Not a Twitter Revolution: Anti-neoliberal and Antiracist Resistance in the Ferguson Movement

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Drawing from the literature on digital media, social movements, and race and class politics, this study analyzes the role media played in the 2014 and 2015 Ferguson Movement. Contrary to current conversations about #Ferguson, this article elevates the voices of local activists who organized from the streets of St. Louis, Missouri, through an analysis of 21 unstructured interviews with community activists. It also places these interviews within the context of Twitter discourse. Employing a mixed-methods approach, we illustrate how local activists repositioned themselves in ways not always captured via social media (particularly during the movement's early stages). Such findings illustrate a more complex movement that is antiracist, anti-neoliberal, and locally specific.

Keywords: social movements, digital media, alternative media, neoliberalism, race and class, #Ferguson

On August 9, 2014, a White police officer, Darren Wilson, shot and killed Michael Brown—an 18-year-old African American resident of St. Louis, Missouri, who was a recent high school graduate. Shortly after this shooting took place in Ferguson, Missouri (a municipality of St. Louis County), a post on Twitter reported from Ferguson: "@stlcountypd incited a riot by bringing dogs to the face of a grieving community. Who's the victim?"[2] Two images accompanied this text. One black-and-white photograph depicted police officers and dogs attacking protestors during civil rights demonstrations in the 1960s. To the right of this image appeared a more recent photograph in which police officers and dogs surrounded Ferguson residents. This tweet underscored the immediate response of the St. Louis County Police Department following Brown's murder and local activists' calls to hold Wilson accountable. What would follow was what historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) called the "unthinkable." For some, it was "unthinkable" that a coalition of longtime local activists, organizations, and youth would sustain daily forms of resistance throughout the fall and

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[2] Due to the sensitive nature of this study, we have kept tweets anonymous to protect the authors.

winter of 2014—and well into 2015. As one St. Louis activist noted: "We were ground zero. We were there. We didn't hear about it. We saw it" (Stephen, personal communication, December 20, 2016).[3]

Social media sites such as Twitter indeed played a role in distributing reports from St. Louisans, particularly in first reporting Brown's death ahead of local and national media. The hashtag trends #Ferguson and #MikeBrown emerged immediately. As activists noted, mainstream media often criminalized Brown and the protestors themselves. For many activists, social media discourse played a role in contesting the mainstream's "media power" (Couldry & Curran, 2003), defined here as a "the net result of organizing society's resources so that the media sector has significant independent bargaining power" (p. 3). Much of academic and media discourse regarding Brown's murder and the emergence of the Ferguson Movement has emphasized the participatory nature of social media (Barnard, 2017; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015), where "networked clusters of people coalesce, respond and mobilize to amplify messages beyond individuals and specific communities" (Kuo, 2016, p. 1). The role that local activists played in witnessing, reporting from, and organizing the movement has become a side note to what has largely been perceived as #Ferguson in the Twitter social media realm. Because the focus of Brown's murder and the movement quickly developed into a national narrative about racist police violence, any connection to a localized picture of St. Louis's racialized and classed dynamics became background noise.

A focus on social media data misses a nuanced story about the movement's positioning of police brutality as a product of an institutionally racist economic state system. Interviews with St. Louis community activists illustrated how they employed various media platforms as a strategy particularly for distributing information and galvanizing outrage toward the city's policing system. Both social media sites and localized media platforms such as live streaming counteracted distorted mainstream representations of Brown and the movement. Some activists perceived the employment of both social and localized media as tools for speaking to the "marginalized through communication channels independent of state and corporate control" (Carroll & Hackett, 2006, pp. 88–89). Yet, activists also provided a more nuanced understanding of the role media played as they witnessed outside voices develop a national narrative that missed key points about the movement. Interviews with activists provided insight into a more complex narrative that has been absent from larger national conversations.

Drawing from the literature on digital media, social movements, and race and class politics, this study highlights how activists saw the movement as an anti-neoliberal, antiracist, and a locally specific struggle. As Marxist scholar David Harvey (2013) suggests, "urban social movements . . . always have a class content even when they are primarily articulated in terms of rights, citizenship, and the travails of social reproduction" (p. 129). Ferguson was perceived as a movement about Black Americans' judicial and citizenship rights, but local activists strategically organized it as a localized movement embedded within the historical consciousness of race and class formations. By placing social media in context with interviews, this study challenges previous scholarly works that celebrate social media as pillars of social movements. We reposition St. Louis activists (not Twitter discourse) as the central voices of the movement and argue that "leadership and organizing cannot be simply tweeted into existence" (Ransby, 2015, para. 7).

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[3] Per Institutional Review Board approval, interviewees were assigned pseudonyms.

On the ground, local activists connected Brown's death to larger systemic issues impacting St. Louis's working-class communities. They saw their organizing and mediated decisions embedded within a discussion about state violence and the city's discriminatory classist and racist practices. Although activists proactively and strategically employed various forms of media, they also understood that the limitations of "capitalist media" elevate concerns regarding power hierarchies (Fuchs & Sandoval, 2015). Indeed, some scholars have pointedly argued that state and capitalist power shape social media, even if these same media serve as activists' tools (Fuchs & Sandoval, 2015). Furthermore, "the political economy of capitalism imposes a fundamental limit on contemporary alternative media: within capitalism is a society grounded in the asymmetric distribution of political, economic and cultural resources" (p. 168). Local St. Louis activists both confirmed and critiqued any expectations that social media would provide them an alternative space. Interviews with activists illustrated how they distinguished the larger mediated narrative of the movement from their own experiences in organizing a locally specific race and class struggle.

Digital Media and Social Movements

Scholars have long suggested that the democratic potential and diversity of media content are diminishing because of the growth of media monopolies, deregulation, commercialized news and information technologies, and the focus on profits for shareholders (Bagdikian, 1980; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 1999). In response to the growth of media power over the past few decades, alternative forms of media have served as communication tools for developing alternative spheres and counterpublics (Downey & Fenton, 2003; Downing, 2014; Fraser, 1990; Gross, 2003; Kuo, 2016; Leung & Lee, 2014). To question media power, one "contests the way social reality itself is defined or named" (Couldry, 2003, p. 39). New media, in particular, have "been hailed as the savior of alternative or radical media and indeed politics" (Downey & Fenton, 2003, p. 196). Some have argued that whereas newspapers and magazines were once popular outlets for creating alternative public spheres, the emergence of "cyberspace" placed the means of media reproduction into the hands of citizens. According to Gross (2003), in comparison to older forms of media, the Internet has guaranteed a "cacophony of competing voices" (p. 259). Recent social movements such as Occupy, Arab Spring, and the Ferguson Movement have adopted communication strategies that incorporate digital media in efforts to influence national dialogues (Chaudhry, 2016; Jackson, 2016; Tewksbury, 2018).

Similar to the emergence in the 1990s of infoshops, which served as "counter-hegemonic" attempts to "establish pockets of resistance" (Atton, 2003, p. 57), activist spaces in Ferguson also formed into "subaltern counterpublics" (Fraser, 1990). Furthermore, some scholarship has suggested that Twitter discourse has significantly influenced national dialogues about race and racism (Chaudhry, 2016). As Kuo (2016) asserts in an analysis of hashtags and social movements, ". . . racial justice activist hashtags offer multiple points of entry and engagement for individual actors" (p. 17). Similarly, Bonilla and Rosa (2015) argue that "hashtags offer a window to peep through, but it is only by stepping through that window and 'following' . . . individual users that we can begin to place tweets within a broader context" (p. 7). Yet, the current study argues that although a deeper analysis into hashtag networks remains an important intellectual endeavor, it is even more critical to examine what occurs outside of Twitter (beyond individual users) to discover the interplay between local race and class dialectics.

A substantial amount of scholarship on digital media activism places emphasis on the participatory nature of social media (Kellner & Kim, 2010), but other scholars have provided more nuanced insights into the relationship between media and activism. For instance, recent literature on social movements in the Arab world has indicated that "in times of revolution many forms of online politics are rendered meaningless—unless organically related to offline street politics" (Aouragh, 2012, p. 518). Digital media should not serve as the sole lens through which to examine revolution. Instead, Internet activism must be analyzed within the context of the actual politics that led people to revolt in the first place. The myth that revolutions are tweeted, with "social media causing courageous citizens' counter actions," help to avoid the "structural changes in society that need to be taken in order to overcome social problems" (Fuchs, 2012, pp. 385–386). These technological deterministic arguments thus circumvent "easy-sounding solutions (surveillance, censorship, control, policing, law and order) that underestimate the complexity of society" (pp. 385–386). For instance, anti–police brutality dialogues on social media often tout reform, rather than a systemic revolutionary transformation of policing, as the solution. Such "ideologies neglect the structural causes" (p. 386) of violence.

Critical political economic analyses of social media, furthermore, have highlighted transnational corporations' colonization of social media (Fuchs, 2015). The logic of capital accumulation, deregulation, and precarious labor now extend from traditional media to the digital. Examining the dialectical relationship between technology and society illuminates how "a specific media/technology has multiple . . . potential effects on society and social systems that can co-exist or stand in contradiction to each other" (Fuchs, 2012, p. 387). To dismiss this complex dialectical relationship is to reify technological fetishism, where "social relations underpinning contemporary capitalism are ignored" (p. 388). This perspective on technology helps to conceal "the social character of phenomena like violence" (p. 388). Emphasis on technological "revolutions" must be confronted with the reality that social media reproduce internal hierarchies, power structures, and elites within social movements (Gerbaudo, 2012).

Given the limitations and contradictions that arise with digital media activism, analyses of social movements and media must highlight a "bottom-up analysis" (Aouragh, 2012). Local specificities are critical to highlighting how the Internet is "shaped by a strong relation with the ground" (p. 529). Scholarly conversations that complicate the relationship between new media and social movements allow for contextualizing the ways local activists navigate and contest mediated national conversations (via social and traditional media). Moreover, this bottom-up approach highlights how activists speak back to the contradictions in which they find themselves. Fuchs (2015) highlights that contemporary activists often use capitalist social media more frequently than activist-run media platforms in an effort to reach more people; however, they risk "corporate and state control of protest communication" (p. 171). Through our findings, we further explore how St. Louis activists navigated their employment of capitalist social media while organizing on the ground against racism, classism, and neoliberalism. This study examines the movement through a ground-level view, not solely through Twitter traffic (Gerbaudo, 2012).

The Intersection of Race and Class Politics in St. Louis

The intersection of race and class politics is evident in recent movements on prison abolition and divestment, which are central to issues of police brutality and mass incarceration. The historiography of

Black social movements in the United States highlights the discourses that have helped shape race and class politics (Kelley, 1990; Taylor, 2015). In an effort to place the "societal structure that frames and conditions social action and the use of technology" (Fuchs, 2012, p. 388), it is important to discuss the context in which #Ferguson emerged. Although the greater St. Louis area is mired in the historical legacies of Black radicalism (Lang, 1990), its politics are also shaped by the state's history of slave patrols, the ongoing prevalence of Black codes within the county and city judicial system, and the various structural and housing barriers that Brown and Black residents face daily. Mechanized at the state and municipal levels, racist economic policies in St. Louis intersect with structural barriers evident in housing and labor segregation (Gordon, 2008). As such, the story of #Ferguson is as much about economic exploitation as it is about state violence toward Black citizens. As St. Louis historians suggest, generations of Black residents have led the struggles for both economic and racial justice (Ervin, 2017; Lang, 1990).

Through the concept of neoliberalism—evident in city and county municipal economic development policies—present-day manifestations of economic exploitation in St. Louis can be understood (Gordon, 2008). David Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as a "theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (p. 2). The role of the neoliberal state is to "create and preserve an institutional framework" (p. 2) that maintains military, defense, police, and legal structures to secure private property rights. The state, then, can "guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets" (p. 2). As Harvey (2005) and Taylor (2015) contend, the neoliberal state intervenes to implement regulations in the name of corporate interests and must employ repressive structures for maintaining class power. Coercive legislation results in policing and hypersurveillance, where trends like mass incarceration become "a key state strategy to deal with problems arising among discarded workers and marginalized populations" (Harvey, 2005, p. 77). The workers in St. Louis, and particularly in Ferguson, are as much working class as they are Black; they share these dual identities.

Placing Ferguson and the larger St. Louis metropolitan area within this neoliberal framework is important for understanding how activists—who have largely been framed as solely "race activists"—have mobilized against local economic and legal institutions. What the movement illustrated is how "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey, 2004) has taken the form of surveillance and policing in Brown and Black citizens' everyday lives. According to Harvey, "accumulation by dispossession"—drawn from Karl Marx's concept of primitive accumulation—includes the privatization of land, "suppression of rights to the commons," "commodification of labour power," "slave trade," and "monetization of exchange and taxation" (p. 74). The state actively protects, promotes, and profits from these policies through its institutions. Local activists have repeatedly demonstrated how St. Louis's legal apparatus plays a role in promoting the state's neoliberal interests through the dispossession of its Black citizens.

Such policies were evident in the United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division's (2014) *Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department* report. The report stated that the city of Ferguson issued approximately 90,000 citations for municipal violations. At the time of the report, the city was in the midst of planning to bring the court under the city finance director. In 2010, the city collected $11.07 million in revenue, with $1.38 million generated from court fines and fees. Officers arrested people for a variety of

"protected conduct," such as "talking back to officers, recording public police activities, and lawfully protesting perceived justice" (p. 24). A charge for "Failure to Appear in Court" fined residents an additional $75.50, plus $26.50 in court costs. Although poorer people have been generally impacted by these fines—which acts as a regressive tax—the court system has particularly targeted Black residents. When St. Louis residents cannot pay such fees, they are imprisoned or contracted to private corporations, sustaining historical debtors' prisons (Kutsch, 2016). Indeed, it is within this historical context that St. Louis activists (many of whom faced substantial legal charges following protests) took to the streets in 2014 following Brown's murder.

Research Design

A larger exploratory sequential mixed-method study (Creswell, 2014) of the St. Louis activist community informs the present study. The larger study consisted of four types of data: (a) geocoded U.S. Census demographics, (b) digital media, (c) archival data, and (d) community activist interviews. Because of the sequential nature of the research design, data collection and analysis began with the collection of interviews with community activists, which then led to the collection of the geocoded census data. While conducting interviews, we collected archival and digital media data. This current study primarily draws from the qualitative data, specifically interviews with community activists and digital media data sets.

Data Collection and Analysis

The primary research methods used in the current study were unstructured, in-depth interviews and Twitter data. We conducted 21 interviews across St. Louis city and county over a period of 16 months. Through snowball sampling previous interviewees provided names for follow-up interviewees, as the St. Louis activist community is a tight-knit circle. These unstructured interviews consisted of questions related to their organizing and media employment, which provided insight into how activists documented a historical moment that shed light on St. Louis's racial and economic politics. Interviews lasted 60–120 minutes, with interviews averaging 90 minutes. We asked interviewees a set of questions designed to understand their lived experiences before and after the killing of Michael Brown. Subsequent questions asked how activists captured, experienced, and perceived the role that media played in the shooting incident and the protests that followed. Questions also addressed their media production. It is important to note that more than 200 community activists were involved in the movement. As such, this study does not presume that the experiences of 21 activists capture the movement in its totality. Yet, this study reveals local components of the Ferguson movement absent from a larger academic and media discourse.

Using NVivo qualitative software, we employed discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) as an analytical tool to synthesize themes across interview transcripts. Initial coding of the interviews consisted of salient themes (Saldana, 2009) related to media activism across all interviews. The second cycle, focused coding (Saldana, 2009), consisted of subcategories within media activism. Additionally, we examined how race, class, and economic subcodes intersected with these organizing experiences.

To contextualize interview data, we analyzed a sample of Twitter discourse. Using the social media analysis software DiscoverText, we retrieved historical tweets from August 9, 2014 (the day of Brown's

murder), to August 12, 2014. Because the researchers were primarily interested in the relationships between local and national activist voices, hashtags #Ferguson, #MikeBrown, and #BlackLivesMatter were employed for gathering historical Twitter content. Using the combination "#Ferguson or #MikeBrown," we obtained 766,501 tweets during the first three days following Brown's murder. To narrow this sample further, deduplication was conducted via DiscoverText, which was then proceeded by a keyword search for tweets specifically related to race and class politics. This keyword search then generated 115 tweets that directly spoke to issues of race and class politics in St. Louis during the early days of protests. Furthermore, we conducted a keyword search for "QuickTrip" (a convenience store in Ferguson that was set on fire and quickly went viral the day after Brown's murder). This search generated 1,390 tweets during the same time period. Examining top tweets provided some insight into a mediated conversation regarding the intersection of race and class politics in the movement. A close thematic analysis of interviews alongside social media analysis helped contextualize how some Twitter discourses aligned with or diverged from activists' experiences. Although Twitter content was not necessarily produced by participant activists, our data analysis strategies reveal how critical offline politics were to the organization of the Ferguson Movement.

Localizing Media Power in Ferguson

In employing social media, many activists used Twitter as a space to challenge mainstream media power, even as the space itself acted as another form of what Fuchs (2014) calls capitalist media. Couldry and Curran (2003) highlight one of two directions for analyzing media power: "an *emergent form of social power* in complex societies whose basic infrastructure depends increasingly on the fast circulation of information and images" (p. 4). Social media power became critical for activists who sought to circulate information and images quickly. They frequently noted the distorted depictions of Brown and Ferguson in mainstream media coverage. Access to social media during demonstrations provided an alternative form of media power. Yet, some activists also noted that other forms of digital media were more powerful than social media sites like Twitter. Live streaming, for instance, was critical for challenging national media power (including social media) and for illustrating a more locally specific movement. Twitter could not capture the full scope of the movement; instead, localized forms of media were far more powerful for capturing the raced and classed context of St. Louis. Although live streaming "did not provide the first instance of the capacity of movement media makers," it "vastly expanded to produce live video coverage of mobilizations" (Constanza-Chock, 2012, p. 382). Watching protest events in the moment, then, audiences could place themselves within the protest events themselves and the space in which they watched (Moores, 2004; Scannell, 1996).

For some activists, Twitter allowed residents to document Brown's murder before a nationalized narrative emerged. Shane, for instance, saw social media as a "corrective tool" (personal communication, July 13, 2016). For instance, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, which emerged in the aftermath of Brown's murder, provided a counternarrative of Black men that challenged historical mainstream representations of Black criminality. This hashtag served as one of many ways in which activists "corrected" mainstream media representations. Once national media did arrive in Ferguson, activists not only read what they perceived as distorted news but also experienced the strategies some employed to sensationalize the movement. Headlines from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and other national media outlets perpetuated a historical pattern of connecting Blackness to criminality. The news headlines "Source: Darren Wilson Says Michael Brown Kept

Charging at Him" and "Robbery Report Could Have Ferguson Officer More Wary" were two of many that moved activists and social media users to challenge such representations. As one Twitter user indicated: "Of all the pictures I see of #MikeBrown on @YahooNews @CNNFoxNews . . . not one was of him [with] a smile thanks for being biased." The criminalization of Blackness also encapsulated Ferguson protestors. As news of "looting" spread across the country, some Twitter users questioned media's focus on the violence of a few individuals rather than the actual murder of Brown: "as I thought! Media didn't cover PEACEFUL vigil but will focus on riots! . . . @CNN #MichaelBrown #MikeBrown." As such, national media's sensational reporting affected activists. After working with several mainstream media organizations in August 2014, Carl (personal communication, March 12, 2017) recalled doing a live interview with a prominent national media organization:

> I was already miked up and . . . I got this . . . instant message . . . It said, "CNN breaking protestors attack police headquarters, tear gas, and bullets," or something to that effect. They say, "Okay, we're ready" . . . I hadn't even processed that yet . . . I just told them what happened. I said, "They were protesting and I was taking photos. They [police] rolled up and they just attacked." And they cut to the next guy and started talking to him . . . They kept asking me the same question and I was like, "This is exactly what happened." The other guy . . . got more personally sensational . . . showing his wound and stuff . . . I think they were trying to get to the story first . . . From that moment on, when I get calls, I just delete their number.

Carl's description illustrates why so many activists sought to counteract mainstream representations of protesters. As indicated here, he, like many others, believed the news merely sensationalized the actual events occurring within Ferguson's physical spaces.

Activists often use corporate media while simultaneously calling attention to the exploitation of capitalism (Fuchs, 2015). Activists agreed that the employment of social media into the movement helped challenge mainstream media power, even as they employed these strategies via corporatized social media spaces. For instance, Marcus (personal communication, May 31, 2016) remembered when he first posted on Facebook:

> So I wrote this post just really kind of condemning the world that doesn't think that it's their issue . . . it occurred to me, "Damn, I think I'm in a position where I can help some of those people make connections if they wanted to." . . . I started a site called Do Something Now. And every day, I just ran a list on Facebook of all of the different activities that were going on . . . I thought that social media is a great place to get out a one-way message.

Marcus primarily relied on Facebook as his tool of communication, but he also saw Twitter as another space that helped mediate the movement. Remembering a particular night in Ferguson following the city's implementation of a curfew, Marcus recalled a confrontation that occurred simultaneously on the streets of Ferguson and on Twitter:

> There were Black men from the Nation of Islam that were going around saying, "Go home.
> They have a legal right to arrest you. Go home and come back tomorrow. But do not
> violate the curfew." And there were some White folks . . . that were saying, "F—— the
> police. Stay out here. It's your right to stay out here." . . . This Black guy from the Nation
> of Islam is saying, "Comply with the law." And this White guy who I would've otherwise
> have thought was just a nice liberal White guy was really inciting more angst between the
> community and the police . . . I posted about that . . . there was no news story that
> would've penetrated me to understand how my stereotypes were being challenged in that
> moment.

Here, Marcus's post served two purposes. First, his post served as a form of reporting from ground zero.
This experience, which he asserted would not appear in mainstream news, originated from an insider's
perspective.

But in highlighting the importance of seeing live events as they formulated on the ground, activists
also recalled how live streaming served to localize the movement in ways that moved beyond other social
media platforms. Surpassing Twitter and Facebook posts, live streams allowed the country to witness online
live, unaltered video footage of demonstrations and police officers' violent interactions with activists.
Constance (personal communication, December 19, 2016) remained skeptical of social mainstream media,
but she believed live streaming allowed people to "bear witness to the violence of capitalism, of White
supremacy, of patriarchy, and [see] the way that these stories [were] told by the people who were . . .
impacted by it and living it." Live streaming exposed the local conditions of St. Louis. Employing live
streaming services such as Ustream, activists "disrupt[ed] state surveillance, surveilling the police
themselves, and providing the space for the construction of subjectivity on the part of the political actors in
the streets" (Thorburn, 2014, p. 52).

Self-identifying as a "revolutionary pot banger," Maya (personal communication, July 6, 16) also
saw the potential for live streaming to "dispute what mainstream media [were] trying to tell people." Live
streaming, perhaps more than any other medium, offered a "real" account of the movement:

> If you take that time to watch this live stream, you gonna see this is happening. Nobody
> is gonna be able to tell you anything. Nobody's gonna be able to tell you anything because
> you gonna see things as it is. (Maya, personal communication, July 6, 16)

Watching the "movement in motion" meant that viewers could go beyond reading words or seeing
a photograph (Thorburn, 2014, p. 54); furthermore, it allowed for the "subject formation of previously
unconstituted activists" (p. 55). Needed was this layer of visibility to tell a more localized story of Ferguson,
especially from those on the ground. Live streaming provided extensive coverage of daily protests, whereas
Twitter and Facebook provided snapshot views.

Live streaming took a turn from national activists who employed Twitter and Facebook as their primary
media platforms:

> [Live streaming] helped in a way when it's out of the purity of your heart. So . . .
> somebody out there just live streaming for your life, right? Sometimes you seeing on
> the live stream that the phone dropped because they were . . . cussing at the police.
> They might get locked up with the phone in their pocket . . . That's different than
> somebody with a clear strategy. (Malcolm, personal communication, August 6, 2016)

Malcolm suggests that live streamers risked their lives when protesting and documenting on the streets
of Ferguson. This decision of some local live streamers to risk arrest illustrated a more locally specific
story about St. Louis resistance. Moreover, local activists offered a different narrative from national
activists who primarily employed social media as their means of communication. Here, Malcolm further
explains:

> So when the Black people that live tweeting for power look no different from *The Washington
> Post* and *The New York Times*, I have to question their motives. How did you go from being in
> the background live tweeting to . . . dancing in the Oval Office?

On the other hand, local live streamers served to protect "people on the front lines" (Badr, personal
communication, October 7, 2017). Moreover, Badr explains why Ferguson activists saw his live
streaming as more authentic to the movement: "I spent so much time in one of the roughest areas of
St. Louis . . . So you know, that's another thing that helped me . . . having street credit . . . got me to
be able to be a voice." In placing themselves at the center of live streaming coverage, local streamers
enacted resistance against state violence while providing viewers live action of ground zero. Some local
activists made class distinctions between national activists employing social media sites and local live
streamers. As such, close proximity to violence from the state represented the movement's working-
class identity. Live streaming allowed for a more locally specific representation, in which the class
dynamics of the movement were more apparent.

Interviews revealed a narrative about Ferguson that repositioned the issue of police brutality
as challenging both racist and classist discourses: Some activists indicated that national activists
positioned the movement (arguably via media) as one not contextualized within the labor organizing of
local community activists. In an opinion piece published in *The Guardian* on August 9, 2015, national
civil rights activist Deray McKesson wrote:

> I will always remember that the call to action initiating the movement was organic—
> there was no organizing committee, no charismatic leader, no church group or school
> club that led us to the streets . . . In those early days, we were united by #Ferguson
> on Twitter—it was both our digital rallying cry and our communication hub . . . Once
> the protests began to spread, we became aware of something compelling and concise,
> something that provided common language to describe the protests: the hashtag
> #BlackLivesMatter. (paras. 4–5)

Nationally, the movement was described as leaderless, yet St. Louis activists defined the movement in
ways that challenged this narrative:

> It was poor, working-class Black folk. It wasn't state-sanctioned marching . . . So you have people like Hands Up. You have people like the Lost Voices. You have people like Center for Hope and Peace. These are people who just knew that also Black Lives Matter. You see people who are first-generation college students. You see people who don't have full-time employment. They're part-time employees. You have people who have trades and entrepreneurs. You see people . . . living on welfare . . . So it ain't Rosa Parks. It's Claudette Colvin on the front line. (Malcolm, personal communication, August 6, 2016)

Malcolm's comment challenges McKesson's point that there was "no organizing committee" or that Twitter was a "communication hub." What such contention raises is the question of whose narrative defines the movement. Challenging the notion that #Ferguson was the same as #BlackLivesMatter, Malcolm argues: "There ain't no Black Lives Matter Movement . . . It ain't the people. So the working class is gone." Such distinction between the Ferguson Movement and Black Lives Matter emerged from several interviews. For Malcolm, this distinction lies within a class analysis. Local live streamers like Badr (personal communication, October 17, 2017) were often targeted by St. Louis police officers, and activists highlighted how national activists (who became the face of the movement) did little to risk their own lives: "The problem is when the local [stuff] gets subsumed" (Martin, personal communication, October 13, 2017).

Interviews with local activists demonstrate how activists navigated their employment of media to narrate the movement. As evidenced by these data, Twitter, Facebook, and live streaming were critical in challenging national media power. Yet, activists also reflected on the manifestation of a movement that was largely defined by broader online publics. Engaging in localized forms of media became much more critical for establishing a counterpublic sphere to resist state violence. They sought to reconstruct and reposition Brown's death and the movement as an anti-neoliberal and antiracist struggle. In the next section, we expand on how local activists' nuanced approaches to organizing within a unique racialized and classed geographical context sometimes differed from the online politics of #Ferguson.

Resisting Media's Corporatist Space: Intersecting Race and Class

St. Louis-based activists acknowledged the importance of counteracting mainstream mediated narratives, but they simultaneously understood national media (in both traditional and digital forms) as a space where local voices disappeared. The movement as defined by local activists was, as Malcolm put it, "in the air." In their spatial analysis of #Ferguson, Bonilla and Rosa (2015) ask, "what do they [tweets] tell us about this event, its place in the social imagination, and about social media itself as a site of both political activism and social analysis?" (p. 5). Although such a question is important to examine, we argue that an examination of social media data in isolation fails to capture what activists perceived as a hyperlocal movement unique to a particular geographic context (even while sharing similar struggles with other nationwide incidents of police brutality). Our analysis reveals a complex relationship between Twitter discourse and activists' ground-level organizing. Critical analyses of Western media systems have illustrated how the logics of capitalism shape mass media (Hallin, 2008). Although digital space is perhaps more participatory, scholars also have demonstrated how it has not moved away from the institution of the market but has become central to the logics of neoliberalism (Fuchs, 2014). This section argues that Twitter

discourse either reflected a corporatized space in its defense of St. Louis's business community or ignored the movement's class components. Activists, however, consciously highlighted the component of class in their organizing. Many illustrated how a ground-level perspective of the movement captured a more accurate representation of the movement's race and class organizing.

On August 10, 2014, news about people in Ferguson breaking into and setting a QuickTrip convenience store on fire reached Twitter. Several tweets pointed to the fact that media were absent in covering Brown's death but were immediately present when the QuickTrip convenience store was burned: "Crazy how the media was slow to pickup #mikebrown's death but quick to talk about the riot #ferguson." Others shared their sentiments: "Appalling. Violence answers nothing. . . . Looting at the #Ferguson QuickTrip: https://t.co/gw05YSQZEM." When news broke about several North County business owners experiencing break-ins, some of the discourse on Twitter attempted to defend the city's spaces of capital. One user commented: "real smart #MikeBrown looters burn and destroy the business that hire in your community. #DawnOfThePlanetOfTheApes." *St. Louis on the Air*, a news and talk show on St. Louis Public Radio, posted on August 12, 2014: "If you live, work or own a business in #Ferguson, how is the turmoil affecting you?" Arguably, tweets such as these signaled the burning of the QuickTrip as a threat to the city's capitalist order.

Yet, interviews with local activists depicted a more nuanced and historicized understanding of those early events. As Malcolm recalled: "On August 10th, we had a vigil for the family. That was the day after. We had it in the morning. We stopped the press conference. That night we had a vigil and that night people call it rioting and looting. I called it an uprising" (personal communication, August 6, 2016). One Twitter user echoed a similar tone: "Business have insurance. They can rebuild. #mikebrown is gone forever. My sympathy is not with them. #Ferguson." Jessica's recollection also highlights activists' insight into the immediate response to Brown's murder and the subsequent presence of militarized police throughout Ferguson and the larger county: "This is something I think people from far away should understand. You seeing something even on Twitter, you seeing it on TV, it's a totally different experience from you experiencing it and you living it and seeing it" (personal communication, July, 13, 2016).

Here, activists demonstrated how distorted social media portrayals of events were after the killing of Brown. The focus on the disruption of businesses without context of the class dynamics of Ferguson misrepresents the material lives of its residents. For instance, one artist and activist created a wall that served as a physical reminder of St. Louis's Delmar Divide, significant for creating a line that divides the predominantly White southern upper class from the city's predominantly Black and poorer southern region. Residents could "leave their problems here" on the wall by writing letters to the city and their fellow neighbors (Deven, personal communication, April 30, 2017). For many, Brown's murder pointed not only to police brutality but also to the county's and city's classed structure.

Although social media may have depicted a first-person account of St. Louis's history of racial injustice, citizens' own experiences of St. Louis's classed dynamics and attempts to organize around economic justice were often absent from such mediated discourses. This was a sentiment Marcus also noted when discussing the lessons he learned from his own involvement: "I recognized that I was also part of the problem. In that middle-class Black folks are often the front line of defense for the status quo." Here, Marcus

referred to the various internal politics of the movement, where younger activists frequently critiqued St. Louis clergy members (Martin, personal communication, October 13, 2017) and older civil rights activists for promoting more "respectable politics." Many of these class dialogues occurred on the ground and not always within mediated spaces.

Other St. Louis activists, such as Jayden (personal communication, February 25, 2017), were involved in the resistance struggle against police brutality even before Brown's death. As a college student in St. Louis in early 2014, she helped launch a "free store" where "everything was free" for the university community. After graduating, Jayden joined a local organization in which she helped launch a campaign to "try and implement alternative options to incarceration and to abolish these settler's prisons." In an effort to develop "campaigns that focus on the way that poverty is criminalized in St. Louis," Jayden began working with other community activists to address St. Louis's municipal court system. Jayden recalled that in the spring of 2014 they met with a nonprofit civil rights law firm, which "was really helpful in sort of creating the basis for a lot of the relationships later on." Although the local organization Jayden worked for launched a campaign to challenge the court system even before Brown's death, his murder temporarily halted the campaign. The organization "sort of dropped everything and was like, 'we're going to throw everything, all of our support, all of our time and energy into supporting what we can.'" Still, the organization would immediately connect the protests to the same court system:

> But after we started seeing . . . like 70 people getting arrested in one night and [that] people had warrants . . . we started trying to bail people out and realize[d] that these other parts of the municipal court system were keeping us from getting people out of jail. And so that's when we were like, "Okay. Well, we need to connect these dots . . ." And so we rereleased the ArchCity Defenders white paper, sent it to national media, *Washington Post*, all these people. So while we were doing that, we were having those meetings when we were coordinating the movement support. We were doing the campaign work, trying to go to Ferguson City Hall, get warrants cleared. . . . We were able to convince the city of St. Louis to forgive 220,000 outstanding warrants because they didn't [want to] have that reputation.

Jayden's description of organizing reinforces the significance of capturing "offline street politics" and not relying "on the prism of the internet" (Aouragh, 2012, p. 518). Her experiences suggest that much of the organizing around economic and racial justice occurred on the ground: "So just thinking about . . . communicating with each other, you were going to physical spaces. This wasn't really happening over social media. None of [our] faces [said] that 'we're the leaders of the movement.'" Activists had "teams of people who were working on things like material support for activists, checking in on legal support, fundraising, doing the direct-action coordinating, and communications." If one perceives national media descriptions of Twitter and the movement as the story behind #Ferguson, then critical moving pieces organized by local activists become lost in the fray of digital media politics. Instead, what we see is not a movement solely based on racial politics that was leaderless, but one collectively developing as a racialized and classed movement.

When activists protested Clayton, St. Louis, "the seat of all of the political and economic power in the county" (Jayden, personal communication, February 25, 2017), national mediated conversations failed to capture the intersected complexities of an institutional system that continues "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey, 2004). Some Twitter discourse indeed made these connections: "#Ferguson US cops serve the white middle class just as much as they serve the 1%. Occupy movement rhetoric aside. Own your complicity." Many others, however, continued to focus on the business community and the language of "looting": "Lesson learned today: Don't open up a business in a black neighborhood. #Ferguson." These comments differed very little from mainstream news representations. But interviews with activists debunk the notion that protestors targeted their own communities. Instead, in many of their strategizing decisions, disrupting spaces of capital became an essential component to the movement. For instance, interviews with activists revealed that malls across the county were targeted sites of protest, along with sporting events and stadiums in the heart of St. Louis.

As interview participants frequently highlighted, a mediated narrative about Black criminality positioned the Ferguson Movement as chaotic and one-dimensional. In both traditional mainstream news and on social media, working-class organizing against the police state became solely about institutional racism. The national narrative often ignored the ways in which institutional racism is mechanized by the corporatized and militarized policing systems across St. Louis. Because activists saw these representations as different from their own experiences, they largely employed a wide range of media to counteract stories that criminalized protestors. Yet, they also understood how the media tools they employed failed to capture their own local organizing strategies and experiences. They discredited the nationalized narrative that seemingly defended the spaces of capital in St. Louis and differentiated this movement from #BlackLivesMatter by highlighting the movement as a working-class struggle. This dialectical conversation between offline politics and online discourse reveals the nuances of the movement, which national media (both social media platforms and mainstream legacy publications) could not capture.

Conclusion

In describing the growing crowd of witnesses and protestors at the apartment complex Brown's family lived in on August 9, 2014, one Twitter user reported from inside Ferguson: "they chanting we gon.be.on.the news smh." At this moment, people outside and inside of Ferguson received an instant glimpse into the weeks that would follow. Instantaneously communicating information about an emerging movement, Twitter served as one space; yet it would not begin to capture the daily multilayered dynamics that consumed activists. Although social media spaces served as digital locations of resistance, these sites also posed a problem for activists in publicly locating and naming themselves "within a system of relations" (Carroll and Hackett, 2006, p. 93). In many ways, live streaming provided an alternative form of media, which activists perceived was better able to capture unadulterated visuals of the movement. To do so was to capture a closer view of the streets of Ferguson where an antiracial and anti-neoliberal movement took place. For some activists, live streaming played a critical role in distinguishing local activists who risked arrest (resulting in imprisonment and an accumulation of more court fines) daily from those who appeared to tweet from afar (or with less risk). Furthermore, a ground-level view of the movement that emphasized its working-class identity seemed to disappear within the fray of national narratives. What activists called

for was a localization that revealed the nature of the movement's race and class struggle—even while they acknowledged the importance of creating national awareness.

Scholarship on social media and social movements have demonstrated "networked publics' use of common platforms and hashtags to document, contextualize, and amplify cases of police violence against people of color, revealing an undeniable pattern explained only by structural racism" (Barnard, 2017, p. 5). This study's analysis contends with the notion that social media platforms provided a space for individuals outside and inside of Ferguson to connect Brown's death with other national incidents of police brutality. Yet, it also demonstrates that a celebratory perspective on the participatory nature of digital media misses larger connections between police brutality, the importance of localized geopolitics, and ongoing efforts to accumulate capital through the dispossession of people of color. The outcome of police brutality does not solely explain the pattern of structural racism. In-depth interviews with activists demonstrate a local movement that consciously defined itself within the working-class history of St. Louis. The local voices of those who did make these connections are only recently entering some academic discourse (Tewksbury, 2018). To bring in local activist voices complicates optimistic and technologically deterministic arguments about the power of social media. As Fuchs (2012) suggests, "communication technologies do not cause riots, revolutions, or rebellions; but rather discontented people will make use of all means necessary and available" (p. 389).

Furthermore, many activists found themselves employing capitalist social media to counteract mainstream media power, and they did so consciously. Activists were highly aware of the trappings that social media posed; many highlighted the importance of ground-level organizing and the employment of localized media forms (e.g., live streaming) that seemed more equipped for capturing the local context of the movement. Gerbaudo (2012) suggests that contemporary activists have "shamelessly appropriate[ed] corporate social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter" (p. 3). Yet, while local activists in St. Louis indeed employed these platforms, they also knew that such media failed to capture the movement's working-class structure. Part of what social media discourse lost was a highly organized movement that strategically fought against a localized context of police brutality and economic exploitation.

An analysis of interviews with local activists raises questions for scholars to consider if we are to give voice to the ongoing significance of social media power, social justice, and the people behind today's struggles against the neoliberal order. Mansell (2004) argues that "in the growing field of 'internet studies' there is little explicit treatment of power" (p. 100). As many scholars have noted, faces exist behind the production of social media; yet, an emphasis on social media data without an analysis of the voices behind social movements raises more questions than it answers. The spatial movements of offline resistance and their reflections and divergences from online spatial politics raise critical questions for media and social movement scholars. As such, the question of power and what it is "embedded in, and experienced through" (p. 100) is equally important. To understand why some Ferguson activists perceived the Ferguson Movement as uniquely different from the larger Black Lives Matter network of organizations—even as #BlackLivesMatter reached prominence in the months following Brown's death—requires more in-depth analyses. For instance, the network of relationships between #BlackLivesMatter and #Ferguson need to be further explored. Whether and to what extent local activists engaged in creating hashtag networks or how they may have differentiated between national and local social media practices requires additional

investigative inquiries into the ways that activists navigated the movement's "hashtag discursivity" (Kuo, 2016). Such investigations, however, would require deeper insight into the nuanced strategies that local community activists employed inside Ferguson.

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