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The vitality of social media for establishing a research agenda on black lives and the movement

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ABSTRACT

Social media provides scholars with important portals into the lives of marginalized communities and the movements organized to combat issues of race and racism in society. However, how to incorporate the seemingly unwieldy amount of social media data for research in our fields can pose challenges to further clarify how people navigate our social world and the issues with in it, but also how they organize to push for social change and equality. In what follows, the authors discuss how social media data can be used to enhance our studies of black lives in reflection of the burgeoning Black Lives Matter movement on issues such as gun violence, public health, and higher education.

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Introduction

Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, and Sandra Bland, among many others, are names forever etched in the ethos of American life as martyrs of police brutality and a racially biased criminal justice system. Stemming from this martyrdom, the #BlackLivesMatter (#BLM) movement has utilized social media to organize, protest, and renew the awareness of many issues and conditions facing black communities across the U.S. Accompanying this shift in organizing and protesting, scholars are determining how best to capture this movement in real time and elaborate on how this movement's use of social media provides a springboard for other groups to shed light on critical social issues to enhance our studies of race and racism. The web-based services allowing users to create profiles and connect to other users in a bounded system under the umbrella of social media (Boyd and Ellison 2007) provides researchers an important portal to examine identities

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and collective behaviour in real time. Despite over 70 per cent of internet users having a Facebook account, the use of social media differs by race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status (Duggan et al. 2015); illustrating how people's positioning in relation to identities shapes the media services they use every day. Social media serves as portals between bodies and spaces, and offers a communication platform that provides important data and insight into the social world for social scientists (Farman 2012). The ready-access to technology such as cell phones to quickly send messages, videos, and share news and other information indicates how social media is an important tool for collective action. The integral use of social media by BLM establishes this social movement as different through its use of technology and social media platforms, which did not readily exist in the past for other social movements.

Twitter, in particular, is useful in both organizing and protesting as well as research pursuits. Users can distinguish themselves from other users by classifying their tweets (i.e. messages composed of 140 characters) by hashtags, which allow users to join with others in pinpointing social issues within communities in efforts of solidarity and collective action. Observed repetition of information legitimizes hashtags, and the information in messages or tweets becomes a distinct characteristic of the group via the hashtag. However, not only do the words or images of tweets play a role in the collective self-concept of hashtag groups, the tweets become a characteristic of users' personal identities as well. Hashtags often relate to individuals' social belief systems, which are their understanding of the relations among groups (Hogg 2003), and separate identities from unwanted cultural or political mergers with other collective identities (Brewer 1991). Hashtags allow for depersonalizing the self-concept; transforming the "I" into a "we".

Research on social movements highlights how activists often form a group through a shared feeling of fraternal deprivation rather than feelings of personal deprivation (Vanneman and Pettigrew 1972). As is the case with #BLM, some blacks and non-blacks feel a collective solidarity to speak out against the increased number and publicity of police killings of blacks (Gilbert et al. 2016). Accordingly, the mobilization that occurs online has implications for how people organize and think about crime and justice, health, and education offline. Social scientists can utilize their skillsets to incorporate the communication of social issues and community experiences by social media into their research and provide more insight into the activities in our social world and the meanings of them. Below, we outline how social media efforts to organize and combat issues of racism and inequality provide ample reason for scholars to incorporate social media data into their research examining gun violence (written by Richardson), public health (written by Gilbert), and higher education (written by Byrd).

Gun violence and black lives: why social media matters

This section explores how social media re-framed my approach to conducting applied research on black lives and violence in the U.S. As a criminologist who engages in the study of violence in its many forms including interpersonal, structural and state sanctioned, social media has been integral in providing real-time data regarding the intersection of black lives and gun violence. Social media sites such as the *Washington Post* and the *Guardian* (The Counted) on Twitter have provided real-time data on police-involved homicides, particularly shootings that would be impossible to track using traditional data sources such as the UCR (Uniform Crime Reporting). In fact, the Director of the FBI, James Comey, and former U.S. Attorney Generals, Eric Holder and Loretta Lynch, have criticized the Department of Justice (DOJ) for its inability to record and report police-involved shootings in real time in novel ways. Other social media sites (e.g. Trace and Gun Violence Archive) provide important real-time data on the context of gun violence in the U.S. Social media has provided a platform to gauge the political, cultural, and social temperature of black communities impacted by gun violence. Furthermore, social media platforms have and continue to be used by scholar activists to organize and protest. For example, Twitter was instrumental in organizing medical scholars examining gun violence to protest the National Rifle Association (NRA) backed ban on Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) gun violence research funding that has existed for over two decades.

Social media is moving a new generation of scholars from the proverbial esoteric “ivory tower” of gathering data and from traditional intellectual spaces such as peer-reviewed journal articles and government organizations to data and discussions informing the public in real time. For scholars of colour engaged in intersectional research on black lives and violence, social media has provided access to data and networks, which for decades has been coveted and for many inaccessible. It is a revolutionary technological tool that has enhanced our scholarship, social capital, social networks, and social justice activism. Social media has created outlets for gun violence researchers to share our research in different forms with other scholars engaged in similar work. For example, without social media I would have never learned of the innovative work Desmond Patton at Columbia University on the use of social media to predict gun violence in Chicago. Thus, the result is an organic formation of a scholar activist community that organizes and functions both online and off.

As an ethnographer and criminologist, frustrated by the archaic, slow generation of data collection on the social context of violence and black lives, social media has produce in real time debunking many of the myths of violence, including police and state sanctioned forms, in the U.S. Live streaming platforms such as Facebook Live, Instagram Live, and Periscope

provide alternative mediums and narratives for documenting police violence. For example, the police-involved shooting and murder of black motorist Philando Castile in Minnesota was live streamed on Facebook. These platforms in addition to podcasts provide alternative intellectual spaces for scholar activists to share information. As a result, scholar activists no longer have to rely on the narratives generated by corporate news entities. Much of the information I use to disseminate to colleagues is gathered from Twitter and allows us to be more independent of news corporations and government agencies that traditionally controlled police violence narratives. Podcasts allows scholar activists to discuss police violence in unfiltered ways that mainstream media prohibits; handcuffing freedom of speech. Additionally, mainstream media selectively identifies scholars to engage in the police violence discourse, which mutes the voices of scholar activists who are critically engaging in challenging the system.

Social media has empowered gun violence researchers with the ability to control the gun violence narrative and its impact on black lives despite the lobbying efforts of organizations such as the NRA. Social media has forces federal justice agencies such as the DOJ and the FBI to enhance their data collection capabilities; making databases on gun violence comparable for research and policy purposes. The *Washington Post* and the *Guardian* set this precedent in their analysis of fatal police-involved shootings, which was compared to the UCR data. The disparities in the data illuminated how outdated the federal government's data collection strategy is, and advanced new data collection and analysis efforts. The next step for gun violence researchers is to legitimize the repositories on gun violence data such as the Gun Violence Archive, which would not allow governmental agencies to control and monopolize the dissemination of data. Through constant citing and referencing these repositories in publications, and advocating for them among think tanks and policy-makers would further legitimize these repositories. Finally, scholars must be able to convey the use of these new forms of data to the everyday layperson to increase the broader public's access and understanding of these important tools on gun violence afflicting communities.

Coping or not through posting experiences and being virtual witnesses to policing as a threat to public health

Public health research leverages social media to engage the broader community in health promotion and disease prevention activities, which enhances the supportive networks of groups experiencing chronic and acute illnesses. Social media, including the now pervasive #BLM hashtag, provides opportunities to peer into the realities of blacks in the U.S. similarly to how television captured the violent reactions of white community members to the Civil

Rights Movement of the mid-twentieth century. Since this era, new forms of media can highlight the *invisible* injustices skewing the social realities of blacks. These social realities form the “social determinants of health”, or the range of social factors shaping health status and outcomes differentially among groups (Braveman, Egerter, and Williams 2011; Phelan and Link 2015). Media is often limited in information and perspectives provided to the public, which can skew and even negate clearer understandings of how social determinants or fundamental causes of health such as labour market discrimination can increase health risks including risk for police violence and a range of chronic diseases. We must consider the delicate relationship between the lived experiences of blacks generally and how lived experiences are influenced by gender norms and stereotyping of bodies such as those projected onto black boys and men. Relying only on the projected or mismanaged images of black boys and men renders them *invisible*, and limits access to needed support to live healthy lives and to make positive decisions. For decades, public health studies of black men have focused somewhat narrowly on four perspectives: (1) maladaptive behaviours presuming deeper cultural and psychological deficits; (2) victimization and systematic oppression of black males; (3) strategies to promote adaptive coping with structural barriers including racism; and (4) health promotion strategies rooted in African and African-American cultural traditions. Black men are not the only victims of public health crises, media misrepresentation, and police violence as recent research on the criminalization of black women importantly notes (Crenshaw et al. 2015; Towns 2016). Therefore, we must dig deeper to understand how intersected identities can result in differential and even similar public health risks within our communities.

Various media forms connect to differences in lived versus portrayed images of black boys and men within a sociohistorical context, and are framed within public health disease prevention and health promotion models for community engagement and advocacy reflecting intersectionality. In particular, scholars often limit themselves by utilizing social media outlets to reach out and into communities for research purposes only, while not activating them as listening tools. Engaging and listening to the daily experiences of black boys and men provides critical insights into the social realities that undergird social inequities black boys and men experience daily (Gilbert et al. 2016). We can use these images during photovoice sessions that lead to conversations about the determinants of a particular issue such as education or health to identify community-based solutions (Wang and Redwood-Jones 2001). Education has been largely considered an important determinant for good health and economic stability. However, educational advancement does not reduce the risk for chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease in the same way for black and white males (Williams 2003). From this finding, my own photovoice project with black middle- and high-school

boys aimed to understand what happens earlier in the lifecourse that negatively associates educational attainment with an increased cardiovascular mortality risks. Images produced by the boys and young men during the study highlighted the need to address policies, programmes, structures, attitudes, and behaviours that systematically disengage black males at an early age from institutions established to support and prepare them for later life. How the images these young men produced may look similar to those we see in the mainstream media, but similar to the use of social media hashtags and images, they are interpreted differently and provide a critical lens to both problems and solutions.

Professionally, the field of public health has a responsibility to collect real-time data in ways that the *Washington Post* and the *Guardian* (The Counted) have been able to use data to help direct the importance of the topic of police shootings. We can suggest a link to the public availability of these data, the presence of social media and traditional media coverage, and the rise in research shaping the public discourse around this public health issue as well as helping inform recent decisions by the DOJ to pilot data collection of police-involved shootings that end in lethal and non-lethal outcomes. This change in social policy will provide evidence that can lead to other policy changes to guide community, state and national interventions addressing the fundamental causes of police-involved incidents and to address the systemic issues in communities disproportionately affected by these public health challenges. The changing landscape of health and health care requires varying levels of engagement with communities to improve population-level health, and social media becomes one of the tools leveraged to implement a paradigm shift in how we address health disparities through the evidence collected and mined in social media data. We can utilize social media data as a way of understanding how black men and boys, for example, navigate their social worlds and how these experiences shape their racial and gender identities to provide adequate support for healthy lifecourse transitions.

Tweeting from experience and for change: social media and racial disparities in higher education

A wealth of research examines educational disparities, including those facing black students. However, incorporating social media data into the study of education and the experiences of black students as well as other students of colour can provide needed context for understanding various sociological processes and monitoring institutional changes and outcomes. Social media can elaborate on the multiple levels of students' lives in relation to both academics and social experiences. As a general example, imagine researchers are examining black doctoral students' experiences in sociology programmes at multiple research universities. In addition to the collection of a variety of

data on students' experiences, social media data could enhance such studies by identifying how students' experiences (1) fit within a specific institutional context, (2) a broader narrative facing black students at historically white colleges and universities, and (3) field-specific experiences within sociology. The social media data by other students not part of the study could provide needed information about events and collective experiences on-campus and in academia as a whole to further contextualize multilevel examinations of students' positions and experiences and explore how space, place, and knowledge are racialized in higher education.

First, using social media conversations about a specific institution, researchers could identify how the students who are part of their project may be experiencing similar issues as other black students and students of colour on the same campus. Social media allows for the immediate knowledge of continuous microaggressions and explicit racist incidents at an institution, and could assist with understanding particular coping and affective labour practices of black doctoral students, for example. The #ITooAmHarvard hashtag is one example of an institution-specific forum created to document racism and inequality in higher education. The invisibility of students of colour, and the minimization and outright dismissal of racism on-campus under the guise of colourblindness and what's included as part of the "Harvard experience" in this case can contextualize student experiences included in the hypothetical research project. Second, researchers could mine tweets under specific hashtags illuminating black students' collective experiences at historically white colleges and universities. One hashtag example is #BlackonCampus. Through an examination of tweets using the specific hashtag, researchers may situate their students' experiences within the broader conversation occurring across higher education of how universities were complicit with perpetuating the institution of slavery in eras past (see Wilder 2013), and importantly, how the lack of recognition or lip-service to this history shapes black students' positioning at their institution and within academia as a whole.

Lastly, as black doctoral students are budding professionals within the field of sociology, perhaps all of the students attended the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association (ASA) one year, and many reported negative overall experiences at the conference. As the researchers delve into the issues raised by the students in their study, they may explore the broader Twitter conversations about ASA, and identify the hashtag #ASAsowhite as a space where sociologists, including students of colour, point out how the organization segments or segregates particular research and theoretical trajectories. Such explorations of social media data can reveal their importance to underlying themes of the conference such as the recent example of the 2016 meeting of ASA, where tweets clustered around conversations about race, immigration, and critical conversations about inclusivity at the

conference (NodeXL 2016). Through the incorporation of social media data using these three approaches, researchers can further link micro-, meso-, and macro-level phenomena together to indicate how individual experiences connect with broader issues facing groups within organizations.

Despite the usefulness of social media data for examining issues of race and racism in higher education, the question then turns to “how can social media be used within academia for institutional and social change?”. One recent example of how social media data and dialogue can combine for social change within academia and our fields is the recent conversation led by Tanya Golash-Boza and the ASA around #inclusiveASA. This conversation elaborated on the experiences of marginalized sociologists in the organization, and posited different approaches to make ASA an inclusive space for scholars of different perspectives. Additionally, using hashtags to crowd-source important readings and conversations focusing on black communities such as the origins of the #CharlestonSyllabus and the #FergusonSyllabus that were subsequently expanded into full books provides examples of the incorporation of experiences and knowledges not frequently included in policy discussions that scholars can actively contribute to through social media platforms.

Conclusion

Social media permits instantaneous conversation and participation at any time a user chooses to engage in the online portal, and is prime for social movement activism and the expression of individuals with marginalized identities and statuses to be heard and seen. Researchers must make the transition from simply studying the activism in our communities to studying the implications of activism and how it plays a role in social change. Social media data provide opportunities for scholars to incorporate them into population centres to create repositories for storage and data collection such as the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities. Utilizing social media as a research tool under such approaches could expand the explanations of social issues and improve policy suggestions deriving from our work. Social media will continue to play a critical role in moving the scholarly discourse from the ivory tower to the masses. As a new cohort of emerging scholars from the millennial generation moves into the academy, a generation socialized on digital and social media, the implications of incorporating social media data into repositories will take on more social significance. The academy can no longer afford to rely on traditional modes in the generation and production of knowledge with little public engagement. New innovative approaches must be integrated into the social fabric of what academics do. Although we must not replace or over rely on social media to the degree we lose sight of the value of human interaction and humanity, it is now a

necessity, not a luxury, for academics to incorporate social media more into their work to impact academia and beyond.

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