

All Lives Matter, but so Does Race: Black Lives Matter and the Evolving Role of Social Media

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Abstract

This article demonstrates the ways in which youth of color played an active role in debates that erupted on Twitter following the tragic deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner in 2014. These debates on social media represent a larger struggle over discourse on race and racism across the nation. Drawing from critical theory and race theory, and engaging in the relatively new practice of using Twitter as a source of data for sociological analysis, this article examines Twitter as an emerging public sphere and studies the hashtags “#AllLivesMatter” and “#BlackLivesMatter” as contested signs that represent dominant ideologies. This article consists of a qualitative textual analysis of a selection of Twitter posts from December 3 to 7, 2014, following the nonindictments of officers in the murders of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. The debates on Twitter reveal various strategies that youth of color employed to shape the national discourse about race in the wake of these high-profile tragedies.

Keywords

social media, race, social theory

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Personal Reflexive Statement

As someone very involved with the nationwide Black Lives Matter protests of 2014, this article emerged from a desire to examine the discourse regarding race and police violence unfolding on Twitter using sociological theories and tools. The events of Ferguson affected me personally as a woman of color, a sister, a cousin, an aunt, an activist, and a scholar. During the fall of 2014, I was actively engaged in protests against police brutality and systemic racism that permits such atrocities to occur without any sense of justice for the victims and their families. I closely followed news surrounding the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, among other victims of police violence, on mass media and social media. I also took to the streets with other activists and participated in acts of protest at my university on a daily basis. Rather than claiming to produce an “objective” analysis, I use my subjectivity to examine discourse as it unfolded on social media with the goal of better understanding the ways in which youth of color used technology to influence dominant discourse in the nation.

The tragic events of Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 had the nation abuzz, with much of the conversation taking place on social media. Michael Brown’s death reignited support for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and prompted many to use social media to debate the role of policing and the state of race relations in the United States. In the aftermath of Ferguson, national attention turned to the killings of other Black boys and men, such as Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York. Some argued that the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner were a race issue, plain and simple. Others argued that their deaths had nothing to do with race and that the police were the “real” victims. This article demonstrates the ways in which debates that erupted on Twitter represent a larger struggle for power over the discourse on race and racism across the nation, drawing from critical theory and race theory to analyze a collection of posts on Twitter (<http://twitter.com>), and applying these theories to a pressing contemporary context. Youth of color, a traditionally marginalized group in U.S. society, play a central role in the national discourse on race as it emerges on social media, using this technology to voice their experiences and concerns in ways that challenge dominant ideologies about race.

The BLM movement began in 2012 when George Zimmerman was acquitted after shooting and killing 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Florida. Three Black women activists, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, started the movement that subsequently engaged many, including many youth of color, in social justice activism across the country. According to the website, “#BlackLivesMatter is working for a world where Black lives are no longer systematically and intentionally targeted for demise . . . The call for Black lives to matter is a rallying cry for ALL Black lives striving for liberation” (Black Lives Matter: A Movement, Not a Moment; blacklivesmatter.com). The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter gained prominence once again and became the rallying call for protesters after the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, in August 2014.

The debates on Twitter following the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner indicate a struggle for power in controlling discourse about the state-sanctioned killings of Black men in the United States, particularly following tragedies and lack of accountability for the police officers responsible, as was the case in the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice. These often heated exchanges on social media also reveal the emergence of a few dominant ideological positions, emphasizing how different groups viewing the same media coverage interpret issues of race and police violence in drastically different ways (Smith et al. 2014).

Stereotypes of young Black men, especially those who come from low-income neighborhoods, have become so entrenched in our society that they serve as a way to legitimate police violence against unarmed Black boys and men in the eyes of many Americans. Many normalize and accept these stereotypes as truth on a subconscious level, leading some to insist on looking “objectively” at the facts without involving an analysis of race. In contrast, many people of color, particularly youth, recognize those stereotypes and acts of violence as part of a larger pattern of racism within the United States. Using a combination of sociological theories to frame my analysis, I argue that our positions within complex systems of oppression affect what we believe to be “fact” in the national discourse about police violence against people of color. Focusing in particular on the deployment of the phrases “#BlackLivesMatter” and “#AllLivesMatter,” my analysis examines the discourse on Twitter at a particular moment in time to investigate a contested site of knowledge production and power through discourse.

First, this article brings together the traditional sociological theories of Jurgen Habermas ([1962] 1991), György Lukács ([1923] 1971), and Karl Mannheim ([1936] 2013) with contemporary critical race theory to create a framework for understanding the social processes unfolding on Twitter in discourse about BLM. Then I engage in the relatively new practice of using Twitter as a source of data for sociological analysis, joining other scholars who have begun to investigate the role and implications of Twitter as it unfolds (Dubrofsky and Wood 2014; Ems 2014; Florini 2014; Penney and Dadas 2014; Theocharis et al. 2015; Tremayne 2014). This study consists of a qualitative textual analysis of Twitter posts following the non-indictments of officers in the murders of Michael Brown and Eric Garner between December 3 and 7, 2014, to examine a contested site of knowledge production and power through discourse at this moment in time. This study reveals the ways in which youth of color challenge dominant ideologies of race through social media, highlighting various strategies that they employ. Lastly, an examination of Twitter activity during this five-day span illuminates the speed with which discourse evolves on social media, pointing to the instability and contestability of emerging signs.

Theoretical Framing

The work of Habermas ([1962] 1991) provides us with tools to think about social media as an emerging public sphere where signs and myths are constructed (Barthes

1972; Saussure 1916) and discourse on race unfolds. I use the works of Lukács ([1923] 1971) and Mannheim ([1936] 2013) alongside the critical race theory of Omi and Winant (2014) to explain how some use color-blind racism without realizing their partial view of the greater system of racial oppression in the United States. The writings of Lukács and Mannheim on totality and the production of knowledge illuminate processes taking place in this contemporary public sphere. While traditional sociological theory can provide valuable insights and theoretical frameworks to understand society today, the glaring absence of any discussion of race in the works mentioned above makes it necessary to supplement those scholarly works with contributions from critical race theory to fully understand the historical context surrounding the police violence and the BLM movement. The works of Omi and Winant (2014), Roediger and Esch (2012), and Roithmayr (2014) provide theoretical contributions regarding racial oppression and resistance, the evolution of racial stereotypes in the United States, and structural racism, while *Killing Trayvons* (2014) offers a more targeted account of the ways in which race plays a role in the state-sanctioned violence against Black bodies.

Social Media as a New Public Sphere

The important role of social media as a platform for recent discussions of racism and police violence necessitates a revisiting of classical sociological theory in light of modern technology. Habermas's ([1962] 1991) theory of the public sphere provides a useful framework to understand the discourse surrounding BLM on social media, as discourse and specific rhetoric used in the public sphere allow insight into the social and political tensions and forces at play just beneath the surface during and following these events. With rapidly developing technology and the rise of social media, the public sphere today looks very different than it did even 10 years ago. However, as numerous scholars highlight, Habermas identifies key aspects of the public sphere that are transferable to contemporary public discourse (Calhoun 1992; Dahlgren 1995; Fraser 1992; Fraser and Nash 2014). Although not specifically attuned to issues of race, Habermas's theory of the public sphere sheds light on social processes of national discourse in which today's youth of color actively engage.

In Habermas's theory, the audience plays a crucial role in the functioning of the public sphere. However, media scholar Peter Dahlgren (1995) asserts that the notion of an "audience" is insufficient in that it implies a stable fixed group of receivers. Instead, Dahlgren suggests that public spheres need "publics" that are interactive social agents, rather than passive audience members. With the creation of a new interface for public discourse, we see the emergence of subjectivities forming in a new way, allowing for the active engagement of new publics.

We can extrapolate from Habermas's perspective a set of questions that allow us to reassess what the problem of "public sphere" may mean with regard to new social media. Some may classify social media as a "weak" public, given that publics

organizing on social media do not have the power to directly shape decision-making in the state (Fraser 1992:134). However, social media serves as both a weak public in which people formulate opinions and a “strong” public that puts pressure on the state to reform its practices by raising awareness and organizing protests.

Although social media far from remedies the issue of universal accessibility to the public sphere, it certainly creates a new form of access that engages many who otherwise would not be able to participate in the public sphere. Habermas ([1962] 1991) argues that “[p]ublic opinion originated from those who were informed” and that the lower classes did not participate because “they had neither the leisure nor the opportunity” to concern themselves with anything beyond their most immediate needs for survival (p. 102). With technological innovations and the increased accessibility of cell phones, most youth in the United States can tap into discourse on public media almost anywhere, anytime. Rather than needing to set aside time to engage in national and transnational conversations about race and oppression, increased access to the Internet and the ability to read and contribute to discourses on social media via one’s cell phone allows youth to integrate this participation in the public sphere into their daily activities. While the public sphere is not universally accessible, the rise of social media appears to be increasing accessibility to national discourse, particularly for youth who are coming of age with the rise of this technology.

While Habermas’s theories serve as great tools in the unpacking of the discourse on social media, it is also important to point out the ways in which his theories do not neatly map onto the contemporary context. Most importantly, the Internet is not tied to any single nation-state. If online social media can in fact be considered an extension of the public sphere, or a site where a new public sphere emerges, this new platform for public discourse calls into question the relationship between the public sphere and the state. For Habermas, the public sphere emerged as a space for people within a nation-state to exchange ideas outside of state control. Today we see a multiplicity of public spheres that overlap and are constantly shifting, public spheres that are not necessarily tied to any singular governmental entity or confined within the borders of a single nation-state. Although outside the scope of this article, the implications of transnational public spheres in light of Habermas’s theory warrant further attention.¹

Totality versus Partiality

In *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), Lukács argues that “[f]acts can only become facts within the framework of a system—which will vary with the knowledge desired” ([1923] 1971:5). According to Lukács, all facts already imply an interpretation, no matter how seemingly objective. In light of the contemporary discourse surrounding the BLM protests in the fall of 2014, Lukács might argue that adamant support of the phrases #AllLivesMatter or #BlackLivesMatter emerged as a result of reified minds viewing these concepts as “true representatives of [their]

societal existence” ([1923] 1971:93) rather than seeing the capital relations that shape their existence and drive them into conflict with each other. In other words, these hashtags took on greater significance, as they came to represent the identities of groups of people. However, an overreliance on these hashtags could take attention away from underlying issues of structural inequality and capitalist exploitation.

Lukács argues that “the knowledge yielded by the standpoint of the proletariat stands on a higher scientific plane objectively” than knowledge produced by the bourgeoisie ([1923] 1971:163). Although I do not necessarily agree that “objectivity” is the most useful way to frame this, Lukács’s point that those in power are often blind to certain knowledge that is more readily available to the oppressed remains a salient one. Other scholars, such as Georg Simmel (1950) and Patricia Hill Collins (1986), have made similar claims about the uniquely situated knowledge of those outside of the dominant system or society. As we will see in my analysis below, in debates on Twitter regarding #BlackLivesMatter versus #AllLivesMatter, those adamantly supporting #AllLivesMatter in protest against the claim that Black lives matter (BLM) tend to oversimplify the discourse, engaging in color-blind racism. While the claim that all human life is valuable is not “wrong,” it intentionally erases the complexities of race, class, gender, and sexuality in the lives of people who suffer from systematic police brutality.

In *Ideology and Utopia* (1936), Mannheim argues that utopian thought and ideology are partialities that view themselves as objective totalities ([1936] 2013:36). Mannheim aptly highlights the point that groups of people who are strongly invested in a certain set of interests may mistakenly come to believe that they see the totality, when in fact their views are only part of the totality. Another aspect of Mannheim’s work that lends itself to this project is his theory of relationism. For Mannheim, relationism lies between relativism and objective truth. Following Mannheim’s concept of relationism, while I do not consider that searching for objective truth in the discourse around racial violence and the BLM movement serves as a useful or productive exercise, I do believe that there are criteria by which to judge the ethical implications of various statements. For instance, statements that reaffirm racial hierarchies and the silencing of marginalized communities are ethically problematic. “Truth” can be used in ways that perpetuate violence against vulnerable populations. Perhaps more important than the straight facts are the ways in which the deployment of certain facts perpetuates regimes of power.

What about Race?

In the seminal work *Racial Formation* (2014), Michael Omi and Howard Winant define race as a modern, socially constructed concept, and introduce the theme of oppression and resistance as dialectical forces at play in race and racism. In the case of discourse on social media following the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner and the nonindictments of their killers, we see this dialectical relationship between

oppression and resistance at play, as youth of color use social media to call out racist rhetoric and practices.

Omi and Winant also address the emergence of color-blind racism alongside neoliberal ideology in the United States, making a connection between this form of “new racism” and how it coincides with economic practices that structurally disadvantage people of color. According to Omi and Winant, “Neoliberalism was at its core a racial project as much as a capitalist accumulation project” (2014:211). As opposed to Jim Crow era racism, color-blind racism appears egalitarian on the surface with its assertion that all people are the same. However, adherence to this postracial ideology while both structural and interpersonal racism persist effaces the struggles of people of color by claiming that racism is a thing of the past. This dangerous liberal ideology provides a false sense of comfort to those who do not face racial oppression in their everyday lives.

Drawing on David R. Roediger and Elizabeth D. Esch’s (2012) account of the history of race management in the United States, I examine how the legacy of this management of race through labor can be seen today in the persisting racial conflicts with regard to culture and power. While violence against people of color in the United States has persisted in some form for hundreds of years, today we see youth of color fighting to control the national discourse about state-sanctioned violence in their communities in new ways through the use of social media. At the same time, stereotypes of African Americans, which Roediger and Esch argue were developed to manage Black labor over a century ago, continue to persist and serve as justification for violence against Black bodies.

Emphasizing the importance of understanding the structural components of racism in the United States, in *Reproducing Racism* (2014), Daria Roithmayr explains factors that lead to the reproduction of racial inequality over time. While discussions of the killing of Black boys and men on social media focus largely on interpersonal racism and the details of particular instances of police brutality, the underlying structural racism largely influences the different ideologies that emerge in response to acts of police violence. Those who face structural oppression and systematic racism on a daily basis tend to understand the events of Ferguson and Staten Island very differently than those who do not face systematic racial oppression regularly. While mainstream conversations often do not address structural racism, an understanding of those underlying structures is necessary when examining discourses about race within the nation. Even if all interpersonal racism magically ceased, the existing systems that privilege white supremacy and criminalize nonwhite bodies and behaviors would persist. While discourse is crucial, the goal should not be to merely “win” an argument, but to encourage people to fundamentally change structures of oppression that permeate our lives.

In an explicit examination of the ways in which Black men are rendered disposable in the eyes of the state, *Killing Trayvons* (Gray, Wypijewski, and St. Clair 2014) highlights the connections between each individual act of violence against Black males and the larger systemic problem, both nationally and globally.

Addressing the ways in which whiteness functions as an ideology, Thandisizwe Chimurenga, one of the authors in *Killing Trayvons* (2014), writes “Being a person of color in the U.S. does not make one immune to white supremacist ideology or behavior on its behalf” (2014:108). This quote emphasizes the point that the tension exists not merely between white bodies and Black bodies, but that the battle must be fought on an ideological level that goes beyond the visible components of race. The fact that George Zimmerman, Trayvon Martin’s killer, is Latino illustrates the way that whiteness as an ideology does not necessarily correspond to white bodies. This analysis of whiteness as an ideology can be linked back to theories about partial ideologies as presented by the traditional sociological theorists above. Not all white people attempt to erase the role of race in police brutality. At the same time, there exists great diversity in the experiences and politics of people of color. For instance, a Black or Latino police officer may act in ways that reaffirm white supremacist agendas by nature of their position within an institution designed to criminalize nonnormative (read: nonwhite, heterosexual, middle class) behavior.

Language and Discourse

I now turn to the work of Ferdinand De Saussure ([1916] 2011) and Roland Barthes (1972) to provide a theoretical framing of my textual analysis of specific language circulating on social media. Saussure’s work emphasizes the relational nature of the signifier and signified, producing language as a structure. According to Saussure, “language never exists apart from the social fact” (1916:79). Words are signs that are composed of two parts: the signifier and the signified. The relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary, in that the words do not objectively or inherently possess some essence of the concept that they signify. Over time, the relationship between a signifier and what it signifies can shift as social forces adapt and refine concepts.

Barthes starts from Saussure’s theory of signs as consisting of the relationship between the signifier and the signified, and then uses those signs as building blocks to theorize the construction of myths as meta-level signifiers. In *Mythologies* (1972), Barthes writes, “It is this constant game of hide-and-seek between the meaning and the form which defines myth” (1972:117). Barthes also emphasizes the historically situatedness of myths and the ways in which myths can change and even disappear completely over time. As we will see in the case of the hashtags that gained prominence in autumn of 2014, Barthes argues that “myth essentially aims at causing an immediate impression—it does not matter if one is later allowed to see through the myth, its action is assumed to be stronger than the rational explanations which may later belie it” (1972:129).

For the purposes of this study, I use the tools offered by Barthes to understand the ways in which language functions in society and to analyze contemporary discourse around race in the United States. Rather than pursuing a Marxist analysis as Barthes

does in the final pages of *Mythologies*, I take a more Foucauldian approach to studying discourse as power and investigating the effects of that power.

The combination of traditional sociological theory and critical race theory above provides the framework necessary to analyze discussions of the BLM movement on social media. This theoretical framework allows for an analysis that looks at the discourse on social media in terms of partial ideologies playing out in an emerging public sphere. Critical race theory complements the more traditional sociological theory by providing the crucial historical context necessary to understand underlying structural racism that informs modern discourse, while highlighting that said discourse is a current manifestation of racial tensions that developed over hundreds of years. Having outlined the theoretical frameworks for this article, I now turn to an overview of my methodology and an analysis of social media discourse in light of the theory outlined above.

Method

This study consists of a qualitative textual analysis of Twitter posts following the nonindictments of officers in the murders of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, between December 3 and 7, 2014. News of the nonindictment in the case of Eric Garner broke on December 3, leading to a surge in the usage of the hashtags “#BlackLivesMatter” and “#AllLivesMatter.” For the purposes of this study, I focus on Twitter posts that include the hashtags #BlackLivesMatter and/or #AllLivesMatter to examine the discourse surrounding the emerging movement.

This study examines only a selection of tweets that fit these criteria for a number of reasons. Primarily, the sheer number of tweets containing these key hashtags during this week following the nonindictment in the killing of Eric Garner is staggering. According to Topsy, a Twitter analytics tool, in just the first hour following news of the nonindictment for Eric Garner’s death, tweets using “#BlackLivesMatter” soared to over 13,000 (Dastagir 2014).

Current technology does not allow for an efficient way to archive tweets by hashtag during a set period of time in the past. Some tools, such as Topsy, or Twitter’s advanced search function, allow users to perform somewhat sophisticated searches by key terms, hashtags, and dates, but these tools do not allow users to download and easily use these data. Other tools harvest tweets and allow users to download these data, but these functions are restricted to tweets from the previous six to nine days but not prior.

Given these challenges, I decided to use Twitter’s advanced search feature and take screenshots of selected results between December 3 and 7, 2014. The analysis process drew heavily from grounded theory in order to identify key themes (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Lofland and Lofland 2007). I initially read through approximately 500 tweets from this time period to get a sense for the dialogue on Twitter at this moment in time. Based on this initial read-through, I loosely coded tweets based on whether they used “#BlackLivesMatter,” “#AllLivesMatter,” or both. I selected

100 tweets out of the initial sample of 500, consisting of approximately 30 to 35 tweets from each initial grouping that were representative of the larger sample. I conducted a close textual analysis on these 100 tweets, from which I developed more specific thematic groupings, including “call to action,” “conflict over signs,” and “shifting signs/discourse.” After using the refined codes to categorize the 100 tweets, I then analyzed the tweets within each thematic grouping. At this point in the process, I investigated the race, gender, and age of each Twitter user when that information was available, so that I could include these factors in my analysis of the various trends I observed and recorded.

Although this method does not allow for the collection of comprehensive information regarding demographics of users, it highlights processes of discourse as they unfold on social media while taking into account Twitter users’ identities to the extent that they publicize that information. This study is not intended to be generalizable to the practices of all social media users or all Americans; instead, this study provides insight into dominant discourse on race at a particular moment in time and applies classical sociological theory to analyze this contemporary phenomenon.

Sample

Of my final sample of 100 tweets, each from unique Twitter users, I was able to determine some descriptive factors (age, gender, and race) of the majority of the users based on their Twitter profiles and links to their other social media accounts and blogs. Of the 100 users, I coded 31% as Black (16 men, 15 women) and 27% as white. Additionally, 23% of users represent enormous diversity with regard to age (teenage to retirement age), race (white, Asian, Latino, and unknown), and ability (one user stood in solidarity with the BLM movement as a non-Black person with Autism) and the remaining 19% of user identities are unknown.

Self-reflexivity

As a queer, Black woman who was actively involved in protests and debates on social media in the wake of the nonindictment of officers in the killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, I understand my position as that of a participant observer. While I did not directly engage in conversations on Twitter, I followed and engaged in the discourse on Facebook and several blogs regularly during the fall of 2014. I chose to use Twitter as a source of data for this project because of the public nature of many Twitter posts and the prolific engagement of users, including youth of color.

Findings

The #BlackLivesMatter slogan met a great deal of resistance in the wake of the killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. On social media, one of the primary ways in which people resisted the #BlackLivesMatter movement came in the form of

using #AllLivesMatter as a counterslogan to undermine the purpose and message of the #BlackLivesMatter call to action. Many social media users deployed #AllLivesMatter as a way to deny the specific and prominent violence against Blacks by appealing to a larger universal. Thus, in the guise of presumably broader politics, it depoliticized and deracialized the specificity of #BlackLivesMatter.

#BlackLivesMatter: A Call to Action

The following examples are representative of one type of post, or tweet, that dominated the Twitter discourse in December, immediately following news of the non-indictment in Eric Garner's killing. In parentheses following each tweet, I include any information about the person who posted the tweet when that information is available. First, here are three examples from December 3 to 4 of the ways in which the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag was deployed as a way to draw attention to systemic racism faced by Black people in the United States. This grouping of #BlackLivesMatter tweets represents the call to action at the heart of the movement by highlighting the ways in which Black bodies are disproportionately targeted for violence by the police:

1. I am JUDGING you by the way you are responding to this. THIS IS MY MEASURING STICK. #BLACKLIVESMATTER #ThisEndsToday (black and white anarchist flag icon).
 - Includes screenshot of Facebook post reading: "The ultimate measure of man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
2. The outrage should be unanimous and universal. #ThisEndsToday #IndictTheSystem #BlackLivesMatter (identity unknown).
 - Includes link to CNN article announcing nonindictment reading "Protesters poured onto the streets of New York late Wednesday, upset over a grand jury's decision not to indict a police officer in the death of Eric Garner."
3. Shooting up a school? Np.² Killing spree in a movie theater? All good! Just NO loose cigarettes or skittles. #blacklivesmatter #fb (identity unknown).

The first quote in this series insists that all members of that individual's social media network take a clear stance in support of #BlackLivesMatter, invoking a quote by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to emphasize that the character of a man can be measured in times of crisis. The second tweet calls for universal outrage against a system that failed to indict the police officer responsible for Eric Garner's death. By including the hashtag "#IndictTheSystem," this Twitter user draws attention to the systemic nature of the problem of state-sanctioned violence against Black bodies, which includes interpersonal and structural racism. Lastly, the third tweet contrasts the

violence targeted at Black men such as Eric Garner and Trayvon Martin in response to nonviolent behavior, and instances where white perpetrators of domestic terrorism were treated very differently.

Struggle over Signs: Black Lives versus All Lives

Next, here are three examples of the ways in which some Twitter users countered the #BlackLivesMatter call to action with the #AllLivesMatter hashtag:

1. #AllLivesMatter All of them. Black, white, Asian, mixed race, you name it. ALL LIVES MATTER (white woman, young adult).
2. This #BlackLivesMatter is so ignorant. #AllLivesMatter period. No matter what you look like (young white woman).
3. This is not about skin color! It's about resisting arrest & disrespecting authority. #AllLivesMatter #SupportPolice as they have a job to do (middle-aged white woman).

Based on the Twitter profile information available, well over half of those arguing against the #BlackLivesMatter movement on Twitter in my sample appeared to be young white women. The argument generally centered on a color-blind politic, accusing #BlackLivesMatter protesters of being exclusive and privileging Black lives over any other lives. This group of social media users at times made explicitly racist claims, such as implying that Black men are disrespectful and dangerous, while masking their objection to #BlackLivesMatter in color-blind terms.

Many Twitter users took issue with the #AllLivesMatter rhetoric and vehemently disputed its usage. Here are five examples representative of the ways in which the #AllLivesMatter hashtag was disputed on Twitter on December 3 to 4:

1. Do people who change #BlackLivesMatter to #AllLivesMatter run thru a cancer fundraiser going "THERE ARE OTHER DISEASES TOO" (young Black woman).
2. If I see you tweeting #AllLivesMatter I'm unfollowing you because you clearly don't get the point of #BlackLivesMatter (young Black woman).
3. #AllLivesMatter is the #NotAllMen of racism. You miss the point, either through ignorance or a deliberate attempt to undermine a movement (identity unknown).
4. I'll raise the banner for #AllLivesMatter when "all lives" are subject to being destroyed—shot at 12 times; choked to death—with impunity (white man).
5. Don't tell me #AllLivesMatter when this is happening. Don't. #BlackLivesMatter (young Black woman).
 - Included screenshot of CNN coverage reading "Police shootings by race (age 15–19): Whites 1.47 per million; Blacks 31.17 per million."

In this grouping of posts, we see Twitter users taking a number of different approaches to defending the use of the #BlackLivesMatter rhetoric. The first of these tweets in particular went “viral” and was widely circulated. The poster makes the argument that at times it is perfectly acceptable to draw attention to a particular problem, such as raising awareness for cancer. Generally, cancer fund-raisers do not meet much backlash, as cancer is widely accepted as a problem society faces. However, #BlackLivesMatter was hotly contested because many were outraged by the insistence that we look at racism as a serious social problem in the United States.

Through discourse on social media, those refusing to look at the issue of racism replaced the rhetoric of #BlackLivesMatter with #AllLivesMatter as a way of claiming impartiality and perhaps even superiority, as though by posting #AllLivesMatter those users are not limited to focusing on the issue of race. This subtle move to shift the discourse was not missed by activists. As seen in the third tweet listed above, supporters of #BlackLivesMatter were quick to call out the use of #AllLivesMatter as either ignorance or barely veiled racism. By invoking the hashtag #NotAllMen, this Twitter user references a similar debate that previously consumed social media in which many of the same tactics were employed in an attempt to control the dominant discourse around gender-based violence. In contrast to Twitter users deploying #AllLivesMatter in an attempt to undermine the BLM movement, most of the Twitter users in my sample who fought back against #AllLivesMatter were people of color, particularly young Black women. While great diversity exists within each grouping of Twitter users, with some white users standing with BLM and some people of color affirming that all lives matter, the dominant trends reveal important information about whose voices are contributing to the conversation and in what ways.

Shifting Signs and Discourse

The conversation on social media evolved rapidly in the week following news of the failure to indict the officer who killed Eric Garner. The above tweets represent trends that emerged in the first one to two days following news of the nonindictment. The argument over #BlackLivesMatter versus #AllLivesMatter was in full swing the day the nonindictment for the killing of Eric Garner was announced. But by later that week, all arguments were drowned out by calls to take to the streets when activists on Twitter included both hashtags when organizing events. The following tweets represent an emerging feature of the conversation on Twitter regarding #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter three to four days following news of the nonindictment for Eric Garner’s death.

1. #BlackLivesMatter #AllLivesMatter Meet at the library @ 7:30 pm TOMORROW! Wear ALL BLACK!! [emoji icon of a brown fist] (young Black woman).
 - Includes a professional photo of a young Black man.

2. Protests are happening for one cause all over the world . . . Amazing [clapping white hands emoji] #EricGarner #MikeBrown #AllLivesMatter (young Black man).
3. #AllLivesMatter #blackout Hollywood right now—#justiceWILLbeserved @ Hollywood Boulevard (Black man).
4. No Charges for Cop Who Broke Face of Handcuffed Woman in Patrol Car #AllLivesMatter Mr. Policeman (Black woman).
5. Boston is shutting it down for #EricGarner #ICantBreathe #WeCantBreathe #BlackLivesMatter #AllLivesMatter (young white woman).

These represent only a segment of tweets using these hashtags on December 6 to 7. Some Twitter users, primarily white, continued to use #AllLivesMatter in an attempt to undermine the claim that Black lives matter. However, in an interesting turn, young Black users largely stopped engaging in debates over the meaning of #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter. Some Black youth chose not to engage with #AllLivesMatter at all and continued to use #BlackLivesMatter to highlight the injustice of state-sanctioned violence against Black bodies. As shown in the tweets above, others chose to conflate #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter, shifting attention away from semantics in favor of mobilizing protests in the streets.

Discussion

These findings represent part of the national discourse regarding race following the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, as it unfolded on social media. Contrary to mass media, which plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of race for a largely passive audience, social media allows users to actively engage and shape the discussions (Adoni and Mane 1984; Bjornstrom et al. 2010; Entman 1992; Parham-Payne 2014), offering youth of color an opportunity to contest dominant ideologies. I now return to the theoretical framework outlined above to analyze these findings in light of sociological theory. Through this analysis, I seek to examine social media as an emerging public sphere where youth of color both confirm and transform existing sociological theory.

Twitter is an interesting platform to host debates about such complex issues because it restricts the length of posts to 140 characters. To effectively convey messages in so little space, words must be chosen carefully. To transpose Barthes's explanation about myth, each tweet must be crafted in a way to capture one's attention. Since the Twitter platform does not allow space for a lengthy, nuanced conversation to unfold, the importance of making an immediate impression is a central character of these debates on social media. The practice of "trolling," leaving incendiary comments with the intention of causing offense and eliciting a response, further amplifies the polarity of political conversations that unfold (Smith et al. 2014).

The passion with which groups contested the meaning and usage of these signs, #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter, indicates the power associated with being

able to control discourse. The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter signifies a contested concept. Although imperfect in its representation of the concept, and not necessarily pointing to any concrete or objective truth, the sign serves as a crucial tool in mobilizing for social change.

Rather than contesting the “truth” of the situation, let us look at the ways in which multiple and conflicting knowledges were produced and the power of those knowledges. Thinking back to Mannheim, these factions of Twitter users each focus on selective parts of an already partial ideology, some strategically and others seemingly with less intentionality. The debates over these signifiers indicate a struggle for power in controlling the discourse about the national race crisis.

The first thematic grouping of tweets above, “#BlackLivesMatter: Call to Action,” consists of posts from activists seeking to dismantle institutional racism who seized the opportunity to create a discourse about the oppression of Black men by the police. By stating that Black lives matter, protesters and activists on social media did not seek to invalidate the lives of non-Blacks, but rather to momentarily draw attention to the systemic violence and oppression that Black people in the United States face on a daily basis. In emphasizing that Black lives matter, activists, including many youth of color, strategically chose to emphasize the importance of racism over other forms of oppression.

In the public sphere, where white voices normally control the discourse and marginalize voices of the oppressed, the #BlackLivesMatter movement appeared very threatening to some, as evidenced by the second thematic grouping of posts, “Struggle over Signs: Black Lives vs. All Lives.” A contingent of Twitter users deployed the hashtag #AllLivesMatter as an attempt to question and dismiss the legitimacy and presumed “rationality” of #BlackLivesMatter. Although #AllLivesMatter claims a certain universality that is inclusive of all, in practice, it worked to collapse the specificities of different groups’ experiences in favor of a color-blind ideology that favors white supremacy. Although impossible to determine intent given the limitations of the medium, some Twitter users supporting the color-blind ideology of #AllLivesMatter may truly believe that they see the totality of the situation, without understanding how their situated knowledge influences their perceptions.

Although originally created for strategic political purposes, as #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter were repeated in discourse, they came to be fixed in the minds of many. Instead of seeing these signs as the socially constructed, historically situated, and constantly changing signs that they are, many came to stand by them as “true representatives of [their] societal existence” (Lukács [1923] 1971:93). This process of people viewing signs as “true” representations of identity and existence is particularly clear in the debates on Twitter on December 3 to 4, immediately following the nonindictment. Contestation over these signs came to eclipse any conversation about class, gender, sexuality, or any other ways in which oppression occurs within the nation. As the signs became reified, they came to stand for a debate about the value of Black male lives in relation to “all” (read: unmarked, white, middle class, male) lives.

The intensity of the debate and the prolific engagement of social media users led to a rapid evolution of the discourse over the course of the following days. While some continued to engage in a debate over #BlackLivesMatter versus #AllLivesMatter, particularly those in support of #AllLivesMatter, many youth of color shifted the discussion. Some youth of color refused to further engage with those purporting that #AllLivesMatter and continued to spread awareness of state-sanctioned violence against Black men. As demonstrated in the “Shifting Signs and Discourse” theme in the findings above, some youth of color strategically chose to adopt #AllLivesMatter alongside #BlackLivesMatter in efforts to organize in-person protests. This adoption of #AllLivesMatter for the cause of protesting racist systems and practices ingeniously took power away from those who tried to deploy #AllLivesMatter as a counter to #BlackLivesMatter. By using both signs, these activists subtly and effectively shifted the conversation away from a debate over the meaning of these hashtags as mutually exclusive and toward a call for collective action. Rather than continuing to attempt to reveal the racist intentions behind #AllLivesMatter, many youth of color adopted the sign and used it for their own purposes, once again taking control of the discourse.

In the case of public discourse surrounding BLM and the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, another example of Mannheim’s notion of partialities is the surge in protests against police killings of Black men while the deaths of women and transgender people of color received far less attention. For some, a focus on Black men as victims of police violence led to an emphasis on the role of racism in police brutality at the expense of other issues, such as class, gender, and sexuality.

Interestingly, though the #BlackLivesMatter movement was initiated by Black women and many young Black women were extremely active in the debates on social media in autumn of 2014, talk about violence toward women of color was largely absent from the dominant discourse, emerging only as an afterthought in later weeks. The focus on state-sanctioned violence against Black men rendered Black women and transgender victims invisible. This oversight, which was addressed by many activists in following months, illustrates the ways in which even well-intentioned antiracist work can unintentionally lead to the continued marginalization of vulnerable populations. The fact that many Black feminist activists subsequently came to speak out against this silencing of the struggle of Black women illustrates the ways in which these imperfect signs continue to evolve over time, as their meanings are contested. Although the signs can never be a perfect representation of any group’s ideology, they serve as important markers in the debate about race and oppression in the United States and allow people to engage in these important conversations.

Finally, the contestation over signs and the fight for control of discourse in the public sphere that took place on social media indicates a shift in the way that we understand the public sphere. In previous decades, young people like those currently dominating the discourse on social media, which has in turn influenced news coverage and more mainstream or traditional forms of media, might not have had the

opportunity to participate in the public sphere. Developing technology created the emergence of new subjects, or new publics, who otherwise would not have been involved in the public sphere. While the technology calls new subjects into being, the new subjects in turn create and develop the technology. Despite the benefits of accessibility for youth of color to this emerging public sphere, scholars have noted definite drawbacks to the use of social media, such as risks associated with surveillance and government regulation (Penney and Dadas 2014).

As mentioned above, the implications of this emerging public sphere are outside the scope of this article but deserving of further investigation. Contributions by youth of color in national discourse on social media can reveal a great deal about the ways in which social media can be understood as a public sphere as described by Habermas as well as the limitations of Habermas's theory in light of new technology. As one of the Twitter posts above states, "Protests are happening all over the world for one cause." Social media allows youth of color across the globe to engage in transnational discussions about oppressive systems and state-sanctioned violence. While this article focuses on the public sphere as an extension of U.S. civil society, it is important to remember that social media functions both within the nation and transnationally.

Conclusion

This analysis shows the ways in which active participants in the emerging social media public sphere contested the usage of two "signs," #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter, immediately following the nonindictment in the killing of Eric Garner. Drawing from Barthes, my analysis of these signs as created and used at a certain point in time speaks to the historical situatedness of signs and myths. Even in that short span of time, only a few days, the definition of the signs was in flux and constantly changing. My research revealed that over that limited period we can see the conversation begin to shift, from a contentious debate over the meaning of two prominent signs (#BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter) to a conflation of these signs as protesters mobilized action off-line. This is not to suggest that my analysis points to a major or permanent discursive shift beyond the conversation on Twitter; rather, this study points to the instability of emerging signs and the ways in which meaning can rapidly shift on a platform such as Twitter. I suggest that this particular discursive shift indicates a very intentional strategy employed by supporters of the BLM movement.

This analysis reveals how these signs were both constructed and contested but also by whom and to what ends. Some Twitter users supported white supremacy through the deployment of a purportedly color-blind ideology. More interestingly, this study reveals the ways in which youth of color actively engaged in debates over race in the nation, strategically and adeptly negotiating signs and language to control the public discourse. Social media serves as a public sphere where youth of color are particularly skilled and well equipped to gain some amount of power over public discourse to express their experiences and viewpoints.

As yet the full implications of social media as a public sphere are unknown, but there is already evidence that it holds great possibilities for engaging youth of color in important current issues in the United States. Engaging in activism and participating in a forum that allows traditionally silenced groups to be heard are valuable in and of itself. In the future, we should stay alert to the ways in which public discourse on social media directly or indirectly influences policy and affects change on a structural level within the nation.

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Notes

1. See Nancy Fraser and Kate Nash (2014) for theories of transnational public spheres.
2. “Np” is common Internet shorthand for “no problem.”

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