Networking #Ferguson: An Ethnographic Study of Ferguson Protesters' Online-Offline Community Mobilization

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This paper presents the results of a qualitative, ethnographic study of participants in the 2014 Ferguson protest, exploring the intersection of the movement's online, social and mobile media uses and its offline community-building and mobilization. It is the result of dozens of interviews with protesters, collected on-site during various protest actions in Ferguson, Missouri during the days following Michael Brown's death in August 2014. For Ferguson protesters, it was participatory, online media—social and mobile media, in particular—that greatly strengthened the offline practices of solidarity, community, and togetherness through the act of sharing. Participants found that using participatory media as a connective, community discursive space to share information established grassroots counter-narratives to mainstream media accounts, but more importantly, this sharing created affective connections that built strong ties within the community, ties that greatly encouraged and rewarded offline mobilization and knowledge-sharing. As with other contemporary technology-embedded social movements, the Ferguson protests suggest new evidence that these types of movements continue to serve as a laboratory for emerging democratic practices, one with new online, mobile tools used in spaces that intersect with offline efforts, such as boots-on-the-ground organization, strategy development and community mobilization.

Keywords: Ferguson; Social Media; Community Building; Mobilization; Ethnography

ichael Brown was killed by Officer Darren Wilson on August 9, 2014. Brown, 18, was shot in Ferguson, a generally poor, predominantly black neighbourhood of 21,000 residents adjacent to St. Louis, Missouri, following his theft of several small items from a local convenience store, and an alleged confrontation with Wilson on a residential street. Brown was African-American; Wilson was white. The first known public reporting of this event—'I JUST SAW SOMEONE DIE OMFG'—was minutes after the shooting, when Emmanuel Freeman (@TheePharoah) saw the killing from his apartment window and posted to Twitter, essentially live-tweeting the shooting (Crilly 2014). Some witnesses claimed that Brown had his hands up, when he was shot; Various other police and authorities claimed that he was reaching for Officer Wilson's gun (US Department of Justice 2015a). Brown's body would remain in the street for over four hours at the site of the shooting (Sanchez and Lawler 2015).

Brown's killing sparked immediate protests and mass demonstrations in Ferguson, and later, worldwide, in a dramatic unfolding of events that news media heavily reported and discussed. The vast majority of protests were non-violent, but clashes between protesters and police did occur, as well as property crimes, including robbery, arson, and vandalism (Sanchez and Lawler 2015). Police responded with massive force, with military-grade equipment and vehicles, shooting rubber bullets and tear gas into the crowd of protesters. Over 400 would be arrested at protests in the region (Wulfhorst, Wallis, and McAllister 2014). The city enacted curfews, which were generally ignored by protesters, and soon after, Missouri governor Jay Nixon granted the State Highway Patrol authority over local police in an attempt to ease tensions between protesters and the authorities (Schwartz, Shear, and Paulson 2014). Several weeks of protest action would follow in Ferguson and surrounding communities of St. Louis, but the legacy the issues raised by this event would spark nationwide conversations over race, class, and policing (Lowery 2017). In late November 2014, the grand jury in St. Louis County did not indict Officer Wilson, which led to a resurgence in action, both peaceful and violent, as well as continued debate, dialogue and community organization that continues today, both online and offline (Ferguson and Roberts 2014; Sanchez and Lawler 2015). In 2015, the US Justice Department would conclude that there was overwhelming evidence that the Ferguson Police Department acted with "discriminatory intent" through a "focus on revenue rather than…public safety needs" and that the "police and municipal court practices both reflect and exacerbate racial bias, including racial stereotypes…disparities that adversely impact African Americans" (US Department of Justice 2015, 2).

The 2014 events in Ferguson were a landmark moment in understanding the current intersection of discourse on race, class, and media: The killing of Michael Brown that August became a touchstone for global consciousness and attention to turn toward the contemporary experiences of racialized peoples in the United States, especially with the subsequent (and often filmed) publicity of police killings of numerous other African Americans, and the longevity of the #blacklivesmatter hashtag and movement that effectively began with Brown's death.

Yet why was this? The narrative of it all—black male shot by white police officer—is common enough to become a banality in the United States: For years, a black or Latino person has been shot by police on average more than once a day[*]. What was it about the killing of Michael Brown that made this one different?

[*] There are no reliable statistics on police homicides in the United States. The Federal Bureau of Investigation maintains a database of deadly police shootings, but police department reporting is voluntary, and generally assumed to be considerably underreported (Lowery 2016; Wines 2014). Following the police killings of several unarmed black individuals in 2014, several journalistic outlets

This paper explores the role that participatory media—social and mobile media platforms, in particular—played for the protesters in Ferguson as network-centric, technology-embedded social movement, and one that hybridized its online discursive exchanges with its offline mobilizations. This study is the result of on-the-ground ethnographic interviews at various protest sites in St. Louis conducted in August 2014 in the days following the killing of Michael Brown.

Ferguson, as a technology-embedded social movement, is representative of a new form of social justice action that has emerged in the past several years, one whose online-offline assembly weaves a complex matrix of ties and network-based connections in a formation of community, belonging, and affective connection. These technologies function of a mediatisation of both race and class: for the residents of Ferguson, the 2014 demonstrations were not the first protests of race-based policing, but they proved to be among the most significant in United States history, and among the most lasting in terms of spawning a larger movement.

The protests in Ferguson were the result of a specific conjuncture that represented a specific, contextual lived experience, one that has its own practices and complexities, its own identity, its own uses of technologies and network orientations and structures. Yet it is equally important to place this individual movement within the trajectory of the post-2010 social movements around the world, movements that utilize online social and mobile media, but primarily rely on offline strategies of information- and knowledge-exchange to amass, mobilize, organize, and share for social action. In looking at the intersection of hybridized online-offline networks that are mediating intersectional formations of race, class, and identity, the exigency is imperative for researchers to better understand how technology-embedded social movements navigate the diversity of information, narratives, and values, but most importantly, how social movements' utilization of these networks of information and technology can foster justice, equity, and democracy.

Networked Communities and Technology-Embedded Social Movements

Today, the flows of information that occur through the practices and networks of online communication increasingly mediate the offline politics of social forms in all part of social life, but particularly for the post-2010 technology-embedded social movement. The sharing nature of participatory media has allowed for lateral, grassroots communities to be built in a way that has not been possible until quite recently, but has also allowed for new mediatizations where shared experiences can lead to an expanded collective consciousness and action (Bennett 2004; Castells 2013; Fuchs 2006; Juris 2012). The integration of online-offline flows of knowledge and information with the affective connections that build communities of practice creates hybridized spaces to discursively generate not only ideas, knowledge, narratives, and information, but also serve as a platform for affective exchange ,(Berlant 2011; Butler 2015; Carty 2015; Castells 2013; Dartnell 2006). The importance for researchers of understanding these relationships is crucial, as Juris (2008) notes that scholars and activists must better understand "how newly emerging digitally powered networks operate and how periodic mass actions might lead to long-term social transformation" (5).

Yet while the role of participatory media is clearly central to any social movement in this era, it is important to remember that these platforms are not deterministic. They do not function as a plug-and play technology for democracy, nor as leading to an automatic unfolding of spontaneous self-organization of a disaffected public. This is despite the techno-optimism of many popular accounts: Those heralding the

began keeping their own records for subsequent years. The Washington Post's database (2016, 2017) for example, reported 431 police homicides of black and Latino individuals in (excluding mixed or unknown race), and 393 for 2016. Research continues to be ongoing on the actual number of police shootings.

dawn of the 'Twitter Revolution' or the 'Facebook Rebellion' (Andersen 2011; Beaumont 2011) commonly offer overblown accounts that tend to essentialize the nature of the specific circumstances, community, and lived experience of any online social movement, while subsequently creating a myopic narrative that discounts or ignores the effectiveness, and indeed, the risk, of offline gatherings in space, especially in a highly racialized atmosphere of policing and state violence (Butler 2015; Tufekci 2017).

Yet as in the pre-networked age, community is central to any effective social movement (Willson 2006). Community, itself, remains a contested concept. Social groups' online and offline belonging and togetherness are complex practices , especially when new, participatory technologies weave a cultural politics into mediations of everyday life and offline conceptualizations of the self (Bennett 2004; Willson 2006). The mainstreaming of participatory digital technologies both amplifies and complicates these tensions, especially in terms of how any individual relates to another in a politicized cultural environment, either online, offline, or in a hybridized environment (Allen 2013; Fuchs 2006).

For activist communities, however, the interconnections of socialization, self-organization, shared consciousness, and strategic action offer new political possibilities through the process of building networks, particularly through affective connections and discourse, since feeling-together offers the first step in being-together as an amassed body politic (Berlant 2011; Butler 2015; Dartnell 2006; Melucci 1996; Nancy 2000). Castells (1996, 2012), for example, argues that new networks of connectivity offers the possibility for social change through creating networks of online and offline togetherness, and particularly when the role of the individual is one placed in the context with a larger, cultural collective of discursive actors. Similarly, Wellman et al. (2003) argue for the conceptualization of a "networked individualism" of sharing with one another, but doing so in a context of collective decision-making and expression. And Juris (2008) discusses the way that a network structure emerges through the interpersonal and discursive connections within a framework of shared or overlapping political and social goals. For Juris, the effective modern social movement is derived from a "cultural logic of networking" (11) built on a foundation of horizontal connections between autonomous forms, information circulation, collaboration and consensus-making, and self-directed networking.

Yet simply understanding the role of the individual within a community is not enough: this relationship must be placed within the context of the material, lived, online-offline experience and emotions of the individuals. Willson (2006) argues that it is important to remember that despite the macro-level view that is often tempting in its reductionism of complex communities, it is the individual that is at the center of interconnectedness, the active producer whose act of communicating is as important as the content, itself. And while Turkle's (2011) research contends that new media technologies are creating social isolation, a worldwide culture of atomized individuals that feel alone, even as they communicate with others in online communities and offline groups, Allen (2013) notes that the placelessness of network-based communication has the possibility for community creation through the "multiple rhythms of interaction" (4) that occur across spaces, further understanding that these connections and interactions that happen through various mediations of discursive communication are what bring people together.

So, then, how to explain the rise of socially connected, hybridized, online-offline collective movements that have arisen around the globe in recent years? These are movements that must necessarily *feel* something together in order to *do* a thing together and to *become* a body politic that develops and exercises a political will. Jean-Luc Nancy's (1991) concepts of being-together and the singular-plural offer a theoretical framework to bridge the gap between the individual and the community when it comes to connecting, whether online or offline, whether materially or otherwise. He argues that community cannot be simply a cluster of what Hutchens (2005) calls 'individuals determined by common social means and focused on common political ends that produce a controllable future" (Hutchens 2005, 1). Rather, community must be thought of as an aggregation of individual subjects' interactions and discourse, a collective of individual beings that can come to understand each other through a commons of

being-together, albeit loosely and through the context of their own lived experiences. The collective remains constantly shifting and ever-incomplete, but different from the more common notion of community, one that most commonly:

> …identif[ies] a named community and analyze[s] it as an identifiable and understandable phenomena. Then…the choice is whether to focus on the community itself as a discrete entity and its history and actions, or to identify and research the actions and experiences of particular individuals in terms of their relations within this community. (Willson 2006, 285)

For Nancy, these connections are necessarily defined through the political nature of resistance against power through discourse and interaction. In a sense, he gives the provision that community can indeed be understood through the 'singular-plural,' where the actions and practices of aggregated individuals highlight the bonds built between them through their affective interconnectedness, rather than through the reductive simplicity of their categorical sameness. In other words, "our experiences of community are enhanced, diminished, and shaped by the social and political organizations that we enact across them" (Willson 2006, 286).

Through this lens, community is dictated by the shared bonds that individuals develop with one another through interactivity and interconnectedness and experience. Discourse is central to this interconnectedness, as a community that *feels* together does so through the sharedness of its disaffection about power relations in some form[†]. Social media and participatory media platforms, in particular, create avenues that allow for these types of connections as a being-with and feeling-with one another in a network matrix of connections (as long as the information channels remain open for discursive exchange and consensus-building (Juris 2008)). And while imperfect, the democratic promise of these technologies is apparent, at least in their capacity to create a discursive forum between individuals to develop relations and social bonds as a collective community of social beings with a political vision (Boler 2010; Castells 2013; Fuchs 2006; Massumi 2017).

Data Collection and Methodology

I arrived in Ferguson on Sunday, August 19th; Michael Brown had been killed on Saturday, August 9th. Influenced by Tufekci and Wilson's (2012) ethnographic research on the media usage of protesters participating in Egypt's Tahrir Square in that movement's early days, and also by (Milkman, Lewis, and Luce 2013) survey on the motivations behind participants in the Occupy Wall Street movement in New York City, this study collected qualitative ethnographic data primarily at the main demonstration region in Ferguson – several blocks surrounding West Florissant Road, about two blocks from where Brown was killed – but also at various sites in the St. Louis area, including several protests outside of the Ferguson Police Station, and community meetings, parks, churches, a safehouse for volunteers, and several other sites. No interviews were conducted at the nearby memorial site for Michael Brown. Over 50 individuals were interviewed and audio recorded during the week that I was there, either individually or in small groups. Some interviews were brief, only a minute or two (particularly during the protests, events, and marches); others were in-depth, including several scheduled, sit-down conversations with participants for 30 minutes to an hour or so. All interviewees were provided informed consent prior to discussion. This

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[†] Much has been written on the way that political forms amass through the shared interconnectedness between individuals, as well as the role of new media technologies, global flows of information, mobile information production/consumption, and new protests movements. See Berlant (2011); Butler (2015); Gamson (1991); Massumi, Barney, and Sorochan (2012); Massumi (2012); Papacharissi (2014).

research was approved by my home university's Institutional Review Board through an expedited approval process for time-sensitive projects.

A Comment on Privilege, Data Collection, and Research Ethics

Power often operates through oblique mechanisms in any social realm, and my experience in Ferguson as a researcher was no different. In my own experience as a white, mid-30s, English-speaking, hetero, male, Canadian-American, both highly educated and a university professor, I live with a great number of privileges, both visible and invisible. In Ferguson, those privileges operated on multiple levels at almost every moment. The half-dozen or so times I was verbally threatened with arrest by police never led to an actual arrest, but had this occurred, it is likely that my status as a white, academic researcher would have most certainly led to few charges, if any. Other times, when vehicle traffic was blocked by police surrounding the protest sites, I was granted daily access by police to park alongside broadcasters' satellite trucks and National Guard vehicles upon explaining to officers that I was a researcher. Most interview subjects assumed I was with the news media until I explained that I was a university professor and researcher. Perhaps most notably, I was able to temporarily drop into this community to do my research, and then leave, whereas those that reside in the community have to live with the consequences of the many systemic inequalities and injustices that led to, and followed, the killing of Michael Brown.

The point in discussing this here is to remind the reader that I am an outsider to this community in numerous ways, and that the results of this study are no doubt complicated by my own social privileges, and furthermore by my privileged status as a researcher. While I support the protesters in Ferguson, as well as other movements for racial and social justice, my goal in doing this type of research is not to speak for the Ferguson protester community, nor to co-opt its struggle, nor to represent it from the outside-in. Instead, the purpose of this study is to theorize the role that both online and offline discourse played in this social movement, its various mediatizations of race and class, and, most importantly, to position this one movement in the context of larger knowledge and theoretical structures on the way that activist communities are using online-offline networks and technologies in their work for social change. I hope that this sentiment comes through to the reader.

Analysis: The Network-Centric Communities of the Ferguson Protesters

> P1[‡]: "We aren't meant to keep things to ourselves. We need to have people bear witness to them. When Twitter first came out, I remember, I was like, "This is just ridiculous! [laughs] You're just talking to nobody. You're just literally talking to…anyone can read it. You aren't really talking to anyone. But that's not true. As it's developed, it's become you're talking to anyone who wants to hear you. And I've gotten so much more out of Twitter than I thought I would. And I hear what other people are saying, and I'm like, 'I feel you.'"

What was the role of social and mobile media in the Ferguson actions of 2014? On its face, a technology-embedded social movement's turn to user-generated media seems unsurprising: When the economic, political, or social needs of a blighted, racialized, predominantly poor community are underrepresented in traditional media forms, it is the social media platforms where communities already reside online—

[‡] During the data collection, I did not collect names or identifying information from participants in this research, except for when pragmatically necessary, such as when scheduling interviews or exchanging telephone/email contact information. All participants have been given pseudonyms as participants, numbered in order of appearance in this paper, not in temporal order of interview (e.g. P1, P2, P3), and any identifying information or remarks have been redacted.

Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Vine, and also others—that become the central sources of mass-communicated information, discourse, and community self-determination (Barnard 2017; Carty 2015; Juris 2008; Tufekci 2017). Through the discursive practices that led to and resulted from the direct democratic activities of the Ferguson protests, these media created a hybridized network of political action, an online-offline participatory stream of user-generated information that ran perpendicular to mainstream news media narratives.

In Ferguson, participatory media served as an effective tool for movement mobilization through on-the-ground testifying and information-sharing, nearly a real-time, interactive feed from participants, but also through practical considerations, such as logistical or knowledge-sharing strategies. These media became a place where the community could be together by feeling together through its outrage—the visual narrative of police repression of protesters was especially galvanizing—but also through its mediated show of solidarity. Yet in each of these instances, the events of Ferguson serve as a case study in a larger body of work on the role of social and mobile media on online-offline togetherness, community and belonging, and the way that contemporary social movements operate as technology-embedded communities, working for social change, citizen empowerment, and democracy.

Sharing Together, Feeling Together, Being Together

In Ferguson, it was affective exchange that amassed a generalised body politic through sharing as a hybridized online-offline community. Sharing—both materially through media-making and discourse, and affectively through being-together as feeling connections to other individuals in a collective—served an incredibly powerful function in not only mobilizing individuals to become involved and sharing tactics and strategies, but also by becoming a source of togetherness and belonging. While social media are often criticized for their isolating and atomizing tendencies (Turkle 2011; Brandtzæg 2012), it is worth recognizing that these platforms are particularly good at bringing together like-minded people, connected through some aspect of their lived experience, values, or practices in the formation of a 'networked individualism' of a collective political project (Rainie and Wellman 2012). The positive and negative social consequences from the various uses of these platforms are many, but for social movements, the range of mediated options at their disposal has dramatically expanded, and so too has the number of channels through which connections and discursive formations are built online.

The first step is to building community is to share: Participation in any political movement is necessarily predicated by a feeling that one is not alone. To feel isolated in one's dissatisfaction or marginalization is to feel affectively disconnected, and conversely, feelings of belonging and togetherness have always been essential elements to any community, whether online or offline. Historically, sharing information and communicating with participants in a social movement has been among the largest barriers to social change, but the decentralized nature of network-based sharing through social media allows for a protest community to mobilize efficiently (Boler 2010; Castells 2013; Juris 2008; Tufekci and Wilson 2012). Affective sharing is essential, but it is only possible when the virtual and physical spaces for sharing have enough participation (and the community has adequate access) in order to facilitate community discourse and deliberation.

In Ferguson, the dominant space for this exchange was Twitter. One protester noted the power of using social media to amass a movement through sharing both information and knowledge:

> P2: That's how this became a news story.…police brutality against black communities is nothing new. But what is new is in the fact that social media is disproportionally people of color, and that black people are very active in most social media networks. And particularly on Twitter. Black Twitter drove the Trayvon Martin story. Black Twitter drove Eric Garner. It drove the Ferguson story. There are any number of other examples that you

could say, that these things that have been going on for a long time are much more often ending up in front of a national audience than they were in the past, because black folks on social media have so much reach.

There were few interviewees that did not mention Twitter as a primary media source for this movement, an unsurprising finding given the Black Twitter community and the dominant role of this online platform for African-American and black internet users (Florini 2014; Lavan 2015; Sharma 2013). Smith's (2014) Pew Research Center study found that in the U.S., 22% of black Americans that are online are Twitter users, compared with 16% of whites, a statistic that skewed to 40% and 28%, respectively, amongst 18-29 year-olds. Similarly, Sharma (2013) argues that 'Blacktags,' Twitter hashtags retweeted within racial or ethnic minority communities, have at least the capacity to interrupt the generalized whiteness of the Twitter network, and serve as a affective community aggregating device.

Like most contemporary social movements, protesters in Ferguson commonly reported the use of hashtags as central to the movement's discursive deliberation and dialogue, with a number of needs being fulfilled through this practice, including finding real-time information about the protests, watching videos filmed at the protests, and linking to articles online. The common hashtags participants mentioned (beyond #Ferguson) included #MichaelBrown or #MikeBrown, #JusticeForMikeBrown, #OpFerguson (Anonymous' online political campaign), #DarrenWilson, and the most notable tags, #HandsUpDontShoot and #BlackLivesMatter.

#BlackLivesMatter, notably, had existed prior to the Michael Brown shooting without much attention, but was mentioned on Twitter over 52,000 times in August 2014 (Demby 2016), and hundreds of millions of times since then, as the hashtag entered the popular North American lexicon and became the name for the movement for racial justice and an end to racialized policing. Writing about the #HandsUpDontShoot hashtag, Bonilla and Rosa (2015) note that:

> The hashtag in this case provided a quick retrieval system for someone looking for updated news on the unfolding events. But, in addition to providing a filing system, hashtags simultaneously function semiotically by marking the intended significance of an utterance…Hashtags allow users to not simply "file" their comments but to performatively frame what these comments are "really about" (5).

In other words, it's not just about finding information; It's about *speaking with* a community of others who feel the connection of another when they find that they 'get' the same thing through discursive exchange, both online and off. Yet the influence of social media—and perhaps its central purpose in post-2010 social movements worldwide—has been more than simply a knowledge or information exchange. Instead, its importance lies in its discursive ability to testify, to bear witness, and to establish the affective bonds that bring a community into being and continually shape its constitution. It is this sharing-with that is the underlying basis of all community ties: Feeling understood and understanding others is the root of empathy, and it is empathy that underlies any amassed community (Nancy 1991, 2000; Hutchens 2005). When it comes to the networked social movement, this describes how the collective talks amongst itself in its own language, its own discursive subtext, and one that Juris (2008) notes "complements and reinforces, rather than replaces, face-to-face interaction" (13).

Part of this subtext is that a sharing community requires trust and veracity (Loader, Vromen, and Xenos 2014; Rainie and Wellman 2012). Online, trust is note easily established, especially with the relative anonymity of the internet, but within a networked community, the visual aspects of social media sharing – photographs and video – have a tendency to be more immediately understood and evaluated than discursive discussions, as well as a higher likelihood of shareability than a written narrative account. Instagram, Vine, Snapchat, Tumblr, and numerous other social media platforms tend to highly privilege

the image over the textual, but the brevity of Twitter can also be effective in this regard (Barnard 2017), and often function as an easily shareable, quickly digestible counter-narrative to mainstream accounts where communities are represented by others, rather than by themselves (Tufekci 2017).

In the Ferguson protester community, participants almost universally reported a generalized mistrust toward mainstream news and journalism outlets. Conversely, they reported a relative trust in the representation of events that were produced or curated through their own social networks. This was especially the case with live-streaming video technologies and mobile video uploads to YouTube (and the subsequent connection to Twitter/Facebook/Vine virality and sharing of these streams). Live-streaming video technology was still in its infancy in August 2014—most social media platforms did not offer the service—yet it was a common to see people live-streaming during the protests in Ferguson using the LiveStream or uStream services, or more commonly, filming, immediately posting to YouTube, and then sharing links Twitter, Facebook, or other platforms using hashtags. In conversation with a group of three protesters, their comments echoed the trust in one's personal connections through social media forms and the visual, shared aspects of this trust:

> P3: I think social media did play a big part of this, because that drives attention to everyone around here.

> P4: Social Media. That's the biggest form of communication right now. Like, we [points to friends] will be on social media before we talk on the phone with each other, and we have each other's numbers.

> P5: We talk on *our own* social media.

> P4: And since this has been going on, if you don't see it on the news, you can go on #ferguson. You can see what's going on.

> RESEARCHER: So do you trust what you see on social media?

> P5: I mean, you can't trust everything. But videos you see with your own two eyes? Yes.

> P4: Some things. Because with social media, you have a lot of Photoshop. And you can change the stuff around, but with the video?

> P3: I believe the video. When I see the real-live video, you can believe it.

> P4: When there's a video, it's someone that actually records what they're seeing. There's no way that you can't believe something like that….

> P5: No. Edited. Footage.

> P3/P4 [echoing together]: No edited footage.

> P5: The raw cut.

The ability for a social movement to communicate effectively within its own community has always been an essential component of any meaningful political action: intra-movement discourse, deliberation, and decision-making are how networks of solidary are built, and how a democratic body politic comes into being.

The establishment of strong and meaningful networks of participation and information-sharing was an essential component for a hybridized, but decentralized and horizontal movement such as the Ferguson protest. There were few organizing bodies that coordinated the protest community's actions or events, and much of the protest's structure, action, and strategies were relatively spontaneous. Numerous researchers (Flesher Fominaya 2015; Penner 2007) caution that spontaneity must be carefully approached when studying social movements, remembering that there is little spontaneous about any individual event when one takes into account the totality of systemically oppressive structures, whatever form they might take.

But Penner also notes that "With significant advances in communications technology over the last few decades, the argument for spontaneity now has added force because of the instantaneous symbolic or spectacular reverberations of any mass action" (16). In Ferguson, participants commonly reported that social media was a major force in their decision to mobilize and take action in both the immediate moment and the days-long term. Seeing their friends and community being present at the event, seeing opposition between protesters and police, and the information-sharing that occurred through hashtags and trusted networks of communities were each important motivators, and the social-media shared event of the aftermath of Brown's killing was clearly especially jarring for the community's consciousness.

Online Sharing, Offline Mobilization

Yet simply having the means to communicate is not enough: It is necessary to have a meaningful connection between the participants that unifies a collective of bodies into an amassed multitude through Nancy's (1991) 'being-together,' the affective emergence of a diverse, but unified, inclusive bond of feeling connected. For example, when asked about sharing on social media and the building of community within the movement, one participant responded:

> P6: That's why in the old days, we had photo albums. You sit up and you show people your photos, your vacation shots, and anything that happened in your life that you thought was worth sharing. This [social media] gives us another way to share it. So we can share it across the world in an instant, whereas you had to have people come over to look at photos in the old days. That was important here, because it brought these people down here [to the protest] when they got upset about what they saw on Twitter or Facebook.

The network structure of peer-to-peer distribution creates a horizontalism, an efficient sharing platform that often works more efficiently than a vertically based, hierarchical information distribution source (Flesher Fominaya 2016; Juris 2008, 2012; Milkman, Lewis, and Luce 2013; Tufekci 2017). The audience is amassed, brought into being through a model of a decentralized, flexible, horizontally based multitude that can, in turn, lead to a public sphere where individuals can foster a network of community self-determination through deliberation and discourse (Castells 2013; Tufekci 2017).

In other words, a social movement cannot happen when one *feels* alone, but can only happen when a mass of individuals *feels* together. It's very difficult to be the first person to take the risky step of political action in opposition to an authoritative state. But when one feels as though they're not alone, as though they have a connection of some form to another human being, as though they are affectively and practically understood in their disaffection, a community begins to come into being. Willson (2006) calls this "radical relations," highlighting the mutually constitutive relationship between individuals that comes through sharing, one that "does not privilege the individual as a discrete, contained entity but instead enables, in deed requires, recognition of the immersive and social context within which engagement or exposure takes place" (287). If the grammar of the affective is an uncapturable moment in the lived experience of oppression of the individual, one where "It is critical to be able to think about and experiment with the ways in which affectively-based politics can give rise to radically inclusive forms of

direct democracy" (Massumi 2017), then the affective commonalities shared between different groups or singularities amass themselves into identifiable, network-structured collectives that can exist in space.

This amassing becomes reflective of a moment in time where some shared goal brings people together to act in concert on some issue as a singular being. Willson (2006) notes:

> Singular beings or exposures end at the point where they meet/touch other singular beings…This is the point or moment when a singular being has cause both to questions and to acknowledge its own and the other/s' existence. It can be as simple as the point when skin meets skin or body meets body in a particular encounter, but it can also be something seemingly more abstract, for example, as a moment when an author's writing connects with a reader (286).

In Ferguson, participants commented on the feeling of empowerment this coming together, having access to a collective voice through social media platforms, one produced and shared by their network of peers who were members of the community rather than through mainstream media sources. In an interview with two protesters:

> P7: As you know...it pisses me off, some of the shit I was seeing on there [mainstream news television].
>
> P8: Right. And then this is what I want to get across. You see, the media, they're turning it around like, "The police are just doing their job." No. They're out here antagonizing the shit out of us. We can't stand anywhere, but we're supposed to have protests. And they're pushing us, "Keep it moving. Keep it moving." It's police brutality, harassing people, and they're not from this community…But, you know, people are filming it, and we're getting our voice out there on Twitter and Facebook and YouTube, and we're optimistic.

While Ferguson was reliant on technology for much of its information and knowledge sharing, the heart of the action was clearly on the street: It was the mobilization of individuals in direct democratic action that led to a critical mass, and whatever the achievements of this movement in the online realm, its effectiveness was driven by material bodies in material spaces.

Mobilization of individuals to physical action simply matters for a social movement to come into being, but social media helps: the online sharing of offline events is extremely important for mobilizing people, and to build connections between participants and community members. One participant stated:

> P11: People are getting a different view of Ferguson. But they're getting some good news, too, like the peace marches, people are filming it, they're putting it on Vine. They're putting it YouTube. They're putting it on Instagram. The community meetings are going up. People are finding out about how to get there, what's going on. They're finding out about where to meet, and what time, and what to do.

Offline mobilization, and the collective risk-taking that this can often entail in a social movement opposing a militarized police presence, continues to be an essential part of any meaningful effort for social change. The amassing of individuals in a physical space has a physical force that is quantifiable, and demands a response from authoritative bodies, whether bureaucratic, such as policy change, or authoritative, such as the police encounters. Neither can ignore the mass occupation of space by protesters indefinitely, though, and particularly when the events of that occupation are occurring at the intersection of online and offline narratives.

It is in the demand for attention, both in terms of authoritative governing structures and from mainstream media sources, where participatory media continues to be especially effective in protest situations .In Ferguson, participants noted that this demand for attention began in the days following Brown's death, with the violence and destruction of property, both of which are definition spectacular, but also simply share well on both traditional and social media as media events. As one Ferguson activist stated,

> P12: Some of the other murders we've seen out here in St. Louis and across the country, there were a bunch of peaceful rallies where people tried to work within the bounds of the system that we live under, I mean, you get nothing. You get no attention. But you got a QuikTrip burn up? You let people come together and start doing what's associated with 'looting'? We call it, people just taking, what they felt they needed to take in order to have something at home. And that's what helped to push everything into social media, and to bring some national attention, some worldwide attention, was that unfortunate outbreak of violence. But we know that sometimes in life, you need to have violence in order for something positive to occur. You need to have struggle to have progress, absolutely.

Another participant stated,

> P13: Mainstream media swarms on events, especially the riots. If there wasn't riots down here, the media wouldn't have cared. It's just another black man who got shot by a white cop. If people were just peacefully marching down at the capital, people wouldn't have cared. We needed the riot to get the media down here. We don't want to get violent. And I wish that it didn't have to come to this. But let's face it, without violence, would any of this media be here? Would you [addressing me, the researcher] be here right now?

Direct democratic actions such as the events in Ferguson don't happen *because* of social media, but they are unlikely to occur *without* it: It might have been the events of violence toward humans and property that began the protest, but it was the networked publicity, the signal-boosting, of these events through social media that brought this protest community into being. Yet the power for a social movement that comes through the connection between people extends beyond simply the practical, and into the affective, allowing the possibility for an on-the-ground narrative to emerge through a matrix of sharing and togetherness. It is this mobilization that demands not only the attention of the community itself, but also the attention of the traditional news media, and ultimately the attention of those in positions of power, and aggregates the amassed individuals into a collective body politic.

Conclusions, and Challenges to Future Movements

The politics of racial or class-based discrimination certainly did not begin with Ferguson in 2014, nor will they end there. And while the event served as an important moment of rupture in the normal conversations in many communities worldwide, this case, in particular, reminds us that the exercise of state violence does not happen in isolation, but builds through the on-going material and immaterial violence of a marginalized population. These were events that spurred global dialogue over the nature of race, class, policing, and many other social issues, yet the story of what political action looks like in an era of online-offline movements continues to unfold.

What was surprising in the case of the Ferguson protests was the magnitude of the response to one black male getting killed by one white police officer. Despite the dependability of a decades-long project of diminished economic, social, and political opportunity for America's underclass through a systemic disregard for the poor, the institutionalization of state violence and militarized policing, the dismantling of the public education and workers union systems, and countless other atrocities of neoliberal governance, the United States has had remarkably few meaningful mobilizations since the early 1970s, few protests

that had staying power and lasting, actionable results. And those that did occur during this period rarely led to any sort of dialogue outside of the community where the event occurred, let alone nationwide discourse on issues of race, policing, social and economic class, media representation, and the many other issues sparked by the foundations of the Black Lives Matter movement.

It is hopeful that these new technologies that contribute to new forms of sociality, despite their flaws, will continue to develop grassroots-based social and political action for the disaffected around the globe, leading to further democratic outcomes worldwide. There is one overarching lesson that we can learn from the events in Ferguson, and from those other places where oppression exists and is being shifted through direct democratic action and community-building: The biggest problems for a society, whether racial, class-based, or otherwise, are systemic problems, not individualized, and any correction needs to be addressed on a systemic scale. This will only happen through a greater sense of social and economic cooperation, and when marginalized communities get more discursive access to the public sphere through the production and consumption of information and knowledge, the result can only lead to greater equitable and democratic outcomes: This empathy and inclusive approach is how the practices of any undemocratic society are shifted toward inclusiveness and equality. And despite the events that followed the killing in Ferguson, and the subsequent political and cultural backlash to the politics that resulted, it is hopeful that the new technologies of interaction and discourse will lead to an increased sense of community sovereignty, and with that, an increased sense of equity, fairness and justice.

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