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#BlackLivesMatter as A Case Study in the Politics of Digital Media: Algorithms, Hashtag Publics, and Organizing Protest Online

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#BlackLivesMatter as A Case Study in the Politics of Digital Media: Algorithms, Hashtag Publics, and Organizing Protest Online

Overview and Rationale

The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was first circulated by Opal Tometi, Alicia Garza, and Patrisse Cullors in the summer of 2013 in response to the unpunished death of Florida teenager Trayvon Martin at the hands of George Zimmerman. By inaugurating this hashtag, these three black queer women gave voice to a burgeoning movement against the systemic anti-black racism facing their communities. The hashtag then circulated widely following the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO and Eric Garner in New York City, NY, as it was used by protesters, activists, and organizers to coordinate protests against racialized police violence both on the ground and in the digital sphere (Craven, 2015). By allowing strangers from across the country to collectively coordinate under the banner of #BlackLivesMatter, the hashtag campaign has given organizational coherence to a movement that is otherwise decentralized and lacking the same institutional structures previously required to organize large scale movements for racial equality. Social media became one of the main tools in the arsenals of #BlackLivesMatter protestors, allowing them to quickly organize protests, disseminate information to a wide audience, demand the attention of mainstream media, and join together with others interested in their cause (Stephen, 2015). Examining the media landscape of the #BlackLivesMatter movement thus provides students with a critical insight into the changing dynamics of social media use for online organization. Additionally, media studies scholarship provides students with a robust set of theories and concepts for analyzing the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

This lesson plan is conceived of as a 1.5 - 2 week (4 class days) sequence in an “Introduction to Media Theory and Criticism” undergraduate course. The lesson plan is written as a combination of lectures, screenings, in-class assignments, and discussions of media artifacts and readings. We wrote this lesson plan to fit twice-weekly classes which last an hour and fifteen minutes, although much of the sequence below can be modularized to fit into other temporal configurations. The lesson is designed to fit into a course that takes a critical perspective on media theory, and helps students reflect on and understand their role as civic participants in a digitally mediated world. We ask students to consider the relationship between #BlackLivesMatter and the organizational, technological, and discursive dynamics of online activism. This lesson plan helps students understand the political effects of social media technologies and how the technological affordances of algorithms and social media platforms affect the prospects and risks of engaging in anti-racist political activism.

In this lesson plan, #BlackLivesMatter serves as a critically important case study through which students learn about (1) the ways algorithms have political effects (Baker and Potts, 2013; Gillespie, 2015; Kirchner, 2015; Mager, 2012; Rambukkana 2015); (2) the constitution of online *publics*, (temporary collectives of strangers called together by the circulation of discourse such as the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter); and (3) the politics of organizing and acting together online. This approach situates #BlackLivesMatter within the historical tradition of black resistance movements while simultaneously using #BlackLivesMatter as a case study to grapple with contemporary debates in media studies about the utility and desirability of online activism in the

digital age. Therefore, in this lesson plan, we view #BLM as a digital movement campaign both rooted in material, corporeal struggle and organized and made possible by the affordances of new technology. By studying the function of algorithmic influence and the creation of online *publics*, students learn how increased digital connectivity and lower-entry costs for participants allow for (1) rapidly-circulating images and information and (2) the connection (and galvanization) of otherwise strangers into a powerful online and offline movement. However, as we and others note elsewhere (Tufekci, 2014; McVey and Woods, forthcoming) the rapid circulation that makes it easier to quickly organize large protests with hashtag campaigns also makes it more difficult to organize collective action in the long term. Further, because hashtags themselves are public, almost anyone can use them however they wish--perhaps even to the detriment to the original hashtag campaign. Therefore, when considering hashtag campaigns such as #BlackLivesMatter and the discursive publics formed around the hashtag, we invite students to carefully analyze both the benefits and risks to using online media to organize activism and protest.

General Timeline

Day 1 - Algorithms' Social Sorting and the Political Affordances of Social Media Technology

This day introduces students to the political dynamics of algorithms, how they contribute to social sorting, and how they affect what we see and discuss online. This week's readings discuss, in particular, the ways racial, gendered, and class bias can be "baked into" algorithmic media. Students are asked to reflect about the ways supposedly-neutral algorithmic logics actually represent similar or the same biases in creating the "online" world as exist in the "offline" world. Instructors should also begin to introduce the idea that algorithmic logics, when understood and properly considered, can also be used to resist technological bias. Then, students apply these concepts to a discussion of #Ferguson, analyzing the role that algorithms played in the evolution of the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

Day 2 - Hashtags as Collective Action, Using Algorithms for Political Organization

This day builds on the previous discussion of algorithms by introducing the concept of the "Hashtag Public" and by prompting students to think about how activism and political organization changes when it moves online. Students are called on to use #BlackLivesMatter as a case study for analyzing internal debates within media studies about the possibilities and pitfalls of political organizing IRL ("In Real Life") vs the digital sphere. Instructors should make clear that, especially in the context of #BlackLivesMatter, both the embodied action of protesters and their online/social media use contributed to the success and powerful reverberations of the movement. As Zeynep Tufekci writes about "[People-Powered Uprisings](#):" "There has been a false debate. Was it social media or the people? Was it social media or the labor movements? Was it social media or anti-imperialist movement? Was it social media or youth? These questions are wrong and the answer is yes. The correct question is how." We encourage instructors to think of how the dynamics Tufekci describes might apply to the context of #BLM.

Day 3 - #BLM, Filter Bubbles and the Creation of Publics/Counterpublics

This day calls on students to think about the role that algorithms and filter bubbles play in the formation of publics and counterpublics in regard to Ferguson and the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Students discuss the consequences of digital segregation for online discussions of race by looking at how news about #Ferguson was algorithmically filtered for different publics. Students are prompted to think about how divisions of identity such as race, class, and gender are reproduced and reinforced technologically through the use of algorithms.

Day 4 - Hijacking Hashtags: #HandsUpDontShoot / #PantsUpDontLoot

This day examines one of the dangers of using hashtags to organize online: hashtag hijacking. Here, students will learn about the ways that various groups have attempted to hijack the hashtags of the #BLM movement in order to defend police violence against black bodies, circulate antiblack representations, and criticize protesters. Students will read about the role of media racism in depictions of looting, and then read about how anti-#BLM social media users hijacked #HandsUpDontShoot with #PantsUpDontLoot in order to circulate racist representations of anti-police brutality protesters. Students will then compile tweets in a Storify or Excel document in order to compare and contrast #BLM hashtags with their hijacked counterparts. Storify gives students the option to create a more public-facing presentation and analysis of the tweets, or to possibly integrate the tweets into a broader blogging or digital humanities assignment. Excel gives students the options to create an easily editable database of tweets with notes, to sort tweets into multiple sheets, or to create tables with multiple lines of analysis.

Detailed Lesson Plans

Day 1 - Algorithms' social sorting and the political affordances of social media technology.

Read:

Baker, P., and Potts, A. (2013). 'Why Do White People Have Thin Lips?' Google and the perpetuation of stereotypes via auto-complete search forms. *Critical Discourse Studies* 10(2): 187-204. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2012.744320>.

Kirchner, L. (2015, September 6). When Discrimination is Baked into Algorithms. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/09/discrimination-algorithms-disparate-impact/403969/>

Objectives for the day: Introduce students to the algorithm as it relates to online activity, and in particular social media. **Students will learn that their search results** and their social media feeds are constructed by **proprietary, partial, and productive** digital agents called "algorithms." **They will also learn the political relevance** of these agents; in particular, students will learn that algorithms can be encoded with bias and that the results of their sorting mechanisms can reaffirm or recreate inequality and discrimination. Students will think about how **differences in identity do not disappear online**, and how divisions such as **race, class, gender, and ability carry over** into and affect social interaction online. **Students will reflect on how they operate online** and how algorithms, in part, create the online environments in which they operate.

Opening discussion: (could begin as a Think-Pair-Share in small groups before becoming a larger group discussion): Who uses social media, and for what? Why did you choose the social media that you did? And what do you do on it?

Instructors can list answers on board, to create a set of social media platforms and link their uses. Ultimately, instructors should point out that students use certain social media platforms over others for specific reasons and that some platforms are better at doing certain things than others partially by virtue of their construction. For instance, because it allows longer-form posting than Twitter, I use Facebook to connect with my friends who are no longer close. Because my Twitter timeline rapidly refreshes and 140-character Tweets require brevity, I use Twitter to follow important events in real time, to catch up on news, and to learn from other public intellectuals/scholars (but not to keep in touch with friends.)

In-Class Activity (Option 1): Ask students to divide up into groups of three or four. Assign one half of the students to the Baker and Potts essay and one half to the Kirchner essay. Tell them that they will be presenting their essays to the other half of the class. Prompt students to identify:

- The main argument of each essay
- The evidence supporting each argument
- What each author thinks about algorithms (i.e.: Are they neutral technical tools? Do they have bias? Are they powerful? In what ways?)
- How algorithms might affect the ways in which different types of people find information, connect to one another, and organize collectively. How might algorithms have affected the way people found/learned about/participated in #BlackLivesMatter?
- How identity and social location (i.e. race, gender, class, ability, sexuality, and so on) play into online interaction. Is the Internet really a neutral space? How do bodies figure into the way we act and interact online?
- How identity and social location factor into the way algorithms produce results. How do different people come to access algorithms and algorithmically-mediated platforms? How is bias encoded in algorithm results? Does everyone have an equal say in the production of algorithms and algorithmic logics?
- Two-open ended discussion questions based on the readings (for discussion in class. If these are especially well written, they may serve as essay prompts on an upcoming paper or exam.)

Spend the rest of class discussing the essays, allowing the students to “teach back” the content to one another. Preview/link this discussion to #BlackLivesMatter.

In Class Analysis – #Ferguson case study (Option 2): Ask students to read and analyze the following essays in groups of 2-3. Prompt students to identify the role algorithms play in digital media and what the ultimate impact of algorithmic sorting might be in various contexts. Prompt students to think about how their identity and social location might impact the way they interact with a given algorithm.

Sullivan, G. (2014, August 19). How Facebook and Twitter Control What You See About Ferguson. *The Washington Post: Morning Mix*. Retrieved from

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/08/19/how-facebook-and-twitter-control-what-you-see-about-ferguson/>

and/or

Tufekci, Z. (2014, August 14). What Happens to #Ferguson Affects Ferguson: Net Neutrality, Algorithmic Filtering and Ferguson. *The Message*. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/message/ferguson-is-also-a-net-neutrality-issue-6d2f3db51eb0#.irumzxd7>

Toward the end of class, come back together and discuss the implications of the algorithm on #Ferguson. Preview/link this discussion to #BlackLivesMatter.

Day 2 - Hashtags as Coordination/Organization of Protest / Hashtags as Collective Action Using Algorithms

Read:

Rambukkana, N. (2015). From #RaceFail to #Ferguson: The digital intimacies of race-activist hashtag publics. In Nathan Rambukkana (Ed.), *Hashtag Publics: The Power and Politics of Discursive Networks* (pp. 29-49). New York: Peter Lang Publishing

Karpf, D. (2012). *The MoveOn Effect: The Unexpected Transformation of American Political Advocacy*. New York: Oxford University Press. [Chapter 1, pp. 3-21]

DeHahn, P. (2014, December 12). *Anti-police brutality hashtags: Your complete guide*. Retrieved from <http://www.dailydot.com/politics/ferguson-michael-brown-eric-garner-black-lives-matter-hashtag-activism/>

Objectives for the day: Consider how the Internet, and in particular, social media has influenced the way **people organize and protest online**. **Analyze** the ways in which protest movements are the same and/or are different in the “digital age.” Use this as a springboard to **discuss how contemporary technology**, and in particular, hashtags, **influences** methods of political **organizing/protest**.

Intro to class:

- Review the partial/productive nature of algorithms by asking students to define them, list their characteristics, and speculate about how they create the environments/context for digital protest **OR** Instruct students to write a “minute paper” on the highlights and/or most important content from last class. Give them approximately 3 minutes to do so before collecting, and consider using this information to calibrate Day 3 and 4 discussion/review.
- Give context for the following videos:
 - explain that the concepts covered in the videos are a good indication of many debates about the importance and utility of hashtag organizing/protest; by comparing/contrasting the viewpoints of the speakers in the videos, we can learn about what scholars think about hashtag protests and debate it ourselves.
 - Define/Discuss “Clicktivism” vs “Organizing Without Organizations” vs “Netroots” (Karpf). Is activism online good or bad? Conclusion to steer students

toward: Probably need more complexity than that question allows for, as evident in the following talks.

- give background on the two speakers
 - Zeynep Tufekci (@zeynep on Twitter): assistant professor at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill at the School of Information and Library Science, writes regularly about technology and particularly about how it relates to collective action. Contributor for the New York Times
 - Mark Anthony Neal: (@newblackman) Professor of African & African American Studies and the founding director of the Center for Arts, Digital Culture and Entrepreneurship (CADCE) at Duke University

Videos to watch in class:

Tufekci, Z. (2014). *How the Internet has made social change easy to organize, hard to win*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mo2Ai7ESNL8>

Neal, M.A. (2014). *#BlackTwitter, #Hashtag Politics and the New Paradigm of Black Protest*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z3J9Jv91i2M>

Compare/Contrast Tufekci and Neal:

[Instructors may use this Google template created by the authors for the compare/contrast assignment:

https://docs.google.com/previewtemplate?id=1nxjL2Xxs1brBgv3jR9i_PcOQmAqFnAd6o9dcX2_GE1I&mode=public]

Discussion questions:

- What is the overall argument of each of the speakers? What is the role of media in their arguments?
- What are the particular (digital) tools discussed in these video clips? List them, and identify a few of their characteristics.
- What, for each of these speakers, is the benefit of online, digital tools/environments for organizing protest?
- What, for each of these speakers, are the possible disadvantages of using digital tools/environments for organizing protest?
- Each of these speakers compares contemporary, digitally-mediated protest with “traditional” protest. What do they say? What do you think about it?
- What are the effects or results of using these tools and online environments for digital protests/gains? Or: does online-organized protest change anything?
- How might Karpf’s discussion of clicktivism, organizing without organizations, and “netroots” be applied to a discussion of #BlackLivesMatter? How might #BlackLivesMatter cause us to rethink these concepts?

Day 3 - #BLM, Filter Bubbles and the Creation of Publics/Counterpublics

Objectives for the Day: Students will think about how **social segregation occurs both offline and online**, how the concept of **filter bubbles** affects what people read, think, and share about

#Ferguson and #BLM, how filter bubbles affect **the creation of publics and counterpublics**, how **divisions of identity become mediated and reproduced online**, and how these technologically mediated divisions of identity **affect public discussions of police brutality and racism**.

Read:

Pariser, E. (2011). *Filter Bubbles*. Retrieved from <http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2011/05/12/the-filter-bubble/>

Warner, M. (2002). Publics and Counterpublics. *Public Culture*, 14(1), 49-90.

Garza, A. (2014, October 7). *A herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter movement by Alicia Garza*. Retrieved from <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>

Pierson, E. (2014, November 25). *See how red tweeters and blue tweeters ignore each other on Ferguson*. Retrieved from <http://qz.com/302616/see-how-red-tweeters-and-blue-tweeters-ignore-each-other-on-ferguson/>

Opening Prompt for Discussion:

Describe an algorithm that you use/encounter on a regular basis. Be specific – what does the algorithm do? How do you interact with it? What are its affordances? What does the algorithm demand of you, and what do you demand of the algorithm?

Watch:

PBS Digital Studios. (2014). *How Powerful Are Algorithms?* | Idea Channel | PBS Digital Studios. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSi6YoTPWLw>
(Relevant part of the video ends at approximately 6:00)

Discussion questions:

1. What effect do filter bubbles have on your daily life? What types of filter bubbles do you encounter on a day to day basis? Be specific. Describe the contours and qualities of your specific filter bubble/bubbles.
2. How do filter bubbles come into being? What do you think contributes to the creation of filter bubbles? Thinking specifically about Warner and the formation of publics through the circulation of texts, in what ways is the creation of filter bubbles related to the creation of publics?
3. How might identity affect the creation of filter bubbles? How might one's race, gender, class, age, sexuality, or other markers of identity affect what content they see online? Does identity determine the bubble or does the bubble determine identity?
4. If publics are formed through the circulation of texts, how might hashtags contribute to the creation of publics and counterpublics? How might filter bubbles affect the way hashtags contribute to the creation of publics and counterpublics?

Journal Assignment (In Class or Take-Home):

In a 3-4 page journal entry, apply Warner's theory of publics and counterpublics and Pariser's theory of filter bubbles to the article we read about how red and blue tweeters ignore each other

on #Ferguson. Think about the role that algorithms play in arranging discussions about #Ferguson. What are the political effects of the way conversations about #Ferguson play out online? How might divisions of identity such as race, class, and gender be reproduced and reinforced technologically through the use of algorithms? How does this play out in the context of #Ferguson and #BlackLivesMatter?

Day 4 - Hijacking Hashtags: #HandsUpDontShoot / #PantsUpDontLoot

Read:

McVey, J.A. and Woods, H.S. (Spring 2016, forthcoming). Anti-racist Activism and the Transformational Principles of Hashtag Publics: from #HandsUpDontShoot to #PantsUpDontLoot. *Present Tense*.

Garcia, F. (2015, April 29). How racist coverage made Baltimore's protests into just another violent riot. *The Daily Dot*. Retrieved from <http://www.dailydot.com/opinion/baltimore-protests-media-riot-racism/>

Solomon, A. (2015, April 28). Thugs. Students. Rioters. Fans: Media's Subtle Racism in Unrest Coverage. *ColorLines*. Retrieved from <https://www.colorlines.com/articles/thugs-students-rioters-fans-medias-subtle-racism-unrest-coverage>

Roncero-Menendez, S. (2013, October 19). 8 Hijacked Hashtags Gone Horribly Wrong (or Right). *Mashable*. Retrieved from <http://mashable.com/2013/10/19/hijacked-hashtags/#9KPGa2gn7uq8>

Objectives for the day: Students will learn about the **public and open-ended nature of the hashtag**. They will question the notion of **authorship and ownership** of discourse on the Internet by tracking how various communities identify with and then use hashtags for their own benefit. Students will consider how the **public nature of hashtags is itself political** when **determining the benefits and disadvantages** of using **online media** to organize collectively. Students will also learn about **the racialized dynamics of media representations of looting** and explore how the **circulation** of these representations online works to **delegitimize anti-racist protest**.

Watch:

Comedy Central. (2015). *The Nightly Show - What a Riot - Questionable Coverage from CNN and Fox News*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pDK8Vt8Ng9Y>

Ataxin. (2014). *Limbaugh has fun with "Pants Up Don't Loot."* Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYXu5fpAOgA>

Lecture:

On Media Representations of Blackness:

- Rioting (Historical examples: Hurricane Katrina, white people “finding” food, black people looting; Vancouver Stanley Cup Riots; Ohio State Riots)
- Stereotypes: Criminality (Historical legacy of black criminalization in media), Laziness/“Welfare Queen,” Black Brute / Animal Strength

On Hashtag Hijacking / “The Bashtag”

- Contingency and Visibility
- Control, Ownership, Appropriation
- Virality and Unpredictability
- “Failed” Hashtag Campaigns. Historical Examples: #McDStories, #MyNYPD, #_____LivesMatter

Activity:

Tracking Hashtags (Can be done either as homework or as in class activity or library lab. Can be done individually or in groups)

Pick a set of hashtags:

- “#BlackLivesMatter” vs “#BlueLivesMatter”
- “#BlackLivseMatter” vs “#AllLivesMatter”
- “#HandsUpDontShoot’ vs “#PantsUpDontLoot”

For your pair of hashtags, assemble an archive (either in a Spreadsheet or using Storify) of tweets using each hashtag. Find 10-20 tweets using each hashtag, and record them. Then compare and contrast how these hashtags are used online, thinking about the following questions. What are they being used to share? What messages, images, and texts circulate under the banner of each hashtag? How does their circulation change over time? How do these hashtags contest one another? What arguments and enthymemes are being made in these posts?

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Biography

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James Alexander McVey (Twitter: @themcmc87) is a doctoral student in the Department of Communication and a fellow in the Royster Society of Fellows at UNC Chapel Hill. He works at the intersection of rhetoric and media studies, studying the role of visual media in the production of symbolic economies of antiblack racism. He is interested in how visual media works to negotiate public controversies about race, sovereignty, and policing. He teaches and assists courses in Media Studies, Public Speaking, Argumentation and Debate, Persuasion, and Rhetoric. More information can be found at: www.jamesalexandermcvey.com