PARTICIPANTS ON THE MARGINS: EXAMINING THE USE OF SNAPCHAT, FACEBOOK, AND TWITTER AMONG POLITICAL NEWCOMERS DURING THE STUDENT FERGUSON PROTESTS

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Introduction

"Whites torch cop cars and destroy property after baseball games: rowdy. Blacks torch cop cars and destroy property after cops get away with murder: savages." Observation attributed to a comment in worldstarhiphop.com and circulated via blogs, tweets, Tumblrs, and Instagram, December 5, 2014.

In late November and early December 2014, thousands of people in more than 170 cities across the U.S. participated in demonstrations protesting the Grand Jury decision not to indict officer Darren Wilson in the shooting death of unarmed teenager Michael Brown (Almasy & Yan 2014). A week after the decision in Ferguson, MO, protests widened after the New York Grand Jury declined to indict an NYPD officer in the case of Eric Garner, an unarmed man who resisted arrest and then died when placed in an apparent chokehold. By early December, as protests continued, several began speculating that this was the beginning of a new social movement decrying not only racial bias in law enforcement, but also the wider social and economic system that reinforces disadvantage among U.S. young people of color (Blake 2014; Madhani and Alcinor 2014; Roth 2014). Through a variety of media platforms, voices within this emergent movement discussed interrelated issues of racial profiling, police brutality and police accountability, and criminal justice reforms aimed at ending the "school to prison pipeline" through increased investment in urban educational and economic opportunities (Roth 2014). Young activists such as 20-year-old Rasheen Aldridge were invited to the White House; other young people, who had staged protests beginning with Michael Brown's death in August 2014, formed organizations such as Millennial Activists United, Hands Up United, and Lost Voices to continue coordination of protest efforts (Corey 2014; Swaine 2014).

By late November in areas around New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, Oakland (CA), Denver (CO), San Antonio (TX), St. Paul (MN), and St. Louis (MO) as well as in other locations, thousands of students between the ages of 11 – 18 staged walkouts

from their schools in solidarity with the Ferguson and Garner protesters. Some held their hands in the air and others hoisted signs reading, "Black Lives Matter" and "Hands up, Don't shoot;" some participated in "die-ins" in honor of Brown and Garner (Klein 2014; Morrison 2014; Nolan and Mezzacappa 2014, Schworm, 2014). Many more expressed solidarity in online venues, sharing photos and expressions of indignation via Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr (see, e.g., http://millennialau.tumblr.com/; https://www.tumblr.com/tagged/ferguson).

This article presents a case study of a group of high school aged students of color as they considered participating in a walkout, as they observed others in their peer networks who were making similar decisions about participating, and as they then interpreted that participation after the fact. It explores the role that the social media platforms Snapchat, Facebook, and Twitter played in this decision-making and in reflections about their own participation. It therefore aims to contribute to understandings of how social movements develop, following Palczewski (2011), who argued that scholars need to pay attention to both state-focused political activism as well as culturally driven discursive politics.

The ways that the students communicated with one another in social media locations was of course shaped by both the specific political and cultural settings of the young people themselves and by the infrastructure of connectivity, as will be discussed (van Dijk, 2012; Khamis & Vaughn 2011). Whereas some young people received encouragement to participate in the protests via social media, a number of participants later received criticism in a variety of online venues for acting rudely or violently toward law enforcement, for participating in protests merely as an excuse to skip class, for not understanding the issues, and for merely "following the crowd." Students mentioned other deterrents to participation as well, expressing concerns about missing school, worries about personal safety, and fears of being singled out by their peers or by school administration as "troublemakers." Both the online and offline venues in which the student protesters expressed their dissent therefore became contested public spaces that these young people needed to navigate in relation to their choices. How did these students, many of whom were newcomers to political action, navigate these spaces, and how did the techno-commercial and political settings of the major social network sites amplify, shape, and constrain these processes of navigation? This article argues that as young people navigated these spaces, some of them experienced themselves as members of a counterpublic for the first time. The article will argue that online artifacts of political engagement – whether they were in the form of photos, quoted sayings, passed along commentary, or something else – were important in the formation of counterpublics with which newcomers could come to identify as they decided whether or not to add their voices to dissent within contested public spaces. Equally important were the constraints of differing social media spaces, which shaped how, in what venues, and when young people participated.

This case thus draws upon ethnographic fieldwork to provide new insights into the relationships between what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) have termed connective action and its relationship to the formation of counterpublics (Fraser 1992). Results suggest that when newcomers from minoritized communities utilized social network sites to display artifacts of their own engagement in political activities, others in their

social networks who were casual observers interpreted those artifacts in ways that may have strengthened their own motivation to participate – or, they may have made decisions not to participate based on the criticisms they witnessed others receiving. This challenges the claim that online activism can be dismissed as "cheap talk" (Farrell & Rabin 1996) or "slacktivism" (Morozov 2011), demonstrating that digital activism plays an important role in providing encouragement for those at the political margins to see themselves as at least potentially part of an unfolding movement. It also underscores the criticisms that newcomers encounter in various social media sites and that they must decide to overcome in order to actually engage in participation.

As networks in minoritized communities largely remain difficult for social movement organizations to mobilize and recruit, the article argues for the need for more communication researchers to focus on marginal and first time participation at the hyperlocal level, and for more research on the ways that social networks may facilitate the linking of participants at the margins with wider resources for social change efforts going forward. In order to develop this argument, we first turn to a review of existing research in order to situate this article's case study.

Social Media, Publics, and Race/Ethnicity

Many of our recent and evolving theories regarding the role of social media in political change have taken as their starting point the national and international protest movements that involve large numbers of people who hail from western Europe and from the U.S.(Bennett & Segerberg 2012, 2013; Castells 2012; Donk et.al. 2004; Howard and Parks 2012; Juris 2012). Exploring cases of contentious politics such as Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, the Spanish Indignados and Greek Aganaktismenoi movements, scholars working in politics and communication have considered the role of networked communication in collective action. Scholarship has focused on the social media practices and intentional efforts of those who have been involved in coordinating protest activities, those who have been active participants in such activities who work independently or in collaboration with collective organizing efforts, and those covering such activities in the legacy and alternative media (Ardevol et.al. 2010; Papacharissi 2012b; Postill 2013; Russell 2013). A particularly influential line of thought from Bennett and Segerberg (2013) has explored the emergence of connective action, or the ways in which individuals personalize expressions of a movement's goals and act independently in networking efforts that sometimes complement the collective action work of social movement organizations (SMOs) but sometimes occur with little organized leadership. Extending research on social movement organizations and resource mobilization that has long been an important strand of research within political sociology, communication scholars working in this space therefore have been contributing useful theoretical frameworks and analyses regarding the ways that social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have come to be incorporated into increasingly sophisticated efforts to mobilize constituents, raise funds, and to garner new forms of power in the discursive battles that are waged in and through the news media. But as existing research has focused on participants in political action who are already "in the fold," we have missed a key point: how is it that people come to be involved politically in the first place, and what role do social media play in these processes? This article contributes to this research by considering U.S.

urban young people from communities that are historically underrepresented in public spaces as more than casual observers to the action, considering newcomers as more than viewers of "clicktivism" who may think of those in their social networks as friends rather than "slacktivists." Rather, this article posits that as young students of color observe others in their social networks who share views, photos, stories, and other materials about Ferguson and related incidents, they are actively hailed into a counterpublic that is coming into being in relation to the heightened tensions around U.S. racial/ethnic identity, specifically in reference to relations between U.S. law enforcement and communities of color. This occurs as those they know use social media to express views, share stories, and pass along photos and videos that reinforce a way of viewing the world that is counter to the mainstream and consistent with some elements of their own lived experiences – even as the conversations about these issues are often contested for a variety of reasons.

Scholars theorizing about public spaces are often in conversation with those who write about what Habermas (1989) termed the public sphere. The public sphere is understood as a space where people can share information and opinions in order to form a public will that influences political action, and the public sphere is also a space in which political officials are held accountable for that action. But not all members of society enjoy the same level of access to public realms of decisionmaking. In the U.S., white male landowners initially were granted the right to represent everyone else in such decisionmaking. After the women's and African American suffrage movements, the right to vote was extended to other populations, but due to inequities that continue to structure life in the U.S., political power remains overwhelmingly in the hands of the white wealthy male elite. Because of this, groups within society that have not had access to public decisionmaking have gathered in spaces that are far removed from mainstream media discourse and separate from state-approved spaces in order to discuss their shared political interests. In response to Habermas' description of a singular public sphere, then, Nancy Fraser (1992) and others have argued that there are actually multiple publics, and that "subaltern" or marginalized groups have participated in creating counterpublics in response to the exclusionary politics of dominant publics.

Michael Warner (2002) has added the key point that counterpublics exist not out of intentional creation on the part of would-be members but by virtue of being addressed. According to Warner, counterpublics do maintain some awareness of a subordinate status as they are marked off from a dominant public, but like all publics, counterpublics come into existence in relation to texts and their circulation. This article therefore argues that when people participate in political action for the first time and choose to share such "texts" - here identified as artifacts of their political engagement - with others in their social networks via Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, or other social media platforms, they may in some sense be participating in hailing a counterpublic into being. It is not that people intentionally "join" a counterpublic, but rather, as people seek to express something of their own experiences to those in their networks, they rely on readily-available and easily-recognized resources, such as photos, videos, jokes, statements, and quotations like the one that opened this article. As these items are shared, they become evidence of convictions that are shared and that are thus part of a collective expression that further connects those sharing such artifacts with others.

Those who do not overtly identify with that collective and who may not find its expressions convincing may nevertheless find the expressions of those in their social networks to be persuasive, or at least thought-provoking and relevant. In this way, even those at the margins are hailed into a counterpublic as it comes into existence. This helps us to conceptualize what happened as people connected with one another and with an emerging social movement's agenda in the case of the Ferguson protests and the broader issues the protests represented. Although conversations about Ferguson seemed to erupt spontaneously on social media in the days and months following the shooting death of Michael Brown, what was articulated aligned with the African American community's longstanding rage about injustices in law enforcement. As people expressed their dismay and frustration over the death of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, and as they expressed anger over the ways they perceived that the justice system had failed their communities, such texts were recognizable and personalizable, even as they were only loosely connected with existing and nascent social organizations seeking to bring about political change. And the students in this study found that their own conflicted feelings about law enforcement were echoed and reinforced in what they were seeing and hearing in the various social media spaces where they interacted with their peers, as will be discussed.

This article therefore looks at how students interacted with one another and with others across a variety of social media platforms. Social media platforms have become sites for political expression, and as Hutchby (2001) observed, there are values embedded in every technology that shape and constrain the ways in which those technologies are used. The students in this study did not explore any of the tools such as Ushahidi or Freenet that have been utilized by protesters who are more central to political action (Russell 2015). Rather, these students relied on commercial tools that are easily accessible. Whereas social media platforms such as Snapchat, Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram are distinct, they share certain characteristics in common. They are commercial; they are easily accessed through smart phones, laptops, or tablets; they allow for instantaneous and real time postings that can consist of quick reports, shared photos, or short replies; and, as Marwick (2013) has pointed out, these social media offer users a way to measure their own status by considering the number of followers, friends, retweets, comments, and @replies they receive. But they are also distinct. Facebook serves as a "social lubricant" that allows people to broadcast positive and negative life occurrences and to seek further support or information (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2011). Twitter encourages playful performances and improvisation within its 140-character limit (Papacharissi 2012). It also allows for instant validation of the quality of one's public contribution and is used by some as a form of public instant messenger (Manjoo 2010). Snapchat allows users to communicate with a select group of recipients, to control how long those recipients will have access to the message that the user is sending, and to learn instantly whether or not the recipient has opened the "snap." It is therefore less public than other social network sites, and also more likely to garner an immediate response because of its time limit. As danah boyd (2014) writes, "the underlying message is simple: You've got 7 seconds. PAY ATTENTION. " Plus, if it's a group "snap," the recipients face the added social pressure of responding more quickly than the other recipients who have also received the "snap."

In previous research, social media such as Facebook and Twitter have been found to enhance or enlarge counterpublics (Eckert & Chadha 2013; Leung and Lee 2014). Milioni (2009) suggests that online counterpublics are sites defined by information self-determination, interactivity, and delocalized network (inter)action. But Dahlgren (2005) broadens this definition beyond single sites, suggesting that a public or counterpublic may be understood as "a constellation of communicative spaces in society that permit the circulation of information, ideas, debates, ideally in an unfettered manner," where political will may be constituted. It is this definition that is embraced here. Soriano (2014) further points out that the process of connectivity facilitated acrosss social media sites creates opportunities for the identification, belonging, and support that energize collective resistance to oppressive power, which is also important in this case.

Counterpublics still face several definitional issues, however, such as whether counterpublics are primarily recognizable in relation to membership in marginalized communities, which in the U.S. are usually comprised of racial/ethnic and historically underrepresented groups. Following Holt (1995), Squires (2002) has noted that there is a key distinction between groups engaged in "idle talk" and those that have the potential to act as counterpublics, noting that what she terms a Black public sphere must offer space for the critique of the dominant order and must also enable participants to engage in action that can challenge and change that order. She proposes a definition of a Black public as "an emergent collective composed of people who (a) engage in common discourses and negotiations of what it means to be Black, and (b) pursue particularly defined Black interests (p. 454)." She notes that this definition allows for heterogeneity and also allows for coalitions including those who do not self-identify as Black but who identify with similar issues.

According to Pew, 73 percent of African American Internet users participate in social media, and nearly one quarter of African Americans online utilize Twitter (Smith 2014). The Internet, as Brock (2012) writes, "maintains Western culture through its content and often embodies Western ideology through its design and practices," and is therefore not "value-neutral" but rather mediates racial and cultural identity (pp. 531-2). This has led to the emergence of what some have termed "Black Twitter," which Brock (2012) identifies as the "mediated articulations of a Black subculture" (p. 545; see also Manjoo 2010). Black Twitter thus becomes a space for what Gates (1983) terms "signifyin,'" which is the articulation of a shared world view expressed through references to Black culture and Black idioms (Brock 2012). According to Brock, Black Twitter calls into question the whiteness of online public space, as it disrupts the way in which White experiences are taken as normal and invisible whereas racialized populations are visibly marginalized. Black Twitter is not a counterpublic, but is rather a space in which counterpublics may form as people find and follow one another, engage in discussions about the meanings of Blackness, and discuss strategies for engaging in political action that arises from those meanings.

Hashtag memes, twitter @replies and retweets flourish among densely connected clusters of people who are highly connected with one another, as is the case among young black social media users, as Meeder (2012) found. From August 2014 onwards, key voices on Ferguson emerged in Twitter and in other social network spaces. Some

of these emergent leaders, like Ta-Nehisi Coates, were also affiliated with media outlets like The Atlantic Monthly. Others, such as Ashley Yates, Tory Russell, Johnetta Elzie and Deray McKesson, and organizations such as the Ferguson Response Network and Millennial Activists United, were also active in Twitter as well as elsewhere, and came to be identified by mainstream media as activists after assuming organizational roles in the protests and responses.

But even with the emergence of Black Twitter, young people from historically underrepresented communities do not experience themselves as members of a singular community, nor do they uniformly choose to follow or interact online with elites or those who have emerged as political leaders. This is in part because political activism is understood among young people in these communities in ways that differ from their more privileged counterparts, and schooling shapes these differences in profound ways. In the U.S., privilege is correlated with higher parental educational levels and better schools, both of which are predictors of participation in political activism (Van Aelst and Walgrave 2001). In privileged communities, schools may be understood as locations where young people are encouraged to draw connections between civic engagement and personal empowerment (Middaugh and Kahne 2009). In contrast, young people from what deFinney and colleagues (2011) refer to as "minoritized" backgrounds are more likely to attend high schools that are underfunded and undersupported. They are aware of the negative judgments rendered against their schools by outsiders, and many believe that their education has suffered due to discriminatory practices and policies that shape their school experiences in many ways. Rather than viewing the school setting as a place for empowerment, therefore, they may experience their school context as at least in part an extension of a national discourse that emphasizes the containment of youth and the embedding of young minoritized "Others" into a racialized construct that privileges whiteness (Giroux 1996). As Foreman (2005) writes in his study of Somali immigrant and refugee youths, these young people "are regularly denied adequate opportunities in society or their schools to implement the values of their experiences and to collaborate meaningfully in the redefinition and reinvention of "the nation." Members of minoritized groups thus have fewer connections to social movements, and encounter more barriers to engagement (Juris 2012; Mercea 2014). It is from these points of departure that minoritized young people express skepticism about participation in large scale collective action and do not necessarily see themselves as part of what they perceive to be a "White" public.

This article argues that the social network spaces of participants at the margins function as spaces for the formation of counterpublics. Prior research suggests that social network spaces constitute contested public spaces for young students of color, and thus any consideration of the formation of counterpublics within social media must begin by examining how young people navigate those spaces as they encounter and consider political participation in relation to an unfolding movement.

Digital Media Club: Using Media to Make a Difference in Our Communities

The findings from this article are based on a larger ethnographic project that has explored how minoritized young people become engaged in utilizing media to make a difference in their communities (Author 2014). My colleagues and I created a context in

which young people of color would have an opportunity to work together within a process that involved, first, a critical examination of our places in and the relationship of media systems to existing hierarchies of power, and secondarily, a consideration of how various media might be used to organize for change. My university colleagues and I therefore had committed to leading an after-school group called the Digital Media Club in one of the city's most culturally diverse high schools, where 40 different language groups and more than 60 countries are represented in the student body. The most intensive part of the study took the form of two-hour weekly interactions and observations with 19 high school students over a three-month period, although relationship-building between the researcher and students had taken place over a three month period prior to that. Discussions in the weekly interactions included one-on-one consultations as well as group conversations. Students discussed how social media had played a role in the ways students, and they themselves, had learned about and shared views about unfolding events related to both Ferguson and to local law enforcement. Interviews and observations with teachers, staff persons, and administrators who worked with the students on a daily basis also informed this analysis.

The school administrators were supportive and granted IRB approval for the presence of an ethnographic researcher who would be co-leading the club. School leaders take an asset-based approach to the school's diversity, and they are interested in after school activities that encourage students to build relationships with other students whose backgrounds that differ from their own. They are also glad for a connection to the nearby university as that helps them to make manifest the high school's strong interest in supporting their students as they move toward a college education. The after-school program has drawn about four dozen students over its four years, and students involved have included those who were born in the U.S., Mexico, Ghana, Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, Guinea, Jordan, Iraq, Russia, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Students born outside the U.S. have had varying levels of English language proficiency and had been in the U.S. from between 2 months to twelve years.

Ferguson Protests

During the weeks following the Ferguson Grand Jury decision, the young people in this after school group reported that they, along with most of the students they knew, seemed to have first learned about the protests from face-to-face communication with friends, peers, family members, or teachers. Students then also encountered news about the protests secondarily through Facebook. Consistent with what is already known about social network sites, the students said that many more young people had read about than had posted about the happenings.

Students reported that many of their peers had chosen to engage in online discussion about the protests in a somewhat tentative way, viewing a Tumblr, tweet, comment or photo and then tagging or @tweeting a friend or family member they knew to be sympathetic with the views of the protesters, thereby identifying themselves as supportive to someone else they believed to be equally supportive. Others chose to "like" or "favorite" a message they encountered on someone else's feed, thereby leaving a more public declaration of how their views comported with those of the protesters.

Even more courageous students chose to repost, retweet, or otherwise share a curated message more broadly through their own Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, or Instagram feeds, either with or without commentary. The students reported that a few young people they knew had gone so far as to create their own Tumblr on the issue.

When students engaged in the reposting of curated content, they risked receiving negative comments or feedback from those in their social networks who disagreed with them. Responses could take on the form of "microaggressions (boyd 2013)." Sometimes, these curated reposts, retweets, or shares were effectively silenced after receiving negative comments. One student who re-posted a curated message supportive of the Ferguson protesters noted that while some peers "liked" his post, another peer enacted a form of microaggression by tagging him without comment in a post that denigrated the protesters. The student who'd been tagged felt embarrassed, but also seemed to believe that by publicly voicing support through his Facebook page, he was "taking a stand," or, perhaps, participating in a form of digital activism. Even questions about safety were interpreted as potential microaggressions meant to express a difference of opinion about unfolding events. One student noted, "I got a lot of texts from family members and friends asking if I was safe, but who's asking if the black men who live in this city are safe every day?" (Kram 2014). Students who chose to express opinions about the protests and walkouts in any way therefore experienced themselves as entering contested social spaces.

News of the non-indictments in the Michael Brown and Eric Garner cases had occurred when students were out of school during the U.S. Thanksgiving holiday. On the second day back in school, the city's largest urban high school staged a walkout. One news report, giving voice to the dominant frame of police as public servants who protect all members of the comunuity equally, quoted a member of the police union who labeled the walkouts "unlawful," complaining that they cost taxpayers money and restricted the police's ability to pay attention to other issues as they were charged with keeping students protected during their walkouts (McGhee, 2014).

The following day, three other urban high schools joined in staging walkouts. On that day, conversations about Ferguson and about the protests in the urban high school where I volunteered were tense. The students I talked with during after school hours that day seemed to feel that the majority of students in their school were listening rather than commenting on the protest activities and tensions at other schools. As a group, the students present in the after school program that day were reticent, and tentative. I learned from the students that whereas many teachers in their own school had offered general support for participation in the walkouts, only a few teachers discussed the protests. The students said that these few teachers attempted to place the frustration and rage behind the protests in a larger historical context, noting that many in the African American community did not feel that the police were there to protect them and the courts were not, either. One student in our after school discussion volunteered that maybe this was because of the U.S. legacy with slavery, as the law during that time was used against the interests of minority communities and law enforcement protected the interests of slaveowners rather than slaves. All of the students in our after school circle recognized the contentiousness of the issues involved, and were reluctant to enter into

the contested public spaces of online discussion about the unfolding events. One student noted her reluctance about participating in discussions about the protests because, as she said, in "heated situations," people can become "targets" for the aggression of others, and she didn't want to put herself in a position of becoming such a target.

Later on, however, the same student that had been concerned about being a "target" reported excitedly that she had just received a text from another student about the possibility that her school would be organizing a walkout. Her enthusiasm was palpable as she frantically texted others in her social circles, seeking more information about where and when the walkout would take place and then reporting to others in the room on what she was learning: "they're trying to decide if it's going to be tomorrow or the next day," she said to no one in particular. But this interaction, witnessed by the other students, changed the tone of the discussion from a conversation about what others had done, to what this particular group of students might or might not do. Seated in one of the school's computer labs, students quickly found news and alternative news images online of those at other neighboring schools who had participated in a walkout that day, and they shared and discussed them with one another. When an adult mentor then asked another student whether or not she would attend her own school's walkout if indeed it was staged, the second student was hesitant. Her parents would not want her to miss school, she said. Another volunteered that he had heard that the walkouts at one school had led to a disciplinary lockdown, in which no one was allowed to leave the school building. That student did not want his school to receive a "bad reputation," and he was concerned that participation in a walkout during the school day might contribute to that. Finally, several students noted that they did not believe that they understood all of the facts related to the protest. "What if someone asks me what I'm protesting for and I can't really explain it?," one wondered, giving this as a reason for hesitation in participating.

But by the next day, many more students had received word of the possibility of a walkout through in-person and text conversations. A student organizer had set up a Facebook event page that quickly circulated throughout the student body. Another organizer stopped in to the school's front office to discuss the protest with the high school administration, who in turn alerted local law enforcement and parents: their school was going to stage a walkout in solidarity with the other protesters. Together, student organizers and teachers decided on a plan to walk around the nearby park, hold a rally, and then return to classes.

On the day of the scheduled protest, students from that urban high school held handmade signs reading, "Respect," and chanted, "hands up, don't shoot," using the mantra associated with Michael Brown's arrest. They shared photos with their friends primarily through Snapchat. But during the protest, the group split, with some students following the original plan to walk and then rally at the school while others elected to walk downtown to the grounds of their rival high school, where the first local school protests had taken place. Much to the chagrin of the student organizers and school administrators, the rogue student protesters shut down a major thoroughfare, snarling traffic for more than an hour. Some reportedly shouted profanities. They were all eventually bussed back to their school.

"Come back!," students who had remained with the protest organizers had texted their friends. Many sent snaps with photos so that those who had begun the trek downtown would realize that not all students were heading downtown. These instantaneous communications were important during the chaos of the moment, as the school's principal used a bull horn to try to stop the impromptu rogue protesters and as the protest's organizers continued back toward the school. Students also texted and exchanged snaps with their friends at the rival school downtown, alerting them that some had chosen to take the protest to their school grounds. That school went on lockdown, and students in the school texted and exchanged snaps with friends they saw outside, reportedly telling them to go back to their own school. The split colored the experience for many and became central to the narrative students later told about their involvement in this protest activity. Perhaps it is ironic that in the midst of all of the personalized communication through various social media, students later articulated the problem as a lack of centralized leadership and communication.

Still, many students saw the participation in the protests as valuable. One student at another school expressed to a journalist the feeling that seemed to be a part of many experiences of those engaged in the walkouts. Responding to some of the criticisms he and others had heard about the walkouts, he noted, "Some people were like, why is walking out of school even going to help anything. To me it was like, we're students, and this is what we can do. A grievous injustice took place in our nation and it's continuing to take place." And then, this student noted the significance he felt in recording the event as it was happening: "As I was filming, I was getting a shot of everyone's feet coming down, and I just got goosebumps." (Zubrzycki 2014).

Artifacts of Engagement

Why was it that this particular student had "goosebumps" when filming the activities of his school's walkout? A great deal of research has already focused on the fact that being involved in the action through protesting, as well as by photographing and texting about it, enhances a person's sense of emotional identification with a movement and its aims (Pappacharissi 2013). But what was particularly of interest in this case was what happened when those on the margins of political action, such as students who had been unsure about the walkouts, encountered first-hand evidence of others in their peer networks who had already decided to walk out: in other words, it is worth focusing not on the smaller numbers of creators and circulators of most of the protest's video or texts, but on the larger numbers of recipients and viewers of that material.

Not all of the students in the Digital Media Club after school program decided to join the walkout as soon as they learned that others their age had been similarly involved, and many expressed hesitation even when they learned that those in their peer networks were going to participate. But the conversation noticeably shifted as they encountered more and more images, texts, and other forms of evidence of how people they knew had been involved in these activities. It became difficult for them to remain indifferent to or isolated from the protests and the many discussions that took place about them.

The recording of these activities through video, photos, and messages thus had a particular salience: not just for those who created and shared, but also for those participants at the margins who saw themselves as less involved or at a greater distance from the core of the movement activities. The comments, photos, videos, and stories were no longer simply the stories of unknown involved individuals; as they became artifacts shared online, these stories spoke of a form of political action writ large and inserted recognizable actors into the narrative. These artifacts provided evidence of their peers' engagement, not only in political activities like the walkout, but in the activity of sharing stories about their own engagement with a wider audience. The sharing of these artifacts of engagement – comments, photos, videos, tweets, news stories that were found or created and then passed along largely via Snapchat, Facebook, and Twitter as well as through texts – may not have been on the same order as other political activities, but they provided an avenue into what Dahlgren (2009) calls the "proto-political," or the important step whereby young people come to be aware of the collective limits of their situation and thus the possibility that things could be different as a result of their own involvement in the action at hand. The artifacts of engagement that others created and shared sutured young people into emergent counterpublics coalescing around the perceived injustices in Ferguson and in other places. These artifacts thus became part of a non-linear chain of causality that contributed to the ways that the less-involved students came to see participation as not just something that others did, but as something in which they themselves might also engage. The artifacts thus functioned as the personalized expressions of a collective counterpublic that propelled people toward connective action.

Discussion

Communication about political action among one's networks within social network sites has become an important "open channel" associated with the mobilization of other newcomers, particularly in locations where civic infrastructures are weak (Mercea 2014). As young people shared their artifacts of engagement on their social networks, their activities and shared perspectives became visible to other members of their communities who might not otherwise consider such actions to be part of the repertoire of actions that are deemed appropriate for their group. This is important, as we do know that strong collective identities as well as strongly felt shared grievances can play a central role in mobilizing members of one's extended social networks to consider participation for the first time themselves (Verhulst & Walgrave 2009; Jasper & Poulsen 1995). Knowing that others in one's social circle are expressing their concern through action is a strong predictor for future participation (Verba et al., 1995; Schussman & Soule, 2005). This then makes artifacts of engagement that signal a possible connection to an emergent social movement something worthy of further investigation as we strive to understand the role of social media in fostering connective action. It also points to the significance of the more immediate and less public forms of communication that are a part of Snapchat, as young people at the margins who may have been reluctant to voice either support or opposition on Facebook or Twitter found the barriers of entry to participation to be much lower when communication was primarily between and among a select circle. Through Snapchat, young people could express their views or call on their peers to act, thus signaling their membership in a

nascent counterpublic in a less public yet still social setting that demanded attention and reponse.

As Tufekci and Wilson have argued (2012), digital activism, like activism occurring in the streets, is not without costs. Additionally, there is a sort of "root for the winning team" phenomenon that takes place in relation to political involvement (Walgrave and Verhulst 2009). And indeed, when students in this study encountered evidence of the fact that others agreed with their stances or actions, they became more willing to consider greater involvement themselves. However, they were aware that the open-ended nature of platforms such as Twitter and Facebook meant that they were more likely to encounter resistance when they engaged in expressing views or engaging in actions related to contentious politics. Snapchat provided an attractive alternative, as students could then select recipients and share messages. Snapchat also became primary during the actual protest event, as students were able to relay messages instantaneously that demanded immediate attention. After the event, conversations continued on Twitter and Facebook, although of course many more students were observers than produsers (Bruns 2008). The use of differing social platforms for different kinds of communication demonstrates that students were able to utilize a variety of strategies as they and their peers were hailed into an emergent post-Ferguson counterpublic and were compelled to negotiate the contested public spaces of social media.

Conclusion

Reflecting on findings from an ethnographic study of young students of color engaged in discussing how to use media to make a difference in their communities, this article has argued that as students encountered evidence of how their peers and others in their communities participated in political dissent through social media, they may have been able to overcome fears and find the courage to participate themselves as they were hailed as members of counterpublics. But the case study demonstrates that both political and proto-political participation occurs among political newcomers in contested social spaces and not without risk. Students in this study utilized differing social media platforms for differing actions. They used a Facebook group to organize a protest, twitter to send messages to their followers about their activities, and then Snapchat as events were unfolding and as disagreements about the nature and direction of the protest emerged. Once the student protest event was passed, conversations returned primarily to the sharing of broader commentary through Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. The affordances of differing platforms combined with the political and cultural contexts to shape how students negotiate their felt desire or reluctance to participate in the unfolding political action.

Newcomers to political activities like the students in this study are, of course, not embedded in the relationships that comprise formal and informal movement networks. And yet, "first-timers" come to these new activities as members of a variety of other communities and networks. Whereas a great deal of existing research has focused primarily on the outcomes of such participation on the individuals who are full participants, or on members of social movement organizations and their goals, this case study instead focuses attention on individuals who are marginally involved in political

action. By exploring participants at the political margins and their relationships with other communities and networks outside the realm of the current political action, the article extends the timeline of when and how we might think about the ways that political awareness might transform into political action, and how we might conceptualize the role of social media in this process. Because newcomer participants may generate or share artifacts of engagement on their social networks, such activities are revealed to community members who might not otherwise consider such actions to be part of the repertoire of actions that are deemed appropriate for a certain group. This is important, as we do know that strong collective identities as well as strongly felt shared grievances can play a critical role in mobilizing members of one's extended social networks to consider participation for the first time themselves. Knowing that others in one's social circle are expressing their concern through action is a strong predictor for future participation. This then makes artifacts of engagement that signal a connection to emergent counterpublics something worthy of further investigation as we strive to understand the role of social media in fostering connective action.

This finding confounds prior theories that presumed that casual online and largely observation-only participation might be dismissed as merely a form of "slactivism." The article suggests instead that such casual observation may serve an important role as a form of early participation that is made possible through digitally networked communication, even as the opportunities to observe those artifacts are increasingly limited as the structures of commercial social network sites continue to shift. The article therefore concludes that further studies of the role of social media in early political participation among minoritized communities across a variety of social media platforms are necessary to enrich our theories of the role of social media usage in long term political change.

This article has therefore argued that when people participate in political action for the first time and choose to share artifacts of that engagement with minoritized others via Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or other social media platforms, they participate in hailing a counterpublic into being. Through this sharing of artifacts with those in their networks who, like them, are also at some distance from the mainstream, people in their networks are given the opportunity to consider and possibly render meaningful those artifacts of engagement shared by their friends or family members in social media. The act of using social media to share the artifacts of one's engagement in political action is therefore potentially potent as a means for garnering support for an alternative vision that can further mobilize counterpublics toward political action. In other words, even participation at the margins and its representation in social media matters; it just may matter to different groups, and on a different time frame, than our theories might have invited us to pay attention to at present.

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