#Ferguson is everywhere: initiators in emerging counterpublic networks

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ABSTRACT

On the afternoon of 9 August 2014, 18-year-old Michael 'Mike' Brown was shot and killed by Officer Darren Wilson in the small American city of Ferguson, Missouri. Brown's body lay in the street for four and a half hours, and during that time, his neighbors and friends took to social media to express fear, confusion, and outrage. We locate early tweets about Ferguson and the use of the hashtag #Ferguson at the center of a counterpublic network that provoked and shaped public debates about race, policing, governance, and justice. Extending theory on networked publics, we examine how everyday citizens, followed by activists and journalists, influenced the #Ferguson Twitter network with a focus on emergent counterpublic structure and discursive strategy. We stress the importance of combining quantitative and qualitative methods to identify early initiators of online dissent and story framing. We argue that initiators and their discursive contributions are often missed by methods that collapse longitudinal network data into a single snapshot rather than investigating the dynamic emergence of crowdsourced elites over time.

On the afternoon of 9 August 2014, 18-year-old Michael 'Mike' Brown was shot and killed by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. Within minutes of his death, members of Brown's community began to tweet about what they were witnessing. Together, these tweets, and those of other concerned citizens who learned of the developing story, performed the discursive work of constructing the city of Ferguson, and the Twitter hashtag #Ferguson, as ciphers for national debates about American racism, police profiling and brutality, militarized responses to civil unrest, government corruption and criminal justice reform.

When, on 13 August, several members of the national press, including Wesley Lowery of the Washington Post and Ryan Reilly of the Huffington Post were arrested by police while on assignment in Ferguson, the story secured a position in the mainstream news agenda. An increasing number of Twitter users joined the chorus imploring Missouri Governor Jay Nixon and US President Barack Obama to do, or at the very least say, something about Brown's killing and the draconian measures police were taking in response to protests (see Figure 1).

Those nascent days of unrest in Ferguson, MO sparked a national dialog and series of actions that some have dubbed America's 'New Civil Rights Movement' (Allen & Cohen, 2015; Demby, 2014). We argue that Twitter catalyzed this national response, and that the first week of Ferguson tweets, from the moment of Michael Brown's death, to national media coverage and an eventual public address by the President of the USA, illustrates the power of online counterpublics to influence larger public debates and of everyday citizens to take up the work of activists and journalists in moments of community crisis. Using a combination of large-scale network analysis and qualitative discourse analysis, we offer insight into emergent counterpublic structure and leadership in the #Ferguson network and illustrate the important role of early initiators in online activism.

Networked counterpublics and early initiators

Theories of publics and counterpublics are central to understanding how and why Twitter networks mattered in the crisis that unfolded following the killing of Michael Brown. Habermas' (1989) concept of the public sphere has been widely applied to consider the roles of citizens, information sharing, media, and democratic debate in contemporary societies. While an approximation of a democratic public sphere – one in which citizens, facilitated by media, are able to debate pressing social and political issues – exists in the USA, Habermas' ideal continues to be exactly that. In practice, many populations have been systematically excluded from the public sphere by historically narrow definitions of citizenship that do not include women, people of color, immigrants, or other marginalized groups (Fraser, 1990; Squires, 2007).[1]

Narratives idealizing an engaged citizenry of the past ignore that there has never been a time when all citizens trusted and relied on mainstream channels of information in constructing social and political thought. Instead, counterpublics illustrate the lack of faith many Americans have always had in the traditional, elite institutions of the public sphere. Counterpublic sphere theorists like Felski (1989), Fraser (1992), and Asen and Brouwer (2001), have illustrated how traditionally marginalized groups create and maintain their own, alternative publics with the express goals of both legitimizing and communicating their lived realities and pushing the mainstream public sphere to acknowledge and respond to these realities. For example, Jackson (2014), Squires (2002), and the Black Public Sphere Collective (1995) have documented how the historical black press in.

@cwhite850	@BarackObama please address what's going on in #Ferguson. We the people need you. (8:02 PM – 11 Aug 2014)
@ChubbySpiderman	@BarackObama Mr. President please, please, please say something to the American people address all the #PoliceBrutality lately #Ferguson (9:54 PM – aa Aug. 2014)
@ProfessorGrains	Dear Prsident Obama: please address the use of paramilitary force in #Ferguson before addressing the passing aof a celbrity. Thanks (6:23 AM – 12 Aug 2014)
@TH_DA_06er	@BarackObama No freedom of the press in Ferguson? My God, what are you doing? (5:08PM – 13 Aug 204)

Figure 1. Example tweet pleas to US President Barack Obama from users in the Ferguson network

America took up the work of constructing counternarratives about race, political dissent, social inclusion, and other topics central to the African-American experience. The black press, and other communicative spaces of the black public sphere, pushed for the ideological and physical integration of mainstream institutions, while also challenging white supremacy and the legitimization of white racial violence common in mainstream discourse.

Herein, we contend that counter publics created by marginalized groups are particularly relevant to examining what Benkler (2006) and others have identified as the networked public sphere – especially given the evolving discursive labor of counterpublics alongside changing mediums and historical contexts. Yet, despite a surge in scholarship on the democratic possibilities of networked publics, few other scholars have identified the alignment between communication phenomena that evolve in networked publics and prior theorizing about the relationship of counterpublics to mainstream publics. For example, Benkler, Roberts, Faris, Solow-Niederman, and Etling (2013) define and describe the

networked public sphere as 'an alternative arena for public discourse and political debate, an arena that is less dominated by large media entities, less subject to government control, and open to wider participation. This digital space provides an alternative structure for citizen voices and minority viewpoints as well as highlights stories and sources based on relevance and credibility' (p. 8).

We suggest that the 'minority viewpoints' these scholars allude to often reflect the work of networked counterpublics who, enabled by digital technology, have new opportunities to create and broadcast knowledge. We are cautious about ascribing the networked public sphere as a whole unlimited democratic potential, given the prioritization of elite, corporate interests in the technological architecture of online spaces (Poell, 2014). However, in alignment with the work of scholars like Mitra and Gajjala (2008) and Bailey and Gumbs (2010), we believe that networked spaces offer citizens most invisible in mainstream politics radical new potentials for identity negotiation, visibility, and influence.

While much of so-called 'activism' online is quite inactive in terms of sustained social change, recent work illustrates the enormous capacity for social media in general, and Twitter in particular, to elevate and sustain counterpublic voices and refocus the attention of the mainstream public sphere (Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012; Lewis, Gray, & Meierhenrich, 2014; Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012). In examining the role of Twitter in the Egyptian revolution, Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012), for example, have documented the unique nature of Twitter storytelling and collaborative news produced by network publics. Unlike traditional modes of news reporting and information sharing, they argue, Twitter can provide a continuous stream of information from the perspective of those closest to crisis events. In particular, networked publics' fusing of activist discourse with traditional news narratives results in an 'affective' flow of information that can speak to the common experiences, concerns, and sympathies of larger publics. Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira contend that such flows of information 'provide a form of emotional release that simultaneously invigorates and exhausts tension' in times of social crisis (p. 280).

Here, we suggest that the all-too-common police killings of unarmed African-Americans in the USA is one such social crisis. In this vein, media response to the killing of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin by neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman in 2012 is the first, to our knowledge, to have been studied through a detailed network analysis. Graeff, Stempeck, and Zuckerman (2014) find that after receiving a small amount of local media coverage, Martin's story garnered increased attention both because of the strategic targeting of offline/ traditional news sources by Martin family representatives, and the online advocacy of several African-American and racial justice organizations. These organizations contributed influential frames to mainstream coverage of Martin's story and facilitated traditional activism via digital spaces. Graeff and colleagues argue then that media controversies (and it seems nothing is more controversial in American media than racial conflict) interrupt traditional media gatekeeping and create unique space for the inclusion of citizen and alternatively created information.

In tracing another example of 'Blacktivism', Wardell (2014) examines the 2013 #BBUM campaign undertaken by black University of Michigan students hoping to address what they perceived as a racially hostile campus environment. The author observes that young people and people of color (and in America, young people are increasingly people of color) are using new media to draw attention to issues related to inequality and injustice more than ever before. Wardell contends that online activism, particularly that utilizing Twitter, YouTube, and other social network sites, often starts within small, densely connected networks but spreads because of the amplification of a broader public that includes

people of similar identities with similar experiences of marginalization. Such examples of online racial justice activism are connected to the larger phenomena Florini (2014) and Brock (2012) have called 'Black Twitter,' and the popularity of what Sharma (2013) calls 'blacktags.' Sharma's exploration of networked subjects is particularly relevant to networked counterpublics, in that he details the way racialized hashtags come from within, and spread through, particular communities, allowing twitter users, regardless of their own racial identities, to join in the 'assemblages' of antiracist discourse.

Thus, that networked counterpublics can and do successfully infiltrate and influence mainstream conversations no longer seems up for debate, rather, questions remain as to how and why this infiltration (sometimes) works and what public(s) primary players belong to. Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012) explored the question of who drives discourse in networked publics in their exploration of crowdsourced elites. They identify crowdsourced elites as a hodgepodge of actors who became prominent network influencers because of how their storytelling during the Egyptian revolution resonated with their networks and the resulting reply and retweet networks – elevating regular citizens to the same status as more traditional information sources. Our own work on how citizens hijacked the New York City Police Department's hashtag #myNYPD to highlight and critique incidences of police brutality and racial profiling demonstrates that crowdsourced elites also play an important role for creating and amplifying anti-establishment narratives outside of immediate and intense national crisis (Jackson & Foucault Welles, in press). Further, traditional elites were completely absent from top crowdsourced elites, measured in terms of the most frequently retweeted or mentioned (but usually retweeted) accounts, yet the hijacking received local and national coverage in a variety of mainstream outlets. In this case, everyday citizens with non-dominant identities played a role on par with activist collectives and non-traditional/activist media in helping the hijacking trend. Thus, we extend Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira's findings about the democratic potentials of digitally crowdsourced information to everyday, localized phenomena and suggest that such information can, and often does, come from members of counterpublics.

Below, we introduce the concept of 'initiators' in an effort to add specificity to current conceptualizations of crowdsourced elites. Particularly, we think it is important to avoid collapsing longitudinal data in studies seeking to identify the players and discourse that birth social and political phenomena within the networked public sphere, especially given what we know about the way traditional elites adopt and co-opt counter narratives that arise from networked counterpublics. Foucault Welles(2014) cautions that, especially in cases involving 'big data' analysis, the tendency to focus on statistically common cases from static network snapshots often obscures the actions of actors who, although statistically less notable overall, nevertheless play important roles in the emergence or dynamics of networked publics. This risk is highlighted by many studies that focus on communication processes, rather than (or in addition to) distal outcomes. For example, in their network analysis of the SOPA-PIPA debate, Benkler et al. (2013) identify 'a highly committed group of actors that engaged early in the debate and continue to play a leadership role throughout the controversy' pushing the later 'entry of larger players' (39). This early group of what we consider 'initiators' played a particularly important role in gaining broader attention and support for objections to SOPA-PIPA legislation, motivating the engagement of more traditional elites, and shaping the terms of debate.

We focus here on interrogating the role of initiators in the aftermath of Michael Brown's killing in Ferguson, MO, both because of the way their narratives may reflect counterpublic discourse and because of the importance of mapping the source of digital phenomena that so significantly impact the

social and political agenda of our nation. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative methods, this research is guided by three central research questions:

RQ1: Who most centrally influenced the move of Twitter discussions about Ferguson from the margins to the mainstream, and what publics do they represent?

RQ2: How did digital discourse about Ferguson change during the week following Brown's killing, and what does this reveal about the shifting identities of emergent crowdsourced elites?

RQ3: How did the specific communication architecture of Twitter enable and shape the discursive strategies of the emergent crowdsourced elites within the Ferguson networked public?

Methods

In the first hours and day of tweeting about Brown's death, Ferguson was not ubiquitously used as a hashtag; in fact, our preliminary data suggested that the very first, and thus most central, tweets about Brown's killing did not hashtag the city. Thus, in order to include early initiators, the present analysis details the first week of the use of keyword 'Ferguson' and hashtag #Ferguson on Twitter. We focus particularly on highlighting who initiated Twitter discussion and information sharing, how these individuals and their discursive labor changed day to day, and implications for understanding how crowdsourced elites emerge and evolve in networked counterpublics. Our data include a sample of tweets sent from 9 August 2014 to 15 August 2014.

We combine quantitative and qualitative methods in this study in response to calls from scholars like Barnhust (2011) who maintain that advances in social science research require approaches that recognize the connections between measuring data and the thick description of human experience and affect. In particular, we use computational network data to identify individuals and tweets for critical qualitative assessment.

Twitter data

Twitter is a microblogging service that enables users to communicate via short messages called 'tweets.' For this analysis, we gathered a sample of tweets via the Twitter streaming application-programing interface (API). The streaming API allows researchers to 'listen' to a randomly selected sample of Twitter data in near real-time, downloading, and storing publicly available data for future use. For the present analysis, we downloaded 535,794 tweets containing the keyword 'Ferguson' sent between 9 and 15 August 2014 (inclusive), or 10% of the total number of 'Ferguson' tweets sent in that time period.[2]

Network specification

Twitter data are not inherently network data, although there are a number of conversational conventions on Twitter that allow tweets to be represented as networks (boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010). In this case, we used Freelon's (2013) *Text to Gephi for Python* converter to create retweet and mention networks of Twitter users connected by references to one another in tweet text. Retweets and mentions can serve different communicative purposes on Twitter with distinct ideological implications; in particular, Conover et al. (2011) have suggested that retweets tend to represent ideological

endorsements, while mentions more often represent ideological opposition. Because both functionalities seemed theoretically plausible and relevant for the present analysis, we included both retweets and mentions in our network specification, although we distinguish the discursive function of these actions in our analysis, described below.

We created a total of eight networks for analysis, one aggregate network that includes all the tweets in our sample, and also one daily network for each of the seven days represented in the sampled data (12:00:00am to 11:59:59 pm for each date). In aggregate, these seven networks included 305,269 unique nodes (Twitter users) connected by 425,746 links, directed such that links originate from authors of tweets to users mentioned or retweeted in the text of those tweets. A detailed accounting of the nodes and links per daily network appears in Table 1.

Table 1. Ferguson network nodes and directed links by day.

Day	Nodes	Directed links
9 August 2014	4602	3979
10 August 2014	14,790	16,827
11 August 2014	25,116	32,352
12 August 2014	38,212	53,166
13 August 2014	30,718	41,181
14 August 2014	177,730	289,630
15 August 2014	14,101	15,611

Identifying initiators and crowdsourced elites

We identified a sub-sample of popular tweets from each of the seven daily Ferguson networks for inclusion in our discourse analysis. There are a number of standard ways to measure 'popularity' in a network (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005); in this case, we used a simple measure of in-degree to identify the 10 most frequently mentioned and/or retweeted users in each network. These users, organically selected by the network as either the source or focus of attention (or both) on a given day, can be understood as crowdsourced elites.

Like most social networks, the in-degree distribution in the #Ferguson network follows roughly a power-law, with a small number of nodes receiving a disproportionately high number of retweets and mentions, and most receiving none at all (Barabási & Albert, 1999). This affords the advantage of being able to examine relatively few of the 'elites' to understand conversations within the network more generally, as individuals are more likely to see (and retweet) a message from these elites than anyone else in the network. Moreover, focusing on the elites per day overcomes the confound of growing network size overtime; rather than selecting tweets based on a fixed minimum number of retweets, sampling elites by day will naturally sample the most influential users at that time. Consistent with Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira's (2012) conception of crowdsourced elites as members of the network who, as a function of retweeting, are especially prominent in the news stream on a given topic, in a network with a power-law in-degree distribution, those featured near the top of the distribution

(most retweets) at any given time will be featured disproportionately more than those lower down on the list.

To partially mitigate the possibility that we inadvertently excluded a user and/or set of tweets that was substantially different than the sampled crowdsourced elites, we took the additional step of manually examining the most popular tweet from each of the top 100 most re-tweeted/mentioned users within the #Ferguson network and found no cases of notable ideological inconsistency as compared to each day's top 10. Among the crowdsourced elites we sampled, we detail those who achieved popularity on the first day of our sample – the day Michael Brown was killed – as initiators. Many of these initiators were tweeting within minutes or hours of Michael Brown's death, giving them a distinct role in the emergence of the overall network topology and discourse.

Identifying discursive frames

As a method, discourse analysis allows us to go beyond the identification and description of networks and their members to understand how early initiators and crowd sourced elites engaged in processes of meaning-making. Meaning-making during crisis and around tense social issues is particularly important because of the power of language to create, legitimize, and/or undermine certain interpretations of the world. As Schrøder (2012) details:

> The world as we know it is constructed through words (as well as other types of signs), and the particular choices and combinations of words, images, and sounds that social agents use to make sense of events, processes, and institutions produce versions of 'reality' that are negotiated in public and privates space on their way to becoming accepted as legitimate or rejected as inadequate. (p. 107)

With this in mind, we engaged in an in-depth, emergent discourse analysis that examined how Ferguson early initiators and crowdsourced elites used language, image, tone, and other discursive strategies to lead and shape discussion immediately following Brown's killing. We considered what words were used, excluded, and/or connected to describe Michael Brown's death, the resulting protests, and police reaction and response, with an eye to how this choice of language, in combination with specific affective or informational images, collectively constructed meaning. Given our understanding of the potentials of online counterpublics to shape national discussions, we paid particular attention to the evolution of Ferguson discourse, noting the introduction of specific discursive turns – for example, calls for help, informational reporting, and the use of collective memory – and the discursive variance among early initiators and later crowdsourced elites.

Results

Ferguson network topology, initiators, and crowdsourced elites

Prior to engaging the discursive content of tweets in the networks of study, we explored the overall topology of the networks and changes in the communication patterns within the networks overtime. Collectively, the Ferguson network can be characterized as a broadcast network, where the vast majority of nodes radiate out from a small number of influential users (the crowdsourced elites), without otherwise interacting with one another (Smith, Rainie, Shneiderman, & Himelboim, 2014).

Broadcast networks signal an intentional spreading of information, with crowdsourced elites serving as opinion leaders and the rest of the network amplifying their messages. This overall Ferguson topology emerges primarily as a function of retweets, with crowdsourced elites receiving nearly three times as many retweets as mentions(14.71% of total tweets are retweets, 5.60% are mentions).This retweet topology is consistent with prior work on networked counterpublics, as well as online social movements more generally (Jackson & Foucault Welles, in press).

Looking more closely at the daily Ferguson networks, a secondary strategy also emerges. Although the daily networks demonstrate a similar preference for retweeting over mentioning, the balance of retweets versus mentions shifts throughout the week. Table 2 summarizes the proportion of tweets containing a retweet from or mention of one of the crowdsourced elites by day.[3]

As Table 2 illustrates, the balance of retweets versus mentions declines throughout the week following Michael Brown's death, with the lowest proportion of retweets (most mentions) on 13 August, when clashes between police and protesters became especially violent. Although previous work has suggested that mentions are a signal of ideological opposition within Twitter networks (Conover et al., 2011), this was not the case within the Ferguson network. As discussed below, the ideological work of discourse within the Ferguson network is remarkably consistent, and overwhelmingly focused on critiques of state violence. Although we do not doubt that some amount of pro-police, anti-protest sentiment

Table 2. Percentage of tweets mentioning or retweeting a crowdsourced elite by day.

Day	Retweet tweets (%)	Mention tweets (%)	Retweet: mention ratio
9 August 2014	9.02	2.01	4.5:1
10 August 2014	32.77	5.47	6.0:1
11 August 2014	18.40	8.23	2.2:1
12 August 2014	16.31	6.94	2.3:1
13 August 2014	13.49	6.82	2.0:1
14 August 2014	12.88	5.71	2.3:1
15 August 2014	15.71	3.61	4.4:1

was tweeted during the time our data were collected, those messages either did not include direct references to Ferguson (and were therefore not sampled into our data set), or they failed to capture the attention of the emergent network in sufficient measure to influence the core conversations. Indeed, a post-hoc analysis of the top 100 crowdsourced elites across the dataset as a whole reveals no users with stated pro-police or anti-activist agendas; indeed, many of these users include explicit racial justice messages in their profile text and/or photos.

Rather than ideological opposition, mentioning in the Ferguson network, especially the shift toward more mentioning as the week progresses, appears to correspond with a shift in emergent strategy from amplifying the messages of select counterpublic elites toward (1) requests for help from mainstream elites, and (2) efforts to focus attention on notable members of the counterpublic. Although these strategies could broadly be interpreted as amplification as well, they rely lesson individuals broadcasting information, and more on individuals taking an active role in growing and shaping the

network. Specifically, mentions in these networks are often used to endorse specific members of the counterpublic and encourage others to follow them, or to gain the attention of those in traditional positions of power by associating their Twitter names with the events in Ferguson. This results in a divide in communication affordance by public sphere status, where members of the counterpublic almost always rise to positions of influence through retweets, or networked amplification of their messages, while members of the mainstream public sphere often achieve elite status through mentions, or networked attempts to draw those in traditional positions of power into the conversation.[4] This composition of retweeting and mentioning complicates the notion of crowdsourced elites, and suggests that, even in cases where mainstream elites appear in positions of influence in these networked publics, they do so only as a function of specific discursive strategies deployed by counterpublics to spread messages and further their cause. Importantly, these differences in amplification strategy (retweeting, mentioning) as well as the shift from marginalized to mainstream elites become evident only by looking at the network change day by day; key counterpublic elites and amplification through mentioning are not evident in the aggregate network.

Primary discursive trends

Ferguson initiators

On 9 August 2014, the day Michael Brown was killed, the most influential crowdsourced elite in the Ferguson network, with over two and half times as many retweets and mentions as the next closest elite, was an African-American woman using the Twitter handle @AyoMissDarkSkin. @AyoMissDarkSkin was in the Ferguson neighborhood where Michael Brown was shot and sent the tweet seen in Figure 2 within 30 minutes of the altercation:

The discourse of this tweet immediately frames Brown as the innocent ('unarmed' 'boy') victim of extreme violence ('executed' 'Shot him 10 times') and communicates an effective response ('smh'- Shaking My Head – generally used to indicate disgust or incredulousness). This discursive work stands in sharp contrast to a tweet sent two hours later by the only media outlet to achieve crowdsourced elite status on day one, local mainstream newspaper the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* (@stltoday). @stltoday reported: 'Fatal shooting by Ferguson police prompts mob reaction'. These two tweets illustrate the difference between discourses of crisis that arise from members of marginalized publics and those that follow the ideological and professional logics of elite institutions. @stltoday's tweet not only lacks the affective response to the killing of an unarmed teen seen in @AyoMissDarkSkin's discourse, its structure and word choice construct the 'mob reaction' rather than Brown's shooting as the source of conflict. Notably, @AyoMissDarkSkin's tweet was retweeted or mentioned three and a half times more on this first day than @stltoday's tweet, demonstrating a clear preference by the networked public initially engaging with the story for a form of citizen journalism that acknowledged the problem of police violence and humanized its victims. This differential amplification on the first day *in particular* served an especially important function in shaping the networked discourse throughout the week. Consistent with Lin, Margolin, and Lazer's (2015) findings on satisficing political searches, users seeking to amplify the events in Ferguson were much more likely to find (and retweet) @AyoMissDarkSkin than @stltoday or anyone else, thereby amplifying the discourse of the marginalized public over mainstream framing.

@AyoMissDarkSkin Ferguson police just executed an unarmed 17 yr old boy that was walking to the store. Shot him 10 times smh. (12:48PM – 9 Aug 2014)

Figure 2. Image and text tweeted by Ferguson network initiator @AyoMissDarkSkin, sent within minutes of the altercation and neighbor/police arrival on the scene. This tweet garnered over 3,500 retweets before "Ferguson" or "#Ferguson" became widely used.

All but one of the remaining crowdsourced elite initiators on 9 August are African-American individuals with personal connections to the Ferguson area including; Antonio French, a St. Louis-based Democratic alderman whose district borders Ferguson, Goldie Taylor, a journalist and author who was born and raised near the Ferguson/ St. Louis area, and Tef Poe, a St. Louis/Ferguson-based rapper.[5] Both French and Tef Poe would later be arrested while protesting Michael Brown's killing in Ferguson. Michael Skolnik, the Jewish American political director of the African-American-targeted entertainment website Global Grind rounded out this group.

Along with @AyoMissDarkSkin and @stltoday, what is notable about this group of initiators is the centrality of black voices. In fact, @stltoday is the only account that does not directly reflect an African-American voice or target an African-American audience. This group also illustrates the potential diversity of status within a counterpublic. @AyoMissDarkSkin is an everyday citizen with a modest number of Twitter followers and no elite connections, yet had the most influence in the network, while French, Taylor, Tef Poe, and Skolnik have varying levels of access to niche, alternative, and mainstream spaces. Together, these figures are not unlike those who contributed to political and social debates in the historical black press (Jackson, 2014).

Also in the tradition of the black public sphere, these crowdsourced elites immediately challenged and reframed mainstream discourses about what was happening in Ferguson. For example, in response to

the @stltoday tweet referring to 'mob reaction,' @AntonioFrench tweeted the popular response,'"Mob"? You could also use the word "community".' Here, French directly critiques the *Post Dispatch*'s ideological framing of the grieving black community as sweepingly dangerous. Likewise, Taylor rewrote the @stltoday headline with the word 'crowd' in place of 'mob' and corrected tweets calling Brown a 'man' with 'he was 17'[6] Taylor's most popular tweet also worked to recall and educate on the white supremacist history of Ferguson: 'I remember way back when Ferguson was an all-whitesundowntown.'[7] Tef Poe, immediately on the ground in Ferguson and observing the police–community interactions there, tweeted within three hours what according to our data was the first crowdsourced SOS: 'Basically martial law is taking place in Ferguson all perimeters blocked coming and going. National and international friends help!!!' This plea calls upon Poe's niche but global audience to engage with the events in Ferguson and is eerie given what we know about the tactics of suppression and obfuscation undertaken by the Ferguson Police Department.[8]

Other influential citizen voices

Of these day one initiators, only Antonio French maintained his status among crowdsourced elites for the following six days. As the days passed, crowdsourced elites including activist collectives like Anonymous, bloggers and tweeters without personal connections to the Ferguson/St. Louis area, and more mainstream news sources both local and national moved in and out of influence in the network. Significantly, however, several non-elite, mostly black, tweeters appeared among crowdsourced elites for the entire first week of the evolution and expansion of the Ferguson network, even in the face of increasing competition from elite sources.

For example, @natedrug, tweeting directly from within the ranks of Ferguson protesters, held a position as a crowdsourced elite for five of the seven days examined here and was the most widely re-tweeted user in the network by a large margin. @Nettaaaaaaaa, a St. Louis-based college student, was a crowdsourced elite for three days and was also among the most widely retweeted. Both these users are young, black, and without elite status or connections, though @Nettaaaaaaaa has since become a well-known digital activist in the larger #BlackLivesMatter movement.[9] @natedrug and @Nettaaaaaaaa's popularity in the network frequently outranked more traditional and elite sources including @CNN and a range of individual journalists. To this day, @natedrug has chosen to maintain a much lower profile than @Nettaaaaaaaa which includes deleting his entire Twitter history every few months; yet, it is clear from our sample of his tweet text that he actively tweeted compelling and timely images of police suppression in Ferguson, many of his tweets carrying a sense of immediacy by reporting that these tense images were happening 'right now' or 'moments ago.' In addition to these live reports, @natedrug's tweets reflected a tone of community advocacy and criticism of elites including local and federal agencies and government representatives.

@Nettaaaaaaaa offered her own timely on the ground updates of events unfolding in Ferguson ranging from violent police interactions to more mundane tasks like passing out food and water to protesters (Figure 3). @Nettaaaaaaaa also served as something of a local, citizen journalism news congregator, live-tweeting questions and answers from press conferences and sharing the experiences of other protesters both within and outside Ferguson through mentions and external links.

Along with @natedrug and @Nettaaaaaaaa, other individual young people farther from the action became crowdsourced elites through affective discourse and visuals that communicated frustration with state and media responses to African-American grief and rage. For example, a white high school student in Kentucky, @brennamuncy, tweeted a widely retweeted image of German Shepherds being sicced on historical civil rights protesters alongside an image of police confronting Ferguson protesters with the same breed. @brennamuncy's tweet sarcastically asks, 'what year is it again?' Likewise, the New York-based @jackfrombkln tweeted a side-by-side of historical civil rights protesters and Ferguson protesters facing off with police with the snide remark 'Behold progress'. Midwestern user @lolitasaywhat offered a succinct critique of the language used by mainstream media to describe events in Ferguson, tweeting: 'PAY ATTENTION as "teen" becomes "man,""community" becomes "mob", and "murder" becomes "alleged shooting". #Ferguson #medialiteracy' (Figure 4)

Figure 3. Example tweets & image from @Nettaaaaaaaa and some resulting exchanges within first week of Ferguson network.

Figure 4. Popular tweets from @brennamuncy [7,200+RTs] and @lolitassaywhat [4,300+RTs], both of whom have few followers yet became crowdsourced elites in the first week of the Ferguson network.

Together, these tweets illustrate the labor undertaken by members of networked counterpublics who cannot offer firsthand accounts of an important unfolding event but can offer relevant collective memories and institutional critiques. Notably, none of these non-elite, individual crowdsourced elites had particularly large Twitter followings at the time of Brown's killing, and several still do not,

reinforcing that their presence as influential voices in the network is due to the resonance of the affect and information in their tweets rather than any particular level of initial connectedness.

Activist reporting and activist collectives

By 10 August, the day after Michael Brown was killed, several individuals with either online or offline connections to activist communities and/or activist journalism also appeared among Ferguson crowdsourced elites, though they came and went within this single day. These included @ShaunKing, @syndicalisms, and @UntoldCarlisle. These users relied heavily on discourse that combined advocacy journalism and shocking images and stories of state violence. For example, @ShaunKing used #Ferguson to tweet about the cases of other victims of police shootings including John Crawford, Andy Cruz,andSeanBell.@syndicalismsand@UnToldCarlislebothtweetedawidelycirculated and graphic image of Brown lying dead in the street as a police officer stood over him with news bulletin style captions like, 'Teenager #MikeBrown won't start college on Monday because he was shot ten times by a #Ferguson police officer'.

The following day, 11 August, activist collective Anonymous became influential in the network with sometimes two and sometimes three different Anonymous affiliated accounts achieving crowdsourced elite status every remaining day of the week as users retweeted their messages. These accounts included @YourAnonNews, @OpFerguson, @TheAnonMessage, and @YourAnonGlobal. Over the course of the week, Anonymous was the only activist organization to achieve crowdsourced elite status, no other either traditionally organized or unstructured activist groups had as much influence. We suggest that as a collective of individuals that is quite literally anonymous, the organization was able to offer a kind of affective discourse to the networked conversation about Ferguson that would have been far too risky for any individual citizen or activist to introduce. This discourse seethed with indignation about police violence and state suppression and provided members of the network an illustration of what their individual anger and sense of immediacy channeled into collective outrage and digital civil disobedience might look and sound like.

For example, the account @OpFerguson was wholly dedicated to tweeting about ongoing events and relevant figures in Ferguson and gained infamy for threatening to dox[10] every member of the Ferguson Police Department. In general, Anonymous' discourse was unique from that of individual citizens or activists because the collective engaged in direct threats and warnings to state organizations in response to Brown's killing. The organization released a widely retweeted video that demanded congressional action to introduce something called 'Mike Brown's law ' to set national standards of police conduct and threatened to take offline every 'web-based asset' of police departments who responded to Ferguson protesters with force. The video warned, 'that is not a threat, it is a promise,' and, indeed, on11 August 2014, Anonymous launched a successful cyber-attack that took the City of Ferguson website, email servers and phone system offline for several hours.

Notably, while many individual activists were displaced by Anonymous in the network, some everyday citizens like @natedrug and @Nettaaaaaaaa remained elites alongside Anonymous. We suggest that these phenomena reflect the importance of both connectedness and is course within the network. In this case, Anonymous' reach, which includes far more followers and notoriety than most individuals, and their uniquely unrepentant discourse, resulted in their Ferguson engagement becoming prominent and

lasting; at the same time, the discourse offered to the network by everyday citizens who brought live on the ground updates or sets of knowledge and perspective based in counter public experience was in such demand that these citizens maintained influential positions even as the network spread and included more powerful players.

Mainstream media and other traditional elites

Contrary to previous work suggesting alternative and niche media play an influential role in digital storytelling about conflicts between citizens and the state, such outlets were almost entirely absent from the first week of Ferguson crowdsourced elites. Only the account of Global Grind (@GlobalGrind), the Hip Hop-centric entertainment and news website for which Michael Skolnik is political director, appeared as an influential alternative media source, and then only for one day, 10 August. National mainstream news organizations also played a minimal role among Ferguson crowdsourced elites, only one, CNN, gaining elite status on the last day of the first week of the network. Instead, the most visible media throughout the first week of the Ferguson network were mainstream local outlets and photographers and mainstream national journalists. As previously noted, the Twitter account for the St. Louis Post Dispatch was among the day one initiators of the Ferguson network, although its discursive contributions were starkly different than those of other initiators. The following day, no media outlets appeared at crowdsourced elites but beginning on 11 August and for the remainder of the week, at least two local news outlets or select individual mainstream journalists' accounts did.

We suggest, several phenomena are at play in this representation of news sources among crowdsourced elites. First, local news outlets, like @ksdknews, @KMOV, and @Fox2now which represent NBC, CBS, and Fox affiliates, respectively, provided a range of on the ground coverage of various developments in Ferguson but were most retweeted by the network when they reported information about the scale of police response to protesters, the confirmed hacking of the City of Ferguson by Anonymous, demands by police that media leave the scene, and the potential that the Ferguson PD would release the name of Michael Brown's shooter. That tweets covering this content in particular pushed local news outlets into crowdsourced elite status is evidence of the kinds of information the network was hungry for. Notably, these outlets tweeted a range of other content including quotes from officials about 'looting,' and 'positive' updates about events in Ferguson that were not at all popular within the network. Instead, the Ferguson network selected only specific content from these local elites to share, namely content that reinforced critiques of state response, reflecting a preference for information that helped to construct critical counternarratives (Figure 5).

Second, individual national reporters, including @WesleyLowry, @juliebosman, @ryanjreilly, and @Yamiche, of The Washington Post, The New York Times, The Huffington Post, and USA Today, respectively, offered on-the-ground updates of events in Ferguson that offered the tone and legitimacy of mainstream news alongside personal impressions and experiences of fear, outrage, and confusion. This group of journalists skews young (three in their 20s and one in her 30s), and is markedly more diverse, including women and African-Americans in equal proportion to men and White Americans, than most American newsrooms. This suggests that the perspectives and reporting styles of this young and diverse set of national journalists, even within the limits of their professional roles, spoke uniquely to the Ferguson network and resonated more with counterpublic interpretations of the events in Ferguson than those of other national sources covering the story.

As previously noted, Lowery and Reilly were arrested while covering the events in Ferguson and thus also gained some credibility in the counter public network for having found themselves in conflict with police. Although both Lowery and Reilly received a number of retweets on specific days, the primary action resulting in their inclusion as crowdsourced elites for the entirety of the week is mentions, as members of the network used mentioning to direct attention to their arrests. Similarly, we see a shift in strategy around some of the more persistent crowdsourced elites in the network, including @Nettaaaaaaaa and @OpFerguson, who initially rose to elite status by being retweeted, but then later received manymorementionsasmembersofthenetworknotlocatedinFerguson,MOaskedthem for information, and directed others' attention to the details coming from those accounts.

Beyond journalists, very few political or entertainment figures appear as crowdsourced elites in the first week of the Ferguson network. In fact, the only politicians' twitter handles to appear, both fairly late in the week, were those of Barack Obama and Missouri Governor Jay Nixon, neither of whom appeared because they tweeted about Ferguson but rather because so many Twitter users were tweeting at them (mentioning) with various

@KMOV	Confirmed: Anonymous group hacked into the City of #Ferguson website last night. All city emails are down. (6:37 AM - 11 Aug 2014 - **1,200+ RTs)**
@ksdknews	#Breaking: Police will release name of the officer involved in #Ferguson shooting of #MikeBrown by noon Tuesday per Chief Thomas Jackson (12:28PM - Aug 11 - **356 RTs)**
@KMOV	RT @ChiefSLMPD: County PD is working with our officers, state police, and several muni depts to calm the situation in Ferguson. (9:51 PM - 10 Aug 2014 - **8 RTs)**
@ksdknews	2 officers injured, 32 arrested during riots in #Ferguson. on.ksdk.com/1nJ9vMz (11:48AM - Aug 11 - **8 RTs)**

Figure 5. Examples of mainstream media tweets that were highly circulated by the Ferguson network (top) and largely ignored (bottom). Note that highly circulated tweets reported on activism and the accountability of state actors while ignored tweets reflect state narratives that focus on unrest.

Pleas and criticism about the events unfolding there. The only celebrities to appear as crowd sourced elites were Wil Wheaton, the actor, and John Legend, the musician. Legend only maintained his position as an influencer for one day and Wheaton, who has a particularly large twitter following, for two days. Both these celebrities specifically offered critiques of institutional failings around Ferguson, Legend focusing on the militarization and over reaction of police and Wheaton criticizing the national media for paying more attention to celebrity news than the events unfolding there. Ultimately, however, the minimal presence or influence of politicians and celebrities in the first week of the Ferguson network reinforces the democratizing potential of online storytelling initiated by everyday citizens. In this case, traditional elites were simply not needed to shape the discussion or push it onto the national agenda; regular people and activists accomplished this themselves.

Conclusion

Our findings support other works on the potential of public interest to outweigh state interest in setting agendas and creating the terms for debate (Benkler et al., 2013; Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012). However, this research specifically illustrates that it is possible not only for those with a set of niche expertise or activist experience and connections to significantly infiltrate public debates but also for individual members of highly marginalized counter publics to do so. In this case, African-Americans, women, and young people, including several members of Michael Brown's working-class, African-American community, were particularly influential and succeeded in defining the terms of debate despite their historical exclusion from the American public sphere. This highlights democratic potentials within the networked public sphere, particularly vis-à-vis the discursive labor of members of American counterpublics willing to contribute collective knowledge and critiques to the process of making sense of community crisis. We are not arguing here that Twitter, or any digital space, is innately democratic and we recognize the techno-cultural power dynamics that prevent this; however, we do suggest that radical possibilities for democratic debate, based in a history of counterpublic intervention and integration, have made themselves an undeniable feature of Twitter's landscape.

Furthermore, we reiterate the complementary and necessary combination of network data and discursive data in assessing the power of networked publics and counterpublics. Investigating solely the Ferguson network topology or the discursive content of the tweets misses the critical intersection of structure and meaning; the networked counterpublic comes to life only through a close reading of the tweets spread through the particular network structure. For example, in this case, the presence of local mainstream outlets and national journalists does not indicate a re-centering of elite narratives as might be assumed. Rather, the selection of which tweets from mainstream outlets and which mainstream journalists were spread (retweeted) and engaged with (mentioned), reflects an intentional focus by the network on highlighting evidence of state abuse – a focus that aligns with the counterpublic narratives initiated and maintained by everyday citizens.

Finally, our findings underscore that chronologically decompressing data in research on social movements and citizen–state conflict should be an ethical imperative if we hope to reveal the complex democratic potentials of the networked public sphere. Without focusing on the first week of the Ferguson network and further unpacking the network by day, we would not have been able to see the important influence of key crowd sourced elites and members of American counterpublics. In particular, our data spotlight the discursive labor of initiators and other influential everyday citizens, most of whom were young and/or African-American, who pushed the larger public sphere to address what happened to Michael Brown and offered ideological interpretations of Brown's death and resulting events firmly situated in minority experiences with state oppression. For example, important daily crowdsourced elites like @Nettaaaaaaaa do not appear if the network from 9 August to 15 August is collapsed into a single data set. Likewise, many of the people doing immediate on-the-ground witnessing and discursive storytelling of events in Ferguson, like our top day one initiator@AyoMissDarkSkin, also disappear when the data are collapsed. Both these users are young, black women whose voices played an important role in moving conversations about Brown's death into broader spaces. Thus, it is clear that compressing data in research attempting to detail the development of affective stories that hinge on discursively wrought subjects like race and policing can render members of counterpublics, particularly individual citizens who are already at the margins of the mainstream public sphere, invisible. Moreover, collapsing data masks important amplification strategies vis-à-vis traditional elites. While traditional elites,

including mainstream news sources and high-level politicians eventually achieve elite status in the Ferguson network, it is only through close examination of when and how they become crowdsourced elites that we can see their presence is a function of counterpublic strategy, and not reflective of a shift in power. Specifically, contrary to previous work on mentioning in Twitter networks, this research reveals that mentioning, like retweeting, can serve as an ideologically consistent amplification strategy, a counterpublic attempt to force the mainstream to pay attention to their cause. To that end, the technological architecture of Twitter becomes an important tool for subverting traditional citizen–state power structures, enabling counterpublics to drive national conversations.

Notes

1. This, in fact, was always the case; Habermas' idealized French salons were not a place of sweeping social inclusion.

2. The standard sample rate for the streaming API is 1% of all tweets. However, Twitter grants access to a 10% sample (sometimes called the 'garden hose') on a case-by-case basis. Our data were obtained through an individually negotiated 10% stream.

3. Mentions and retweets were counted separately in this analysis and normalized by the total number of tweets per day. Tweets containing both a mention and a retweet are counted in both columns. Tweets containing multiple mentions or multiple retweets were counted only once in the appropriate column. The tweet percentages for 9 August 2014 are somewhat lower than the rest because only 6 of 10 crowdsourced elites were discussing Ferguson, MO in the context of Michael Brown's death. Tweets related to the remaining 4 crowdsourced elites on that day were excluded.

4. Here, we draw on definitions of "mainstream" versus "counterpublic" membership that identify individuals and organizations based in dominant/powerful institutions and ways of knowing as "mainstream," and individuals and organizations that seek to challenge dominant institutionsandwaysofknowingbyreflectingtheexperiencesofthosewithouthistoricalsocial power as "counterpublic" (Squires, 2007). As has always been the case, the possibility exists for particular individuals, for example Wesley Lowery a reporter for the Washington Post, to be both a part of the mainstream public sphere (via his professional affiliation) and counterpublic sphere (given his identity and attempts at integrating counterpublic narratives into the mainstream vis-à-vis his professional affiliation).

5. The demographic characteristics (including race/age/gender) of Twitter users described throughoutthisanalysiswereprimarilydeterminedthroughanexaminationofself-descriptors in Twitter bios, biographies available elsewhere online (including Instagram, blogs, and personal/professional websites), and other available identity indicators (for example, self-identification w/in Tweet text, in other public forums, and 'selfies' on social media accounts).

6. Brown was a recent high school graduate who had turned 18 two months before.

7. The term 'sundown town' refers to the historical exclusion of non-whites, particularly African Americans, from living and residing in thousands of towns across the United States, as designated by signs at city limits warning African-Americans to keep out after dusk. While such overt exclusion was

challenged by the Civil Rights Act in 1968, these practices have continued to shape demographics (and community relations, and law enforcement) of cities like Ferguson, a former sundown town where the proportion of African-American residents made up two-thirds of the population in 2010 (up from 25% in just two decades) (US Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, 2015).

8. The US Department of Justice's(2015) report on the Ferguson Police Department uncovered a long-running pattern of disregard for due process and unconstitutional violations, including 'stops without reasonable suspicion and arrests without probable cause in violation of the Fourth Amendment; infringement on free expression, as well as retaliation for protected expression, in violation of the First Amendment; and excessive force in violation of the Fourth Amendment' (p. 3).

9. #BlackLivesMatter is a US-based movement calling for an end to racialized police brutality. The hashtag was first used by activists Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the killing of Travyon Martin, and spread widely once it was used in conjunction with tweets about the events in Ferguson, MO.

10. 'Doxxing' refers to releasing personal identifying information on the Internet.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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