

“#HashtagActivism and its Impact on the BLM Movement as a Counternarrative Tool”

by Rachel Darius

In the United States, despite representing only 13.4% of the population, Black people experience police violence at disproportionate rates, with Black men accounting for 32% of police killings (DeGue et al., 2016) (Edwards et al., 2019) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American man, was killed by the Minneapolis Police as he was being arrested. Overnight, the video of his murder spread like wildfire across social media, and in subsequent months, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was used across various social media platforms to raise awareness, organize protests, and advocate for institutional change regarding racism and discrimination against people of color. This phenomenon of “hashtag activism” describes “the creation and proliferation of online activism stamped with a hashtag” (Jackson et al., pp. xxxii, 2020). Some may argue that hashtag activism is useless in the face of the powerful mainstream media. In *Manufacturing Consent*, Noam Chomsky explains that the national/elite media hold a monopoly over the “selection of topics, framing of issues, filtering of information” among other things (Achbar & Wintonick, 1992, 0:36:30). In other words, “The media thus represent the primary, and often the only, source of information about many important events and topics...[and] define for the majority of the population *what* significant events are taking place, but, also, they offer powerful interpretations of *how* to understand these events” (Hall et al., 2009). But in my paper, I will argue that in the digital and information age, fewer and fewer people see traditional media outlets as their primary source or definer. Therefore, by analyzing the impact this form of activism has had in garnering attention

across racial groups after George Floyd's murder, I will show how hashtag activism can be more powerful than the mainstream media in persuading groups to act.

According to research by Ince et al. (2017), the use of hashtags as a form of distributed framing is one of the ways movements help foster understanding of issues and solutions without relying on leaders or influencers within the movement, ultimately giving power to the larger audience to create their own meaning and foster groups within their community around specific issues (Ince et al. 2017, p. 1818). The phrase "Black lives matter" began in 2012 when a Black woman named Alicia Garza posted on Facebook her frustration over the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Florida teenager, Trayvon Martin.¹ Patrisse Cullors, a Los Angeles community organizer and friend of Garza replied to the Facebook post with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter.¹ In 2013, Cullors, Garza, and Opal Tometi created the Black Lives Matter Movement and over the following years, the phrase and hashtag grew in popularity and was quickly adopted by grassroots activists and community organizers across the country, especially in 2014 after Michael Brown, an unarmed Black 18-year-old teenager, was fatally shot by a white Ferguson police officer (*Herstory* 2019).¹ During the three weeks following the police officer's indictment, "the hashtag was used 1.7 million times" on Twitter (Anderson, 2016).

Around 8 PM on May 25, 2020 George Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, who kept his knee in Floyd's neck for a total of 8 minutes and 46 seconds, preventing him from breathing and receiving proper medical attention. The video of Floyd's death was recorded and uploaded to Facebook by Darnella Frazier, a young Black

¹ A&E Television Networks. (2020, July 10). "The Hashtag #BlackLivesMatter First Appears, Sparking a Movement." History.com. <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/blacklivesmatter-hashtag-first-appears-facebook-sparking-a-movement>.

teenage girl. Within a matter of hours, the video went viral and was shared on Twitter, Instagram, and every social media platform possible, notably accompanied by the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. After Floyd’s death, the number of tweets mentioning the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag reached a new record. Between May 26 and June 7, #BlackLivesMatter was mentioned about 47.8 million times, reaching its highest frequency on May 28, with 8.8 million mentions, a dramatic increase from years prior (Anderson et al., 2020). Hence, we can see that over the past seven years, the BLM movement and hashtag activism are inextricably linked, as hashtags have been consistently used by activists and regular citizens alike to help draw attention to injustice. Arguably, without the hashtag and subsequent media attention, George Floyd would only be one name among dozens of those who had fallen victim to police brutality.

During the BLM protests in the summer months of 2020, many news media channels described protests as “violent” without explaining the power imbalance or instigator(s) of said violence—which were usually the police—and/or uncritically repeated lines from officials in their headlines (Jackson, 2020). For example, “Spokane sheriff, police chief blame Sunday’s violence on outside agitators,”² “Protests, some violent, spread in wake of George Floyd death,”³ and “Protests in Minneapolis turned violent: Officials first blamed outsiders, but that’s not what

² Shanks, A., Sokol, C., & Epperly, E. (2020, June 2). “Spokane Sheriff, Police Chief Blame Sunday’s Violence on Outside Agitators.” *The Spokesman-Review*. <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2020/jun/01/15-arrests-made-in-sundays-disturbances-in-downtown/>.

³ Thanawala, S. (2020, May 30). “Protests, Some Violent, Spread in Wake of George Floyd Death.” AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/nv-state-wire-az-state-wire-co-state-wire-fl-state-wire-virus-outbreak-baf3b29612527b8e9a841cb34f6f5789>.

arrests show.”⁴ This “passive and ambiguous language...common in news reports” has nefarious consequences: it “strip[s] responsibility from state actors and soften[s] facts” (Jackson, 2020). This kind of journalism justifies police violence against protestors, paints protestors in a negative light, and reduces support for the causes for which protestors are fighting. More importantly, it “dismiss[es] or disparage[s] protesters and protest tactics through a reliance on police and government sources, along with episodic, conflict-based stories that fail to engage the complex social causes of protest” (Jackson, 2020) (Solnit, 2020).

However, audiences may be starting to see through this tactic. According to a 2021 survey, less than half of Americans report they trust traditional media and more than half believe that journalists and reporters are not being truthful and often exaggerate (Salmon, 2021). Instead, both Gen Z and millennials look to alternative media sources for news, with Gen Z mainly searching YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok (YPULSE, 2020). Perhaps this trend is due to the fact that young people are less likely to use technologies like print and broadcast that legacy media dominate. An alternative could be that younger audiences possess an increased awareness of media bias and the influence moneyed elite have on what news is told and how. Thus, when it comes to issues such as systemic and institutionalized racism and abuse of power—issues that do not benefit the needs and interests of the system/elite media institutions—there is a greater distrust in the traditional media reports. No longer does the mainstream media solely frame, select, and filter issues, as Chomsky argues (Achbar & Wintonick, 2017). Instead, through different social media platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, prosumers can counter the narrative being propagated by the elite media (e.g. newspapers, TV stations, and other media

⁴ Hughes, T. (2020, May 30). Protests in Minneapolis turned violent: Officials first blamed outsiders, but that’s not what arrests show. *USA Today*. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/05/30/george-floyd-protests-riots-violent-outside-agitators-minnesota/5291658002/>.

that can influence the political agenda), becoming citizen journalists, and reporting to audience sizes media outlets would envy.

For instance, on Twitter users posted videos from the George Floyd protests with the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag, oftentimes including clips where police were instigating the violence against peaceful protestors. This allowed the BLM movement to gain more visibility and credibility than ever before on a national and global scale. Because now, users could see videos on their feeds of the unmerited violence towards peaceful protestors by police, as well as how media reports were demonizing protestors or not showing the full story. In June 2020, #BlackLivesMatter was the top trending hashtag on TikTok, reaching over 12 billion views. Furthermore, creators on TikTok used the short video sharing app to educate, share their personal experiences with racism in the US, and document protests. In many of these videos, users would explain the domino effect of slavery and racism in modern US society, such as the prison-industrial complex, redlining, the police system, and much more. Currently, the hashtag has more than 26.3 billion views on TikTok.⁵

Critics of the efficacy of hashtag activism may argue that this mass engagement only lasts for so long and is only effective at influencing certain racial groups. In the month following George Floyd's death, the Pew Research Center found that 86% of Blacks expressed support for BLM, followed by 77% of Hispanics, 75% of Asian Americans, and 60% of Whites (Parker et al., 2020). In a matter of three months, support decreased by 15% for white adults, 10% for Hispanics, and 6% for Asian Americans (Thomas & Horowitz, 2020). As seen by a comment

⁵ #blacklivesmatter Hashtag Videos on TikTok. TikTok. (n.d.). <https://www.tiktok.com/tag/blacklivesmatter?lang=en>.

under a *Washington Post* news article, “My heart goes out to [George Floyd] an[sic] his family. All people should be treated equally. With that being said I'm sick of hearing black lives matter! Because all lives matter no matter what color you are” (Amanda, 2020). However, the results of social media mobilization during the summer months can be seen in research from Anderson et al. (2020): An estimated 15 million to 26 million people participated in protests and demonstrations across the country, making this the largest movement in U.S. history. By the end of June, there were several thousand protests, averaging 140 protests a day (Anderson et al., 2020). Although during the following months support gradually decreased, this may be due to the decreased frequency of BLM posts coupled with the hostility of mainstream media. Since hashtag activism largely relies on community and citizens to counter arguments in large numbers, when the amount of people posting about BLM decreases over time, the elite media becomes the loudest voice on the issues. But, because of the informational posts, grassroots protest videos, and public discussion on police brutality on social media by marginalized groups, the BLM movement received record amounts of support and visibility during the crucial summer months of 2020 via the hashtag.

In conclusion, hashtag activism has been used to spread counternarratives to media reports and elite media spaces like the television, newspaper, and radio—traditional sources that often sensationalize violence at protests and misrepresent key issues, like racism and discrimination in order to maintain the power imbalance in modern US society. Of course, hashtag activism must be used in combination with offline efforts to be effective in instigating long-term change in society and institutions. Moreover, the use of hashtags as a means of spreading BLM goals and visions, as well as gathering allies is especially effective when the viewer holds similar beliefs and values. In the case of George Floyd and subsequent protests,

BLM activists and marginalized groups were able to use social media to voice their dissent and frame issues. Thus, hashtag activism is effective even in the face of mainstream media and will continue to be used in years to come.

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