

#BlackLivesMatter News Coverage: Examining Racial Projects and Hegemonic Imagery

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Abstract

This study examines the theoretical concept of racial projects and how social institutions carry them out to support or challenge racial formation in a given society. In particular, it examines how news media outlets create divergent racial projects surrounding the #BlackLivesMatter movement while drawing on shared racial imagery existing in society through a qualitative content analysis of 83 news articles published in 2018 by *Slate* and *TheBlaze*, which are liberal and conservative news outlets, respectively. I outline how these organizations construct contradictory controlling images and advance two different racial projects in response to this contemporary racial justice movement. *Slate* ultimately advances a controlling image of prejudiced police to support a racial project I call *advancing anti-racism*. In contrast, *TheBlaze* deploys a controlling image of problematic protesters to support their racial project of *reproducing white supremacy*. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of these racial projects for the racial formation of the United States and the theoretical importance of racial projects carried out by social institutions and organizations more broadly.

Keywords: race, social movements, #BlackLivesMatter, controlling images, racial projects

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The social fabric of the United States' society has long been shaped by the issues of race and racism. In response to the perceived successes of the Civil Rights Movement, and even more so after the election of the first Black president, Barack Obama, some argued that we now live in a post-racial society. However, sociological scholarship outlines how race still shapes social structures, identities, and interactions in the contemporary era. *Racial formation theory* (Omi & Winant, 2015) is a structural theory of race and racism that conceptualizes racial formation as an ongoing structural process, partially carried out through racial projects. This study is designed to answer two questions regarding racial projects in society: First, how are racial projects carried out by social institutions (in this study, media outlets) to support or challenge the racial formation of a society? Second, how are racial projects with divergent stances created by drawing on similar hegemonic imagery? To answer these questions, I conducted a content analysis to investigate how racial projects are created by politically polarized news outlets in their coverage of #BlackLivesMatter (#BLM), a racial justice movement.¹

In this paper, I outline how racial formation theory, specifically the concepts of racial projects and racial hegemony, can help us understand how racial meaning is created to shape the racial structure in America's society. I will also discuss why looking at a racial justice movement such as #BlackLivesMatter as a case is an ideal point of analysis and why it is important to center race theory rather than social movement theory in this analysis. Ultimately, I find that the sources in my sample create divergent racial projects by deploying contrary controlling images of problematic protesters and prejudiced

police. These controlling images are primary mechanisms used to support opposing racial projects concerning American race relations, which I call *advancing anti-racism* and *reproducing white supremacy*. Based on these findings, I argue that no matter their audience or political stance, social institutions such as media outlets engage in racial projects by drawing on existing hegemonic ideas surrounding an effort to shape society's racial, social structure.

Guiding Frameworks and Concepts

Racial Projects and Social Movements

Racial formation theory (Omi & Winant, 2015) is a structural theory of race and racism that acknowledges race as a master category operating on a structural level to shape social outcomes. Racial ideologies, racial hegemonies, and racial projects are all a part of the overall process of racial formation that structures the racial hierarchy and race relations in a society. *Racial projects* are the interpretations, representations, and explanations of racial phenomena and the meaning we assign to them. They are taken on by actors on all societal levels, from individuals to whole institutions, to influence the distribution of resources across racial groups in a given society. They contribute to both the *racial hegemony*—pervasive, taken for granted, common-sense understandings of race—that guides microlevel interaction and the organization of institutionalized racial structures on meso and macro scales. These projects help create, maintain, contest, and destroy racial structures and hierarchies over time (Omi & Winant, 2015). Organizations and institutions play a crucial role in the racial formation process. *Racial hierarchy* is created and perpetuated between organizations at the macro-institutional level, within organizations at the meso level,

and among individual members of organizations and institutions at the macrolevel. As a result, organizations and institutions that take on racial projects act as racialized organizations by enhancing or diminishing racial groups' agency and shaping and legitimating the distribution of resources across racial groups (Ray, 2019).

Social movements are political projects that aim to produce some social change in the way a given society is organized. Movements (as cumulative actors, rather than looking at individual actors within movements) constitute racialized organizations to the extent that they take on racial projects that influence the distribution of resources and life chances across racial groups. #BlackLivesMatter fits this description because racial equality and the treatment of Black people are directly stated as its concerns. Responses to the movement by other institutions or organizations are also racial projects if they are efforts to affect the racial hierarchy or racial discourse in society. Understanding these racial projects and the ways they may affect the racial organization of society will give us a deeper understanding of the dynamics of racial justice movements (Bracey, 2016). This study examines news media organizations and interrogates how characterizations of the movement in news articles act as efforts to influence the racial discourse and structure of the United States.

Controlling Images and Racial Hegemony

Racial hegemony highlights the gradual shift in our racial hierarchy throughout American history, from a foundation of domination to one of racial common sense generally accepted in society, including those victimized by these understandings (Omi & Winant, 2015). The hegemonic narratives written or communicated through

media may influence our common understandings of race, guiding social interaction and the creation of racial structures that organize society. This may include our taken-for-granted narratives surrounding racial justice movements or their participants. Controlling images serve as supporting mechanisms in particular racial projects and the creation of racial hegemony, including in news media. These images consist of stereotypes that normalize inequality in people's daily lives with particular social identities (Collins, 2000). This normalization contributes to our common-sense understandings of different groups of people and their social standing in society. For example, controlling images of Black men as thugs or criminals (Dow, 2016; Rome, 2004; Welch, 2007) is often used in news media narratives to rationalize instances of police brutality. Racialized controlling images deployed in the media influence the way people of different backgrounds relate to and interact with one another through their incorporation into racial hegemony. Controlling images to characterize the movement and those who participate in it in a particular light may be used to support racial projects to either discredit or legitimize the movement, which then influences the perspectives of American citizens. This study recognizes the power of controlling images in creating hegemonic narratives and seeks to uncover how they contribute to racial projects taken on by social institutions or organizations. While news media coverage of #BlackLivesMatter is used as a case study here, the framework of this study could be used to examine the creation of competing racial projects by various organizations and institutions that likely shape public opinion and social discourse on a range of racialized topics, influencing the social and political development of the United States.

Centering Race Theory to Study Racial Justice Movements

While the primary theoretical focus of this study is an extension of our understanding of racial formation processes, the framing used here has important implications for the study of social movements, particularly racial justice movements. Throughout history, social movements have served as mechanisms of social change, particularly in pursuing justice and civil rights for vulnerable populations such as marginalized racial groups. Scholars define *social movements* as collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional channels to promote or resist change within the group, society, or world order of which it is a part (McAdam & Snow, 1997). Studies in the social movements literature generally center on examinations of movement emergence, processes of recruitment and participation (micromobilization), and movement dynamics (operation, functions, and outcomes). Despite the known importance of these social structures for oppressed racial groups and the recognition of race or ethnicity as an axis of domination essential to understanding social movements (Oliver, 2017), studies of social movements generally fail to integrate sociostructural frameworks that center race in their analyses.

While studying social movement emergence, mobilization, and dynamics is important, I argue that to take race seriously in social movements research, we must also understand the social structures and environment in which racial and ethnic movements operate. This means going beyond studying movements directly to examine contexts in which minority movements are fighting for change. *Political*

process theory (McAdam, 1999), a dominant social movements framework, was developed to examine the Civil Rights Movement and examine contextual factors external to them. However, it fails to critically theorize race or the societal racial structure in which it took place (Bracey, 2016). Centering race and interrogating power structures built on race in the study of social movements is an important yet underutilized way to ensure that knowledge production does not reproduce structural inequality (Watkins Liu, 2018). By using #BlackLivesMatter as a case and using racial formation theory (Omi & Winant, 2015) as a framework for understanding racial justice movements and their social context, this paper aims to provide an explicitly race-conscious analysis of news coverage and the ways it shapes social organization in society.

The Case of #BlackLivesMatter

Although the Civil Rights Movement happened more than 50 years ago, 97% of Americans polled still identify racism as an ongoing issue in our society to some degree—58% of whom consider it a big problem (Neal, 2017). One of the most notable contemporary responses to this ongoing issue has been the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which some consider the 21st-century iteration of the Civil Rights Movement (Day, 2015). #BlackLivesMatter as a movement started as a social media hashtag project by three Black female activists (Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi) in 2013 in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of a young and innocent Black boy named Trayvon Martin (Howard University, n.d.). "Black Lives Matter" as a phrase or slogan pertains to many things: a hashtag, social movement, global network, and call to action.

Holistically, #Black Lives Matter can be described as:

an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise ... [and] an affirmation of Black folks' humanity, our contributions to this society, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression. (Black Lives Matter, n.d.)

Cumulatively, this ideology consists of thirteen principles,² aimed toward leadership development and the empowerment of the Black community (Black Lives Matter, n.d.). Unlike the Civil Rights Movement, though, #BlackLivesMatter is a decentralized movement and set of networks (i.e., Black Lives Matter Inc., Black Lives Matter) without official leaders, although some activists may stand out or be more well-known than others (Cutolo, 2021). As a result, perceptions of the movement may be influenced by the behavior and statements of many, including the organizations that strive to carry out the principles of the movement.

Descriptive survey data shows that support for the movement is polarized, with Black people, Democrats, and younger age cohorts more likely to support the movement. These divisions make it important for us to consider what forces may be shaping these opinions. While the movement, its participants, and its supporters engage in the significant use of social media to spread their message and awareness of issues facing Black Americans, news media coverage of #BlackLivesMatter is largely outside the movement's control. Given the influential power of the media (Beaubien & Wyeth, 1994; McCombs, 2013; Nacos et al., 2011), news coverage of #BlackLivesMatter may contribute to the polarization of public opinion on the

movement across racial, political, and age-based lines (Easley, 2017; Horowitz & Livingston, 2016; Pew, 2016). However, these narratives have been explored very little in academic research up to this point. Most academic research on #BlackLivesMatter has primarily focused on how people use social media to participate in the movement (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Brown et al., 2017; Carney, 2016; Choudhury et al., 2016; Ince et al., 2017; Ray et al., 2017). Another large portion of the literature on #BlackLivesMatter consists of historical accounts and memoirs from activists who participate in the movement rather than scholarly research (Khan-Cullors & Bandele, 2018; Lebron, 2017; Lowery, 2016; Ransby, 2017; Taylor, 2016).

This study aims to extend our understanding of racial formation processes by examining politically polarized media outlets' advance divergent narratives about the #BlackLivesMatter movement as a case study for understanding how institutions and organizations engage in racial projects. Furthermore, the analysis points to the role of racialized organizations, such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), in the racial formation of society, specifically to racial justice movements. When narratives are written by politically polarized news sources, such as *Slate* and *TheBlaze*, which are examined here, they may create competing discourses of racial hegemony adopted by the different audiences they reach. However, to shape racial hegemony and discourse, these sources draw on existing hegemonic ideas to frame their perspectives and connect with their audience. This analysis demonstrates that the sources in the sample (*Slate* and *TheBlaze*) center their coverage of "Black Lives Matter" around themes of politics, policing, prejudice, and protest. However, despite shared themes, they create significantly different narratives about the

#BlackLivesMatter movement, partially through the deployment of contrary controlling images of protesters, and police that support opposing racial projects concerning American race relations. These racial projects are called *advancing anti-racism* and *reproducing white supremacy*, taken on by *Slate* and *TheBlaze*, respectively.

Methodology

To investigate the way social institutions and organizations engage in racial projects that shape the racial formation of society, I performed a content analysis of news articles on the #BlackLivesMatter movement as a case study. In this content analysis, I used a *critical discourse analysis* approach to examine the way discourse (in this case, media discourse) (re)produces or challenges systems of racial power and dominance (Fairclough, 1989; van Dijk, 1993). For my sample, I chose two politically opposing news sources—this allowed me to highlight the importance of the shared hegemonic discourse these sources draw upon even in creating divergent racial projects through news coverage of #BlackLivesMatter.

Data Collection

Articles were collected through purposive, theoretical sampling from two small online news sources from opposite ends of the political spectrum: *Slate* and *TheBlaze*. The former has a staunchly liberal audience, while the latter caters to those on the conservative end of the political spectrum (Engel, 2014). I conducted searches for articles in the online archives of each source using the terms "black lives matter," "#blacklivesmatter," and "BLM." The use of all three search terms allowed for the most comprehensive evaluation of

"Black Lives Matter" as both a movement, organization, and general social phenomenon. I ordered 10 pages of search results by date from *Slate* and then selected articles for the sample. Because *TheBlaze's* search engine does not have the same filter capabilities, I reviewed the list of results from the search and only pulled out articles written in 2018. Only including articles from 2018 creates an analysis that reflects the political and social climate #BlackLivesMatter operated within during this specific time period.

Articles were included in the final sample if their content covered race relations or sociopolitical topics on a societal level,⁴ regardless of whether #BlackLivesMatter was explicitly mentioned or was a main topic of the article. The sample was further refined by excluding articles that appeared in the search results but were wholly unrelated to #BlackLivesMatter or sociopolitical issues and articles that mention #BlackLivesMatter in the context of or in relation to fictional media.⁵ For each source, I collected the entire sample of articles available in each search that met these characteristics. This process resulted in a total sample of 83 articles, 31 from *Slate* and 52 from *TheBlaze*. While the majority (74%) of articles in the sample from *Slate* directly mention "Black Lives Matter," the opposite was true for the sample from *TheBlaze*. This implies that the racial project taken by *TheBlaze* rests upon a much broader foundation of information than *Slate*. Only text content (including tweets from Twitter users placed within the articles) was analyzed. Photos, videos, and captions were excluded. I used a word processor application to copy and store the articles in two documents organized by source. In addition to the body of the articles, their titles, authors, dates of publication, and URLs at the time of

collection were also included. Analysis was completed directly in these documents.

Data Analysis

Analysis for this study was performed primarily through thematic coding in line with established conventions of qualitative research (Charmaz, 1983, 2008). This analytic procedure consisted of two coding schemes. In my initial coding, each article was analyzed line-by-line, using open coding to identify recurring topics and content. In the second round, I used focused coding by integrating related initial codes into thematic categories. These categories are discussed in the analysis to explain the linguistic differences in the content of #BlackLivesMatter news coverage across the two sources. Due to my theoretical framework, I paid particular attention to issues of race, and the use of potential controlling images in descriptions of #BlackLivesMatter or people deemed to be associated with the movement, its affiliated organizations, or the phenomenon as a whole. However, in my analysis, I did not use predetermined themes in relation to this topic to avoid overlooking unexpected themes in the data. In an iterative process, I also returned to previously coded articles for additional coding if a theme arose that had not yet emerged when that article was coded.

Findings

Thematic analysis of articles from *Slate* and *TheBlaze* revealed that the two news organizations provide significantly different narratives about #BlackLivesMatter. By drawing on existing hegemonic knowledge about race, politics, and the movement, they construct contrary controlling images that help them connect with their audiences and potentially influence their perceptions of this

racial justice movement. *Slate* advances a controlling image of *prejudiced police* by identifying police brutality as a form of racial discrimination and, therefore, a social problem to be addressed. In contrast, *TheBlaze* deploys a controlling image of *problematic protesters* by painting #BlackLivesMatter participants as engaging in unjustified behavior in order to delegitimize the movement's actions and goals. These differences culminate in two competing hegemonic narratives about the movement communicated to the outlets' respective audiences. The first is *advancing anti-racism*—a liberal and supportive project taken on by the *Slate* that joins #BlackLivesMatter in interrogating America's existing racial hierarchy. Second, *TheBlaze's* project is *reproducing white supremacy*, which delegitimizes #BlackLivesMatter, downplays racial injustice, and aims to maintain the extant racial hierarchy in the United States. The sections below describe the content that typifies each racialized media organization's approach to supporting their racial project. To follow, I discuss the meaning and implications of these divergent narratives in the discussion section.

***TheBlaze* Sees Problematic Protesters, While *Slate* Sees Protests as Justified**

Articles published by *TheBlaze* deploy a controlling image of problematic protesters by repeatedly characterizing #BlackLivesMatter protesters and demonstrators as disruptive to society. This disruption was showcased in various contexts, painting #BlackLivesMatter as disruptive in both public and private spaces. For example, *TheBlaze* called attention to how protests of police brutality inconvenienced citizens, rather than focusing on the reason for the protest:

Sacramento police shot and killed an unarmed [B]lack man on Sunday in his grandparents' backyard while responding to a call about break-ins. Video was released Wednesday, and by Thursday, protests had disrupted the entire city. ...Protesters angry about the killing took to the streets Thursday, first mobilizing outside city hall with chants of "Come outside." Later, the crowds moved to Interstate 5, shutting down all traffic on the highway during rush hour. The protest eventually made its way to the Golden 1 Center, home of the Sacramento Kings basketball team. ...Before the game, protesters locked arms outside the arena and blocked thousands of patrons from entering. The start of the game was delayed, but the NBA opted not to cancel. For the safety of patrons, the Kings closed the doors of the arena to fans who hadn't already gotten inside, offering refunds to those who were forced to miss the game. (Colen, 2018a)

In this excerpt, the writer described a trail of disturbance that #BlackLivesMatter protesters created over time in Sacramento. While they note that these actions were in response to the police killing of an unarmed Black man, they are far more focused on the disruption they created for residents of the city. First, they characterized the protesters as disrupting "the entire city" (Colen, 2018a). Given that Sacramento covers 100 square miles and has a population of over half a million people, this is a stretch. They also highlighted that #BlackLivesMatter protesters blocked traffic during rush hour, heightening the sense of disruption since this is a significantly busier time. Lastly, the writer characterized #BlackLivesMatter as a disruption to not only Kings' fans but to the NBA organization itself. Not only did they keep fans out of the arena by blocking the

doors, but they financially disrupted the organization by forcing them to shut the doors and provide refunds to fans who ended up blocked from attending.

The controlling image of protesters in this politically conservative outlet is not restricted to #BlackLivesMatter protests of police brutality. *TheBlaze* articles make the point that Black Lives Matter as an organization threatens to disrupt other social contexts as well, such as in the institution of education:

After a video recently surfaced of controversial University of Pennsylvania law professor Amy Wax saying she didn't believe she knew of a black student graduating in the top quarter of the class, the tenured prof kept her job—but was barred from teaching first-year students as a result of her remarks. But for the leader of Black Lives Matter Pennsylvania [BLM Chapter] Penn Law isn't going far enough. In fact, Asa Khalif said he told the school it must fire Wax or face major disruptions on the Philadelphia campus—including disrupting classes and organizing protests—that could commence as soon as Friday. (Urbanski, 2018a)

This article excerpt highlights that the controlling image of Black Lives Matter protesters is more comprehensive than their protests of police brutality. The writer described the threat of disruption to a college campus in response to the actions of university personnel perceived as racist. While they noted the reason for these potential protests was "controversial" behavior, they abstained from calling this out as racism or diving deeper into its effects on Black students and did not justify the protests as a necessary or appropriate response to those racist actions.

To take this controlling image of #BlackLivesMatter as a societal disruption even further, articles from this source noted that #BlackLivesMatter activists even disrupt the private lives of individual citizens rather than just disrupting public spaces:

[#BlackLivesMatter] activists on Saturday crashed the wedding of one of the police officers linked to the fatal shooting of Stephon Clark. ...[P]rotesters showed up on the day of the unnamed officer's wedding, barging into a room where the groom was gathered with his groomsmen just hours ahead of his nuptials. ...Sacramento Police Sgt. Vance Chandler ... said that he couldn't fathom a purpose behind disturbing a man on his wedding day. (Taylor, 2018)

Here, the writer described #BlackLivesMatter protestors as inappropriately disrupting the wedding day of a police officer. Instead of recognizing that this disruption to the officer's private life may be similar to (but much less drastic than) the disruption to the private life of Stephon Clark's family, they described this act as unfathomable. In all three of these examples, *TheBlaze* painted #BlackLivesMatter and its protests as societal nuisances and disruptions preventing social order in society.

Instead of characterizing protesters as disruptive, *Slate* articles advanced a more positive (or at least neutral) image of #BlackLivesMatter protesters. Their articles countered the controlling image of problematic protesters advanced in *TheBlaze* by highlighting that similar, or even more disruptive, white collective action is not received or characterized the same way in society:

The media often uses a racist double-standard to evaluate the behavior of white sports fans as compared with that of [B]lack civil rights protesters. White people flipping over cars? Boys will be boys. Black people blocking traffic? There's a riot going on. ...The question we should be asking now is not why sports rioters are not more severely punished, but how we can convince police departments to show that same good faith and tolerance toward groups like [#BlackLivesMatter] or anti-Trump protesters. There is no different handbook at work here. Good-natured crowd control isn't reserved for sports, but for white people—it was on display, for example, at the 2017 Women's Marches, where officers greeted marchers in uniform, not in riot gear. (Grabar, 2018)

Here, the *Slate* writer described how the actions of Black civil rights protestors are evaluated differently than white protestors of other issues, including when compared to white sports fans who cause significant physical damage in celebration of a favorite team. They also promoted the idea that the issue is not how these different groups behave but how police respond to the different groups and that this difference is based on race and white privilege.

In addition to pointing out differential treatment of their participants, *Slate* articles also combat the controlling image of problematic protesters by contextualizing, explaining, and supporting the actions of #BlackLivesMatter protesters:

The [#BlackLivesMatter] protests that brought new attention to the problems of police violence and systemic racism in 2014 and 2015 saw similar action from

teenagers and other young people.
(Bouie, 2018)

The excerpt above comes from an article that promoted an argument in favor of enfranchising teenagers across the nation so that they could participate in politics through voting in addition to protesting. As a part of this argument, they used youth participation in #BlackLivesMatter protests as a supporting reason. This paints participation in #BlackLivesMatter protests not as disruptive but as a worthy and progressive political cause. *Slate* articles also justified #BlackLivesMatter's actions directly, such as in the excerpt below:

Thousands of protesters marched in Chicago on Saturday to call attention to gun-related deaths and the need for jobs, education, and infrastructure in the city. The protesters shut down all northbound lanes on I-94 for about an hour. The marchers, organized by ChicagoStrong and led by the Rev. Jesse Jackson and the Rev. Michael Pfleger, chanted "Stop the killing." In the past year, 501 of Chicago's 578 homicides have been shootings, according to the Chicago Tribune's homicide tracker; most of the victims are [B]lack men in the city's South and West sides. (Pollard, 2018)

Here the writer described #BlackLivesMatter protests as against a variety of social ills facing the Black community in Chicago, including violence in the form of police brutality and otherwise. So, instead of quickly noting the reason for the protests, they justify that action by providing evidence as to why it is valid, specifically in homicide statistics and recognition that Black men are disproportionately affected by this issue. The culmination of these tactics exemplifies a very different narrative surrounding the

#BlackLivesMatter protests (as a movement) in *Slate* compared to in *TheBlaze*.

***Slate* Sees Prejudiced Police, While *TheBlaze* Sees Police Violence as Justified**

In addition to advancing different narratives about #BlackLivesMatter's impact on society and citizens, the two sources also differ in their positions on #BlackLivesMatter and its main cause: disproportionate police violence against the Black community. *Slate* describes police violence as prejudice and discrimination in the form of brutality or excessive use of force, in line with the narrative of #BlackLivesMatter. As a result, they characterize police violence as protest-worthy rather than as justified use of force. To get this point across to readers, they deploy a controlling image of prejudiced police by consistently contextualizing police violence as a broader pattern rather than as isolated instances. For example:

In another instance of violence that left Black Lives Matter activists crying out against racism in policing, a white officer in the city of Asheville, North Carolina, punched, choked, and used a stun gun on an unarmed [B]lack man he was pursuing for allegedly jaywalking. (Olmstead, 2018)

Rose's death is part of a pattern of predominantly white police officers fatally shooting unarmed [B]lack people in the U.S. In recent years, there have been several high-profile cases of [B]lack men being shot in the back by police officers. (Werthan, 2018)

In the two excerpts above (from separate articles), the incidents described are cited as part of a larger pattern through language like "*another* instance" and "*several* high-profile

cases" [emphasis added]. Contextualizing incidents of police brutality as part of a pattern delegitimizes these incidents because they are no longer viewed in a vacuum. This justifies the protest action by #BlackLivesMatter (and others) in response to individual incidents of police brutality.

In other content, the *Slate* does not just state that incidents of police brutality are part of a larger pattern worthy of protest; they support this assertion with statistical data on the frequency of police shootings and the comparably low rate of arrests and convictions for those murders:

Few police officers who shoot civilians ever face a trial. Research estimates that there are approximately 1,000 police shootings each year in the U.S. However, between 2005 and April 2017, only 80 officers were arrested for manslaughter or murder for police shootings. Of those, only 35 percent were convicted. Slager's conviction broke from that pattern, but it is unclear whether Rosfeld will face similar consequences for shooting Rose. The Rose family's attorney, Lee Merritt, said the family is "going through the highs and lows that is common to this kind of situation from disbelief to anger to determination to get justice." A preliminary hearing is set for July 6. (Werthan, 2018)

By juxtaposing these rates, they highlight that not only are the killings protest-worthy, but the lack of accountability for those who commit them is protest-worthy as well.

In contrast, *TheBlaze* articles used language to describe instances of police violence that justify or rationalize police behavior. As a result, they advance a

narrative of police violence as a legitimate use of force rather than brutality. The excerpt below focused on what the officers thought led to their use of force rather than the factual conditions of the events in question:

Vance Chandler, a department spokesman, said ... "Prior to the shooting, the involved officers saw the suspect facing them, advance forward with his arms extended, and holding an object in his hands. At the time of the shooting, the officers believed the suspect was pointing a firearm at them," the department said in a news release. "Fearing for their safety," the officers fired multiple rounds at Clark at 9:26 p.m., hitting him several times, the department said. "After an exhaustive search, scene investigators did not locate any firearms." (Pruet, 2018)

While the writer acknowledged that the victim of the police shooting was unarmed, this was not the focus of the narrative they advanced about the incident. Instead, they describe what led the officers to shoot the victim, focusing on the officers' stated belief that the victim did have a weapon and that they were in imminent danger. They also described police efforts to find the nonexistent weapon as "exhaustive." While they were incorrect and unsuccessful, the use of this adjective still speaks to their characterization of police as putting out a great deal of effort in their job, which could be viewed as an effort to legitimize their actions.

This writing pattern is consistent across instances of police violence in *TheBlaze* coverage. This outlet describes the perceived conditions that led to officers' actions, justifying their behavior in a way that makes these incidents a less worthy cause for

concern and protest.

After receiving 911 calls about a man threatening people with a gun Wednesday, New York City police officers fatally shot a mentally ill man who was unarmed but had been pointing a silver pipe at passers-by as if it was a gun. ...Police received three 911 calls from people reporting that a man with a silver gun was pointing it at others and threatening them. Five officers responded to the calls, and when they arrived on the scene, Vassell "took a two-handed shooting stance and pointed an object at the approaching officers," according to NYPD Chief Terence Monahan." (Colen, 2018b)

In the excerpt above, the writer described the unarmed victim as a perceived threat that warranted the officers' actions. To support this position, the writer also noted that they received not one but three 911 calls from citizens, making the threat seem legitimate enough that the victim's death was not a result of police prejudice but of probable cause.

Even in instances where they recognize the position of #BlackLivesMatter protesters or other racial justice groups, *TheBlaze* journalists take the same position. This is exemplified by the following excerpt about the deaths of two Black men in Portland and the reaction of Portland Equity in Action (PEA) to the incidents.

Members call the deaths of Terrell Johnson, a man shot and killed by a Portland police officer last year, and Larnell Bruce, a man run down outside a Gresham 7-Eleven in 2016, unjust. Johnson died May 10, 2017, after police [said] he threatened people with a knife at the Flavel Street Max station. A grand

jury ruled deadly force by the officer was justified. Bruce died in August 2016 after a fight with a man and his girlfriend in the 18700 block of East Burnside Street. Bruce ran from the scene but was chased down by the couple and run over by a 1991 Jeep Wrangler, according to police. (Urbanski, 2018b)

Following the summary of PEA's position on the matter, they took a different angle in their description of those events provided information to the contrary. In both cases, they emphasized that the victims were engaged in violent behavior and that in one case, the deadly force used by the police was found justified, while in the other, the victim was actually killed by someone other than the police. This position downplays the role of police behavior in facilitating events, regardless of who pulled the trigger or why they may have been pursuing the victims as suspects.

Controlling Images and Racial Projects

The divergent narratives surrounding protest and police violence taken on by these sources contribute to opposing racial projects. The way this source draws on hegemonic knowledge of policing and race relations delegitimizes the need for the movement (#BlackLivesMatter) in general by discussing police violence not as a systemic issue but as isolated incidents. By highlighting factors in individual cases to justify officer decisions to use deadly force, *TheBlaze* obscures police brutality as a pattern of race-based maltreatment and discrimination. Following this source's logic, #BlackLivesMatter is not a necessary social movement, and those who participate in #BlackLivesMatter protests do not have legitimate grievances and are disruptive to society. Therefore, *TheBlaze* polices and delegitimizes #BlackLivesMatter through

consistently deploying the problematic protesters controlling image. This delegitimization supports a racial project aimed at reproducing white supremacy in America, based largely in conservative politics, and aimed toward preventing substantial change to race relations. This racial project justifies the existing racial hierarchy in America, which keeps whites at the top and Blacks at the bottom—one that #BlackLivesMatter is attempting to disrupt or dismantle.

Conversely, *Slate* characterizes the #BlackLivesMatter protests as legitimate political action needed to address the pattern of negative social outcomes endured by Black Americans. Instead of policing protest behavior, they are critical of police behavior and repeatedly advance a controlling image of prejudiced police who engage in racially prejudiced police brutality. They explicitly situate these incidents of police violence in a larger narrative of racial injustice that disproportionately affects Black Americans. *Slate's* articles attempt to provide supporting evidence for the need for #BlackLivesMatter as a racial protest movement by contextualizing police brutality rather than examining incidents in a vacuum. While they do not hide the fact that some of #BlackLivesMatter's actions (and Black Lives Matter as an organization) may be disruptive, their efforts to justify these actions point to their engagement in a racial project that highlights the racial injustice of the existing hierarchy in the United States and aspires to an anti-racist America. This racial project is based on liberal politics and supports the #BlackLivesMatter movement by interrogating America's existing racial hierarchy and highlighting racial inequality. By identifying racial bias so that it can be eradicated in the long run, their racial project aims to create a more equal and just playing field across racial groups in the

United States.

Discussion

This content analysis study examined news media coverage of the #BlackLivesMatter movement in polarized new media as a case study for understanding how social institutions carry out racial projects to support or challenge the racial formation of a society. In particular, the analysis illuminates how social institutions or organizations can create racial projects with divergent stances while drawing on similar hegemonic imagery. Within the 83 articles collected from *Slate* and *TheBlaze*, I found that news organizations support divergent racial projects despite drawing on shared content and themes of politics, policing, prejudice, and protest. Three primary mechanisms facilitate the creation of divergent narratives while drawing on the hegemonic knowledge prevalent in society surrounding these themes. First, the distribution of topical themes and subthemes between sources provides different levels of emphasis on particular issues and supports different bodies of knowledge about #BlackLivesMatter. Second, each source deploys different controlling images; while *Slate* deploys a controlling image of prejudiced police, *TheBlaze* uses a controlling image of problematic protesters. These controlling images police the behaviors of different groups, which is policed reflects a larger political agenda or racial project either in support of or against the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Lastly, *Slate* and *TheBlaze* privilege different voices in the narration of instances of police brutality, creating a further divergence between the hegemonic narratives and bodies of knowledge transmitted to their audiences. In culmination, these mechanisms highlight the existence of two competing hegemonic narratives and racial

projects. First is *Slate*, which legitimizes #BlackLivesMatter and supports a liberal racial project to deconstruct the existing racial hierarchy in America based on discrimination toward Blacks. I have called this racial project by *Slate* as advancing anti-racism. Second is the narrative and racial project taken on by *TheBlaze*, reproducing white supremacy, which delegitimizes the movement and supports the existing racial hierarchy in the United States.

Contributions

This study has three main contributions to our theoretical understandings of racial formation and social movements. First, this study is a step toward remedying a common issue in analyses of racial justice movements: the lack of concepts and theoretical frameworks that prioritize and critically consider race and race relations. To do so, I used racial formation theory (Omi & Winant, 2015) as a framework to understand racial projects in support of or against racial justice movements as part of the racialized societal landscape in which they operate. This centers race in the analysis in a way that dominant theoretical paradigms in the social movements' literature, such as political process theory, often fail to do. Similarly, I center the Collins's (2000) concept of controlling images in my analysis of how these news organizations interpret and disseminate knowledge about #BlackLivesMatter rather than using concepts such as framing (Snow & Benford, 1992; Snow et al., 1986) from the social movements' literature. This approach explicitly focuses on the power dynamics inherent to race as a construct rather than a more abstract approach to meaning-making processes that may not pay as much attention to these factors. Bracey (2016) and Watkins Liu (2018) emphasize that we cannot truly understand the

dynamics of social movements aimed at racial justice through a white racial frame, commonly used by traditional social movements theories. Because race is a master category and structural force in society (Omi & Winant, 2015), it must be given more primacy in analyses of racial justice activism.

By examining news media organizations as actors that engage in racial projects, this study extends the literature on the role of racialized organizations (Ray, 2019) in processes of racial formation. As social actors, institutions or organizations create racial projects with the potential to constrain or facilitate the agency of marginalized racial groups and shape the distributions of resources across racial groups. *Slate's* racial project works to enhance the agency of #BlackLivesMatter by legitimating the movement and supporting the need for a redistribution of resources that provides more equity for the Black community. In contrast, *TheBlaze's* racial project attempts to prevent any redistribution of resources across racial lines by delegitimizing #BlackLivesMatter and constraining the movement's ability to create change. By attending to the activity of organizations and institutions outside of the social movement sector, we can better understand how various institutions shape racial formation even if their efforts to do so are not as explicit as racial justice movements.

This study's third contribution highlights the functions of hegemony in constraining the way social organizations and institutions disseminate narratives associated with racial projects. Regardless of their stances, the shared focuses between the two sources analyzed here demonstrate how organizations must draw on similar bodies of hegemonic knowledge to communicate with their audiences and be perceived as

legitimate. However, in their use of controlling images and linguistic approaches, they are able to use that shared extant hegemony to produce divergent racial projects aimed at producing new hegemonic narratives that have the potential to shape the racial formation of society. While we may still be in an age of media hegemony (Block, 2013), the United States has also moved into an age of concern over fake news. As a result, many people may be turning to more specialized news outlets, like the two analyzed in this study, that better match their own social and political perspectives. It seems more appropriate for the future scholarship of this nature to pay attention to the existence of multiple media hegemonies rather than assuming that media create a singular and dominant hegemony.

Limitations

Differential search engine capabilities and algorithm-based limits and biases are two main challenges of search algorithms (Rainie & Anderson, 2017) that impacted the construction of the sample for this study. Whether the search results are based on the technology and math involved in computer search algorithms or the way articles are organized and tagged by people working at the respective news outlets, people who search for information on #BlackLivesMatter are likely to be exposed to these articles. As a result, this exposure ties the issues discussed in the articles to #BlackLivesMatter as part of a larger racial project and hegemonic narrative. If only articles that explicitly mentioned or focused on #BlackLivesMatter were included in the sample, relevant information about the coverage impacting readers' perceptions of the movement would have been obscured. Due to these factors, search results were reviewed to determine their related topic, and only articles that fit certain parameters

were collected and included in the final sample.

Future Study

While the unique cases of *Slate* and *TheBlaze* provide an interesting window through which to examine racial projects in media, these sources may not be representative of news coverage even among smaller outlets. For this reason, future research on racial projects in media (about #BlackLivesMatter and otherwise) should investigate other sources and racial projects taken on by the Black Lives Matter organization or other types of organizations, charities, and institutions. In addition, future studies should also examine whether these patterns remain consistent over larger periods of time. While the themes and patterns I observed were consistent throughout the year-long period of articles my sample covered, looking back at news coverage of the movement in its earlier development may not reveal the same themes. This may also be true of coverage of Black Lives Matter and #BlackLivesMatter in the future, given that it is still ongoing.

In addition, future studies should also examine whether these patterns remain consistent over larger spans of time. While the themes and patterns I observed were consistent throughout the year-long period of articles my sample covered, narratives written about the movement may change over time. These changes are important in the context of how the media outlets impact racial formation through the racial projects they take on through their coverage of race-based social movements. Therefore, future research should examine such potential shifts in messaging over time by analyzing coverage at other points in time, both earlier in the movement's development and in its future stages, given that it is still ongoing.

Conclusion

Through thematic analysis of one year of news coverage of the #BlackLivesMatter movement from two separate news organizations, I provide a case study of how social institutions and organizations engage in racial projects to shape the racial formation of society. I find that even though these sources largely discuss the same issues and events, they differ in their use of controlling images and advance divergent racial projects in response to #BlackLivesMatter. While it may seem evident that news organizations produce narratives in line with their political leanings, this study illuminates through what processes this is achieved. To the extent that people rely on the news or organizations for information on #BlackLivesMatter (among other topics), they are likely receiving a very specific set of messages about #BlackLivesMatter as a movement based on the racial projects taken on by those sources and organizations. However, by drawing on hegemonic knowledge to connect with their audience, both legitimize their racial projects and hegemonic narratives they disseminate to shape society's racial formation. If we interpret what we read in the news as legitimate and these narratives become hegemonic, taken for granted knowledge among those who consume them, this will only continue to polarize the American public on racial issues. More importantly, these divergent racial projects taken on by the news sources themselves comprise and contribute to larger racial projects in our society. The project taken on by *Slate*, advancing anti-racism, aligns with the project taken on by #BlackLivesMatter itself and supports the idea that racial inequity is still a rampant problem in America. Meanwhile, the racial project taken on by *TheBlaze*, reproducing white supremacy, exemplifies the ongoing

attempts of conservatives and whites to downplay racial injustice and maintain their privileged position in the existing United States racial hierarchy. Unfortunately, the existence of these competing hegemonies in news media suggests that America's racist structure and its foundation will not be changing anytime soon unless the racial project associated with *Slate* and #BlackLivesMatter triumphs over that of *TheBlaze* and white supremacy.

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Footnotes

- ¹ For consistency purposes in the *Understanding & Dismantling Privilege's* special issue "All #BlackLivesMatter!" Special Issue Editor Sheramiah Arki defines "Black Lives Matter" verbiage as follow: #*BlackLivesMatter* (#BLM) with the hashtag to refer to the movement at large that started with the hashtag project in 2013; *Black Lives Matter* (BLM) without the hashtag to signify the charity organization and its affiliating chapters and resulting network⁶; and in quotation marks "Black Lives Matter" as the umbrella term or slogan (Howard University, n.d.; S. Mayer, personal communication, February 7, 2022).
- ² The 13 principles that make up the ideology of #BlackLivesMatter include: diversity, restorative justice, globalism, queer affirmation, unapologetic Blackness, collective value, empathy, loving engagement, transgender affirmation, Black villages, Black families, Black women, and an intergenerational approach. Retrieved from <https://www.dcareeducators4socialjustice.org/black-lives-matter/13-guiding-principles>
- ³ Definitions of what was included in these four categorical themes are included in both the methods and results sections.
- ⁴ Articles talking about the experiences of a singular person were not included unless they were explicitly linked to #BlackLivesMatter within the article.
- ⁵ Exceptions were made when the articles compared media representations to real-life sociopolitical issues rather than simply analyzing what happened in the fictional media in question.
- ⁶ For more information on the Black Lives Matter organization and its racial project initiatives, go to <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>