

WITNESSING GEORGE FLOYD

Tracing Black Mobile Journalism's Rise, Impact and Enduring Questions

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She lay awake many nights, apologizing to him.

As Darnella Frazier recounted to the jury tearfully, the teenager said she felt powerless to help George Floyd on May 25, 2020, when Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on his neck for nearly ten minutes. All Frazier could do, she said, was take out her smartphone and press 'record'. So she did. Her hand was steady. She offered no exclamations or play-by-play commentary. She simply bore witness. Frazier captured the 46-year-old Black man pleading for his mother while handcuffed on the ground. Floyd told Chauvin, who is White, that he could not breathe more than 20 times (Singh, 2020). As pedestrians stopped to observe the scene, they cried out for Chauvin to relent. Despite their pleas, Chauvin persisted. Floyd died on the asphalt. Later that day, Frazier went home and uploaded her video to Facebook. Within hours, it went viral. Black Lives Matter protests erupted in all 50 states across the US (Buchanan, Bui & Patel, 2020). Soon after, movements of solidarity sprang up around the globe (Poujoulat, 2020).

In the eventual April 2021 murder trial, the prosecuting attorney Jerry Blackwell referred to Mr. Floyd's bystanders as a "veritable bouquet of humanity" (Salter, 2021). When the jury decided that Chauvin was guilty on all three counts brought against him – of unintentional second-degree murder, third-degree murder, and second-degree manslaughter – some felt that justice had blossomed indeed (Wamsley, 2021). Pres. Joseph Biden said the rare verdict was due, in part, to "a brave young woman with a smartphone camera" (Treisman, 2021). Top US newspapers extolled praise in their headlines (Bogel-Burroughs & Fazio, 2021; Sullivan, 2021; Yancey-Bragg, 2021). Calls for Frazier to win a Pulitzer Prize even surfaced (Clark, 2021).

This landmark case of mobile journalism – or news created using only cell phones – has become an iconic example of how African Americans leveraged these devices to trouble the news production process. Before Darnella Frazier, African Americans also filmed the fatal police encounters of Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Walter Scott, and Freddie Gray. This tragic archive has inspired many other communities of color to emulate this communicative model. Indigenous activists filmed their standoffs with police during the #NoDAPL movement in 2016 (Hinzo & Clark, 2019). Latinx bystanders recorded the horrors of US Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids on its undocumented communities throughout Donald Trump's presidency (Helmores, 2019). Likewise, Asian Americans and Pacific

Islanders used cell phones to document rising hate crimes against them in 2020 (Tessler, Choi & Kao, 2020). All of these case studies beg the question: How did African American mobile journalism become the blueprint for marginalized peoples' political communication across the US? I offer the following field review in three parts. First, I explore how communication scholars' theories about mediated witnessing evolved in the last decade. Second, I share how Black peoples' use of the mobile device to document police brutality provided a brilliant, yet fraught, template for modern activism. Third, I explain how Black mobile journalism created counternarratives that challenged the journalism industry in the last decade, and presented scholars with a wealth of researchable questions.

Mobile Journalism as Bearing Witness

The rise of global smartphone ownership throughout the 2010s – and the growing sophistication of cellphone cameras – inspired a dynamic field of media witnessing research. Scholars throughout the decade investigated how poignant cellphone footage affected viewers, each searching for the most nuanced way to distinguish witnessing from onlooking. Some argued that media witnessing should be studied through an “archaic” religious frame, to consider how someone’s spirit changed as a result of what they saw (Blondheim & Liebes, 2009). Others argued that scholars should explore how mobile journalism “extends beyond seeing through practices of enacting responsibility” (Tait, 2011, p. 1220). These approaches suggested that there was labor involved (Chouliaraki, 2006; Ong, 2014; Ristovska, 2016). One was expected to *do* something after viewing an immersive piece of mobile journalism. The videographer, after all, had put their body in harm’s way to record “graphic testimony in a bid to produce feelings of political solidarity” (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014, p. 753).

Darnella Frazier faced this risk. Although she, too, could have been harmed physically by former officer Derek Chauvin (and scarred mentally by seeing a man die), she kept filming. Moreover, when people saw her footage, they were activated to participate in public dissent. This kind of galvanization defied established media witnessing theories, however, which argued that seeing an event secondhand weakened one’s emotional response to it (Frosh & Pinchevski, 2014). How could scholars make sense, then, of Black people flooding the streets in protest whenever they viewed a fatal police encounter of another Black person online? The rise of the Black Lives Matter movement necessitated an ethnocentric explanation. In 2017, I coined the term “Black witnessing,” to explain how African American mobile journalism birthed a distinct sub-genre of news reporting (Richardson, 2017, p. 673). It has three qualities. First, Black witnessing adopts a *sousveillant* gaze that challenges authority figures from below. Second, this kind of “connective witnessing” (Mortensen, 2015) stitches together current and historic testimonies from African Americans in various sub-communities, so that you are just as likely to hear from a working-class Black Twitter user as you would a Black celebrity on matters of social justice. Third, Black witnessing hacks any useful social media platform, such as Twitter, to create a vibrant, *ad-hoc* newsroom. In these digital spaces, movement-building often occurs.

Mobile Journalism as Black Movement-Building

The Black Lives Matter movement began in 2013, when a jury found George Zimmerman, who is White-passing, not guilty of killing Trayvon Martin, a Black teenager in Sanford, Fla. Alicia Garza, a labor organizer in Oakland, California, took to Facebook to express her

disappointment for the trial's outcome. She ended her post with three words: "Black lives matter." Her friend, Patrisse Cullors, added a hashtag in front of those words, and re-posted the message to Twitter (Garza, 2014). The #BlackLivesMatter hashtag gained prominence slowly. During the second half of 2013, #BlackLivesMatter appeared on Twitter 5,106 times, or about 30 times a day. When Michael Brown, Jr., another unarmed Black teenager, was killed in Ferguson, MO one year later, in August 2014, the hashtag went viral. It appeared an average of 58,747 times per day in the roughly three weeks following Brown's death (Anderson, 2016). When a grand jury in Ferguson decided not to indict Officer Darren Wilson for killing Brown in November 2014, the hashtag's use soared to 1.7 million times in the three weeks that followed. It has since remained a "continuous presence on Twitter," according to Pew Research Center, which has observed that its usage spikes when high-profile police brutality cases, like Mr. Floyd's, emerge (Anderson, Barthel, Perrin & Vogels, 2020).

Beyond the hashtags, African Americans used smartphones and Twitter to sustain the anti-police brutality campaign in real life, from 2014 to 2019 (Freelon et al., 2016; Richardson, 2020). It was, after all, a Black Twitter user named Emmanuel Freeman who broke the news that police shot Brown on Canfield Drive in 2014 (Richardson, 2017). When protests began in Ferguson – to oppose the fact that Brown's body remained uncovered on the sizzling summer asphalt for more than four hours – Twitter helped organizers find each other. Groups such as Millennial Activists United (Templeton, 2020) and We the Protesters (Mckesson et al., 2016) formed after its leaders met on Twitter. The groups mobilized rapidly to create some of the first nationwide databases of fatal police encounters and to help 2016 US Presidential hopefuls craft police reform platforms (Deshpande, 2019). During Pres. Barack Obama's time in office, he, too, invited Black mobile journalists to join his Task Force on 21st-Century Policing in 2015.

Hundreds of anti-police brutality groups either sprang up or expanded between 2014 and 2019, to fall under the eventual, sprawling banner of "The Movement for Black Lives." Black mobile journalism during the movement's first wave was urgent and poignant, since its organizers were working in an incredibly hostile space. The hashtags #AllLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter emerged as a counter to the Black-centered campaign in 2015 (Gallagher et al., 2018). Shortly thereafter, extremist violence against the movement began. Dyllan Roof, who is White, shot nine Black people in a South Carolina church in 2016, for example. White supremacists in Virginia led a two-day "Unite the Right" rally through their city in 2017, which ended abruptly after James Alex Fields, Jr., a purported neo-Nazi and white supremacist, rammed his car into a crowd of detractors, injuring several people and killing another (Caron, 2017).

When there were no high-profile cases of police brutality or anti-Black Lives Matter movement clashes making headline news, Black people continued to use their cellphones to film "everyday racism" (Essed, 1991). They interrogated what it meant not only to die due to the "fact of Blackness" (Hall, 1996) but what "#LivingWhileBlack" often meant (Williams, 2020). They filmed incidents of White people calling the police on them for selling lemonade (Levin, 2018); for attempting to enter their own apartment buildings (Gomez, 2018); for trying to barbecue in a California park (Williams, 2020); or for requesting that a dog be put on a leash in New York's famed Central Park (Maslin Nir, 2020). Some Black social media users remixed this kind of footage to spawn a new genre of "Karen" memes, in which they called attention to, and rejected "White women's surveillance and regulation of Black bodies in public spaces" (Williams, 2020). Communication innovations such as these represent the wide-ranging labor of 21st-century Black witnesses, who dared to glare back at white supremacy in ways that would have been deadly for their ancestors.

Mobile Journalism as Embodied Counternarrative

For the first time in American history, the mobile device allowed Black people in the 2010s to document atrocities against them in real-time. If one considers the three overlapping eras of domestic terror against Black people living in the US – which include slavery, lynching, and police brutality – this was not possible before. During slavery, those who were in bondage could not look, lest they too incur the wrath of their master. An iconic scene in the Academy Award-winning film *Twelve Years a Slave*, for example, depicts Solomon Northrup (played by Chiwetel Ejiofor) standing on his tiptoes as he tries not to be hanged. Other enslaved characters in the background continued their daily routines as they avoided him (McQueen, 2013). Looking in real-time was punishable.

As one progresses through time, to consider any number of the well-known lynching photographs of the 20th century, one does not observe Black people huddled in its margins (Allen, Als, Lewis & Litwack, 2000). African Americans commonly fled town en masse when large lynch mobs descended upon them (Waldrep, 2008, p. 157). Even Ida B. Wells – who rose to prominence as a premier Black documentarian of lynching with her iconic *Red Record* – was run out of Memphis, Tennessee in the early 1900s, after a mob burned down her newspaper office (Wells, 2020). Looking in real-time was punishable.

In the 21st century, however, Black people used mobile devices to bear witness to exactly when the human rights violation transpired. When Darnella Frazier made the decision to film Mr. Floyd's murder, she was saying to him at that moment: *I will not leave you. I will make sure people know what happened to you. I will make sure people say your name.* This is important because mainstream news media were notorious for reporting that lynchings in the US happened “at the hands of parties unknown” (Jean, 2005). This journalistic failure to name the perpetrators cloaked their participation in mob violence. Perhaps one of the most striking contributions that Black mobile journalism has made in the last decade, then, is that it rendered the killer visible. Whereas Derek Chauvin's status as a police officer may have granted him “parties unknown” invulnerability in the past, Black mobile journalism no longer allows such eliding. The narrative of nameless police, as invisible enforcers of white supremacy, has been forever disrupted.

Black mobile journalism has challenged official police narratives too. Danielle Kilgo has noted that initial police reports about Mr. Floyd's death claimed he had a “medical incident” in the back of a police car. Police also stated that Mr. Floyd died on the way to the hospital. Many news organizations parroted that official report in the first few days of his death, until Ms. Frazier's video surfaced (Kilgo, 2021). Scholars will observe this familiar pattern from 2015, in the case of former officer Michael Slager in South Carolina. Slager claimed in an official report that Walter Scott lunged for his taser, so he shot him fatally. Feidin Santana's mobile video later offered the counter narrative, that Scott was running away when Slager shot him in the back. Slager was charged with murder, and sentenced to prison for 20 years (Blinder, 2017). In both incidents, when professional journalists echoed the “police said” narrative, Black mobile journalists contradicted those stories.

This is remarkable when one considers that it was once deadly for Black people to engage in an “oppositional gaze” (hooks, 2003) against their oppressor. Former officer Derek Chauvin does, indeed, look at Ms. Frazier in the video. Those who dared to watch her video had a chance to lock eyes with him too. Although scholars have not yet explored the impact of this exchange, I venture to say that Chauvin's gaze broke a fourth wall, in film parlance, and made what researchers call “distant suffering” (Kyriakidou, 2015; Martini, 2018) feel far less remote. This invited the audience to imagine itself in Frazier's place; to feel the terror

of hopelessly watching someone's life slip away. Viewers did not get the chance to peer back into the eyes of the four police who battered Rodney King on video in 1991. Likewise, in the 2016 Philando Castile video, viewers saw only officer Jeronimo Yanez's arm wielding his gun through a car window. This "agony at a distance" (Sumiala, 2019) is absent from Ms. Frazier's video. Her footage is intimate and immediate.

The Future of Black Mobile Journalism Research

Black mobile journalism in the last decade has forced US citizens to reckon with how their hidden biases might marginalize others. This genre of reporting also has forced professional journalists to challenge how they may have contributed to the country's racial morass. Amid the global protests against Mr. Floyd's murder in 2020, newsrooms across the US dealt with internal mutinies that spilled over into public view. Whether it was *Washington Post* journalists writing an open letter to its upper management, to request stronger diversity and equity goals (Lowery, 2020); the trending #BlackLAT hashtag that highlighted problems at the *Los Angeles Times* (Scire, 2020); or Sen. Tom Cotton's call for Pres. Donald Trump to "send in the troops" to disrupt the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in a *New York Times* op-ed (which led to the resignation of some of the newspapers' highest-ranking editors), the industry found itself in the eye of the maelstrom (Klein, 2020).

These introspective moments in American newsrooms reflected what media scholars had discovered already during the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement: that these outlets struggled to cover it fairly due to deeply entrenched anti-Black news framing practices (Joseph, 2021; Obasogie & Newman, 2016). Mills (2017), for example, found that right-wing media outlets, such as Fox News, regularly deployed these biased tropes: (1) blaming Black victims, (2) blaming Black leaders, (3) blaming the Black community, (4) attacking the Black protesters and their demonstrations, and (5) discrediting attempts to address issues of racism as the "politics of racial division" (p. 39). Leopold and Bell (2017) found that even left-leaning news outlets relied on these frames, in their examination of the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times* and *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, two of these three newspapers – *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* – experienced public revolts from its Black reporters during the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020.

This is where future Black mobile journalism studies can intervene. There have not yet been any studies that explore whether professional journalists have become more conscious of their biases due to being exposed to Black mobile journalists' reports. Have legacy media, for example, become more aware of anti-Black framing when reporting on police brutality? If so, how have their rituals and practices changed when deciding on sourcing, word choices, and even accompanying visuals for a story? Have any news organizations created editorial advisory boards that can provide cultural sensitivity guidance when reporting on vulnerable or grieving communities? How are newsrooms addressing the dilemma of either re-traumatizing or numbing news audiences with images of Black death (Downs, 2016; Dwyer, 2016; Reign, 2016; Richardson, 2020a; Richardson, 2020b; Smith, 2015; Touré, 2020)? To answer these questions, researchers can conduct a series of longitudinal studies that may elucidate how mainstream news outlets descended into, and emerged from, the turmoil that Black mobile journalism exposed.

Conclusion

Darnella Frazier was quiet for most of 2020, as legal proceedings around Mr. Floyd's murder ensued. On April 20, 2021, however, when the guilty verdict for former officer Derek

Chauvin was announced, she broke her silence. “I just cried so hard,” she wrote on Facebook, adding: “This last hour my heart was beating so fast, I was so anxious, anxiety bussing through the roof. But to know GUILTY ON ALL 3 CHARGES!!! THANK YOU GOD THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU” (Knowles & Bella, 2021).

Professional journalists thanked Frazier in return, two months later. On June 11, 2021, the industry’s highest honor – the Pulitzer Prize – acknowledged her with a Special Citation. Frazier was recognized exactly one year after Ida B. Wells posthumously earned the same Pulitzer distinction, for her tireless reporting on lynching in America. For some, there was immense pride that a Black girl, and a Black woman before her, had engaged in brave acts of journalism that captivated the world. For others, Frazier’s win was bittersweet. Despite the 90 years that separated Wells’ death in 1931 from Floyd’s demise in 2021, the Prize proved that anti-Black racism still made headline news in the US.

From either vantage point, it is striking that Black mobile journalism’s influence grew so quickly in the last decade. Black witnesses’ homegrown newsreels inspired dialogues about race and policing in the US, and catalyzed the largest social justice movement in American history. At the same time, Black mobile journalism ached with immense loss. It demanded collective requiems in neighborhoods that legacy media otherwise may have overlooked. It erected sites of remembrance for people who are memorialized rarely in busts and statues. It is between this conflicted space of seeing – amid mourning and movement-building – that Black witnessing continues to grow. In each new frame of tragic footage, one can find the quiet radicalism of Black peoples’ ancestral yearning to look; the sorrow of families who seek visual closure and legal justice; and the immortalizing force of lifting up a victim’s name.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Ms. Darnella Frazier for the incredible courage she demonstrated on May 25, 2020. May she have the space to heal and rest now, knowing that she need not apologize to Mr. Floyd any longer.

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Witnessing George Floyd

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