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ABSTRACT

#BlackLivesMatter, a social-media-fueled social movement for racial justice in the United States, rose to international prominence between 2014 and 2016. Described by one of its co-creators as a call to collective action in the struggle against racial inequity, the movement's hashtag (#BlackLivesMatter) was second to only #Ferguson among the most frequently used racial justice hashtags in the first 10 years of Twitter's existence. This critical case study analyzes the reflective narratives of 14 self-identified White social media users – part of a larger, interracial group of self-identified online social actors – who used the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag as part of their online activism repertoire during the height of the movement. Grounded by the application of Helms' White Racial Consciousness Development Scale, this research presents a descriptive account of the ways antiracist labor – colloquially described as 'White folks' work' – can be performed via social media. Using an *a priori* definition of allyship as the processes of affirming and taking informed action on behalf of the subjugated group, this research illustrates that strategic information seeking and sharing on Twitter – particularly the amplification of marginalized voices – were key components in the development of digital allyship praxis within this social-media-fueled movement for racial justice.

News media in the United States dubbed 2014 – the year when Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager in Ferguson, Missouri (USA), was gunned down by a White police officer – as 'The Year of Outrage.' Slate magazine included Brown's slaying, and a series of incidents brought to the public's attention via the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, as part of an interactive gallery that documented of 365 days of online outcry on everything from state-sanctioned assaults on Black bodies (often at the hands of White aggressors) to the discontinuation of a cult-status animated television. The label clumsily dismissed the intricate racial dynamics behind digital discourses that evoked the #OccupyWallStreet phenomena of 2011, which was comparatively praised as 'The Year of the Protestor.' Described by one of its co-creators as a call to collective action in the struggle against racial inequity, #BlackLivesMatter was second to only #Ferguson among the most frequently used racial justice hashtags in the first 10 years of Twitter's existence (Anderson & Hitlin, 2016).

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The categorical dismissal of Black Lives Matter and its online discourse as simple 'outrage' obscures the complex inner workings of protest repertoires that required users to perform their racial identities online in the pursuit of racial justice. One goal of the movement, wrote philosopher Chris Lebron (2018), was to 'demand Whites extend their historical imagination and recognize that … America has somehow escaped its racially murderous history.' Part of this challenge lay in getting White Americans to decode Black Lives Matters' sentiments and significance, and understand the power relations at work within the movement and its social media discourse. White-led participation in racial justice movements via publically mediated critical race discourse can be traced back to 1831, when William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* newspaper called for an immediate end to slavery in (Baszile, 2015). Studies of White Americans involvement in racial justice projects including abolition and the Civil Rights Movement have created historical lines of inquiry about the processes by which White social actors can come to recognize hegemonic racial hierarchies and their place in them, while joining alongside non-White movement participants to dismantle structures of White supremacy – without replicating a power dynamic that placed White interests at the forefront of the movement.

Social media technologies have extended these discourses into new media ecologies online, prompting scholars to investigate whether existing media theories and practices are sufficient for understanding the role allies play in racial justice movements within digital settings, or whether such movements require new media practice approaches (Mattoni, 2017; Schradie, 2017). On Twitter, the antiracist efforts undertaken by White people to combat White supremacy through education, discourse, and activism, colloquially summarized as 'White folks work,' constitute an exercise in social media's use within a social movement (Sanders, Hutzel, & Miller, 2009; Silverman, 2015).

Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted in 2015 with 14 participants who self-identified as White allies in the Twitter-based #BlackLivesMatter discourse in 2014–2015, this article presents a critical case study that conceptualizes *digital allyship praxis* as part of a repertoire of contention within Black Lives Matter's online discourse. Recognizing that the dynamic nature of social media as a tool for information, framing, and mobilization in social movements requires what Vaidhyanathan (2006, p. 297) refers to as a 'transfield approach,' I modify concepts from social movement studies to investigate this phenomenon by applying perspectives from multiple fields and disciplines, including cultural studies, critical race studies, media studies, and social and technology studies.

I begin by positioning #BlackLivesMatter discourse as part of a fourth-wave, digitally based social movement, defined by its emphasis on personalization and networked individualism (Gruzd, Wellman, & Takhteyev, 2011; Khamis, 2011). I then present a point-in-time examination of White social actors' commitment to participating in the movement as they discursively repurposed their self-perceptions of the economic, social, and political advantages of being White – defined by McIntosh (1990) as White privilege – in collective, yet individualized attempts to configure 'new forms of Whiteness' within the movement as allies (Nakayama, 2017, p. 71). By examining their own lived experiences with Whiteness, and using Twitter's affordances to follow the hashtag toward conversations by Black actors and members from similarly disempowered groups, these individuals demonstrated how social media was used to foment

a movement-within-a-movement. As they developed their own sense of racial power dynamics, participants in this research applied strategies of informed action and amplification to simultaneously enter and create pathways for more White participants to join in #BlackLivesMatter's online discourse and offline collective action without supplanting Black voices.

#BlackLivesMatter as a social-media-fueled social movement

Throughout 2014, mainstream media struggled to define Black Lives Matter, an epistemological challenge reflected in the interdisciplinary nature of the literature about its brief, yet incendiary era of networked action against racial injustice (Chernega, 2016; Freelon, McIlwain, & Clark, 2018; Jackson, 2016; Tynes, Schuschke, & Noble, 2016). A bit of disambiguation is necessary here. I use #BlackLivesMatter, the hashtag created by the movement's founders, Alicia Garza, Opal Tometti and Patrice Cullors, to refer to the digital signifier used to invoke the movement's online and offline information campaigns and Black Lives Matter (BLM) to refer to the movement itself, including on-the-ground protests organized in cities in the United States (Garza, 2014). Applying Tilly's (2008) definition of the term, Black Lives Matter is considered a social movement because of its sustained attention to specific incidences of police misconduct and brutality, and its general occupation with White supremacy and the devaluation of Black life.

The hashtag was created as a reaction to the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman, a White Hispanic man who shot and killed Trayvon Martin, a Black, unarmed 16-year-old, in February 2012 (Garza, 2014). The hashtag, and subsequently, the movement, gained prominence from 2014 to 2016 as news media reported on a series of caught-on-video cases in which Black Americans, usually unarmed, were assaulted and often killed by police (Freelon et al., 2018). As one of its co-creators has explained, the hashtag is a call to collective action and social responsibility in confronting the historic, systematic oppression Black people face in the United States – ranging from economic discrimination to state violence (Garza, 2014). A myopic evaluation of the hashtag as a simple expression of 'outrage' obscures the critical decision-making processes of social-media users who used it while choosing to perform their racial identities on Twitter in the pursuit of racial justice through online discourse. In this study, part of a larger, multi-method research project on the motivations and goals of a cross-section of users tweeting with #BlackLivesMatter, I sought to address whether 'the emerging digital space can create new ways of whiteness that are not older forms of whiteness, but new, progressive, reconfigured whiteness that lives alongside, not dominating, other racial identities' among White social media users (Nakayama, 2017, pp. 71, 72).

What do White people have to do with Black Lives Matter?

Social movements that seek to address racial injustice require the direct efforts and cooperation of members from both the dominant [White] and subjugated [Black] groups (Brown & Ostrove, 2013). One year after Brown's death, cultural critic Sally Kohn (2015) published an op-ed in the *Washington Post* with the prescriptive headline, 'This is what White people can do to support Black Lives Matter,' challenging White

people to take on the responsibility of identifying and defining their own roles in the movement rather than asking people of color to do it for them:

> It is not up to Black Lives Matter, nor any movement led by and for communities of color, to make space for or articulate a vision for White people. The expectation that Black leaders and movements should automatically do so is a subtle extension of the sort of White-centric entitlement that gives rise to the need for such movements in the first place.

Alimi (2015) notes that communication-based efforts, such as education and recruitment, are critical within movement repertoires, and are increasingly carried out via new channels, including social media. Twitter was one digital space where White people were able to collaboratively work out their vision of participation in BLM. On the platform, 'the value of Black lives received massive affirmation from more than just the usual suspects' (Freelon et al., 2018, p. 49). Non-Black users' Twitter activity indicated that members of other racial groups, particularly White people, were part of the movement discourse online surrounding Brown's death and related infamous cases of police brutality involving Black Americans. The broadcast-style nature of Twitter, the microblogging site used by more than 330 million unique monthly users worldwide enabled users to engage in what Milan describes as 'cloud protesting,' highly individualized collective action that allows informal, amorphous collectives to work without a central organization, and to develop a digitally enhanced repertoire of engagement practices. These include the emergence of counterpublic networks through which individuals engage in hashtagged discourse to counter narratives from authorities such as the police, judiciary, and federal government (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2016).

At the height of the Black Lives Matter movement, Twitter served as an arena of contention, where, through a series of violent episodes indexed by the hashtag, networked actors such as 'Young Black Twitter' developed collective identities to symbolically resist the devaluation and subjugation of Black lives and Black bodies (Freelon et al., 2018). These groups included a subculture of liberal White allies who performed their racial identities online as part of their cooperative communication strategies to supporting movement. A code of ethics for White antiracist allies, initially developed by activist JLove Calderon, and later edited by sociologist Tim Wise, instructs would-be White allies in the struggle for racial justice to first acknowledge their racial privilege, develop interpersonal connections and structures to maintain antiracist accountability, and, when speaking about White supremacy, acknowledge that people of color, though often silenced, have openly advocating for the racial equity for a long time. They write:

> We are persons classified as White, who oppose racism and the system of White supremacy. As such, we are committed to speaking out and challenging racial injustice, mistreatment and institutional inequity, as well as interpersonal racism whenever and wherever it exists. We are also committed to challenging our own biases, inculcated by a society that has trained us all, to one degree or another, to internalize notions of our own superiority. (n.d.)

'White people,' the authors maintain, 'have a moral and practical obligation to challenge racism in a responsible and responsive manner' (n.d., p. 5). The fulfillment of this obligation requires the measured, intentional efforts of White allies, individuals who recognize the seemingly invisible economic, legal, political and social advantages of a White racial identity. Having developed awareness of their privilege, White allies

distinguish themselves by showing solidarity with non-Whites, speaking against systems of oppression, and challenging other Whites to do the same (Tatum, 1997). This led to my first research question:

> (RQ1) How did White Twitter users in the United States using #BlackLivesMatter interpret their experience as self-identified allies in the context of Black Lives Matter, a Black-oriented social-media-fueled social movement?

Conceptualizing White allyship in digital spaces

Allyship praxis has a rich history of exploration in community activism and educational settings. A synthesis of key education, psychology, and sociology literature on White allyship identifies three core directives: First, potential allies must see themselves as White, rather than assuming their ethnic identities and positions within the dominant culture as the default. Second, White allies in racial justice movements must recognize the power and privilege conferred by White identity. Third, these individuals must actively work to dismantle systems of White supremacy, and be willing to both confer and share power with members of subjugated groups (Brown & Ostrove, 2013; Cammarota, 2011; Case 2012; Ford & Orlandella, 2015; Sanders et al., 2009; Tatum, 1992, 1994, 1997; Feagin, 2010; Spanierman & Smith, 2017).

But most, if not all, of this work considers Whiteness in *physical* spaces; it does not extend to the digital realm, where concern over issues of race and representation has been growing since the late 1990s (Nakamura, 2002, p. xiii). As information communication technologies expand the communicative terrain through which social actors create and share information resources, negotiate collective identity, and engage in collective action to achieve shared goals, they create a demand for critical examination of how they simultaneously complicate social movement dynamics. This reflection led to the formation of my second research question:

> (RQ2) What social media-based practices emerged from White social media users' efforts to engage in digital allyship?

Data collection and analysis procedures

For four years prior to conducting this study, I was engaged in ongoing digital ethnography of Black Twitter, the amorphous network of social media users credited with helping #BlackLivesMatter emerge as a social media phenomenon (Freelon et al., 2018). For recruitment, I tweeted links to a blog on my academic website which explained the study's aims – to learn more about why Twitter users from all racial backgrounds used the hashtag – and linked the informed consent form with an invitation for U.S.-based Twitter users ages 18 and older to participate. The project relied on convenience sampling of participants who self-identified as being active in the online movement through engagement with the hashtag. 'Engagement' was not pre-defined as part of the sampling strategy; instead, I asked each participant to define the frequency and level of their involvement as part of the interview process. Participants read and electronically signed an informed consent form before completing a semi-structured interview conducted by phone. The interviews were conducted in 2015.

The narratives of 14 White participants were drawn from the larger, multi-racial sample of 40 interview participants from the initial study. Ten participants identified as female; the remaining four identified as male. Each participant was offered anonymity via use of a pseudonym, yet all of the participants in this portion of the research agreed to be identified by their first names. Eleven of the 14 held at least a bachelor's degree; all had finished high school or earned a GED. All but two had full-time employment outside the home. One was a full-time caretaker for his disabled partner, and did not work outside this capacity; the other was a parolee who was searching for employment and running a small online business. Together, their narratives constitute what Flyvbjerg (2006) defines as a critical case study, one that bears strategic importance to a broader issue. In this instance, I use this critical case to explore and describe the concept of White allyship in digital spaces.

As a follow-up to each interview, I wrote analytic and reflective memos that highlighted key sentiments about White racial awareness and self-disclosures on participation in the Black Lives Matter movement and #BlackLivesMatter digital discourse (Saldaña, 2013). I then coded the data in three stages. First, the interview transcripts were first analyzed using a process coding technique, in which I searched for gerunds as indicators of participants' 'strategic … thoughtful actions' in using the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag as they develop their individual digital allyship practices (Charmaz, 2002; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Saldaña, 2013). Second, the process codes were then refined via a round of axial coding, using allyship as defined by people of color to contextualize the data in terms of what actions and behaviors have previously been deemed useful by members of disadvantaged groups: affirmation and informed action (Brown & Ostrove, 2013). This dual-factor designation 'helps distinguish an 'ally' from a 'friend' who may be high on affirmation but not on informed action; and an 'activist,' who may be an informed actor but not necessarily affirming' (Brown & Ostrove, 2013, p. 2220). I applied Helms' White Racial Consciousness Development Scale (1984, 1990, and 2007) to develop categories for assessing how the participants moved from being a friend or activist to becoming an ally. The first three stages: contact, disintegration, and reintegration, are involved in developing awareness of a White racial identity and abandoning racist modes of thinking and behavior. The latter three stages – pseudo-independence, immersion/emersion, and autonomy – are associated with the development of an antiracist identity.

Finally, using analytic induction, my third round of coding iterated between the analytic and reflective memos developed during the interview process and the categories developed in the axial coding step to conceptualize the respondents' self-perceptions of their allyship praxis in the digital public sphere (Saldaña, 2013).

Findings

Analysis of interviews with White self-identified participants in Twitter-based #BlackLivesMatter discourse suggests that White allyship in social media spaces includes: 1) self-identification of Whiteness as one's privileged racial identity; and 2) strategic digital discursive practices designed to signal participation in antiracist work by educating other Whites and working toward the movement's shared goals. These themes, and their corresponding subthemes, are consistent with the definition of allyship – affirmation and informed action – described in Brown and Ostrove's (2013) empirical studies centering the perspectives of people of color about White individuals

involved in racial justice work. White individuals who seek to align themselves as allies must first acknowledge how the social construction of race is used to subjugate non-Whites, and how they, despite their most benevolent intentions, directly benefit from these constructions. Helms (1984, 1990, 2007) defines this process through the White Racial Consciousness Development Scale, stages of cognitive awareness about social disparities determined by race that privilege White people. The process begins with recognition of the White racial frame (Whiteness as default for individual humanity) as the dominate structure (Feagin, 2009). It then proceeds through stages of self-reflection and re-orientation, and ends with the individual assuming an antiracist identity that admits their White privilege, but uses it in the collective struggle for racial justice.

Jerry, one of the White Twitter users in this research, said that following conversations within the #BlackLivesMatter online discourse prompted him to examine social privileges and inequities tied Whiteness, symbolically unpacking his 'invisible knapsack,' the unearned privileges that White people unconsciously use and rely on every day to navigate their social world (McIntosh, 1990). Watching the dialogue unfold, he said, prompted him to start paying attention to the racial injustices highlighted by the movement, but left him with a sense of guilt about not doing enough.

> I'm a frustrated White person. I grew up in segregated Michigan – in Dearborn – and I'm 55. After 40 years, I started really noticing. I've done very superficial things to address what I see. [I know] full well that I have privilege and am doing nothing.

> I'm concerned about the diversity of the BLM movement. But I haven't done any marches, I haven't done anything more than through regular media and social media (personal communication, 2015).

Stuck in a stage of fear about the costs of publicly recognizing White racial privilege (Pinterits, Poteat, & Spanierman, 2009), Jerry is symbolic of those participants whose participation was initially rooted in the contact stage of developing White racial identity. Having realized his own limited understanding about Black lived experiences came from the minimal contact he had with Black people, he sought to address this gap through an interactive use of the hashtag online, where he could more regularly converse with Black participants in the movement. He described himself as 'stuck' about what to do after recognizing his own White privilege, an indication that he'd reached the disintegration stage of White racial identity (Helms, 1995; Tatum, 1992). Lee et al. (see Table 1) described the disintegration stage as a turning point 'associated

Table 1. From Lee et al. (2007). Revising the White Racial Consciousness Development Scale. Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development. 39, 194–208, pp. 204–205.

Stage	Characteristics
Contact	Naïveté or obliviousness to the sociopolitical implications of race in the United States; little contact with people of color
Disintegration	Feelings of depression or guilt while developing a greater understanding of racism and their role in it
Reintegration	Conscious and nonconscious idealization of Whites and White culture and denigration of that which is perceived to be not White
Pseudo-Independence	Increased awareness and understanding of White dominance and privilege as contributing factors to racist behaviors and attitudes
Autonomy	Establishment of a non-racist/anti-racist identity; appreciates similarities and differences between racial groups; seeks out relationships with non-White people

with feelings of depression or guilt as White people develop a greater understanding of racism and their role in it' (2007, p. 204).

For participants in this stage, using social media to interrogate their existence as White people required abandoning the the 'universal, impartial, disinterested view from nowhere' lens through which many Whites see and experience the world (Farr, 2004). Self-identifying White allies within #BlackLivesMatter such as Jerry were confronted with hashtag messages that presented a real-time, racialized reality of the myriad ways in which Black lives were being devalued. As Jerry admitted, though he experienced this awakening from the relative safety of social media, doing this work is uncomfortable, and leaves individuals with McIntosh's questions of how to best use their newfound knowledge or White privilege in the context of racial justice work: 'Having described it (White supremacy), what will I do to lessen or end it?' (1990, p. 2).

For several other participants, who were able to pass through the disintegration stage and into pseudo-independence and beyond, the solution was to take individual action to educate other White people. Alex, who works in the public school system of a northeastern metropolis, characterized herself as an infrequent Twitter user prior to Brown's slaying. She reflected on how she used the hashtag to follow discussion about certain cases, criticizing how some of the dead were framed, particularly among White people:

> I feel like it's my personal responsibility to fight willful ignorance among White people. I see a lot of it in 'if this person wasn't a thug,' or niceness requests: 'if this person had been more polite, they would not have been murdered by this person who was supposed to be protecting them,' she said (personal communication, 2015).

Another participant, Sarah, also assumed this responsibility, explicitly stating that White people had their own race-specific roles to play in the movement. She discussed her decision to participate in street-level protests, which grew out of her own recognition of how the presences of White bodies in Black protest spaces may complicate how these protests are read and interpreted by the state:

> Fundamentally, the both systematic and individual racism don't change if White people don't change. I can't see injustice and leave it to the people who are affected by it. In #BlackLivesMatter, there are leaders for me to follow. But we need some louder White folks. Protesting, being a part of a group of people is one of the ways to draw attention to public officials and residents to these issues. In particular, it's a way to be visible as a White person, but also a way to make sure the events are safer. If the White people are visible, it protects it from becoming a riot. It's not like being White alone makes that a safer space, but … having more White people in a crowd will prompt the cops to read it as more of a protest and less of riot (personal communication, 2015).

Each participant described a process of engagement that consisted of using the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag as a means of *contextualizing* the instances of police interactions with Black and brown bodies, which primed them to begin *acknowledging* the legal, social, and political factors that shaped incidents of police brutality brought to light via the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag, ultimately *motivating* them to take some sort of action, both online and off. Two men who participated in this study also made particularly relevant comments to this effect. The first, Dalton, was a collegiate newspaper editor at a large southwestern public university. He referenced an incident that occurred close to his university in 2015:

> The one that comes to mind instantly is the McKinney officer.[1] I think we put ourselves in the situation. People say 'if I were there, I would have done what the cop said.' When you do that, you're putting yourself in that situation, not taking in everything that isn't being said. What BLM has done is shaped the narrative. It makes it more focused. If you didn't have certain indicators about what this was, made it different The hashtag and the movement shapes the narrative and helps us to think about what this is more clearly.

'*What this is*' references the hashtag's embedded meaning. For Dalton, who used the hashtag and phrase in discussions about the McKinney incident, #BlackLivesMatter served as a discursive signifier of the shared mental schema about racial injustice that White participants relied upon to give context to their commitment to pursuing racial solidarity as a part of their contribution to the movement's collective action:

> Honestly, I haven't really thought of it [the hashtag] as a means to an end rather than a discussion. We can talk about it. It's a way to propel people to talk about it more. It's a way to galvanize support and to get people to talk about institutional racism, mistreatment, to post the videos that we see almost weekly. To appreciate that Black lives do matter. When someone says "stop saying 'Black Lives Matter', it's not about one group of people," you say, yes it is, because this group isn't getting the treatment that it needs. It's saying that there is an imbalance, there's an injustice, and we're calling attention to that (personal communication, 2015).

Other users in the study made similar statements about using #BlackLivesMatter to engage White people in discussions about the caught-on-camera slaying of 12-year-old Tamir Rice[2] and the criminalization and deviancy frames used to normalize the extrajudicial of Black boys. For White allies like Dalton, Shelley, Sarah, and Jerry, the movement's online discourse exposed a competing set of narratives about the separate reality Black bodies experience at the hands of police, ones that could not be dismissed or ignored.

Charles, a professor at large public university in the southeast, said online exposure to these counternarratives via #BlackLivesMatter strengthened his awareness about the White racial frame, and helped him develop language address it via his protest work. He gave an example of engaging in antiracist discourse by confronting another White man during a solidarity protest following the non-indictment of Brown's killer, Darren Wilson:

> It (the hashtag) symbolizes how our current system devalues Black lives; it is a resistance against that. Right after the verdict for Darren Wilson came out… there was this White guy there saying 'All Lives Matter.' And I think he was more clueless than malevolent. And he said 'All Lives Matter,' … and I was like, 'yes, people shouldn't be killed, but there's this racial disparity.' The 'All Lives Matter' guy was one of the protestors. He just had no sense of what things were like.

Charles said he relied on the hashtag and the information it indexed online to locate movement texts and other materials he could use in two ways: first, to educate other White people that while #BlackLivesMatter is pro-Black, it is not anti-White; and second, to underscore the importance of centering Blackness in the movement. By using their social capital to expose more Whites to information about the Black experience in America, Dalton and Charles demonstrated ways to take informed action, one of the two components of allyship as defined by people of color. Like Dalton and Charles, each of the participants stressed that their ability to learn about the discourse surrounding

#BlackLivesMatter, and to educate themselves and other White people about their place in the movement, came through strategic consumption and recirculation of narratives from Black people they encountered online. Once they felt informed and empowered enough to do so, they took informed action, a reflection of their advancement to the 'autonomy' stage of Helms' White Racial Consciousness Development Scale.

Amplifying marginalized voices as allyship praxis

Although several participants described using their own words and perspectives to educate other White people in the name of antiracist movement work, *the most salient theme among the participants was the use of the hashtag to 'amplify' voices of individuals they deemed marginalized in critical discourse surrounding #BlackLivesMatter.* Several participants used this specific word to describe practices that included tweeting links to content from other websites, retweeting material posted on Twitter, cross-posting information onto other social media platforms including Facebook and Tumblr, and even sending relevant movement texts to family members, friends and associates via email. Shelley described a tweet in which she had retrieved and reposted Garza's Black Feminist Herstory of the Movement as a tactic to inform other White people of its origins.

Participants said they also 'signal boosted' (Gerbaudo, 2014, p. 205) messages from Black movement actors by cross-linking texts and using retweets in attempt to galvanize likeminded movement participants in moments of confrontation and crisis. Alex described her initial use of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag on Twitter to find and promote messages from members of groups that have been historically marginalized in mainstream news media:

> Almost immediately, I realized that it was more important to be amplifying others. For everything I say, I try to amplify three or four other people. It's your opportunity to use your audience to amplify other people who don't look like you (personal communication, 2015).

Amplification is the concept that bridges the gap between the participants' formation of racial identity and their willingness to perform and contextualize their White identities as part of their digitally based antiracist work. By strategically selecting and promoting tweets from disempowered members of the movement, participants fulfill a key component of allyship: willingness to relinquish privilege conferred by social identity as a form of equity.

"There's a lot that I don't feel like it's appropriate for me to participate in, but I retweet and amplify those," Alex said.

> To me, amplifying just means seeing something … something that I wouldn't say because I'm not a Black person, and saying 'hey, I'm going to make sure my audience sees this because they wouldn't necessarily see something like this.' I'm trying to put other people's voices in their face. I'm trying to make it necessary for people to stop ignoring that people who don't look like them (personal communication, 2015).

Shelley spoke of both being directed to and directing others to Black activists from Ferguson in the wake of protests there, encouraging students involved in campus media to directly seek perspective

from people on the ground.

> I'm sort of deliberate of 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 RT those folks or tell people, 'I'm reading this and you should check it out because it's really moving.' she said (personal communication, 2015).

Amplification, in her estimation, is performed by using one's own social media presence to seek, identity, and promote those actors' perspectives, and doing so with specific intent to educate others, particularly other White people who may have had misconceptions about #BlackLivesMatter, or may have otherwise been ignorant about the movement and its specific aims.

Sarah also described how she used information found online in her work to amplify voices in both online and offline spaces.

> My paid work is in the tech and startup sectors and in that realm, I think about how to elevate the voices of people who are underrepresented; [to] connect people to resources that might not be available to them. I think about hidden bias. On Twitter, I'm retweeting and sharing articles to help people understand how racism works... One of the things that is abundantly obvious is that most of the people in this country aren't educated about Black history, about racial background (personal communication, 2015).

These participants were deliberate about targeting online associates with links to specific materials. Shelley discussed using tweets, and linked material from blogs and alternative news sites to educate other White people about the #BlackLivesMatter movement through the voices of marginalized people whose work was not in the mainstream. She recalled several conversations, including a debate about why even a well-intentioned '#AllLivesMatter' was silencing:

> I see my objective as wrestling as many other White people as possible away from that willful ignorance, that dismissing. We need way more people than we have. I've done a little bit of trying to trying to interrupt people's kneejerk and uninformed opinion about this [#BlackLivesMatter]. And I'm like, 'Have you read this? Do you actually know anything about this town (Ferguson)?'; just trying to get people to think about where their news comes from and what perspectives are not reflected' (personal communication, 2015).

Kevin, a White man also living in the Northeast, expressed similar concern for bringing Black perspectives to other White people's attention:

> I'm a privileged White dude. I only know in a privileged sense what a young Black man in society might be feeling. Instead of trying to say my thing, since my thing is pretty weak, I've tried to amplify the voices of others while trying to understand for myself the best I can what the details of the problem are (personal communication, 2015).

The recognition of how Whiteness works in racial hierarchies is the link between affirmation and informed action as allyship praxis in the digital space. Shelley and Kevin's choices to retweet alternative discourses about the experiences of Black people in Ferguson and beyond served as a countermeasure in responding to problematic media coverage of social movements (Penney & Dadas, 2014). Along with their choices to (1) strategically seek and share information that affirmed Black lived experiences with racial justice efforts, and (2) amplify Black voices within their personal communities, their actions exhibit an identifiable

course of action for White allies who desire to perform antiracist work in digital spaces. The White allies' strategic use of tweets and retweets to share Black-authored, movement-affirming texts to educate both the allies and members of their personal communities was critical to the development of their digital allyship praxis.

At its core, the concept of allyship rests on the recognition of power and privilege, and the intentional transference of these benefits to members of subjugated groups. The shifting nature of these power relations change in reference to their setting: in a community organizing setting, allyship may mean that members of the dominant group choose to subordinate themselves to Black leadership; in an educational setting, it may mean recognizing the hegemonic influence of the dominant group in creating standards for achievement; in a media landscape, it may mean centering the voices of otherwise disempowered actors and focusing on the alternative narratives they offer. In a social media setting, it may mean seeking and circulating narratives from a diverse cross-section of marginalized users, and actively crediting their insights as starting points for would-be white allies to take informed action as part of a digital pedagogy of resistance. Examination of how these social relations and practices are developed online – specifically on social media platforms – contributes to literature defining the concept as it exists on digital platforms in an ethereal setting.

Qualifying digital allyship as low-risk activism

Still, this form of allyship is not without its complications. Fundamentally, the participants' reliance on online texts can be interpreted as surveillance of the often unpaid labor of Black people who used social media platforms including Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter and Vine to provide counternarratives about their experiences with racist social norms. Participants were also distinctly removed from the physical and psychological harm others incurred as they served as witnesses to both the police brutality protested by #BlackLivesMatter, and the ongoing devaluation of Black lives (Mundt, Ross, & Burnett, 2018).

From a technocultural perspective, engagement in digital allyship praxis is complicated by the involvement of bad-faith actors. As Freelon et al.'s (2018) analysis of the hashtag indicated, several smaller clusters of conservative White Twitter users co-opted the hashtag to criticize the movement. And between 2016 and 2018, nearly four years after Black women on Twitter called out racist trolling behavior among a series of accounts that targeted Black feminists, research scientists presented empirical evidence that Russian actors used the hashtag to exploit racial tensions with the movement, potentially manipulating the participation of users involved in its intersecting discourses (Crockett, 2014; Stewart, Arif, & Starbird, 2019).

This study, however, makes a useful contribution to the literature in illustrating how the broadcast-style nature of platforms such as Twitter allow individuals who wish to build multi-racial coalitions with potential allies to engage with people 'doing the work' of developing their own awareness of racial power dynamics. The application of Helms' model, along with Brown & Ostrove's articulation of allyship provides a roadmap for assessing the efforts of a self-proclaimed digital ally who claims to amplify the voices of marginalized users in the pursuit of racial justice.

Conclusion

In the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, participants were 'recruited along established lines of interaction,' a point Sandell (1999, p. 3), citing McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1988), argues is a consistent across contemporary empirical literature on social movements – that contact with a movement is key toward encouraging more individuals to join. In the Internet Age, such recruitment strategies are considered to be comparatively low-risk (Mundt et al., 2018). As the narratives of the 14 participants in this study illustrate, recruits may be introduced to the movement, and learn of how their white identities position them to assume particular roles in movement discourse, via their self-directed exposure to social media conversations about race, social justice, and advocacy. This point-in-time examination of White individuals' networked participation in the #BlackLivesMatter movement is my response to Jen Schradie's challenge for scholars to look more broadly at what is beyond, around, inside, above and before social movement protest (2017, p. 10), drilling down to an atomized, individual-level examination of how members of the amorphous digital network used social media to find their place in the movement.

By focusing on these individuals' experience with and use of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag as part of a discursive repertoire of collective action for racial justice, I identified the processes of self-awareness they experienced, White Racial Consciousness Awareness, and strategies they used – amplification and informed action – to position themselves as self-determined allies, committed to the movement's goals of attracting attention to instances of the country's systemic devaluation of Black lives. By choosing to recognize the social affordances of Whiteness in a space where race does not have to be performed, and using their positionality to educate other White people about racial injustice while amplifying the historically marginalized voices of Black individuals within the movement, the participants in this study demonstrated a few fairly simple ways that digital allyship can contribute to an existence that seeks racial equity and justice rather than dominance.

A contemporary survey of social attitudes in the United States indicated that nearly two-thirds of White people do not have any non-White friends (Cox, Navarro-Rivera, & Jones, 2014). Noting that the infrastructure of other platforms, like Facebook, created a spiral of silence about #BlackLivesMatter during its zenith (Tufekci, 2016), I argue that Twitter provided a valuable space for these White allies to gain access to Black narratives and counternarratives about state-sanctioned violence against Black bodies, ones they might not have otherwise had in their day-to-day lives offline. Using the digital discourse to further educate themselves about issues of White privilege and racial injustice, they further developed their own White racial consciousness, resulting in their decisions to confront, educate, and invite other White people to participate in the movement's activities.

Engaging in race-centric conversations that question, challenge and ultimately seek to dismantle White supremacy can be extremely difficult and uncomfortable for White people who unwittingly profit from this system of oppression, especially when they participate in that work without the direct social support in their physical communities (Case, 2012). The narratives from participants in this study suggest that digital spaces such as Twitter offered a semblance of support that was otherwise lacking for would-be White allies in #BlackLivesMatter.

Notes

1. In June 2015, McKinney, Texas, police officer Eric Casebolt was recorded brandishing a gun and forcefully restraining a 15-year-old girl after being called to break up a pool party. The incident was caught on camera and shared via social media with the hashtag #McKinney. Casebolt later resigned.
2. 12-year-old Tamir Rice, a Black boy, was shot and killed by Cleveland police officer Timothy Loehmann, a White man, on 24 November 2014, as he played in a city park. The incident was caught on camera, and shared online with hashtags including #TamirRice and #BlackLivesMatter.

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