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# Content, Interaction and Media Portrayal of Violence against African Americans in Mainstream and Citizen Journalism

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Content, Interaction and Media Portrayal of Violence against African Americans  
in Mainstream and Citizen Journalism

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### **Abstract**

This content analysis centers on a comparison of reporting content between mainstream print media and citizen journalism, pertaining to high-publicity deaths of African American individuals caused by police officers. The deaths focused upon in this paper include Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York; Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio; and Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland. For the purposes of this paper, the mainstream print outlets examined are The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and USA Today. Advanced Twitter searches using the Topsy search engine have been utilized to document citizen journalism reports. Through constructed week sampling and the examination of 51 articles and 1302 tweets, it was found that mainstream media generally reports on incidents before citizen journalists, and that the interaction between citizen journalists using Twitter and the mainstream media is extremely sparse.

### **Introduction**

This academic paper was undertaken as a way to compile the work accomplished and knowledge acquired over the course of three and a half years of undergraduate study. This work is significant considering the current state of domestic American reporting and the fact that stories of the deaths of unarmed black men are reported on nearly every day. Some of these stories receive very little attention, but others have been thrust into the limelight, inciting intense emotions in the American people. These incidents are not just reported on by traditional journalists as part of the mainstream media, but also by citizen journalists through the use of internet media. Methods and content tend to vary between the mainstream news media and citizen journalism, although previous research on this is sparse at best. By studying the similarities and differences between mainstream and citizen reporting of these incidents, a greater understanding of what the similarities and differences occur may be found. Considering the fact that this is a topic rocking American society today, it is crucial to know what is contained in the contents of both mainstream and citizen journalisms and how they interact with one another.

### **Literature Review**

The last few years have been largely characterized by an increase in articles pertaining to violence against African American individuals by police officers. These incidents have not gone unnoticed by the media, but recently many cases have been thrust into the national spotlight due to public attention. Mainstream media have published reports regarding the deaths of several unarmed Black civilians, such as Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner and many more. However, many of these incidents might have gone unnoticed

without the presence of citizen journalists who provided documentation through video, audio and reports on social media. Reminiscent of the attack on Rodney King in 1991, wherein a bystander took video footage of police officers beating King in Los Angeles, many of these incidents grabbed the attention of citizens. However, the means of informing citizens changed after 1995, when the widespread adoption of the World Wide Web made it possible for increasing numbers of citizens to use social media and blog posts to inform the world.

However, many times there may be discrepancies between citizen and professional journalism reporting content and portrayal of incidents. This literature review seeks to examine the uses and practices of citizen journalism in contrast to traditional journalism, as well as its relation to reports of the deaths of African Americans at the hands of the police.

Traditional journalism practices are normally based in the principle of objectivity, or the concept that emotions and opinions remain separate from factual reporting. The Code of Ethics of The Society of Professional Journalists states that traditional journalists should “seek the truth and report it” (The Society of Professional Journalists 2014). Part of this entails “label[ing] advocacy and commentary” and avoiding “deliberately distort[ing] facts or context” (The Society of Professional Journalists 2014). However, an influx of technology in recent years has brought rise to citizen journalism, a new trend in reporting wherein individuals who are not necessarily trained in journalistic practices use social media, blogs or other outlets to report an incident or event. Blaagaard (2013) characterizes citizen journalism by its affectivity, or its association with emotions, and adds that it is “subjective and contextual” (p. 187). Despite this association, citizen journalism is not considered the antithesis of traditional journalism, but rather an alternative. Blaagaard indicates that citizen journalists are largely criticized due to their lack of professional training, but when looked at as a tool rather than a profession, “the passions

portrayed in citizen journalism can provide swift access to the personal space and convictions to the public” (p. 191). To explain, the emotions, although displaying affectivity, also engage readers.

In conjunction with this, Carpenter (2008) notes, “journalists should strive to unite their communities by representing all groups” (p. 531). Carpenter suggests that, because citizen journalists are not “subject to the same constraints” as professionals, they are able to offer “diverse content” (p. 532). Often, when covering issues that are local to them, even if it is regarding a topic that attracts national attention, citizen journalists are able to contact unique sources of which traditional journalists may not know (p. 24), according to Watson (2012).

Blaagaard (2013) divides participation in citizen journalism into three groups, one of which is deemed “crisis reporting” (p. 194). This type of citizen journalism is defined by “ordinary citizens using the web [which has] fostered a heightened sense of personal engagement for ‘us’ with the distant suffering of ‘them’” (194). People who are on the scene of important events and incidents gather information in a manner much different than traditional journalists are the ones who often initiate crisis reporting.

In their article, Johnson and Wiedenbeck (2014) classify citizen journalism into different categories than those of Blaagaard. These may include readers commenting on articles that have already been posted, or mainstream news websites designating a specific page for citizens to post their own stories (p. 332). However, Blaagaard emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between traditional and citizen journalism; those who partake in citizen journalism are unlikely to receive a far-reaching audience without the aid of mainstream media (p. 190). This is further emphasized by Watson, who states that citizen journalists who utilize blogging as their primary platform

“rely on the traditional media for ninety-nine percent of their sources,” such as information from The New York Times and The Washington Post (p. 22).

According to Johnson and Wiedenbeck (2014), the credibility of social media posts may be called into question due to an author’s lack of professional training. This may be due to a difference in publishing processes. Traditional journalism outlets tend to use a “filter-then-publish” method, according to Johnson and Wiedenbeck (p. 335), wherein information and articles are edited before being published. On many websites encouraging participation in citizen journalism, the “publish-then-filter” model is used, wherein content is published upon its reception and edited later if needed (p. 335). Citizen journalists may aid their credibility by providing information about themselves and the sources they use in their articles (p. 336). However, citizen journalism is not the only form of news media with credibility issues. In 2014, only fifty percent of people surveyed in a Pew poll felt that ABC News and NBC News were credible and trustworthy sources; similarly, only forty-six percent of people felt that CBS News was a credible source. (Mitchel 2014).

A primary case of social media prominence in relation to the death of an unarmed black individual centered on Michael Brown, a eighteen-year-old who was shot and killed by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri in August of 2014. This event was not immediately picked up by vast amounts of people using social media; rather, bystanders and witnesses utilized Twitter, Facebook and blogging to inform the world of the goings-on in Ferguson, as described by Yarimar Bonilla of Reuters University and Johnathan Rosa of the University of Massachusetts Amherst. They liken Brown’s death and subsequent protests to the attack of Rodney King, lauding it as “one of the most influential examples of citizen journalism in the United States” (p. 5). Unlike the Rodney King incident, video was not taken to document the

attack on Brown. That said, witnesses were able to verbally document the scene and the “direct aftermath” through social media posts (p. 5). Due to one witness on the scene of King’s brutal beating, the world became aware of excessive police violence. Similarly, after the shooting of Michael Brown, locals began utilizing Twitter to spread information; subsequently, peaceful protests that metamorphosed into violent riots—many of which were arranged on Twitter—ensued. Harris (2015) calls these protests “a multiracial, multigenerational movement asserting black humanity in response to racist police killings and vigilante violence” (p. 34). Within a week of Brown’s death, “3.6 million posts appeared on Twitter documenting and reflection on the emerging details surrounding Michael Brown’s death,” and by the end of August, the hashtag “#Ferguson’ had appeared more than eight million times on the Twitter platform” (p. 5). Initially, the hashtag was utilized to “[call] attention to an underreported incident of police brutality;” however, as it was used it eventually began to “trend” nationally, solidifying its importance as a nationally-regarded incident (p. 7). Harris remarks that social media serve not only as “a tool for mobilization,” but as well as a “documentary tool” for organizing and documenting protests (p. 35). As a result, there has been a “bottom-up insurgency led by ordinary people,” as opposed to the civil rights movement of the 1960s that relied on a top-down approach stemming from leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson (p. 36).

Of course, citizen journalism is not the only form of reporting that has covered these instances of violence against African American individuals. William Freivogel’s (2015) *Gateway Journalism Review* article, “Four Pinocchios for ‘Hands Up;’ Time to own up, editor says,” discusses the concept of myths in the mainstream media, such as that of the phrase, “hands up, don’t shoot.” Freivogel indicates that St. Louis’ KTVI station used information from two



unreliable witnesses who said that Michael Brown was holding his hands up over his head when he was shot and killed by officer Darren Wilson (Freivogel 2015a, n.p.). In turn, MSNBC began using the information from this report in its broadcast programming, only to find out after the fact it was false information (Freivogel 2015a, n.p.). Despite this, the phrase, “hands up, don’t shoot” spread like wildfire, becoming the mantra for protests that ensued following Brown’s death. Freivogel (2015b, n.p.) discusses this in another article, entitled, “One year later: Media ignore their Ferguson failures.” In this article, Freivogel states that, not only did MSNBC use the previously aforementioned false information from KTVI, but hosts Chris Hayes and Lawrence O’Donnell “threw fuel on the fire with biased reporting” (Freivogel 2015b, n.p.).

This was not the only mistake made in terms of reporting by the mainstream media. Anarchist activist Anonymous “misidentified the police shooter and the shooter’s police department,” and “The New York Times committed journalistic malpractice by naming the street that Wilson lived on and then refusing to admit its mistake” (Freivogel 2015, n.p.). A third article by Freivogel (2014), entitled, “The myths of Ferguson’s media coverage” discusses how many reports strayed from the central issues of the incident in Ferguson, choosing instead to focus “on the sexy images of tear gas, rubber bullets, etc.” (Freivogel 2014, n.p.). Additionally, several outlets, such as The New York Times, chose to “suggest there is a ring of angry black communities surrounding St. Louis,” which is “greatly exaggerated.” (Freivogel 2014, n.p.). There is, furthermore, an issue of omission. While Brown was not carrying a firearm—a fact that was reported by most outlets—witness and police officers report he did fight with Wilson over his sidearm, which was largely omitted by most outlets (Freivogel 2014 n.p.). This is confirmed by Kilgo, Mourau and Silvie (2015), also writing in the Gateway Journalism Review, who found that many articles by mainstream news outlets opted to focus on “the negativity of rioting and

confrontation, and giving less attention to the demands and grievances of protesters” (Kilgo et.al., 2015, n.p.). Additionally, “one-third of the coverage emphasized rioting and unrest, while a similar proportion of articles emphasized police-protestor confrontation, police arrests and portrayed protestors as combatants” (n.p.). Thus, while citizen journalism may have its faults in reporting, mainstream media is not free of these either.

Little research has been done concerning the interactions between mainstream and citizen journalism reporting tactics in relation to police violence against African American individuals. That said, it is feasible to examine the tactics of each type of media. Mainstream journalism is based on the principle of objectivity and employs individuals who have been trained to report under certain ethical guidelines (The Society of Professional Journalists 2014). Meanwhile, citizen journalism does not carry the same standards (Blaagard 2013). Generally, those who partake in this media are untrained in traditional journalistic standards. However, the subjectivity and affectivity associated with citizen journalism may allow for more diverse content to be spread to the public. Despite a lack of objectivity, mainstream media may take notice of trending topics in citizen journalism through social media, as was the case for the death of Michael Brown. This study attempts to document similar interactions, though focuses more on Twitter users interaction with mainstream news articles, as well as which group reports content first: citizen journalists or traditional journalists.

### **Research Questions**

For the purposes of this academic paper, two research questions were investigated.

1. Which grouping breaks news first, mainstream news outlets or citizen journalists using Twitter?

2. What interaction, if any, is there between the most relevant tweets and mainstream news articles?

### **Methods**

In conducting this research, four high profile African American deaths were examined: those of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice and Freddie Gray, as aforementioned. The killings of these individuals are the focus of the reporting examined in this paper. In doing so, three newspapers were selected based on circulation in 2014, USA Today, the most circulated newspaper in America; The Wall Street Journal, the second-most circulated; and The New York Times, the third-most circulated. (Beaujon, 2014). To organize the data analysis, a constructed week was determined for each individual's death, starting with the day each one was killed. As a result, this constructed week covered a span of seven weeks. Blogs, editorials and letters to the editor were excluded on the basis of opinionated content. The Factiva database was used to collect these articles, using solely the names of the victims. This process resulted in the examination of fifty-one articles.

Constructed week sampling was utilized for this research due to its efficiency and reliability. Hester and Dougall (2007) note that it "is more efficient than simple random sampling or consecutive day sampling" (811). This holds true particularly for large samples wherein between two and five constructed weeks are examined, and analyzed (820). This reinforces the use of the constructed week sampling method for the purposes of this research paper, as four constructed weeks were examined.

To obtain tweets, the search engine Topsy was utilized. Topsy allows users to search Twitter archives dating back to 2006, when the first tweet was posted on the social medium (Goel 2013). Searches were conducted similarly to the searches for the articles, wherein solely

the names of the victims were used. Tweets from the day of each person's death, as well as tweets from the days before the days used in the constructed week, were used. For the day of each individual's death, all tweets from the entire day were collected. However, to avoid having to examine an impossibly excessive amount of tweets, however, tweets gathered on all other days were only collected from 12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. This provided an afternoon hour and an evening hour to be examined. A morning hour was excluded from examination because many mainstream media outlets tweet in the morning and since civilian tweets were the focus, the inclusion of mainstream media tweets would have skewed the sample. When searching Topsy, the 100 most relevant tweets were brought up, based on "retweets and the past influence of the tweeter," as well as "how much a particular piece of content is being cited by other people" (Goel 2014). The first thirty tweets of each search were used for this research, due to time constraints of finding the tweets, coding them, and comparing them to articles pertaining to the same subject. If fewer than thirty were available for time and day being searched, then all of the tweets in that search were used. This process resulted in 1,302 tweets being examined. Although this was the amount of tweets that were individually examined, approximately 5,200 were initially collected to determine common themes for the purposes of coding.

The articles and 1,302 tweets were coded in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for the three most common themes found among them. These were perceived police antagonism, protests, and community violence. Perceived police antagonism excludes mentions of the police merely killing the four victims, as this is not indicative of antagonism. However, mentions of "murder," "homicide," inflammatory terms such as "slay" or "massacre" and other similar terminologies were coded for perceived police antagonism. The category of peaceful protests included

mentions of that exact phrase, as well as any references to marches, rallies and similar happenings. As for community violence, this included mentions of rioting, looting, violent acts against police or other civilians, etcetera. In addition, each tweet was coded for links to mainstream media outlets or mentions of mainstream news article headlines. Also, if hashtags were included in the tweets, this was denoted as well.

Once articles and tweets were collected and coded, they were compared against each other to determine if the information in the tweets preceded the information in the mainstream news articles, or vice versa. Additionally, the coding was used to determine how many articles included links to mainstream media articles or direct mentions of mainstream news headlines.

### **Results**

In regard to the first research question, asking which group (mainstream news outlets or citizen journalists) breaks news first, the data shows that typically, the mainstream news media reported on incidents before citizen journalists. To detail particular example, the reporting of each group on each victim's day of death will be examined in detail.

On the day Eric Garner was killed, there were zero tweets. There was one article, published by The New York Times. On Michael Brown's day of death, there were seventeen tweets and zero articles; this is the one exception to citizen journalists breaking news prior to mainstream media. On the day Tamir Rice was killed, there were zero tweets and zero articles; the initial tweets came the day after his death from Cleveland local news stations and reporters, but not from citizen journalists. While it was not the largely distributed newspapers studied for the purposes of this research breaking the news, it was still professionally trained journalists. The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal reported on Tamir Rice's death two days after he died. USA Today did not report at all until December 16, 2014, nearly three weeks after his

death. As for Freddie Gray, there were zero tweets on the day of his death, and one article published by The Wall Street Journal.

Pertaining to the second research question regarding interaction between the most relevant tweets and mainstream news articles, there was very little interaction whatsoever. Out of the 1,302 tweets that were coded, only 146 included links to mainstream news articles or mentioned headlines; this accounts for 11.2 percent of tweets studied. Only eight tweets out of the 1,302 included links or headlines to the mainstream news outlets that were studied for this research, which accounts for 5.5 percent of tweets with any mainstream media links, and only 0.6 percent of tweets overall.

As a whole, the three primary themes examined appeared in the mainstream media outlets studied first, with the exception of the day of Michael Brown's death. In this case, tweets appeared detailing his death before reports appeared from The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and USA Today. Beyond this example, however, mainstream media reported on topics pertaining to the tweets prior to citizen journalists using Twitter.

Beyond the research questions, other interesting observations were made. Zero tweets studied contained all three themes of perceived police antagonism, peaceful protests and community violence; eleven articles contained all three themes. Of the articles studied, 70 percent included mentions of perceived police antagonism, compared to 26.6 percent of tweets that did. 52.9 percent of articles studied contained mentions of peaceful protests, whereas 11.4 percent of tweets detailed this theme. 43.1 percent of articles contained mentions of community violence, compared to 4.8 percent of tweets that did.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

Regarding the results of the first research question and each individual's day of death, several factors must be noted. Regarding Michael Brown, wherein there were 17 tweets and zero articles on the day of his death, this is likely due to the fact that Ferguson, Missouri is a very small town with little to no national recognition prior to Brown's death. Eric Garner was killed in Staten Island, New York; Tamir Rice was killed in Cleveland, Ohio; and Freddie Gray was killed in Baltimore, Maryland. These are largely urban metropolitan cities that are known throughout the country. Ferguson, Missouri does not have this in common with the rest. While smaller news media there may have reported on his death on the same day, it is logical that it would have taken the mainstream media longer to report on his death.

It is interesting to observe that there were zero tweets and reports on the death of Tamir Rice the day he died. It is reasonable that Cleveland local news stations were the first to tweet, but to see that it did not happen until the day after his death is considerable, as is the consideration that The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal waited two days to report, and that USA Today waited three weeks.

Additionally, it is interesting to consider that there were zero tweets and only one article published on the day of Freddie Gray's death. This is compelling due to the fact that Gray was injured by police and made comatose several days prior to his death. The media reported this, and there were some tweets about it as well. Despite this, on the day of his death, there was only one brief article published and no tweets from citizen journalists.

As for the observations noted outside the research questions, it is probable that the reason no tweets contained all three themes of perceived police antagonism, peaceful protests and community violence is due the fact that more content can be packed into an article versus a

tweet. Tweets are limited to 140 characters; articles do not have a limit. This likely also explains the fact that higher percentages of articles contained particular themes than the tweets.

However, a couple interesting aspects can be noted. 43.1 percent of articles contained themes of community violence compared to 4.8 percent of tweets that did. This is a considerable spread.

This may be because it is often community members that are tweeting, and they might perceive incidents differently than the mainstream media; the media may classify something as violent or exaggerated, whereas the community members do not. Conversely, the community may be understating its actions, whereas the media is not. Which is the truth remains to be seen, but this concept likely explains that spread in addition to the lack of limit on articles.

### **Limitations of this Study**

One limitation of this research is that there have not been similar projects published as of yet. As a result, the method used is very new, and morphed several times over the course of the idea, research and analysis contained in this paper. There are very few works to which to compare this one.

Time was also another massive constraint. This project was originally intended to cover other topics besides the deaths of African Americans at the hands of the police, including changes in American political policy and the “dark side” of citizen journalism, including the “whistle-blowing” acts of Edward Snowden and Julian Assange. However, it was not possible to cover these topics over the course of the semester. It was narrowed down to simply focus on the polarizing stories of deaths of African Americans. The research also originally included the deaths of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and Sandra Bland in 2015. However, not many articles were published about Bland, nor were there many tweets. As a result, Bland was eliminated from the sample. As for Martin, the Factiva database would not allow the collection of articles any older



than 2013. Martin was killed in 2012. Additionally, he was not killed by police, but rather a member of a gated community's neighborhood watch acting as a vigilante. These two factors combined resulted in the elimination of Martin from the sample.

Another limitation was the Topsy search engine itself. For each search, only 100 tweets maximum were retrieved. This was not a huge limitation for this research, as only the first thirty tweets were used for each search, but if this research were to be broadened, that would be a massive limitation. In the grand scheme of Twitter, 100 is an extremely tiny fraction of the amount of tweets posted within a certain time frame. In addition to this, Topsy has an extremely inefficient advanced search function that does not work quite like it is supposed to. For instance, when I searched using the phrase, "Michael Brown," it would pull up the tweets as expected. Many of these included the hashtag, "#Ferguson." However, if a boolean search was utilized to find tweets containing the phrase, "Michael Brown," and the hashtag, "#Ferguson," Topsy would not retrieve any tweets. This is a clear problem with the software itself that hindered the search process.

### **Conclusion**

It would not be wholly appropriate to use this study as a generalization for all media; clearly, a sample consisting of 1,302 tweets and fifty-one articles is very small, especially considering only three newspapers were examined. However, it still provided very interesting results for the purposes of this research project. Despite a rise in social media use by the public, the mainstream media still typically breaks news prior to citizen journalists utilizing Twitter. Additionally, most Twitter users tweeting about these incidents do not link to mainstream news articles or mention their headlines, which was also compelling to see. Taking into account the limited sample and results, this research serves as a starting block for further study. It would

perhaps be more appropriate for a team of people to code a much larger sample of tweets over a much longer period of time to get a more conclusive result. As research in this field progresses, it will be compelling to see what further observations were made.

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Appendix 1: Constructed weeks

Eric Garner

Thursday, July 17, 2014

Friday, July 25, 2014

Saturday, August 2, 2014

Sunday, August 10, 2014

Monday, August 18, 2014

Tuesday, August 26, 2014

Wednesday, September 3, 2014

Michael Brown

Saturday, August 9, 2014

Sunday, August 17, 2014

Monday, August 25, 2014

Tuesday, September 2, 2014

Wednesday, September 10, 2014

Thursday, September 18, 2014

Friday, September 26, 2014

Tamir Rice

Saturday, November 22, 2014

Sunday, November 30, 2014

Monday, December 8, 2014

Tuesday, December 16, 2014

Wednesday, December 24, 2014

Thursday, January 1, 2015

Friday, January 9, 2015

Freddie Gray

Sunday, April 19, 2015

Monday, April 27, 2015

Tuesday, May 5, 2015

Wednesday, May 13, 2015

Thursday, May 21, 2015

Friday, May 29, 2015

Saturday, June 6, 2015