

#IfTheyGunnedMeDown: An Analysis of Mainstream and Social Media in the Ferguson, Missouri, Shooting of Michael Brown

Electronic News
2018, Vol. 12(1) 23-41
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DOI: 10.1177/1931243117697767
journals.sagepub.com/home/enx



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Abstract

Focusing on the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, this study examined the framing of mainstream newspaper coverage of social media activism in the aftermath of the 2014 police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. People of color primarily used the hashtag to draw attention to what they perceived as negative stereotypes perpetuated by the news media. The study employed a textual analysis of news coverage combined with semistructured interviews with hashtag-protest participants. The analysis found that the mainstream media followed news production rituals by relying primarily on elite, established sources and generally ignoring the social media protestors' voices. The social media protestors who used the hashtag said they used it to bypass the mainstream media, and this research indicates they may well have done so and possibly reached a younger generation that relies more on social media than legacy media.

Keywords

incognizant racism, theory, framing, new media/social media, news format, in-depth interviews, method, race, dimensions of journalism

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In the aftermath of the August 2014 police shooting of unarmed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, a social media movement emerged. Disillusioned with the way the U.S. mainstream media portray people of color, activists began posting personal photos on social media. Using the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, activists displayed contrasting images of themselves: one meant to portray an “upstanding citizen” and the other meant to symbolize a more stereotypical image. With the photos came the question: If police shot me, which photo would the news media show? Through this clever play on news media’s tendency to ambiguously frame police violence victims, a crowd-sourced grassroots movement channeled its outrage at the deaths of Brown and others. Seeking to understand social media activism and protests of media frames, this study examines the use of #IfTheyGunnedMeDown and situates the motivations and actions of the hashtag protestors within the legacy media’s coverage of the August 2014 events.

Given the influential role of news media, examining portrayals of ethnic and racial groups is essential. Media define news agendas and frame narratives, thereby infusing meaning and shaping cultural perceptions (D’Angelo & Kuypers, 2010; Entman, 1994). They often perpetuate myths and stereotypes about cultural and ethnic groups, for example, the assumption that ethnicity equals criminality (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Entman, 2006).

This project examines the potential for social media spaces such as Twitter to function as conduits for social protest. Within the backdrop of the legacy media’s framing of Ferguson, social media hashtags such as #IfTheyGunnedMeDown functioned both as protest speech and as competing media frames. This project seeks to understand the use of social media within the wider media narrative about Michael Brown and the Ferguson protests. It also examines legacy media coverage of social media protests that followed Brown’s killing and seeks to discover directly from the protestors what motivated them to use social media as a political statement.

Social Media Activism

At the dawn of digital news, media scholars and First Amendment advocates predicted the internet would be good for democracy by opening up new avenues and spaces for disparate and oft-ignored voices (Ferdinand, 2000; Shirky, 2011). However, some media scholars contend that incognizant racism, a theory suggesting journalists cover people of color differently than the dominant White community by ignoring, marginalizing, or stereotyping them (Heider, 2000), has thwarted those hopes in the mainstream media. Incognizant racism (Heider, 2000) is not intentional bias but an assumption that the dominant White values of society at large are adopted by news organizations and practiced through day-to-day news production. Moreover, through personalized and dramatized news, false balance, and reliance on elite sources, news media present inaccurate and unfair portrayals of communities, subsequently perpetuating the societal status quo (Baran & Davis, 2015). Not surprisingly, few African American and Hispanic news consumers believe the U.S. news media cover their communities accurately (Media Insight Project, 2014).

In some ways, society has not changed much since the 1967 Kerner Report, commissioned after a series of racially fueled violent actions. It found that the United States was “moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal” (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1967, para. 8). What has changed in the ensuing decades is the use of social media platforms, which may serve as conduits for people to supplement the news with material journalists overlook or choose to ignore (Singer et al., 2011).

As Shirky (2011) notes, “social media have become coordinating tools for nearly all of the world’s political movements” (para. 8). Ferguson was no exception. With dozens of platforms to present content, users were able to spread their messages quickly and efficiently. The proliferation of mobile devices allows any member of the public to serve as a reporter; they capture and post incidents online or even report live from a scene. This participatory journalism allows nonjournalists to bypass media gatekeepers and produce and publish their own content (Singer et al., 2011). In this way, voices that may not be heard otherwise become part of the public discourse, allowing citizens to discuss and share information without a journalistic filter. User-generated content can disrupt the news production process, but it can also become a part of the news process. News organizations use publicly generated content in their reports, sometimes making the public collaborators in the news process (Hermida, 2011). Videos of police heavy-handed actions and harassment in Ferguson went viral during the protests, as did other police shootings of unarmed civilians that occurred after Brown’s killing.

On the other hand, beyond mere surveillance, social media networks enable activism. From hashtag memorials using the names of unarmed victims of police brutality to strategic campaigns drawing attention to intersectional issues of race, gender, and oppression, social media users of color have harnessed social media platforms to present alternative narratives on issues of race and social justice. On Twitter, in particular, the number of African Americans and Latinos/Hispanics overshadow those of White users (Pew, 2015). Studies by Jackson and Foucault-Wells (2015) indicate people of color have used their existing and growing connections to advance messages of resistance. These communicators seize upon offending messages, using key images and phrases as tools in their social media activism. Early examples of this resistance gave rise to the term “Black Twitter,” an umbrella term to describe temporally linked groups of Twitter users who strategically communicate about race-centered issues (Brock, 2012; Florini, 2013).

As a communication phenomenon, #BlackTwitter describes the structure and process of race-centric messaging by and about topics of interest to Black users through the lens of the Black experience in America (Clark, 2014). Structurally, Black Twitter consists of three levels of connection—personal communities, thematic nodes, and a meta-network of communicators (Clark, 2014). The first level, described in Gruz, Wellman, and Takhteyev’s (2011) social network analysis of linked users, is comprised of reciprocal Twitter following/follower relationships among individuals who share off-line ties, such as living in the same neighborhood, attending the same school,

or membership in a community group. Through ongoing online communication, these users form thematic nodes, connecting with their followers' followers as their messages are tweeted and retweeting into timelines of individuals with whom they otherwise would have no connection (Clark, 2014). Finally, as multiple nodes connect across different topics and points in time and ultimately converge on a single topic (indexed by a particular hashtag or phrase) at the same time, Black Twitter as a meta-network comes into shape (Clark, 2014).

The meta-network activity causes particular hashtags to trend for days, creating bursts of social media activity that fit news values of timeliness, conflict, magnitude, and emotional impact (Yopp, McAdams, & Thornburg, 2010). These conversations are observed by journalists performing traditional gatekeeping roles and are used as source material for background, context, and quotes. The stories, blogs, and broadcasts that rely on the meta-network's activity often are shared by participants in the conversations from which they originated, furthering an iterative cycle of conversation, creation, and comment. This step in the process pushes the phenomenon into mainstream recognition among news creators and consumers (Clark, 2014).

This phenomenon has grown to include other social networking applied programming interfaces, including Instagram. On August 12, 2014, *The New York Times* reported on the trend created as hashtag activists used #IfTheyGunnedMeDown to publicize conflicting views of the self (Vega, 2014). As people published on Instagram, many posts simultaneously were published to Twitter, allowing users to see them throughout their personal communities and thematic nodes. The social component of this phenomenon took over as individuals drew inspiration from images in their timelines and repeated Black Twitter's process of identification and participation by choosing to retweet the images and/or create similar images of their own. Use of the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown helped individuals signal their agreement to members of their personal communities and thematic nodes. The hashtag trend confirmed that many users, not simply those connected by physical-world ties or common interests, supported the movement for greater media responsibility regarding the use of Black and brown images. To further understand the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown protest hashtag in the context of the media coverage of Michael Brown's death, we ask the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How did legacy print media cover social media protests in the aftermath of the police shooting of Michael Brown?

Research Question 2: What were the motivations behind activists' social media postings with the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown hashtag?

This study employs a qualitative approach to examine coverage of the Michael Brown shooting and the protest hashtag. The first step was in-depth interviews with social media users who posted photos with the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown and the second step was a textual framing analysis of the case in two prominent newspapers.

Interviews

Method

We used interviews to inquire directly with protestors about their motivations and actions. The subjects were individuals who posted protest tweets to the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown between the same period as the textual analysis, August 9, 2014, and August 31, 2014. The researchers searched Twitter for the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown between those dates and identified 12 activists to contact via Twitter private message. Six people responded to the messages and four agreed to interviews on Skype or telephone. The interviewees answered a series of open-ended questions (see Appendix A) including follow-up questions. Identities were protected with a coding system, and the study followed institutional review board protocols. Participants included Respondent A (Black, male, 20), Respondent B (Black, male, 26), Respondent C (Hispanic, male, 18), and Respondent D (Black, male, 33). Respondent D, creator of the hashtag, said in his interview that he did not require anonymity in this study.

The interview transcripts were examined under a grounded theory approach outlined by Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011). The transcripts were read for descriptive codes that identified key concepts and then for analytical codes that focused more closely on categories. The data were interpreted according to the theoretical basis and examined for validity according to a checklist established by Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011).

Findings

Participants were motivated to post photos of themselves under the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown for three primary reasons: (1) they related to the victims of police violence (e.g., Michael Brown), (2) they wished to publicly critique the news media's framing of ethnic groups, and (3) they hoped to change the way journalists stereotype people.

It could have been me. The participants reported that they perceived a personal relationship with Michael Brown and/or other Black males who were victims of police and wanted to join a national conversation about negative perceptions perpetuated by the news media. Respondent C included a photo of him frowning in a red football jersey and flat bill ball cap and a gray hoodie; the other was a smiling photo of him wearing a suit. Respondent C said he observed coverage of Brown's shooting, then became concerned people might view him and his friends as "troublemakers":

I feel that a lot of the time people of color in the media are displayed as aggressive and thugs. I like yelling and having fun, but I don't support violence. People might think I am a loud, aggressive teenager just trying to cause trouble. I wanted to say, "Don't judge a book by its cover." (Respondent C, interview, December 30, 2014)

Respondent A's photos included one of him and his friends preening for the camera and another in his graduation cap and gown. A college student, he reported posting photos because he related to media coverage of Brown and others killed by police violence:

A lot of the teens who were killed were around my age when the photos were taken. Seeing the stories, it could very well have been me. I thought about how my mother would feel. I felt like I had to give my opinion about the situation. (Respondent A, interview, December 29, 2014)

Another participant, a young professional, said, "the hashtag rang true for me, so I decided to participate with everyone else" (Respondent B, interview, December 29, 2014). His photos showed him and some of his college friends flashing the sign representing their college residence hall, which he noted, "any media outlet could interpret as gang signs." The second photo was of him speaking at his college graduation.

Critiquing media coverage. The participants felt their posting of the two photos was an act of criticism that could help change the way news media cover people of color. By posting photos, they wished to draw attention to what they saw as negative stereotyping:

The media portrays African Americans as if the only good things we do are something around sports or something we do every so often in the community. Usually coverage is negative: a murder, or a robbery, or drugs. They try to portray the negative background. (Respondent A, interview, December 29, 2014)

Respondent D, a lawyer who created the hashtag, said he became concerned when he saw a photo of Michael Brown holding up two fingers displayed by news media as if it were a sign of criminality. "I initially saw graduation photos of him and then later I saw photos of what I perceived to be the peace sign and they were calling a gang sign. That was disturbing to me." (Respondent D, interview, January 6, 2015). Further, Respondent B said he posted photos because he wanted to draw attention to portrayals of Black males in news media.

I was upset that every image of both Eric Garner and Michael Brown at the time cast them in a negative light. Only media run by and for African Americans began using positive imagery of the two before the hashtag began. (Respondent B, interview, December 29, 2014)

All participants noted they rarely saw positive portrayals of people of color in news media. They attributed this to media organizations' economic motivation or racial bias or both. Respondent B mentioned "implicit bias" as a motivating factor for journalists' representation of people like him:

If you believe certain stereotypes about African Americans, then this will be reflected in your reporting. Once you put pen to paper—metaphorically speaking—you are already making assumptions about the world around you and the world you are writing about. (Respondent B, interview, December 29, 2014)

Noted Respondent C: “I think it is a subtle racism. I feel that the system has put people of color beneath anyone else, particularly Black people.” Respondent A noted the 24-hour news cycle has caused competition at the expense of fair reporting. “They’re trying to make sure their company always has the best story and hottest story to keep their views and ratings up,” he said. Respondent D said he believed the news media’s motive is to earn money:

It’s not about delivering the best, most accurate news; it’s the first news. There has to be a little oomph to portray it. There has to be good and bad in the news. And sometimes, the scary character portrayed in a lot of American media is the Black male. (Respondent D, interview, January 6, 2015)

Defying and correcting stereotypes. The participants expressed a desire to counteract news media coverage by shattering stereotypes. Their posts were an attempt to correct what they saw as inaccurate reporting and misrepresentative journalism. Respondent B said the news media “has not done a good job overall handling these stories,” suggesting:

When a white offender (usually male) attacks someone or a group of people, he is described as having mental issues, being an angel, having high marks in school, and never showing signs of malice. When an African American is deemed the offender, the media is quick to dig into this person’s past to pull out instances of school suspensions, single-parent households, drug use or gang involvement, as if these things and others justify the death. (Respondent B, interview, December 29, 2014)

Respondent D relayed an incident involving his own #IfTheyGunnedMeDown photos. They included a photo of him in a Halloween costume, dressed like Kanye West and carrying a bottle of Hennessy cognac (which did not contain alcohol). The second photo was of Respondent D giving his college graduation valedictorian speech. President Bill Clinton was pictured behind him, laughing at one of his jokes. Respondent D said he recently was nominated for a city attorney job. Soon after, a local blogger published the Halloween photo of him under the headline, “Could this man really be the next city attorney?”

The thing is, if he really did research, he would have found out who I was and that he literally proved my point . . . It just reinforced what the movement was created for, and it made him look real bad. He was attempting to assassinate my character. (Respondent D, interview, January 6, 2015)

Textual Analysis

Method

The textual analysis examined how legacy media treated the public's social media use in news coverage of Michael Brown's death and the Ferguson protests. The media sample was drawn from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and *The New York Times*. These sources were chosen because they are accepted as opinion leaders and agenda setters nationwide (*Times*) and within the community (*Post-Dispatch*). Following a mixed-methods design typology, we used a partially mixed sequential dominant status design (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009) to inform our data collection strategy for the media samples. Having first conducted the interviews, we used preliminary themes developed from those interviews to develop the sample strategy. Guided by interview responses, we first searched for articles using the key words "Michael Brown," drawing them from the Lexis-Nexis News database to coincide with Brown's death, August 9, 2014, until August 31, 2014. We selected every 10th article from August 9, 2014, through August 31, 2014, a time period that Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark (2016) have dubbed "the birth of a movement." Unlike the hashtags that trended between August 9 and August 31 (e.g., #Ferguson), #IfTheyGunnedMeDown was the only tweet indicating Black Twitter's self-selection into the conversation about the Ferguson uprising, the users' expression of solidarity with Brown, and its perception of media images of African Americans. These are embedded meanings that cannot be derived through the quantification of a hashtag's use.

Using #IfTheyGunnedMeDown as a primary search term to retrieve articles from the *Times* and the *Post-Dispatch* would have returned a limited sample that ignored these embedded meanings. The hashtag was directly covered by outlets including *TIME* magazine, the *Los Angeles Times*, and Mashable.com in addition to our primary sources. However, a search of these publications retrieved only a handful of articles relevant to the portrayal of Michael Brown, the impetus for the users' participation in the hashtag. We used the hashtag as a secondary filter to refine our sample, in keeping with the notion that hashtags "organize discussion around specific topics or events" (Fitton, Gruen, & Poston, 2009, p. 127, via Small, 2011). Our focus for this study was the discussion of how users perceived their portrayals in the media and a comparison of how those media interpret the users' agency via social media.

A total of 67 items published between August 9 and August 31 were coded in the sample, including news stories, editorials, columns, briefs, and feature stories. From the *Times*, 44 items were selected and 41 coded (8 were corrections and 5 were included as they mentioned social media use). From the *Post-Dispatch*, all 26 items were included. Two trained coders used open coding for the analysis. The data sets, one from the *Times* and the other from the *Post Dispatch*, were coded sequentially.

Data were coded in three stages. First, the mentions of social media use were open coded at the paragraph level, with emphasis on the sources, source identification, and general content. The initial codes were collapsed and applied to the mentions of social media use for a second round of coding, which helped define categories of social

media use. These categories reflected existing theory on media gatekeeping practices and source credibility. Applying methodology described by Corbin and Strauss (2008), we elaborated on the categories and modified them as necessary via the constant comparative method. Finally, we checked for validity through the process of analytic reduction in order to identify any negative cases and update our findings accordingly (Katz, 2015).

Findings

Through a sample of coverage selected from the *Times* and the *Post-Dispatch*, we identified three key themes that indicated how these outlets used and viewed social media in while reporting in Ferguson. We found that mainstream news organizations used social media platforms as part of their general reporting practices, but they relied on elite sources for information and largely bypassed the protestors' voices. Newspapers also characterized social media use in Ferguson as a source of misinformation and conflict. The *Times* articles used social media primarily as a reporting tool. Breaking news items represented the bulk of texts mentioning social media use. The majority of social media mentions spanned the 2-week period immediately following Brown's shooting on August 9. Three items and two opinion columns made reference to social media use in the wake of the Ferguson uprising.

The *Times* referenced Twitter and Facebook most frequently to report on Ferguson, although the *Times* articles we examined cited Facebook only twice. The *Times*' use of Twitter was evident in four ways: First, reporters used it as a tool to report breaking news. Second, *Times* journalists used it as a means of selecting information from media and political elites in Ferguson during the uprising. Third, the *Times*' writers critiqued it as a tool that contributed to misinformation in the wake of Brown's death. Finally, the newspaper used Twitter to identify memes related to the ongoing protests.

Twitter as professional reporting tool. The first mention of Twitter use in our sample of coverage on the Ferguson uprising came on August 11, two days after Brown was killed. The story, "Grief and Protests Follow Shooting of a Teenager," focused on the fallout from the shooting and detailed on-the-ground protests (Bosman & Fitzsimmons, 2014, p. A11). The first mention detailed the creation of a visual meme that drew comparisons between Ferguson and protests during the Civil Rights Era:

Police officials, fearing civil disorder, dispatched officers with police dogs to control the crowds. In response, some Twitter users posted pictures of the dogs at the Ferguson gathering on Saturday next to photos of police dogs used to control African-American crowds during the Jim Crow era. (Bosman & Fitzsimmons, 2014, p. A11)

Two days later, the *Times* used tweets taken directly from one of its reporters, Julie Bosman, as well as St. Louis Alderman Antonio French to detail the scene as it unfolded.

St. Louis City Police in St. Louis County blocking W. Florissant at Lucas & Hunt preventing cars from driving to #Ferguson—Antonio French (@AntonioFrench) August 12, 2014

Police advancing closer to crowd, which is shouting and honking horns. “We live here, you don’t!” one woman shouted—Julie Bosman (@juliebosman) August 12, 2014

By 10 p.m., the crowds had thinned and people started to go home. Nightfall in #Ferguson. Many people in crowd returning to their homes—Julie Bosman (@juliebosman) August 12, 2014

These tweets represented the *Times*’ treatment of social media in the Ferguson uprising. The sourcing, which relied on the narratives presented by elite figures, is at odds with commentary by the *Times*’ David Carr about Twitter as a useful source of information during the protests.

For people in the news business, Twitter was initially viewed as one more way to promote and distribute content. But as the world has become an ever more complicated place—a collision of Ebola, war in Iraq, crisis in Ukraine and more—Twitter has become an early warning service for news organizations, a way to see into stories even when they don’t have significant reporting assets on the ground. And in a situation hostile to traditional reporting, the crowdsourced, phone-enabled network of information that Twitter provides has proved invaluable. (Carr, 2014, p. B1)

The *Times* also relied on tweets from other media elites such as Wesley Lowery, of the *Washington Post*, who was arrested while sitting in a McDonald’s during the protests. The *Times* also used tweets from several reporters, including Michael Calhoun of St. Louis’s KMOX radio, and Yamiche Alcindor of *USA Today*, without indicating that they were reporters. For example:

There’s a crowd across from the #Ferguson police department. pic.twitter.com/vCmqdryaJ6—Michael Calhoun (@michaelcalhoun) August 14, 2014

There are probably 100 police officers and less than a dozen protestors left outside the #Ferguson police station—Yamiche Alcindor (@Yamiche) August 14, 2014

Carr’s column on Twitter use during the Ferguson uprising mentions an interaction between the paper’s on-site reporter and local social media users, highlighting at least one opportunity for the *Times* to verify a citizen source:

While much of mainstream media leaves communities of color unmoved—these are audiences that are underrepresented in terms of broadband access as well—Twitter is a place many black users rely on for information. Julie Bosman has been on the ground for *The Times* and posting to Twitter as often as time permits. On Wednesday night in the thick of things, she was approached by a young black man in the neighborhood. “NewYork Times?” he asked. “Yes,” she said, introducing herself. “I follow you on Twitter,” he said. (Carr, 2014, p. B1)

The *Times* used or referred to tweets from local users only 3 times in its coverage and instead gave preference to industry colleagues and political figures. The *Times* also aggregated coverage to report on protests as they unfolded rather than citing specific users or quoting individuals besides media and political elites. One overview of the second night of protests drew from nonsourced posts online to describe the scene:

Witnesses described a peaceful protest that later turned volatile, and there were scattered reports of violence. Images and videos captured on cellphones and posted on social media sites appeared to show people spray-painting and looting a QuikTrip gas station and other stores. (Bosman & Fitzsimmons, 2014, p. A11)

Coverage in the *Post-Dispatch* also was scant in its mentions of social media and also focused on public officials and public figures associated with the case. “Twitter” was referenced as a source only 4 times in our sample. One mention referred to State Senator Maria Chappelle-Nadal joining online protestors, using her account to directly lambast Governor Jay Nixon. Interestingly, mentions of Alderman French were absent in our *Post-Dispatch* sample, a strong contrast to the *Times*’ coverage, which relied heavily on French’s tweets to capture street scenes from ongoing protests. The third public figure mentioned was the shooter himself, Officer Darren Wilson, whose Twitter account was referenced in a story describing how social media could be used to identify an officer involved in a shooting.

Twitter as a source of misinformation. Although social media mentions were few within our sample, both newspapers discounted Twitter and other social media platforms as reliable sources. Ferguson-area law enforcement officials initially introduced this narrative and journalists repeated it, particularly in editorial commentary. In his column on Ferguson, Carr (2014) observed, “Twitter still carries a great deal of unverified and sometimes erroneous information, but for all its limitations, it has some very real strengths in today’s media climate.” Qualifiers such as “alleged” and “appeared to” appeared with most Twitter material in reports (Carr, 2014, p. B1).

In one instance, on August 14, five days after the shooting, the name of Brown’s assailant had yet to be released, prompting outcry on social media and among on-the-ground protestors. The *Post-Dispatch* published an article that day that detailed the St. Louis Police Department’s policy in withholding or the names of officers involved in legal disputes, explaining that:

The Internet complicates the issue. If you have any social media presence, I can get a picture of you. I can find out where you live. . . . I can follow you home. This threat now extends to whoever you live with. And that’s why these things don’t get released. (Patrick, 2014, p. A1)

In the same article, Ferguson’s police chief noted that social media sources had provided an incorrect name of a suspect, leading to death threats against an uninvolved

officer. In keeping with traditional reporting practices, both papers qualified information they reported via social media sources, including alleged eyewitness reports of the shooting (Robles & Bosman, 2014, p. A1):

One person who claimed to witness the shooting began posting frantic messages on Twitter, written hastily with shorthand and grammatical errors, only two minutes after Officer Wilson approached Mr. Brown.

At 12:03 p.m., the person, identified as @TheePharoah, a St. Louis-area rapper, wrote on Twitter that he had just seen someone die.

That same minute, he wrote, "I'm about to hyperventilate." At 12:23 p.m., he wrote, "dude was running and the cops just saw him. I saw him die bruh."

A 10-minute video posted on YouTube appeared to be taken on a cellphone by someone who identified himself as a neighbor. The video, which has collected more than 225,000 views, captures Mr. Brown's body, the yellow police tape that marked off the crime scene and the residents standing behind it. "They shot that boy 'cause they wanted to," said one woman who can be heard on the video. "They said he had his hands up and everything," said the man taking the video, speaking to a neighbor.

Rather than seeking direct quotes from the available individuals using Twitter during the uprising, even when individuals were in direct contact, the *Times* simply published their material.

Social media as a source of conflict. A third theme that emerged from the coverage was social media's role in stoking conflict surrounding the shooting. Carr and other writers from the *Times* and the *Post-Dispatch* acknowledged that social media played an influential role in extending the conflict into a global flashpoint on race, power, and policing. Social media elevated the conflict from one between two individuals to the archetypes of racially charged conflicts. A headline on one *Times* story captured its perspective on the response: "Outrage Over Teenager's Death Erupts on Social Media" (August 12, 2014). Anger and hostility were common terms used to describe how social media was being used in Ferguson; Twitter users were characterized as an angry collective rather than as individuals tweeting specific concerns about the shooting. The *Times* again relied on media elites to underscore social media's role in spreading the conflict beyond Ferguson's borders:

There is a visceral quality to Twitter that can bring stories to a boiling point. Ron Mott, an NBC correspondent and a social media skeptic, watched Twitter turn up the heat on Wednesday and tweeted, "As powerful as our press have been through years of our democracy, social media raises temp on public officials like never before." (Carr, 2014, B1)

Carr went on to describe Twitter as an insufficient means to see inside a conflict but one that can provide valuable insights. However, reporters from both the *Times* and

the *Post-Dispatch* seemingly ignored critical voices posting about the conflict via social media.

Discussion

The data illustrate disconnect between the legacy media coverage and the protestors' intentions. The protestors tried to highlight what they saw as inaccuracies in the news media, while the newspapers, in this case, virtually ignored their social media messages. The textual analysis showed the two newspapers relied on the established routines and practices that journalists have followed for decades, even in an era in which social media is replacing the legacy media as a news source for the public. The Pew State of the Media Report (2015) showed the Millennial generation, which represents the future of news consumption, obtains a majority of its news through social media sources rather than traditional media. Six in 10 members of this generation reported getting political news from Facebook, more than any other news source (Mitchell, Gottfried & Masta, 2015). Moreover, young Black and Hispanic social media users rely heavily on Twitter rather than other news sources and rarely trust traditional news media (Media Insight Project, 2014).

The *Times* and *Post-Dispatch* used social media as a form of gatekeeping during breaking news reporting. In the *Times*, use of social media was largely limited to quotes from one reporter on the scene in Ferguson as well as local political elites and media elites. In our sample, tweets from members of the public, including protestors, were few in number and were often contextualized to indicate that their contents may be unreliable. News production research acknowledges journalists' tendency to be overreliant on official sources for information (Baran & Davis, 2015; Cottle, 2000; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). News media's dependency on reports and statements issued by official sources—in this case, police department public information officers and related members of law-enforcement communities—is a growing cause of concern on framing police brutality and officer-involved shootings such as Michael Brown's (Hodges, 2015). In reporting on the Ferguson uprising, the *Times* relied primarily on one reporter's tweets as a source of information, defaulting to an established system of reporting rather than using the protestors' tweets about #Ferguson in the days after Brown was shot. The *Times* engaged in a peculiar practice of failing to directly identify tweets had come from other journalists, including Wesley Lowery (@WesleyLowery) and Yamiche Alcindor (@Yamiche), upon whose Twitter-based accounts of the events it relied to shape coverage of the conflict. The *Times* also used secondary-source information tweeted by other media outlets, a practice that reflects institutionalized news practices that serve to uphold the status quo rather than trying to include varied voices or give voice to the voiceless.

Second to tweets from its own reporters and national media workers on the scene, the *Times* relied on eyewitness and first-hand accounts of events from a single political elite, Alderman Antonio French, who represents St. Louis' 21st Ward. This again raises the issue of overreliance on official sources for information, even when the

information produced is not vetted through traditional public relations channels. This use of official sources, however, differs from the practice of merely quoting spokespersons and taking prepared sound bites from elected leaders. In a situation where authority was difficult to establish (relative to accuracy and the ability to verify claims), reliance on an eyewitness source such as French was essential for the *Times*, as it provided up-to-the-minute coverage of events on the ground. Interestingly, aside from French, only one other elected official is quoted, State Senator Jamilah Nasheed, who was responding to French's arrest rather than speaking directly to people in Ferguson and surrounding areas.

The difference between the *Times* and *Post-Dispatch's* social media reporting use in each of the three themes developed in this research juxtaposes how the *Times* used tweets as source material, often qualifying and sometimes ignoring the users' editorial judgment, with the *Post-Dispatch's* use of tweets simply to complement its own reporting. While reporters for the *Times* relied heavily on tweets from their own workers and local political elites to cover the story, only four mentions of Twitter in coverage were drawn from the *Post-Dispatch*. For its part, the *Post-Dispatch*, staffed by individuals assumed to live and work in the St. Louis metro area, also privileged political elites over the perspectives of social media users tweeting with relevant hashtags, including those who, by all accounts, were in Ferguson. However, rather than relying primarily on one reporter's Twitter narrative about the events unfolding in Ferguson, the *Post-Dispatch* tapped into multiple community-based perspectives from local residents. That input appears to have been drawn from traditional channels including one-on-one interviews instead of using information from local social media users.

Our sample suggests that the assumption of social media's influence on informing coverage of the Ferguson uprising has its faults, especially where primary sources are concerned. This speaks to the issue of source credibility as determined by news workers. Reich (2011) describes the determination of source credibility as the outcome of four types of reasoning: epistemological (imposing standards that impact the press' ability to distinguish between "versions and facts"), political (privileging the input of upper-class sources and minimizes other perspectives), professional-ethical (which behooves news workers to adhere to a narrowly defined standard of identifying professionally acceptable sources), and pervasiveness (the impact of human fallibility that undergirds all reporting; pp. 51-52). In both data sets, we find evidence that suggests news workers primarily chose to adhere to traditional means of reporting by relying on public officials and colleagues as primary sources and adapted to the input of pervasive social media commentary by equivocating about the authenticity and veracity of Twitter user information.

The use of existing structures of authority to select sources for coverage in these mainstream media outlets underscores the perspective of our sample of social media users who tweeted with the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown hashtag. Despite the reporters' ability to interview individuals in Ferguson who may have been using social media to describe their experiences in real time, they overlooked or discounted average

residents in what began as a hometown protest and extended into part of a national movement. This is explicitly confirmed in one of the stories reported on Ferguson, in which the author mentions an encounter with a “young Black man” who recognized her from Twitter. Arguably, this exchange indicates that the reporter had at least one opportunity to select a nonelite eyewitness source for her stories but did not do so.

Reliance on elite sources functioned to shut out the perspective of the individuals being described in the coverage. While letters to the editor or comments on stories stood as potential avenues for protest participant contributions to the reporting, on-the-ground source selection was not an option, leaving them with social media and the work of collective, connective action as one of the stronger means of entering the news conversation about race and police brutality.

Although the legacy media largely ignored them, the social media activists were able to circumvent these gatekeepers and disseminate their voices on Twitter and other social media. In a sense, this was the goal of the activists interviewed. In protest of perceived inaccurate and incomplete coverage, those using #IfTheyGunnedMeDown sought and possibly succeeded in reaching audiences beyond those consuming legacy media. In an era of shrinking news budgets and a documented lack of influence of legacy media on the Millennial generation in favor of social media, the social media protestors may have established their own communication channel with a younger, Black and Hispanic audience who may indeed have received their message.

Limitations

Limitations of this study included a small window of media coverage over a specific event. Other social media uses in different situations may not have produced the same sorts of coverage. Also, the interviews consisted of only four individuals who participated in the hashtag protest. More individuals may have provided further perspectives on the motivations of people to use #IfTheyGunnedMeDown.

The Ferguson uprising, and other similar protests, present challenges in collecting and parsing culturally relevant data on how social media and “traditional” or “legacy” outlets interact. As researchers attempting to establish linkages between legacy media and the Big Data created by millions of Twitter users, we argue that our study, while narrowly focused, meets six key criteria for creating rich qualitative research focused on internet culture (Baym, 2006). Specifically, the project (1) is theoretically grounded, (2) demonstrated rigor in data collection/analysis, (3) used multiple methods and triangulated testimony and textual data, (4) participant interviews informed article collection, (5) used a broadened search criteria to capture a broader sample, and (6) used a pairing of online and interpersonal data. It contributes to larger body of scholarship that examines how media, social media and race function to create a common cultural narrative.

Appendix

Interview Questions

1. Please tell us your age, race, gender, occupation and city where you live. (You will be kept anonymous in this study. No names or identifying information will be included.)
2. Why did you decide to post your photos on social media with the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown hashtag?
3. Can you please tell us the background on these two photos?
4. Why did you choose these particular photos?
5. What has been your experience in the past with law enforcement authorities?
6. How do you think the news media handles stories involving race and law enforcement?
7. How do you think the news media handles stories involving people of color in general?
8. Studies show that African Americans and Hispanics do not believe the news media represents them accurately. Do you agree, and if so, why?
9. Why do you think news media underrepresents/misrepresents people of color in stories?
10. If you were a media worker/reporter, how would you change the way news media covers stories involving people of color?
11. What else would you like to tell us?

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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