

OUT OR IN? THE BLACK BLOGOSPHERE AND THE NEWS MEDIA

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Abstract: Alternatives to the dominant public sphere and associated dialogue are especially important for underrepresented groups. These alternatives allow for groups to create their own dialogues that can then be used to change the direction of the larger discussion. While the Internet seems to be the perfect tool for these alternative dialogues to be created, the feasibility of using the Internet to take the next step into mainstream dialogue remains unclear. The black blogosphere is one alternative information stream pushing back. This chapter examines the way in which the black blogosphere discusses news stories and offers alternatives to the mainstream discourse, and why it is crucial that these alternative public spheres are available.

Keywords: black public sphere, public sphere, activism, social media, organizing.

THE INTERNET AND POWER

A great deal has been written about the role of the Internet in creating a more egalitarian forum for the exchange of information and ideas. The Internet, after all, provides open access to asynchronous, two-way information exchange. Anyone with Internet access can start a Twitter account or a blog espousing his or her ideas. While many individuals in a variety of venues find success through blogging and other forms of social media, the dominant players in the sector are mainstream media outlets (Pole 2010; McLean and Wallace 2013). There are, however, important questions surrounding the capacity of

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alternative public spheres to arise and provide a platform for alternate news and discussion.

Alternative public spheres

In eighteenth century US society, competing publics established outlets for deliberation and engagement in efforts to foster democratic governance within disadvantaged groups. In the United States, the power to exercise democratic voting and to elect representatives and participate in policy debates was, by law, limited to landowners. Racial and ethnic minorities, as well as women, were prevented from owning land. This prevention, while constraining access to the dominant public sphere, did result in the creation of subaltern counterpublics – “where subordinate social groups can develop and circulate alternative understandings and descriptions of the social world” (Gibson, Hundt and Blaxter 2014: 105).

A large, diverse society such as the United States contains many groups that compete and contest for power in public spaces. Subaltern counterpublics assist members of minority groups to engage in deliberation and discussion. The American Civil Rights Movement (CRM) created a set of goals with an action plan to participate, to the extent possible, in representative democracy. Access to a space, or a sphere, for this participation is crucial. During the CRM, for example, the discussions that took place among the African-American community and their allies did not initially involve (due to limited access) representatives of the dominant power holders in society – largely white, wealthy males who held power positions in political, religious, corporate, and media institutions. These power holders restricted access to these institutional spheres of influence and decision-making (Brooks 2005). Without the involvement of these power holders, the CRM created an alternative public sphere (one operating outside the dominant in order to change the dominant).

Not only was access limited, but the norms and values governing the sphere were those of the wealthy, white males who ruled the halls of policy making. Historically, African-Americans, females, and low-



income individuals found it difficult to navigate through these cultural barriers to participate and even when they are able to navigate (by imitating norms and values) they are often derailed by the power holder perspective of minority groups (Squires 2002). Even with legal access to the dominant society removed, cultural norms remain based on the dominant societal groups: “Members of subordinated social groups – women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians – have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics” (Fraser 1992: 67). For example, in the first half of the 20th century, the dominant political ideologies were premised on the superiority of capitalism. Therefore, those promoting alternative economic systems (i.e. socialism and/or communism) found themselves outside the mainstream. The monetary power of the capitalists was used to further ostracize, through governing institutions, those promoting and advocating for other systems. Alternative subaltern counterpublics were created among those competing for access to the negotiated space of democratic governance. Their lines of communication provided spheres for discussion and deliberation inaccessible through established means of information dissemination. The information discussed within the advocates for communism stood in stark contrast to those found within the dominant society.

Racial minorities have a long tradition of forming subaltern counterpublics (Robbins 1993; Howley 2007; Bailey and Harindranath 2007). For example, African-Americans used churches and other religious spaces as meeting places to discuss policy, politics, work, and family. During the 1800s, African-Americans created secret societies as a “social and intellectual space” discussing slavery and policy (Brooks 2005: 74). Barkley-Brown (1994) highlights the importance of the church as a meeting space for political discourse in the transition period post-slavery. Newly freed slaves negotiated their role in the post-Civil War public sphere by “holding mass meetings and Republican Party conventions” in churches; placing churches at the foundation of the black public sphere (110). Local traditional media outlets (e.g. *The Richmond Whig*) wrote news stories ridiculing these meetings and conventions as radical; thus, demonstrating the need for newly freed African-Americans to create their own public discourse space via

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newly established alternative public spheres “where blacks are at the center” (Brooks 2005: 74).

Alternative public spheres, as in the case of freed former slaves, provide a space for members of non-powerful groups to form identities, develop plans for community participation, and take action on public issues. The CRM is another example of the formation and operation of an alternative public sphere (Baker 1995). Without access to the larger society, American blacks formed civic groups that engaged in deliberation aimed at fighting for change in their social and economic situation through the elimination of repressive public policies (i.e. Jim Crow Laws) and the racist attitudes of white Americans (Morris 1984). The CRM formed various strategies for action directly resulting in a repeal of Jim Crow as well as additional policies governing race in American society (e.g. fair housing laws). CRM leaders understood the important role the traditional media (specifically, the growing television medium) played in shaping public discussion and, therefore, public opinion – both of which were needed to bring social and political change. Leaders developed comprehensive strategies for breaking through the traditional news gatekeepers to garner coverage of school desegregation, protests, sit-ins, and police violence. This coverage provided a visual representation of racism for white audiences (Bodroghkozy 2013). The CRM utilized their alternative public sphere to navigate and negotiate with the traditional news media.

The ongoing intersection of race and the traditional news media remains contentious. (Bleich, Bloemraad and de Graauw 2015). Racial minorities comprise 12.37 per cent (versus 37 per cent of the general population) of newsroom employees (Gold 2013). Further, “The Radio Television Digital News Association (RTDNA)’s 2012 diversity study reports that 86 per cent of television news directors and 91.3 per cent of radio news directors are Caucasian (Gold 2013: par. 10). “The lack of representation is one of many issues demonstrating this contentious relationship. Another is coverage. Coverage of African-Americans promotes a racial hierarchy, emphasizes black criminal activity, and portrays black citizens as a threat to order (Entman and Rojecki 2000; Gilliam and Iyengar 2000). These representations influence the perception of African-Americans in the public sphere and,

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thus, decision-making on issue related to black individuals and the black community (Gilliam and Iyengar 2000). This reality results in an ongoing need for African-Americans to operate alternative publics in order to create venues for discussion and social change.

Social change is often driven through community organizing and the internet provides a new means for community organizing and community building utilizing the methods of Saul Alinsky. Politicians were some of the earliest to latch on to online community organizing. Howard Dean in the 2004 United States presidential race and Barack Obama in the 2008 race used the internet to build a coalition of disparate individuals looking to facilitate widespread social change across the country. Through community organizing techniques focused on cooperation, message building and creating power through numbers (e.g. Obama utilized vast amounts of small, individual donations as a key message of his campaign), the internet served as a foundation for electing the first black President (Castells 2009).

Historical role of the press in the African-American community

Media outlets targeting an African-American audience are an important component of American history. From newspapers like *The Chicago Defender* calling for southern blacks to leave the segregated south (a pivotal part of the Great Migration) to the creation of black-oriented magazines (e.g. Ebony) and television stations (e.g. Black Entertainment Television), traditional media has helped the African-American community communicate and report on information through the lens of the black community for the black community (Squires 2002).

Whether produced by a club, a church, or an independent businessperson, all black newspapers share the same specialty: coverage of local and national events that have been often misrepresented or ignored by the mainstream white press. Research on racial violence, voting, civil rights, education, poverty, and social welfare benefits enormously by utilizing black newspapers (Danky 2001: 78-79).

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In the late 1700s, free African-Americans in the northeast published pamphlets transcribing the proceedings of African-American events and meetings as well as the history of Africa and African peoples. These pamphlets represent the beginning of the African-American media counter public (Brooks 2005). Pamphlets transitioned to newspapers, journals, and other more intensive forms of journalism.

Beginning with an anti-slavery publication, the black press *Freedom Journal* created a sphere for discussion and action related to issues impacting the black community. *Freedom Journal* was instrumental in increasing the support for the abolitionist movement in the northeast (Chavis 2015). The black press not only attacked issues, but also the way in which African-Americans were (and are) presented in the mainstream media.

For example, some mainstream papers used to write the word black in parenthesis, next to the name of anyone black, mentioned in their pages. The Defender and other black papers responded to this, by putting the word white in parenthesis, next to the name of anyone white, who was mentioned in his paper (Hubbard 1999: par. 9).

In its hay day, *The Chicago Defender* had a circulation of over 200,000 (Hubbard 1999). These newspapers alongside other forms of media production – art, music, literature – spearheaded the African-American counterpublic (Squires 2002). The integration of mass media with creative outlets is related heavily to the historical methods of discourse utilized by slaves in the American south – dance, song, oral storytelling (Thompson 1993). Southern states also produced several black media sources. In Mississippi, for example, since reconstruction, African-Americans have started more than “fifty magazines and several hundred newspapers” (Thompson 1993: xi).

With the desegregation of the 1960s, newsrooms also began to see the need for diverse perspectives and as a result began to hire more black reporters and journalists. This contributed to a decline in circulation for many newspapers in the black press as talent began to integrate with the mainstream media (Hubbard 1999). African-Americans were now able to read and watch stories told by African-Americans in the *New York Times* or on *CBS News*. That integration, however, did

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not necessarily come (and most agree it did not come) with any substantial change to the actual prioritization or framing of issues within the mainstream sphere. At the same time, the black press was becoming more comprehensive and focused on meeting the diverse needs of African-American consumers. Niche magazines related to music, gaming, romance, health etc. were now available (Jacobs 2000). The black audience became a powerful monetary force with respect to media consumption.

Squires (2009) points out that it is important to look at the historical and contemporary ways in which African-Americans not only participate as media creators but as an audience of the mass media. The power of the black audience is an important component in the development and structure of the black media and the mainstream media. The black audience has been a powerful force in demanding representation visually across media outlets, and provides ongoing critiques of black representation by holding black media creators accountable for the ways in which they yield their power (for example, through the controversy and subsequent cancellation of *Sorority Girls* on VH1 in 2015). Black media leaders like filmmaker Spike Lee have been instrumental in facilitating conversations on the issues facing Black Americans through producing controversial films that have been noticed in popular news and culture (e.g. *Jungle Fever* [1991], and *Do the Right Thing* [1989]) (Jacobs 2000).

The need for these alternative spheres in African-American communities was, and continues to be, clear – the way in which societal norms, values, and experiences are manifested is clearly linked to, amongst other things, one's ethnic identity. Further, the prioritization of issues and the framing of those issues are tied to ethnic identity. As a result, minority communities must find a sphere through which they can present their perspectives.

The modern mass media, through the diversification of sources (i.e. multiple news channels), has the capacity to potentially create alternative public spheres (subaltern counterpublics). The presentation of news, in a variety of forms with a diversity of emphases (what and who the stories focus on) can set very different parameters for public debate. As a result, the audience of one news program can come away



understanding a public issue in a strikingly different way from the audience of another news program.

Historically, the American mass news media disseminated information to the public through a one-way exchange. With the rise of online communication streams that exchange of information has changed. Information now also flows from online sources to the mass news media – a two-way exchange. Online news sources are a key component of the media’s information sphere. This change is evident as journalists at traditional outlets (*CNN*, *CBS*, *New York Times*) utilize blogging and microblogging platforms to provide information and communicate with the public (and the public with them). Some observers applaud this change as it opens the door for increased, independent voices to enter the dominant public sphere. Strong communities of groups historically mis- and/or under- represented in the traditional news media have begun to find a voice online – such as the popularly termed “Black Twitter”. Questions remain, however, on the extent to which the new two-way information exchange has created actual avenues for alternative voices to enter the public sphere, particularly those outside the dominant culture. This is particularly important as it relates to the black blogosphere in the United States.

THE BLACK BLOGOSPHERE

The black blogosphere is composed of black blogs, Twitter accounts, message boards, and news sites focused on not only issues of particular relevance to black individuals but also told by black individuals. These blogs are largely independent but some also have affiliation with traditional news sites (such as *The Root*, *MSNBC*, *Black Voices*, and the *Huffington Post*).

The Obama era brings with it the theoretical philosophy of a post-racial America. With the election of President Obama, the United States is perceived by the world as a society without racial discrimination and prejudice. However, the reality of racism across socio-political spaces is ever-present (Cantey 2013; Harrison 2012; Miller and Garran 2008). These dynamics are also reflected in mainstream

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media. For instance, Black Twitter is defined as a cultural identity on social media focused on issues of interest to the black community in the United States (Opam 2013). Yet, when asking 31 black bloggers what does it mean to be a “black blogger” no one response is the same. As one article noted, “The blogosphere is such a rich tapestry of voices, and as a Black blogger, you have the unique opportunity to add your voice to this growing chorus” (Marlee 2014). The blogosphere is a unique atmosphere that continues to expand and an expansion that offers a voice to race related issues while also providing a perspective that is reflective of one’s uniqueness irrespective of race and race related issues. Black blogger Marlee (2014) wrote,

being a Black blogger is not relevant because of the color of our skin, and it’s not unusual just because of our cultural underpinnings. Being a Black blogger is relevant because of the varying perspective we present to the online world, the unique experience we can share with our audience, and the trail we blaze for those who look to us as an example (Marlee 2014: conclusion).

The black blogosphere represents a digital entrepreneurship, a wave of the future for many (Brown 2015). This enterprise has elevated discourse about dating, love, pop culture, and current events (Sobze 2013; Pole 2005). To that end, the black blogosphere arguably mirrors many characteristics that are attributed to Black Twitter. These include a source for online activism and mobilization of black dialogue and a diversity of voices, which are reflective of the diversity in the larger black community. These characteristics directly inform the role of the black blogosphere. The question remains as to whether the black blogosphere is an alternative public sphere in the vision of Fraser (1992). Our chapter raises two primary questions. Does the black blogosphere offer an alternative sphere of information? Given the historical role of the black press in providing a space for black dialogue, how does the black blogosphere continue that legacy and how does it differ?



Researching the black blogosphere

In this chapter, we explore the commentary in the black blogosphere versus that in the traditional news media on the five biggest news stories of 2014. These news stories were selected by reviewing articles on the mainstream news sources of the *Washington Post*, *Reuters*, *New York Times*, *CNN*, *Yahoo News*, *The Guardian*, *ABC News*, *MSN* and *USA Today* as well as black blog sites *The Root*, *Black Agenda Report*, *The Grio*, *Code Switch*, *Black Commentator*, *Black Millennial Musings*, *Madame Noire*, *Black Youth Project*, and *Hue Wire*. The top stories of the year were selected based on lists compiled at the end of 2014 by news outlets based on web traffic and other media measurement tools. These stories include the Ferguson Grand Jury case, the Ebola Epidemic, Boko Haram, the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, and the Malaysian Airline disaster (MH 370)¹.

For each of the stories, we analyzed the content from three articles and/or blog posts from both the black blogosphere and the traditional news media. The articles were chosen by a random sample on Memeorandum – groups of articles representing each type (black blogosphere and mainstream news) were gathered and then were randomly selected for analysis. As a news aggregator, Memeorandum compiles the top stories of each day (auto generating new content every five minutes) and repopulates its website with news stories from a variety of online traditional news sites and blogs as they relate to those top stories. Top stories are determined by web traffic and news content coverage. Memeorandum’s archives allow a user to choose any day at any time during its history as a website and see the top news stories at that moment in history. For the purposes of this study, Memeorandum served as a starting point to search for a diverse array of mainstream news stories and black blogosphere stories on the top stories of 2014. Memeorandum focuses not only on traditional news sites but also the blogosphere when auto-generating content. News aggregators have and continue to play an increasing role in the media landscape particularly as sites like the *Drudge Report* and *Huffington Post* not only aggregate stories, but offer original material as well (Anderson 2011). News aggregators are cited as a new intermediary between the

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Tab. 1. *Story, source, and title of articles examined*

	Black blogosphere		Traditional news media	
STORY	SOURCE	ARTICLE TITLE	SOURCE	ARTICLE TITLE
Ferguson	The Grio	Let's not forget, we've overcome much worse than Ferguson	New York Times	Security in Ferguson Is Tightened After Night of Unrest
	Black Millennial Musings	7 Consequences from Darren Wilson Grand Jury Dismissal	CNN	Obama calls anger over Ferguson decision "understandable," but urges peace
	Code Switch	In Darren Wilson's Testimony, Familiar Themes About Black Men	ABC News	Buildings Burned, Businesses Trashed in Ferguson Protests
Ebola Epidemic	The Grio	Our ignorance of Africa is more dangerous than Ebola	NBC News	Majority of Americans Want Flights Banned From Ebola Countries: Survey
	Black Agenda Report	Africans Should Demand That US Do All It Can to Rid West Africa of Ebola	Washington Post	The ominous math of the Ebola epidemic
	The Root	#IamaLiberianNotavirus Goes Viral to Stop Ebola Stigmatization	New York Times	Death of Thomas Eric Duncan in Dallas Fuels Alarm Over Ebola



Tab. 1. (follows)

Boko Haram	The Root	Why I Can't Get Behind #Bring-BackOurGirls	New York Times	"Bring Back Our Girls"
	Black Agenda Report	Freedom Rider: How Not to "Bring Back our Girls"	CNN	Nigerians demand government do more to bring home kidnapped girls
	Black Youth Project	Hundreds of Nigerian girls kidnapped by terrorist group	CBS News	How call to rescue kidnapped Nigerian girls spread around the world

I/P	The Root	Is the Gaza Conflict Making Black Folks Uncomfortable?	Washington Post	Israel presses air assault as Hamas fires salvo of cross-border rockets
	Black Voices	Why The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Should Matter To Black Americans	USA Today	Death toll rises as Israel Escalates airstrikes
	Madame Noire	Israel or Palestine? Do Black People Have A Stake In the Conflict?	New York Times	Killing of Palestinian Youth Puts an Israeli Focus on Extremism

news and the reader; therefore, their role in compiling information is important when looking at media coverage (Balkin 2006; Lee and Chyi 2015). As with all news aggregators it is essential to understand the purpose of Memeorandum as all aggregators have a content focus. Memeorandum focuses on politics and current events (Cheney 2015; Stoddard 2015). For the purposes of this study, Memeorandum was

Tab. 1. (follows)

MH370	The Root	Men Who Used Stolen Passports on Missing Malaysia Flight Were Iranian, Not Black	CNN	US officials lean toward “those in the cockpit” behind missing flight
	Hue Wire	Malaysian Airlines Flight MH370 Search Team Detects “Pulse Signal”	Reuters	Exclusive: Radar data suggests missing Malaysia plane deliberately flown way off course – sources
	Black Youth Project	Update: lost Malaysia Airlines flight path altered by computer	New York Times	As US Looks for Terror Links in Plane Case, Malaysia Rejects Extensive Help

used as a starting point – Memeorandum provided an aggregation of potential sources that were, according to their generation method, the most popular of the time period. The specific stories for the study were selected to represent traditional news and black blogosphere diversity in sources, ownership types (corporations, mainstream media-affiliated, independent, group) and, in the case of the mainstream media, across the most popular news sites on the web.

Our exploration of the black blogosphere and the traditional news media led to the formulation of four main themes: *a)* the racial implications of news; *b)* mainstream media critique; *c)* a nuanced Africa; *d)* dominance of white western hegemony. These themes are discussed further below.

The black blogosphere created a forum to talk about the racial implications of these news stories

The black blogosphere provides insights to the role race plays in news stories and events. For example, during the Ebola outbreak, while traditional news outlets focused on the threat the disease posed to Americans and the potential of widespread infection, the black blogosphere asked questions regarding the international response and the coverage of the African outbreak as a byproduct of racial stereotypes. The black blogosphere was concerned about the role race played in spreading fear about the disease, lack of in-depth coverage of its impact (pre-United States outbreak), and in treatment options for those infected. Another example is the frank discussion on the black blogosphere regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; asking questions on the similarities between the Palestinian diaspora and African diaspora. The black blogosphere raised questions regarding the natural linkages Africans and African-Americans may have with the Palestinian state due to the shared history of colonialism, state-sponsored brutality and segregation, and exploitation. Dickerson (2014) highlighted the following statement from a young African-American student at Stanford University: “I think that first and foremost what’s important to note is that Israel is a colonial project and as black people, we have a tradition, a right, and an obligation to oppose colonial projects” (Dickerson 2014: par. 4).

The events in Ferguson led to many discussions on race relations across media outlets. The black blogosphere and traditional news outlets focused on the racial element in the death of Michael Brown as well as the reaction to his death. The black blogosphere did take these discussions further as the need to present “both sides” was largely thrown out the window; Darren Wilson was a murderer who was set free by a racist justice system and that decision was par for the course in American society given its racial history. The black blogosphere was, for the most part, void of any police justification stories – standing in sharp contrast to the traditional media.

The black blogosphere also responded to false narratives concerning black individuals. For example, it was briefly reported that at least

one of the MH370 hijackers was black (reported as resembling Italian soccer player Mario Balotelli). The black blogosphere specifically pushed back on that detail once new potential storylines emerged (pilot-lead hijacking); thus, demonstrating the delicate role the media plays in reporting stories with racial elements. Overall, the black blogosphere provided a space for the racial elements of news stories – those with obvious implications for black Americans (Ferguson) and those with less obvious associations (Israeli-Palestinian conflict).

Critique of the mainstream media plays a large role in the black blogosphere

Given both the lack of and indifference to reflective discussions regarding race in traditional news outlets, it is not surprising that much discussion in the black blogosphere is a critique of traditional news coverage. The emphasis on critique is very similar to other alternative news spaces. For example, African online forums have been created to “fight” the messages received via independent and state-sponsored traditional news stations across the continent (Moyo 2011). Moreover, lower power FM radio stations in the United States have been used to reach communities (largely minority) left out of and/or perspectives underrepresented in many mainstream news stories (Markels 1999). Online news sites from a variety of ideological perspectives have started to provide these alternative spaces (e.g. Red State, Daily Kos). Stories on these sites, including the black blogosphere, are often written as if to fill in the missing details and ideas left out of traditional news reporting (see aforementioned MH370 black suspect story). Filling in the gaps is a role that many alternative news streams play or believe they play. Conservative and progressive blogs, for example, also critique the traditional media due to bias and lack of coverage (Levi 2007; Davis 2008; Meraz 2009).

For example, with reference to the #bringbackourgirls campaign against Boko Haram, one article discussed the lack of effectiveness that these campaigns had – in particular for so-called black causes (e.g. KONY, Zimmerman). Despite the success the black blogosphere had

in getting attention for specific issues, the results were largely the same – nothing changed. Online activism, while nice, was detrimental as people felt accomplished for Tweeting, not doing. In other words, individuals were active in Tweeting (creating online content) but did not actively become engaged beyond the internet to create change through policy advocacy or community service. Further Lovell (2014) writes,

I'm concerned that this cause – the value of the lives of girls – is now being even further diluted, with the Twitter discussion veering off into a debate about who deserves the credit for the first #bringbackourgirls tweet. No one deserves credit until the girls are safely home. And credit should be the furthest thing from anyone's mind (Lovell 2014: par. 12).

The traditional news media did little to discuss the actual potential impact of the campaign beyond the role of Michelle Obama and other celebrities and the process by which the campaign itself had spread. The black blogosphere was served to “fill the gaps” in the discussion by discussing the value of the #bringbackourgirls campaign as a substitute for active, engaged involvement.

The Ebola outbreak also served as another case wherein the traditional news narrative was critiqued by the black blogosphere. The hyper focus on the American impact (versus the much deadlier African impact) and the associated lack of knowledge demonstrated in regards to the African continent by the traditional media were both criticized: “With it [Ebola fear] comes misinformation, stigmatizing and the vilifying of an entire region and people. The media is especially complicit in that process, as reporters do the most with the absolute least” (Ajayi 2014: par. 7).

Another example which emerged was the coverage of the Ferguson protests. The black blogosphere provided alternative narratives for following the protests; while traditional news largely focused on the “safety” aspect of the protests – emphasizing the degrees of violent incidents occurring in the city and where those incidents were located. *ABC News*, for example, spent a majority of their time discussing fires, shootings, and arrests. This contrasted sharply with the “protest” and

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“justice” narratives that were displayed across the black blogosphere. Boswell (2014) thoroughly points out the historic and contemporary imagery of black men displayed by pop culture and the news media, the effect/s of that coverage on societal perceptions of black men (e.g. hyper masculine, violent, out of control), and the relationship between the imagery, police violence, and justice. The black blogosphere spent time and space countering the looting and violence narratives by finding space for the social aspect of these brutality incidents and the consequences therein:

We saw how quickly news outlets and law enforcement were keen on describing Mike Brown as a superhuman thugged-out criminal, pulling his school record and other character traits unrelated to his dead, unarmed body. We saw how the journalistic narrative was not focused on the rapid militarization of local police, but on peaceful protestors whose anger is justified (blackmillennials 2014: par. 6).

The black blogosphere gives more nuances in reporting about Africa

Much of the media critique referenced in our second theme relates to reporting about Africa, its people, its diverse countries and the methods in which traditional media outlets fail to appreciate that diversity. Too often, especially in discussions about sub-Saharan Africa, the continent is treated as a monolith. During the Ebola outbreak, the black blogosphere discussed the stereotypes being perpetuated about Liberians largely due to the American outbreak being started by Thomas Eric Duncan, a Liberian citizen visiting the United States. Liberians felt compelled to start the #IamaLiberiannotaVirus hashtag to avoid harsh generalizations and the othering of a country and, too often, a continent. The black blogosphere is specifically concerned about the stereotyping of Africa and Africans; thus, leading to a more in-depth discussion of the continent especially when issues related to American events involve Africa and Africans. Black blogs offer alternative perspectives.

Kimberly (2014) pointedly critiques the general lack of knowledge in the west regarding the political histories of African countries and the role of western nations in helping establish those histories. She argues that this coupled with the lack of ongoing, comprehensive coverage of issues like Boko Haram, the traditional American news media is complicit in perpetuating stereotypes of Africans as savage peoples living in unstable countries with governments unwilling to help make needed changes. Conversely, the black blogosphere has more honest discussion about the issues in Africa. For example, in a story regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Ball (2014) discussed the unique perspectives of African citizens and the relationship between Muslims and Christians on the African continent. The division between identifying as a diaspora (akin to the Palestinian) people and sympathizing with Israel as a non-Muslim nation in the Middle East is a nuanced discussion across Africa. The nuance in perspective is reflected in the writing inclusive of real African opinions. It is important to note that in the traditional news articles regarding the conflict discussion of regional impact failed to mention Africa beyond Egypt.

The traditional news media largely ignores race and, by doing so, falls into white western hegemony

The black blogosphere was quick to investigate the rumor that there were black terrorists on the MH370 flight because the black blogosphere was concerned about the implications. The traditional news media has the luxury and privilege to report events without worrying about the racial implications of said reporting. Much has been written (Chiricos and Eschholz 2002; Kinney 2005; Wing 2014) about the differences in reporting when the subject is a white versus black person (such as the coverage of post-Katrina New Orleans and the much discussed “looting” blacks and “finding supplies” whites; see also Macomber, Rusche and Wright 2010) but the response to that critique has not been to discuss the reasons behind the differences but fall into the trap of “both sides” reporting. Over the past twenty years there has been a large push to present both sides of an issue to avoid

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the appearance of bias – the false balance (Montopoli 2004; Doran and Zimmerman 2009). In cases like Ferguson this leads to discussions which, due to the hegemonic values in American society, implicitly create more problems for blacks than whites. The black blogosphere is a means of pushing back against those ideas. Examples of pushing back include countering the paranoia over Ebola in the United States (and the black African component of that paranoia) and the “feel good” participation in #bringbackourgirls (lack of real attempts to save black Africans suffering from terrorism). The clear racial dimensions of these media narratives on the black blogosphere stood in sharp contrast to the traditional news stories.

The Ebola story and the hysteria over the disease reaching the shores of the United States resulted in a mobilization of the black blogosphere to participate in the #iamaLiberiannotavirus campaign as well as create stories discussing the racial dynamic at play in the fear the Western world displays over African diseases. The racial component of the fear, according to the black blogosphere, was clear while the traditional news media largely ignored the implication that the hysteria was linked to race. Despite the disease having resulted in many deaths in west Africa over the previous nine months, once it reached the American mainland, the disease not only needed to be stopped but stopped at the source through control: “In fact, the US response, which was to first send troops, is indicative of what is really important to the US and the West: conquest and control, not compassion and care” (Reeves 2014: par. 1). Further, the black blogosphere prominently discussed the role race played in the lack of immediate treatment and urgent given to Thomas Eric Duncan at Dallas area hospitals. The lack of protocol was discussed in traditional news outlets but not the role race may have played in that lack of care. Concerns in the traditional news media were of policy not race and survival.

The black blogosphere has similarities and differences with its historical black press counterparts. Like the historical black press, the black blogosphere offers a space through which black voices direct, guide, and push the conversation. Moreover, the black blogosphere has also been instrumental in pushing beyond discussion to more wide scale coverage and action on issues important to the black community

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(Pole 2010; Payton and Kvasny 2012). Conversely, the black blogosphere does often fall (not always – see Ferguson) into the contemporary trap of promoting “slactivism” – engagement equals a tweet or an angry email not moving 1,000 miles to escape Jim Crow or marching on Washington – advocacy efforts have become less active (Butler 2011). The black blogosphere is also similar to the historical black press in that it has a complicated relationship with the mainstream media. Black blogs are often housed on mainstream media websites and black bloggers are often guests on traditional mainstream media programs. The difference lies in the size, scope, talent base and diversity of the black blogosphere with respect to its contributor base. Not everyone could write for the *Chicago Defender* and the vast majority of Black Twitter contributors are not going to leave Twitter for the *New York Times* (and even then they would still be Tweeting). Anyone can participate in Black Twitter.

CONCLUSION

The Black blogosphere provides a forum through which black individuals can create messages and report on news stories from a cultural perspective outside of mainstream white interpretations. While the Black blogosphere provides an alternate sphere for cultural discussions, much of the discussion of the news remains tied to the behavior and messaging of the mainstream news outlets. What are the mainstream news outlets covering? What are they not covering? How can our message get across? There are successful cases of the mainstream news tackling issues brought forward by the Black blogosphere. Questions remain, however, on the extent to which the power of the Black blogosphere can successfully help it enter the mainstream as its own voice or, more fundamentally, if it wants to. Analysis suggests that the black blogosphere reconfigures the representation of black individuals, the black community, and the black diaspora through a consistent engagement with and challenge to the media and its presentation of issues. The need to actively engage in this re-representation speaks to the need for the black media sphere in modern society.

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As Jacobs (2005) suggests, counterpublics often attempt to find a balance between the maintenance of cultural autonomy through an alternative media sphere (e.g. black blogosphere) and full integration with the larger, dominant media sphere (traditional news) to gain power and influence. The black blogosphere attempts to maintain that balance by interacting with the traditional news media (Ferguson, Ebola) to fight for representation while also maintaining a strong base of intercultural discussions focused on issues specifically pertinent to the black community (e.g. relationship between the Palestinian diaspora and the African diaspora). The internet as a meeting space for the black community builds on a legacy of black churches, newspapers, magazines, and other forms of black-oriented media. The need to formulate an alternative is similar to the reason freed slaves met in churches across Richmond in the post-Civil War era; the black community is marginalized and the traditional media plays a key role in fostering that marginalization through their reporting on black individuals, neighborhoods, and nations. The black blogosphere is an influential part of the larger black media sphere – one that continues to grow, change, and self-examine its purpose in that sphere.

NOTES

¹ The Ferguson Grand Jury story refers to the indictment decision on the shooting death 18 year-old African-American Michael Brown by Ferguson Police Office Darren Wilson on August 9, 2014. The decision not to indict Office Wilson was announced on November 24, 2014. Following the announcement, non-violent and violent protests took place in Ferguson and across the nation. The Ebola Epidemic refers to the beginning of the cases treated in the United States. On September 30, 2014 Thomas Eric Duncan was diagnosed with Ebola at Texas Presbyterian Hospital in Dallas, Texas. Duncan, a citizen of Liberia, was visiting family in the Dallas area when he started displaying symptoms of the disease. Duncan died on October 8, 2014. Two nurses who treated Duncan were also diagnosed with Ebola; both survived. Boko Haram is a terrorist organization operating out of Nigeria. On April 15th, 273 school girls (ages 12-17) were kidnapped by Boko Haram from the Chibok Government Secondary School in Chibok, Nigeria. Following the kidnapping an online movement was launched using the hashtag #bring-backourgirls in an effort to raise awareness of the kidnapping and to push for a resolution to the incident. On June 30, 2014 the bodies of three missing Israeli missing teens were found and determined to have been murdered by neighboring Palestinians. In retaliation Israel began launching airstrikes (Operation Protective Edge) into Gaza on July 8, 2014. This was the latest

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in the decades long conflict. For the purposes of this paper we will be reviewing articles for the week following the launch of the airstrikes. On March 8, 2014 Malaysia Airlines flight 370 from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing went missing. For the weeks that followed an international coalition of search and rescue services scoured the surrounding oceans and seas looking for wreckage of the missing flight. Despite these exhaustive efforts to date no wreckage has been found.

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