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Nina Cosdon
Denison University, cosdon_n1@denison.edu

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Nina Raphaella Cosdon

Project Advisor: Dr. Omedi Ochieng

Department of Communication

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Abstract

This research sought to understand how Americans respond to racialized police violence by examining discourse conducted in the social medium, Twitter. To that end, it does a close reading of Twitter discourse to excavate the social ideologies that structure how racialized violence is conceptualized. It aimed to illuminate the possibilities and limits of Twitter as both a forum for public discourse and a technological medium of communication. After weeks of analyzing the rhetoric of Twitter users speaking against police brutality, the findings suggest that the vast majority are calling for conservative, status quo-enforcing reforms to the corrupt policing they claim to oppose. Additionally, this research concludes that Twitter, though an effective space for spreading awareness and garnering support for activist causes, is limited in its ability to enact social change.

We are in the midst of a civil rights movement. In May, video of a police officer kneeling on the neck of George Floyd went viral. With three other police officers standing nearby in complicity, Floyd, a young Black man, was murdered in broad daylight. The police killing of George Floyd sparked protests around the country, across the world, and on social media. This research sought to understand the responses to racialized police violence through examining discourse conducted in the social medium, Twitter. In performing a close reading of Twitter discourse, I hoped to identify the social ideologies that structure how racialized violence is conceptualized. Finally, this research aimed to discern whether Twitter could serve as an effective platform for protest.

To understand the present anger many Americans feel toward the police, it is important to first understand the history of the police. Police forces came into existence long before the United States, with "night watch" patrols as the earliest form. These were informal, with a rotation of volunteers signed up to discourage various forms of debauchery like gambling and prostitution. The system was corrupt from the start, as watchmen would often drink on the job and richer colonists would pay off others to take their shifts for them (Waxman, 2017). However, in the South, the first state-funded police originated as slave patrols, chasing down anyone who tried to escape slavery and quashing any rebellions that aimed to liberate enslaved persons. The first formal slave patrol was founded in 1704, but laws dating back to the 1600s enabled and encouraged White people to catch runaway slaves. The earliest police forces were intended to protect the institution of slavery, but even after the Civil War, police were tasked with enforcing "Black Codes" such as segregation (Waxman, 2017). The 14th Amendment may have made Black people citizens, but it failed to make them equal. From then on, the police and prison systems have worked hand-in-hand to target Black Americans. Although they represent only

13% of the population, one in three Black people are shot by the police and one in three Black men will be incarcerated (Alexander, 2010; Lyle & Esmail, 2016). Black Americans may be theoretically equal in the eyes of the law, but not in the eyes of law enforcement. This past summer, the United States was forced to acknowledge the disproportionately violent treatment of Black Americans by the police, largely because of the protesters who made it impossible to ignore. Their anger at the police for murdering Black Americans is justified, but it should not be a shock because this is what they were created to do: establish and maintain a racial undercaste (Alexander, 2012; Waxman, 2017).

It is undeniable that Black Americans are targeted by racist violence, both systemically and interpersonally (Alexander, 2010; Hayes, 2017; Hutto & Green, 2016). The term "violence" necessitates a definition because this paper acknowledges the ability of violence, and especially racialized violence, to transcend the physical. While Officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on George Floyd's neck is violence, so too is an officer pulling over a Black motorist for no reason beyond the color of their skin. In his Critique of Violence," German philosopher Walter Benjamin defined police violence as spectral, everywhere and nowhere all at once (Jennings & Bullock, 1996). It seems as if you cannot drive down the street without seeing a police car, but despite the overwhelming, Big Brother-esque nature of the police, it is nearly impossible to hold them accountable for their actions (Lawson, 2013; Oglesby-Neal, Tiry, & Kim, 2019). Benjamin calls police violence spectral because it is not only omnipresent, it is essentially limitless (Jennings & Bullock, 1996). Many times, when the news media passively reports that a Black person "died in police custody," it goes without question. Benjamin writes that policing combines law-enforcing violence and law-making violence; police supposedly exist to uphold the law, but as society

empowers them to act as judge, jury, and executioner at their discretion, they have become the law (Jennings & Bullock, 1996).

Perhaps the best way to examine the pervasiveness of police violence is through the violence that is *not* enacted by the police. In February, Ahmaud Arbury, a young Black man, was on one of his regular jogs through a Georgia neighborhood not far from his own home. In broad daylight, Arbury was chased down and shot to death by two White men who believed him to be a criminal (Fausset, 2020). These men, a father and son, were not police officers. However, they believed their Whiteness enabled them to embody the police and kill at their discretion. And, it seemed, they were correct: it took leaked video footage of the murder going viral on Twitter and national attention from celebrities, politicians, and ordinary citizens before murderers Gregory and Travis McMichael were charged and arrested almost two months later (Fausset, 2020). How could this happen? Policing has become ubiquitous, as Benjamin argued, and inextricably linked with anti-Blackness (Jennings & Bullock, 1996; Waxman, 2017). These White men were socialized to believe that if a Black man is running, he must be a criminal, and it is therefore their civic duty to stop him. If there had been no video evidence of Arbury's murder, his killers would undoubtedly still be free today. Police are deputized by the law to kill with impunity, and White laypeople are deputized as police.

Recently, on social media and the news, we have seen police officers respond to the Black Lives Matter protests with violence, regardless of whether the protestors were peaceful. Many people, however, would be reluctant or unwilling to label the actions of the police as violence, instead preferring to say the police are "maintaining order" or "keeping people in line." This rhetoric, Benjamin would argue, stems largely from the belief that any violence committed by the police is justified (Jennings & Bullock, 1996). Calling for the abolishment of the United

States police system may seem radical, but that is only because we cannot imagine a world without them. Benjamin would argue that this has less to do with the prescribed role of the police and more to do with our imagined role of the police (Jennings & Bullock, 1996). Nowadays, it is common to call the police for a wide variety of reasons; anything from a loose dog to loud neighbors to attempted murder can fall under the police's jurisdiction. As we rely more heavily on the police, we give them more power. However, this past summer, the public sphere began to question the unquestionable authority of the police. This can be largely attributed to social media users making it impossible to continue ignoring the racialized violence of the police (Hayes, 2017; Ince, Rojas, & Davis, 2017; Lee, 2017; Oglesby-Neal, Tiry, & Kim, 2019).

Social media has aided and facilitated protests in ways that would have formerly been impossible. Gathering virtually enables protesters to amass support and coordinate an eventual in-person protest. In addition to easily sharing the time and place of protests, social media enables protestors to communicate vital safety information amongst one another. While social media is uniquely able to connect protesters who will gather offline, the platform itself can facilitate protests. There is a large body of research devoted to the ability of social media, and especially Twitter, to serve as a space for protest (Hayes, 2017; Ince, Rojas, & Davis, 2017; Lee, 2017; Hutto & Green, 2016; Oglesby-Neal, Tiry, & Kim, 2019; Ray, Brown, Fraistat, & Summers, 2017). The majority of these studies touted the ability of social media as a platform for protest, with some speculating that it could render in-person protests unnecessary (Hayes, 2017; Ince, Rojas, & Davis, 2017; Oglesby-Neal, Tiry, & Kim, 2019). This research considers such findings but aimed to look beyond whether social media protests are possible to discern whether they are effective.

For this study, the social media platform Twitter provided the best depiction of the public's response to racialized instances of police brutality. This is largely due to the demographics of Twitter users, the majority of which are Left-leaning young adults aged from 18-30 years old. The political affiliation and relatively young age of most Twitter users undoubtedly contributed to the amount of anti-police brutality dialogue on the platform (Lee, 2017; Ray, Brown, Fraistat, & Summers, 2017). In contrast, the majority of Facebook's users lean Right and belong to an older generation. This combined with Facebook's primary purpose of sharing personal photos and connecting with old friends makes Twitter users far more likely to discuss current social issues. Additionally, and most notably for this research, a disproportionately large number of Black young adults use Twitter. 40% of Black Americans aged 18-29 use Twitter, compared to 28% of White Americans in this age range (Lee, 2017; Ray, Brown, Fraistat, & Summers, 2017).

Twitter's interface also made it ideal for collecting and analyzing the rhetoric surrounding racialized police violence. Twitter users communicate through 280-character tweets, making the dialogue bite-sized and conducive to my research. The other social media platform dominated by young adults, Instagram, is primarily a picture-sharing service that is less conducive to written discourse. While Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter all allow you to search for certain hashtags, Twitter is the only one with the capability to search for any term used in the post ("tweet"). For this study, terms such as "police brutality," "racism," "police violence," "Black Lives Matter," "the media," and "justice for…" were searched for within tweets. Twitter's search feature is also accessible even without a Twitter account. Therefore, I was able to search for tweets without worrying that Twitter's algorithm would show me what it thought I wanted to see based on activity from my personal account.

While searching through tweets that discussed racially motivated police brutality and police murders, two dominant themes emerged. These were Twitter taking over the news media's job as the watchdog of the people and Twitter users criticizing the police in very limited terms. The first theme may be disconcerting, especially for older Americans who have learned to trust the mainstream news media and are less familiar with social media. Older generations may find it laughable to get one's news from Twitter, but Twitter has proven its capability as a conduit of information that mainstream news companies are failing to publicize.

Noah Farrar
@NoahFarrar

Show your parents the twitter videos, the news is rotting them

1:04 PM · Jun 2, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

153.8K Retweets   **581.5K** Likes

In a tweet that received over half a million likes, user @NoahFarrar succinctly criticizes the reliance of older Americans on the traditional news: "Show your parents the twitter videos, the news is rotting them". The "Twitter videos" to which this user is referring were the myriad videos clips and images of police officers brutalizing or antagonizing otherwise peaceful protestors. Accompanying such disturbing videos was a commentary akin to "They won't show you this on the news!" Twitter users expressed their distrust in the news coverage of the Black Lives Matter and police brutality protests by portraying themselves as telling the whole story where the traditional news media fell short.

🌹 ⚔ ꕥ **The Artsy Marxist** ꕥ ⚔ 🌹 BLM
@Artsymarxist

The Tucson city council passed an ordinance making it illegal for citizens to film the Tucson police. I'm horrified. This needs national attention.

1:54 AM · Jun 6, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

74.7K Retweets   **129.6K** Likes

The screenshot above exemplifies one Twitter user embodying the role of the news media. Using the handle @Artsymarxist, this individual felt it was their responsibility to share with Twitter an ordinance they believed required "national attention." Now that Twitter users are positing themselves as a reliable source of information, the traditional news corporations come into question. Do we really need elitist, politically biased news outlets? Are individual Twitter users with no corporate interests a more reliable source of information?

As people opt to get their information from online sources over newspapers or cable news, major news outlets are forced to move online lest they lose their relevancy. However, on the internet, clicks are currency and the most sensational headlines attract the attention of readers, leading to "fake news" and "clickbait." On Twitter, distrust in the traditional news media grew even more during the protests following the murder of George Floyd. Many Twitter users were concerned that traditional news outlets were publicizing the wrong aspect of the protests. The tweet below criticizes the myriad news cycles devoted to denigrating the looters.

kam
@ChicKamNigglet

Did y'all notice how looting died down and peaceful protests continued, but the media coverage of the protests has died down? This speaks volumes to the media's part in demonizing the black community.

12:14 PM · Jun 17, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

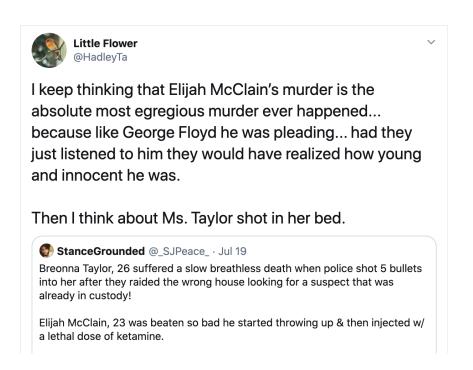**207.2K** Retweets and comments   **541.5K** Likes

This Twitter user accuses the media of "demonizing the black community" for beginning and ending their coverage of the protests with looting. The user has hit a very important point, because many Right-leaning Twitter users, such as the one below, were quick to disregard the entire Black Lives Matter movement because of the actions of a few protesters.

David Benjamin
@thetoyman1

Antifa, & BLM the Organization R TERRORIST GROUPS! No more beating around the bush! They riot & loot. They set fire 2 statues, buildings, & private businesses! ENOUGH! @realDonaldTrump & AG Barr must designate these groups as TERRORISTS! Let's dismantle these enemies of State!

12:28 PM · Aug 16, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

52 Retweets   **61** Likes

Twitter user @thetoyman1 advocated for BLM and anti-fascism ideology ANTIFA to be

designated as terrorist organizations. Making no mention is made of the Black Lives Matter

platform, this user rejects the entire movement based on the actions of the minority.

Calling for Black Americans to protest their oppression in ways that are more acceptable

to the White majority is a clear instance of respectability politics. Respectability politics put the

burden on marginalized communities, arguing that if Black Americans behave better, they will

be treated better. Other tweets from Right-leaning Twitter that reinforced respectability politics

were often in response to videos of police officers beating or tear-gassing protestors, and

maintained that it must have been the protestors' fault for not listening to or cooperating with the

police. Walter Benjamin would say that government employees should not have the power to

enact violence on its citizens to keep them in line, but many people accept that the police were

just doing their job. This may be an unsurprising argument coming from Conservatives wishing

to maintain the status quo, but many White Liberals advocating for BLM and social change were

inadvertently reinforcing respectability politics as well.

Little Flower
@HadleyTa

I keep thinking that Elijah McClain's murder is the absolute most egregious murder ever happened... because like George Floyd he was pleading... had they just listened to him they would have realized how young and innocent he was.

Then I think about Ms. Taylor shot in her bed.

StanceGrounded @_SJPeace_ · Jul 19
Breonna Taylor, 26 suffered a slow breathless death when police shot 5 bullets into her after they raided the wrong house looking for a suspect that was already in custody!

Elijah McClain, 23 was beaten so bad he started throwing up & then injected w/ a lethal dose of ketamine.

While tweeting their strong opposition to police brutality, Liberal Twitter users, as exemplified above, often focused their outrage around the innocence of the victim. These Tweets emphasized that Breonna Taylor was sleeping when she was murdered by the police, and that's why her death was wrong, or that Elijah McClain's last words were so kind and innocent, and that's why he didn't deserve to be killed. Such rhetoric implies that the police killings of these Black individuals were wrong because of their respectability. It overlooks the fact that it is not the job of the police to act as executioner, and even if Breonna Taylor had fought back, even if Elijah McClain had committed a crime, they *still* did not deserve to be killed.

Tweets that expressed shock at the murder of innocent Black people enforce respectability politics in a very different manner; they expose White Americans' deep-seated belief that respectable Black persons are exempt from police brutality. Liberal Whites are able to clearly label the police murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Elijah McClain as wrong because of their compliance, but the fatal shooting of Rayshard Brooks, who stole a taser from the police and ran from them, becomes more difficult to classify. Police brutality is so hegemonic that it takes the murder of someone who is objectively innocent to arouse anger, and we forget that police are not "supposed" to kill guilty people either. Not only are respectability politics offensive (they call for a minority to change itself to appease the majority), but they are a myth. Racially targeted police brutality proves that respectability does not save Black Americans from being murdered.

The Twitter user below pointed out another shortcoming of the mainstream news media: coverage often begins and ends with sensational events.

User @BrettRedacted expressed frustration that politicians acknowledge wrongful police practices only when Twitter brings it to their attention. This user's tweet is another example of the mainstream news media neglecting to report on the nonphysical violence of police officers. Only the most sensational police abuses of power make the news; the others are reported by Twitter.

The latter theme I identified is perhaps more complex. It emerged from the myriad Twitter users who call for reform rather than abolition. Such tweets often demanded "justice" for the victims of police brutality, but equate this justice with the incarceration of the violent police officers. In this way, people who attempt to take a radical and antiracist stance are operating

within a conservative, status quo-enforcing frame. This is often done with the best of intentions, such as the tweet below.

This Twitter user is calling for the arrest of the police officers who entered Breonna Taylor's apartment with a no-knock warrant. When Taylor's boyfriend, Kenneth Walker, fired his gun once in what he believed to be self-defense, the unidentifiable officers fired a series of shots that would kill Breonna Taylor (Oppel & Taylor, 2020). Many citizens and lawmakers alike agree that the police officers acted negligently and illegally, and may be considered murderers. Tweets like this one by @TatianaKing have dominated Twitter for months. That keyword "justice" is frequently seen in conjunction with the names of Breonna Taylor and the other Black Americans who were murdered by the police. However, calling for the officers who killed Taylor to be arrested is looking to an admittedly broken system for a solution. It is asking for these police officers to be investigated by other police officers. It is relying on the same prison system that incarcerates Black men at rates six times higher than White men to deliver justice (Alexander, 2010; "Mapping police violence," 2020).

Calling for the imprisonment of the police officers who killed Breonna Taylor, or Rayshard Brooks, or Elijah McClain is to subscribe to the "few bad apples" mentality. This is the belief that there is a small minority of police officers who are racist or kill with impunity, but that the rest are okay (Lyle & Esmail, 2016; Oglesby-Neal, Tiry, & Kim, 2019). However, this is to ignore the systemic nature of racism. Just as certain laws or industries reflect the mainstream values of Christianity, capitalism, or male supremacy, so too is racism "baked in" to the status quo. This is particularly true of the police system, which was established to keep Black Americans subordinate (Alexander, 2010; Waxman, 2017).

In addition to serving as a critique of the conservative nature of Twitter activism, this theme of calling for justice epitomizes the limits of the platform as a space for protest. Of course,

Twitter's ability to serve as a space for protest, and especially Black-led protest, must be acknowledged (Ray, Brown, Fraistat, & Summers, 2017). As the tweets criticizing the lack of coverage from the traditional news media indicate, Twitter can raise awareness and garner support for causes that may have otherwise gone unnoticed. However, this is not without its limits. Firstly, Twitter users are constrained by Twitter itself. Ultimately, the social media platform's algorithms have the final say in what content will be seen. If "Black Lives Matter" is trending, related tweets will likely be pushed to the top of users' feeds. Twitter's community guidelines restrict speech as well, though many would argue for the better, to combat hate speech and cyberbullying. However, this also prevents true radical speech on the platform. Twitter's rules have no problem with users tweeting "Black Lives Matter!" but will likely restrict someone tweeting "Let's burn down the local police station tonight at 10 pm" for violating its rules against promoting violence.

For something to trend on Twitter in the first place, it must be driven by mass interest. Therefore, it is the extreme instances of police violence that trend on Twitter. The obvious murder of George Floyd by the police went viral, but a cop choosing to stop-and-frisk a young Black man will likely not. This problem is not unique to Twitter—it is the sensationalized instances of racism that spark outrage, not the mundane, "boring" racism. Examples of boring racism are so common that they hardly receive attention: A Black job applicant getting turned away, a White woman clutching her purse tighter when a Black person walks by, and, of course, Black people receiving disproportionate attention and abuse from police officers. Similar to Twitter, news outlets inadvertently ignore "boring" racism by limiting their coverage of the police brutality protests to looting and rioting. Unfortunately, systemic racism is some of the

most common and unspectacular there is. If it takes sensational instances of racism for people to pay attention, nothing will change.

This research found that even the Twitter users attempting to speak out against racialized police brutality were still enforcing the status quo by looking for solutions within the system they were critiquing. While many scholars have touted Twitter as a place for activism, they ignore that much of the advocacy on the platform is conservative and does not seek to challenge the status quo. The "justice" many Twitter users call for is limited and even tautological; how can we expect police officers to be investigated, arrested, and jailed by other police officers? Walter Benjamin would object to Twitter users interpreting justice as inextricably linked to the law, especially when it is agents of the law committing the offense (Jennings & Bullock, 1996).

By examining the dominant themes within the Twitter rhetoric surrounding police brutality, it is clear that the vast majority of Twitter users are content with conservative, status quo-enforcing reforms. Twitter itself is undoubtedly a platform for protest, but a very limited one at that. When even the challengers of a system are offering very limited critiques, the system will no doubt endure. I was surprised to see Twitter users positing the platform as a more reliable source of information than the traditional news media, and this result is worthy of further study. The rhetoric surrounding racialized police brutality is vast and complex, and this brief summer research paper was only able to scratch the surface. I hope to expand this research this fall semester, examining more dialogue and uncovering deeper themes as Twitter users attempt to make sense of racialized police violence.

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