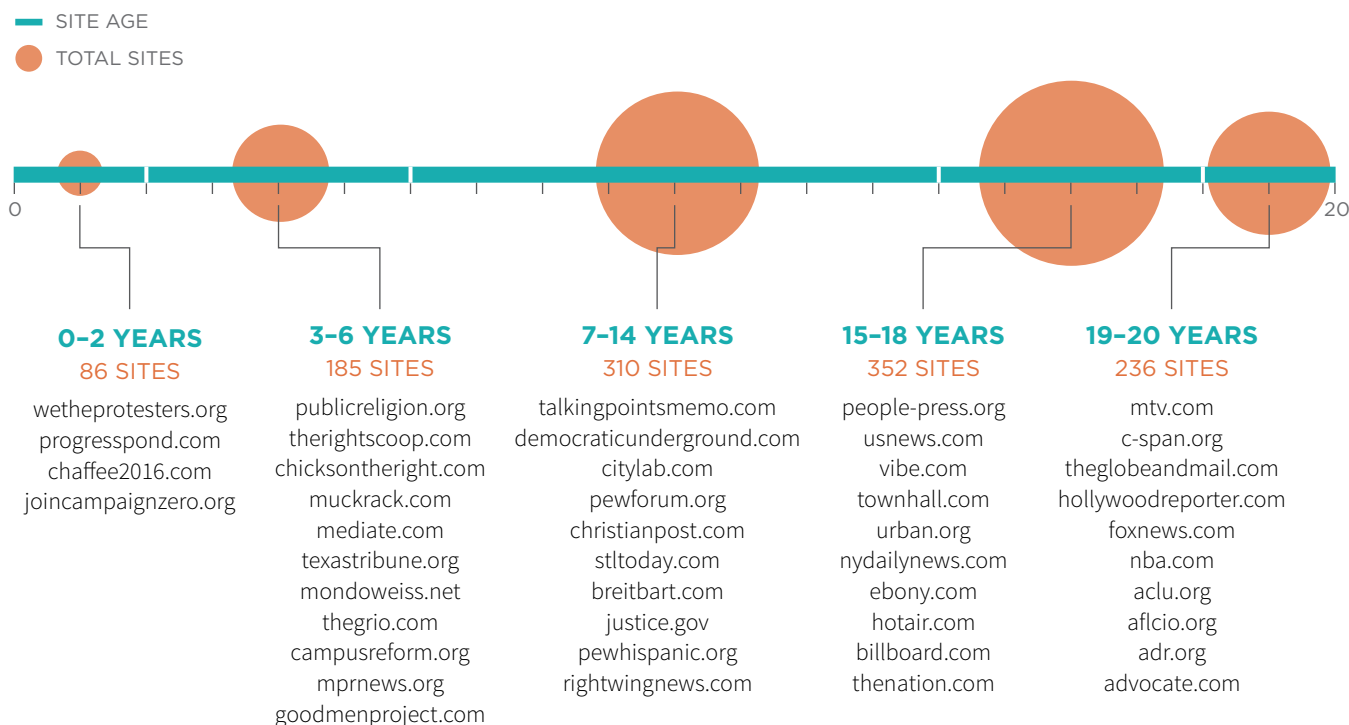


The Black Lives Matter Web Network is an Old Network

Again, one of the most distinctive characteristics about Black Lives Matter is its wide and relatively sustained visibility. The specific sites the organization is connected to across the Web accounts for part of this. An additional network characteristic that contributes significantly to the visibility of Black Lives Matter and its related issues is the age of the sites present in the network. The length of time that a site has existed on the Web is a measure of site quality, credibility and importance. While we cannot say for certain, there is evidence to suggest that a website domain’s age figures prominently into search engine rankings, and thereby contributes to a site’s visibility. For example, a site’s age correlates strongly and positively with overall MozRank popularity score ($r = .452, p < .01$).¹⁶ That is, the greater a site’s age, the higher its score.

Retrieving what we might call a site’s birth date, that is, the date that the site was created, is one way to measure its age. The problem is that just because a site has been created and registered does not mean that it is actively producing accessible and visible content. To account for both a site’s birth date and content production, we use as a starting point the date that a site was first crawled by the Internet Wayback Machine.¹⁷ We determined a site’s age as the length of time between the date the Wayback Machine first archived it and December 8, 2015.

Figure 2: Age ranges for sites in the Black Lives Matter network (The sites listed are only a subset of each age category and were chosen for illustrative purposes.)



¹⁶ Factors included in the MozRank ranking algorithm can be accessed at: <https://moz.com/learn/seo/mozrank>

¹⁷ <https://archive.org/web/>



The sites to which Black Lives Matter connect have a median age of 15 years. The oldest sites in the network—representing almost one quarter of the total number of sites—have been around for 19 years, which places their initial crawl date around 1996.¹⁸ We should bear in mind that the graphical World Wide Web has only been around since 1991. Figure 2 offers a sense of which sites fall into the various age ranges.

So what bearing does this have on the Black Lives Matter network, and what does it tell us about its ability to broadly circulate content across the Web? For one, it means that the network built up around Black Lives Matter consists of sites that have had a long time to produce other markers of quality that make them highly visible in terms of Internet users' search outcomes—most notably, the number and quality of the links to those domains. This becomes easy to see when we look at the oldest sites in the network (Figure 2). Among them are not only news sites, but some of the most high-volume, highly trafficked, and highly-ranked news sites such as Reuters, Fox News, MSNBC, and the New York Times, to name just a few.

The abundance of weak ties in the Black Lives Matter Web network, the prevalence of news sites among its membership, and the relatively high level of connectivity among them account for the distributional power found in this network. The relatively old age of the network's member sites suggests that these sites may be lending some of their hard-earned legitimacy to the still-young organization, connecting it with readers who otherwise might never have come across it.

The Black Lives Matter Web Network is Multigenerational and Racially Targeted

Given that the Black Lives Matter Web network is characterized by news and information circulation, it is natural to want to know who produces and consumes the content that flows through the network. Addressing this question can help us understand who the Black Lives Matter network is poised to reach, and, by extension, who participates in the second-degree production and distribution process. While it is difficult to identify users with great specificity, by looking at the audiences of the network's member sites, we can at least draw some inferences about the type of people who consume Black Lives Matter-related content.

We collected race/ethnicity and age data available for each of the 239 sites directly linked to or from Blacklivesmatter.com. This enables us to limit our focus to the audiences that consume content that is directly connected to the hub of Black Lives Matter content production, distribution, and organization. We gathered demographic data from Alexa.com, which presents such data on a per-site basis as a deviation from the Web's average. The results for each site indicate how certain demographic groups in its audience measure up on a five-point scale, ranging from greatly overrepresented to greatly underrepresented. For example, White men with a college education, children and a job are overrepresented among the audience for BlackLivesMatter.com.¹⁹ Meanwhile, at the Root.com (an important news hub in the network), Black and White women over 35, with some college or a college degree, with

¹⁸ This number is likely skewed a bit given that the Wayback Machine's archive only extends back as far as 1996. Thus, some of the oldest sites could be even older than that.

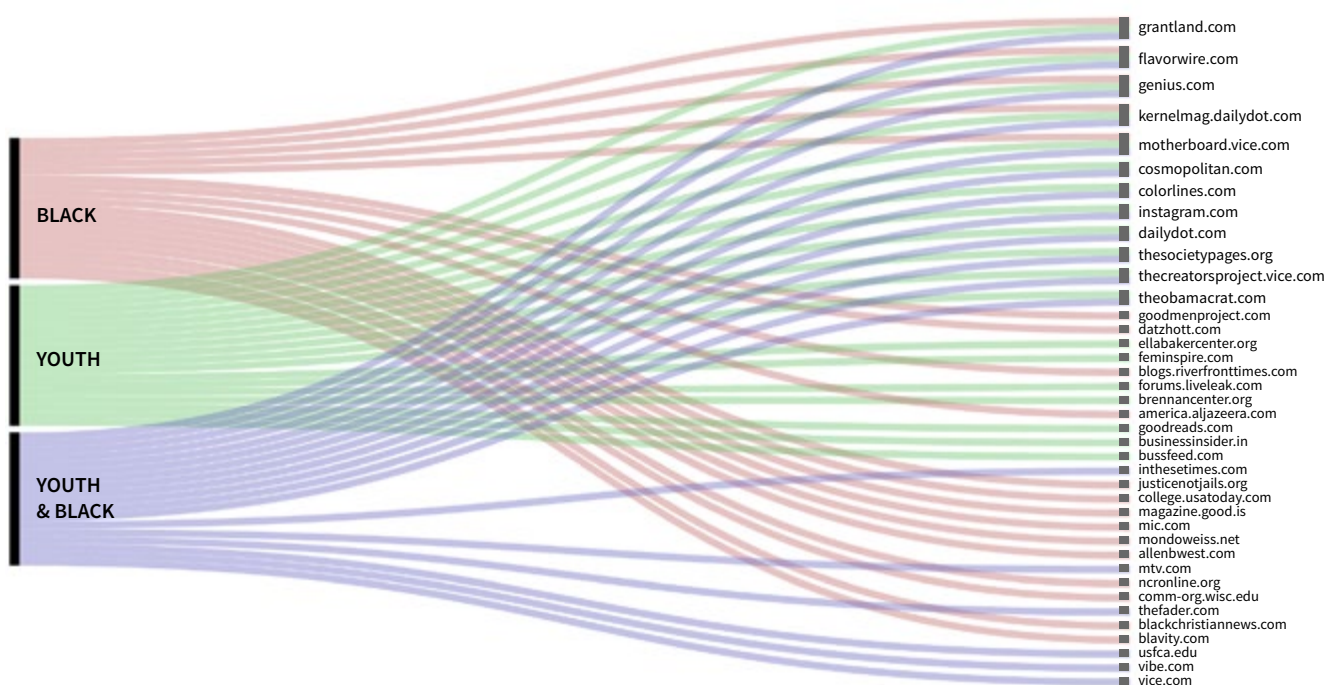
¹⁹ These findings are based on relatively limited information given the site's relatively recent existence.



no children and an annual income above \$65,000 are overrepresented. Men and those aged 18-34 are underrepresented in the site's audience.

In the Blacklivesmatter.com network overall, young people, specifically those aged 18-24, are greatly overrepresented or overrepresented on only 21 sites (8.9%). This means that the greatest number of sites are visited by individuals 25 and older. The opposite is true when it comes to race: African Americans are overrepresented on 111 sites (46.4%). Both African Americans and 18-24 year olds are overrepresented or greatly overrepresented on 39 sites (16.3% of all ranked sites). Figure 3 visualizes these findings.

Figure 3: Overrepresentation of key demographic categories among network sites



Like the larger network, BLM's ego network is dominated by news sites (specifically, 76% are news sites). Only a small fraction (11%) of news sites feature content that is explicitly race-targeted; most are general-interest sites.²⁰

To conclude, our evidence indicates that most of the sites directly connected to Blacklivesmatter.com are news sites. Nearly half focus on race, but very few cater specifically to youth. Our Twitter analysis, which we present in the next section, largely corroborates these findings.

²⁰ Sites were considered race-targeted if any one of a number of race-related terms (e.g., African American, Latino, afro, urban, racial, etc.) were included in a site's title, description or keyword metatags, as derived from <http://tools.buzzstream.com/meta-tag-extractor>.



TWITTER

Before we begin analyzing the Twitter conversation, we present an overview of the entire dataset. We purchased directly from Twitter all public tweets posted during the yearlong period between June 1, 2014 and May 31, 2015 containing at least one of 45 keywords related to BLM and police killings of Black people under questionable circumstances (see Table 3). The keywords consist mostly of the full and hashtagged names of 20 Black individuals killed by police in 2014 and 2015. We counted a tweet as including a particular name if it contained either the case-insensitive full name or hashtagged name as written below. The resulting dataset contains 40,815,975 tweets contributed by 4,435,217 unique users.

Table 3: Twitter keywords and relevant metadata

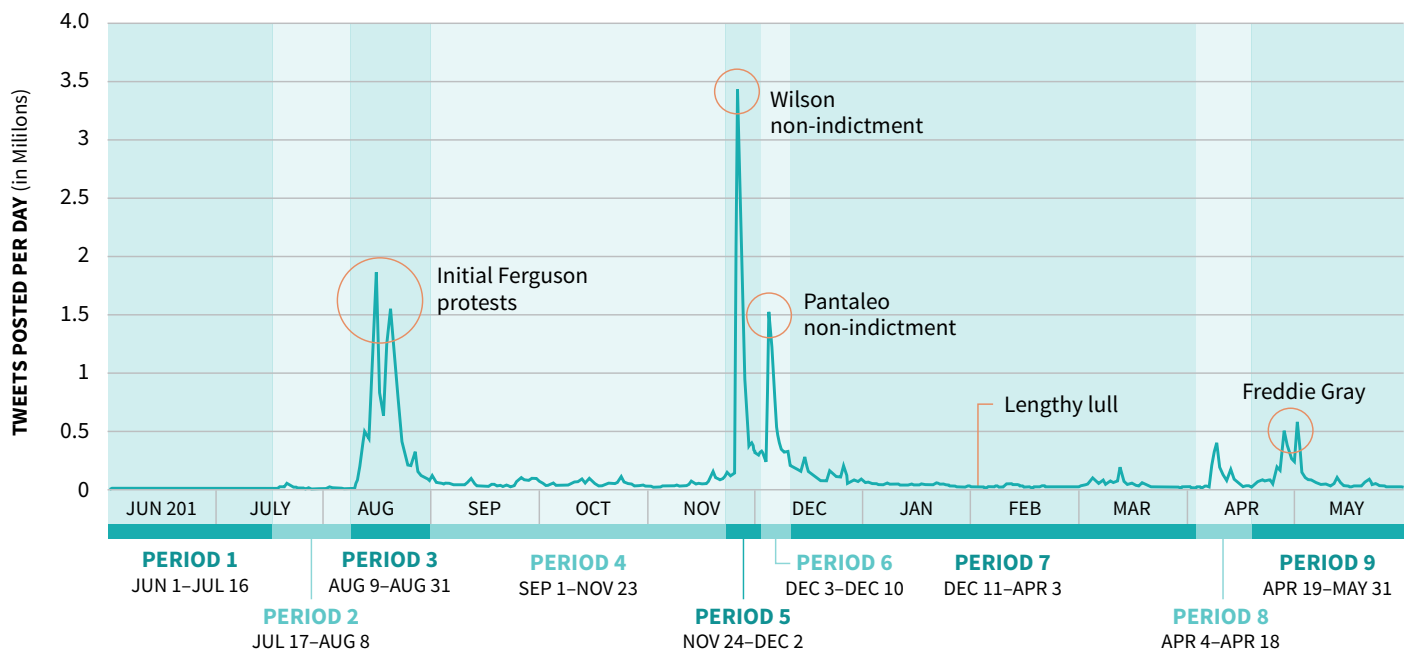
KEYWORD(S)	DATE KILLED	LOCATION	NUMBER OF TWEETS
#ferguson	N/A	N/A	21,626,901
“michael brown”/”mike brown”/ #michaelbrown/#mikebrown	Aug 9, 2014	Ferguson, MO	9,360,239
#blacklivesmatter	N/A	N/A	4,312,599
“eric garner”/#ericgarner	July 17, 2014	Staten Island, NY	4,286,350
“freddie gray”/#freddiegray	Apr 19, 2015	Baltimore, MD	2,559,316
“walter scott”/#walterscott	May 4, 2015	North Charleston, SC	1,083,316
“tamir rice”/#tamirrice	Nov 22, 2014	Cleveland, OH	1,001,971
“black lives matter”	N/A	N/A	445,514
“john crawford”/#johncrawford	Aug 5, 2014	Beavercreek, OH	331,793
“tony robinson”/#tonyrobinson	Mar 6, 2015	Madison, WI	245,020
“eric harris”/#ericharris	Apr 2, 2015	Tulsa, OK	200,641
“ezell ford”/#ezellford	Aug 11, 2014	Los Angeles, CA	184,141
“akai gurley”/#akaigurley	Nov 20, 2014	Brooklyn, NY	150,966
“kajieme powell”/#kajiemepowell	Aug 19, 2014	St. Louis, MO	102,524
“tanisha anderson”/#tanishaanderson	Nov 13, 2014	Cleveland, OH	27,130
“victor white”/#victorwhite	Mar 3, 2014	New Iberia, LA	27,048
“jordan baker”/#jordanbaker	Jan 16, 2014	Houston, TX	21,565
“jerame reid”/#jeramereid	Dec 30, 2014	Bridgeton, NJ	14,651
“yvette smith”/#yvettesmith	Feb 16, 2014	Bastrop County, TX	13,266
“phillip white”/#philipwhite	Mar 31, 2015	Vineland, NJ	6,756
“dante parker”/#danteparker	Aug 12, 2014	Victorville, CA	5,713
“mckenzie cochran”/#mckenziecochran	Jan 28, 2014	Southfield, MI	1,931
“tyree woodson”/#tyreewoodson	Aug 5, 2014	Baltimore, MD	1,914



As Table 3 shows, some keywords were considerably more popular than others. #Ferguson was by far the most-mentioned, appearing in more than half of all tweets. Michael Brown was mentioned more than any other victim, followed by Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, and Walter Scott. Few clear patterns emerge among those who are widely and seldom discussed—at both the high and low ends there are cases that span a wide range of ages, locations, and dates, with and without accompanying video evidence. One exception to this general rule is that the four deaths that occurred prior to Eric Garner’s yield very little Twitter conversation. This suggests that while social media may have played a critical role in helping activists push police violence to the forefront of public consciousness, this was by no means an automatic process. The mere presence of articles about police killings on social media was not enough: a critical mass of concerned parties had to decide to aggregate their anger into a movement.

Figure 4 plots the number of tweets posted on each day.

Figure 4. Total Tweets Per Day



As with most issues, attention to police violence on Twitter is episodic. Figure 4 shows that comparatively few people were engaged with the issue prior to Michael Brown’s killing on August 9. The sustained attention spike that extends from that date through the end of the month encompasses the iconic initial Ferguson protests. After that, tweet volume plummets precipitously, rarely exceeding 100,000 tweets per day until the non-indictments of Michael Brown’s and Eric Garner’s killers (on November 24 and December 3, respectively). The former event yielded the timeframe’s highest total number of tweets on a single day—3,420,934. After the two non-indictments, the daily tweet count never again crosses one million, though there are several smaller spikes on April 8 (the day Walter Scott was killed in North Charleston, SC), April 28, and May 1 (both during the Freddie Gray protests in Baltimore).



Figure 4 suggests that police violence only sporadically becomes a mainstream issue, at least on Twitter. When major events occur, such as non-indictments, clashes between protesters and police, or the posting of explosive video, the conversation surges very quickly but tapers off after a few days. Most of the time, the data reveal a steady, low-volume conversation among those closely following the issue.

Some of the analyses to follow rely on connections between Twitter users formed by retweeting and @-mentioning. Therefore, it is worth noting here that a large majority of the tweets in our dataset (75.3%) are retweets. In contrast, only a small minority of tweets (7.6%) contain @-mentions outside of a retweet context. This suggests that analyzing communication patterns using retweets and @-mentions is a highly revealing means of discovering which Twitter communities were closely linked and how those communication patterns changed over time.

Twitter Results Overview

Many of our most important findings span multiple time periods, so to avoid unnecessary redundancy, we summarize them in this section. Later, we will explore the nine periods individually and focus on what is most distinctive about each of them. We divide the current overview into five subsections, with the first focused on the major network communities and participants in our data, and the second on the most common themes expressed in the tweets. The third subsection analyzes the most frequently-shared images across the entire year, while the fourth explains how “#Blacklivesmatter” became the definitive rallying cry for the movement. The fifth and final subsection covers the major themes of our interview data.

COMMUNITIES AND PARTICIPANTS

Twitter users do not associate with one another randomly. Rather, they follow, mention, and retweet each other in patterns that often reveal their shared identities or political affiliations.²¹ We use a research method drawn from the field of network analysis called *community detection* to sort the users in our dataset into subsets called *communities* based on recurring patterns of retweeting and mentioning. (Additional technical details on this method can be found in Appendix A.) Each community we detect aggregates users who retweet and mention similar sets of very popular users called *hubs*. Without exception, the vast majority of users in every community are referenced (i.e., retweeted and mentioned) very little or not at all, while a small number of hubs account for a disproportionately large share of references. Hubs within a given community are usually similar to one another in terms of political views, occupation, age, race, geographical location, and/or other characteristics. Identifying the shared characteristics of a community’s hubs can tell us what dominant interests that community represents.

21 M.D. Conover et al., “Political Polarization on Twitter,” in *Proc. 5th Intl. Conference on Weblogs and Social Media* (Barcelona, Spain: AAAI, 2011), 89–96; Leticia Bode et al., “Candidate Networks, Citizen Clusters, and Political Expression Strategic Hashtag Use in the 2010 Midterms,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 659, no. 1 (May 1, 2015): 149–65, doi:10.1177/0002716214563923; Deen Freelon, Marc Lynch, and Sean Aday, “Online Fragmentation in Wartime A Longitudinal Analysis of Tweets about Syria, 2011–2013,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 659, no. 1 (May 1, 2015): 166–79, doi:10.1177/0002716214563921.



Using software designed by this report's first author, we sorted all users within each period into a set of communities. At the end of this process, each user belonged to one and only one community within each period. We labeled each of the 10 largest communities in each period based on the shared identities of its hubs. This gave us a sense of the collective identities of the largest and most committed users discussing police brutality on Twitter. In the sections focusing on the individual periods, we present visualizations that show each community's size and how it connects to the others.

A wide variety of users chimed in on police brutality incidents during our data collection year. But we have determined the following six recurring communities to be the most consistently engaged on the issue throughout the year: BLM, Anonymous/Bipartisan Report, Black Entertainers, Conservatives, Mainstream News, and Young Black Twitter.

- » **BLM.** In the months following the initial Ferguson protests, BLM emerged as a recognizable set of recurring communities with their own specific agenda and identity. Hubs typically focused on police brutality, its disproportionate impact on Black people, and the urgency of systemic change. Within some periods the movement spans multiple communities, a testament to its growth and viability. These multiple communities are not usually at odds; rather, they simply reflect how different BLM hubs have cultivated slightly different followings. Many of the most-referenced hubs here are activists of color, including DeRay Mckesson (@deray), Johnetta Elzie (@nettaaaaaaaa), Shaun King (@shaunking), Daniel Jose Older (@djolder), Bassem Masri (@bassem_masri), Hands Up United (@handsupunited_), Kayla Reed (@re_invent_ed), @brownblaze, @awkward_duck, and many others.
- » **Anonymous/Bipartisan Report.** A community representing the hacktivist collective Anonymous first appeared in August 2014 expressing steadfast support for the fledgling movement. Later, the collective was joined by the Bipartisan Report, a left-wing news and opinion aggregation outlet (its name appears to be ironic). Over time, these two groups split apart, often sharing communities with other movement-allied interests. Principal accounts here included @anonymouspress, @anonyops, @anonympress, the Bipartisan Report (@bipartisanism), @crypt0nymous, @occupythemob, @youranoncentral, @youranonglobal, @youranonlive, and @youranonnews.
- » **Black Entertainers.** Throughout the year, certain Black celebrities voiced their opinions on police killings. They nearly universally supported the protesters and movement, and many, though not all, of these were hip-hop artists. The following small sample represents the diversity of these hubs: rappers Pharrell Williams (@pharrell), 50 Cent (@50cent), Nas (@nas), and Kanye West (@kanyewest); hip-hop publications Vibe (@vibemagazine), XXL (@XXL), and The Source (@thesource); actors Kerry Washington (@kerrywashington), Jesse Williams (@ijessewilliams), and Rashida Jones (@iamrashidajones); and professional athletes Richard Sherman (@rsherman_25) and Kobe Bryant (@kobebryant).
- » **Conservatives.** Beginning during the initial Ferguson protests, a recurring community of politically conservative Twitter users began discussing police brutality issues. Most vigorously opposed the protesters and their goals with the exceptions of periods 6 and 8, which will be discussed further below. This community was the only one to mount a



sustained, high-profile oppositional narrative against the movement—most other communities were either predominantly supportive or unaligned. Some of the top voices here belonged to media personalities Larry Elder (@larryelder), Wayne Dupree (@waynedupreeshow), Pat Dollard (@patdollard), and Sean Hannity (@seanhannity); popular Twitter conservatives Crystal Wright (@gopblackchick) and Amy Mek (@amymek); and conservative media outlets Fox News (@foxnews), the Washington Times (@washtimes), and the Blaze (@theblaze).

- » **Mainstream News.** Followers of these communities receive their information about police killings, protests, and related events primarily from corporate news outlets like CNN, the New York Times, the Associated Press, the Los Angeles Times, CBS News, and Reuters. Newer outlets such as Mashable, BuzzFeed, the Daily Beast, and the Huffington Post are also often included here, even though they sometimes voiced explicit support for the movement. Most of the hubs in these communities are institutional accounts: although a few individual reporters are present, more are scattered throughout other communities.
- » **Young Black Twitter (YBT).** The phenomenon of Black Twitter has been discussed extensively in both the mainstream press and the academic literature.²² In the words of communication scholar Andre Brock, it is “Twitter’s mediation of Black cultural discourse”; that is, the ongoing production of Black culture as refracted through Twitter.²³ The communities we observe here are “young” in that they deal in topics and communication styles that appeal to Black youth: hip-hop music, culturally relevant jokes, fashion, sex and relationship advice, and Black celebrities. Like most young people, they rarely discuss politics or current affairs, but make exceptions when the news affects them directly. Also, many of the accounts in these communities are pseudonymous, likely because of the explicit nature of the subject matter they tweet about. Top recurring users here include @bestcomedyvine, @commonblackgiri, @drugfambeezy, @freetopher, @hbcufessions, @igivebootyrubs, @ikeepittooreal, @jabarithegreat, and @ultralightskin.

A few additional details about communities are worth noting before we continue. Community boundaries are nearly always somewhat porous, in that some will include a few accounts that seem not to “fit.” For example, President Obama’s account appears in period 3’s Conservatives community despite the fact that most participants strongly disagree with him. This is not an error—Obama is present because he was frequently mentioned by conservatives for the express purpose of publicly disagreeing with him. Our community labels are based on our subjective readings of their memberships, which in turn are rooted in characteristics shared by at least a plurality of top accounts. Labeling communities in this way is a well-established practice in network analysis.²⁴

22 Brock, “From the Blackhand Side”; Clark, “To Tweet Our Own Cause”; Donovan X. Ramsey, “The Truth About Black Twitter,” *The Atlantic*, April 10, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/04/the-truth-about-black-twitter/390120/>.

23 Brock, “From the Blackhand Side,” 530.

24 Bruce Etling et al., “Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere: Politics and Dissent Online,” *New Media & Society* 12, no. 8 (December 1, 2010): 1225–43, doi:10.1177/1461444810385096; Bode et al., “Candidate Networks, Citizen Clusters, and Political Expression Strategic Hashtag Use in the 2010 Midterms”; Freelon, Lynch, and Aday, “Online Fragmentation in Wartime A Longitudinal Analysis of Tweets about Syria, 2011–2013.”



TWEET CONTENT

The 40+ million tweets in our dataset contain a massive accumulation of ideas that resists attempts to summarize it comprehensively. That said, most of them seem to fit into one of three broad categories based on their orientation toward the movement: supportive, opposed, or unaligned. These categories’ names are fairly self-explanatory, and most tweets fit neatly into one or another. But there are many different subtypes of support, opposition, and non-alignment, as we will demonstrate.

Determining the proportional sizes of each category with an acceptable degree of precision would be a prohibitively difficult undertaking, and we did not attempt it here. That said, our informal inspection of the data leads us to conclude that the vast majority of highly-retweeted messages supported the movement in some respect. This should not be a controversial finding: in all periods, supportive communities outnumbered opposed and unaligned ones by a substantial margin. Very few communities presented anything close to equal proportions of messages from different categories—most decisively adopted a single majority stance.

SUPPORT

Participants expressed support for the movement in a number of ways. It would be impossible for us to catalog them all, but we saw those identified here repeatedly across multiple periods.

One popular type of supportive tweet shared breaking news about an incident of police violence or protest combined with a clear movement-supporting tilt. These “activist headlines” signal that the author is a friend of the movement whose information can therefore be trusted. Such messages can be first-, second-, or third-hand, and it is not always possible to tell which is the case:

PERIOD	USERNAME / COMMUNITY / TWEET LINK
3	@antoniofrench / MULTIRACIAL LEFT 2 https://twitter.com/antoniofrench/status/500021221392936961
3	@plmpcess / MULTIRACIAL LEFT 2 https://twitter.com/plmpcess/status/501072967334641665
7	@khaledbeydoun / BLM 2 https://twitter.com/khaledbeydoun/status/545055410169057280
9	@zellieimani / BLM 1 https://twitter.com/zellieimani/status/592844801042731009



Activists and allies also linked specific incidents of police brutality with longstanding, society-wide systems of White supremacy and anti-Black oppression:

PERIOD	USERNAME / COMMUNITY / TWEET LINK
4	@chescaleigh / BLM https://twitter.com/chescaleigh/status/514906259649486848
6	@mspackyetti / BLM 2 https://twitter.com/mspackyetti/status/540239632869249024
7	@deray / BLM 2 https://twitter.com/deray/status/547024078226608128
8	@nettaaaaaaaa / BLM 2 https://twitter.com/nettaaaaaaaa/status/585611376883798018

Complaints about mainstream news coverage of the events were common. Many of these tweets scornfully noted the differences between portrayals of police and victims, or between White and Black protesters/rioters:

PERIOD	USERNAME / COMMUNITY / TWEET LINK
5	@reignofapril / BLM 1 https://twitter.com/reignofapril/status/537313371788681217
3	@ijessewilliams / MAINSTREAM NEWS + BLACK CELEBRITIES + JOURNALISTS https://twitter.com/ijessewilliams/status/500705130778333184
4	@deray / BLM https://twitter.com/deray/status/524168584537583617
7	@farwzaz / BLM 2 https://twitter.com/farwzaz/status/575305014119436288

One of the simplest ways to express support echoed some variant of the following sentiment: “what happened was wrong and I support those seeking justice.” The essence of this subcategory is most clearly seen in tweets by celebrities:

PERIOD	USERNAME / COMMUNITY / TWEET LINK
3	@common / BLACK CELEBRITIES https://twitter.com/common/status/499930116127219712
5	@harikondabolu / BLM2 https://twitter.com/harikondabolu/status/537007101365993473
7	@kanyewest / POP CULTURE + ENTERTAINERS https://twitter.com/kanyewest/status/544726027243491329
8	@kerihilson / BLM 3 https://twitter.com/kerihilson/status/587166218735366145



These four categories certainly do not exhaust the vast variety of supportive content posted throughout the year, but they offer a sense of some of the most common ways participants expressed support. Additional supportive categories that primarily appeared within one or two periods will be discussed in the sections devoted to those periods.

OPPOSITION

Opposition to the movement and support for accused police officers was concentrated in the Conservatives community, which began building its counternarrative during the Ferguson protests. Over the course of the year, participants marshaled a variety of rhetorical tactics to attack and vilify protesters and victims. One common attack focused on looting and other acts of lawlessness allegedly committed by protesters:

PERIOD	USERNAME / COMMUNITY / TWEET LINK
3	@gamma_ray239 / CONSERVATIVES https://twitter.com/gamma_ray239/status/501824800328015872
3	@ahmalcolm / CONSERVATIVES https://twitter.com/ahmalcolm/status/502562982048829440
7	@cronkitesays / CONSERVATIVES https://twitter.com/cronkitesays/status/553634417357647872
9	@larryelder / CONSERVATIVES https://twitter.com/larryelder/status/592843034804547590

Conservatives often posted news items favorable to the accused police officers and unfavorable to victims. Some of these were accompanied by statements of support for the officers:

PERIOD	USERNAME / COMMUNITY / TWEET LINK
3	@foxnews / CONSERVATIVES https://twitter.com/foxnews/status/502150574289453056
5	@peddoc63 / CONSERVATIVES https://twitter.com/peddoc63/status/525103570212110336
7	@dineshdsouza / CONSERVATIVES https://twitter.com/dineshdsouza/status/573507501057961984
9	@megynkelly / CONSERVATIVES https://twitter.com/megynkelly/status/593591405747970048



Attempts to change the subject were also commonly seen among these communities' top retweets. The basic claim here was that the protesters, the media, or the government were spending too much time and energy on police killings of Blacks, and not enough on more important issues like abortion, the IRS, and Black-on-Black crime. Many of these complaints included sharp condemnations of President Barack Obama, Eric Holder, Al Sharpton, and other ideological foes:

PERIOD	USERNAME / COMMUNITY / TWEET LINK
3	@patdollard / CONSERVATIVES https://twitter.com/patdollard/status/501571281389895681
5	@youngblkrepub / CONSERVATIVES https://twitter.com/YoungBLKRepub/status/537036978580385792
5	@lifenewshq / CONSERVATIVES https://twitter.com/lifenewshq/status/537636844339347456
7	@larryelder / CONSERVATIVES https://twitter.com/larryelder/status/575577524064878592

Conservatives did not always disagree with protesters—in particular, many of them viewed the Garner and Scott killings as unjust. Their reactions will be discussed at greater length in the sections devoted to periods 6 and 8, respectively.

UNALIGNED PARTIES

We use the term “unaligned” to refer to individuals and institutions that do not consistently advocate for or against the movement and police violence victims. We avoid using the term “neutral” to emphasize that the choice to remain unaligned does not free a given party from political responsibility. Indeed, both supporters and opponents frequently criticized the unaligned press for aiding the other side by emphasizing or minimizing particular facts or interpretations thereof.

Most accounts and communities that fall into the unaligned category belong to mainstream news outlets. Standard news headlines exemplify non-alignment in their pursuit of the journalistic ideal of objectivity. The style will be extremely familiar to anyone who has ever read a newspaper, but we offer a few examples from our data nonetheless:

PERIOD	USERNAME / COMMUNITY / LINK
7	@ap / MAINSTREAM NEWS 2 https://twitter.com/ap/status/594150913473929217
9	@cnn / MAINSTREAM NEWS https://twitter.com/cnn/status/543005549848444929
3	@nytimes / (MOSTLY) WHITE LEFT https://twitter.com/nytimes/status/501216422681673729

Additionally, we classify as unaligned several communities which include substantial numbers of both movement supporters and opponents (although this is fairly rare). Because these communities do not collectively espouse one side or the other, the unaligned category fits best.



MOST-SHARED IMAGES

We cannot ignore the role and power of images in spreading BLM's messages. The power of mass-mediated images to combat racial injustice is well-documented in historical accounts of struggles for racial justice in the United States.²⁵ Images circulate prominently in the corpus of BLM Twitter activity, with many of the most-retweeted tweets overall including one or more images. Our analysis of the most frequently circulated images reveal a narrow and consistent narrative focus.

In the aggregate, images commonly depict police, victims, protestors, slogans, commentary, news media personnel, and celebrities. Of course, many of these images contain multiple content forms. For example, some images feature police officers alone, but many depict them interacting with protestors. In still other instances, the images combine depictions of police with some form of textual commentary.

These findings tell us much about what those involved in circulating BLM-related content on Twitter did, or were trying to do. Images often included participants' commentary on what was represented in the images; for example, commentary about the role of protests in confronting police violence against Black victims. In nearly every image depicting police officers and police killing victims, police are depicted in positions of authority (often acting violently) and the victims are depicted either as dead or as ordinary, living citizens. Generally, whether we're talking about official organizers, recognized spokespersons, heavy or casual Twitter users, or activists, most images speak to a common agenda: fighting back against the violence meted out by police officers against Black victims.

Taking a closer look at the images that were circulated most widely adds to this sense of narrative consistency. Among all the images in our dataset, the top 10 most-shared say a great deal about what motivated Twitter users to produce and circulate BLM-related content. Table 4 describes and presents links to the top 10 most-tweeted images in our data.




25 Martin A. Berger, *Seeing through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011); Aniko Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time: Television and the Civil Rights Movement* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013).



Table 4: Most-shared Twitter images

RANK	TWEET COUNT	DESCRIPTION	IMAGE LINK
1	46,506	Two moments of confrontation between police and Black protestors side by side: one from the 1960s, the other from Ferguson, Missouri. This image enters Twitter streams around August 13, 2014. The implication is that not much has changed over the time separating these two incidents, and some of the text surrounding this image stated as much directly.	 VIEW IMAGE
2	41,618	Darren Wilson standing over Michael Brown’s corpse in the Ferguson, Missouri housing project where his body lay for hours before being covered and then transported to the medical examiner’s office. This photograph was originally taken and tweeted by Ferguson-based rapper Thee Pharaoh.	 VIEW IMAGE
3	36,056	An image of the full text of Michael Brown’s family’s statement on the non-indictment of Darren Wilson. This was likely shared as an image to circumvent Twitter’s 140-character limit.	 VIEW IMAGE
4	33,392	A transcript of Eric Garner’s final words as New York City Police officers confront him, force him to the ground, then strangle him in a chokehold. The words on this page bear witness to Garner’s frustration with a history of police confrontation. It also provides the words that soon become a rallying cry, a symbolic expression of BLM’s collective mood: “I can’t breathe.”	 VIEW IMAGE
5	30,596	Eric Garner’s final words transformed into a poem about America’s enduring legacy of racial brutality. The author addresses America’s vision of Black people through the lens of criminality, connects it to a historical legacy of racial violence from slavery through Emmett Till’s murder, and highlights Black death and expendability.	 VIEW IMAGE
6	29,743	Eric Garner shown with his family. This image circulates widely as a reminder that he was connected to a community and a life—a very different depiction from the image that dominated media attention. This image reminds viewers that his life mattered, and those who valued his life—his family—mattered.	 VIEW IMAGE
7	28,072	A school assignment in which first graders with no knowledge of Michael Brown answered questions about him based on his photo. Those circulating this image used it to comment on both Brown’s innocence and that of children in general. It humanized Brown in the midst of a sustained attempt to define him as a violent thug and robbery suspect.	 VIEW IMAGE



8	27,647	Eric Garner being confronted, taken down, and restrained by several police officers, one of whom places him in the chokehold that led to his death. This is a screenshot taken from the video of the incident posted by the New York Daily News. ²⁶	 <p>VIEW IMAGE</p>
9	24,322	One White and one Black man standing side by side, each with a sign asking how much the other's life is worth. This image was circulated in the midst of the Ferguson protests.	 <p>VIEW IMAGE</p>
10	21,800	A simple statement about the injustice of Darren Wilson not being criminally charged after killing Michael Brown. This image was produced by the author who penned the poem ranked fifth in this list. Here, he calls on the public to take their pleas for justice to President Obama.	 <p>VIEW IMAGE</p>

Beyond being some of the most widely-circulated BLM-related images within Twitter (and beyond; for instance, the Eric Garner photo from the New York Daily News was shared more than 80,000 times on Facebook), these images share two other key characteristics.²⁷ First, they were retweeted from multiple starting points, meaning that they crossed over into multiple network communities beyond that of the original Twitter user. The Garner image ranked eighth, for example, was retweeted across at least five different communities during period 2, although four of these represented YBT. Second, these images were retweeted across multiple time periods. For example, the second most-shared image (Darren Wilson standing over Mike Brown's corpse) was retweeted heavily during periods 3 and 5—beginning with Brown's death, extending through the resulting protests, and dropping sharply afterward but surging again around Wilson's non-indictment. The Garner images were heavily tweeted during period 6, which included his killer's non-indictment, gradually tapering off but never completely disappearing in the remaining periods.

Overall, the images shared most widely under the BLM banner express what most resonated with Twitter users. They spread powerful messages to diverse audiences about police brutality, Black innocence and vulnerability to state violence, the absolute and relative value of Black lives, and, of course, the confrontation with state power, media power, and public opinion surrounding these issues.

26 Ken Murray et al., "VIDEO: Man Dies after NYPD Cop Puts Him in Chokehold," *NY Daily News*, December 3, 2014, <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/staten-island-man-dies-puts-choke-hold-article-1.1871486>.

27 Murray et al., "VIDEO."

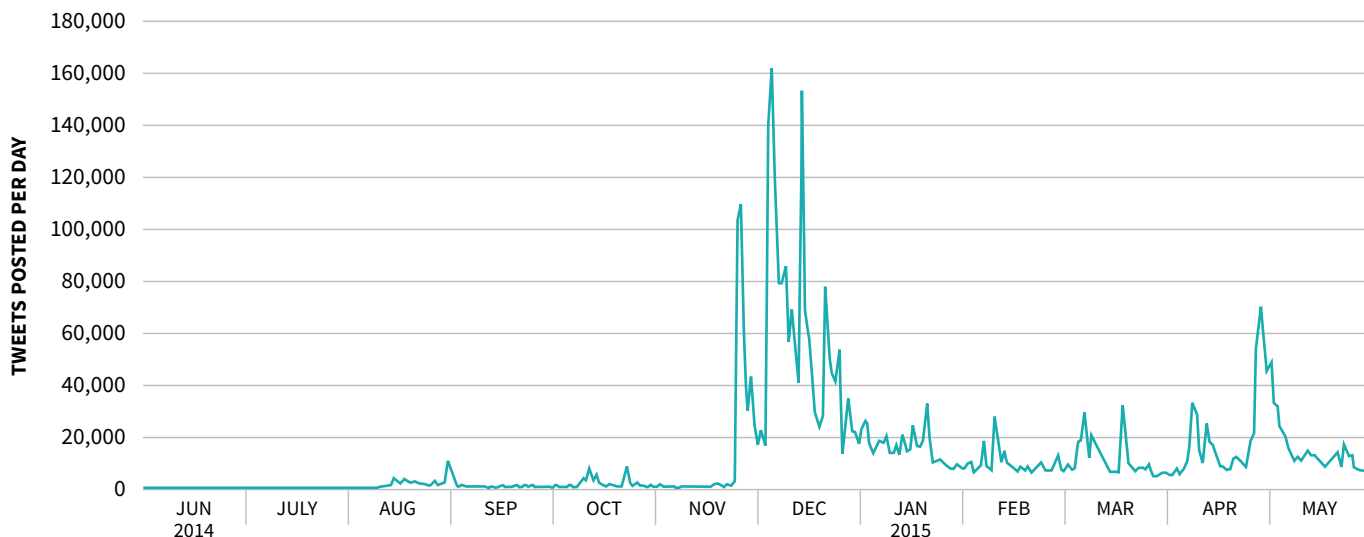


THE RISE OF “#BLACKLIVESMATTER”

We would like to shed some light on how the #Blacklivesmatter hashtag became the movement’s definitive rallying cry. It was the second most-used hashtag overall in our data (after #ferguson) and the most-used hashtag that did not refer to a specific incident.²⁸ In the early days, #Blacklivesmatter was only one of several popular hashtag slogans along with #HandsUpDontShoot, #NoJusticeNoPeace, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, and #Justice4All, among others. Unlike many of its competitors, #Blacklivesmatter was one of the few widely-used hashtags to articulate the issue in explicitly racial terms. While our data cannot fully explain how it became the household term it is today, it can contribute a partial answer.

As explained above, the #Blacklivesmatter hashtag was created in July 2013 after the George Zimmerman verdict. But by June 2014 it had fallen into disuse: only 48 public tweets included it throughout the entire month, an average of fewer than two tweets per day (see Figure 5). Usage increased very slightly in the weeks following Eric Garner’s death, but it was still only used 581 times during the 23 days of period 3. The hashtag appeared nearly that many times (565) on August 10 alone. Its chief promoters on that day were Black activists affiliated with established justice advocacy organizations such as Black Youth Project 100 and Million Hoodies. Within a few days, non-Black allies such as the ACLU, Dream Defenders, and activist Suey Park were using the hashtag. But it did not crack the top 10 during the Ferguson unrest, and at that point it was still mostly a statement of opinion and not yet a broad-based movement. Indeed, most of our interviewees recalled little knowledge of the hashtag’s existence prior to Mike Brown’s death and the ensuing protests.

Figure 5: Tweets containing “#Blacklivesmatter” over time



28 This does not include mentions of the phrase “Black lives matter,” of which there were nearly half a million; see Table 3.



The next major moment in the growth of #Blacklivesmatter was August 30, the day of a protest march in Ferguson. Some of the better-known individuals present at the march used the hashtag and were retweeted heavily. Most of the top tweets containing the hashtag on that day were eyewitness reports from the ground. A similar minor spike occurred on October 22, when a small group of activists blocked Interstate 75/85 in Atlanta to protest police killings. Again, eyewitnesses and physically remote allies included the hashtag in highly-retweeted posts covering the action. But as previously, it seems not to have penetrated beyond activist circles at that point, based on both the identities of the most-retweeted users and on the fact that the daily tweet counts declined quickly after that day.

#Blacklivesmatter was not widely used after then until November 24, the day St. Louis County prosecutor Robert McCullough announced that a grand jury had decided not to indict Darren Wilson for the death of Michael Brown. The previous day, the hashtag appeared in 2,309 tweets; but on that day, the total soared several orders of magnitude to 103,319. Closer inspection of the timing of that day's tweets reveals that 90% of them were posted between the hours of 8pm and midnight Central time, coinciding with McCullough's announcement and its immediate aftermath. This is the moment the #Blacklivesmatter hashtag first broke through to a larger audience. The most-retweeted users on this day were artists, media personalities, internet celebrities, television writers, and ordinary people—activists were few and far between. Some of these tweets reported from protests, some declared solidarity, some criticized the media response, and some contained only the hashtag itself.

Two additional usage spikes helped chisel #Blacklivesmatter into mass consciousness. The non-indictment of Eric Garner's killer less than two weeks after Brown's produced an even larger spike of #Blacklivesmatter-tagged tweets than the earlier event. Again, the top users were demographically and socially diverse—not just the activists who formerly dominated the hashtag. These users broadcasted the hashtag to audiences that were not dedicated followers of the activists who used it in the preceding months. It provided a means of expressing shock, disappointment, and solidarity with victims at a time when public attention was fixated on the issue.

Simultaneous protests against police brutality were held in New York City; Washington, DC; Oakland, and Syria (among other places) on December 13, generating yet another major Twitter spike. Every tweet in the top 10 most-retweeted contained an image from a protest, and not one was posted by a mainstream journalist. Activists had once again taken control of the hashtag, but with public attention now primed by the recent non-indictments, they reached much larger audiences. This represents a sharp contrast from the earlier, smaller spikes which contained similar content but received much less attention.

The events of late November and early December 2014 helped lift #Blacklivesmatter from a slogan largely unknown outside activist circles to a global phenomenon engaged by much broader publics. The hashtag was used in a median of 725 tweets per day between June and December 2014, a figure that rose to 10,112 for January through May 2015. Factors other than Twitter—other social media outlets, news coverage, interpersonal communication, etc.—almost certainly contributed to this dramatic boost in visibility. But the Twitter data show that the hashtag initially migrated from its online birthplace offline to street protests, then surged in popularity online based in part on social media coverage of the protests.



PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

Interviewees identified educating others and amplifying activist messages as primary motivators for discussing matters of police violence against Black people online. They also discussed use preferences that reflect Clark's six-stage process of connection among individuals and thematic nodes in Black Twitter: identification as culturally Black, the choice to join the Black Twitter community, performance of the role of community member, affirmation of others' contributions, re-affirmation beyond Twitter, and vindication as the community exerts offline power in various ways.²⁹ A handful of participants mentioned Black Twitter by name (not necessarily the "young" variant discussed above) and its influence in raising conversation about police brutality, systemic anti-Blackness, and notably, the erasure of Black women in civic action and as victims of related crimes.

Identification with victims, part of the network-building process that links Black Twitter together around issues of concern to Black communities, was a theme that emerged from many participants. These individuals often made empathetic statements about being a potential victim of similar police misconduct. Statements such as "I could be next," "it could have been me," "I have brothers, and that could have been one of them," reflect a certain sense of identifying with both the victims and their families. Aside from the names of victims highlighted in the Twitter data, Sandra Bland's name was mentioned repeatedly by women participants and a few men. Some of the women specifically noted that Bland's personal background was very similar to their own, which heightened their connection to her case.

Finally, the use of various BLM-related hashtags reflected participants' willingness to participate in public protest. For those who lived outside of cities where physical protests were held or otherwise could not participate in them, the ability to engage in online conversation, donate money to help activists doing work in physical communities, and share information with their personal networks helped them feel connected to a larger community.

²⁹ Ramsey, "The Truth About Black Twitter."



TWITTER PERIOD 1 / JUN 1 - JUL 16, 2014

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

The first 1.5 months of our data (which we will refer to as P1) reveal no evidence of a nationally-visible anti-brutality movement. This is despite the fact that four of the victims whose names we used as keywords were killed prior to this period. Most of the keywords hits we see refer to individuals with the same names as the shooting victims. For example, the name Michael or Mike Brown is shared by a member of the San Jose Sharks hockey team, the coach of the Cleveland Cavaliers professional basketball team, and an independent hip-hop artist (@mikebrownDACZAR). Walter Scott is also the name of a 19th-century Scottish poet and playwright who is perhaps best known for the quotation, “Oh! what a tangled web we weave / When first we practise to deceive!”

For all of the periods except this one, we display a network visualization of the 10 largest discussion communities (based on retweet and @-mention patterns). We have not done so for P1 because none of the 10 largest communities have anything to do with police violence. Five of these communities were devoted to the Cleveland Cavaliers, while three focused on the works of Sir Walter Scott. Aside from the absence of police brutality-related content, these communities also illustrate the multiple uses of some of our more ambiguous keywords. As later periods will show, these uses are quickly dwarfed by movement-related concerns.

Of course, it is entirely possible that selecting other Twitter keywords would have revealed a greater level of public engagement on the issue, or that such engagement was more prevalent on other social media platforms. But at least on Twitter, where African-Americans have been overrepresented for years, the recent victims of police violence whose names we chose were very seldom mentioned. Some of the few uses of the #Blacklivesmatter hashtag we saw mentioned specific victims, including Renisha McBride, Marlene Pinnock, and Trayvon Martin. Others applied the sentiment to matters beyond police brutality, including rape, gun violence, criticism of anti-Black bias in the media, and general Black empowerment. Thus, despite the hashtag’s obscurity, the seeds of a movement had clearly been planted within it.

To be clear, we are not suggesting in any way that anti-brutality activism started with BLM. Indeed, grassroots and national organizations have been advocating on this issue for many years. But our data indicate that the issue was not on the national news or policy radar during P1, insofar as Twitter faithfully measures such things. Like many important but invisible issues, police brutality was for many years the exclusive concern of the communities most affected by it. The rise of BLM changed that.

 **28,650**
TWEETS

 **20,759**
UNIQUE USERS

OVERVIEW

Very little BLM activity at this point

Most keyword hits are for other people with the same names as police victims



TWITTER PERIOD 2 / JUL 17 - AUG 8, 2014

ERIC GARNER

P2 begins the day Eric Garner was killed and ends the day before Michael Brown was killed. Despite impassioned outrage over Garner’s death, Twitter activity around it was still relatively small in scale compared to the flood of attention to come in P3. Nevertheless, in P2 we see some early movement activity around the event, with the lion’s share of the attention coming from the Black community. Some of the most prominent voices in P2 become movement leaders with massive followings in later periods.

Several of our interviewees referred to Garner’s killing as “*the case*.” His death was seen as a litmus test for whether law enforcement officers would ever be held accountable for their actions. Participants’ collective memories of watching the video, and then hearing of the non-indictment of NYPD Officer Daniel Pantaleo, indicate a sense of telescoping the events — thinking of them as closer or further away in time — as they experienced them via social media.

The cell phone footage of Eric Garner’s final moments brought police violence against Blacks to Rick’s attention. The Black 26-year-old advertising executive was scrolling through one of his social media accounts one day at work when a friend sent the video via private message: “I was distraught after watching the video, and I started doing research,” he said. “Police procedure, etc. Just watching the video, seeing the cops bringing him down, and when you see them take him down... Finding out that the chokehold was an illegal chokehold, I had hope. You see it, we’ve got footage. You think: ‘This might be the case.’”

P2: Network communities

The video itself and the news stories written about it were broadly shared across P2’s Twitter network. Figure 6 displays the network’s ten largest Twitter communities and how they are connected. We have created one such figure (called a “social network diagram”) for each period, but since this is the first one, we will briefly explain how to interpret it. Think of it as a map that shows which like-minded communities attracted the most attention and the frequency with which they communicated with one another. Each circle represents a community of users that retweeted and mentioned one another intensely during the period: the larger the circle, the more users in that community. We labeled each circle based on the shared identities of the most-retweeted and -mentioned members of that particular community. The lines between the circles represent the extent to which each community was in contact with the others. Thicker lines indicate more retweeting and mentioning between community members—in other words, a more active connection. Accordingly, communities that rarely interacted with each other share thin and in some cases barely visible lines of connection. The communities’ teal color indicates their support of the victim and demands for justice. In future periods where opposing and unaligned communities appear, they will bear contrasting colors. Also, the numbers used to label communities with comparable identities (e.g.

 **226,675**
TWEETS

 **128,831**
UNIQUE USERS

OVERVIEW

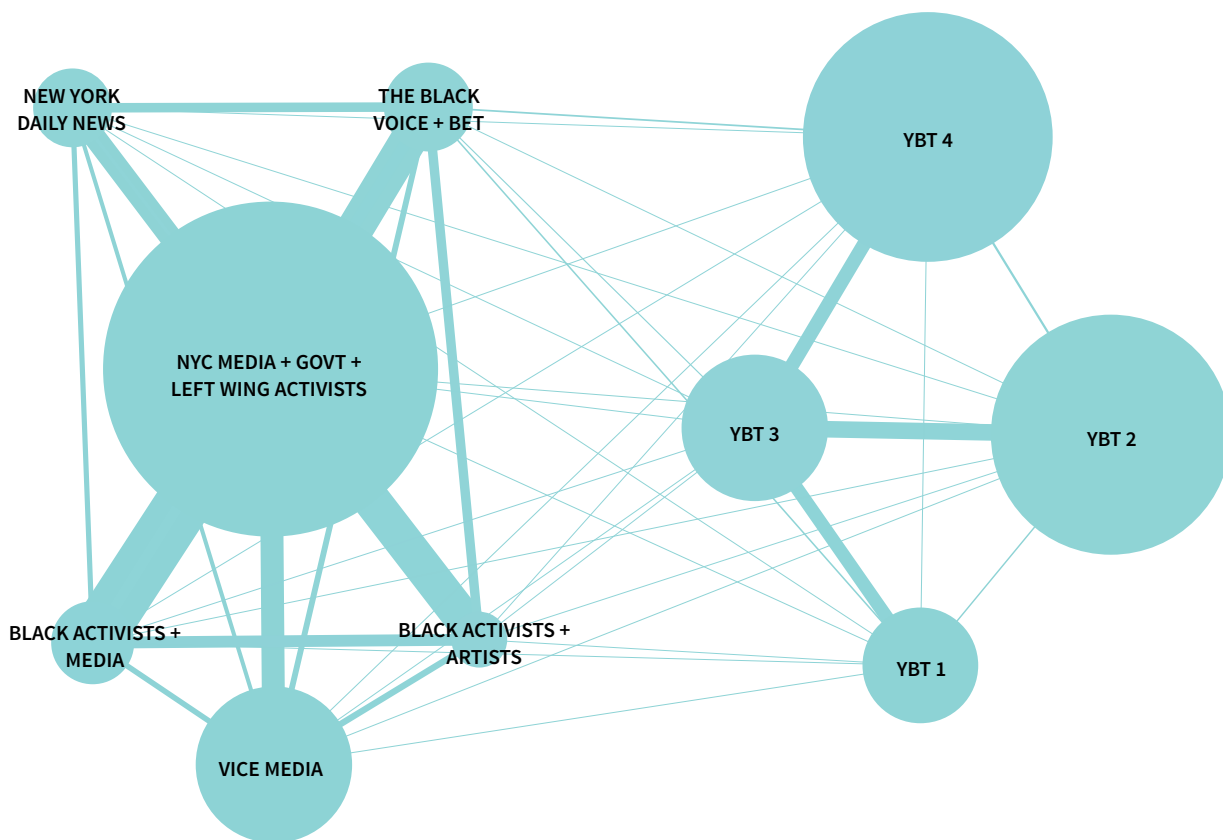
Sharp divide between political participants and Young Black Twitter (YBT)

All network communities objected strongly to the Garner killing

Relatively little media attention or conservative opposition



Figure 6: Social network diagram for period 2



BLK ACTIVISTS + ARTISTS	BLK ARTISTS + MEDIA	NYC	NEW YORK DAILY NEWS	THE BLACK VOICE/BET
@spikelee (1633)	@ap (1101)	@thereval (1015)	@nydailynews (3748)	@theblackvoice (1866)
@shaunking (977)	@huffingtonpost (745)	@dreamdefenders (821)	@talibkweli (483)	@nypdnews (1495)
@jblack501c3 (476)	@soulrevision (588)	@billdeblasio (817)	@atmosphere (246)	@bet (1331)
@lamsuede (293)	@jamilsmith (546)	@commissbratton (555)	@dnainfo (201)	@theblackguyx (106)
@marstu67 (88)	@feministajones (282)	@ny1 (440)	@massappeal (101)	@goapele (83)
VICE	YBT 1	YBT 2	YBT 3	YBT 4
@vice (6281)	@drugfambeezy (4882)	@wsfights (8207)	@craziestsex (1251)	@ikeepittooreal (8546)
@wilbertlcooper (258)	@pretty__bishhh (15)	@sorry_imnachos (13)	@kingtrillgotti (692)	@shescharlirose (26)
@monaeltahawy (90)	@justdo_me (14)	@slatefr (10)	@fiirtation (555)	@_ikeepitreal_ (16)
@hovain (72)	@thatdudestan (10)	@andrewcoyle_ (9)	@dr_pussyology (346)	@crooknkush (9)
@somaya_reece (57)	@flexbitchflex (10)	@too_unorthodox_ (8)	@lmasaprocky (32)	@vinnieswe (7)



Young Black Twitter 1) are arbitrary and have no ordinal implications. Additional details on the methods we used to create our social network diagrams are available in Appendix A.

The caption table below Figure 6 lists the Twitter usernames of the five most-referenced participants in each community. Included in parentheses after each username is the number of unique users from the 10 largest communities referencing that username during P2. This offers a sense of which hubs were most visible in each community, as well as the differences in reference counts between ranked participants.

Figure 6 clearly shows two distinct network neighborhoods. The one on the left is explicitly political, linking together Black activists, media outlets, and local New York City interests. At this point, Garner's story is not front-page news, and only a comparatively small number of media outlets have picked it up. The fact that the NYC community is by far the largest demonstrates that Garner's death remained a local story throughout P2. This community brings together such prominent figures and institutions as the Reverend Al Sharpton (@reval), journalist Goldie Taylor (@goldietaylor), Mayor Bill de Blasio (@billdeblasio), the NAACP (@naacp), local TV station NY1 (@ny1), and the New York Civil Liberties Union (@nyclu). Both the New York Daily News and Vice Media head respective communities of which they are the main provider of news about Garner. Some of the Black activists and journalists represented in the remaining clusters include Shaun King (@shaunking), Kim Moore (@soulrevision), *New Republic* writer Jamil Smith (@jamilsmith), and the pseudonymous *Ebony* writer @iamsuede.

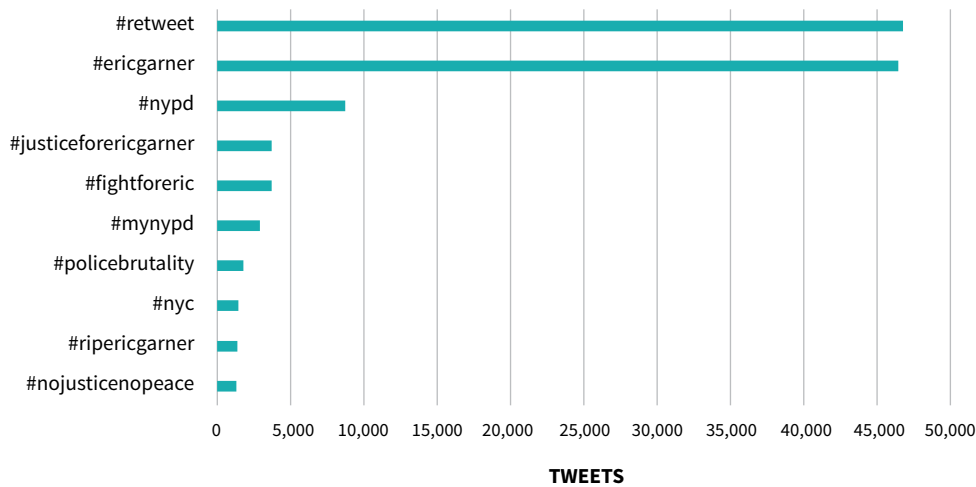
But only the thinnest of connections link these political communities to the neighborhood on the right, which represents what we call Young Black Twitter (YBT). The most-retweeted accounts from these communities--@ikeepittooreal, @wsfights, @drugfambeezy, and @craziestsex—are all pseudonymous accounts with tens of thousands of followers or more. In spite of the two neighborhoods' shared interest in Garner, YBT is largely cut off from news reporting and activism around the event. The thick lines connecting YBT 1, YBT 2, and YBT 4 to YBT 3 indicate the close connections between these communities. On the other side, the NYC community is strongly connected to the remaining five communities, while most of those share relatively active connections with one another.

P2: Tweet content

Figure 7 shows the most-used hashtags across all tweets posted during P2. For the first and only time, #retweet claims first place, while every other hashtag refers directly to Garner. The hashtagged version of his name is a close second, with the remaining entries quickly dropping off in volume. As is typical in the early periods, P2's hashtags are completely fixated on a single incident. They also reflect the uniformly anti-brutality stance adopted by the ten largest communities.



Figure 7: Top hashtags for period 2



The two network neighborhoods discussed Garner’s killing very differently. The vast majority of the retweets in the YBT communities consisted of a single tweet which was reproduced almost verbatim by multiple high-profile accounts. The tweet’s text describes Garner’s death in very straightforward terms and is illustrated by a grim diptych containing one image of his smiling face and another of him being choked to death. It also contains the hashtag “retweet,” and thus is the main reason it ranked so highly in Figure 4: by our count, the tweet was shared almost 36,000 times during P2.

SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK

@ikeepittooreal / YBT 4
<https://twitter.com/iKeepItTooReal/status/490898084658819073>

What is most noteworthy about this tweet is the radical departure of subject matter it represents for the accounts that shared it. These accounts usually deal in lighthearted topics like music, sports, and relationships, rarely venturing into the realm of public affairs or “hard news.” Yet when an event of life-and-death relevance to their target audience occurs, they suspend their usual programming to acknowledge and share it. This is particularly relevant for an audience that is exceedingly unlikely to read politically-oriented news sites, even those devoted to Black issues. In this sense, YBT serves as young Black people’s CNN, to paraphrase Public Enemy frontman Chuck D.³⁰ Further evidence for this can be seen in the massive numerical disparity between the first and second-most-referenced user positions in YBT communities (see Figure 6 caption table). Three of the four YBT communities rely overwhelmingly on a single popular account to spread a single verbatim message about Garner. This one-to-many communication flow is similar to that of traditional mass media and is not present to nearly the same extent in the political neighborhood.

³⁰ Adam J. Banks, *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011), 24.



The tweet is also important for the way it frames Garner's death. It is stated respectfully but matter-of-factly, and although it blames the NYPD it makes no demand for justice, no acknowledgment that Garner was unarmed, and no explicit connection to a broader system of racialized oppression. It simply says, in essence, "The NYPD killed this man." We do not mean to criticize YBT for its manner of expression, but rather to contrast it with the impassioned and overtly political style of the political neighborhood, which generally shared supportive news stories and directly condemned police violence and White supremacy as systemic problems.

Several additional observations are worth discussing briefly before proceeding to the next period. First, interest in Garner was initially driven primarily by Black people and a handful of allied left-wing individuals and institutions. It was certainly not driven by mainstream news attention, as only a few such outlets were present. Conservative support of the police officers involved was also largely absent at this point—while some may have risen to the NYPD's defense on Twitter, the opposition was scattered if not completely silent. Finally, we should keep in mind that online circulation of the video of Garner's death was not by itself sufficient to spark a mass movement. That would not occur until Michael Brown's death less than a month later.



TWITTER PERIOD 3 / AUG 9 - AUG 31, 2014

MICHAEL BROWN AND THE BIRTH OF A MOVEMENT

Of all the police killings of unarmed Black males in 2014, Michael Brown’s was in some ways an unlikely candidate to spark a nationwide movement against police brutality. His death was not recorded, as others before and after his were; there was no pressing legislative hook as there was with Florida’s Stand Your Ground law in Trayvon Martin’s case; and Ferguson is not a particularly large or well-known city. Still, as this report is far from the first to point out, Michael Brown’s death and the protests that followed pushed police brutality to the top of the American public agenda, where it remains as we write this report.

In terms of volume of participation, P3 eclipses P2 many times over. Despite both periods lasting exactly 23 days, P3 saw over 55 times more tweets and over 13 times more unique users than P2. This massive, sustained spike is clearly visible in Figure 4, unlike the comparatively tiny blip Eric Garner’s death initially produced. P3 represents perhaps the most critical contemporary moment in the progression of police brutality from minor issue to national priority. Given the completeness of our data, we can reconstruct this process and weave a story that explains exactly how the issue made this transition—revealing who was involved, what they said, and the exact steps that occurred. After this, we will discuss more general characteristics of P3’s network.

P3: How Ferguson captured Twitter’s attention

Darren Wilson killed Michael Brown shortly after noon CST on August 9, 2014. The first tweet in our dataset to reference the shooting appeared at 3:13pm CST and retweeted Grant Bissell, a reporter for the St. Louis-based local TV station KSDK. Bissell’s tweet, which he posted at 3:05 pm, gave a straightforward account of the scene and featured a photo of a small gathering of Black residents at the scene of the shooting:

SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK

@gbissellksdk / MULTIRACIAL LEFT 1

<https://twitter.com/gbissellKSDK/status/498198378044743680>

We cannot be sure that this was the first reference to the shooting on Twitter, as earlier tweets may have done so without using our keywords. But it was almost certainly one of the first, and at that point in time we can say definitively that Brown had not been identified by name on Twitter.

The first individual to mention Brown’s name after his death is a 20-something Black male resident of St. Louis whose tweet read simply, “RIP Mike Brown.” Several other locals tweeted about the shooting in the ensuing minutes, often interjecting lamentations or calls for

 **12,589,097**
TWEETS

 **1,734,541**
UNIQUE USERS

OVERVIEW

Michael Brown’s death and the resulting protests attract mass online attention

Vast majority of tweets support the movement and/or oppose the police response

Conservatives emerge to oppose protesters and activists



justice. The second public figure to tweet about it after Bissell in our dataset was Antonio French (@antoniofrench), a local politician from St. Louis who later became widely-known for his eyewitness accounts of the protests. One of his later tweets on this day was retweeted by Sarah Kendzior (@sarahkendzior), a St. Louis-based independent journalist and anthropologist who followed up with additional details and commentary. Other nationally-visible activists from beyond the Ferguson/St. Louis region who responded in the next few hours included @reignofapril and @onekade.

Three individuals played an outsized role in spreading the word about Brown's death far beyond the St. Louis area that evening: St. Louis-based rapper Tef Poe (@tefpoe); Michael Skolnik (@michaelskolnik), a New York City-based entrepreneur and activist; and Shaun King (@shaunking), an Atlanta-based activist and writer for the New York Daily News. At 6:42pm CST, Poe posted a chilling photo of Brown's dead body lying in the street:³¹

SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK

@tefpoe / MULTIRACIAL LEFT 1

<https://twitter.com/TefPoe/status/498253074566483968>

This tweet was not included in our dataset due to its lack of a distinctive keyword, but it was quoted by another user who used the hashtag #ferguson, which made it available to us. Tef Poe's tweet had amassed over 5600 retweets by December 2015, with most sent in the hours and days immediately following its posting. Less than a half hour later, Skolnik posted a series of tweets that filled in the basic details of the situation, including the facts that Brown was unarmed and that the police had left his body in the street for four hours. King's tweets on the incident, which began less than 30 minutes after Skolnik's first, cover many of the same details.

The national media picked up the story within a few hours. The first national outlet to appear in our data is News One, which ran an AP story at 7:31 pm headlined "Ferguson, Missouri Crowd After Fatal Shooting Of Unarmed Teen: 'Kill The Police'" We collect links to this and the other early Ferguson news stories by the national mainstream press in Table 5. All eleven articles posted before midnight the day of the shooting focused on the community protests, suggesting that they helped to generate the coverage in the first place. Eight were sourced at least partly from social media—mostly Twitter and Instagram, but also Facebook in one case (with the exceptions being the LA Times, CBS News, and the Blaze).

31 This was not the first photo taken of Brown's dead body: the second most-shared image in the dataset, which is described on p. 31, shows another angle on this same scene.



Table 5: National news stories about Ferguson posted to Twitter on Aug 9, 2014

TIME (CST)	NEWS OUTLET	LINK
7:31 pm	News One	http://newsone.com/3042999/missouri-crowd-after-shooting-kill-the-police/
9:11 pm	ABC News	http://abcnews.go.com/US/fatal-shooting-sparks-calls-kill-police/story?id=24916252
9:12 pm	Raw Story	http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2014/08/09/officer-related-shooting-teenager-in-st-louis-draws-protestors-massive-police-response/
9:16 pm	Global Grind	http://globalgrind.com/2014/08/09/he-has-a-name-ferguson-police-fatally-shoot-unarmed-teenager-michael-brown-photos/
9:32 pm	Buzzfeed	http://www.buzzfeed.com/jimdalrympleii/police-in-missouri-reportedly-shot-and-killed-an-unarmed-tee
10:26 pm	Mediaite	http://www.mediaite.com/online/police-fatally-shoot-unarmed-black-teenager-out-raged-town-protests/
11:08 pm	LA Times	http://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-missouri-grandson-dead-shot-by-police-20140809-story.html
11:29 pm	NY Daily News	http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/18-year-old-shot-dead-missouri-witnesses-article-1.1898333
11:30 pm	CBS News	http://www.cbsnews.com/news/angry-crowd-gathers-after-missouri-police-shoot-teen
11:36 pm	The Blaze	http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2014/08/09/hundreds-yell-kill-the-police-after-officer-fatally-shoots-allegedly-unarmed-teenager/
11:44 pm	Huffington Post	http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/09/ferguson-teen-police-shooting_n_5665305.html

Despite this early national media coverage, the initial Twitter conversations that referenced our keywords were led by Skolnik, King, French, and other activists. Links to national news stories were shared far less than commentary, photos, and information from these activist sources. Thus, social media played a critical role in giving conversation participants an alternative to the mainstream media narrative, which some sharply criticized. One common complaint disputed the claim, repeated in some of the stories mentioned above, that the protesters chanted “kill the police!” Another asked why the story was not being treated as a national news priority—some users tweeted the usernames of top news organizations to request coverage. Some users predicted that the national media, should they ever decide to pick up the story, would probably use Brown’s own behavior to justify the shooting. This view would soon be vindicated in some of the top stories about Brown’s death over the next few days, including his New York Times obituary.³²

Our interviewees largely corroborated these findings. Most of them recalled August 9, 2014, as the day they became aware of the movement that would later become known as Black Lives Matter. Brooke, a Black writer living in New York, mentioned that she heard of Brown’s death via Twitter, and logged on to the site to get more information about the events unfold-

³² John Eligon, “Michael Brown Spent Last Weeks Grappling With Problems and Promise,” *The New York Times*, August 24, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/25/us/michael-brown-spent-last-weeks-grappling-with-lifes-mysteries.html>.



ing in Ferguson. “August 9th. Mike Brown was the very first one,” she said, discussing her use of Twitter to keep track of the movement as it chronicled the deaths of Black citizens at the hands of police. “So many things were getting tweeted into my timeline about this kid lying dead in the street not covered up. That was the first one. The first details I saw about it was on Twitter, when nothing was covering him.”

Over the next few days, the story gained momentum, eventually attracting international attention. By August 12, word had spread well beyond the activist networks of the first few days, driven by the militarized police response, the presence of national media outlets on the ground, and several iconic photos. At this point, celebrities, ordinary users, and accounts linked to the hacktivist collective Anonymous were collecting thousands of retweets per day. Palestinian activists tweeted advice to the Ferguson protesters on how to treat tear gas exposure, and allies across the country posted words and photos of support. Tweet volume peaked between August 13 and 14, likely driven by a combination of the following factors:

- » Police attacks on and/or detention of several prominent information sources, including Wesley Lowery of the Washington Post, Ryan Reilly of the Huffington Post, Antonio French, and an al-Jazeera television crew;
- » Dramatic photos of tear gas diffusing through the crowd that were widely shared;
- » The gradual increase in global interest in the story, driven by the first two factors; and
- » A marked uptick in the number of highly-visible accounts (specifically those with over 100,000 followers) sharing information about the protests.

Eventually, the tweets died down as the police presence receded and the protests subsided. In the absence of mainstream attention, the task of keeping the issue of police brutality on the public agenda fell to committed activists in P4.

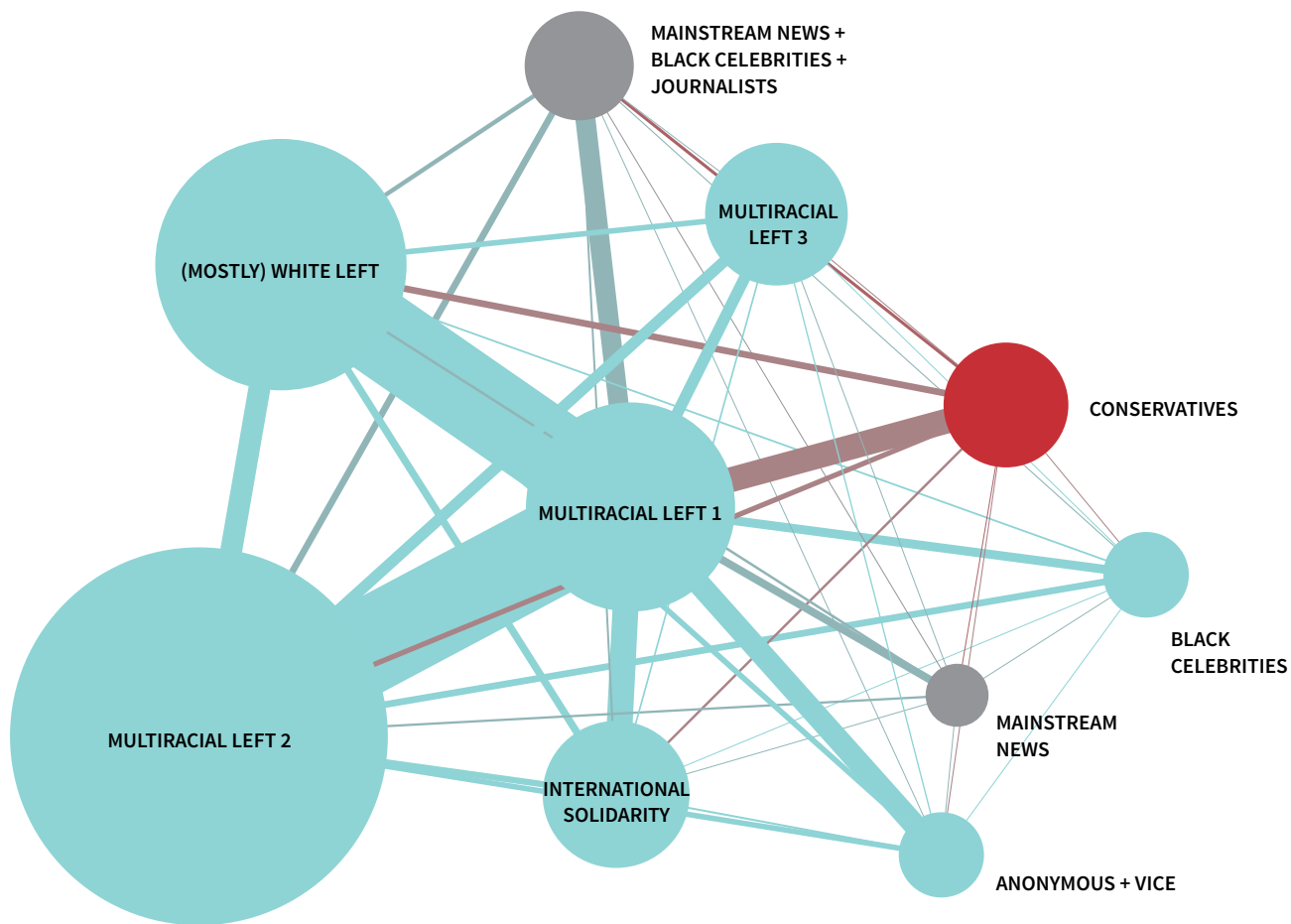
P3: Network communities

Figure 8 displays the 10 largest network discussion communities in P3, offering a sense of the various kinds of individuals who took an interest in Ferguson. The diagram and its caption reveal that P3 was much more racially diverse than P2, which was overwhelmingly Black. The Ferguson protests brought three large multiracial communities together to condemn both Brown’s death and the hyper-militarized police response to the resulting protests. *Multiracial left 1* and *Multiracial left 2* along with *(Mostly) White Left* featured prominent activists and journalists reporting from the ground, including Johnetta Elize (@nettaaaaaaaa), Elon James White (@elonjames), @awkward_duck, French, Lowery, and Reilly. Some of the hubs of *Multiracial lefts 1* and *2* would go on to lead BLM-centered communities in later periods, although the hashtag/slogan was not widely known at this time as explained above.

Seven of the 10 communities are mostly aligned with the protesters. Black celebrities and journalists, international media outlets, the White left, and Anonymous overwhelmingly sided with the protesters, against the police, or both. At least in that moment, the value of Black lives received massive affirmation from more than just the usual suspects. Only one community—*Conservatives*—dissented on this point (more on this below). But this conser-



Figure 8: Social network diagram for period 3



ANONYMOUS + VICE	BLACK CELEBRITIES	CONSERVATIVES	INTL SOLIDARITY	(MOSTLY) WHITE LEFT
@youranonnews (74238)	@talibkweli (16630)	@barackobama (32225)	@fergusonunity (43859)	@ryanjreilly (75953)
@alicesperi (18708)	@common (6057)	@foxnews (16377)	@newsweek (16730)	@wesleylowery (50379)
@vicenews (16565)	@rickyrozay (3439)	@youtube (13275)	@bbcworld (13575)	@nytimes (42369)
@140elect (14251)	@nelly_mo (3336)	@abc (12983)	@cassfm (12987)	@pdpj (34718)
@crypt0nymous (13071)	@join____us (3289)	@thereval (10615)	@rt_com (12063)	@chrislhayes (34181)
MAINSTREAM NEWS	MAINSTREAM NEWS + BLK	MULTIRACIAL LEFT 1	MULTIRACIAL LEFT 2	MULTIRACIAL LEFT 3
@the_blackness48 (15373)	@cnn (64970)	@nettaaaaaaaa (27010)	@antoniofrench (122424)	@jackfrombkln (40964)
@time (15200)	@cnnbrk (22247)	@msnbc (26916)	@shaunking (61264)	@Natedrug (21251)
@huffpostpol (13052)	@ijessewilliams (16958)	@govjaynixon (26905)	@theonmessage (53716)	@theeyeofcontrol (20115)
@blackvoices (12528)	@rolandsmartin (14536)	@elonjames (23143)	@michaelskolnik (53093)	@occupyoakland (12164)
@motherjones (7543)	@donlemon (12927)	@awkward_duck (21330)	@occupythemob (41536)	@cmclymer (11490)

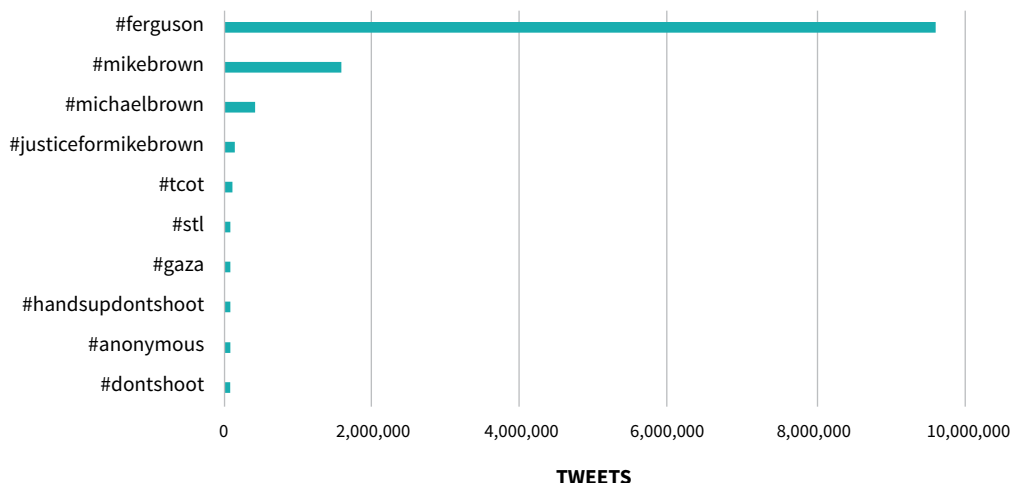


vative community is not an echo chamber, as it is strongly engaged with *Multiracial left 1* and weakly engaged with several other communities.

P3: Message content

#Ferguson was P3’s most-used hashtag by far—it appeared in more tweets than the remainder of the top 10 combined (Figure 9). Its use crossed walks of life and lines of political difference, bringing together a diverse array of information and perspectives on the shooting. The fact that #ferguson drew much more attention than the hashtags based on Brown’s name suggests a greater emphasis on the protests and resulting police response than on the victim. As in P2, we see that most of the top hashtags refer directly to Brown or Ferguson, with the exceptions of #tcot, a long-running conservative chat hashtag; #gaza, of which many Ferguson onlookers were reminded; and #anonymous, indicating that the hacktivist collective had adopted the Brown shooting as one of its main issues.

Figure 9: Top hashtags for period 3



Many of the tweets among P3’s most-retweeted fit into the types described in the Twitter section of the Results Overview. Aside from those, we will discuss two important types that are distinctive to P3. First, eyewitness accounts from the ground attracted a great deal of attention given the dramatically violent circumstances. Activists posted many of these harrowing updates:

SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK
@awkward_duck / MULTIRACIAL LEFT 1 https://twitter.com/awkward_duck/status/501618021832482816
@elonjames / MULTIRACIAL LEFT 1 https://twitter.com/elonjames/status/499740581128454146
@antoniofrench / MULTIRACIAL LEFT 2 https://twitter.com/antoniofrench/status/499964972823486464
@tim_sweetiepies / MULTIRACIAL LEFT 2 https://twitter.com/tim_sweetiepies/status/499742097172594690



Professional journalists were also threatened and assaulted, which they documented with somewhat less detachment than usual:

SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK
@alicesperi / ANONYMOUS/VICE https://twitter.com/alicesperi/status/499760650726289408
@wesleylowery / (MOSTLY) WHITE LEFT https://twitter.com/wesleylowery/status/499762842292477952
@ryanjreilly / (MOSTLY) WHITE LEFT https://twitter.com/ryanjreilly/status/499870270233247744

We saw no examples of highly-retweeted eyewitness accounts supporting the police response.

Relatedly, we detected a strong overall sense that what was happening in Ferguson was a gross breach of normality. Participants expressed this sense in a number of ways. For example, expressions of shock, horror, and/or disbelief at the brutal police response to the protests were commonplace. It is difficult to overstate the importance of this reaction, as it demonstrates that social media can at times promote informal education about political issues. Like the televised police brutality against civil rights protesters in the 1960s, Twitter forced many Americans to reconcile their beliefs about their country with the images of violent oppression on their screens:

SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK
@fxmatt4 / MSM https://twitter.com/fxmatt4/status/499269323547222016
@nycjim / [MOSTLY] WHITE LEFT https://twitter.com/nycjim/status/499753724605386752
@complexmag / MULTIRACIAL LEFT 2 https://twitter.com/complexmag/status/501204160566788096
@fergusonunity / INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY https://twitter.com/fergusonunity/status/499880207310811136

Some tweets in this category compared Ferguson to authoritarian countries, with the implication that the US should not or does not normally treat its citizens so brutally:

SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK
@crypt0nymous / ANONYMOUS/VICE https://twitter.com/crypt0nymous/status/499746129714896896
@anupkaphle / INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY https://twitter.com/AnupKaphle/status/499934429734006784



Internationally, foreign governments and NGOs issued statements and reactions condemning the police response. The tone and content of these messages resembles those often issued to dictatorial regimes, not democratic Western nations:

SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK

@amnestynz / (MOSTLY) WHITE LEFT

<https://twitter.com/amnestynz/status/501226485156298752>

@bbcworld / INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

<https://twitter.com/bbcworld/status/501745864118116352>

@occupyoakland / MULTIRACIAL LEFT 2

<https://twitter.com/occupyoakland/status/499758619470987266>

Some of P3's hubs observed that such reactions seemed to come mostly from non-Blacks, though without a rigorous count it is impossible to be sure. The following tweet effectively captures this sentiment:

SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK

@maxberger / MULTIRACIAL LEFT 1

<https://twitter.com/maxberger/status/501106859169021952>

P3: Attention wanes

As September approached, the Ferguson protests subsided, and so did Twitter attention to the underlying issue. After a second peak on August 18, tweet volume dropped dramatically and settled into a consistent, much quieter thrum of conversation—P4—which would last until late November. During the last week of August, the top tweets were dominated by activists and journalists; few if any celebrities or ordinary citizens reached the top. When the protests ended, journalists began leading much more of the conversation, as relevant information became harder to come by. The job of amplifying the new information that emerged after the protest fell largely to committed activists who had been concerned with police brutality, and issues of concern to Black people more generally, long before Ferguson.



PERIOD 4 / SEP 1 - NOV 23, 2014

FERGUSON'S AFTERMATH

P4 was a lengthy period which saw a much lower volume of Twitter activity than P3, with no major activity spikes. Despite lasting over three times as long, it yielded only 37% of P3's tweets and 38% of its unique users. One explanation for this is that the only police killings in our keyword set that occurred during this period—Tamir Rice and Akai Gurley—came at the very end. Given this, P4 offers our first opportunity to observe what happens to the online component of a movement after a major moment of public attention.

P4: Network communities

The network diagram for P4 (Figure 10) reveals a fairly well-integrated conversation, if slightly less so than P3. The top communities are comparable to P3's as well, but one key difference is that their tweets are receiving much less attention. Another is the emergence of the first community we classify as dominated by BLM. In P3, the top members of this community were present but generally did not identify themselves with that phrase (see Figure 11). This indicates that a group of Twitter users are beginning to interact with a core set of prominent activist hubs consistently across the 85 days of P5. These hubs are directly focused on the issue of police brutality, as opposed to the other communities which mostly consist of participants from news media, entertainment, or partisan politics.

The other communities closely resembled those of P3. Accounts linked to Anonymous were still major amplifiers of information, and many of the same media outlets from earlier periods emerged as leaders yet again, including BET, Vice, and the Huffington Post. Three communities represented Ferguson: *Ferguson locals + journalists*, which was largely sympathetic to the protesters; *Ferguson activists + muckrakers*, an activist community closely linked to the first that included some of the organizations that emerged after the initial protests (@handsupunited_, @opferguson); and *Ferguson local media + Black media*, which heavily covered Cornel West's arrest at an October protest. In one community, liberals (@thedailyedge, @rwwatchma) made interesting bedfellows with hip-hop journalists (@vibemagazine) and Black nationalists (@thefinalcall). A few entertainers, many of whom identify with hip-hop culture (@therealmikeepps, @unclerush, @disetv, @worldstar) or Young Black Twitter, shone light on the issue. And a devoted conservative cluster continued to oppose the protesters and the federal government's response to them.

The respective sizes of the communities in Figure 10 reveal how power has shifted since P4. The two movement-affiliated communities—*BLM* and *Ferguson activists + muckrakers*—are the two largest communities by unique users. *Conservatives* is the third, *Black Entertainment + YBT* the fourth, and *Anonymous* the fifth. Mainstream news outlets take the sixth spot and are largely absent from the remaining communities. This shows that the most widely-heard voices on this issue are not those of the mainstream media, unlike in P3 when such sources were spread across many of the top communities.

 **4,609,046**
TWEETS

 **663,887**
UNIQUE USERS

OVERVIEW

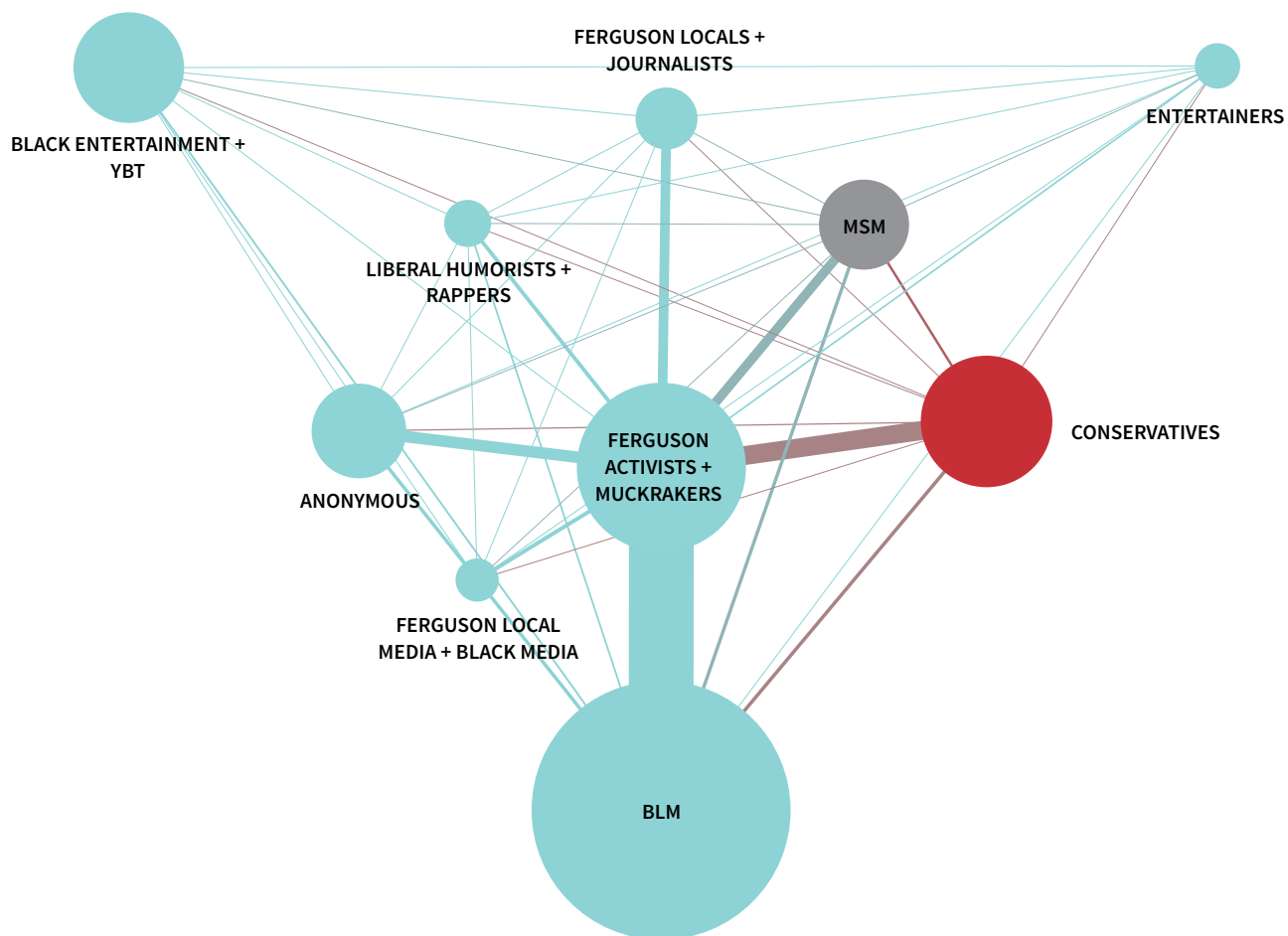
Ferguson/Brown continues to dominate the conversation

BLM emerges as a network community for the first time

DeRay Mckesson emerges as a top leader



Figure 10: Social network diagram for period 4

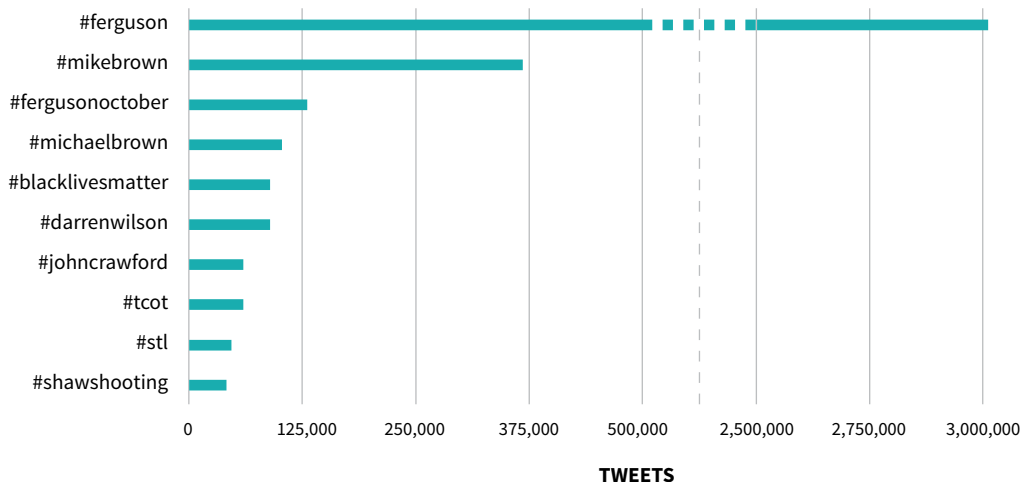


ANONYMOUS	BLACK ENTERTAINMENT + YBT	BLM	CONSERVATIVES	ENTERTAINERS
@youranonnews (19344)	@voice (10195)	@deray (54067)	@msnbc (8473)	@youtube (5311)
@occupythemob (7485)	@complexmag (8967)	@shaunking (48323)	@chris_1791 (7283)	@therealmikeepps (682)
@bipartisanism (5996)	@bet (6218)	@theonmessage (20253)	@waynedupreeshow (6008)	@disetv (506)
@youranonglobal (5414)	@freetopher (4190)	@nettaaaaaaaa (18560)	@gatewaypundit (5090)	@t_h_e_f_a_c_e (486)
@breenewsome (5268)	@unclerush (2920)	@michaelskolnik (15175)	@foxnews (4975)	@worldstar (314)
FERGUSON ACTIVISTS + MUCKRAKERS	FERGUSON LOCAL MEDIA + BLACK MEDIA	FERGUSON LOCALS + JOURNALISTS	LIBERAL HUMORISTS + RAPPERS	MAINSTREAM NEWS
@bassem_masri (13572)	@kodacohen (8436)	@antoniofrench (18372)	@thedailyedge (7794)	@cnn (18331)
@ryanjreilly (10811)	@cheathamkmov (7036)	@sarahkendzior (10615)	@talibkweli (6249)	@cnnbrk (6306)
@handsupunited_ (10523)	@cornelwest (4875)	@wesleylowery (8215)	@vibemagazine (2014)	@ksdknews (5919)
@musiccoverpeople (9258)	@bigboi (4211)	@vicenews (7168)	@thefinalcall (1521)	@yamiche (5110)
@opferguson (7973)	@blackvoices (4071)	@alicesperi (3052)	@rwwatchma (1426)	@nytimes (4852)



P4: Tweet content

Figure 11: Top hashtags for period 4



P4's 10 most-used hashtags (Figure 11) are again dominated by #Ferguson, which again accounts for more tweets than the remaining nine combined. However, a slight broadening of scope is apparent here, as multiple police killings are represented for the first time. John Crawford, who was killed at a Walmart in Beavercreek, OH less than a week before Brown's death, appears in seventh place. The #shawshooting hashtag refers to Vonderrit Myers, who was killed on October 8 in south St. Louis but was not on our list of victims.

But perhaps the most significant development on the hashtag front is the first appearance of #Blacklivesmatter on the list. Here it appears in fifth place, after four hashtags referring to Ferguson. At this point the phrase was still mostly known in activist circles, but that changed in P5 on the day the St. Louis county grand jury declined to charge Darren Wilson. The analysis presented in "The Rise of '#Blacklivesmatter'" above shows that many of the tweets containing the hashtag referred to offline protests against police violence.

In terms of their content, the top tweets in P3 and P4 were very similar. Both see the continued dominance of the Michael Brown/Ferguson story, details and opinions on the latest news thereabout, and strident demands for justice. Perhaps the most distinctive sentiment to emerge during P4 was memorialization: attempts to prevent Brown and others' death from vanishing from public consciousness. Given P4's low incidence of high-profile police killings and major developments in existing cases, activists faced an uphill battle. One tactic they used pointed out the amount of time elapsed since Brown's death with no arrest, indictment, or other desired official action:



SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK

@bet / BLM
<https://twitter.com/bet/status/509763283440525312>

@traciethoms / BLM
<https://twitter.com/traciethoms/status/509385299051311104>

@wyzechef / BLM
<https://twitter.com/WyzeChef/status/511883512895397889>

Others worked to keep the victims' memory alive through art:

SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK

@complexmag / BLACK ENTERTAINMENT + YBT
<https://twitter.com/complexmag/status/514460232484147200>

@jennli123 / BLM
<https://twitter.com/jennli123/status/505593135989542912>

@voice / BLACK ENTERTAINMENT + YBT
<https://twitter.com/voice/status/530179751076327425>

These efforts to exert continued public pressure on authorities stand in sharp contrast to the near-complete absence of activism during P1. One of the major shifts in the wake of P3 was that activists began to press the issue with much more urgency than they had before. And although public attention had slumped, enough participants had been mobilized to sustain a steady stream of communication about police killings even as the incidents themselves receded into the past.

Conservative movement opponents used several distinctive tactics particularly often during P4. One attempted to brand protesters as unpatriotic or un-American, including by associating them with unrelated fringe groups like the New Black Panther Party:

SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK

@bradthor / CONSERVATIVES
<https://twitter.com/bradthor/status/536160559113441280>

@chris_1791 / CONSERVATIVES
https://twitter.com/chris_1791/status/517810107984261120

@gamma_ray239 / CONSERVATIVES
https://twitter.com/gamma_ray239/status/520624017720770561



Another was to quote or retweet statements by conservative-leaning Blacks to trade on their credibility, adding a movement-related hashtag to increase visibility:

SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK
@chris_1791 / CONSERVATIVES https://twitter.com/chris_1791/status/526073917702959104
@josephjett / CONSERVATIVES https://twitter.com/josephjett/status/514209513290076161 ³³
@klsouth / CONSERVATIVES https://twitter.com/klsouth/status/520438705283035136

The relevance of these tweets to police brutality is, of course, a matter of opinion.

We close this section with a brief account of the rise to national prominence of activist DeRay Mckesson, one of P4’s most important events. He is the most-referenced participant in our dataset overall, amassing over twice as many retweets and mentions (1,112,332 in total) as the second-place participant. During P2, McKesson was in most respects an ordinary user—his only tweets were retweets of others and his follower count ran well under 1,000. In P3 he gained attention by livetweeting the Ferguson protests, eventually becoming the 99th-most referenced user in that period. But by P4 he had emerged as the single most-referenced individual by far. The subject matter of his tweets did not change significantly from P3 to P4—he continued to post protest livetweets along with news and commentary about police injustice and unequal treatment. In other words, McKesson first established himself as a trusted source of protest information, which in turn allowed him to become the movement’s best-known activist.³⁴

It is impossible to say for certain exactly why McKesson, rather than someone else, achieved the prominence he did. But several qualities distinguished his tweets from others. First, regardless of the amount of media coverage, he consistently participated in and documented anti-brutality protests. This level of commitment likely established trust and respect between him and his audience. Second, his tweets linked individual incidents to systemic injustices in policing and to a broader movement dedicated to ending those injustices. Third, as he moved from retweeting others to reporting from protests to inspirational declarations that “the movement lives,” McKesson publicly documented his own transformation from concerned onlooker to committed activist, which probably reflected many other similar transformations occurring across the country at the same time.

33 This exact tweet was posted by the original author at least 112 separate times during P4. Thus, although this specific link shows fewer than 100 retweets, the duplicate tweets collectively amassed at least 460 retweets.

34 For a corroborating account of McKesson’s rise to prominence, see Jay Caspian Kang, “Our Demand Is Simple: Stop Killing Us,” *The New York Times*, May 4, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/10/magazine/our-demand-is-simple-stop-killing-us.html>.



TWITTER PERIOD 5 / NOV 24 - DEC 2, 2014

WILSON'S NON-INDICTMENT

At only nine days long, P5 is the second shortest period after P6. It begins on November 24, the day St. Louis County prosecutor Robert McCullough reported that a grand jury had declined to file charges against Darren Wilson, and captures over a week of Twitter conversation following that decision. Protests once again erupted on the streets of Ferguson and around the country, and much of this activity is reflected in our data.

Several relevant features distinguish P5 from its predecessors. First, November 24 saw the highest total tweet volume of any single day in the entire dataset: 3,420,934 tweets. The St. Louis County grand jury verdict attracted 13.4% more unique users than P3, despite the earlier period lasting well over twice as long as P5. Unlike P3, that attention was not sustained to the same degree, since it was generated by a single moment—McCullough's press conference—rather than a multi-day event. But tweet volume did not immediately return to the baseline range set by P4: instead, a new, higher baseline separated the aftermath of the Wilson verdict from the defining event of P6, the non-indictment of Eric Garner's killer.

P5: Network communities

P5's network map (Figure 12) shows a highly integrated conversation featuring many familiar communities from previous periods. Notable additions include the return of Young Black Twitter, which forms the backbone of P5's largest community; a relatively small community combining news tweets in English and Spanish; and a community centered on anonymous humor accounts. Half the communities are clearly supportive, representing a slight drop from P5, and these account for 62.3% of all users included in the top 10 communities. We classify four of the remaining communities as unaligned and one as opposed.

BLM 1 is the most central community in terms of its connections with the others. BLM allies—individuals who share sympathies with the movement but are not consistent participants—share the top spots in this community with well-known activists. The community shares strong connections with seven of the nine remaining communities, including *BLM 2*, *YBT + Mainstream news*, *Black entertainers*, and *Bipartisan Report + Anonymous*. Once again we see conservatives strongly connected to a BLM community despite stark differences in opinion about the non-indictment. The presence of two distinct mainstream media communities (which are not strongly connected to one another) indicates that the story is being amplified to broader audiences than during less active periods. A small community led by Latino news sites and the Russia Today news site spread the news to Spanish- and English-speaking audiences. *Twitter humor*, perhaps P5's most unusual community, featured anonymous accounts such as @meninistt-weet, @worldstarfunny, @badgrandpatweet, and @guycodes that usually tweet jokes and humorous videos. These users posted a combination of supportive and oppositional messages, some of which were apparently intended as jokes. We will explore these further below.

 **8,528,144**
TWEETS

 **1,966,447**
UNIQUE USERS

OVERVIEW

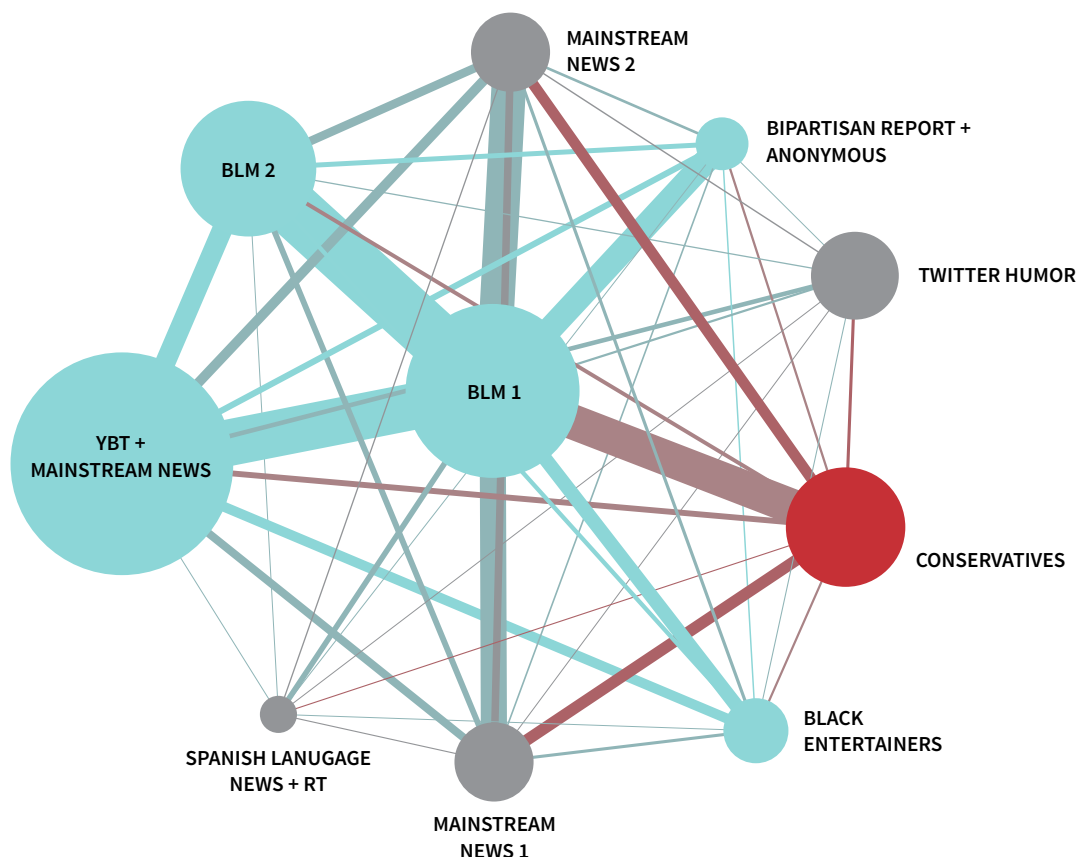
Widespread attention returns after nearly three months

BLM community remains most central to the conversation

New *Twitter humor* community shares a mix of jokes, opposition, and support
DeRay Mckesson emerges as a top leader



Figure 12: Social network diagram for period 5



BIPARTISAN + ANONYMOUS	BLM 1	BLM 2	BLACK ENTERTAINERS	CONSERVATIVES
@bipartisanism (85012)	@deray (55047)	@shaunking (51166)	@complexmag (53267)	@foxnews (30039)
@youranonnews (35973)	@elonjames (17289)	@creativerobd (18988)	@globalgrind (6962)	@stlcountypd (22076)
@occupythemob (11328)	@lisabloom (15771)	@crystallewis (18021)	@talibkweli (6773)	@nytimes (11286)
@ifalasteen (4125)	@motherjones (14457)	@mrpooni (14992)	@tmz (5510)	@fox2now (9422)
@nettafinesse (3994)	@140elect (14084)	@aurabogado (13721)	@sonsandbros (5270)	@msnbc (9001)

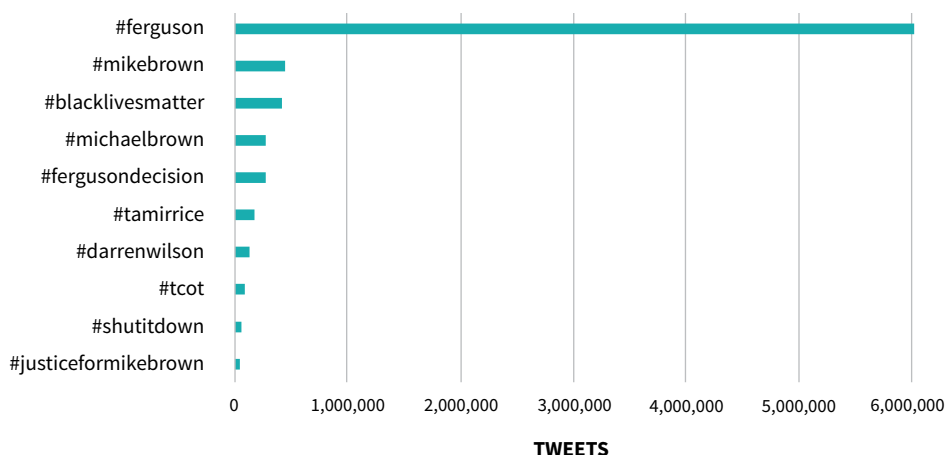
MAINSTREAM NEWS 1	MAINSTREAM NEWS 2	SPANISH/ENG NEWS	TWITTER HUMOR	YBT
@breaking911 (18888)	@cnn (56577)	@rt_com (8905)	@foundingfratter (14065)	@barackobama (38728)
@usatoday (18011)	@nbcnews (26604)	@cnnee (4219)	@worldstarfunny (11862)	@jaychillinbro (34383)
@ksdknews (17761)	@abc (22454)	@actualidadrt (3408)	@fox13now (11784)	@mikebrowncover (23836)
@abc7 (13072)	@cnnbrk (14099)	@telesurtv (3058)	@sierra2231 (11656)	@voice (23785)
@russtacek (12548)	@whitehouse (11379)	@bbcmundo (2050)	@meninisttweet (8211)	@curlsgoddess (20197)



P5: Tweet content

P5’s top hashtags (Figure 13) resemble P4’s in their strong emphasis on Ferguson with a few other topics present. #Ferguson again takes first place, far ahead of everything else as in the previous two periods. #Blacklivesmatter moves from fifth place to third, indicating the slogan’s rising currency among people following this story on Twitter. In spite of all the attention focused on Ferguson, Tamir Rice’s hashtagged name makes sixth place despite his being killed only two days prior to the period’s start. Had the two events not occurred so close in time, Rice’s case might have received more initial attention. These fairly minor differences aside, P5’s top hashtags more or less represent a holding pattern from P4.

Figure 13: Top hashtags for period 5



As for the top tweets, movement supporters were understandably disappointed when they learned of Wilson’s non-indictment. However, these tweets reflected little in the way of distinctive trends, with most either falling into one of the overview categories or being rather unique. Supporters raised facts supposedly ignored by the prosecutor and grand jury, posted images and accounts of protests from around the country, relayed reactions from other countries, and continued to condemn the justice system. A few tweets mentioned Tamir Rice, but the vast majority addressed the Ferguson decision.

One minor trend among supporters was to draw distinctions between how Black and White criminal suspects, or potential suspects, were treated. The goal here was to demonstrate that better policing of Blacks is possible, but rendered substantially less likely by anti-Black policies and attitudes:

SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK
@mrpooni / BLM 2 https://twitter.com/mrpooni/status/536662970676576256
@thebaxterbean / BLM 2 https://twitter.com/TheBaxterBean/status/501056036388995073
@thedailyedge / MAINSTREAM NEWS 1 https://twitter.com/thedailyedge/status/537369332616294400



A more interesting story about tweet content comes from a community we have not seen before. In previous periods, the opposition has been relegated to a single community, *Conservatives*. In P5 this changes, as oppositional messages appear in the *Twitter humor* community, which appears only in P5. Many of these staunchly supported law enforcement or scolded the protesters for rioting. Some were clearly intended as jokes while others were not:

SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK
@fakesportscentr / TWITTER HUMOR https://twitter.com/fakesportscentr/status/537101691460812800
@peaceofthesouth / TWITTER HUMOR https://twitter.com/peaceofthesouth/status/537077673273860096
@wshhfans / TWITTER HUMOR https://twitter.com/WSHHFANS/status/537092829441687552

On the other hand, some tweets in this community supported the movement, noting for example the protesters’ peaceful tactics, local efforts to clean up Ferguson, and generally opposing the grand jury’s decision:

SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK
@theliluminati / TWITTER HUMOR https://twitter.com/theliluminati/status/537096613706366976
@toptwitpics / TWITTER HUMOR https://twitter.com/toptwitpics/status/537292613049532417
@wshhfans / TWITTER HUMOR https://twitter.com/wshhfans/status/537104785275879424

In some tweets the intended humor was clear, but it was difficult for us to tell whether they were supportive, oppositional, or simply looking to lampoon the news story of the moment.

SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK
@illuminati_stop / TWITTER HUMOR https://twitter.com/Illuminati_Stop/status/537105730650664960
@meninisttweet / TWITTER HUMOR https://twitter.com/meninisttweet/status/537118607793479680
@worldstarfunny / TWITTER HUMOR https://twitter.com/worldstarfunny/status/537114498612490240

We find *Twitter humor* particularly interesting because it offers insights into how politically disengaged users were thinking about Ferguson. As Figure 12 shows, this community was relatively weakly connected to the others. This makes sense because most of its hubs do not typically tweet about politics or current events—rather, participants were unified by their tastes in entertainment. This is not to say that they had no politics, only that their interests in entertainment were stronger than their interests in this particular issue. Accordingly, there was no consensus opinion on the decision as there was in most of the other communities.



TWITTER PERIOD 6 / DEC 3 - DEC 10, 2014

PANTALEO'S NON-INDICTMENT

P6 is the shortest period in our dataset at only seven days. It begins on December 3, the day a Staten Island grand jury returned its decision not to indict Daniel Pantaleo, Eric Garner's killer, and captures the following six days of reactions. P6's sole peak occurred on the day of the non-indictment, with tweet volume gradually tapering off thereafter. We decided to treat P5 and P6 as separate periods despite the close timing of the two non-indictments because we wanted to ensure that the former did not overwhelm the latter given its much higher public profile.

P6: Network communities

P6's network diagram (Figure 14) looks much like P5's. One major similarity is the presence of two BLM communities in both periods. (We should point out that the numbered BLM communities in this period don't necessarily correspond to those in other periods because each period's network was created independently). The main difference between the two is that *BLM 2* counts many more Blacks and consistent civil rights activists among its top ranks. More entertainment-based communities rose to the top in P6 compared to P5, and these are also more racially diverse than in P5. Mainstream news, conservatives, and the Bipartisan Report reemerge from P5, as does YBT, which lies furthest on the margins in terms of its connections to other communities.

P6: Tweet content

P6's top hashtag list (Figure 15) reveals the most substantial shift since P3. For the first time since that period, a hashtag other than #ferguson—Eric Garner's hashtagged name—occupies the top spot. Rick, the advertising executive we interviewed, recalled using this hashtag to find solidarity with others in New York the day on the non-indictment:

Hashtags played a big role in the process after that. I knew there was going to be a protest. I knew NYC did not play that. With the Eric Garner protests, I left work, and I did not know where the protests were going to be. I did not know what website to go on to. I typed in #EricGarner, and without that, I was not going to be able to find it.

#Ferguson, still a major topic of conversation after the Wilson non-indictment, falls to number three, while #Blacklivesmatter ascends to number two. The remaining hashtags represent a split between Brown and Garner, with more understandably devoted to the latter. Thus P6 is the first month in which no single incident accounted for a majority of the hashtags. Even given the rush of interest in Pantaleo's non-indictment, the movement's attentions were clearly broadening.

 **4,475,174**
TWEETS

 **1,106,020**
UNIQUE USERS

OVERVIEW

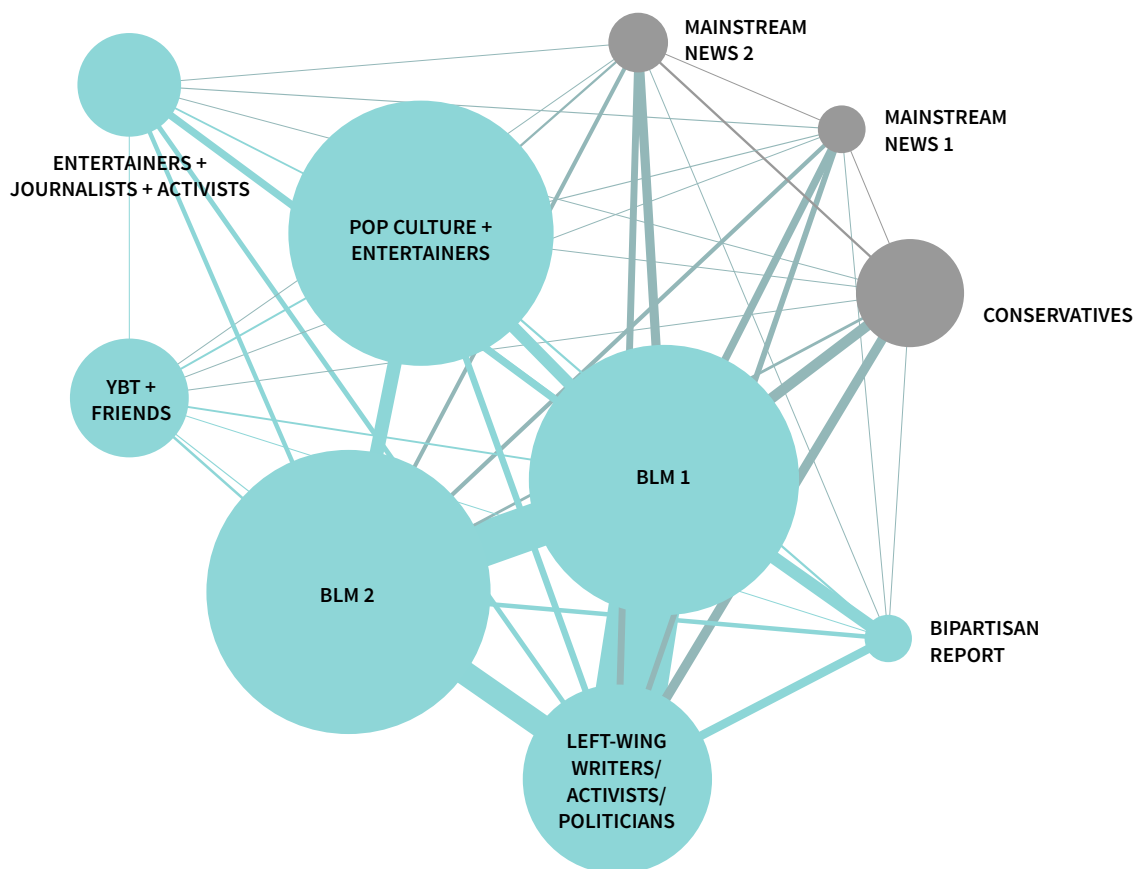
Conservatives speak out against Garner's killing

BLM splits into two closely-connected communities

Less protest news than in P5



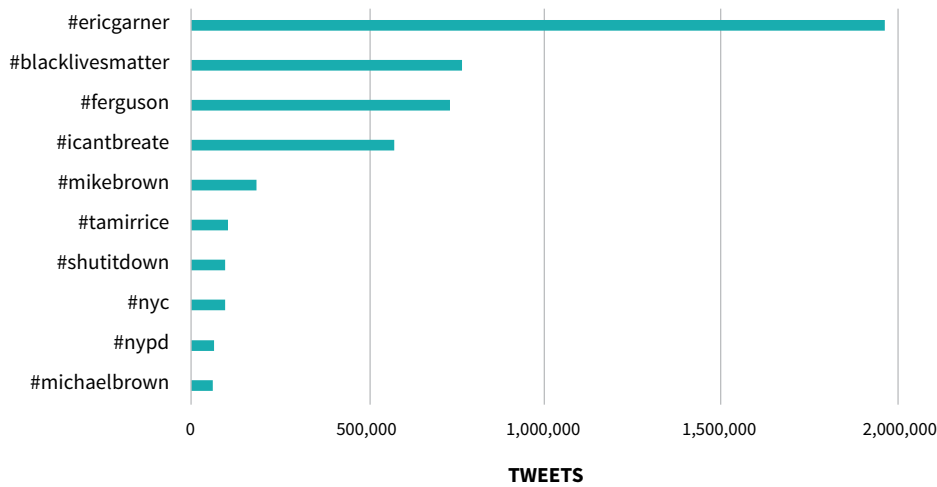
Figure 14: Social network diagram for period 6



BIPARTISAN REPORT	BLM 1	BLM 2	CONSERVATIVES	ENTERTAINERS + JOURNALISTS + ACTIVISTS
@bipartisanism (51345)	@deray (26928)	@shaunking (27748)	@cbsnews (7261)	@ozchrisrock (29859)
@captainraylewis (7291)	@keegannyc (15371)	@thebaxterbean (15355)	@foxnews (4609)	@markduplass (9645)
@createlex (2906)	@youranonnews (14780)	@ryanjreilly (9909)	@thereval (3893)	@mmflint (7329)
@dmanthedesigner (1888)	@lsarsour (9946)	@lifewannab_easy (6474)	@chris_1791 (3675)	@dwaynedavidpaul (7113)
@chicagobulls (1541)	@newsrevo (9133)	@britrbennett (6469)	@nypost (3598)	@brookejarvis (6657)
LEFT-WING WRITERS + ACTIVISTS + POLITICIANS	MAINSTREAM NEWS 1	MAINSTREAM NEWS 2	POP CULTURE + ENTERTAINERS	YBT + FRIENDS
@lisabloom (17053)	@mattdpearce (10872)	@cnn (22250)	@complexmag (49106)	@johnngreen (28696)
@barackobama (7199)	@nydailynews (8236)	@ac360 (6688)	@jcolenc (13510)	@voice (20539)
@nbcnews (6099)	@billbramhall (8105)	@cnnbrk (6461)	@jfxm (10068)	@kushnbooty__ (5318)
@msnbc (5525)	@slate (7272)	@cnnsitroom (5087)	@quikwest (9116)	@curlsgoddess (4245)
@rolandmartin (5469)	@nydnlocal (5261)	@outfrontcnn (4225)	@cthadgod (6868)	@shegotcake___ (2959)



Figure 15: Top hashtags for period 6



P6’s major content story involves the *Conservatives* community, which shifted from a definitive oppositional stance in P5 to unaligned. This occurred because of an unprecedented schism between those who believed Garner’s death was unjustified and those who were still tweeting pejoratively about Brown and the Ferguson protesters. The latter generally continued to indulge in system justification and red herrings like Black-on-Black crime and abortion as in previous periods. But the former saw Garner as fundamentally different from Brown—an undeserving victim of police brutality who was denied posthumous justice:

SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK
@anncoulter / CONSERVATIVES https://twitter.com/anncoulter/status/540295254277357569
@brithume / CONSERVATIVES https://twitter.com/brithume/status/540308667183407104
@gopblackchick / CONSERVATIVES https://twitter.com/gopblackchick/status/540261162265624576
@iowahawkblog / CONSERVATIVES https://twitter.com/iowahawkblog/status/540281163009388544

As Ann Coulter’s (@anncoulter) and David Burge’s (@iowahawkblog) tweets exemplify, conservatives were not above incorporating partisan jabs into their condemnations of Garner’s death.

The video evidence and the undisputed facts of Garner’s case were enough to push some conservatives toward the same conclusions anti-brutality activists had drawn in late July. A few took some rather unorthodox logical paths along the way, such as the attempt to claim Garner as a tax martyr because the law he violated was a state tax law. The differences in how they treated Garner as compared to most of the other victims shows that they were willing to make fine distinctions between deserving and undeserving victims that BLM partici-



pants had no interest in. Along the same lines, while conservative criticism of Garner’s killing did acknowledge the existence of police brutality, it generally did not go so far as to critique White supremacy, as BLM has consistently done.

As a result of this shift in conservative sentiment, an even greater proportion than the usual majority of overall tweets were supportive. The mix of news and opinion at the top was largely similar in tone and content to P5’s top tweets: outrage, disbelief, resignation, and pledges to work for justice abounded. One difference was that there seemed to be far fewer tweets about protests in P6. However, several tweets spotlighted entertainers who publicly supported Garner outside of Twitter:

SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK

@complexmag / POP CULTURE + ENTERTAINERS
<https://twitter.com/complexmag/status/542086093055995904>

@steve_os / POP CULTURE + ENTERTAINERS
https://twitter.com/steve_os/status/541394841348100096

@bet / POP CULTURE + ENTERTAINERS
<https://twitter.com/bet/status/540611550294204418>

Tweets like these demonstrate celebrities’ role in promoting awareness of police brutality in offline contexts.





TWITTER PERIOD 7 / DEC 11, 2014 - APR 3, 2015

UNDER THE RADAR, THE MOVEMENT EXPANDS

P7 is by far the longest period, lasting nearly four months. We created such a lengthy period because not a single large spike occurred over its entire duration. During this time, participants produced fewer tweets by far than the nine-day P5 and only slightly more than the seven-day P6. P7 is a particularly important period for understanding BLM because it reveals what happens when media and popular attention to the issue decline for an extended period of time. In this P7 is similar to P4, but our data suggest that P7 represents the movement continuing to broaden beyond its Ferguson roots.

P7: Network communities

This evolution comes despite the fact that the top network communities and users are very similar to the previous few periods (Figure 16). BLM again manifests two closely-linked communities, and YBT, entertainers, Black media, and conservatives are all represented. The new Russian/Iranian media community was anchored by Russia Today, several Iranian media outlets, and the English-language account of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader of Iran. Meanwhile, Bishop Talbert Swan of the Church of God in Christ headed another new community more or less on his own—he alone accounted for nearly a third of its most-retweeted tweets, including all of the top 21. Other participants in this community include religious leaders, Black media personalities, and several accounts associated with the NAACP.

P7: Tweet content

For the first time, the #Blacklivesmatter hashtag was used more often than any other (see Figure 17), the culmination of a slow climb up the rankings that began in P4. This indicates both the arrival of “Black Lives Matter!” as the movement’s defining rallying cry and a shift away from a single-minded focus on individual police brutality incidents toward an understanding of the issue as systemic, racialized, and in dire need of remediation. Further evidence of this can be seen in the greater variety of hashtags referencing different police killings among the top 10. Whereas previous periods’ top hashtags were dominated by a single police killing, P7’s referenced five separate incidents (the deaths of Brown, Garner, Rice, Antonio Martin, and Tony Robinson), the highest number of any period. By this point in the post-Ferguson era, the practice of hashtagging the names of police killing victims had become entrenched enough to render visible on Twitter the systemic scourge of anti-Black police brutality. Unfortunately, it did so at a time when Twitter attention to the issue had reached a post-Ferguson low.

 **5,388,906**
TWEETS

 **1,056,438**
UNIQUE USERS

OVERVIEW

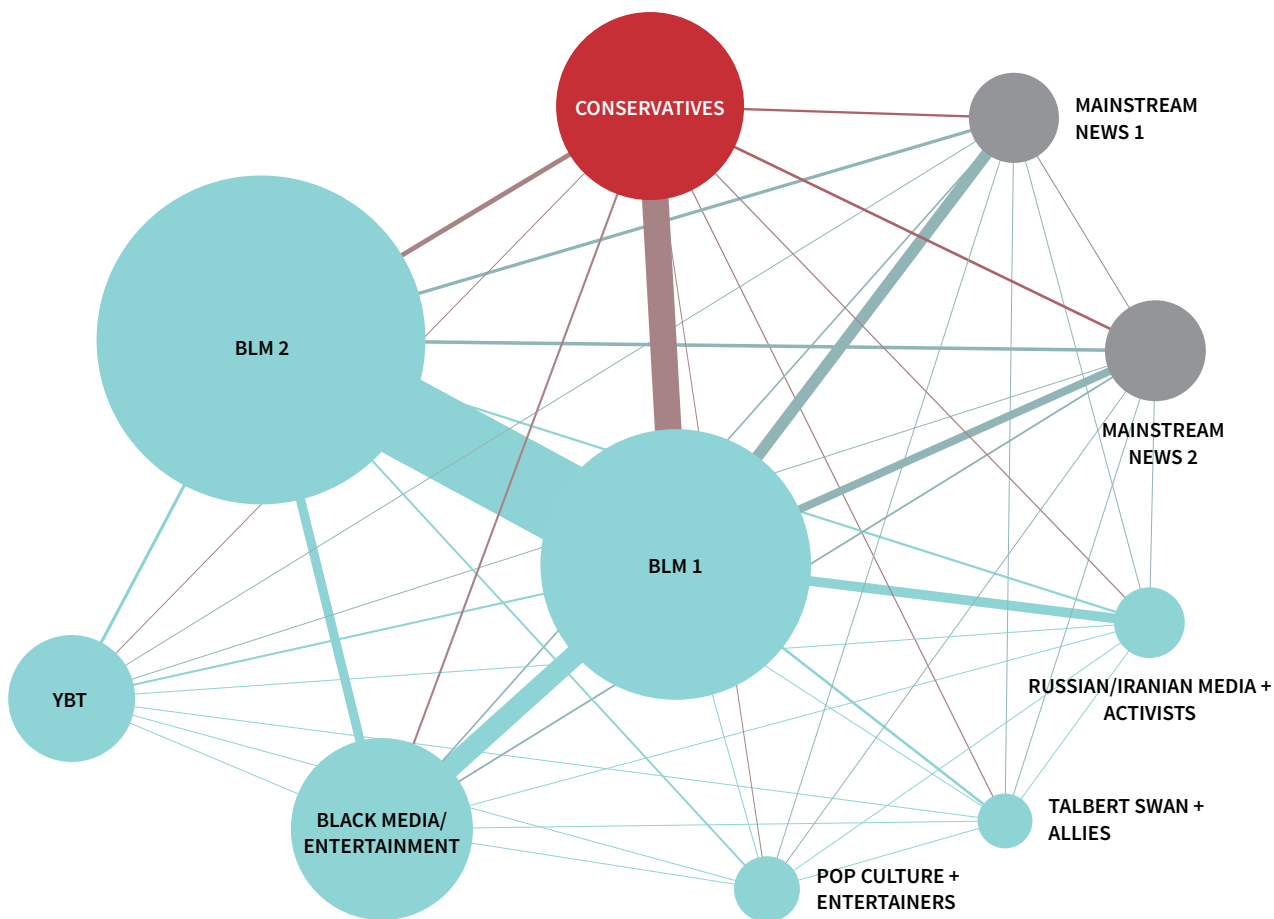
#Blacklivesmatter is the top hashtag for the first time

Religious leaders and foreign media enter the scene

Conservatives return to oppositional status



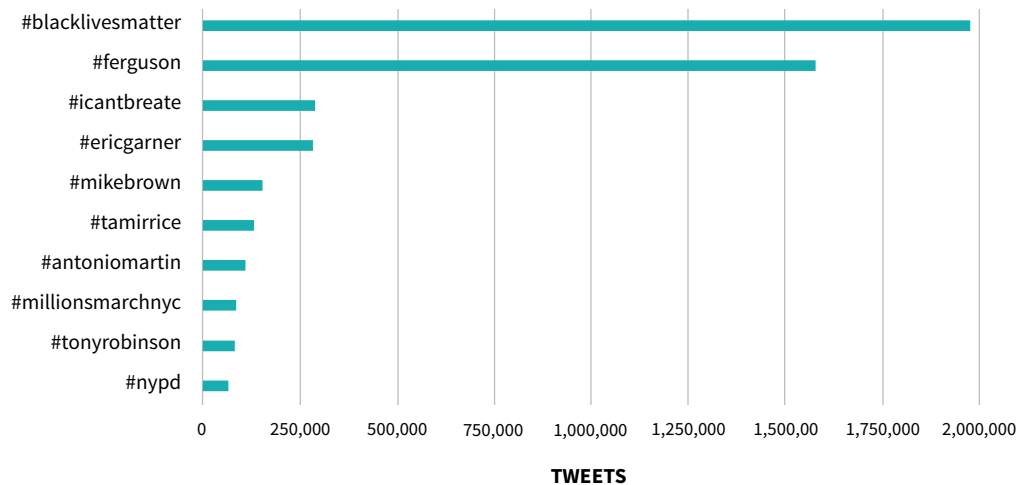
Figure 16: Social network diagram for period 7



BLM 1	BLM 2	BLACK MEDIA/ ENTERTAINMENT	CONSERVATIVES	MAINSTREAM NEWS 1
@nettaaaaaaaa (18252)	@deray (47221)	@michaelskolnik (13225)	@chris_1791 (9657)	@nytimes (7879)
@bassem_masri (17531)	@shaunking (30215)	@theroot (11492)	@foxnews (9271)	@nbcnews (6552)
@occupywallstnyc (11692)	@keegannyc (20586)	@blackvoices (10495)	@msnbc (7548)	@ap (5596)
@lnonblonde (9845)	@khaledbeydoun (17807)	@shondarhimes (6110)	@stlcountypd (6368)	@buzzfeednews (4362)
@ryanjreilly (9371)	@sonsandbros (10758)	@bet (5659)	@thereval (6085)	@huffingtonpost (4048)
MAINSTREAM NEWS 2	POP CULTURE + ENTERTAINERS	RUSSIAN/IRANIAN MEDIA + ACTIVISTS	TALBERT SWAN + ALLIES	YBT
@cnn (28366)	@kanyewest (18328)	@occupythemob (8887)	@barackobama (13732)	@voice (11801)
@cnnbrk (17070)	@complexmag (8997)	@rt_com (3976)	@talbertswan (13543)	@justice4dontre (5077)
@cnnsitroom (8592)	@aclu_norcal (1390)	@rt_america (3081)	@naacp (3919)	@freetopher (4452)
@ac360 (4336)	@sepsruby (1335)	@sputnikint (1800)	@wgby (3285)	@kushnbooty__ (3616)
@globalgrindnews (3790)	@kendalljenner (1327)	@khamenei_ir (1727)	@govjaynixon (2284)	@bestcomedyvine (3279)



Figure 17: Top hashtags for period 7



Aside from the previously mentioned trends in tweet content, two stand out among supporting users. First, the lull in attention to high-profile police killings was not for lack of trying on activists' part—we see several attempts to push various incidents to the top of the agenda, with little success. The participants posting this information sometimes specifically request that the audience not forget about these lesser-known victims:

SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK

@justice4dontre / YBT

<https://twitter.com/justice4dontre/status/574082654661963776>

@khaledbeydoun / BLM 2

<https://twitter.com/khaledbeydoun/status/545055410169057280>

@talbertswan / TALBERT SWAN + ALLIES

<https://twitter.com/talbertswan/status/555386978553057280>

However, for various reasons, few of these cases end up joining the ranks of the most-discussed. Tony Robinson is a partial exception, with his hashtagged name coming in ninth on the top 10 list.

Supporters also documented the callous speech of some police officers toward both victims and their families and friends. This heaping of insult upon injury was viewed as especially hurtful given the lack of consequences for the killers:

SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK

@apadillafilm6 / BLM 2

<https://twitter.com/Apadillafilm6/status/546883125645950977>

@ranirastawoman / BLM 2

<https://twitter.com/ranirastawoman/status/547702648393056259>

@nathanzed / BLM 2

<https://twitter.com/NathanZed/status/572536851602509824>



The *Russian/Iranian Media + Activists* community was supportive, but in a very different way from the other communities. Its participants posted a mix of protest news and censure of US authorities for their treatment of Blacks and other minorities:

SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK
@rt_com / RUSSIAN/IRANIAN MEDIA + ACTIVISTS https://twitter.com/rt_com/status/543864012505899008
@presstv / RUSSIAN/IRANIAN MEDIA + ACTIVISTS https://twitter.com/presstv/status/547683635131076608
@khamenei_ir / RUSSIAN/IRANIAN MEDIA + ACTIVISTS https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir/status/547775037432795136

Foreign countries using the US' domestic human rights violations against it is an old propaganda tactic that dates back to at least the 1930s.³⁵

Conservatives had largely moved on from the moment of agreement some shared with supporters during P6. Their P7 tweets largely reprise oppositional tactics they introduced in previous periods, including impugning the credibility of supportive witnesses, changing the subject, news about attacks on police, complaints about the “liberal” media, and partisan sniping.

35 See Meredith L. Roman, “US Lynch Law and the Fate of the Soviet Union: The Soviet Uses of American Racial Violence,” in *Swift to Wrath: Lynching in Global Historical Perspective*, ed. William D. Carrigan and Christopher Waldrep (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2013).



TWITTER PERIOD 8 / APR 4 - APR 18, 2015

WALTER SCOTT

The shooting of Walter Scott in North Charleston, SC marks the beginning of P8 and produced the first massive volume spike since mid-December. At only 15 days, it is one of the shorter periods, yet it captures the most frequently-tweeted police killing in our dataset since Tamir Rice in November. It also showcases BLM as its participants respond to a major police brutality incident after having attained a fair degree of name recognition.

 **1,421,304**
TWEETS

 **468,160**
UNIQUE USERS

P8: Network communities

P8's network diagram (Figure 18) shows the increasing dominance of BLM over the Twitter police brutality conversation. The movement accounts for four of the ten largest communities and over 45% of all users. Mckesson breaks out as the solo leader of his own BLM community, in which he alone accounted for 61% of all incoming references. The remaining communities mostly represent various left-leaning constituencies, most of which we have seen in previous periods.

P8: Tweet content

Scott's name is the most-used hashtag in P8 by far, with #Blacklivesmatter a distant second (Figure 19). (Interestingly, few interviewees mentioned Scott's case. Among the handful who did, several had difficulty recalling the facts of the case and spoke of fatigue brought on by repeated playback of clips showing Scott's last moments.) Otherwise, hashtag usage in P8 continues the trend in previous periods of representing a broad range of police killings both more and less recent. Eric Harris, who was killed in Tulsa, OK on April 2, ranks third on the list, while #ferguson, #ericgarner, and #mikebrown appear in the fourth, sixth, and seventh spots respectively. The hashtag in the eighth position, #kentucky, warrants some explanation: on April 5, fans of the University of Kentucky's basketball team rioted in Lexington, KY after the team's loss in the Final Four. Many participants used the hashtag to observe how media portrayals of Lexington differed from those of Ferguson.

OVERVIEW

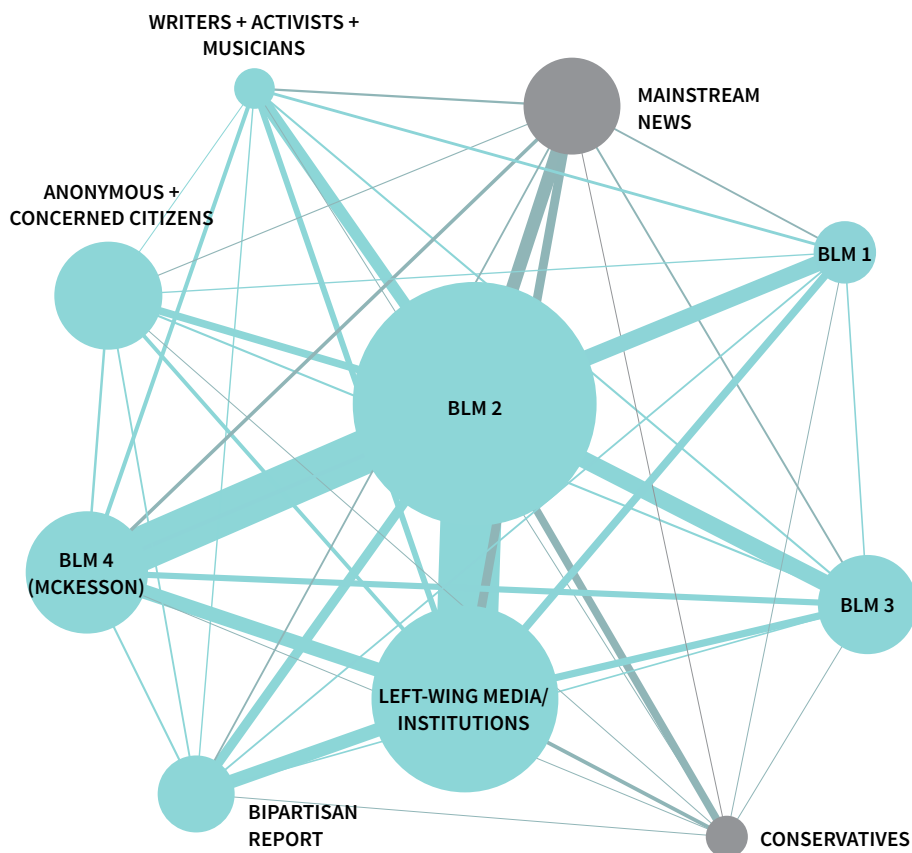
DeRay Mckesson anchors his own community

BLM leads four of the top 10 communities

Some conservatives condemn the Scott killing



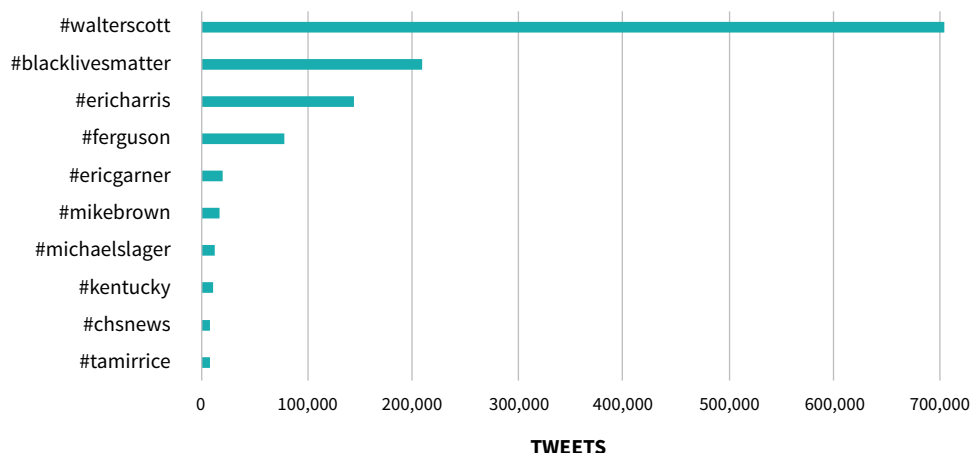
Figure 18: Social network diagram for period 8



BLM 1	BLM 2	BLM 3	BLM 4 (MCKESSON)	ANONYMOUS + CONCERNED CITIZENS
@mspackyetti (3652)	@keegannyc (3735)	@drumbeats4peace (6014)	@deray (35769)	@occupythemob (12585)
@jamilsmith (3133)	@jessebenn (2636)	@kerihilson (3380)	@time (7468)	@marvabbey (3245)
@andyrichter (2338)	@nettaaaaaaaaa (2116)	@leejasper (2668)	@brianvhughes (1644)	@bbcworld (1933)
@sophie_kleeman (2262)	@dreamdefenders (1648)	@thatkiddwill (2483)	@naacp (1312)	@shaneclaiborne (1238)
@newjusticedept (2214)	@antoniofrench (1513)	@tyreebp (2201)	@cjwerleman (299)	
BIPARTISAN REPORT	CONSERVATIVES	LEFT-WING MEDIA/ INSTITUTIONS	MAINSTREAM NEWS (MOSTLY CNN)	WRITERS + ACTIVISTS + MUSICIANS
@bipartisanism (28604)	@the__udontc (2771)	@tomadelsbach (3018)	@cnn (7971)	@bigboi (3806)
@antheabutler (674)	@senatortimscott (1751)	@theroot (2833)	@ac360 (7739)	@andragrimes (3740)
@kathrynbruscobk (609)	@foxnews (1215)	@splcenter (2708)	@vanjones68 (3070)	@shaunking (3694)
@reportedly (313)	@iowahawkblog (625)	@thehill (2591)	@outfrontcnn (2628)	@tusk81 (1985)
@bennettcartoons (280)	@waynedupreeshow (561)	@thinkprogress (2395)	@cnnsitroom (2509)	@illlllll (1414)



Figure 19: Top hashtags for period 8



Tweets by movement supporters do not change substantially in content during P8. This is probably at least in part because there are only so many ways to communicate one’s passionate opposition to police brutality. Much of the conversation focuses on analyzing how various details of the Scott video implicate his killer. Supporters also discuss Eric Harris, who was shot to death by a sheriff’s deputy in Tulsa, OK two days before Scott was killed. A third prominent news item was the legal troubles of Ramsey Orta, the man who filmed Eric Garner’s death, who was incarcerated at the time on unrelated charges.

Many in P8’s *Conservatives* community viewed Walter Scott’s killing, like Eric Garner’s but unlike Michael Brown’s and Tamir Rice’s, as an incident of unjustified police brutality. Therefore, we label the community as unaligned, as we did in P6. The stark, indisputable video evidence of a police officer shooting a man in the back as he ran away was enough to convince many who usually oppose the anti-brutality movement that it was correct in this instance:

SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK
@benshapiro / CONSERVATIVES https://twitter.com/benshapiro/status/585661431359614976
@iowahawkblog / CONSERVATIVES https://twitter.com/iowahawkblog/status/585590250434596867
@senatortimscott / CONSERVATIVES https://twitter.com/senatortimscott/status/585624503973195777

However, as in P6, attacks on the movement were also in no short supply, and these resembled what we saw in the earlier period. But such attacks rarely attempted to justify Scott’s shooting, a significant contrast to the many justifications cited for the Brown and Rice killings. Scott’s killer had at least a few online defenders—some of them created a crowd-funding campaign to raise money for his defense—but prominent conservatives were largely not among them.



TWITTER PERIOD 9 / APR 19 - MAY 31, 2015

FREDDIE GRAY

Our final period spans the last 43 days of our year-long data collection window. It begins on April 19, the day Freddie Gray died after spinal injuries sustained in the back of a Baltimore police van a week earlier. His death was followed by some of the most intense protests and clashes with police since the original Ferguson protests. As might be expected, Twitter played similar roles in P9 as it did in P3, spreading outrage, media criticism, statements of solidarity, and first-person reports from both mainstream and activist sources. But mainstream news also projected an international spotlight onto Baltimore during this period that reduced activists' capacity to dominate the narrative.

P9: Network communities

P9's network diagram (Figure 20) contains two BLM communities, and the larger one (*BLM 1*) is quite central to the conversation: its nine connections are among the ten largest in the entire network. In other words, all of the links involving *BLM 1* are more active than those in which it is not involved, with one exception: the link that connects *BLM 2 (Mckesson)* with *Baltimore locals*. The other communities will mostly be familiar from previous periods, though it's worth noting that the civil unrest in Baltimore prompted the emergence of a large locally-based community (*Baltimore locals*) for the first time since P4.

P9: Tweet content

P9's top hashtags are similar to P8's, with a recent police killing victim's name in the top spot, followed by #Blacklivesmatter in second place (Figure 21). But Baltimore did not completely dominate the rankings, as earlier homicides were still being discussed months after they occurred. It is instructive here to compare P9 with P3, another time when protests rocked a city after a high-profile killing. P3 was dominated by Ferguson-related hashtags, but P9 is much more diverse and less skewed in its distribution. This is the mark of a maturing movement: even when other police brutality incidents were dominating the headlines, participants did not lose sight of earlier events.

 **3,949,473**
TWEETS

 **897,397**
UNIQUE USERS

OVERVIEW

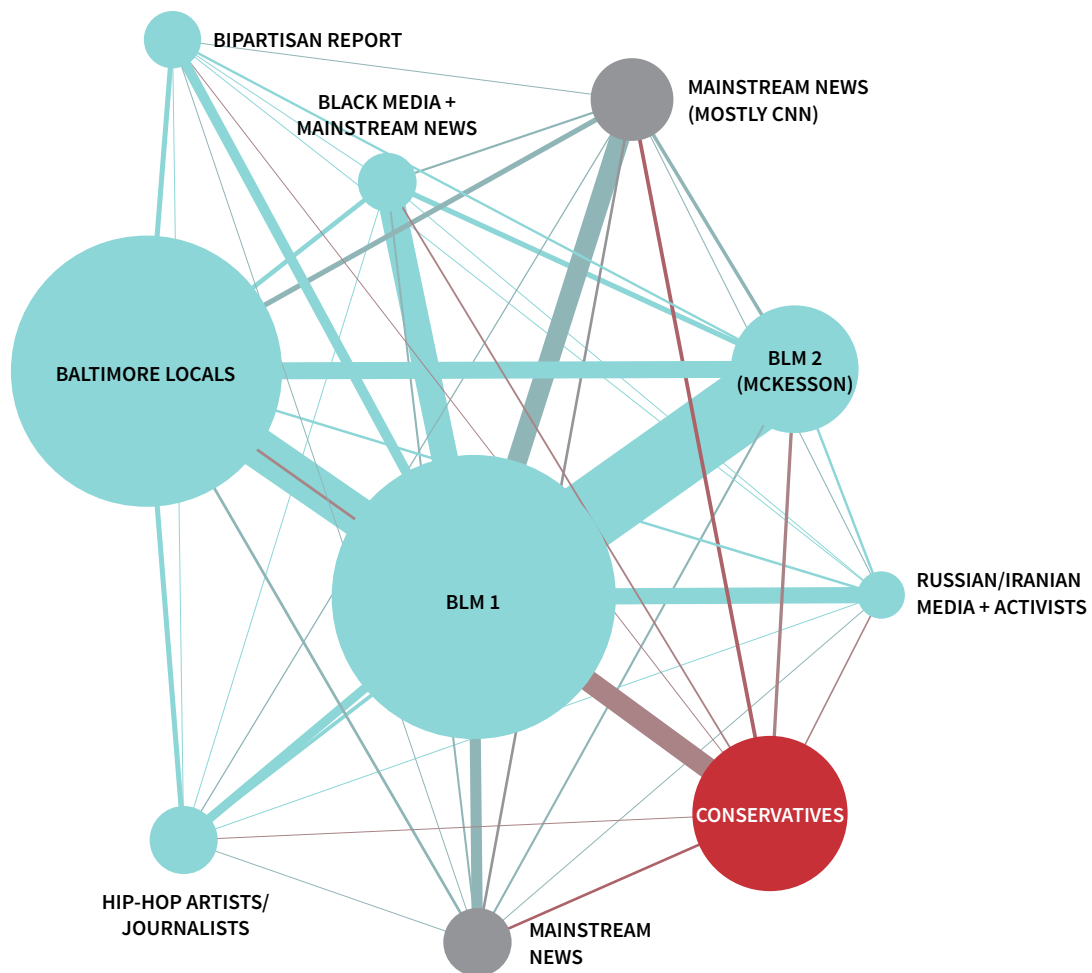
A local community makes the top 10 for the first time since P4

Most top tweets focus on the Baltimore protests

Distinctive tweet topics: police interactions, Black unity



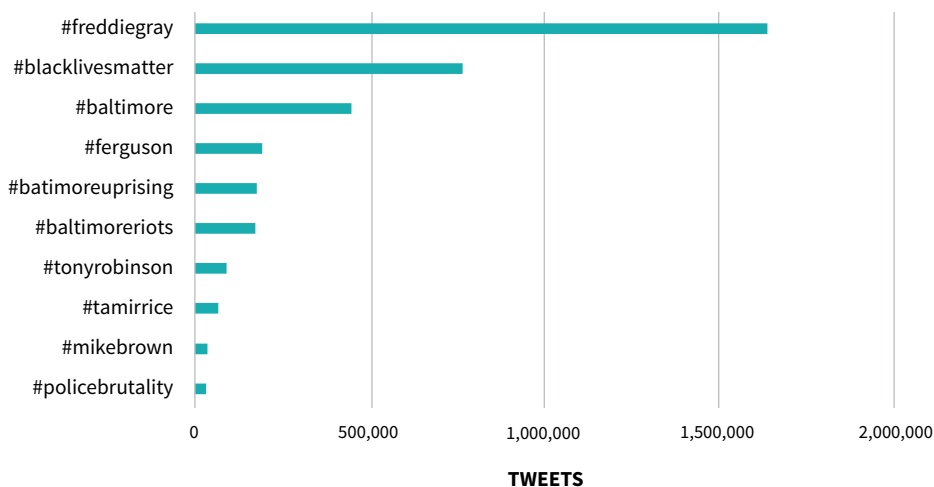
Figure 20: Social network diagram for period 9



BALTIMORE LOCALS	BIPARTISAN REPORT	BLM 1	BLM 2 (MCKESSON)	BLACK MEDIA + MAINSTREAM NEWS
@cmcampbell6 (18366)	@bipartisanism (53020)	@nettaaaaaaaa (13682)	@deray (50964)	@marilynmosbyesq (13377)
@ajplus (14508)	@frankthedoorman (1452)	@zellieimani (10073)	@russian_starr (5591)	@jonswaine (9359)
@charlieelovesu (10257)	@bipartisansport (1052)	@keegannyc (8751)	@nydailynews (5169)	@wesleylowery (5468)
@rectorsun (8133)	@leedsdaggers (1045)	@mayorsrb (8208)	@blackinformant (5107)	@justin_fenton (5304)
@iam_bwill (5822)	@shekinahjo (812)	@samswey (8096)	@theblackvoice (4350)	@tanehisicoates (4967)
CONSERVATIVES	HIP-HOP ARTISTS/JOURNALISTS	MAINSTREAM NEWS 1	MAINSTREAM NEWS 2 (MOSTLY CNN)	RUSSIAN/IRANIAN MEDIA + ACTIVISTS
@foxnews (10023)	@talibkweli (8654)	@ap (14822)	@cnn (22592)	@independent (3666)
@washingtonpost (8118)	@xxl (4909)	@abc (12697)	@cnnbrk (18872)	@rt_america (3561)
@waynedupreeshow (5243)	@joeybadass (4169)	@nbcnews (5938)	@cnnsitroom (6579)	@abbymartin (2784)
@thehill (3270)	@complexmag (2776)	@cbsnews (5637)	@ac360 (5226)	@rconflictnews (2738)
@chris_1791 (3081)	@cthagod (2468)	@abcnewslive (4683)	@bbcbreaking (4182)	@akhenaten15 (2676)



Figure 21: Top hashtags for period 9



The top tweets mostly focused on the protests: news stories abounded, as did first- and secondhand reports by activists. There appeared to be fewer dispatches from individual reporters than there were during the height of the Ferguson protests, with more highly-retweeted stories coming from news outlets’ official accounts. Images and video were very popular, including documentation of both civil and contentious interactions with police:

SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK
@cmccampbell6 / BALTIMORE LOCALS https://twitter.com/cmccampbell6/status/592042433048743936
@deray / BLM 2 (MCKESSON) https://twitter.com/deray/status/592301041250672640
@jelani9 / BALTIMORE LOCALS https://twitter.com/jelani9/status/592102034935013376

Supporters also spread images of Black unity, particularly several photos of rival Crip and Blood gang members protesting with one another and with members of the Nation of Islam:

SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK
@___panther / BALTIMORE LOCALS https://twitter.com/___panther/status/592110305435484161
@ddockett / BALTIMORE LOCALS https://twitter.com/ddockett/status/592430124525625344
@hbcubuzz / BALTIMORE LOCALS https://twitter.com/hbcubuzz/status/592152648062783489



Conservatives largely shifted back to the role of movement opponents in P9, denouncing Baltimore's protests as they did Ferguson's. Most of their top tweets were in line with those of previous periods, focusing on "rioters," protesters' unwillingness to wait for the results of an official investigation, and Gray's possible role in causing his own death. One novel twist on the familiar partisan brickbat was the claim that Democrats and/or liberals were to blame for Baltimore's protest violence:

SCREEN NAME / COMMUNITY / LINK

@a_m_perez / CONSERVATIVES

https://twitter.com/a_m_perez/status/600956580155232256

@miltonwolfmd / CONSERVATIVES

<https://twitter.com/miltonwolfmd/status/592832172228239360>

@waynebogda / CONSERVATIVES

<https://twitter.com/waynebogda/status/594315972405657600>

The volume spikes at the beginning of P9 produced most of the top tweets from both supporters and opponents. But as in Ferguson, eventually the National Guard was recalled, the protesters went home, and Twitter moved on. Tweets posted after the protests addressed a variety of victims and incidents, including Tamir Rice, Tony Robinson, Trayvon Martin, and Aiyana Jones as well as Gray. But without a single, immediate event to consolidate public attention, it is likely that committed movement supporters and opponents were the main parties to these conversations.



Ferguson, Missouri - AUGUST 18, 2014 - A group of young women march on W. Florissant Ave, protesting the killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed African-American teenager who was shot and killed by Darren Wilson, a white police officer.

PHILIP MONTGOMERY

CONCLUSIONS

"One of the things I'm really grateful for is the emphasis on elevating women of color, particularly queer women of color. And these people who have been contributing for years and years and generations... I appreciate is how Black Twitter has been instrumental to elevating the work."

—JASMIN, 25





THIS REPORT CAPTURES the birth of a social movement as refracted through online media. Participants in this movement came from many different walks of life, but not all constituencies were proportionally represented. BLM hubs were successful in projecting their messages through various nonactivist networks; in criticizing the media harshly for portraying police killings in anti-Black ways; and in educating some audiences rather than simply preaching to the choir. The question of whether BLM could have achieved all this without online media is ultimately unanswerable. There is no meaningful way to measure the magnitude of the internet's impact on the movement (whatever that might mean) or test how outcomes would have been different without it. We encourage readers to resist the urge to view the internet as an autonomous, external force, and instead to think of it as a series of tools that only gain social significance through how they are used.

The following discussion summarizes some of the report's most important findings and explores some of their most pressing implications. Like previous sections, it focuses on both *who* was involved most prominently and *what* was said, shared, and accomplished.

THE “WHO”: VOICES, VICTIMS, AND YOUTH

Who is heard?

The social network diagrams for all nine periods clearly show that supportive communities consistently attracted more attention than unaligned or opposed ones. There is a possibility that this result may be skewed somewhat by our particular keywords, but the inclusion of the victims' full names increased the likelihood that discussions beyond activist communities would be included. Thus, the alternative narratives supporters created were shared more widely than opposed or unaligned narratives. This is one of the movement's most important success stories, at least inasmuch as its online activities are concerned.

Throughout the year, the Twitter discussion remained Black-led. During no period do non-Black voices constitute an overwhelming majority of the most-referenced users, although the proportion of non-Blacks does seem to rise somewhat during the periods that include the highest peaks.³⁶ Although it makes sense that the people who care most about the impact of police violence on Blacks would be Black, it is significant that many of the most widely-heard voices are also Black, and that this holds true even during times of heightened attention. Activist communities in general and BLM communities in particular were major sources of information, as the network diagrams indicate. We should stress that these conclusions are preliminary, as we have not rigorously classified the races of all contributors to each community. But we believe this is fairly clear from our presentation of the communities and their top users.

Throughout the year, the Twitter discussion remained Black-led

³⁶ See also Olteanu, Weber, and Gatica-Perez, “Characterizing the Demographics Behind the #BlackLivesMatter Movement.”



Scanning the ranks of each period's top five user lists, it is plain to see that men are over-represented. While women appear regularly among each period's hubs, only one of the 10 most-referenced users overall is a woman (Johnetta Elzie/@nettaaaaaaa). It seems unlikely that this distribution of retweets and mentions rewards women's contributions proportionally. To some extent this reflects who audiences view as credible and whose perspectives and stories they value. The choice to lift up the voices of certain individuals over others' is not a neutral one, though its political implications may not be perceived by those who make it. Retweets and replies may not always be endorsements but they do partially determine which participants are seen as experts and leaders. Put more directly, they confer power, and the women in our dataset have not received a proportionate share.

VICTIMS

The 20 Black victims whose names we used as keywords allow us to consider what characteristics make a particular death go viral. Our sample is too small to produce statistically rigorous conclusions, but we can try to draw some preliminary inferences. In this case it is easier to rule factors out than to identify those that may be consequential. We can see, for example, that neither video evidence, not photographic evidence, nor being killed with a gun, nor mass protests, nor the victim's age is consistently associated with conversation volume on Twitter. Generally, incidents with some form of evidence seem to attract more attention than those without, but the mere presence of video or images is not sufficient to interest non-activists.

Predicting what social media users will react to is incredibly difficult, and there is no guarantee that because a certain type of case has gone viral in the past, similar future cases will also go viral. Even so, the fact that the most popular cases do not all share one or more unifying traits is worth remembering in itself. It appears there are no shortcuts in generating sympathy for the victims and anger against the system that killed them. If activists wish to be strategic about which cases to emphasize online, our data offer little direction regarding how to do so.

YOUTH

Given that many of the victims of police violence are Black teens and young adults, we expected this demographic to be heavily engaged on the issue, which they were. Young Black Twitter, as we called the communities in which they predominated, appeared among the ten largest network communities in five of the nine periods. But YBT's perspectives on the issue were fairly different from BLM's. We saw some of BLM's emblematic outrage and calls for justice in the YBT communities, but the latter were overall much less political. Instead, simple memorialization (e.g. "RIP Mike Brown") and dark humor were common. Police brutality may seem like a strange topic to joke about, but humor likely functions as a coping mechanism for a harsh reality youth feel they can do little about. Jokes may help ease some of the pain of witnessing people like them being killed for no apparent reason. It also fits with Black Twitter's usual lighthearted tone—joking about serious topics is one of its best-known pastimes.³⁷

37 BET.com, "Tweet Sheet: Black Twitter's Best Reactions to Anthony Mackie Endorsing Donald Trump," *BET.com*, October 2015, <http://www.bet.com/celebrities/photos/2015/10/tweet-sheet-black-twitter-s-best-reactions-to-anthony-mackie-endorsing-donald-trump.html?cid=facebook>; Matthew Rodriguez, "Hillary Clinton Just Tried to Reach Black Voters — And It Completely Backfired," *Mic*, December 28, 2015, <http://mic.com/articles/131324/black-twitter-suggests-new-hillary-logo-since-campaign-keeps-trying-to-be-black-friendly>; WatchTheYard, "#CivilRightsTwitter: Black Twitter Parodies What Would Happen If Civil Right Activists Had Twitter," *Watch The Yard*, December 14, 2015, <http://www.watchtheyard.com/pop-culture/civilrightstwitter/>.



One key conclusion that follows from this is that not all Black people identify with BLM. The YBT communities are consistently among the most insular in terms of their ties to other communities, including BLM. This, combined with our reading of the top YBT tweets, tells us that there are substantial populations of Black youth that are simply not being reached by BLM's messages, at least on Twitter. Our data do not tell us much about why this is the case, so we encourage future research to investigate this question more specifically. One study has already examined the racial makeup of the #Blacklivesmatter hashtag's user base, but Black youth are a subgroup of particular interest.³⁸ For activists and other concerned non-academics, this finding should prompt some reflection about whether BLM is reaching everyone it is intending to reach. If the answer is no, tactics may need to change to entice those who have not yet adopted the BLM perspective, but could.

Another point about potential youth audiences for BLM bears mentioning here. Research in education and political science has long shown that young people are largely disengaged from politics and civic engagement.³⁹ Traditional forms of civic engagement such as voting, regular news consumption, and participation in membership-based local organizations are especially in decline among youth. This is how most K12 civics classes portray civic life, but it does not resonate with most students, especially students of color.⁴⁰ Schools that teach civics and social studies have an opportunity to help their students reconnect with civic life by incorporating BLM into their curricula. However, this prospect presents K12 educators with a dilemma: ignore BLM and forgo the benefits of allowing students to engage with an issue that affects them directly, or teach the movement and risk incurring the wrath of parents and administrators who find it objectionable.⁴¹ In other words, incorporating BLM into civics curricula may offer a way to help students discover the value of civic life at a time when established methods of doing so have failed. But this option is not without risks, and teachers wishing to adopt it need to understand that. Several online resources for teaching about BLM are already available to help interested teachers get started.⁴² (We humbly suggest that this report may be appropriate for advanced high school civics courses and undergraduate-level communication and sociology courses.)

Incorporating Black Lives Matter into civics curricula may offer a way to help students discover the value of civic life at a time when established methods of doing so have failed

38 Olteanu, Weber, and Gatica-Perez, "Characterizing the Demographics Behind the #BlackLivesMatter Movement."

39 Bennett, "Changing Citizenship in the Digital Age"; Zukin et al., *A New Engagement?*; Stephen Coleman, "Doing IT for Themselves: Management versus Autonomy in Youth E-Citizenship," *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth*, 2008, 189–206; Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

40 Ginwright, "Hope, Healing, and Care."

41 Jef Rouner, "Student Sent Home For Wearing #BlackLivesMatter Shirt With List of People Killed by Police," *Houston Press*, September 10, 2015, <http://www.houstonpress.com/news/student-sent-home-for-wearing-blacklivesmatter-shirt-with-list-of-people-killed-by-police-7747458>.

42 "Black Lives Matter: From Hashtag to Movement," *Anti-Defamation League*, accessed January 19, 2016, <http://www.adl.org/education-outreach/lesson-plans/c/black-lives-matter.html#>; Chalida Anusasananan et al., "Teaching #Blacklivesmatter.," *San Francisco Public Schools*, accessed January 19, 2016, <http://sfusd.libguides.com/blacklivesmatter>; Frank Leon Roberts, "Black Lives Matter Syllabus," accessed January 19, 2016, <http://www.blacklivesmattersyllabus.com/>; Marcia Chatelain, "How to Teach Kids About What's Happening in Ferguson," *The Atlantic*, August 25, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/08/how-to-teach-kids-about-whats-happening-in-ferguson/379049/>.

THE “WHAT”: DIGITAL TOOLS AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

When we ask about BLM’s most visible uses of online media in its first year in the national spotlight, our data suggest several answers. First, activists used digital tools to generate alternative narratives about police violence to counter the so-called neutrality of the mainstream press. These narratives affirmed the value of unarmed Black lives and roundly condemned all those who defended police actions to end them. During the year we analyzed, activists managed to spread their messages on this issue much further than ever before. They did so by appealing to the moral sensitivities of non-activists who in turn projected their messages before audiences who otherwise would not have witnessed them. These non-activists—celebrities, politicians, online humorists, and ordinary citizens—either endorsed BLM’s messages or at least recommended that their followers listen to them. This process of information gatekeeping is not new, but before the internet, activists had to rely on news outlets to carry their messages. Mainstream journalism still plays a major role in this today, but it is no longer alone.

Criticism of racially-based differences in media portrayals of police, victims, and unrelated crimes by Whites justified these alternative narratives. The use of mugshots for Black victims and official photos for police was harshly condemned, as were the inclusion of details about victims’ criminal pasts. The effect was to demonstrate that certain media outlets were in fact taking sides despite their editorial stance of neutrality. Unfavorable portrayals of victims and protesters may have contributed to the anti-media hostility seen during the BLM-influenced university protests in the fall of 2015.⁴³ At the same time, activists relied on trusted journalists and news outlets to pass their messages on to larger audiences. But journalists had to earn that trust: the working assumption we saw expressed repeatedly was that “the media” in general stood with the status quo and against the movement.

The Web analysis findings testify further to Black Lives Matter’s prowess in spreading their messages online. Websites linked to the organization adroitly tapped into a preexisting and powerful journalistic network for accomplishing a single task that is critical to activist work: circulating highly visible and accessible information. That a dense network of news sites dominates this Web network speaks to the Web’s primary utility for Black Lives Matter and social media activism more generally. Given the direct linkages between Twitter and the open Web, and the reciprocal flow of Black Lives Matter-related news and information through each, we can see how the structure and constitution of the Black Lives Matter Web network has assisted in keeping police brutality consistently in the public eye. For instance, a previous study by one of this report’s co-authors found that news media headlines about Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner usually framed them as innocent Black victims of police violence.⁴⁴ Concurring, a recent report by the Pew Research Center shows

43 Austin Huguélet and Daniel Victor, “I Need Some Muscle’: Missouri Activists Block Journalists,” *The New York Times*, November 9, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/10/us/university-missouri-protesters-block-journalists-press-freedom.html>.

44 Charlton McIlwain, “Criminal Blackness: News Coverage of Black Male Victims, From Rodney King to Michael Brown,” in *Media & Minorities*, ed. Yasemin Shoorman et al. (Berlin: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, forthcoming).



that the percentage of U.S. citizens who say change is needed to address racial problems increased significantly over the time that Black Lives Matter has been actively part of the public conversation about race and police brutality.⁴⁵ Again, the Black Lives Matter Web network demonstrates how it is poised to shape the online news environment. Future research might focus on exploring the dynamics of this process and how they change over time.

LEARNING

Our Twitter data indicate that the platform hosted at least three occasions of large-scale informal learning: the Ferguson protests of August 2014, the non-indictment of Eric Garner's killer, and the death of Walter Scott. Twitter onlookers who were previously unaware of the extent of the tensions between police and Black communities expressed bewilderment at the brutality of the police response in Ferguson. We see this bewilderment as evidence of a jarring educational process resulting directly from images and video of protesters suffering at the hands of riot police. While it is impossible to know exactly how all these internal conflicts were resolved, their mere existence implies that under some political circumstances, political appeals on social media can do more than reinforce people's preexisting opinions.

The other major informal learning process occurred primarily among conservatives. The admission by some of them that Eric Garner and Walter Scott may have been killed unjustly is remarkable given the intensely tribal nature of 21st-century American politics. Indeed, it is difficult to overstate the rarity of such cross-cutting agreement—admitting that the other side may be correct is usually stigmatized as counterproductive. The learning process here differed from the Ferguson moment in that awareness of anti-Black police brutality was probably not the main learning outcome. Instead, by lifting the issue to national prominence, activists prompted conservatives to educate themselves on the specifics of a number of police brutality cases. In two of those cases, some conservatives concluded that the police officer's actions warranted criminal investigation. In both cases it was their own analysis of the video evidence, not arguments or disputed facts pushed by BLM activists, that convinced them to disregard their default inclination to defer to official police accounts. But without BLM, it is unlikely they would have been discussing these cases in the first place. The potentially transgressive consequences of agreeing with the other side were not lost on conservatives, some of whom attempted to shore up their in-group bona fides by taking partisan potshots. This is not the sort of thing any self-respecting ideologue would want to engage in too often, but in these cases the evidence suggests it did occur.

In keeping with this theme, many interview participants cited “education” and “amplification” as their primary goals for engaging in conversations using the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag. They described using this and other related hashtags to draw attention to structural anti-Blackness, inequality, and erasure that contributes to a lack of awareness surrounding

Many interview participants cited “education” and “amplification” as their primary goals for engaging in conversations using the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag

⁴⁵ Pew Research Center, “Across Racial Lines, More Say Nation Needs to Make Changes to Achieve Racial Equality,” August 5, 2015, <http://www.people-press.org/2015/08/05/across-racial-lines-more-say-nation-needs-to-make-changes-to-achieve-racial-equality/>.



police misconduct and Black communities. Participants also discussed using social media for their own learning purposes — to become more educated about advocacy for justice and equality in Black communities.

“The goal for me is to learn. Every time I get on the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag, the goal is to learn. I’m reading more, I’m learning more. I’m learning about the rhetoric that people are using,” said Opeola, a 23-year-old student who described herself as living in an isolated environment in a small Southern college town. “I see myself as... if I’m going to be the token Black friend, I’m going to be the only one who’s there teaching them [White friends and would-be allies].”

Tweeting and retweeting commentary related to BLM served as a guide of sorts for educating people in Opeola’s offline social group: “It’s arming me. It’s arming me to be better,” she said. Shelley, a White woman in her 50s, had a similar take:

I’m sort of deliberate about trying to lift up and give more exposure to voices that I think are sort of less heard than they should be. I keep an eye out for young people, certainly a lot of the activism that grew out of Ferguson. I try to re-tweet those folks or tell people, “I’m reading this and you should check this out because it’s really moving.”

White participants in particular spoke of using Twitter and other social media platforms to educate others in their communities about the multifaceted issues raised in the BLM conversations. They attempted to use what they learned through social media to penetrate the racial, social, and class boundaries that would otherwise insulate their family members, friends and colleagues from the conflict.

However, some Black interviewees resisted this type of engagement, pointing out that Black people are often expected to carry the emotional burden of educating others outside the community. Kimani, a biracial 25-year-old visual artist in California, exemplified this viewpoint:

The number one thing is to focus on educating our own community. Thinking that we’re not a monolith. It’s hard for me to have conversations with people who aren’t thinking about this on their own. I don’t have time to be a contributor of the research that I’ve been given. ... I’m not going to have vocal conversation with you. They want to have a positional argument with a power dynamic, and I don’t have time for that.

MOST-DISCUSSED INCIDENTS

A closer look at the day-to-day tweet totals allows us to examine which incidents yielded the most discussion. Of the ten days with the highest tweet totals, five occurred during the initial Ferguson protests (August 13-14 and 17-19); three on and following the day of Darren Wilson’s non-indictment (November 24-26), and two on and after Daniel Pantaleo’s non-indictment (December 3-4). The most important finding here is not that Twitter attention is event-driven, which has been well-known for a while, but that the events that drive attention in this case lie largely outside of activists’ control. While protesters of course control their own actions, the Ferguson protests were responses to an external event, and what made them nationally newsworthy were also external events (the violent police responses). This



implies that activists may be somewhat limited in the extent to which they can generate large-scale online debate by themselves.

We were also a bit surprised that police killings themselves usually did not provoke major spikes close to the times they occurred. This underscores several crucial points: first, such incidents do not provoke mass debates automatically—activists must work not only to spread the basic facts of a case but also narratives and interpretations that get people talking. Second, discussions around police killings nearly always build steam over an extended period of time. Unlike with live-tweeted TV shows or natural disasters where large audiences all participate at the same time, it takes longer for BLM activists to share information, gather evidence, and build support for action. Eric Garner is perhaps the best example of this: his case barely made a blip when it first occurred, but activists kept the story alive with updates on his killer and the legal troubles of the man who filmed the killing. By the time the Staten Island grand jury announced its decision, the case had had over four months to build an audience. Such sequences of events are difficult to substantiate without research given the extremely small proportion of relevant social media messages any one person can consume.

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Activists may be somewhat limited in the extent to which they can generate large-scale online debate by themselves

DESIRED OUTCOMES OF ONLINE MEDIA USE

To better understand user motivations for tweeting about BLM-related issues and engaging in conversation around related issues, interview participants were asked about the kinds of social changes they wanted to see as a result of their online activism. Their comments ranged from identifying a political candidate in the 2016 presidential election who would make racial justice part of their platform to the complete dissolution of local law enforcement groups. The primary type of desired outcome was policy change, whether driven by voters at the grassroots level or by federal or judicial mandate.

Tommie Pierson, the minister whose church served as a meeting ground for protestors in the immediate wake of Brown's killing, who also serves as a state legislator in Missouri, presented a perspective focused on voting and self-governance that was common among interviewees older than 50:

One of the things that I pressed was that we live in a democracy by registering, voting and voting for yourself. Where we dominate, we should rule. Black people dominate in Ferguson, but they weren't ruling. They let someone else choose reps who did not represent them. You can't ask people who run and get elected to resign when something happens. That's the lesson that we have to teach. We have to teach that in school.

Others talked more about general policy and social outcomes. "I see two sets of goals," said Leslie McFayden, who runs the Tumblr blog #FergusonResponseNetwork, which posts publicly submitted information about protests, teach-ins and related activism, organizing it by state. "One is policy driven in ensuring that Black folks are treated fairly, electing people of color, ending stop-and-frisk. On the flip side of that is collective Black liberation and acknowledgment of what it looks like for each Black person."



Emrys, a gender-fluid mental health therapist in Pennsylvania, echoed a similar sentiment:

I'm hoping for real reform and real consequences. Something that's going to show the Black citizens in this country that the justice system cares for them. That police officers don't have the power to kill you at will. I think of a lot of the problems we have is because there's no accountability for when Black people are dying or being killed. When a person who is supposed to protect you has free rein, how are you supposed to live? How are you supposed to feel like you're part of a community? That takes a toll on society. I think we need to do something serious about the police force here, to put measures in place.

Many participants referred to creating a sense of generational safety, commenting that their labor was motivated by the desire to see a better world or different circumstances for the children in their lives.

HOW DOES BLM COMPARE TO OTHER RECENT ONLINE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS?

Emphasizing the value of online tools is by now a well-worn trope of social movement reporting and scholarship. For example, the Zapatistas (1994), the Battle in Seattle (1999), the Arab Spring (2011), the anti-SOPA/PIPA movement (2011-2012), 15M/Indignados (2011-present), and the Occupy movement (2011-present) have all been portrayed through this lens.⁴⁶ Because technologies and people's uses thereof are constantly changing, they must be re-investigated every time a major new movement emerges. We must ask once more: in what ways does this movement resemble and differ from its predecessors? Which of our findings are truly new developments and which build incrementally on past innovations?

BLM borrowed many of its digital tactics from prior movements, including the development and independent distribution of new issue narratives, media criticism, systemic critiques, and enlisting well-known endorsers. But arguably the most substantial difference between it and its predecessors has to do with the nature of police brutality as an issue. Simply put, it is extremely well-suited to internet-based activism. Unlike wealth or income inequality, police brutality is concrete, discrete in its manifestations, and above all, visual. Hashtagged names and other digital memorials remind the public of the irreplaceable losses felt by the victims' families. The frighteningly common occurrence of these killings means that activists and journalists have no shortage of occasions to discuss the issue. And the video and photographic evidence that is often available provokes public outrage and disgust, which some-

46 Maria Garrido and Alexander Halavais, "Mapping Networks of Support for the Zapatista Movement," in *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice*, ed. Martha McCaughey and Michael D. Ayers (New York: Routledge, 2003), 165-84; W. Lance Bennett, "Communicating Global Activism," *Information, Communication & Society* 6, no. 2 (January 1, 2003): 143-68, doi:10.1080/1369118032000093860a; Sean Aday et al., "Watching From Afar: Media Consumption Patterns Around the Arab Spring," *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 7 (July 1, 2013): 899-919, doi:10.1177/0002764213479373; Yochai Benkler et al., "Social Mobilization and the Networked Public Sphere: Mapping the SOPA-PIPA Debate," *Political Communication* 32, no. 4 (October 2, 2015): 594-624, doi:10.1080/10584609.2014.986349; Sandra González-Bailón, Javier Borge-Holthoefer, and Yamir Moreno, "Broadcasters and Hidden Influentials in Online Protest Diffusion," *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 7 (March 8, 2013): 943-65, doi:10.1177/0002764213479371; Benjamin Gleason, "#Occupy Wall Street Exploring Informal Learning About a Social Movement on Twitter," *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 7 (July 1, 2013): 966-82, doi:10.1177/0002764213479372.



times leads to solidarity. This in turn increases the number of sympathetic ears that policy proposals intended to end police brutality ultimately reach.

The broader message here is that the success of born-digital social movements may be linked with the specific issue being championed. Wealth inequality is abstract, difficult to grasp, and extremely subtle in its effects, which is probably part of the reason the Occupy movement never collectively offered a plan to address it. The incumbent regime's oppressiveness is the only thing the Egyptian and Tunisian protesters of early 2011 agreed on. In neither case could the respective diverse coalitions opposing the regimes agree on what should replace them. In contrast, the core demand of BLM—"stop killing us"—has been clear and widely agreed-upon from the start.⁴⁷ Related demands such as Campaign Zero have been aimed at realizing this ultimate goal and have not yet seen widespread public opposition within the movement. This puts BLM in the company of the anti-SOPA/PIPA movement, which also focused on a concrete policy goal. But the latter movement mobilized to oppose a single specific legislative proposal and enjoyed widespread corporate support, neither of which is true of the former. Furthermore, while the possibly harmful effects of untested copyright legislation did provoke outrage, they lack the visceral and visual gravitas of witnessing police kill unarmed citizens. Needless to say, the stakes are much higher for BLM and those they seek to protect.

The core demand of BLM—"stop killing us"—has been clear and widely agreed-upon from the start

WHAT'S MISSING?

As we summarize the most important trends in our data, it is just as important to consider what relevant people, institutions, and events are underrepresented or entirely absent. Probably the most obvious case of underemphasis is female victims of police violence; of the 20 names on our list, only two are women (Tanisha Anderson and Yvette Smith). This is to some extent a consequence of the sources from which we drew our names (see Appendix A), which failed to mention the names of Natasha McKenna and Aura Rosser, to name just two women who died at the hands of police during the year covered by our Twitter data. Some of our Twitter users lamented the lack of attention to Black female victims of police violence, using the hashtag #SayHerName to draw attention to this omission. Our data make it clear that the declaration that "Black lives matter" does not include women by default. Researchers in this area should consider an intersectional approach that incorporates the experiences of women, trans* individuals, and other underrepresented groups. Members and allies of such groups have drawn attention to their absence in this conversation by creating their own hashtags, which offer logical starting points for research.

The lack of inclusion is particularly glaring given that #Blacklivesmatter was created by three women. But these creators could not control the hashtag's popularity, the way mainstream news outlets used it, or who claimed affiliation with the movement. The very openness that allows anyone to use a hashtag or quote a tweet led to an erasure of the phrase's origins as more and more people adopted it. This was exacerbated by the anointing of certain individuals by the media and Twitter users as movement leaders. This is more than a simple matter of who receives credit—it also matters who is seen to speak for the

⁴⁷ Kang, "Our Demand Is Simple."



movement, who decides which activists can legitimately operate in its name, and how long-term decisions about its political activities are made. These questions rarely reached the top of the Twitter agenda, although they may have been discussed somewhere among the less-popular tweets. The power of the audience to decide whose messages will be widely heard undermines the ability of any one individual or group to control a movement's social media component. The absence of #Blacklivesmatter's creators from the ranks of our data's top users supports this notion.

We also found that attempts to coordinate movement action were rare among the top tweets. By this we mean information about where protests would be held, invitations to participate, instructions on how to participate, and discussions about what kinds of actions should be held. We saw a few such tweets in passing and some of our interview participants mentioned finding out about protests from Twitter. However, movement action tweets were not among the most shared. This implies that most people paying attention to BLM online were more interested in consuming information and participating digitally than in offline participation. This is not much of a surprise, especially considering the risks of some of BLM's offline actions. But it does remind us that just because a certain movement use of Twitter is not the most visible does not mean it is not occurring somewhere. It simply means that researchers and interested citizens might need to dig a bit deeper to understand the full scope of social media's value for activists.

The very openness that allows anyone to use a hashtag or quote a tweet led to an erasure of the phrase's origins as more and more people adopted it

CLOSING REMARKS

By early 2016, BLM had entered the mainstream. The movement has been profiled in many news and magazine articles, its leaders have appeared on late night television shows alongside celebrities and politicians, and one of them (DeRay Mckesson) is running for mayor of Baltimore. As we end this report, we stress that it comes at the beginning of what will almost certainly be a long, rich research program on BLM and related activism. We have only scratched the surface of our data, and we will continue to explore it in additional publications. In choosing to focus on the most widely-shared content, we likely omitted many important details, but we believe this was a logical first cut at the data. The absence of any participant's name from this report does not in any way reflect on his/her relevance or commitment to the movement. Similarly, we probably have not addressed all the implications of our results, but we hope our readers will fill in some of those gaps as they discuss the report both on- and offline. For researchers wishing to conduct secondary analyses based on research questions not raised here, we will publicly release all Web and Twitter data described in this report on January 1, 2017 (see Appendix A for details). Finally, we again invite anyone with an interest in the movement to send us their feedback, particularly if they have ideas or questions about specific analyses they would like to see.



APPENDIX A:

TWITTER METHODS

We purchased the 40,815,975 tweets analyzed in this study directly from Twitter. They include all public tweets posted between June 1, 2014 and May 31, 2015 matching at least one of the keywords in Table 3 that had not been deleted as of July 20, 2015. However, retweets of deleted tweets were included in the dataset.

Our keyword list draws from two sources: a series of tweets posted by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund's Twitter account (@naacp_ldf) on December 3, 2014 containing the names of unarmed Black people killed by police between 1999 and 2014; and a May 1, 2015 BuzzFeed article listing a number of unarmed Black males killed by police in 2014 and 2015.^{48 49} Neither of these lists is necessarily complete, but they were the most comprehensive we could find. From the NAACP list we pulled all of the 2014 names, and from the BuzzFeed list we pulled all names except two, which resulted in a combined total of 20 names.⁵⁰ To these we added the hashtags "#Blacklivesmatter" and "#ferguson" and the phrase "black lives matter" due to their significance to the movement.

We analyzed the tweet data using software written in Python by the first author. Most of this software is available through the Python module TSM, which can be found here: <http://github.com/dfreelon/tsm>. First we separated the authors and full text of all tweets into the nine time periods described above. Next we created a network edge list for each period that connected usernames (nodes) to one another on the basis of retweets or mentions (edges), so that each period was represented by its own network. This was an effective means of analyzing this data given that well over 80% of the tweets consisted of retweets and mentions. Mentions of multiple users within a single tweet were counted as distinct edges. We then generated a set of network communities within each period's edge list using an algorithm called the Louvain method.⁵¹ The Louvain method creates communities by maximizing edge density within communities and minimizing it between communities. For very large networks like ours, Louvain creates small numbers of very large communities and large numbers of very small communities (many of which consist of a single user retweeting or mentioning another once). In each period, we analyzed only the 10 largest communities, which in most cases accounted for well over half of all users involved in retweets or mentions. A more in-depth justification of this methodological choice is available in the peer-reviewed article that introduced it.⁵²

48 The first tweet in this series is here: https://twitter.com/naacp_ldf/status/540250644658278401

49 Nicholas Quah and Laura E. David, "Here's A Timeline Of Unarmed Black People Killed By Police Over Past Year," *BuzzFeed*, May 1, 2015, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/nicholasquah/heres-a-timeline-of-unarmed-black-men-killed-by-police-over>.

50 Dontre Hamilton and Romain Brisbon's names did not make it onto our final list due to a clerical error.

51 Vincent D. Blondel et al., "Fast Unfolding of Communities in Large Networks," *Journal of Statistical Mechanics: Theory and Experiment* 2008, no. 10 (2008): P10008.

52 Freelon, Lynch, and Aday, "Online Fragmentation in Wartime A Longitudinal Analysis of Tweets about Syria, 2011–2013."

Communities initially emerge from the Louvain algorithm with numerical labels. We qualitatively inspected the usernames, profiles, and tweets of the hubs in each community to give it a descriptive label. This process involved a fair degree of subjectivity, and some may disagree with some of the labels we created. However, we attempted to justify them by displaying the top five most-referenced users within each community and by describing each community's basic characteristics.

We created our network visualizations using a program called Gephi (<https://gephi.org>). Before visualizing each network, we created a new edge list for each period in which community labels were used as nodes instead of usernames. This drastically decreased the amount of system resources needed to generate the visualizations and also made them much easier to interpret.

We determined the top hashtags within each period by extracting all hashtags into a list and counting the incidence of each unique hashtag. This analysis was case-insensitive.

The tweets to which we link as examples of our content trends were drawn from the ranks of the most-retweeted in each period. We did not simply create a list of the most-retweeted tweets in each period because there were trends we wanted to illustrate that required us to discuss tweets beyond the top five or 10. Again, there was some subjectivity here, and we acknowledge that other researchers may have drawn other conclusions from the data.

We took several steps to protect the privacy and intellectual property of the Twitter users whose usernames and tweets we discuss. These were:

- » Posting links to tweets rather than reproducing their full text. This allows anyone who would like to opt out of this research to do so by deleting their tweets. Reproducing full-text tweets in the report would have eliminated this possibility.
- » Linking only to tweets that had collected a minimum of 100 retweets by December 2015. This makes it less likely that our research will shine an unwanted spotlight on previously obscure content.
- » Linking only to tweets posted by users who had at least 3,000 followers or were Twitter-verified by December 2015. That follower threshold places users in the top 1% by followers.⁵³ We did this to reduce the likelihood of exposing relatively unknown users to unwanted public scrutiny.

Despite these steps, we realize that some users may object to the presence of their usernames or tweet links in this report, and we accept full responsibility for including them. We believe our ethical choices strike a balance between the individual rights of the parties to this conversation and the right of the public to know how a movement of such political significance rose to prominence online. That said, if anyone whose name or content is referenced in this report experiences any harm as a result of said inclusion, we encourage them to let us know so that we can work to reduce or eliminate it.

⁵³ Jon Bruner, "Tweets Loud and Quiet," *O'Reilly Radar*, December 18, 2013, <http://radar.oreilly.com/2013/12/tweets-loud-and-quiet.html>.



Finally, we expect that some researchers will wish to make secondary use of our Twitter data. Because we want to reserve time to capitalize on our research investment, we will embargo our data until Jan 1, 2017. On that date, we will publish the tweet IDs for every tweet in our dataset. This not only complies with Twitter's terms of service, which prohibit the distribution of full Twitter datasets; it also gives parties to the conversation time to opt out of future research if they wish.

APPENDIX B:

HYPERLINK NETWORK ANALYSIS METHODS

We collected hyperlink data through a paid subscription to VOSON (Virtual Observatory for the Study of Online Networks), a leading hyperlink network analysis software tool produced by the Uberlink Corporation and its founder/CEO Rob Ackland at the Australian National University.⁵⁴ As the basis for our crawl, we used 100 sites, culled from two sources. The first source included nine BLM-connected websites. The second source was Google, from which we culled the highest-ranking URLs referencing BLM. The link results we generated were grouped by domain, such that the unit of our analysis was the site (rather than specific pages). See Table 6 for the complete list of URLs.

In addition to the basic link data, we collected a variety of metadata about these sites to use in our analysis. This includes:

- » Demographic data about the visitors to each site, accessed via a paid subscription to Alexa.com
- » MozRank Data, collected via a paid subscription to a Web traffic data tool UrlProfiler⁵⁵
- » Url Meta Tag data using Buzzstream’s MetaTag Extractor⁵⁶

Data and analyses and visualizations were conducted and produced using two network analysis and visualization software packages: Gephi and UCINET.

Table 6: Seed URLs for Black Lives Matter Web network

SEED URLS
http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/04/opinion/the-truth-of-black-lives-matter.html
http://www.wmactionnews5.com/story/29301326/new-billboard-in-orange-mound-puts-twist-on-black-lives-matter
http://www.politicususa.com/2015/08/10/real-black-lives-matter-wsnts-activists-publicly-apologize-bernie-sanders.html
https://justindametz.wordpress.com/2015/08/28/why-black-lives-matter-is-crucial-all-lives-matter-is-unnecessary-and-white-lives-matter-is-just-racist/
http://www.filmsforaction.org/articles/the-next-time-someone-responds-to-black-lives-matter-with-all-lives-matter-send-them-this/
http://www.newsbusters.org/blogs/culture/dylan-gwinn/2015/09/14/richard-sherman-blasts-black-lives-matter-activist
http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2015/09/elizabeth-warren-black-lives-matter
http://www.twincities.com/statefair/ci_28673776/black-lives-matter-plans-protest-at-state-fair

⁵⁴ <http://uberlink.com/about>

⁵⁵ <http://urlprofiler.com/our-data-explained/>

⁵⁶ <http://tools.buzzstream.com/meta-tag-extractor>



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APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW METHODS

Our 40 interviewees constitute a convenience sample. This sampling strategy was applied as social-media users who tweeted the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag make up a nebulous meta-network of active participants in BLM and there is no systematic way to select them. A call for participation was tweeted out repeatedly between June and October of 2015. Interviewees needed only to have some knowledge of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag to participate. Informed consent for participation was obtained via electronic signature, and participants were asked to choose a pseudonym or agree to have only their first names used in the report as a means of protecting their identities. Interviews were conducted by a co-PI (Clark) in person, by telephone, or via videoconference, per the interviewee's preference. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed according to an inductive grounded-theory process described by Hesse-Biber and Leavy.⁵⁷ First, the interviews were analyzed for descriptive codes which were used to identify participant thoughts, feelings and motivations as expressed in the conversations. Next, analytic codes were developed through an iterative process of reviewing the data, and were used to create categories for analysis. Using a checklist developed by Hesse-Biber and Leavy, the data were examined for validity before being included in the final report.⁵⁸ The quotes presented in this report are taken from interviews with key informants, and are used to triangulate findings from the Twitter data and Web analysis portions of the research.

57 Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia L. Leavy, *The Practice of Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2011).

58 Hesse-Biber and Leavy, *The Practice of Qualitative Research*, 318.