29

THE MOVEMENT AND ITS MOBILE JOURNALISM

A phenomenology of Black Lives Matter journalist-activists

Allissa V. Richardson

Marissa Johnson said Sen. Bernie Sanders supporters never saw her coming. Although organizers of the now-infamous Seattle rally for the presidential hopeful knew that Johnson was a leader in the local Black Lives Matter chapter, they expected a man to interrupt the rally that day in August 2015, she said. So, she flanked herself with male colleagues – one black and one white – and went forth. As the black, male activist walked to one corner of the stage, "They put all the security over where he was", Johnson said, smiling. With the diversion in place, her white male colleague separated the metal barricades to the platform. In a flash, she walked up the makeshift stairs to the dais. The rest became protest history. A young, black woman had just preempted the presidential stump speech of a sitting U.S. senator. Johnson demanded 4½minutes of silence in memory of Brown, to symbolize the 4½hours his body lay on a Ferguson street. Some yelled profanities throughout the moment of silence. As it ended, Johnson began a speech on Seattle's legacy of police brutality. She usurped Sanders's platform for nearly 30 minutes. The clashing imagery of a seemingly frustrated and forlorn Sanders vis-à-vis Johnson's bellicosity looped on television news networks. In one interview she conducted with the MSNBC cable news network, she seemed assured and proud of her confrontation. Nearly one-and-a-half years later, however, she said that she has mixed feelings as to whether she would do it again. No one could have prepared her, she said in a February 2017 interview, for the immense personal toll that her activism cost her.

As one of the 15 anti-police brutality protestors who participated in this study, Johnson provided insight into the lived experience, or phenomenology, of bearing witness as a Black Lives Matter activist. Phenomenology is a mode of inquiry that focuses on the lived experiences of the study's subjects by evaluating one's: (1) intentionality, (2) intuition, (3) empathy, and (4) intersubjectivity (Husserl, 1970). In terms of this study, it meant investigating: (1) the Black Lives Matter activists' stated purpose for practicing sustained acts of media witnessing in and through the media; (2) whether or not they intuited their bearing witness as a form of journalism; (3) how they viewed their bodies in relation to the world (for example, whether they saw themselves in the body of a slain victim of police brutality); and (4) how they believed their individual work as witnesses impacted the broader Black Lives Matter movement. Nearly nine hours of semi-structured interviews revealed that the participant activists leveraged mobile journalism as a means to disrupt existing power structures between the police, the press, and African-American

15031-2005-PVI-029.indd 387 6/9/2018 4:41:21 PM

protestors. The activists expressed a nearly unanimous desire to reframe the way legacy news media portray African-American victims of police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movement. The activists also reported that they believe in journalism's power to redress the grievances that their communities may have against its local police department. This chapter begins by exploring how theories of power help us understand what may motivate the Black Lives Matter activists' desire to bear witness. Then, I offer an account of the lived experiences of Black Lives Matter activists who decided to use their smartphones to report news long after a high-profile, fatal police shooting rocked their hometowns. This chapter closes with a discussion about what the trend toward mobile journalism as a tool for counter-narrative might mean for protest news coverage of the future.

The rise of Black Lives Matter

The Black Lives Matter movement has become one of the most prominent, sustained, African-American social protests of the new millennium. It began on July 13, 2013, when a jury found George Zimmerman, a 28-year-old white man, not guilty of second-degree murder after he shot and killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager, in Sanford, Florida. Three grassroots activists launched the #BlackLivesMatter Twitter hashtag to protest what they believed to be a travesty of justice. Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi circulated the hashtag widely on Twitter in 2013. It began trending in earnest in 2014, when a white police officer shot an unarmed black teenager, Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri (Garza, 2014). Race riots in Ferguson began, and #BlackLivesMatter evolved from a Twitter campaign to actual street protests there and in other cities across the country. In 2015, Black Lives Matter protesters expanded further, organizing into nationwide chapters. Chapter members then began to follow candidates for the United States presidency on their campaign trails, hoping to start a dialog about the string of highly publicized killings (ThinkProgress, 2015).

At the time of this study, Black Lives Matter has scaled internationally, with chapters in Berlin, Dublin, Israel, London, Palestine, Toronto, and multiple townships throughout South Africa (Khan, 2015). Although the tipping points that led to Black Lives Matter's establishment were rooted in efforts to end police brutality, the organization now states a broader purpose on its website. The group promotes its list of causes as such: (1) efforts to end mass incarceration of black people, (2) pathways to immigration, and (3) systemic support for dually marginalized subgroups of black people, such as women, girls, the disabled, and members of the LGBTQIA community.[1] Despite the momentum that the Black Lives Matter campaign has achieved since its inception, to date, little research has been published about the protest journalism created by black witnesses from within the movement. This study highlights these key documentarians, which belong to three distinct groups. Some of the interviewees for this project tweet using the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag and lead nonprofit chapters of the Black Lives Matter organization in their hometowns. Others tweet using the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag yet align with sister organizations in the movement. The third group of activists Tweet using the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag yet work independently as activists that claim no formal affiliation to an organization, yet exhibit strong ties to leaders of Black Lives Matter chapters on Twitter. These three groups of anti-police brutality activists are unified in their dedication to producing mobile videos and Twitter updates on movement-related news. Their evolving genre of protest journalism pushes discourse about police brutality – and other human rights violations against African Americans – into the global news cycle every day. Their reports are thought to disrupt normative ideas about black victimhood, police brutality, and collective African-American protest.

15031-2005-PVI-029.indd 388 6/9/2018 4:41:21 PM

On power and narratives of control

Roni Jackson (2016) asserted:

> Historically, most media representations of minorities have presented a one-dimensional portrayal of individuals of color, painting certain races with a very wide brush, eliminating individualism and nuance, and feeding a culture of prejudice. For victims of violence and tragedy, this representation serves to undermine both their person and their victimhood.
>
> *(p. 318)*

Does video witnessing serve as a corrective to Jackson's claim? Does filming a human rights atrocity have the *power* to restore one's humanity? Defining the nature of power itself sheds light on these questions. It might be useful to think of theories of power on an "ideology-discourse continuum" (Stoddart, 2007), which ranges from late nineteenth-century thought to modern-day critical race theories. In this vein, Karl Marx (1848) introduced with Friedrich Engels the earliest theories of power in his seminal text, *The Communist Manifesto*. In it, he argued that power flowed in one direction, from the ruling class (bourgeoisie) to the working class (proletariat). Describing the bourgeoisie control of the proletariat through wages, Marx wrote:

> The capitalist class is constantly giving to the working class drafts, in the form of money, on a portion of the product produced by the latter and appropriated by the former. The workers give these drafts back just as constantly to the capitalists.
>
> *(Marx and Engels, 1848: 712–713)*

Marx believed, therefore, that the working class usurped power from the elites only by altering the economy – especially in terms of the labor market. Although Marx's ideas were celebrated throughout Europe, the working class failed to topple the growing forces of capitalism in his lifetime. Philosophers from the Frankfurt School thus attempted to generate a more robust theoretical model of power. They were pessimistic about the proletariats' potential to lead revolutions and posited that resistance must come from the "cultural industry" instead (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002; Benjamin (1968 [1936]), which broadcasts and inculcates ideological representations of the world to the masses. Antonio Gramsci added to this layer of understanding the media as powerful purveyors of values and ideas with his theories of hegemony. Hegemonic power functions as "common sense" facts that are "inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed" (Gramsci, 1971: 333). Gramsci believed that dismantling systems of inequality could be achieved if intellectuals and subaltern groups worked together to create counter-hegemonic media messages. Mark C. Stoddart (2007: 202) explained:

> Where a society is characterized primarily by the exercise of hegemonic power instead of coercion, a prolonged cultural war of position is more important, where the hegemony of the ruling classes is dissembled and a new hegemony is crystallized. This occurs as subaltern groups realize their own capacity to become philosophers.

It is here, in realizing that narratives are tools of control, that schools of thought on power begin to diverge significantly. Michel Foucault's post-Marxist writings asserted that power does not flow unidirectionally, from the elites to the working class, in strictly economic terms. Foucault argued that power operates at diffuse nodes in modern society – through science, schools,

15031-2005-PVI-029.indd 389 6/9/2018 4:41:21 PM

prisons, and government, too. Foucault theorized that resistance, then, occurred through examining micro-social tensions between varying groups. He wrote:

> If we speak of the power of laws, institutions, and ideologies, if we speak of structures or mechanisms of power, it is only insofar as we suppose that certain persons exercise power over others. The term "power" designates relationships between "partners".
>
> *(Foucault, 2000 [1994]: 337)*

Foucault believed that actual discourse – not merely ideology – amasses social power. Stoddart (2007) explained, "The regulation of discourse deals with who is allowed to speak on a given topic, as well as which forms of knowledge are subjugated in the production of truth" (p. 205). In Foucault's own words, he notes, "The delicate mechanisms of power cannot function unless knowledge, or rather knowledge apparatuses, are formed, organized, and put into circulation, and those apparatuses are not ideological trimmings or edifices" (2003: 33–34).

The other theories of power important here are intersectional (Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1991) in nature and fall under the critical race theory paradigm. Whereas the definition of power for Marx lies in economic relations; for the Frankfurt School, ideology; for Gramsci, hegemony; and for Foucault, discourse; the nexus of power for many critical race theorists is at the crossroads of gender, race, and class. This is not to say that critical race theorists eschew all earlier thinking of power structures. Frantz Fanon, for example, analyzes colonialism in *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon and Sartre, 1963) with a Gramscian sensibility, suggesting that intellectuals and marginalized populations work together to create sites of counter-hegemony during times of resistance. Stoddart explained also that Stuart Hall explored a Marxist approaches to race in his essay, "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance." Stoddart wrote:

> [Hall] describes . . . racism [as] rooted in economic structure. Here, racial inequality is a cultural reflection of the economic base of society. Racializing ideologies work to justify a system of economic inequality that is beneficial for capital, in terms of providing a supply of cheap, disposable labor.
>
> *(2007: 215)*

It may serve us better to think of critical race theory, then, as a series of postulations on power that highlights inequalities in economic institutions, political arenas, and in media simultaneously, since narratives of white supremacy are entrenched in all of these major sectors of life. As bell hooks (2014b: 155) explained:

> Certainly in the space of popular media culture black people in the U.S. and black people globally often look at ourselves through images, through eyes that are unable to truly recognize us, so that we are not represented as ourselves but seen through the lens of the oppressor.

Hooks argued further that black gazes at an oppressor were a site of rebellion historically. She wrote,

> Black slaves, and later manumitted servants, could be brutally punished for looking, for appearing to observe the whites they were serving, as only a subject can observe, or see. To be fully an object then was to lack the capacity to see or recognize reality.
>
> *(2014a: 168)*

15031-2005-PVI-029.indd 390 6/9/2018 4:41:21 PM

The rise of sousveillance

The description by hooks of power-in-looking proved an intriguing theoretical frame for this study. I hypothesized that many Black Lives Matter activists doing the work of journalists assumed this "oppositional gaze" (2014a: 116) to establish a degree of narrative power over how African Americans are portrayed in the media – especially when human rights violations are in question. This power does not draw its strength from *above*, however, in that marginalized groups suddenly become the all-seeing eye on high, hacking signals from security cameras and other surveillance devices. Studies suggest otherwise. The black activist gaze draws its strength from *below*. In a technologically mediated model of power, which Steve Mann and Joseph Ferenbok have called *sous*veillance, smartphones and wearable technology devices afford African Americans and other potentially marginalized people the power to elevate themselves from object to subject. Mann and Ferenbok (2013: 23–24) channeled Foucauldian theories of power when describing how sousveillance functions:

> Foucault's panopticon is a power metaphor for the distribution of institutional power that works through the fear of being watched. . . . We are entering an age where people can and will not only look back, but in doing so potentially drive social and political change.

Hans Toch (2012) suggested that this change will come about as a result of great displays of political theater and even likened sousveillant cop-watchers to Greek choruses. He wrote:

> The involvement of spectators in police-citizen confrontations invites comparison with the role played by the chorus in classic Greek tragedies. The chorus has been called the moral barometer of the play in classical Greek theater because chorus members constantly offered opinions on wickedness, punishment, and righteousness.

Ben Brucato (2015) indeed offered evidence of smartphone-toting protestors behaving like Greek choruses during the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011, stating, "Their use of video streaming apps to live-broadcast such events – while chanting 'The whole world is watching!' – showed how protesters framed watching as intercession" (p. 1). Additionally, a team of researchers reported in 2013:

> A variety of practices were uncovered that link YouTube and Twitter together, including sharing cell phone footage as eyewitness accounts of protest (and police) activity, digging up news footage or movie clips posted months and sometimes years before the movement began; and the sharing of music videos and other entertainment content in the interest of promoting solidarity or sociability among publics created through shared hashtags.
>
> *(Thorson et al., 2013)*

Likewise, scholars have marveled at how citizens in Tunisia and Egypt practiced sousveillance in 2011's so-called Arab Spring revolts to circumvent traditional media outlets, which were run by oppressive political regimes, to publish video directly to Twitter (Howard et al., 2011; Khondker, 2011; Lotan et al., 2011). Those who put themselves in harm's way to document political unrest in their countries were heralded as "mediated martyrs" (Halverson et al., 2013) who dared to "overthrow the protest paradigm" (Harlow and Johnson, 2011). Until now, few studies have explored whether Black Lives Matter activists intuited that they are assuming a sousveillant,

15031-2005-PVI-029.indd 391 6/9/2018 4:41:21 PM

mobile-mediated vantage point to anti-police brutality uprisings that have erupted across the United States in recent years.

Method

This study relied on semi-structured interviews as its qualitative data-gathering method. I integrated two established philosophies while developing and refining my interview map: phenomenology and Jerome Bruner's functional approach to narrative analysis. Phenomenology focuses on the lived experiences of the study's subjects by evaluating a subject's: (1) intentionality, (2) intuition, (3) empathy, and (4) intersubjectivity (Husserl, 1970). While the phenomenological school of thought is more than a century old, many contemporary journalism studies employ this philosophy to frame qualitative interview questions. Edson Tandoc and Bruno Takahashi (2016) studied the lived experiences of journalists-cum-*ad hoc* disaster relief workers who covered a typhoon that hit the Philippines in November 2013; Tim Markham (2011) investigated the normative newsroom practices of war correspondents who work in combat zones; and Michael Arnold (2003) described how the social implications of emergent mobile devices must be considered in terms of one's agency to use that device in ways that may not have been conceived by its manufacturer. Phenomenology allowed me to identify common threads in how Black Lives Matter activists *see* themselves and *situate* themselves as protest journalists who have mobile-mediated agency. This "day-in-the-life" perspective allowed me to cluster themes that emerged from their personal narratives into categories.

Interviews were coded by using Jerome Bruner's (1991) functional approach to narrative analysis. Bruner proposed that narratives are the chief way that people construct their realities and meanings of events. For instance, although the initial claim that Michael Brown had his hands up and screamed "Don't shoot!" just before a white police officer killed him proved to be untrue (Lee, 2015), that narrative arguably compelled distant black witnesses to protest in Ferguson in 2014. Online photo memes of African-American NFL football players (NBC Staff, 2014), college students (*Clutch* Staff, 2014), congresspersons (Larson, 2014), and even media personalities (Marsh, 2015) – all with their hands up in the air – went viral. An eponymous organization, Hands Up United, even sprang up.[2] In this vein, people made meaning of current events through the dominant narratives that circulated at that time. Some narratives continued to stick, even if they were not true, because people needed to shape chaotic events into a coherent story that made it easier to process.

Selection of participants

CNN produced in August 2015 a list of 13 "Disruptors" who rose to national prominence in the year after the Ferguson uprisings.[3] This list was the foundation for developing a larger snowball sample of potential study participants. Snowball sampling is a non-probability technique that leverages *a priori* knowledge of a small group of potential study subjects to cultivate a larger pool of study participants that may have remained hidden, if not for a referral from the original study subjects. Snowball sampling can be leveraged to gain access to (and trust from) anti-establishment actors, such as activists, who may be suspicious of legacy media or academic researchers initially (Cohen and Arieli, 2011; Jun, 2013).

My snowball sample began with the 13 CNN Disruptors. I contacted all of the activists via Twitter initially, either through direct message (if they authorized this feature) or on their public walls. Two of the 13 original interview prospects granted me interviews. Nine of the 13 declined my requests for interviews yet referred me to an ally in the movement who was still "doing press". The final two Disruptors never responded to me at all, despite three Twitter direct messages and three emails. I only contacted potential subjects three times on either medium,

15031-2005-PVI-029.indd 392 6/9/2018 4:41:21 PM

unless they told me to submit my interview request via Facebook so that they could verify my identity. Initially, I had hoped that I would make contact with all 13 Disruptors who would each recommend three more people, for a total of 39 potential interviewees. The influencers in the movement are tightly knit, however, and similar names began to overlap by the fifth interview. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 participants between October 2016 and February 2017. The total corpus comprises 8.42 hours of video footage. The average interview duration was 68 minutes. I conducted three interviews in person. The remaining 12 interviews took place virtually – via Skype, FaceTime, or Google Hangout – according to the participant's preference.

Results

The top two narrative themes that emerged from 652 coded interview segments were: (1) revision, with 152 coded segments; and (2) responsibility, with 121 coded segments. I used the "revision" code if the subject spoke explicitly about his or her efforts to correct or reframe an existing news media narrative. I used the "responsibility" code if the subject talked about feeling a sense of duty to bear witness.

Revision

The participants in this study said that they report news to revise existing news narratives. This was the most popular code in the corpus. The activists aim to challenge sensationalism and/or factual errors in legacy reports and to oppose black news myths.

Revising news sensationalism and/or errors. Many interviewees said that professional journalists did not do a good job covering the protests in which they took part. Brittany Packnett protested on the front lines in Ferguson after Michael Brown's death. She was activated to bear witness on Twitter after seeing news reports that conflicted with what she experienced. She said:

> People would be watching a live feed on CNN, and CNN was sitting there saying people are breaking into the McDonald's – there's more looting happening. Well, we would go on the [live] streams, and what we'd be tweeting is that people are being tear-gassed and they're breaking into the McDonald's because they had milk in the McDonald's and milk is what you have to use on tear-gas. Not water. Right? And so that is the instantaneous correction that you're allowed to have. . . . We challenged the mainstream media who were outsiders to our community, to tell the truth.

Packnett said that she continued to use Twitter to provide updates on the movement after Ferguson ceased to be headline news because "media needs to always be held accountable", she said, adding, "the same kind of relationship that we should have with the free press, it's the same kind of relationship we should have with democracy. We should engage with it and reserve our right to criticize".

For Ieshia Evans, bearing witness on Twitter was a more reluctant endeavor. When she participated in her first demonstration in July 2016 – to protest Alton Sterling's killing in Baton Rouge – she said she was surprised to see it portrayed in the news as a riot. She said: "People were boisterous, they were rowdy as far as being very vocal, but there was no violence". Evans said that the police on the scene became increasingly physical, however, which led to the iconic photograph of her facing off against them in a sundress. She said:

> What kind of enraged me at this point was that you're giving us permission to protest in the grass, but then you have police officers beating on their shields and bashing up

15031-2005-PVI-029.indd 393 6/9/2018 4:41:21 PM

> the protesters while they're already in the grass. I don't even know what came over me, but I just decided to stand in the street, like what's your goal here?

Evans said that after the photograph of her confrontation with the Baton Rouge police went viral, she began to notice factual errors in official news reports, such as her age or occupation. She said she stopped watching TV news. General distrust – even cynicism – of news media was a running theme amongst the activists. When pressed for specific examples of journalistic errors that made them feel this way, many had anecdotes to share. Attorney Chris Stewart, for example, was nonplussed by the news reports that stated Black Lives Matter organized and led a rally to raise awareness about the police killing a man named Deandre Phillips in February 2017. Stewart said:

> Seventy percent of that crowd was white, but when I watched the news that night, they called it a Black Lives Matter rally, and they only showed the black people, which I thought was just hilarious, because everybody out there was just shocked how many white people were out there supporting it, but you didn't see that.

Stewart tweeted a crowd shot that day to counter the legacy media reports he began to see elsewhere, he said. "[When] social media covers stuff, it's kind of like a snowball effect", he said, adding,

> Once it starts rolling and it starts picking up and picking up and picking up, it's just really effective to let people know what's going on. Other than that, you have to rely on TV news, and that's not the most effective way, because you have no **control** [*emphasis mine*] over that.

Devin Allen is the famed amateur photographer whose pictures of the Baltimore uprisings in 2015 made it onto the cover of *TIME* magazine. His coverage of the city's response to Freddie Gray's death while in police custody inspired a book in 2017. Allen spoke in terms of power in his interview, also, especially when asked if he ever would work as a photographer for a legacy media publication. He said:

> Once you work for those places, you don't **control** [*emphasis mine*] the narrative of your photos. The thing is, with me and my work, I told the story first, so it was like when they want to use my pictures, I'm already telling them what's going on.

Brittany Ferrell was a frontline Ferguson protestor, more than 800 miles away from Allen's native Baltimore. Still, she speaks of her use of Twitter to counter-frame in the same tones. She explained,

> [Twitter] allows me a place to tell the truth without any bias or anybody policing the things that I choose to say, the things that I choose to tell the world. . . . It's like we are so much better connected in this struggle via social media because we know where to turn to when we need the truth.

Revising black news myths. Another area of revision that some witnesses spoke about was the desires to shatter the tandem news myths of black criminality and black marginality. One witness uses his knowledge of statistics to spar with professional journalists and police. Another witness tweets what he finds in his own investigations of police brutality with the public, to show that

15031-2005-PVI-029.indd 394 6/9/2018 4:41:21 PM

African Americans are telling the truth. Yet another witness said he photographs his community to provide the black human interest stories that news media tend to overlook.

Samuel Sinyangwe is a data scientist. When Michael Brown was killed, he found frontline protesters on Twitter and asked how he could help in Ferguson. Within days, he took a leave of absence from his job at PolicyLink, a Bay Area think-tank. Once he arrived in Missouri, he said he kept hearing the same two narratives: either that shootings like these were one-off events or that all shootings of unarmed black men began because the slain men had resisted arrest. Sinyangwe said he discovered that the federal government does not collect data on fatal police shootings, but websites such as *Fatal Encounters* or *KilledbyPolice.net* did. He decided to merge the data from both sites. He explained:

> About 40% of the records were not identified by race, and so I went through social media profiles – like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram – went through obituaries, criminal records databases, and between those could actually identify more than 90% of the people in the database. Then for armed or unarmed – nobody was keeping track of that – I had to go through all of the [police] reports to identify that column.

Sinyangwe said that being armed with this data made him realize that he could tell different stories about police brutality. He explained a triumph in Colorado, where a police department challenged his data, only to find out their numbers were incorrect. A local reporter then wrote a scathing investigative piece about the department's underreporting of fatal police encounters. Sinyangwe said he targeted his analyses on his home state of Florida also, when he realized that Orlando was "off the charts in terms of every level of police violence, whether it was use of force or stops and searches, arrests or killings", he said. He explained that once he realized this trend, he convened a meeting with the Orlando Police Department's leadership. The officers claimed that the high rates of excessive force were due to equally high rates of tourism. Sinyangwe crunched more numbers. He told Orlando PD that their rates were higher than New Orleans and Las Vegas, which have equal – if not more – annual visitors than Orlando. Additionally, Sinyangwe said he audited the Orlando Police Department's use of force policy to show that the agency did not have a rule that restricted officers from using lethal force as a final resort. The police department in Tampa, about 90 miles away from Orlando, did. Sinyangwe persuaded Orlando's police department to follow Tampa's lead by providing valuable data on why people were stopped by police in the first place. Sinyangwe said:

> Those interactions were starting off with people who were suspected of, quote, "suspicious activity" or drug possession – like small, minor things that then get escalated into deadly force. That helped **debunk this narrative** [*emphasis mine*] that police were killing people because they were trying to apprehend violent criminals.

While Sinyangwe battles the myth of black criminality with his brand of data journalism, Chris Stewart combats such stereotypes by conducting his own investigative reporting as a civil rights lawyer. He said he was sitting in church one Sunday in April 2015 when he received an urgent message through Facebook's text messaging feature on his smartphone. It was Walter Scott's niece. Stewart said:

> She messaged me and said it was an emergency, and said that her uncle had just gotten killed the night before, and the family really wanted to talk to an attorney. She had seen all of the work that I had done on other civil rights cases on Facebook, and she had gone to our website and all that stuff.

15031-2005-PVI-029.indd 395 6/9/2018 4:41:21 PM

He promised to contact her after the worship service concluded. When Stewart eventually connected with Scott's brothers and mother by phone, he said he felt the police department's official report sounded suspicious. He said:

> The video wasn't out. You know, we didn't even know there *was* a video. They asked me to look into it online through the articles, and tell me what I thought. I looked at the articles that were out in the media, but they were all saying that Walter Scott had tried to kill the officer . . . [and] you have to kind of go with your gut, and it just didn't sound right – a man that age fighting a cop – none of it made sense.

The family told Stewart that they would hire him as the attorney if he could drive up to South Carolina by morning. When he arrived the next day, he learned of the infamous video. Stewart said he began to share limited updates to the case on Twitter, with the family's permission, although he did share that he prefers the slower pace of Facebook. He said it allows him to answer questions from supporters more thoughtfully.

The final news myth that one of the interviewees works to overcome is that of black marginality. Devin Allen said that he tries to show the beauty that he sees in black Baltimore, not just its turmoil. Allen mentioned that his earlier work before the Freddie Gray uprisings captured black women with "natural hair, no makeup, not models, just my friends", he said. He endeavored also to photograph the positive things police officers did in his community to provide balance to black-versus-blue tropes. Like Sinyangwe, Allen said he feels his reportage creates entry points for dialog between African Americans and police. He explained, "I did an art show for my youth, and he [the commissioner] came. I was like, 'I want him on the panel. He needs to be on the panel. He needs to see my kids' work. Period'".

"This is the area that police are constantly . . ." his voice trailed off as he held back tears.

"People are being . . ." his voice cracked. Allen paused to collect himself. He sighed deeply and said, "This is where Freddie Gray is from, and . . . if you don't smother and kill our kids – this is what they can do."

Responsibility

Despite the persistent side-stepping of the word "journalism", the activists still expressed the occupational *ethos* that many professional journalists likely would say that they have. For example, the interviewees all spoke of being guided by a sense of responsibility to let people know the facts. Moreover, the interviewees frequently said that their Black Lives Matter reportage also stemmed from a duty to: (1) use their education or professional skills for social justice and (2) open doors for future activists and storytellers.

Responsibility to use one's craft for social justice. Gordon Parks (1966) once wrote "I chose my camera as a weapon against all the things I dislike about America – poverty, racism, discrimination". Devin Allen spoke of his photography in similar terms, 50 years later. He said:

> I believe if you're a writer, the pen is your weapon. That's like if you're a rapper or a singer: Your voice is your weapon. That's why I think it's so important that as black artists, definitely in hip hop, we need to focus on these issues, because your voice reaches the masses. My pictures reach the masses.

Allen noted that he is self-taught. The road to bearing witness to the world has been filled with on-the-job training, he said. He feels obligated, therefore, to share what he has learned with

15031-2005-PVI-029.indd 396 6/9/2018 4:41:21 PM

other would-be black witnesses. "I didn't know what the hell a grant was growing up", he said, laughing. "This stuff, they didn't teach us in school. I'm working on two grants right now".

Eve Ewing said a sense of duty drives her to use mobile and social media in a similar way. She holds a Ph.D. in education from Harvard University. She studies systemic racial inequalities in public education, which often leads her to the frontlines of protests in her native Chicago. She said people often think of movements as needing only a single, charismatic male leader. She shared that when she helped organize a demonstration in front of the Chicago Police Department's Homan Square facility in North Lawndale in July 2016, however, she realized that the movement needed much more. The Homan Square facility is a so-called "black site" of illegal interrogation, she said, where Chicago police allegedly take African Americans in without legal representation, subject them to torture, and coerce them into making false confessions. Activists from Black Lives Matter, Black Youth Project 100, and Let Us Breathe worked as a coalition to produce a sit-in that they dubbed the "Freedom Square Occupation". For one month, they chained themselves together in front of the facility, demanding answers about missing black suspects. Ewing said she never stopped tweeting during her involvement. She recalled:

> When [we] first set up, we spent a lot of time communicating and people were like, "Eve can you make this flyer in an hour?" "Can you do this or this?" . . . After that day I put out these tweets and was like the revolution needs graphic designers. The revolution needs people that can show up to meetings.[4] The revolution needs people that can paint, people that can sew, people that can set up security systems on people's phones so that their phones don't get hacked, people that know how to pitch a tent, people that own sound systems and know how to do audio/visual stuff.[5]

Since Ewing posted her series of tweets on how people can use their talents to fuel the movement, the thread has been retweeted several thousand times. It has become a mantra of sorts for organizers, who often ask her permission to recite it at meetings, she said.

Ewing's Harvard classmate, Clint Smith, had personal responsibility at the forefront of his mind too as he began his graduate-level studies at one of the world's most elite institutions in 2014. Ferguson erupted during the first week of his doctoral program. It haunted him, he said:

> I started graduate school the same week Mike Brown was killed, and so it was impossible for me to disentangle what I saw happening in the world and what I was reading about in my books. I started to use Twitter as a way to share snippets of what I was learning.

Responsibility to open doors for future activists and storytellers. The activists spoke at length about what the brave new world would look like for their descendants. Devin Allen, for example, said he is bearing witness now because, "My daughter loves photography. She can walk through those doors now [because] I walked through these doors". In a broader sense, Allen said he is bearing witness for all black children in his Baltimore neighborhood too. "I'm teaching them how to love their own situation through photography. . . . I give kids cameras. They go out. I might not never see them again, but they have a piece of me with them".

Brittany Ferrell is a parent, too. She said that she tweets about the movement despite facing protest-related felony charges in St. Louis because:

> I have a soon-to-be 9-year-old daughter . . . I think a lot of times I look at the great sacrifice that it's going to take for black people to get free, and for her and so many kids like her, [and it is] so worth it.

15031-2005-PVI-029.indd 397 6/9/2018 4:41:21 PM

Conclusion

In this essay, I offered an account of a day-in-the-life of Black Lives Matter activists who choose to do the work of professional journalists. I have illustrated how bearing witness while black is more than the act of an African-American person picking up a cell phone to record a human rights violation. It is an act of protest, too, since the black gaze has been outlawed historically. In their own words, the leading activists of the movement explained how they are motivated to report news on a long-term basis because they feel a deep responsibility to revise existing news narratives about black victims of police brutality and black protesters. They also explained how they believe journalism has the power to highlight injustices and evoke change. Still, the participants in this study are loath to be called "journalists".

"Blackness is often times very, very misunderstood", Brittany Ferrell shook her head as her interview drew to a close. She added, "When you're black and you're angry or you're black and you're fighting for something, people don't really receive that very well. . . . People don't believe that we're worth what we're fighting for". Brittany Packnett challenges this line of thinking. She told an audience at Citizen University's annual conference in March 2017, "I made the decision to love myself so radically that I am worth more than whatever I could lose".[6] Both Ferrell and Packnett are writing books about their journeys to bear witness during Ferguson. It will be interesting to follow the professional trajectories of black witnesses as media makers, to observe whether they join the mainstream to work alongside professional journalists or remain independent storytellers that work outside of traditional newsrooms.

As Devin Allen wrapped his interview, he waxed lyrical about notions of power. He said that he is aware that professional journalists feel he "jumped the line" to land the cover of a major magazine, but he is not sorry, he said. He explained that his work has empowered him to see black people in Baltimore – and marginalized people struggling elsewhere – with a humanity that he never found when watching the news. "I used to be so hard and cold, but through my photography and the way I see the world now, I'm a crybaby," he said with a smile. Allen said by photographing everyday black life in Baltimore, he finds a capacity to gate keep that which is newsworthy and worth fighting for in his community. He has a new book of photography and essays that was published in June 2017. "That's the thing with this new movement in our generation. You can't smother us, because if we take one leader, another one is going to just jump right back up", he explained.

The activists who participated in this study embodied this spirit of dogged determination. With their smartphones in hand, they were armed with a new kind of weapon. It may not be the Winchester rifle that Ida B. Wells (1892) urged blacks to carry for self-defense in the early twentieth century, but to some people, like Diamond Reynolds, who watched her beloved Philando Castile die in front of her, it offered protection during crisis. Whether the growing video evidence of police brutality against black people will amount to increased police prosecutions or widespread policing reforms remains to be seen. The one thing that seems certain, however, is that African-American activists will continue to leverage the technologies of their day to report news of human rights injustices that are leveled against its most vulnerable communities.

Further reading

This chapter is an excerpt from my doctoral dissertation, *Bearing Witness While Black: African Americans, Smartphones and the New Protest #journalism* (2017). The full text offers nine more themes gleaned from the participant interviews, which include (but are not limited to) journalism as a tool for collective grief and the surveillance that black witnesses face after they distribute their news. This chapter benefitted tremendously from Mann and Ferenbok's (2013) concept

15031-2005-PVI-029.indd 398 6/9/2018 4:41:21 PM

of *sous*veillance, or gazing from below. The ethnocentric layer of inquiry – that is, examining what it means to "look" while black – emerged after reading bell hooks's *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (2014a).

Notes

1 *See:*http://blacklivesmatter.com/guiding-principles/
2 *See*: www.handsupunited.org
3 *See:*www.cnn.com/interactive/2015/08/us/disruptors/
4 https://twitter.com/eveewing/status/758381013911343104
5 https://twitter.com/eveewing/status/758382111984349185
6 *See:*https://twitter.com/CitizenUniv/status/845790199208525825

References

Arnold, M. (2003) "On the phenomenology of technology: The 'Janus-faces' of mobile phones." *Information and Organization*, 13(4), 231–256.

Benjamin, W. (1968 [1936]) "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction." In H. Arendt (ed.), *Walter Benjamin: Illuminations*. New York, NY: Schocken Books (pp. 217–251).

Brucato, B. (2015) "Policing made visible: Mobile technologies and the importance of point of view." *Surveillance & Society*, 13(3/4), 455.

Bruner, J. (1991) "The narrative construction of reality." *Critical Inquiry*, 18(1), 1–21.

Clutch Magazine Staff. (2014, August 14) "Photo: Howard University students stand in solidarity with #Ferguson." *Clutch Magazine*. Retrieved from www.clutchmagonline.com/2014/08/photo-howard-university-students-stand-solidarity-ferguson/

Cohen, N. and Arieli, T. (2011) "Field research in conflict environments: Methodological challenges and snowball sampling." *Journal of Peace Research*, 48(4), 423–435.

Collins, P. H. (1998) "It's all in the family: Intersections of gender, race, and nation." *Hypatia*, 13(3), 62–82.

Crenshaw, K. (1991) "Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color." *Stanford Law Review*, 1241–1299.

Fanon, F. and Sartre, J. P. (1963) *The Wretched of the Earth* (Vol. 36). New York, NY: Grove Press.

Foucault, M. (2000 [1994]) "The subject and power." In J. Faubion (ed.), *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984* (Vol. 3). New York, NY: The New Press (pp. 326–348).

Foucault, M. (2003) *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975–1976*. Edited by M. Bertani and A. Fontana, translated by D. Macey. New York, NY: Picador.

Garza, A. (2014) "A herstory of the# BlackLivesMatter movement." In J. Hobson (ed.), *Are all the Women Still White?: Rethinking Race, Expanding Feminisms*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press (pp. 23–28).

Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections From the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Translated by Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith. New York, NY: International Publishers.

Halverson, J. R., Ruston, S. W. and Trethewey, A. (2013) "Mediated martyrs of the Arab Spring: New media, civil religion, and narrative in Tunisia and Egypt." *Journal of Communication*, 63(2), 312–332.

Harlow, S. and Johnson, T. J. (2011) "Overthrowing the protest paradigm? How the I, global voices and Twitter covered the Egyptian revolution." *International Journal of Communication*, 5, 16.

hooks, b. (2014a) *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston, MA: South End Press.

hooks, b. (2014b) *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Boston, MA: South End Press.

Horkheimer, M. and Adorno, T. (2002) *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by E. Jephcott. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Howard, P. N., Duffy, A., Freelon, D., Hussain, M. M., Mari, W. and Maziad, M. (2011) *Opening Closed Regimes: What Was the Role of Social Media During the Arab Spring*? Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2595096

Husserl, E. (1970) *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Jackson, R. (2016) "If they gunned me down and criming while white: An examination of Twitter campaigns through the lens of citizens' media." *Cultural Studies? Critical Methodologies*, 16(3), 313–319.

Khan, J. (2015) "Black Lives Matter has become a global movement." *The Root*. Retrieved from http://bit.ly/2d4Qirr

15031-2005-PVI-029.indd 399 6/9/2018 4:41:21 PM

Khondker, H. H. (2011) "Role of the new media in the Arab Spring." *Globalizations*, 8(5), 675–679.

Larson, L. (2014, December 2) "Four members of Congress do 'hands up' gesture on House floor." *NY Daily News*. Retrieved from http://nydn.us/11OBRBt

Lee, M. Y. H. (2015, March 19) "'Hands up, don't shoot' did not happen in Ferguson." *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from http://wapo.st/1P6ubQS

Lotan, G., Graeff, E., Ananny, M., Gaffney, D. and Pearce, I. (2011) "The Arab Spring – the revolutions were tweeted: Information flows during the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions." *International Journal of Communication*, 5, 31.

Mann, S. and Ferenbok, J. (2013) "New media and the power politics of sousveillance in a surveillance-dominated world." *Surveillance & Society*, 11(1/2), 18.

Markham, T. (2011) "The political phenomenology of war reporting." *Journalism*, 12(5), 567–585.

Marsh, K. (2015, June 1) "'Hands up, don't shoot' never happened, but networks keep using it." *NewsBusters*. Retrieved from http://bit.ly/2dA4pKB

Marx, K. and Engels, F. (2002 [1848]). *The Communist Manifesto*. Retrieved from http://socialistregister.com/index.php/srv/article/viewFile/5709/2605

NBC Staff. (2014, November 30) "Rams players enter field in 'Hands up, don't shoot' pose." *NBCNews.com*. Retrieved from http://nbcnews.to/1vyhzbe

Parks, G. (1977) *A choice of weapons*. New York: Harper & Row.

Richardson, A. V. (2017) *Bearing Witness While Black: African Americans, Smartphones and the New Protest #Journalism*. Ph.D. dissertation.

Stoddart, M. C. (2007) "Ideology, hegemony, discourse: A critical review of theories of knowledge and power." *Social Thought & Research*, 191–225.

Tandoc, E. C. and Takahashi, B. (2016) "Journalists are humans, too: A phenomenology of covering the strongest storm on earth." *Journalism*, doi:10.1177/1464884916657518.

ThinkProgress. (2015) "Why disrupting political events is an essential tactic for Black Lives Matter." *ThinkProgress.org*. Retrieved from http://bit.ly/2d5nGyV

Thorson, K., Driscoll, K., Ekdale, B., Edgerly, S., Thompson, L. G., Schrock, A. and Wells, C. (2013) "YouTube, Twitter and the Occupy movement: Connecting content and circulation practices." *Information, Communication & Society*, 16(3), 421–451.

Toch, H. (2012) *Cop Watch: Spectators, Social Media, and Police Reform*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Wells, I. B. (1892) *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*. Auckland, NZ: The Floating Press.

15031-2005-PVI-029.indd 400 6/9/2018 4:41:21 PM