

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Hijacking #myNYPD: Social Media Dissent and Networked Counterpublics

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In this article we investigate the hijacking of the Twitter hashtag #myNYPD following the launch of a public relations campaign by the New York City Police Department in April of 2014. Theorizing networked counterpublics, we examine how Twitter was used as a platform to generate and promote counterpublic narratives about racial profiling and police misconduct. Through a combination of large-scale network analysis and qualitative discourse analysis, we detail counterpublic structure and leadership, discursive strategies deployed by crowdsourced elites, and the reception of counterpublic activism in mainstream media. We conclude with implications for understanding the evolving nature of counterpublics, with particular consideration to the roles of new and old media in (re)shaping public debates around marginalization, profiling, and policing.

Keywords: Social Media Activism, Networked Counterpublics, Network Analysis, Discourse Analysis, Policing.

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On 22 April 2014 @NYPDNews, the official Twitter account for the New York City Police Department invited the public to share photographs of officers captioned with the hashtag #myNYPD (Figure 1).

What started as a public relations campaign quickly turned into an online protest as thousands of citizens appropriated the #myNYPD hashtag to highlight instances of police brutality, abuse, and racial profiling (Figure 2).

In total, over 100,000 #myNYPD messages were tweeted between 22 and 24 April 2014. The vast majority of these messages propagated counternarratives that directly challenged the New York City Police Department's goals. A form of media activism under the umbrella of culture jamming, we refer to this appropriation of #myNYPD as "hijacking." The hijacking of #myNYPD helped to popularize counternarratives about police–citizen interactions, setting the tone for discussions on social media and in mainstream media.

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Figure 1 The original #myNYPD tweet, issued by @NYPDNews on 22 April 2014.

Herein, we explore the hijacking of #myNYPD using counterpublic sphere theory as a guiding framework to examine how Twitter is used as a platform to organize, generate, and promote counterpublic narratives. We offer a theoretical framework for networked counterpublics, arguing that this hijacking, and online and offline response to it, illustrates the democratizing potential of Twitter and the evolving strategies of citizen activists in the age of new media. Through a combination of large-scale network analysis and qualitative discourse analysis, we offer insight into emergent counterpublic structure and leadership, the discursive strategies deployed by crowdsourced elites within communities of resistance, and the reception of networked counterpublic activism in the mainstream media. We conclude with implications for understanding the evolving nature of counterpublics and collective action in the second decade of the 21st century.

Theorizing networked counterpublics

Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) represents an epicenter for communication research on the relationship between citizen deliberation, media, and the state. While Habermas (1989) idealized the role of the bourgeois public in the maintenance of democratic societies, scholars studying traditionally marginalized citizens, particularly women and African Americans, developed and applied the concept of *counterpublics* to describe the unique sites and methods that members of these groups use to produce nondominant forms of knowledge. Thus, Fraser's (1990) in-depth critique of Habermas's conceptualization of the public sphere was welcomed and extended by a diverse set of scholars seeking to explain the role of



Figure 2 Example of a hijacked #myNYPD tweet, in this case Occupy Wall Street (@Occupy-WallStNYC) using sarcasm alongside an image of police violence.

power, access, and social identity in defining the public and civil society (e.g., Asen & Brouwer, 2001; Black Public Sphere Collective, 1995; Dean, 1992; Goodnight, 1997; Hauser, 1998; Jackson, 2014; Squires, 2002).

What is significant about counterpublics, beyond the role they play in legitimizing and sustaining marginalized communities, is that they explicitly and strategically seek to challenge the “dominant knowledge” inherent to the mainstream public sphere (Felski, 1989; Squires, 2001). As Asen and Brouwer (2001) have described, “many publics arise from the demands made by long-suppressed and marginalized groups for the rights and responsibilities of political membership, collective sovereignty, or both. Groups drawing on axes of race, gender, class, sexuality, and ethnicity have sought to redeem the promises of democracy” (p. 2). Social movement scholars suggest that activist groups similarly construct communicative counterpublics from diverse sets of people with the goal of creating mass agitation of, and eventual shifts in, the status quo (de Jong, Shaw, & Stammers, 2005). In the 21st century, two questions have been crucial to extending this line of intellectual inquiry; what is the nature of the relationship between various counterpublics and state actors, and how are reconfigurations of the public sphere, particularly those resulting from social movements and technological innovations, influencing this relationship?

Castells (2012) has been at the forefront of theorizing around these questions and has explored the role of the Internet in collective debate and decision-making among

citizens who create subversive networks. These networks of resistance, according to Castells (2012), contribute to producing “counterpower”—a type of power that “challenges the power embedded in the institutions of society for the purpose of claiming representation for their own values and interests” (p. 15). More generally, Shirky (2008) argues that the Internet, and social media in particular, enables a “mass amateurization” of the media, including a shift from professionally produced news toward citizen journalism, and an overall reduction in the coordination costs involved in collective action. Shirky (2008) contends that this shift away from mainstream media elites can open up space for marginalized voices to become influential online in ways that may not have been possible before. Moreover, social media activism may be more nimble than traditional (offline) activism because it does not require unified messages or legitimizing groups to influence the terms of mainstream political dialogue, with online groups frequently rejecting traditional structures of leadership altogether (Castells, 2012).

This opens up the possibility for counterpublics to leverage the architecture of the social web to advance their causes. Leung and Lee (2014), for example, suggest that not only do some social media networks model the characteristics of a counterpublic because of their outward-looking attempt to challenge mainstream narratives and their mobilization impact, they are often the first mediated space where marginalized voices are articulated en masse, and thus play a pivotal role in influencing larger offline counterpublics. These scholars find that Facebook, in their case, plays an important role in strengthening the distribution networks of alternative online media and exposing even citizens not actively seeking alternative political narratives to counterpublic content. Furthermore, as detailed by Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012) in their study of the use of Twitter among Egyptian revolutionaries, social media networks organically create “crowdsourced elites,” or emergent leaders who are not necessarily (or even frequently) traditional elites. On Twitter, these crowdsourced elites can be anyone who rises to visibility as a result of a particular Twitter public’s use of the platform’s features and affordances, including retweets, favoriting, and endorsements.

Because of social media’s connectedness and what Poell (2014) calls the “technological architecture” of platforms like Twitter, members of groups whose worldviews are not traditionally reflected in the mainstream may have more power to rewrite dominant narratives than ever before. Although dominant institutions and the state do not actively seek out counterpublic perspectives on Twitter, the site’s architecture facilitates the spread of information that users can succeed in “trending,” potentially drawing attention from even the most elite and mainstream users. Likewise, retweeting allows porousness between publics as individual tweeters who belong to multiple networks retweet information from one into another, rapidly elevating discourse beyond specific localities and potentially raising the overall profile of some messages (Conover, Davis, et al., 2013). Thus, the ongoing difficulty of destabilizing established patterns of traditional media power does not erase the potential of social media activists to both attract the attention of mainstream journalists and engage in more autonomous and community-specific forms of self-representation (Poell, 2014).

We view the hijacking of #myNYPD as an extension of historical counterpublic attempts, like those documented by Jacobs (2000) and Lawrence (2000), to introduce alternative narratives into mainstream media coverage of police-citizen interactions. In this case, citizens like @MoreAndAgain and organizations like CopWatch discursively worked, in 140 characters or less, to rewrite dominant narratives of heroism, policing, criminality, and victimhood. Our research makes the case for the significance of networked counterpublics to scholarship on networked publics and collective action generally. Using #myNYPD as an example of the evolving power of counterpublics, we identify Twitter as a new and rapidly evolving space for counterpublic protests and discourse, a space that offers unique possibilities for public debate among activists, citizens, and media-makers seeking to define and redefine the role of the state in civil society.

Building on work examining the role of Twitter in social movements more generally, this multimethodological study illustrates how networked counterpublics made up of minority citizens and activist collectives on Twitter worked to reframe and retell dominantly birthed stories about law and order through the hijacking of #myNYPD. We combine large-scale network analysis and focused discourse analysis to reveal the unique nature of the networks engaged in this hijacking. We also highlight how mainstream news responded to networked counterpublic narratives about policing through a discourse analysis of mainstream coverage of #myNYPD.

As an exploratory project drawing on quantitative and qualitative methods, this research is guided by three central research questions:

RQ1: Who most centrally influenced the hijacking of #myNYPD and what publics do their networks represent?

RQ2: How did the communication norms and affordances of Twitter enable these publics to disrupt dominant narratives of policing, and what does the hijacking of #myNYPD reveal about Twitter's potential for counterpublics?

RQ3: What frames were used by mainstream newsmakers to cover the hijacking of #myNYPD?

Methods

The present analysis details how #myNYPD was hijacked, by who, and the implications for both counterpublic and mainstream public spheres. We use two main sources of data: Twitter messages containing the hashtag #myNYPD and mainstream news coverage of the hashtag.

Twitter data

Twitter is a microblogging service that enables users to communicate via short messages called "tweets." For this analysis, we gathered a sample of tweets via the Twitter streaming application programming interface (API). We downloaded 13,631 tweets sent between 22 and 24 April 2014 containing the #myNYPD hashtag, or 10% of the total number of #myNYPD tweets sent during that period.¹

Network specification

In order to identify influential tweets for this analysis, we generated a network of Twitter users connected by *mentions* and *retweets*, two common conversational conventions on the platform. When users mention or retweet one another on Twitter, they use a specific pattern of characters, or syntax, to refer to one another (Boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010). We generated the #myNYPD network for analysis using Freelon's (2013) T2G for Python converter, converter, which scans tweet text for mention and retweet syntax and creates a directed link from each retweet or mention back to the original tweet author. The resulting network included 13,074 nodes (unique users) connected by 10,487 directed links, the majority of which (72%) represented retweets. From this, we extracted the largest weakly connected component of the network, which included 7,338 nodes connected by 8,392 directed links. All subsequent analyses were performed on this giant component.

Identifying elites

From the #myNYPD network, we took a subsample of the most popular tweets for qualitative discourse analysis. There are a number of ways to measure "popularity" within a social network; in this case, we used a basic measure of in-degree to identify the most mentioned/retweeted users in the network (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005), and then extracted the tweets related to those users via Twitter retweet or mention. These most retweeted/mentioned users can be understood as what Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012) have identified as crowdsourced elites.

Like many social networks, the in-degree distribution of the #myNYPD network followed roughly a power-law distribution (Barabási & Albert, 1999), with an average in-degree of 1.14, and a range of in-degree from 0 to 660. Although there is no conventional mathematical way to select "the most popular" from such a distribution, a visual inspection of the degree distribution revealed a break at in-degree 100, or after the 12 highest in-degree nodes, after which the differences in degree distribution became more regular. Thus, we selected the tweets associated with these 12 highest in-degree nodes for inclusion in our qualitative discourse analysis. Of note, these nodes were selected based on their mathematical properties alone, without any a priori filtering on their ideological or demographic affiliations. The resulting sample included a total of 2,653 individual tweets, all of which included at least one mention or retweet (but usually retweet) of one of the top 12 highest in-degree nodes.

Identifying discursive frames in #myNYPD

We used qualitative discourse analysis to investigate meaning-making within this data. This method allowed us to go beyond the descriptive network analytics to gauge how and to what end crowdsourced elites ideologically used #myNYPD. We analyzed tweets associated with the 12 highest in-degree nodes, the accounts of our crowdsourced elites, for how language, explicit and implicit values, image, and tone were used to make #myNYPD semantically meaningful. As Schroder (2012) details, discourse, both mediated and nonmediated, has the power to frame and

define social reality, a power undergoing constant negotiation and struggle. We consider the creation of #myNYPD and its subsequent hijacking a clear example of this negotiative process. Furthermore, we believe the combination of quantitative methodologies with the qualitative ones we employ here is the most rigorous way of analyzing the meaning-making processes that occur as various forces compete to discursively define social issues in the networked public sphere.

Analyzing mainstream news coverage of #myNYPD

To assess whether the counternarratives constructed by citizens on Twitter were legitimized in the mainstream public sphere, we conducted an analysis of mainstream coverage of the hijacking of #myNYPD.² We collected data from mainstream news organizations via a search of #myNYPD on LexisNexis for the same date range as our Twitter data. For this analysis, we included broadcast news transcripts from the top-rated national networks and channels including CNN, FoxNews, MSNBC, NBC, ABC, and CBS and articles from New York-based newspapers *The New York Times*, the *New York Post*, and the *New York Daily News*. We included both sets of sources to compare the similarities and differences in national and local coverage of #myNYPD. We analyzed all #myNYPD stories from these sources for the language, discourse, and value assumptions used to construct frames about the development and evolution of the hashtag.

Results

#myNYPD network structure and crowdsourced elites

The #myNYPD retweet/mention network, including 7,338 nodes connected by 8,392 links, is shown in Figure 3. In the graph, individual nodes (Twitter users) are represented by discs, connected by links (retweets/mentions) represented as lines and color coded to distinguish clusters of users retweeting/mentioning the same central node. Nodes are sized by in-degree, with the 12 highest in-degree nodes (the crowdsourced elites) labeled with Twitter usernames. Taken as a whole, the network is best characterized as a *broadcast network*, with a distinctive hub-and-spoke structure where most nodes in the network radiate out from a small number of central nodes—the crowdsourced elites. This structure indicates that many users are retweeting content from a small number of central sources, without otherwise interacting with one another (Smith, Rainie, Shneiderman, & Himelboim, 2014).

Smith et al. (2014) suggest that broadcast networks are most often associated with breaking news stories or advocacy; to the extent that the #myNYPD hijacking constituted a form of advocacy, the structure of this network may not be especially surprising. However, of note, this structure is distinct from the politically polarized structure of Twitter more generally (Conover et al., 2011) because #myNYPD spread primarily, if not completely, via critiques of the NYPD, and not because of debates between its critics and defenders. A post hoc inspection of the tweets associated with the top 100 most retweeted nodes in the network revealed none that could be

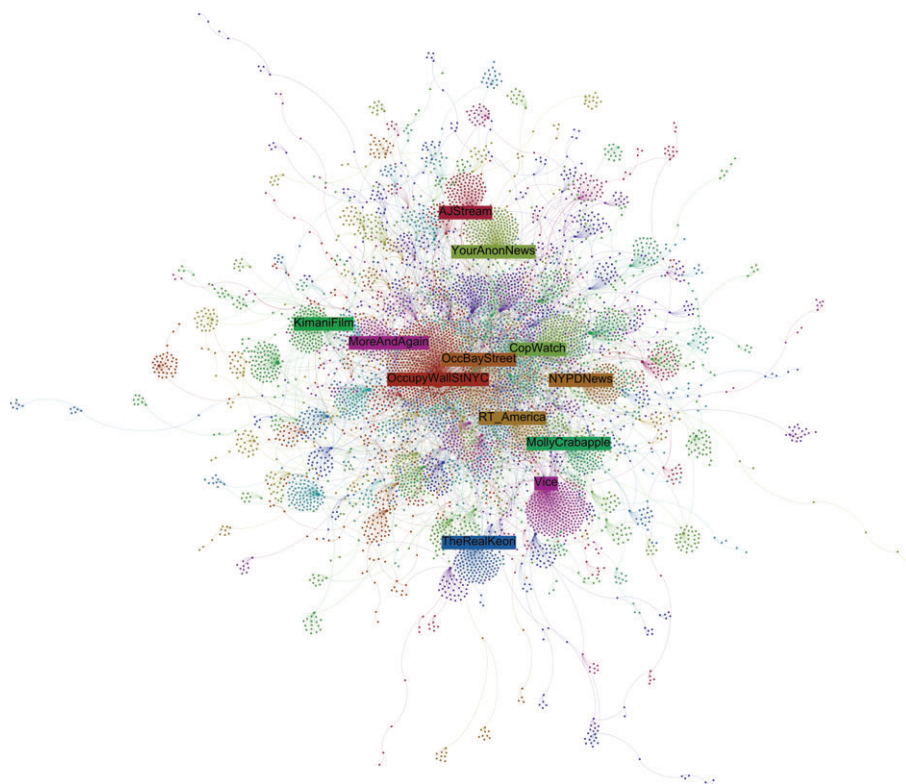


Figure 3 Graphical representation of the node-link structure of the #myNYPD retweet/mention network. Nodes are sized by in-degree and arranged to minimize distance between linked nodes. The 12 highest in-degree nodes (the crowdsourced elites) are labeled, and nodes and links are colored such that retweets/mention links and nodes are the same color as the source node. The image was created in Gephi 0.8.2 using the Fruchterman–Reingold force-directed layout algorithm.

characterized as defending or supporting police, suggesting that any online backlash to the #myNYPD hijacking either failed to be retweeted with any significance, failed to gain notice among the core discussion network, or simply failed to exist altogether. Indeed, #myNYPD trended without the help of mainstream, proestablishment narratives, making the #myNYPD network an inversion of the typical power balance in mainstream and counterpublic spheres; for #myNYPD, members of the counterpublic community were the most visible and vocal elites.

Likewise, while the hubs in Twitter broadcast networks are often mainstream elites (Smith et al., 2014), that was not the case for #myNYPD. The hubs—or crowdsourced elites—in the #myNYPD network include a mix of activist organizations, citizens unaffiliated with any particular organization, and independent media organizations. Notably, the news organizations that appear most frequently as crowdsourced elites are not those that fall within the mainstream public sphere in United States, but

rather organizations with a focus on advocacy and citizen journalism and/or a model based outside the United States. These sources, including @Vice, the Brooklyn-based news organization self-described as “created by and for a connected generation ... shining a light on underreported stories around the globe,” @RT_America, an English-language affiliate of Russia Today news networks with a focus on “broadcasting stories to make you Question More,” and @AJStream, an account run by U.S.-based staff of Al Jazeera networks that describes itself as “a web community and daily television show powered by social media and citizen journalism.”

Notably however, these alternative news sources were not most central to the viral hijacking of #myNYPD; rather their presence in the network reflects their coverage of the hijacking after it began. Instead, it was activist collectives, including two Occupy accounts (@OccupyWallStNYC in New York City, USA, and @OccBayStreet in Toronto, Ontario, Canada), CopWatch, and Anonymous, which make up four out of the top five most retweeted/mentioned crowdsourced elites. Furthermore, individual tweeters rounded out the crowdsourced elites found here. These individual citizens used their voices to hijack #myNYPD in ways that may have been restricted in more organizational settings. Some of these individuals had histories of online activism, like @MoreAndAgain, who was behind the online campaign that pressured publishers to halt book deal negotiations with a juror from the trial of George Zimmerman, the man acquitted of the murder of unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin.

Many of these individual crowdsourced elites were women and/or people of color. We identified the demographic characteristics of these users through a combination of their profile pictures, self-identification in Twitter bios and in other online spaces, and Google searches. The race/ethnicity and gender diversity reflected by individual crowdsourced elites demonstrate that Twitter’s digital counterpublics are more inclusive of traditionally marginalized voices than mainstream sites of political debate, and, potentially even more inclusive than historical counterpublics, which were often dominated by men and other more privileged members of marginalized groups. It is also worth noting that the crowdsourced elites found here have a huge range of followers from just over 300 to more than 1 million, with no significant correlation between followers and in-degree ($r = .145$, $p = .653$). That diverse individuals with relatively few followers were elevated to a similar level of visibility in the hijacking of #myNYPD as organizations with far more followers supports the existence of democratic access in networked counterpublics. Tweeters who sought to challenge dominant narratives of policing and law and order were, by the act of retweeting, highlighting the narratives of those they most valued, and these were not traditionally defined elites but relatively unknown citizens and activist collectives: a counterpublic.

The only traditionally elite account among the top 12 most retweeted using #myNYPD was the New York Police Department—unsurprising given their initiation of the hashtag and attempts to maintain control of it as others subverted their message. Notably, @NYPDNews reached elite status as a direct result of counterpublic efforts; the vast majority of retweets and replies to @NYPDNews were users responding with ire and criticism. Many of the other crowdsourced elites using



Figure 4 Hijacked tweet by @KimaniFilm retweeting the NYPD's (@NYPDNews) request for photos with a counternarrative image.

#myNYPD retweeted @NYPDNews' initial request before launching into hours (and days) of tweeting with #myNYPD. For example, the above tweet from @KimaniFilm, a Twitter account run by a diverse set of filmmakers behind a documentary about Kimani Gray, a teenager shot and killed by the NYPD in 2013, was retweeted over 1,100 times (Figure 4).

To more fully understand how accounts like @KimaniFilm and other crowd-sourced elites contributed to a set of counternarratives about the NYPD, and policing in America more generally, we present the results of our discourse analysis below.

Primary discursive trends in the hijacking of #myNYPD

Crowdsourced elites used two primary discursive strategies, both highly affective, to hijack #myNYPD in attempts to introduce counternarratives of policing to the public sphere: *satire* and *outrage*. These discursive strategies tended to be clustered among crowdsourced elites with particular identities; individual users like @MoreAndAgain and @TheRealKeori used satire to draw attention to police brutality, whereas social change organizations like CopWatch and Anonymous largely attempted to channel rage into mass outrage.

Comedy as a cure for brutality

While perhaps falling outside the limiting Habermasian definition of "rational" debate, there exists a creative counterpublic tradition that attempts to infiltrate the

mainstream public sphere by making matters of life and death discursively accessible to both in and outgroup members through humor. Christiansen and Hanson (1996) have described how, for citizens with AIDS in the 1980s, comedy was one of the only available rhetorical strategies for challenging religious and government institutions that justified and participated in their deaths. Scholars like Watkins (1999) offer similar analysis of how African Americans have long used comedy to critique racist structures. In both cases, citizens' use of satire reflects the marginalized status of their particular counterpublics, often wholly excluded from the mainstream public sphere in America.

In this tradition, our crowdsourced elites, some members of what scholars like Brock (2012) and Florini (2014) have labeled "black Twitter," used satire to challenge the social role of the NYPD. In tweets dripping with irony and sarcasm, these users constructed the NYPD not only as a violent, dangerous force terrorizing New York's less privileged citizens, but also as an absurdity deserving of public humiliation. For example, @MoreAndAgain tweeted a series of highly circulated tweets that attached sarcastically pleasant captions to images of police force. Among @MoreAndAgain's tweets; "You might not have known this, but the NYPD can help you with that kink in your neck. #myNYPD" alongside the image of an NYPD officer kneeling on a half-clothed man's chest and neck, "The #NYPD will also help you de-tangle your hair. #myNYPD" alongside the image of three male NYPD officers apparently restraining a woman by her hair, and "If you can't walk, don't worry, the #NYPD will carry you. How helpful! #myNYPD," alongside the image of a group of officers carrying away a yelling woman whose undergarments are being exposed as a result (Figure 5, left). In each of these images, the citizens being overpowered by police appear to be black and/or Latino and in every case a physical struggle is occurring.

The power of these satirical tweets, which rarely made explicit claims against the NYPD, but instead depended heavily on the juxtaposition of seemingly innocuous and/or sarcastic commentary with images and stories of police violence, resides heavily in the way they ideologically construct policing as a mockery of the very values of freedom and justice institutions like the NYPD claim to represent. Furthermore, @MoreAndAgain's employment of direct address — it is *you* the NYPD will carry, *you* who has a kink in your neck and *you* whose hair is being pulled — calls upon an online community of individuals who are presumably at risk for experiencing police violence themselves.

In a tweet shared thousands of times, @TheRealKeori also used humor, in this case snark (a snide remark) to caption a photo of NYPD officers, uniformed and smiling, standing between a TD Bank and a Byzantium Security billboard reading "We're not for Everyone. Just the 1% that Matters" (Figure 5, right). The caption, "Sometimes the jokes write themselves," again calls on a presumed online community who will "get" the implied joke about the NYPD only existing to protect the powerful and wealthy. In both these examples, individual tweeters speak to and for a counterpublic community critical of the role of policing in a society aspiring to be equal for all.



Figure 5 Examples of counterpublic tweets that use sarcasm (left) and snark (right) as discursive strategies.

Channeling rage/constructing outrage

Castells (2009, 2012) has explored how individual fear and rage becomes mass outrage as citizens share their experiences with state sponsored injustices through technological networks. In fact, the success of activist organizations and social movements is inherently linked to masses of people, from multiple networks, sharing a sense of outrage. Furthermore, outrage is one of the only forms of citizen affect that mainstream media rewards with attention.³ Although certainly the use of satire by our crowdsourced elites worked to channel rage and construct outrage, this task was embraced far most explicitly by activist organizations like CopWatch, a group dedicated to teaching citizens their rights around monitoring and reporting police abuses, and the digital activist collective Anonymous. These groups used disturbing images that sometimes included bloody, battered, bruised, and even dead bodies alongside discursive hyperbole.

For example, the NYPD was compared to the Ku Klux Klan (Figure 6, left), “terrorists,” and “gang members,” while citizens traditionally understood as particularly vulnerable to violence like children, women, and the mentally ill were depicted as their victims. These tweets name “rape,” “torture,” “beatings,” and “murder” among acts committed by the NYPD and rely heavily on specific cases of police force, like those of Amadou Diallo, Ramarley Graham, Kimani Gray, Shantel Davis, and Sean Bell. Although such tweets often listed specifics of a case, like that “#myNYPD massacred Sean Bell in his car on his wedding day” and “17-year-old Deion Fludd” was “beaten into a quadriplegic by #myNYPD” (Figure 6, right), they also relied heavily on affective images of victims of police violence, pushing the online community to see the humanity and vulnerability of these figures, in contrast to the seeming senselessness of the NYPD.



Figure 6 Examples of counterpublic tweets that use hyperbole (left) and outrage (right) as discursive strategies.

Furthermore, although images that accompanied satirical #myNYPD tweets often showed the victims of police violence to be people of color without naming this phenomenon, those that focused on constructing outrage openly called the NYPD racist. For example, @Copwatch tweeted that “#myNYPD is racist, no matter what color the officers are,” and @YourAnonNews offered a “Fuck you, #myNYPD” to what they described as “violent, racist police oppression.”

Unifying counternarratives

Finally, the most retweeted crowdsourced elite in the hijacking of #myNYPD was @OccupyWallStNYC with more than double the in-degree (660) of the next most retweeted crowdsourced elite (@Vice with in-degree 315). The visibility of Occupy Wall Street within the counterpublic of #myNYPD hijackers is perhaps not surprising, given the recent high visibility of the OWS movement, and their history of successfully leveraging Twitter for social activism (Conover, Ferrara, Menczer, & Flammini, 2013). However, @OccupyWallStNYC has far fewer followers than either @YourAnonNews or @CopWatch, suggesting that it was more successful in creating messages that resonated with a diversity of #myNYPD hijackers and the publics they reflect. Our findings support this, as @OccupyWallStNYC made extensive use of both satire (as seen in Figure 2) and outrage in their critiques of the NYPD, frequently combining critiques of police force with critiques of unfettered capitalism, and serving as a megaphone for alternative news stories on the #myNYPD hijacking.

For example, alongside sarcastic captioning of images of the police force as “Free Massages from the #myNYPD,” @OccupyWallStNYC variously tweeted: “#myNYPD: Protecting the corporations from the citizens since 1857” alongside a photo of riot-gear clad police on guard in front of a Chase bank; “#myNYPD

killed Deion Fludd, Kimani Gray, Ramarley Graham, Shantel Davis, Sean Bell, Shem Walker, Amadou Diallo, Kyam Livingston #RestInPower”; and a link to an Al Jazeera story on the hijacking with the tweet “New York cops fall flat with #myNYPD as Twitter users swamp campaign with brutality photos.” These examples demonstrate the way @OccupyWallStNYC adopted and reflected various counterpublic strategies in one place, a strategy that gave them the most influence in the network.

Primary discursive trends in mainstream news coverage of #myNYPD

Of the six national news channels and networks for which we collected data, only half covered the hijacking of #myNYPD—CNN, MSNBC, and NBC—the latter two sharing the same parent company. FoxNews, CBS, and ABC ignored the story altogether. All three of the New York-based newspapers, *The New York Times*, *New York Post*, and *New York Daily News*, covered the hashtag and its hijacking. Coverage in New York-based papers is not surprising given the locality of the story, but considering television news’ general focus on new, developing events it is significant that the hijacking was treated as an event itself, drawing national coverage in some, if not all, of these outlets.

Across all mainstream sources that covered #myNYPD, the most commonly constructed frame for telling the story was that of a public relations failure. Within this frame, the NYPD was largely constructed as having made a good-faith effort to engage its Twitter followers. Sources variously called the NYPD’s use of the hashtag “earnest” “encouraging” “a friendly callout” “community outreach” and “good intentioned.”⁴ Together, such discourse framed the NYPD in a positive light even while acknowledging that the hashtag became a “fail,” “backfire,” and “mishap.” Thus, the NYPD was framed as a hapless victim of its own lack of foresight and social media literacy. As NBC’s Dylan Dreyer reported, “The New York City Police Department has seen the wrath of social media. Haven’t we all?” (“Divers are beginning,” 2014). Likewise, the construction of the NYPD’s campaign as what *The New York Times* (Goodman, 2014) called “an embarrassing stumble” is notably sympathetic, a finding that cannot be detached from the norms of mainstream news making, which rely heavily on governmental elites and institutions like police for information. In fact, across all mainstream stories collected here, the only sources quoted were NYPD commissioner Bill Bratton and other police department spokespeople. Thus, representatives of the state were given an opportunity to frame the hijacking in mainstream news not available to those using Twitter to agitate for change.

Mainstream newsmakers framed Twitter, and the citizens who engaged in the #myNYPD hijacking, in far less generous terms. However, this framing reflected more variance by source. For example, *The New York Times*, CNN, and NBC all constructed Twitter as something of a Wild West of communication where “storms of users” “dredged up” “backlash” in order to “bombard” the NYPD. CNN’s John Berman offered, “The lesson here, live by Twitter, die by Twitter” (“No air pockets,” 2014) and NBC’s Natalie Morales similarly offered, “Once you open up that floodgate, it’s hard to close it” (“Divers are beginning,” 2014). This framing failed to engage

on issues of police brutality and profiling, or questions of police accountability or impact. Instead, it constructed the NYPD—a government organization—as just as vulnerable to online criticism as any Twitter user, and the platform itself as hostile to public relations efforts.

A more extreme framing of online critics of the NYPD as hostile was evident in the two New York-based tabloid-style papers. The *New York Post* and *New York Daily News* called #myNYPD hijackers “derisive” “police adversaries” who were “gross, sloppy, and plain wrong,” labeling their claims “mocking and angry” “vitriol.”⁵ These publications also called hijackers “cop-haters,” “anticop,” and “trolls,” and the *New York Post* used the sexist term “web wag” to refer to one female NYPD critic.⁶ This highly negative framing severely limited the possibility that legitimacy would be given to the concerns of those who hijacked #myNYPD, or that Twitter as a platform could be a legitimate part of democratic conversations. Furthermore, the *Daily News* and *Post* went above and beyond the construction of the NYPD’s public relations attempt as benign, adding explicitly complimentary descriptions of the organization, including that it had “bent over backwards to heal wounds real and perceived” and “saved thousands of lives, many of them belonging to young black and Latino men” (“Editorial #ourNYPD,” 2014). This defense of the NYPD and derision of its online critics illustrates the severe limitations Twitter publics face in attempting to intervene in local mainstream conversations. These findings also suggest a strong, even undemocratic, link between the state and those defining the terms of debate in the mainstream public sphere.

Among mainstream news sources, only MSNBC produced an in-depth analysis of the hijacking of #myNYPD. This analysis, while also including framing that constructed the NYPD’s attempt at community outreach as benign, treated the hijacking of the hashtag as a legitimate form of activism and engaged concerns about police brutality with complexity. MSNBC’s Ari Melber frequently referred to those using #myNYPD to criticize policing practices as “the people” and noted, “Now, here is the thing about telling the story in a two-way media, the people can respond with their own story. And that is what they did. . . . If you ask people for their stories, you better be prepared to listen to them” (“Last word,” 2014). Melber also called the hijacking a “grassroots” “protest template”—discursive constructs that clearly link the hijacking to activism. Melber went on to further legitimize the hijacking, stating:

Anyone who follows politics today knows about the simplistic and often false choice of whether we should be agitating on the Internet or on the streets. But here is the thing about most of the photos. They were all taken in the streets. They all happened in the streets. Yet many of them didn’t achieve initially any great impact, let alone response from the city or the press until they found traction through the online publishing platforms. (“Last word,” 2014)

Melber’s discourse here not only frames the hijacking as activism and identifies what happens “on the streets” as a real issue people should be paying attention to, his invocation of “we” also suggests that “agitation” is something members of the public sphere he is speaking to should be and are engaging in. Here, we see the clear

integration of the agitational goals of counterpublics seeking to interrupt dominant narratives of policing within a mainstream space.

We suggest that this multifaceted and legitimizing coverage reflects MSNBC's brand construction as an antidote to the conservative-leaning FoxNews (a network that did not cover the story at all). MSNBC's homepage describes it as a place for "news, video, and progressive community" and the network's slogan "Lean Forward" also discursively evokes the concept of social progress. Furthermore, while Melber is a fairly traditional journalist, his coverage of #myNYPD took place while sitting in for political analyst Lawrence O'Donnell on a program MSNBC describes as "channeling O'Donnell's extensive background in politics and entertainment" (MSNBC.com). This suggests that there are spaces and opportunities for the dissent of networked counterpublics to be taken seriously in the mainstream public sphere, although these spaces, and the willingness of their creators to openly identify with something closer to advocacy journalism, remain few.

Perhaps most importantly, MSNBC's coverage of the hijacking of #myNYPD was used to provide more details about police brutality and profiling than in any other mainstream source. MSNBC's Melber acknowledged that the NYPD was a "controversial" force and listed "clashes" "over the right to protest," "surveilling Muslim communities and systematically stopping and frisking young black men" as realities for "a lot of people" and legitimate reasons for anger and criticism ("Last word," 2014). This framing stands in stark contrast to the ways brutality and profiling were (and were not) discussed in other mainstream sources. Mainstream sources like CNN and *The New York Times* only briefly touched on concerns over police brutality, using euphemisms like "holding down" to describe images of police in violent one-on-one interactions with citizens and describing these interactions as "infamous moments" and "unfavorable images." Although mainstream sources other than MSNBC noted that the images used in hijacking #myNYPD "appeared to show police brutality," there was no critical or specific engagement with police brutality as a social phenomenon and the larger framing of the story as one about a public relations fail overwhelmed these single mentions.

Thus, for the most part, mainstream news sources either reappropriated #myNYPD from members of networked counterpublics in a way that realigned it with dominant narratives, or ignored the hijacking altogether. Although some mainstream sources, particularly the New York-based tabloids, engaged in reappropriation to defend the NYPD and malign online activists, most mainstream reappropriation depoliticized the hashtag altogether by framing the hijacking as a lesson in 21st-century marketing, a frame that treated the NYPD as a business rather than a government institution with a responsibility to citizens. Hence, there is no question that mainstream gatekeeping of public debates and the centering of dominant narratives at the expense of ones arising from counterpublics are alive and well in America. Yet, despite limiting coverage, the visibility of the hijacking of #myNYPD as a mainstream story is noteworthy as it, at the very least, exposed audiences to the existence of networked counterpublics that actively engage in critiques of

the state. In the case of MSNBC, narratives produced by counterpublics using Twitter seemed to more closely overlap with those in the mainstream, offering legitimacy to both Twitter as a platform and the political frameworks of activists and citizens who use it. Ultimately, with varying success, the hijacking of #myNYPD had real influence over the presence and shape of mainstream conversations about policing.

Discussion

According to Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012), Twitter hashtags as frames for naming social phenomena, events, and institutions “are both attempts to claim power by cognitively characterizing an event and are simultaneously inviting of affective language” (p. 278). Our findings not only reveal discursive, affective, and thereby ideological struggle in the meaning-making process around #myNYPD, but also a move toward the democratization of the public sphere through the hashtag’s collective hijacking and resulting virality.

As public sphere and social movement scholars have theorized, the development of strategies to infiltrate mainstream public discourse is a primary marker, and marks one of the primary measures of efficacy, of counterpublics. Thus, despite the decentralized nature of sending individual tweets, we suggest that the collective hijacking and trending of #myNYPD reveal an intentional and nearly spontaneous strategic effort; an effort that exemplifies how counterpublic strategies meant to infiltrate mainstream narratives have adapted to the technological architecture of Twitter. These efforts can be successful, in large part because Twitter’s architecture allows conceptually related but otherwise disconnected messages to be stitched together in a networked narrative that becomes newsworthy, even by mainstream standards. No single tweet introduced alternative narratives of policing, but a collection of tweets created and spread by a networked counterpublic allowed these narratives to temporarily gain traction in the public sphere.

It is clear from our findings that Twitter functions as a useful tool for counterpublics to share in-group knowledge and experience about police brutality *and* that through the strategic use of Twitter these counterpublics have the power to motivate the mainstream public sphere to take note and respond. Our findings further illustrate that networked counterpublics are more diverse and inclusive than the mainstream public sphere—many of our online crowdsourced elites were women and people of color with no elite status elsewhere (as compared to the overwhelmingly white and mostly male news anchors, reporters, and sources that reinterpreted their message in the mainstream public sphere).

Although these findings and their implications are significant, we must not overly idealize Twitter’s potential for highlighting a diverse set of voices in a meaningful way. Twitter is not a revolutionized, or even generally counternormative, space for information creation and dispersal. As Poell (2014) points out, the economic and technological architecture of Twitter is certainly founded in dominant values that prioritize the needs of advertisers and elites over others. Furthermore, the structure of

the platform still allows the segmentation of publics and the sheer quantity of information at any given moment means it is easy to miss particular narratives as they come and go with a speed unique to the medium. And of course, the mere presence of counterpublic narratives on Twitter, even as trending topics, does not guarantee a sustained or substantive engagement with these narratives by the state or members of mainstream institutions, or even of the majority of members of the counterpublics themselves (Conover, Ferrara, et al., 2013).

Although our work here highlights an improved permeability between the dominant public sphere and counterpublics, it also demonstrates that power and gate-keeping still matter in what frames for understanding dissent and social protest are made available to the general public. Just as citizens and activist collectives hijacking #myNYPD sought to take back power from narratives that legitimize policing, the original use of the hashtag by the NYPD was no less tied to the intentional positioning of power and affect. Furthermore, the contributions of mainstream news media demonstrate how the dominant public sphere reflects (or fails to reflect) discourses that are counter to those presented by the state. This three-way struggle raises important questions about who has access and power to decide how stories are told in the public sphere, and links members of counterpublics, albeit with limitations, to powerful institutions and journalists.

Our findings are consistent with prior research that suggests that mainstream news organizations and affiliated journalists tend to have ambivalent attitudes toward Twitter (Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012). However, when the story itself becomes about Twitter (or rather, what people are doing with Twitter), we find that many mainstream newsmakers feel compelled to acknowledge how social media are being used by citizens both to bypass traditional spaces for information creation and to perform the “watchdog” role journalism once prided itself on. Although our findings indicate that networked counterpublics on Twitter can model a quasi democratic sphere, we also recognize that the same cannot be said of more traditional media.

If drawing mainstream attention to the issue of police brutality, especially as experienced by young people and people of color, was the goal of members of Twitter users who hijacked #myNYPD, they certainly succeeded. Yet, the repackaged and reappropriated discussion of these issues in the mainstream public sphere lost much of the democratic, proactive, anti authority power, it contained within Twitter counterpublics—except on one program on MSNBC. Thus, we are cautiously optimistic about the porousness between dominant and marginalized forms of knowledge production in the 21st century.

We believe the hijacking of #myNYPD reflects a larger pattern of collective counterpublic activism that relies on virality as a strategy and are excited to expand the questions at the core of this research. Several months after the hijacking of #myNYPD, and in the wake of the police shooting of unarmed black teenager Michael Brown, other hashtags critical of police brutality—including #Ferguson and #BlackLivesMatter—contributed to moving citizens across the nation into the ground protests and influenced mainstream debates about racial justice, policing,

and the state. Our ongoing work investigates these hashtags alongside other highly debated issues pertaining to civil society, inclusion, and marginalization in order to further understand contemporary questions of networked collective action and the public sphere. Finally, our research here has demonstrated the importance of fusing network analytics with critical and discursive approaches for studying the role of networked publics in our ever-evolving democracy.

Notes

- 1 The standard sample rate for the streaming API is 1% of all tweets. However, Twitter grants access to a 10% sample (sometimes called the “garden hose”) on a case-by-case basis. Our data were obtained through an individually negotiated 10% stream (Liu, Kliman-Silver, & Mislove, 2014).
- 2 Herein, we define mainstream media as any media based in one-way corporate logics and dominant culture. This dominant model of media production, which includes an exclusion of historically marginalized viewpoints, has and continues to determine the primary economic, political, and logistic means of information creation and dispersal in America (Hall, 2000; Squires, 2007).
- 3 The more difficult part of this affective use of outrage in social movements, Castells (2009, 2012) notes, is balancing outrage with the hope that change is possible.
- 4 For examples, see “NYPD” (2014), “Divers” (2014), and “Last word” (2014).
- 5 For examples, see Goodman (2014), “Bratton” (2014), and “Divers” (2014).
- 6 For examples, see “Bratton” (2014) and “NYPD TWEET BEAT” (2014).

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