



2019

## The Battle for #Baltimore: Networked Counterpublics and the Contested Framing of Urban Unrest

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### Recommended Citation

Foucault Welles, B., & Jackson, S. J. (2019). The Battle for #Baltimore: Networked Counterpublics and the Contested Framing of Urban Unrest. *International Journal of Communication*, 13 1699-1719. Retrieved from [https://repository.upenn.edu/asc\\_papers/767](https://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/767)

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# The Battle for #Baltimore: Networked Counterpublics and the Contested Framing of Urban Unrest

## Abstract

A growing body of research suggests that Twitter has become a key resource for networked counterpublics to intervene in popular discourse about racism and policing in the United States. At the same time, claims that online communication necessarily results in polarized echo chambers are common. In response to these seemingly contrary impulses in communication research, we explore how the contested online network comprised of tweets about the April 2015 protests in Baltimore, Maryland, evolved as users constructed meaning and debated questions of protest and race. We find that even within this highly polarized debate, counterpublic frames found widespread support on Twitter. Progressive racial justice messages were advanced, in part, by brokers who worked across polarized subcommunities in the network to build mutual understanding and model effective strategies for reconciling disparate accounts of protest events.

## Keywords

social media, online activism, networked counterpublics, framing, social network analysis, mixed methods, Baltimore

## Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

## Comments

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## **The Battle for #Baltimore: Networked Counterpublics and the Contested Framing of Urban Unrest**

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A growing body of research suggests that Twitter has become a key resource for networked counterpublics to intervene in popular discourse about racism and policing in the United States. At the same time, claims that online communication necessarily results in polarized echo chambers are common. In response to these seemingly contrary impulses in communication research, we explore how the contested online network comprised of tweets about the April 2015 protests in Baltimore, Maryland, evolved as users constructed meaning and debated questions of protest and race. We find that even within this highly polarized debate, counterpublic frames found widespread support on Twitter. Progressive racial justice messages were advanced, in part, by brokers who worked across polarized subcommunities in the network to build mutual understanding and model effective strategies for reconciling disparate accounts of protest events.

*Keywords: social media, online activism, networked counterpublics, framing, social network analysis, mixed methods, Baltimore*

On April 12, 2015, Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old African American man, was arrested by Baltimore, Maryland, police for allegedly carrying an illegal switchblade. While being transported in a police van on what locals call a “rough ride,” Gray sustained injuries to his neck and spinal cord and fell into a coma. One week later, on April 19, 2015, Gray died of his injuries, sparking a series of protests in Baltimore as the community demanded information about the circumstances leading to Gray’s death.

Two weeks after his arrest, on April 27—the day of Gray’s funeral—a photograph of protesters standing on a Baltimore police car, with the superimposed text, “All HighSchools Monday @3 We Are Going

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Date submitted: 2017–10–05

<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to thank Alan Mislove for providing access to the data used in this study and Ryan Gallagher and Devin Gaffney for help with data collection and organization. This research was partially supported by grants and equipment from Northeastern University’s College of Arts, Media, and Design, NULab, and NVIDIA Corporation. We are grateful for their support.

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To Purge From Mondawmin To The Ave, Back To Downtown #Fdl" (sic) began circulating on social media. The message—referencing the 2013 movie *The Purge*, in which lawlessness ensues following the legalization of all crime for a 12-hour period in a fictionalized, dystopian America—was perceived to be a credible threat. In response, the Baltimore Police Department proactively shut down a shopping mall and metro (public transportation) station in the Mondawmin area, leaving students at a nearby high school stranded at the end of the school day. The details of events immediately following the students' release from school are contested, with some reports suggesting police officers accosted students who were peaceably assembled, and others suggesting students initiated a confrontation by throwing rocks and bricks at the police officers. In the hours and days that followed, unrest escalated and spread throughout the city, resulting in significant property damage and dozens of arrests as students and protesters were met with violent police and national guard response.

Another among many incidents involving clashes between police officers and African American communities in the U.S., news of the events in Baltimore quickly spread through social media, generating over a million tweets in two days. Unlike hashtags arising from community responses to police brutality that came before it—including #Ferguson, the hashtag associated with similar protests following the police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014—tweets about Baltimore clustered into two subgroups denoted by the two most frequently used hashtags during the protests: #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising.

In this article, we explore how technologically enabled discursive contestation in the networks composed of #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising reflect larger sociopolitical debates in the United States. We build on a growing body of research that suggests Twitter has become a key resource for counterpublics—groups historically and continually excluded from representation and power in the public sphere who in turn create alternative spaces and methods of communication—to (re)frame national debates about racism and policing and offer provocation to the assumption that online political polarization is inflexible. Using a mixed-methods combination of computational network analysis and qualitative discourse analysis informed framing and critical theories that ask who makes meaning and how it is made, we examine leadership and framing both within and between the #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising Twitter subcommunities. In what follows, we describe how, even in the contested case of #Baltimore, networked counterpublics continue to have an outsized influence on the emergent framing of events as they unfolded. Moreover, although extreme voices occasionally work to further polarize debates, we find that, more often, those who broker among the subcommunities advance a progressive racial justice narrative, further supporting the capacity for online communication to empower marginalized voices.

### **The Contested Framing of Urban Uprisings**

Following the mass unrest that swept American cities after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968, President Lyndon Johnson established The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (or Kerner Commission) to investigate the cause and possible future prevention of such unrest. The commission, chaired by its namesake Governor Otto Kerner, of Illinois, noted that, in addition to generational poverty, housing and employment discrimination, and overpolicing, the media was partially

responsible for the disenfranchisement and neglect felt by members of urban Black communities. The commission wrote:

Along with the country as a whole, the press has too long basked in a white world, looking out of it, if at all, with white men's eyes and a white perspective. That is no longer good enough. The painful process of readjustment that is required of the American news media must begin now. . . . They must insist on the highest standards of accuracy—not only reporting single events with care and skepticism, but placing each event into meaningful perspective. They must report the travail of our cities with compassion and depth. (United States National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968, p. 389)

The frames created by the "white perspective" named by the Kerner Commission have been evidenced in detail in political communication and cultural studies scholarship. Entman and Rojecki (2001) outline frames as descriptions within media texts that draw from the schemas journalists use to tell stories, define problems, make moral judgements, and suggest social, cultural, and political solutions, noting that "media frames evoke thoughts that have the potential for eroding or building racial comity" (p. 49). Likewise, Hall (2000) argued that "the media's sphere of operation is the production and transformation of ideologies," and that "amongst other kinds of ideological labour, the media construct for us a definition of what race is, what meaning the imagery of race carries, and what the 'problem of race' is understood to be" (pp. 81–82).

At the approach of the 21st century, these dynamics manifested in mainstream press coverage and political commentary on the beating of motorist Rodney King by members of the Los Angeles Police Department and the Los Angeles uprising that followed the officers' acquittals. Nearly 25 years after the recommendations of the Kerner Commission, mainstream newsmakers failed to contextualize these events and figures within histories of racism and anti-Black violence in the United States, constructing instead episodic and fatalistic narratives of a natural and unchangeable divide between white and Black Americans (Jacobs, 2000; Squires, 2009). The mainstream press and politicians also tended to falsely equate Black responses to violence and marginalization with aggression and danger. Infamously, then presidential candidate Bill Clinton called rapper Sister Souljah a "dangerous" "reverse racist" for her critiques of white racism in the weeks following the King incident, and journalists largely followed his lead (Jackson, 2014).

Communication scholars drawing from a range of critical, political, and cultural approaches over time have illustrated that journalism, electoral politics, and other elite institutions continue to reflect the limited worldviews of those who founded and dominate them. The resulting frames for understanding communities who have historically been excluded from these institutions limit proposed solutions to social conflict. Ultimately, as critical scholars and political theorists have detailed, such framing contributes to the discursive construction of reality (Schrøder, 2002), limiting the terms of debate about race and racism in the public sphere.

Yet members of counterpublic communities most affected by poverty and state violence have long attempted to reframe the taken-for-granted ways the American public has come to understand urban unrest as a result of ideologically elite framing. Members of the Black public sphere—which includes the Black press and other physical and communicative spaces where Black Americans have centered their experiences and

forms of knowledge in the framing of stories—have argued, for example, that the term “riot” itself is ideological shorthand used to prime racial stereotypes and foreclose the possibility for complex engagement with why unrest happens while legitimizing the use of suppressive tactics by the state (Jacobs, 2000). In the 1990s, for example, the Black press provided an alternative to mainstream coverage of Rodney King’s beating and the ensuing events in Los Angeles through thematic framing that focused less on sensationalism and individual figures, and more on how such instances and their reception in the mainstream press were illustrative of ongoing systemic injustice, racial double standards, and the lasting impact of these phenomena on the African American community (Squires, 2009).

### **The Network Democratization of Debates on Urban Unrest**

New to 21st-century debates about race, politics, inequality and urban unrest is the role that social media, and Twitter, in particular, plays in the construction and maintenance of alternative frames, often in real time, through the meaning-making work of marginalized communities (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2016). Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012) illustrated how those pushing for change from the margins use hashtags as affective and connotative frames in attempts to maintain, reclaim, and reorient social power. Further, Barberá and colleagues (2015) showed how the collective power of a dedicated core of online activists and a large body of supportive allies can catalyze a message from the margins into the mainstream as a critical periphery amplifies protest messages that are ultimately received by the general public.

Drawing on several examples of global political unrest, Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012) argue that “Twitter is frequently used to call networked publics into being and into action during periods of political instability,” (p. 3). Using personal and affective discourse, these networked publics come together to engage in public discussions, mobilization, social support, and news dissemination under the organizing auspices of hashtags (Papacharissi, 2015). Because Twitter conventions (specifically, retweets and mentions) allow ordinary users to act as gatekeepers, filtering and amplifying messages to large audiences, the frames popularized by networked publics can run counter to those typically advanced by mainstream news sources (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). Extending that idea, Jackson and Foucault Welles (2015) theorized the particular role that Twitter plays in the facilitation of networked counterpublics in a series of case studies involving the U.S. racial justice activism that has come to be characterized by some as the “New Civil Rights Movement.” Following the case of #myNYPD, when a Twitter hashtag introduced by the New York City Police Department was subsequently repurposed by ordinary citizens and activist groups to draw attention to cases of police brutality and misconduct, they argue that, in addition to facilitating networked publics, Twitter presents a new opportunity for networked counterpublics composed of those who otherwise have no access to the mainstream public sphere to infiltrate and change the terms of mainstream debate about issues of race and police brutality.

In another piece, Jackson and Foucault Welles (2016) highlight how ordinary citizens of color used #Ferguson to frame discussions of the killing of Michael Brown and subsequent protests in Ferguson, Missouri, as the events in Ferguson became a national news story. Likewise, Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark (2016) found that the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter has eclipsed the social media spaces where it was created and spread; becoming the slogan for one of the most visible and important social movements in

contemporary American politics. Taken together, this work makes the case that networked counterpublics, using the collective power and reach of Twitter, are meaningfully influencing the mainstream public sphere and democratizing discussion of race and racial justice in the U.S.

This is not to say that counterpublic influences are the only or even most visible and influential messages on Twitter. Rather, many publics, including those reflecting powerful interests, are levying new technology for the creation and dissemination of political messages (Benkler, 2006). And the origins of the Internet, including social media spaces, are rooted in projects of militarism, capitalism, and surveillance that limit/pushback against counterpublic discourse (Foster & McChesney, 2014; Noble, 2018). Further, Choi's (2014) analysis of political discourse on Twitter suggests that online discussions can be rather insular, and Conover and colleagues (2011) find high levels of ideological homophily in Twitter retweet networks (though they mention networks are considerably more heterophilous). These findings are consistent with Sunstein's (2009) idea of Internet "echo chambers," where homophily and selective exposure conspire to limit information exchange across ideological frames. Thus, it is possible that networked counterpublics, although impactful among the ideologically receptive, operate in echo chambers that fail to persuade across ideological lines.

This article explores the work of networked counterpublics in the face of discursive contestation. Because prior work on counterpublic activism often focuses on cases that remained relatively uncontested online (even if they were considerably contested off-line and in the mainstream media) it is difficult to rule out the possibility that the discourses of networked counterpublics operate in echo chambers (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Sunstein, 2009). Although today historically marginalized groups enjoy unprecedented access to the public sphere, it may be that their counterdiscourses only reach those who are already receptive and/or sympathetic to their causes—thus, the power that comes with the ability to create meaning may be continually limited by inequalities of visibility and by technological infrastructures not built with liberatory work in mind. Examining the contested network that emerged during the 2015 Baltimore protests through multiple methods enables us to answer critical theoretical questions about the power of particular ideologies of urban unrest, and to discover why and how some voices and frames become more, or less, influential in this new terrain. The clustering that occurred around #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising presents a valuable opportunity, given that these hashtags represent the various impulses, limits, and possibilities of social media discourse and evoke common but contradictory frames used by those with and without traditional forms of social power to describe urban protest activity (Trottier & Fuchs, 2014).

As noted by a range of scholars in a recent volume dedicated to questions of journalism and coverage of the 2015 events in Baltimore, specifically, many of the old concerns regarding schemas of Black incivility and the ethics of covering disenfranchised communities remain, yet journalists have also been motivated to respond to the frames offered via new media, their coverage illustrating a growing reliance on nonelite sources (Steiner & Waisbord, 2017). Given the various impulses of this body of literature, which raise questions about how digital media complicate historical trends and power imbalances in the framing of urban unrest and racial conflict and suggests contradictory trends in democratization and polarization in digital politics, our work was guided by the following research questions:

*RQ1: Who most centrally influenced the emergence and growth of #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising, and how did their identities and network positions differ?*

*RQ2: How did digital discourse differ between #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising, and what does this tell us about the respective framing strategies and ideologies used within each subgroup?*

*RQ3: Did people using #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising speak to one another, and if so, what does cross-group discourse tell us about points of contention and reconciliation between different ideological framings of the same event?*

### **Method**

Our analysis combines large-scale network analysis to identify influential users within the #Baltimore network(s), and qualitative discourse analysis to identify the frames those users advanced.

#### ***Data and Network Specification***

The focal network for this analysis was constructed from a 10% random (“garden hose”) sample of tweets sent between April 26 and 30, 2015 (inclusive), containing the hashtags #BaltimoreRiots and/or #BaltimoreUprising. From these 240,262 tweets, we generated a network of Twitter users connected by retweets and mentions, limiting the sample to only those users retweeted or mentioned at least one time. The resulting network included 11,916 nodes connected by 21,021 links and contained two notable clusters consisting of users tweeting with #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising.

#### ***Identifying Influential Network Nodes***

The main goal of our network analysis was to identify members of the network who had an outsized influence on the overall conversation. There are a number of different ways that “influence” can be measured in social networks. In studies of online activism, researchers often identify hubs, or nodes with a disproportionately large number of ties, relative to the distribution of ties in the network as a whole (Barabási & Albert, 1999). Such hubs command disproportionate attention in the network and map conceptually to what Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012) call crowdsourced elites—individuals who, through collective communication acts such as retweeting and mentioning, are endorsed by the network as important. Guided by this conceptualization, we disaggregated the data into separate networks, one for users who authored tweets containing #BaltimoreRiots, and another for those who authored tweets containing #BaltimoreUprising. Users tweeting with both hashtags appeared in both networks, otherwise, users were only included in the network corresponding to the hashtag they used. Then, we identified the 10 most popular (highest in-degree centrality) nodes within each individual hashtag network (#BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising) and extracted tweets generated by or about these nodes (e.g., those tweets containing the @username of the most popular nodes) for inclusion in our discourse analysis. Because degree centrality is unevenly distributed in networks, sampling the highest degree nodes oversamples the users/tweets most likely to be seen by members of the network and most likely to turn up in searches for the hashtag. Although the method overlooks low-visibility tweets, it is consistent with prior work on



networked publics and counterpublics (e.g., Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015), and prioritizes those who were widely seen and chosen organically by the network as discursively important.

However, hubs are just one of the many ways to operationalize influence in a network. Burt (2005) argues that some nodes cultivate influence not by having the most ties but by having a diverse set of ties, such that they are among the only individuals in conversation with otherwise distinct subgroups. Burt calls these influential nodes brokers, and argues that they wield influence in networks because their position allows them to gatekeep and/or otherwise control the flow of information within communication networks (Burt, 2005; Fernandez & Gould, 1994). Further, Castells (2013) argues that brokers play an especially powerful role in networks, as they control information flow, and González-Bailón and Wang (2016) find that a small number of brokers are disproportionately responsible for the growth of political protest hashtags, as brokers allow information to flow between otherwise disconnected portions of the network. Thus, in a polarized online network, such as the one consisting of the union of #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising tweets, brokers may play an especially powerful role, as they communicate and coordinate across otherwise disconnected subcommunities. To examine that possibility, we identified brokers within and between the #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising subcommunities for further analysis. To do so, we created a network of all the users who either tweeted using both #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising (in the same tweet, or in separate tweets sent during the data collection window) or tweeted using one of the hashtags and were retweeted or mentioned in a tweet containing the other hashtag. Given Twitter's notification defaults at the time these messages were generated, these inclusion criteria ensured that the users in the combined network were either actively using both hashtags or where at least minimally aware of both hashtags, as they would have received notifications about tweets containing the hashtag they did not use. From this set of users, we constructed a retweet and mention network of 5,601 nodes connected by 12,621 links. This allowed us to identify the 10 nodes with highest betweenness centrality, a measure of the extent to which a node falls on the shortest path between other nodes, and associated with Burt's (2005) conceptualization of importance by tie diversity. We extracted tweets generated by or about these top 10 high betweenness centrality nodes, called brokers, for inclusion in our discourse analysis. Similar to degree centrality, betweenness centrality is unevenly distributed such that sampling the 10 highest betweenness centrality nodes oversamples the nodes that people were likely to see and/or turn up in searches on the relevant hashtags (Barthelemy, 2004).

### ***Discourse Analysis***

Although network analysis allows us to mathematically select important users and tweets for analysis, agnostic to their identities or content, discourse analysis centers how meaning is made by particular people through the content they produce. Our research questions were investigated through in-depth critical discourse analysis. As a method, discourse analysis responds to critical theories that link questions of social power to struggles to define and represent particular social problems and groups (Fairclough, 2013). Critical analysis of how and to what end discourse is employed in digital spaces allows researchers to go beyond the identification and description of networks to understand how members of those networks collectively engage in the processes of meaning making. The theoretical basis for this approach can be traced to the work of Foucault, Adorno, and Horkheimer, and other critical theorists whose work have been used to examine the linkages among language, media, and the construction of social reality (Schröder, 2013).

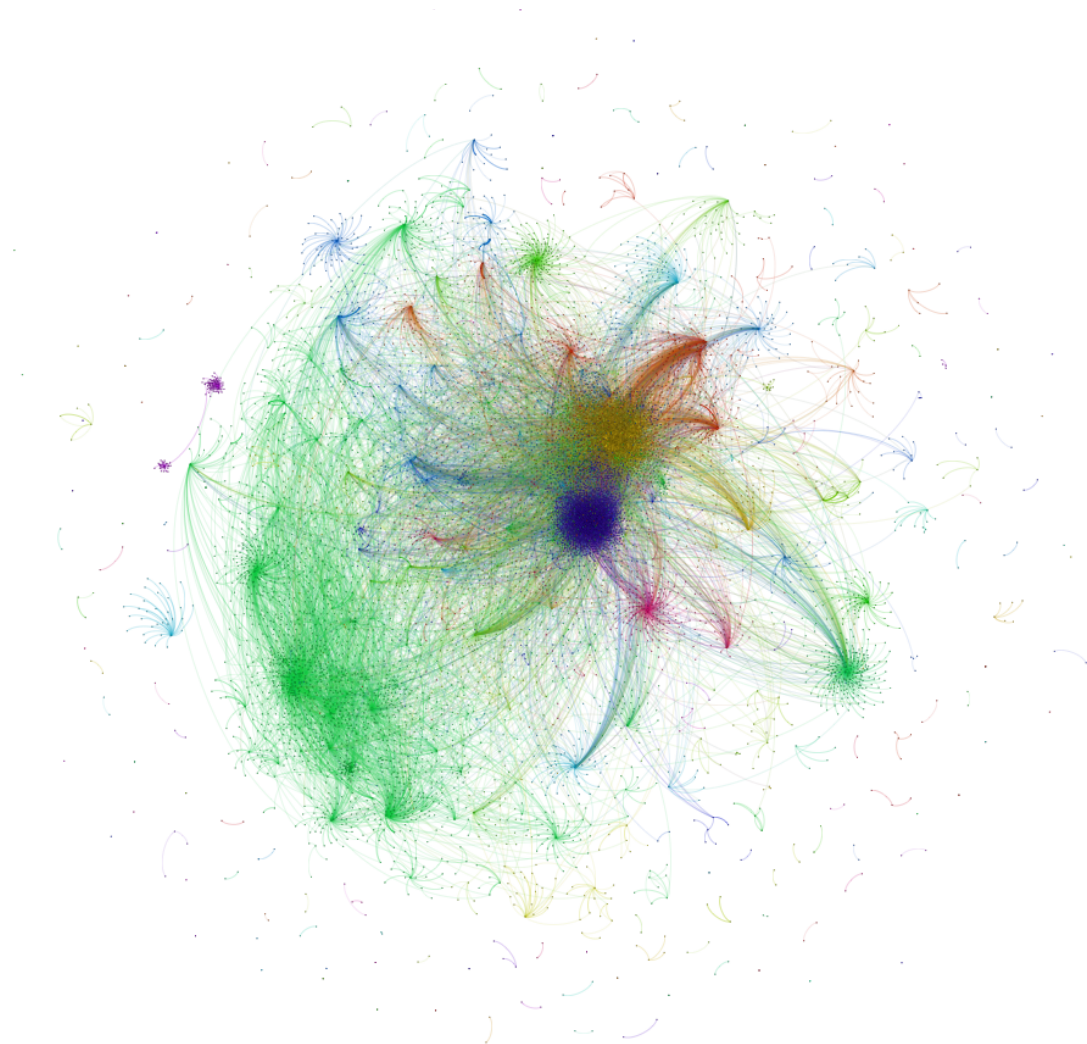
Discourse analysis involves close reading of texts (in this case, tweets) to identify trends and patterns in how individuals and groups use language, image, tone, and other discursive strategies to frame and shape understandings of a particular event. Here, we examine #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising tweets for causal interpretations of the events that unfolded in Baltimore following the death of Freddie Gray, attributions of blame for these events, narrative construction regarding the events of Gray's arrest, death, and the subsequent protests, and the use of particular tropes (e.g., Black incivility vs. state oppression). These various aspects of #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising discourse reflect the ideological frameworks brought to bear by these apparently polarized networks and allow us to document the real-time battle for political and social reality in regard to some of the most pressing issues of identity and the state currently facing our nation. We performed this discourse analysis on 3,769 unique tweets generated by or about the crowdsourced elites or brokers in the #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising (combined) network.

## **Findings**

### ***Hashtag Overview***

In total, more than 2,400,000 tweets containing the hashtags #BaltimoreRiots or #BaltimoreUprising were generated in the late hours of April 26, 2015, as the protests began, through the early hours of April 30, as the protests wound down and community efforts to clean up began. The #BaltimoreRiots hashtag trended first, appearing in more than 5,000 tweets before the first #BaltimoreUprising tweets appeared in the late afternoon of April 27. #BaltimoreRiots continued to surge in popularity in the overnight hours of April 27 to 28 and remained dominant until late into the night of April 28, when it was overtaken in both hour-by-hour and cumulative frequency by #BaltimoreUprising. Use of #BaltimoreUprising surged in the overnight hours of both April 28–29 and April 29–30, and ultimately appeared in almost twice as many tweets as #BaltimoreRiots.

The 240,262 tweets in our sample rendered a network that is both polarized and strongly interconnected. As seen in Figure 1, the network clusters around two poles: #BaltimoreUprising in yellow, in the upper portion of the graph, and #BaltimoreRiots in purple, below the #BaltimoreUprising cluster. Although the #BaltimoreRiots cluster may appear to be more interconnected, this is largely an artifact of the visual rendering, as the darker cluster is both more visually salient and drawn on top of other nodes and links as the three-dimensional algorithmic layout was flattened into two dimensions for print (see Foucault Welles & Meirelles, 2014, for more details on the visual salience and the rendering of network graphs). Indeed, the relative density within each pole suggests more interconnection between those using the #BaltimoreUprising hashtag (density = 0.000115) than between those using #BaltimoreRiots (density = 0.000032), although both poles are quite diffuse overall.

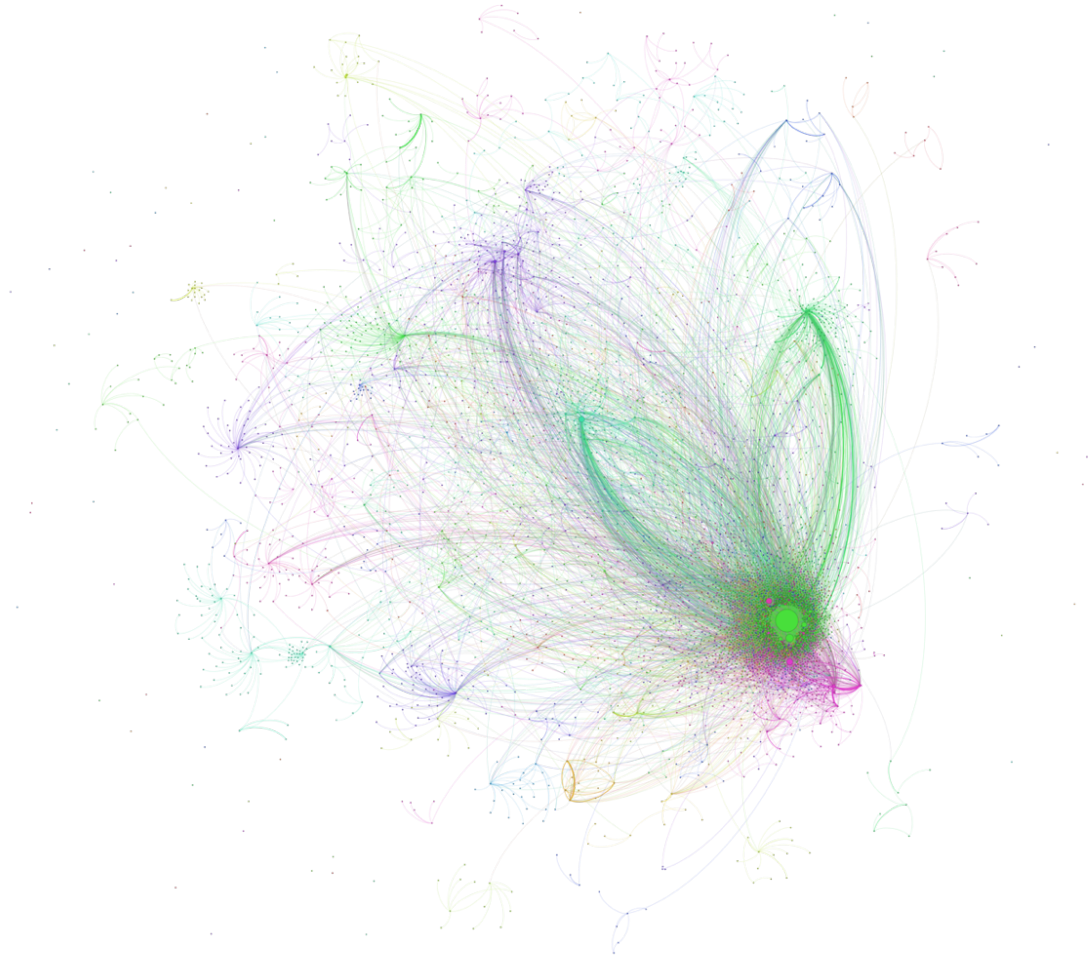


**Figure 1. Graphical representation of the #BaltimoreUprising and #BaltimoreRiots network that emerged on Twitter during the Baltimore, Maryland, protests on April 26– 30, 2015. The 11,916 nodes represent individual Twitter users, and 21,021 links represent retweets and mentions between users; isolates have been removed. The graph was generated with Gephi 0.9.1.**

#### *#BaltimoreUprising*

*Crowdsourced Elites.* Looking more closely within the #BaltimoreUprising subcommunity (see Figure 2), we find network ties disproportionately pointing to a very small number of high in-degree nodes. These nodes, the crowdsourced elites within the #BaltimoreUprising network, include two notable activists—Deray McKesson, who was retweeted or mentioned more than 13,000 times in our sample (@deray, in-degree = 13,664), and Johnetta Elzie, who was retweeted or mentioned more than 800 times in our sample

(@Nettaaaaaaaaa, in-degree = 856). Of note, @deray was retweeted or mentioned more than three times more often than the next most retweeted node in the network, suggesting he alone had a disproportionate influence over the hashtag and accompanying conversation.



**Figure 2. Graphical representation of the #BaltimoreUprising subcommunity within the #BaltimoreUprising and #BaltimoreRiots network that emerged on Twitter during the Baltimore, Maryland, protests on April 26–30, 2015. The graph was generated with Gephi 0.9.1.**

Other crowdsourced elites include local and regional activists and activist organizations such as Keegan Stephen (@KeeganNYC, in-degree = 1,436), Baltimore Bloc (@BmoreBloc, in-degree = 731), and alternative/independent news outlets such as the Bipartisan Report (@bipartisanism, in-degree = 3,914). Three of the top 10 most retweeted or mentioned accounts were parody accounts, or accounts that borrow the name and/or likeness of a celebrity or fictional character and tweet under that guise. Although some have suggested these accounts can be deceptive or problematic (Wan, Koh, Ong, & Pang, 2015), others have found that their content, however irreverent, plays an important discursive role in online

communication (Highfield, 2015). Because of their prominent role in the network, we included tweets from parody accounts in our discourse analysis.

*Framing an Uprising.* Three frames dominated the discussion in the #BaltimoreUprising network: (1) the legitimization of Black protest, (2) police and state interactions with Black communities more generally as responsible for urban unrest, and (3) critiques of mainstream media framing of events in Baltimore. Each of these frames was embedded in timely, often on-the-ground updates and reports of events unfolding in Baltimore and other cities engaged in protesting Freddie Gray's arrest and death

For example, @deray described the protests in Baltimore as "organized struggle" and frequently commented on the "beautiful sense of community" in Baltimore, describing meetings between protestors and Baltimore clergy and the distribution of snack bags to protestors by volunteers. McKesson also highlighted the work and experience of "peaceful protestors." Likewise, fellow activist Johnetta Elzie (@Nettaaaaaaaa), frequently tweeted about solidarity protests that were occurring around the country in response to events in Baltimore and tweeted photos of protestors holding signs reading, "It is civil disobedience that will give us civil rights," and "Not a riot, a revolution." All of these tweets were accompanied by the #BaltimoreUprising hashtag, framing the community and its eruption after the death of Freddie Gray as part of a righteous struggle.

On the other hand, @deray, @Nettaaaaaaaa, and the other crowdsourced elites using the #BaltimoreUprising hashtag, framed the police, and state responses to urban unrest and Black communities generally, as violent and unreasonable. For example, New York based activist @KeeganNYC tweeted about both the events in Baltimore and ongoing solidarity actions in New York City using the #BaltimoreUprising hashtag. In these tweets, @KeeganNYC framed police responses to protest, and to Black citizens in particular, as violent and unruly, reporting that police "set fires," "shot a man in the back," and, "tried to run us over." Likewise, @bipartisanism described police as "murderers" and the "real looters," @BmoreBloc, a Baltimore-based activist collective, described the National Guard as "outside agitators," an intentional reframing of accusations regularly levied at social movement organizers, and @OccupyWallStNYC, the official Twitter account of Occupy Wall Street, tweeted a contextual reminder about the connections of American policing to the patrols used to hunt and capture runaway slaves.

All of these accounts also framed the response of police and the national guard in Baltimore as a violation of the first amendment protest and speech rights of demonstrators. Together #BaltimoreUprising elites very intentionally worked to reclaim and reframe mainstream representations of urban riots, subverting the power of dominant discourse by describing the state and police with the very same language often used to denigrate activists and demonstrators and constructing activists, and members of Freddie Gray's community in particular, as engaged in a fight for basic rights.

Finally, #BaltimoreUprising elites also engaged in frequent and explicit criticism of the framing of events in Baltimore by the mainstream media and the mainstream framing of urban unrest generally. For example, @bipartisanism tweeted images of student and child demonstrators in Baltimore and images of Baltimore demonstrators helping one another, noting that media "won't show" these kinds of images of urban uprising. Likewise, @bipartisanism criticized the "fake narrative" of the unrest being spread in the

media, specifically targeting Fox News for a series of tweets about the “lies” that “villainize protestors.” Although the Bipartisan Report (news outlet behind @bipartisanism) has been criticized by fact-checking organizations for sensationalized headlines and misleading stories (as, notably, have mainstream news outlets, including CNN and Fox News), in this case they provided counternarratives to the mainstream news that resonated with the #BaltimoreUprising network.

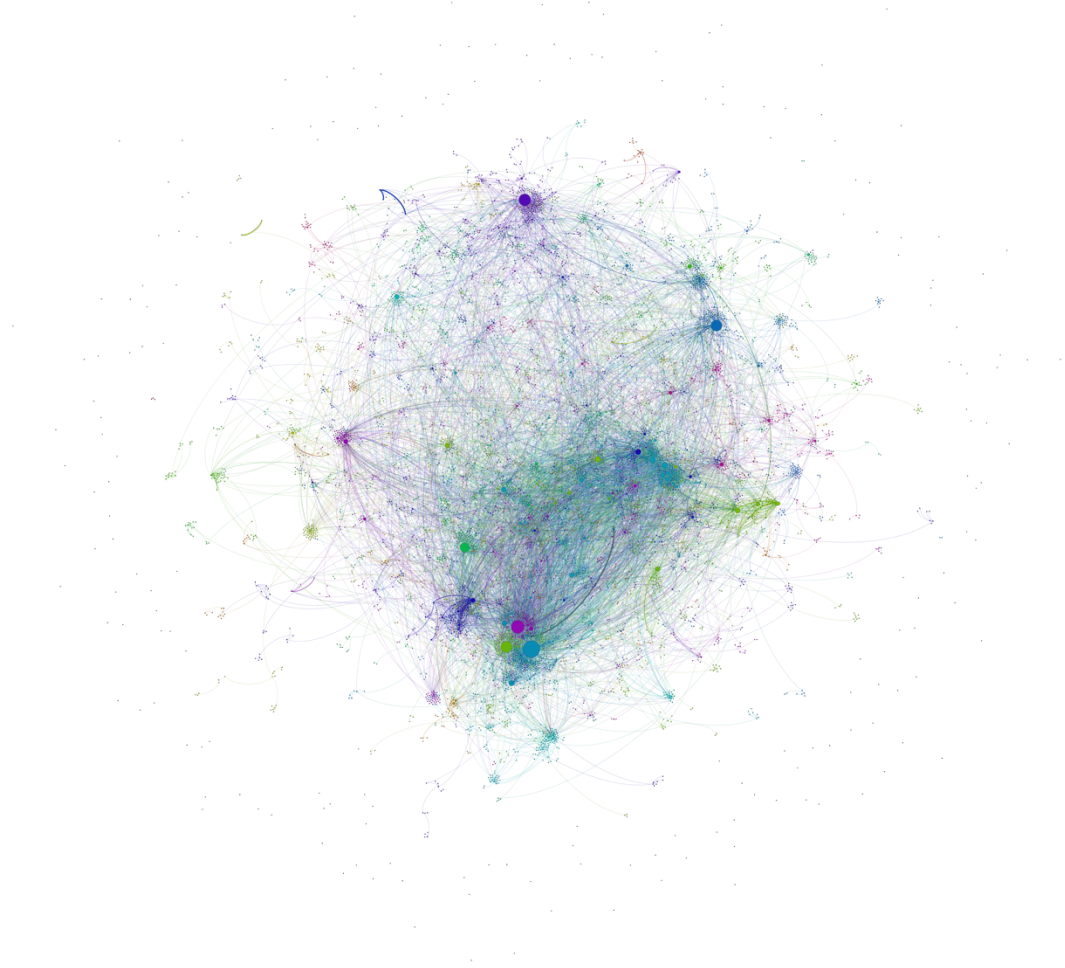
Several other popular accounts also explicitly critiqued the sensational images picked up and spread by the mainstream media, including @astraeanixie, an activist account, that shared a widely retweeted video in the #BaltimoreUprising network that pointed out the hypocrisy in media attention and public concern about “Black people burn[ing] stuff” when the media and public paid so little attention to the conditions of poverty, disenfranchisement, and state violence that led to it. This type of interventionist discourse in the network, which directly critiques and reframes dominant ways of reporting the story, is a classic characteristic of counterpublic narratives and can be seen both historically and in recent accounts of counterpublic framing (Jackson & Banaszczyk, 2016).

#### *#BaltimoreRiots*

*Crowdsourced Elites.* Like the #BaltimoreUprising network, the #BaltimoreRiots network featured several high in-degree nodes, albeit none quite as popular as the crowdsourced elites within #BaltimoreUprising. There were no activists or journalists crowdsourced into elite positions in this network, rather the majority of #BaltimoreRiots elites are parody accounts, tweeting, for example, in the likenesses of celebrities such as Banksy, a noted street artist and political activist, and Chris Rock, a U.S. comedian and actor, as well as more generic parody names such as Childhood Ruiner and World Star Funny. Among these, the Banksy parody account was the most popular crowdsourced elite, with almost 9,000 retweets or mentions in our data (@thereaIbanksy,<sup>2</sup> in-degree = 8,723).

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<sup>2</sup> Although this account is clearly labeled a “fan account,” the account holder uses typography to make this Twitter handle appear to read “The Real Banksy,” capitalizing the “i” such that it reads @thereaIbanksy. As a result, the account has a considerable following of almost 1.5 million users, many of whom presumably believe they are following the account of the graffiti artist himself.



**Figure 3. Graphical representation of the #BaltimoreRiots subcommunity within the #BaltimoreUprising and #BaltimoreRiots network that emerged on Twitter during the Baltimore, Maryland, protests on April 26–30, 2015. The graph was generated with Gephi 0.9.1.**

In addition to these parody accounts, several media outlets were featured among the crowdsourced elites in the #BaltimoreRiots network, including the official Twitter accounts for Fox News and CNN. One alternate news account, the Bipartisan Report, which also featured prominently in the #BaltimoreUprising network, was influential in the #BaltimoreRiots network as well (@bipartisanism, in-degree = 6,720). The remaining crowdsourced elites were young, Black users tweeting videos of the protests. These users have

since deleted their tweets and/or accounts, and therefore, to respect their privacy, we have elected not to use their names or Twitter handles, but we do discuss the content of their tweets, below.

*Framing a Riot.* Framing among crowdsourced elites in the #BaltimoreRiots network was more muddled ideologically than those in the #BaltimoreUprising network, in part because of some crossover of elites. Three of the crowdsourced elites in the #BaltimoreRiots network also appeared in the #BaltimoreUprising network. Thus, many #BaltimoreUprising frames made their way into the network within tweets using both of the competing hashtags.

Likewise, as an indicator of how frequently the #BaltimoreUprising and #BaltimoreRiots frames overlapped in this network, and how differently toned tweets were circulated in different networks, most of the crowdsourced elites in this network, even those that tweeted extremely negative content about protestors, also occasionally included discourses somewhat aligned with those in #BaltimoreUprising, illustrating that the term "riot" in and of itself did not preclude counterpublic interpretations that viewed urban unrest as reflective of something bigger than conservative frames might suggest. In fact, the presence of some #BaltimoreUprising frames in #BaltimoreRiots indicate a deliberate and successful intervention by #BaltimoreUprising tweeters into the mainstream logic of framing urban uprisings.

The frame unique to #BaltimoreRiots that was absent from #BaltimoreUprising was conservative and focused on the construction of the unrest in Baltimore as dangerous and unreasonable. For example, the accounts @ChildhoodRuiner and @WorldStarFunny focused on sharing images of property damage in Baltimore, framing the unrest, and Black citizens engaged in it, as violent and illogical. From these accounts, the story was about "thieves" and "rioters," who, they reported, "set fire to a senior center."<sup>3</sup> This framing of property damage as a violent threat to vulnerable populations in the #BaltimoreRiots network performed the very ideological work that was widely critiqued in the #BaltimoreUprising network as lacking context and denigrating Black protest.

Further, the framing of the unrest and protest in Baltimore as violent and unreasonable was constructed through both sensational and denigrating descriptions and by comparing events in Baltimore with a sanitized version of civil rights protest. For example, crowdsourced elites in the #BaltimoreRiots network frequently tweeted side-by-side images of property destruction and fires in Baltimore alongside those of iconic figures like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks, dressed in their Sunday best. Such use of civil rights images robs these figures of their radical politics, ignores that civil rights protests were often deemed violent and unreasonable by the status quo, and embraces a respectability politics that only allows Black anger and protest to be expressed in ways that presumably do not cause White discomfort.

In this frame, Black citizens constructed as behaving badly were often pitted against Black citizens constructed as exceptional in efforts to discredit Black protest. For example, @ChildhoodRuiner tweeted that "this man knows what he's talking about" alongside a video of an African American man saying that

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<sup>3</sup> A senior center under construction in East Baltimore was destroyed by fire on April 27, 2015. Although the fire occurred during the same time as the protests, the construction site was located several miles away, and the fire was not connected to the protest activities.



protesting “right” involves meeting with clergy and legislators, not violence and destruction. Besides oversimplifying the unrest in Baltimore, this description relies on a conservative frame that presumes that working within established systems like the church and the state are the only forms of legitimate activism. In this vein, much of the media criticism in the #BaltimoreRiots network decried the fact that mainstream media did not give more attention to African Americans who sided with police.

Fox News and CNN appear as the only two mainstream news sources in the network, but for very different reasons. Fox appears because of the popularity of their tweets in the #BaltimoreRiots network, which overwhelmingly focus on “violent riots” “looting and burning,” and the “state of emergency” in Baltimore, using sensational language like “totally insane” and “cops led into slaughter” to describe the conditions on the streets during the unrest. In this framing, Fox constructs the events with a militaristic narrative that places protestors in the position of powerful and dangerous enemy combatants, describing police as “outnumbered and outflanked.”

On the other hand, while CNN contributed to framing the unrest in Baltimore in terms of crimes of property damage and threats to police as well, their place among elites primarily results from the significant number of mentions they received from Twitter users critiquing their framing and asking them to do differently. Here, Twitter users made CNN influential in the #BaltimoreRiots network not because of agreement with their content, but because of direct engagement and critique of it, often using the hashtag #CNNbelike alongside #BaltimoreRiots to levy snarky responses to CNN’s coverage. The difference in network responses to Fox and CNN indicate that although some members of the #BaltimoreRiots network largely retweeted, mentioned, and favored Fox coverage out of agreement, a different set of observers of the hashtag engaged with CNN in an effort to interrogate and change the same type of coverage.

#### *#BaltimoreUprising and #BaltimoreRiots Brokers*

In the face of ideological opposition, Twitter discourse can function to bring people closer, or push them farther apart (Conover et al., 2011). In the combined #BaltimoreUprising and #BaltimoreRiots network, we see evidence of both reconciliation and entrenchment of ideological frames. On one hand, we found that the brokers in the combined network were most often positioned within the #BaltimoreUprising cluster, occupying a gatekeeping role between #BaltimoreUprising and #BaltimoreRiots, and doing discursive work to resolve disagreements and advance common understanding among groups (Fernandez & Gould, 1994; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). However, some brokers, who we call stokers, to distinguish them, were positioned within a single cluster and were retweeted heavily within their respective poles, but not across both. This positioning suggests that some messages gained traction because of opposition to the differing ideological frames, not in spite of it. Recall that those sampled into the combined network included only those users who were aware of both hashtags (either through direct use or through a pattern of retweets or mentions that would have produced notifications of tweets containing both hashtags). When faced with conflicting frames, many users attempted to reconcile inconsistencies through engaged discourse, but others doubled down, retweeting messages ideologically consistent with their original frame (whatever that may have been), in an attempt to crowd out alternate interpretations of the protest activities and/or further polarize contentious conversations.

### **Stokers**

Of four stokers in the network, three used discourse ideologically aligned with #BaltimoreUprising, whereas one used extreme versions of #BaltimoreRiots frames. @GlobalRevLive, @WeActRadio, and @rousseau\_ist, three activism news-related accounts, worked to reify the discourse of the #BaltimoreUprising network by offering a stream of critiques of the state and mainstream response to the death of Freddie Gray and subsequent events in Baltimore. As a result, these accounts were widely retweeted by members of the #BaltimoreUprising network as they worked discursively to center issues of inequality, racism, and state oppression in their accounting of protest events.

On the other hand, @ChristiChat, a stoker for the #BaltimoreRiots cluster, represents an extreme, polarized version of the discourse found in the #BaltimoreRiots cluster more generally. The account, belonging to a self-identified "Christian Constitutional Capitalist NRA Supporting Military Police" not only overwhelmingly uses the hashtag #BaltimoreRiots but also regularly engages in discourse that explicitly works to undermine and antagonize messages advanced by racial justice advocates. For example, @ChristiChat frequently added the hashtags #AllLivesMatter and #PoliceLivesMatter to her #BaltimoreRiots tweets. These hashtags have origins in the far-right Twittersphere and have been widely critiqued as discursive weapons against the #BlackLivesMatter movement (Carney, 2016). Further @ChristiChat attributed the unrest in Baltimore to pathology in the African American community, tweeting that "race-baiting" "lack of family structure," and "black on black crime" were to blame and using the intentionally denigrating slogan "pants up, don't loot" that arose in the right blogosphere in response to the protest chant "hands up, don't shoot." As has been explored extensively elsewhere, such narratives work to obscure systemic critiques of American inequalities, blame victims of oppression, prime racism, and undermine the possibility of good faith debates and policy solutions (Alexander, 2012; Entman & Rojecki, 2001; Shah, 2009; Sonnett, Johnson, & Dolan, 2015). It then is perhaps obvious why @ChristiChat was solely retweeted within the #BaltimoreRiots cluster, as her original tweets and her retweets indicate an unrepentant doubling down on narratives of Black incivility.

### **Brokers**

The remaining brokers occupied gatekeeping roles in the network, performing a unique form of labor that was largely not represented within each individual hashtag's crowdsourced elites (save for @deray, who was both a broker and crowdsourced elite within #BaltimoreUprising). Namely, the brokers engaged in bridge building through retweets, sharing, and the elevation of other accounts alongside conversations about this content. That is to say these accounts became brokers primarily through retweeting the discourse of others, sometimes adding their own thoughts and commentary, but often engaging in conversational exchanges to build mutual understanding about the content they tweeted and retweeted.

Noncelebrities, such as @BmoreDoc, @freedomgirl2011, @TruthCastersTV, and @BaltoSpectator were all part of the #BaltimoreUprising cluster (having primarily used #BaltimoreUprising and its associated messages in their tweets), but rather than constructing original narratives, they more often retweeted each other and the crowdsourced elites from the #BaltimoreUprising network, adding encouraging messages and contextual details to the tweets. What set these brokers apart from other (nonbrokers) in the network was

their frequent engagement with other Twitter users about events unfolding in Baltimore, including users in the #BaltimoreRiots cluster with whom they disagreed. For example, both @BaltoSpectator and @freedomgirl2011 regularly used pictures and videos to refute messages coming from the #BaltimoreRiots cluster. This had the effect of drawing members of the #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising subcommunities together to deliberate the validity of disparate interpretations of the same protest events. Another broker, @BmoreDoc, engaged in a similar strategy, amplifying popular #BaltimoreUprising images and adding his own commentary on their content. For instance, citing an image of violent clashes between police and protesters, @BmoreDoc noted, "This is the shame of America. The police are threatening and intimidating peaceful, nonviolent protesters." Although such discourse was not uncommon within the #BaltimoreUprising cluster, what was novel about @BmoreDoc was his habit of retweeting extended exchanges with both critics and supporters. When members of the broader community, including those within the #BaltimoreRiots cluster questioned his interpretations, he not only responded but also shared their critiques and his responses for all to see. While elevating and contributing to the broadcast of #BaltimoreUprising framing, he simultaneously modeled effective techniques for (re)framing events through a progressive, racial justice lens. This afforded him, and the others who engaged across ideological poles, a unique kind of power as they became responsible for not selecting particular #BaltimoreUprising messages to share more broadly within the network overall but also modeling how to use these messages to resist contestation. In doing so, the brokers advanced key networked counterpublic frames while also amassing a diversity of attention few others were able to achieve.

### Conclusion

A growing body of research suggests that Twitter has become a powerful platform for citizens, particularly those who have historically been excluded from mainstream institutions of power and influence, to articulate and advance visions for progressive social change. Much existing work, however, focuses on successful cases, with limited evidence of failed and/or contested advocacy efforts. This makes it difficult to distinguish whether online activism primarily functions to bolster awareness and support among the already receptive, or if it also affords the possibility for networked counterpublics to reach those not otherwise predisposed to their causes.

The polarized network that emerged to describe the protests in the wake of Freddie Gray's death in Baltimore, Maryland, in April 2015, provided an opportunity to examine how online activism by networked counterpublics plays out in the face of considerable contestation. Echoing the historically significant frames of racial justice protest coverage, the network was discursively divided, with one-third of users tweeting with #BaltimoreRiots, and two-thirds tweeting with #BaltimoreUprising. Looking more closely at the discursive content produced by crowdsources leaders within each hashtag subcommunity, we saw that the activists, citizens, and independent journalists in the #BaltimoreUprising subcommunity tweeted messages that were consistent with historical and contemporary attempts by Black counterpublics to contextualize urban protest in terms of ongoing inequalities, racial injustice, police overreach, and racism. The discursive content of #BaltimoreRiots tweets was more mixed. Some traditional media outlets, including Fox News and CNN, advanced frames consistent with traditional "riot" narratives (including images of altercations between police and African American protesters, and images of a burning CVS store). Similarly, individual citizens and parody accounts dismissed the protests as dangerous and unreasonable, casting urban protest as an illegitimate form of social activism. However, others in the #BaltimoreRiots subcommunity challenged those

narratives explicitly, often juxtaposing the words #BaltimoreRiots against images of peaceful protesters and/or community members helping one another during or after protest events.

Looking more broadly at how these two subcommunities intersected, we discovered two important patterns. On one hand, in the face of oppositional framing the stokers reiterated polarized discourse. In light of recent evidence by Arif, Stewart, and Starbird (2018), suggesting that foreign actors intentionally targeted racial justice hashtags with extreme language designed to polarize the U.S. American electorate, we were interested in whether or not the stokers we found are formative examples of foreign actors using social media to influence U.S. American politics. We find no specific evidence to support or refute that possibility. None of the accounts appear on any of the lists of foreign agents recently distributed by Twitter's election integrity team (Gadde & Roth, 2018). One left-wing stoker, @GlobalRevLive, and the right-wing stoker, @ChristiChat, have been suspended by Twitter for unknown reasons. However, at the time we gathered our data, neither account registered as likely to be a bot using standard measures (Varol, Ferrara, Davis, Menczer, & Flammini, 2017). Regardless of their motivation, stokers worked within their respective poles, reifying core messages and, arguably, further polarizing the network.

In contrast, the brokers worked across the polarized network, advocating for protesters and the Baltimore community more generally. In messages consistent with the #BaltimoreUprising framing, the brokers specifically engaged both subcommunities in the network, using images, video, and text to simultaneously advance a progressive message and also engage in meaningful deliberation about protesters and protest events. By retweeting these conversations for all to see, the brokers demonstrated effective strategies for advancing progressive messages and refuting dissenting, often racist, framing. Of note, we found no evidence of brokers working in the opposite direction to advance antiprotest narratives through constructive deliberation.

These results underscore the power of networked counterpublic activism to (re)frame messages about urban unrest and protest, and to advance counterpublic narratives. Unlike historical contexts wherein the alternative narratives of marginalized groups were kept at the margins by the nature of media access and representation in the public sphere, in a moment of public contestation on Twitter, the marginalized had very real power to set the terms of debate. Although the overall network that emerged along with the protests in Baltimore was ideologically polarized, progressive racial justice frames, consistent with those advanced by networked counterpublics, continued to propagate more broadly than the racialized "riot" framing advanced by traditional elites and those on the far right. This is notably different from the one-way mediated discourses of urban unrest that arise from traditional media spaces where professional norms rely on dominant frames and ideologies of race and racism and the ceding of time to dismissive and denigrative discourses of unrest. The popularity of progressive messages was facilitated, in part, by brokers who actively worked across the polarized network to advance counterpublic messages and reconcile dissenting accounts—something made possible because of both the two-way technological affordances of Twitter and the popularity of counterpublic narratives in it. These results highlight the particularly important role that brokers play in framing contested events online and offer insight into pathways for reconciling contentious accounts of urban unrest.

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