

Reporting on Black Lives Matter in 2020: How Digital Black Press Outlets Covered the Racial Uprisings

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Abstract

George Floyd's fatal police encounter sparked the largest social justice movement in American history. Black press journalists in the United States found themselves documenting and coping with Black trauma as they performed their duties in pandemic-mandated isolation. Through semi-structured interviews with digital Black press journalists, this study, which was conducted between 2020 and 2021, explores the reporting and personal strategies these journalists deployed during tumultuous times. We found they (1) provided humanizing and ongoing social justice coverage; (2) relied on Black experts, activists, and their readers as sources; (3) created social media content that appealed to Black and non-Black audiences; and (4) cared for each other and readers to build intracultural support. Our findings illuminate how the digital Black press practiced “movement journalism,” an approach that centers oppressed people and counters protest paradigm-style coverage.

Keywords

Black Lives Matter, Black press, movement journalism, protest paradigm, digital journalism, social media

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On May 25, 2020, seventeen-year-old Darnella Frazier used her smartphone to film Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on the neck of George Floyd for more than nine minutes. She uploaded the fatal footage to Facebook after the incident. Within two days, the video went viral, sparking global outcry. In the United States, citizens from every state emerged from a pandemic lockdown—in which they had been ordered to stay in their homes—to demonstrate in the streets (Burch et al. 2020). In addition to advocating for George Floyd, Black Lives Matter (BLM) protestors also brought more attention to Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor, who had been wrongfully killed in February and March, respectively. Social justice demonstrations also took place worldwide in countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Colombia, Brazil, and New Zealand as the globe reckoned with racism. The US media's attention to BLM in fact influenced news outlets in other countries to cover anti-racist and anti-police brutality movements in their area that may have previously been ignored (Silverstein 2021; Watson 2020). American media outlets converged on the largest sites of BLM protests in cities such as Minneapolis, New York, Los Angeles, and Washington, DC. Black journalists contributed to the reportage for many of these outlets, and soon found themselves in the unenviable position of covering a racial reckoning while also living through it.

As these reckonings played out in America's top newsrooms for the rest of the summer, a counterculture of reporting on race and social justice movements in more grassroots settings was emerging (Safdar et al. 2020). Tina Vasquez (2020) of *Nieman Reports* claimed that the practice of "movement journalism" was increasing among reporters of color. The concept was introduced in the report *Out of Struggle* by Anna Simonton (2017) a journalist and fellow at Project South, which is a nonprofit working to enhance communications infrastructures in the American South. In the report, Simonton defines movement journalism as "the practice of journalism in the service of . . . social, political and economic transformation" (p. 4). One of its core components is prioritizing "stories that amplify the power of people in action to transform the world" (p. 5). The study included analysis of the historical Black press and independent Black news websites in the South. However, we wondered how much of its philosophy was imbued in today's digital Black press, which includes non-Southern-based publications with national reach. We also were curious about who the audience was for this content. In addition, although many scholars have researched how mainstream news media covered BLM, we did not find any previous studies on how the Black press covered the movement.

This paper begins by explaining how mainstream, alternative, and digital news outlets have previously and contemporaneously covered protests. We detail how scholars have found that mainstream media coverage of BLM protests typically follows the protest paradigm, which delegitimizes protests by primarily using official sources and focusing on violence. In addition, many mainstream outlets covered the protests as isolated events and did not focus on the ideas behind the protests, therefore using episodic instead of thematic framing. However, research has shown that alternative and digital outlets have countered the protest paradigm when they cover social justice protests. We note that many journalists are using social media to reach readers in the new

media age, and scholars have argued that community news outlets are practicing reciprocal journalism by engaging with their audience in a mutually beneficial way. We then describe how movement journalism, which is community focused and aims to advance social justice, has historically been practiced by Black press journalists and posit that the digital Black press may be continuing the tradition online and via social media.

When Black journalists cover BLM, their experience doing so at Black-managed publications may differ from the experiences of Black journalists at mainstream outlets. As such, this paper offers a phenomenology of Black journalists who were working for thirteen of the top forty digital Black publications in the United States in 2020, to hear how they believe their BLM content contrasted with mainstream and how covering the movement personally affected them. We also detail their social media strategy and complement those insights with web metrics analysis to determine how digital Black press outlets were engaging with their audiences prior to, during, and after the protests. Lastly, we discuss these findings in ways that leaders of national and international news outlets might find helpful, by examining how embracing movement journalism's normative tenets might improve social justice reporting.

Framing the BLM Movement

The BLM hashtag was first introduced by Alicia Garza in 2013 after George Zimmerman, who is white-passing, was acquitted in the murder trial of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed, Black teenager (Richardson 2020). Michael Brown, another unarmed Black teenager, was killed in Ferguson, Missouri one year later. In November 2014, when a grand jury decided not to indict Officer Darren Wilson for killing Brown, the hashtag's use soared to 1.7 million uses in the three weeks that followed. It has since remained a "continuous presence on Twitter" (Anderson 2016: para. 11) and its usage spikes when high-profile police brutality cases emerge. Most tweets using the hashtag support the BLM movement and racial equality and people also use the hashtag in posts referencing BLM protests (Anderson 2016).

Research has shown that early news coverage of the protests was racially and politically biased. Mills (2017) found that right-wing media outlets, such as Fox News, leaned heavily into racist framing when reporting on the BLM movement using five key tropes: discrediting racial politics, and blaming Black victims, Black leaders, the Black community, and Black protesters. Even left-leaning news outlets have relied on these tropes. Leopold and Bell (2017) found that seven mainstream newspapers resorted to the riot frame, used official sources, published quotes from bystanders who disapproved of the protests, demonized the protesters, and blamed them for acts of violence. A few years later in 2020, two of these newspapers—*The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*—experienced public mutinies from its Black reporters amid the protests in support of George Floyd.

Shedding the Protest Paradigm

The protest paradigm refers to the framing mainstream journalists routinely use to structure news stories about protests (McLeod and Hertog 1999). Typically, this type

of news coverage critiques and demonizes protesters, highlights extremists and violence, and preferences official perspectives (Brown 2021; Di Ciccio 2010). McLeod and Hertog (1992) found that mainstream outlets frequently employ the protest paradigm to delegitimize protests by focusing on protesters' deviance, such as property damage and traffic disruption. In addition, protest paradigm news frames often center the action of protests as opposed to the issues (McLeod and Hertog 1992). Later scholarship builds on this theory by differentiating episodic and thematic news frames. Whereas episodically framed news is more event oriented, thematically framed coverage provides context and background for public issues (Iyengar 1994). For example, in media coverage of Michael Brown's murder, American, British, Spanish, and French news outlets focused on police brutality and the behavior of individual cops instead of the larger issue of systemic racism (Harlow 2019).

Brown and Harlow (2019) found that protests concerning racial injustice typically receive more negative coverage than protests on other topics. As a result, news articles about BLM protests often follow the protest paradigm and are delegitimizing by focusing on spectacle and violence. Media outlets outside of the country where the protests take place are even more likely to use the spectacle frame (Harlow et al. 2020; Jiménez-Martínez 2021). Boyle et al. (2012) argued that systemic biases are present in the both national and international news media and journalists treat some groups more unfairly, especially if they threaten the status quo.

Conversely, alternative and online-only news outlets often counter the protest paradigm by legitimizing social movements (Downing 2000; Harlow and Johnson 2011). These outlets tend to use more sympathetic framing of protesters. These frames include unjust persecution and "our story," which uses direct quotes from protesters. The debate frame, which aims to fairly portray issues from multiple viewpoints, such as those of protesters and politicians, is often touted but not used by mainstream media (McLeod and Hertog 1999). However, this frame is more commonly used by the alternative press and helps to legitimize protests by highlighting the protesters' social critiques (Brown 2021; Harlow et al. 2020).

Journalists who practice movement journalism inherently eschew the protest paradigm as well. Among some of the criteria, movement journalism "produces news that is based in the experiences and identities of oppressed peoples . . . uses investigative reporting to expose how agents and systems of oppression operate [and] develops shared political analysis between journalists and communities" (Simonton 2017: 5). Therefore, instead of focusing on the spectacle of protests, using a movement journalism framework would mean focusing on the BLM movement's larger goal of addressing systemic racism. According to Simonton, movement journalists also have a relationship with the community that their stories are for and about (Schmidt 2017). As such, they may work with Black protesters and activists instead of following the protest paradigm and publishing critical coverage of them.

Although alternative and advocacy journalism are useful frameworks that have been used to study non-mainstream media outlets (Bekken 2019; Waisbord 2009), movement journalism is a framework that can be employed by both mainstream and minority media outlets to counter the protest paradigm (Vasquez 2020). While they

share similar tenets, advocacy and alternative media have been framed as separate from the mainstream and as targeting an audience with particular shared interests (Bekken 2019; Waisbord 2009). However, movement journalism is a framework that aims to shift narratives about social justice and can be seen in southern Black press publications as well as at mainstream news outlets like *The New York Times Magazine* where Nikole Hannah-Jones published “The 1619 Project” (Vasquez 2020).

Framing BLM in 2020

In the three months following George Floyd’s death, there were more than 7,750 BLM protests across the country, and ninety-three percent of them were peaceful (Kishi and Jones 2020). However, there were some media outlets that overrepresented the amount of violence at these protests and did not provide contextualized coverage (Lahut 2020; Pierre-Louis 2020). One poll found that forty-two percent of adults believed that most BLM protesters were “trying to incite violence or destroy property” (Consult 2020: 49).

News outlets have used social media to disseminate information about BLM and the public has used it to address and challenge mainstream narratives (Harlow et al. 2017). In the twentieth century, many news organizations have normalized social media as a core practice and digital-first publications have been particularly open to utilizing it (Bruns 2018). Community news outlets are using social media to practice “reciprocal journalism” and engaging in mutually beneficial relationships with users (Lewis et al. 2014). Social media also allows US media to broaden their reach given that users worldwide engage with English-language news outlets most. This is due to a significant amount of content on these platforms being written in English and published in the United States (Harlow et al. 2017). Research has shown that social media counterpublics, such as Black Twitter, have shifted problematic frames of protest coverage by critiquing legacy media publicly (Brown 2021). Harlow et al. (2020) found that social media users are especially powerful in their ability to influence the visibility of protests and legitimize them. When social media users share news coverage of protests, it can help to disrupt the protest paradigm and increase support for movements (Barberá et al. 2015; Harlow et al. 2017). We were therefore interested in whether Black press outlets employed social media for similar purposes and whether they did so in a way that legitimized or delegitimized the protests.

In August 2020—as the BLM protests wound down—Vasquez (2020) suggested that journalists appraise the collective lessons learned that summer, and advance the practice of movement journalism. This emergent genre of journalism aims to change how the news media covers social movements and is rooted in the practices of legacy Black press outlets (Simonton 2017). Founded in 1827, the Black press has historically been considered an advocacy press as it foregrounds issues of concern to African Americans (Washburn 2006). African Americans often read the Black press because they believe it provides more fair and accurate coverage of political content (Cohen 1999). Digital-first Black news outlets are considered the “new Black press” and are working to perpetuate the centering and empowerment of African Americans in news narratives (Douglas 2020). Given how closely aligned movement journalism is with

the historical Black press, we sought to investigate whether the new Black press was continuing this practice in their BLM coverage.

Black Journalists Covering Trauma

So while Black reporters were having public mutinies at traditional media outlets and while Project South was forging grassroots efforts, digital Black press journalists were talking directly to Black news audiences on social media and avoiding newsroom controversies. Yet, they were living and working through a racial reckoning as Black Americans. Bor et al. (2018) found that police killings of African Americans have an adverse effect on Black Americans' mental health. What then was the effect on digital Black press journalists whose job required engaging with this content?

Many journalists are exposed to traumatic events given the nature of their work (Smith et al. 2018), but journalists of color may be even more impacted when reporting on traumatic topics related to their racial identity. Walker's (2022) research on Black broadcast journalists covering BLM found that many dealt with their emotional trauma by getting a therapist, going to the gym, relying on their faith, or by taking personal days off. These journalists worked at mainstream news outlets with few, if any, Black managers or executives, but research has shown that support from newsroom management is important to help journalists cope with distress (Beam and Spratt 2009; Walker 2022). There have not been any studies on how journalists at Black-managed outlets cope with covering traumatic events that affect their community. As such, we wanted to know the following:

RQ1: What was digital Black press journalists' experience covering BLM and how did they cope?

RQ2: Who was their audience and how were they connecting with them?

RQ3: Were they practicing movement journalism? If so, then how?

When we could not locate a comprehensive study that answered these questions, we decided to go to the source.

Methodology

To answer the aforementioned questions, we conducted semi-structured interviews with eleven journalists representing thirteen the top forty Black digital news outlets, as determined by Comscore, a web analytics platform. We believed that speaking with journalists at the most-visited websites would best represent common and successful BLM editorial strategies. First, we used Comscore's multi-platform tool to identify the most prominent Black press outlets online. This analytic measured websites' audiences (aged 18 and over) across desktops, tablets, and smartphones. For this study, we focused on monthly unique visitors, which is the number of individual people who visit a website. We believed it was important to include data from mobile devices given that most people access social media apps via their smartphones and many

African Americans get their news from social media (Grace et al. 2018). We initially identified fifty prominent outlets via a list of top Black news websites from *Journalisms*, a website by veteran journalist Richard Prince that covers diversity in the news media; a report on *African American Media Today* from the Democracy Fund, an independent foundation that addresses American democratic challenges; and the researchers' personal knowledge (Ford et al. 2019; Prince 2018). However, we only contacted media professionals from the forty outlets that met the minimum requirements for measurement by Comscore every month of 2020.

We used Comscore data to observe whether BLM movement coverage had any effect on the Black press' website traffic. We averaged unique visitors data from thirty-nine of the forty previously identified Black press outlets to see the monthly shifts in traffic (see Appendix Chart A1). We removed *Cassius Life* from the average, given that its Black audience did not meet Comscore's minimum reporting standards for March and we also wanted to analyze the Black press' audience according to race. We used Comscore's race demographic tool to obtain the Black audience data.¹ We then subtracted the Black audience from the total audience to determine the number of non-Black unique visitors each month in 2020 (see Appendix Chart A2).

We contacted each of the forty measurable Black press outlets and ultimately conducted eleven interviews with the journalists who responded. Given that one of our eleven interlocutors spoke to us about three of the websites in her company's portfolio, the participants in this study represented thirteen, or about one-third, of the leading Black press publications. Our list of interviewees comprised various chief executive officers, founders, editors-in-chief, and social media directors (see Appendix Table A1). Most of our interview subjects identified as journalists, but others had business backgrounds in digital strategy. As such, throughout this paper, we use the terms journalists and media professionals interchangeably when referencing them. The outlets included both digital-first publications (*Black Doctor*, *Black Sports Online*, *Bossip*, *Love B Scott*, *Madame Noire*, *News One*, *The Grio*, *The Shade Room*, and *The Undefeated*) and legacy publications with an online presence (*Essence*, *New York Amsterdam News*, *Rolling Out*, and *Vibe*). Between December 2020 and April 2021, we spoke with the journalists whose job responsibilities included overseeing their outlet's social media accounts in 2020, during the resurgence of BLM protests. The average interview duration was sixty minutes.

Our primary goal was to learn how digital Black press journalists reported on BLM in 2020. As such, we inquired about who they included in their stories and their role in sustaining the conversation after the protests ended. We also asked how they viewed the digital Black press' BLM coverage in comparison to mainstream's. In addition, we were interested in learning about how these Black media professionals used social media to interact with their audiences and how they handled covering potentially triggering topics. In an effort not to impose our preconceptions on the data, we used inductive coding to group the common responses among the journalists. Inductive analysis is a data-driven approach that involves categorizing the dominant themes in raw data (Boyatzis 1998; Thomas 2006). Ultimately, the themes that emerged were social media strategy, framing, editorial edge, and coping mechanisms.

Results

We analyzed 229 coded segments consisting of sentence- or paragraph-length responses concerning the different themes. While each journalist addressed all of our interview questions, some of our interlocutors spoke more about certain topics than others. In our largest code, *social media strategy* (seventy coded segments), the journalists talked about the increased and diverse audience for Black press content during 2020. Second, they contrasted their *framing* (fifty-five coded segments) and *sourcing* (forty-seven coded segments) with that of mainstream, emphasizing how humanizing details and Black sources often were absent from mainstream reports. Third, the journalists stated they believed they had an *editorial edge* (thirty-three coded segments) over non-Black newsrooms, since they report on BLM all of the time, and not just when there are high-profile cases. Lastly, the journalists talked about the *coping mechanisms* (twenty-four coded segments) they used to care for readers and each other during this difficult time. We offer exemplars from the dataset herewith.

Social Media Strategy

A Surge in Popularity Surprised Media Professionals. The most popular topic in the corpus centered around the disbelief many media professionals felt when they saw their user analytics soar to unprecedented heights. Angelica Nwandu, founder of *The Shade Room*, said the company nearly doubled its growth in 2020. Shana Pinnock of *The Grio*, which was founded in 2010, echoed these sentiments, explaining that “the growth that we had as a brand in 2020 outshined [every year] since the inception of *The Grio*.”

Some journalists attributed their success to the increased interest in the BLM movement, while others believed the COVID-19 pandemic also influenced their growth. Digital and social content may have fared particularly well as a result of limited in-person interactions. The COVID-19 pandemic caused more people to be at home and pay more attention to news. Robert Littal of *Black Sports Online* said, “When the pandemic hit—and it hit around the same time as the George Floyd [killing], and then the Trump election—that’s when the numbers were the highest: May, June, July . . . [we had] some record-breaking highs.”

BLM Created a Diverse News Audience. Data from Comscore support these journalists’ statements. In 2020, the average unique visitors for digital Black press outlets during May, June, and July increased by twenty-four percent when compared to the previous months of February, March, and April (see Appendix Chart A1). Many Black press sites saw their highest monthly traffic during June with some larger sites drawing significantly more visitors in June when compared with any other month in the year. For example, although *The Grio*’s unique visitors averaged 5.5 million in 2020, in June they had 10.5 million visitors. Likewise, *The Root*’s yearlong average was 4.6 million people, but peaked at 6.2 million visitors in June. When we asked about the demographics of their increased traffic, most of the journalists did not know the specifics.

However, many acknowledged that there were many non-Black readers consuming their content. Lanae Spruce of iOne Digital said, “We have noted, especially on social, that our audience is not as Black as we think it is.” Nwandu said this is also true at *The Shade Room*. She explained that after the protests began in June 2020, “we did notice that the non-Black audience rose significantly, and I don’t know, to this day. I’m trying to figure out why.” According to Comscore data, the non-Black audience for digital Black press outlets was in fact larger than the Black audience during every month of 2020. Also, although both the Black and non-Black audience grew in May, the Black audience declined in June and July while the non-Black audience continued to grow (see Appendix Chart A2).

This unprecedented spike in Black news interest did not last for every publication, however, and some of our interlocutors noted that the audience tapered eventually. Denver Blackwell of *Love B Scott* said:

[In the beginning] everybody was sharing and trying to be active and trying to voice their support and prove that they’re the wokest and know what’s going on. But then as time went on . . . the engagement just dipped. People just completely tuned out.

So while some Black and non-Black readers may have consumed Black press BLM content because it was trendy to do so in 2020, over time their interest waned (see Appendix Chart A2).

Framing and Sourcing

Countering Mainstream. Digital Black press journalists shared that they were frustrated by persistent victim-blaming in mainstream coverage. Contrastingly, they worked to humanize Black victims of police brutality in their news reports. Akisa Omulepu of *New York Amsterdam News* emphasized that her outlet tries to learn everything they can about a victim before publishing a fatal police encounter story. Whereas mainstream media may report that “someone died,” she said that *Amsterdam News* wants to know more about them. She added: “Were they a mom, were they a son . . . where do they work? Do they have kids? . . . Did he have a name? Did he go to school? Did he have dreams and passions?”

Like Omulepu, many of our participants said that they strive to talk about a police brutality victim as a whole person, and try to eschew victim-blaming narratives. For example, Pinnock of *The Grio* said she was angered by early mainstream reports about George Floyd, which stated, “‘So-and-so says [he] had drugs or something in their system’, but they bury the lead. So when you go to the story, it’s like, ‘Oh, but these are rumors that are flying on right-wing [media], *Fox News* and whatever else’.”

Nuanced coverage of the movement in 2020 meant not only humanizing victims, but it also meant explaining why people were protesting in the streets. Marcus Matthews of *The Undeclared* said:

When it comes to George Floyd, all the media covered it because they had no choice but to cover it. But I think we covered it from a standpoint of going deeper, [determining] the underlying meanings of why everyone was so upset; why people were in the streets. I think we did a good job covering *who* those people were in the streets, leading the charge, and *why* they were in the streets leading the charge.

Black press outlets then provided more context for the BLM movement by covering both protestors and their reasons for protesting.

Turning to Black Sources. When using official sources, Black press journalists were intent to include Black subject matter experts and Black attorneys' viewpoints to prioritize the interests of their Black audience. *Vibe* spoke with Congressman Tim Scott via Instagram Live and *Rolling Out* spoke with the mayor of Washington, DC, Muriel Bowser, on Facebook Live regarding his naming of BLM Plaza, the two-block-long section of downtown DC with the words BLM painted in thirty-five-foot-tall yellow letters. In addition, many outlets interviewed civil rights attorney Ben Crump who represented the families of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor.

Unofficial sources for Black press outlets included activists, celebrities, victims' family members, and their outlet's readers. Many of our interlocutors shared that they turned to BLM organizers and activists like Tamika Mallory for panel discussions and on-the-ground events that they covered via Facebook Live. Nwandu of *The Shade Room* stated:

We know that Tamika Mallory was somebody that everybody revered and respected. So we would just go to who our community really trusted and they trusted Tamika and they trusted DeRay [McKesson]. We would just choose people who we felt represented the community in a good way, that they trust, and we would bring them on.

Some of our interlocutors were also conscious about not just including the well-known activists. Spruce said, "Oftentimes you don't necessarily see included, I mean, it's better now, but you don't necessarily see activists, especially those with smaller platforms being interviewed, so we make sure that we can interview activists from all levels."

Many entertainment-focused Black press outlets centered celebrities in their BLM coverage. This was partially due to the fact that celebrities were personally becoming more involved in BLM activism. Matthews noted that athletes were giving back to the Black community and participating in protests. As such, *The Undeclared* not only covered celebrities' activism, but also reported on how the movement was affecting them. When discussing *Love B Scott's* coverage of Black actress Taraji P. Henson's conversation with Atlanta's Black mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms, Blackwell said, "We were able to just kind of piggyback off of their [celebrities'] work because their work had changed temporarily."

Publishing content about celebrities and BLM was mutually beneficial. Some celebrities even sought out Black press outlets because they trusted them more than mainstream.

Matthews said, “A lot of athletes come to us like, ‘Well, we see how your platform operates. We know that our message won’t get distorted. We want to tell our stories from a raw point of view’.” While this advantaged the celebrities, journalists noticed that their audience also responded well to the combination of celebrity and racial politics coverage. Matthews noted, “Every time we posted content about [tennis star] Naomi Osaka and her social justice message, it dwarfed other stuff that we were doing.”

Black press outlets also provided more legitimacy for protests using BLM victims’ family members as sources for content. For example, *Essence* created a series titled *Beyond the Hashtag* that covered the lives of BLM victims before their death. Charisma Deberry shared that in the series, “we try to really focus in on the existence of these people who lost their lives and what it means for their families.”

Outside of people who were directly involved or associated with the BLM movement, some Black press outlets also spoke with members of the Black community who were unaffiliated. When discussing the people who were included in the BLM content produced by *The Undefeated*, Matthews said:

Some were athletes, but some were just like regular, everyday people in high positions, and how they have been impacted by being stopped by police and the things that African Americans go through that white people don’t have to go through.

These sources then were able to contribute by sharing their Black lived experiences. *Rolling Out* also spoke with people who experienced police brutality firsthand and survived.

Some outlets were intentional about including voices that countered mainstream narratives about BLM protests. In response to the businesses that were broken into during protests, Munson Steed said *Rolling Out* included the perspective of a Black woman who emphasized that protesters were not looting. He said she made that point that,

This is already a depressed community. It is [about] showcasing these people [businesses] got insurance, they were not going to lose a thing, and so don’t look at your brothers and sisters as looters. Look at your brothers and sisters as oppressed, used, taken advantage of.

Unofficial sources also included the Black press’ readers and social media audience. When speaking about *News One*, Spruce said the outlet is constantly,

making sure that we are inviting people into our space to send us information. So sometimes on Facebook or Instagram, people will send us stuff, like, “Did you know this happened in this community?” And they know that *News One* will work and do what we can to tell that story.

Some social media users even contacted Black press outlets about protest media they were willing to share. *The Grio*’s Pinnock added,

You had people who were like, “Yo, I was there! Feel free to use my video.” And we were going to put that on Instagram, we were going to write about it via editorial, we’re going

to talk about it on Twitter, we're going to put this video on Twitter, we're going to retweet all the other stuff that we see.

Editorial Edge

"We're Black history 365"

A recurring theme was that none of the BLM events caught Black press journalists by surprise. Whereas mainstream outlets were "scrambling," according to *The Undefeated's* Mathews, he said his staff felt: "We've been doing this since day one. This is what we do every day. So it's not a big departure from the norm for us. This is our norm." Other journalists offered variations on this same message. Both Deberry and Omulepu said that their publication is "Black history 365 [days of the year]," and Omulepu added that these issues "are never *not* on our radar." Deberry explained further: "The Black Lives Matter movement for us was like: 'Oh, the rest of the world is in on our conversation now.' It wasn't, 'Let us get a strategy going,' because this is literally what we do."

Black digital publications educated mainstream audiences during the racial reckonings of 2020 and inspired dialogue about the best ways to understand the protests around the nation. Derrick Lane of *Black Doctor* said he was happy to see so many non-Black people tagging the site and sharing its posts. He said, "We approached it like how we approach everything: *from* our community, not *to* our community."

Sustaining BLM Coverage

Some of our participants stated that they continued to produce BLM coverage even after the height of the protests because police brutality and systemic racism was still happening, even if the stories did not garner the same amount of attention. Lital of *Black Sports Online* said:

It's a little concerning when you do one story in the spring or in the summer, and it gets 50,000 views or 100,000 views. And you do a similar story in November and December and it's getting [only] 5,000 or 10,000 views. There are still families [and] people that are hurting. There's still people that want their story to be told.

Deberry shared this sense of cultural obligation. She said she got to know Trayvon Martin's mother, Sybrina Fulton, personally, and *Essence* has published nearly 300 digital articles about her son's case since 2012.

Coping Mechanisms

Reader Wellness Checks

Our interlocutors thought it was important to ask how their readers were doing during the BLM protests and found them to be receptive to these inquiries. Lane of *Black Doctor* shared,

Some of our most engaging posts are those where we say, “Hey, are you okay?” And if we can do that, if we can bring the community together, just based upon how we’re feeling and just thank them for being here, then I think we’ve won.

Black press journalists understood the emotional trauma their readers were experiencing and used social media to create a space for community dialogue about it. These media professionals also thought it was important to get their audience’s perspective on news events. Spruce of iOne Digital said, “What my team does is they’ll take that content and they’ll try to . . . pose a question with our audience. ‘Do you agree with this?’ or ‘What would you do?’” Inviting their readers into conversation then created opportunities for the collective processing of events.

Black Journalists Protected Themselves

The social justice content that Black press outlets post can also attract responses from people outside of the Black community. In an effort to safeguard their mental health, some of our interviewees shared that they limit their engagement with negative comments on social media. Littal of *Black Sports Online* said:

Obviously the other side is going to come at you hard, because those are the way that Trump supporters are. You have to deal with that. You have to be deep skinned in dealing with that . . . I just try to ignore the noise. Just do the stories that I think are best for my audience and what I can do to help move our culture along.

While Black journalists were subject to increased exposure to anti-Black rhetoric, they persevered out of a greater desire to serve their Black audience.

Although all journalists were strained more than usual during 2020, this sentiment was exacerbated for Black journalists covering the BLM movement. Matthews of *The Undeclared* shared how Black media professionals feel similarly to their readers who are negatively affected by traumatic coverage. He said, “I’m sure you guys at home get tired. We are tired too. We are fatigued. We do get affected by how all of these issues are affecting our community.” Pinnock of *The Grio*, particularly recalled how she needed to take a break from her job during the George Floyd protests and when the Breonna Taylor police report was released. Working at a Black press outlet made her feel comfortable asking for the time she needed and she was grateful for the genuine support she received from her managers. She said, “I don’t think I could have survived 2020 not working in a predominantly Black space.”

Discussion

Framing and Sourcing

Digital Black press journalists said they eschewed anti-Black news frames more often than their mainstream counterparts. Our interlocutors stated that when they wrote about BLM victims, they strived to report on who the person was while they

were alive, rather than focus solely on their death. We view this as evidence of humanizing framing (Keliikoa et al. 2022), which is a more holistic portrayal of victims, that helps to center African Americans' humanity. We view humanizing framing as an investment in detailing someone's life and character in a manner that allows for readers to better understand and possibly relate to the person or their family. Moreover, Black journalists covering BLM have an edge over their competitors in that they have been framing stories about police brutality as connective and ongoing, rather than topical. This thematic instead of episodic coverage then helps to advance the larger goals of the BLM movement and counter the protest paradigm, by focusing on racism, which is the reason behind the protests, instead of foregrounding the protests as events (McLeod and Hertog 1992; Smith et al. 2001). We argue that this practice contributes to movement journalism since thematic framing of BLM ultimately evidences the larger systems of racial oppression operating in America. By providing ongoing coverage of police brutality, digital Black press outlets are showing how systemic racism continues to negatively affect the Black community.

In terms of sourcing, the Black press takes a novel approach here as well. Although many mainstream news outlets follow the protest paradigm and rely on official sources, such as police and politicians, to provide legitimacy to stories, these Black press outlets used many unofficial sources to cover BLM. Official sources are commonly used by journalists because they are easy to access and provide the illusion of objectivity; however, these sources often delegitimize protests and exclude the voices and goals of demonstrators (Brown and Harlow 2019; Brown et al. 2019; McLeod and Hertog 1999). Conversely, the alternative press' inclusion of protesters' viewpoints "increases balance and legitimizes protesters and their claims" (Harlow et al. 2020: 1592). Our interviewees intentionally included activists' perspectives along with those of their readers. This practice models one of movement journalism's tenets, which says news media should produce content that is grounded in the lived experience of oppressed groups. By incorporating perspectives from people in the Black community, digital Black press journalists showed the importance of including the viewpoints of those affected by police brutality. Many mainstream news outlets did not interview people from the organizations who actually coordinated the BLM protests, who were likely African American (Pierre-Louis 2020). In an effort to not appear to be advocates, and in alignment with the protest paradigm, mainstream reporters may choose to not interview protesters (McLeod and Hertog 1999). Black press journalists, however, are centering protesters and activists in their BLM coverage and practicing movement journalism, which "fosters collaboration between journalists and grassroots movements" (Schneider 2021: para. 14).

Black press journalists also relied on celebrities and victims' family members as unofficial sources. Brown (2021) found that some of the most circulated coverage related to Stephon Clark's death was about two African American professional basketball players who helped pay for his funeral. Celebrities help to draw more attention to social justice stories and Black press journalists noted that their readers are

particularly interested in how Black celebrities give back to the community. Black press journalists also included victims' family members in their coverage as a means to provide more context to the BLM hashtags. Research has shown that African Americans trust the Black press more than mainstream outlets (Cohen 1999). This trust may have allowed the victims' relatives to feel more comfortable speaking with Black press journalists. As a result, Black press outlets received access to many people who are on the frontlines of the BLM movement, such as Trayvon Martin's mother, Sybrina Fulton, and the family members of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Movement journalism calls for a dissolution of hierarchies between journalists and sources (Simonton 2017). We contend that digital Black press journalists' multiple interviews of unofficial sources is a practice that may enable such egalitarian relationships. In addition, their front-row seat to the BLM movement's key leaders and organizers helped the Black press serve as a legitimizing force to protesters who wanted the media to report on their political demands. Family members' perspectives contributed to a humanizing framing of victims and evidenced that many others in the Black community are suffering as a result of police violence.

When Black press journalists did use official sources, they notably looked for Black politicians and lawyers and did not speak with police officers. Owens (2008) analyzed network news programs and found that official sources were predominately white, but minority journalists were twice as likely to include minority sources in their stories. She argued that this may be due to an increased comfort level between journalists of color and minority interview subjects. Our study shows that for Black press outlets, the inclusion of Black experts is also a means to serve their community and facilitate readers' reception of the content that is being shared.

Editorial and Business Strategy

Despite the hardships of producing news content during a global pandemic, many Black press outlets thrived as a result of their BLM coverage. Social media was a key factor in growing Black press audiences as media professionals saw engagement increase across their Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter accounts. BLM activists use platforms such as Twitter to directly speak with users and to gain media attention. This can be evidenced by the significant amount of attention the BLM hashtag gained, which was partially due to the news coverage that amplified it (Freelon et al. 2020). Digital Black press outlets were then able to capitalize on this and meet their audience where they already were. They practiced movement journalism using social media for collaborative analysis of BLM between reporters and the Black community. This also supports the concept of reciprocal journalism (Lewis et al. 2014) given that both parties' interests were served. Movement journalism then proved to be a good business strategy as many journalists noted their outlet's unprecedented growth in 2020.

The spiked interest in Black press outlets during May, June, and July can be directly correlated with the height of George Floyd stories and BLM protests

(Kishi and Jones 2020). Both Black and non-Black audiences turned to the Black press for more in-depth coverage and to get the African American perspective. Scholars have argued that western media often dominate news cycles and greatly influence coverage of global events (Peng 2008). For example, in the Indian media's coverage of the Gulf War, Sainath (1992) found that many outlets published content from US syndicates, such as the Associated Press and Reuters, and emulated Western news outlets' views. As such, readers from across the globe may have looked to Black press content for reprieve from national and international media coverage that adhered to the protest paradigm. The digital Black press' employment of movement journalism attracted large audiences and can therefore encourage global media outlets to publish more content concerning the oppressed groups in their respective countries. We are not arguing that movement journalism is valuable simply because it is popular, but rather that there are readers being underserved by mainstream media outlets that do not publish legitimizing social justice coverage. We find that despite the decline in web traffic after the height of the protests, digital Black press outlets continue to practice movement journalism by producing content that foregrounds the Black experience.

Coping Mechanisms

Increased exposure to incidents of police brutality against African Americans has led to mass trauma in the Black community (Range et al. 2018). Black press journalists are not exempt from this trauma and may even be more prone to it given their profession (Smith et al. 2018). These journalists had the dual burden of reporting on emotionally triggering content while trying to perform their job responsibilities during a global pandemic. They, however, unlike Black journalists who work for mainstream news outlets, had the advantage of Black managers who understood their challenges and allowed them to take breaks. Receiving support from their managers may have helped to reduce the risk of long-term mental health challenges from reporting on traumatic events (Beam and Spratt 2009; Smith et al. 2018).

Our interlocutors were also concerned with the well-being of their readers. The BLM movement has negatively affected the mental health of people in the Black community because many identify with the victims (Bor et al. 2018). Black press journalists used social media for wellness checks with their readers who may have had fewer opportunities to connect with others in the Black community during the pandemic. They also encouraged readers' engagement and participation in the debate frame by soliciting their opinion on news events. These practices contributed to the digital Black public sphere, which enables discussion and promotes the circulation of African American ideologies online (Williams Fayne 2019). Black press outlets' facilitation of real-time dialogue to process communal sentiments during quarantine was then a significant benefit of their use of social media in 2020.

Conclusion

Digital Black press journalists' coverage of the BLM movement demonstrated some best practices that can be emulated by national and international news media seeking to disrupt the protest paradigm. Instead of following the paradigm, by focusing on the spectacle of the protests, like many US and non-US based mainstream outlets, the digital Black press practiced movement journalism by producing content that centered the experience of African Americans. In addition, Black press outlets' ongoing coverage of the Black community and social justice means that they do not provide episodic coverage, but rather add more context to their stories when protests occur. This editorial approach helps to illustrate how oppression operates and is a continuation of the traditional Black press' historical practice of movement journalism.

Most mainstream outlets in the United States do not make sustained efforts to cover social justice issues regularly, and, as a result, are less equipped to produce legitimizing coverage. Many continued to perpetuate the protest paradigm by critiquing protestors and relying on official, non-Black sources for their BLM coverage. Therefore, instead of international media outlets imitating mainstream coverage of racial injustices, they may be better served by drawing influence from minority news outlets. While movement journalism has a long history in the Black press, it is not limited to minority news outlets. Mainstream journalists at outlets across the globe can also practice movement journalism by working more collaboratively with underrepresented groups before, during, and after social justice protests.

The digital Black press worked with their readers to create more community-focused content concerning the BLM movement. This movement journalism tactic allowed for a more symbiotic instead of hierarchical relationship between journalists and readers who also served as sources. The audience engagement tactics that Black press journalists employed can serve as an exemplar for other media outlets aiming to better understand and serve their audiences. Open and welcomed communal dialogue can help create trust and ultimately lead to outcomes that are mutually beneficial.

Our study finds that digital Black press outlets strategically used social media to produce movement journalism by amplifying the Black community's agency and ability to have worldwide impact. The increased attention that their outlets received from both Black and non-Black audiences in 2020 demonstrates a collective desire to forego delegitimizing protest paradigm coverage for legitimizing coverage that includes diverse voices and perspectives. In addition, the support systems that Black press journalists created for themselves and their readers evidence the significance of applied cultural awareness. We argue that as a result of their ongoing commitment to advocating for the Black community, digital Black press journalists effectively countered the protest paradigm, practiced movement journalism, and provided exemplary BLM coverage that served both the African American and global audience.

Limitations and Future Research

Although we did not do a comparative analysis across countries, our focus on the US digital Black press' BLM coverage provides useful insights about how an underrepresented group covers social justice protests originating in their home country. The international impact of the BLM movement increases the importance of studying outlets that produced legitimizing protest coverage with a global reach. Future research should examine whether mainstream and minority media outlets outside of the United States countered the protest paradigm and practiced movement journalism in their BLM coverage or in their coverage of local social justice protests. This study uses interviews to address this line of inquiry, but journalists' self-reported data may or may not align with their actual practices. A content analysis of Black press and mainstream news outlets' websites and social media accounts in 2020 would provide additional data to further determine whether they practiced movement journalism and if so, how.

The methods we employed to determine potential interview subjects for this study created limitations as well. We used Comscore unique visitor data to establish the top Black press outlets on desktop and mobile and only contacted journalists at those organizations. Given our interest in each outlet's social media strategy, we could have determined our interlocutors via their publication's amount of Instagram or Twitter followers instead. While this method would not have allowed us to retroactively collect data on the monthly audience for each social media account, it may have expanded the number of outlets included in the study. Some digital Black press outlets with large social followings may have been excluded from this research if their website traffic did not meet Comscore's minimum reporting requirements. Also, the various organizational structures at each of the outlets we included is another limitation of this research. While some outlets had a specific position for the person who managed their social media accounts, others incorporated those responsibilities into the larger roles of the founder, editor-in-chief, or CEO. Therefore, the amount of familiarity and specificity that our participants had regarding their outlet's social media strategy varied.

This study has examined how Black press journalists coped with covering the BLM movement, but more attention needs to be paid to how Black journalists at mainstream news publications manage their job responsibilities during racial reckonings. Do these journalists receive any institutional support and are they combatting racism in the newsroom as well? Given that outlets such as the *Philadelphia Inquirer* published BLM coverage with the headline "Buildings Matter, Too," which led to the resignation of the paper's editor, and *The New York Times*' op-ed section editor and deputy editor resigned after publishing an article by Senator Tom Cotton advocating for the military to intervene in BLM protests, it is evident that mainstream news outlets either need to diversify their staffs or listen to their Black journalists. In the interim, research on the experiences of journalists from oppressed groups who are working in newsrooms across the globe during times of social unrest can provide further insight regarding the utility and potential necessity of movement journalism.

Appendix

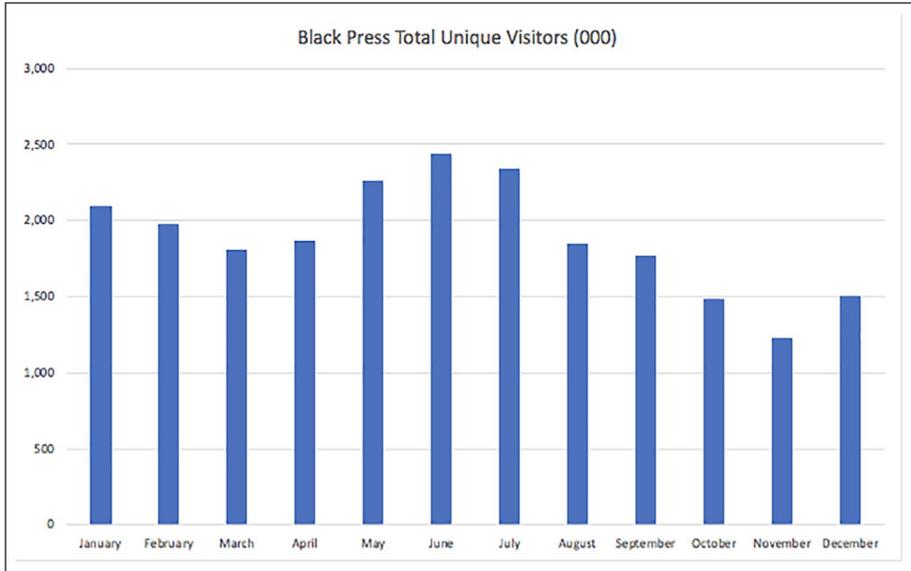


Chart A1. Black press unique visitors in 2020.
Source. Comscore.

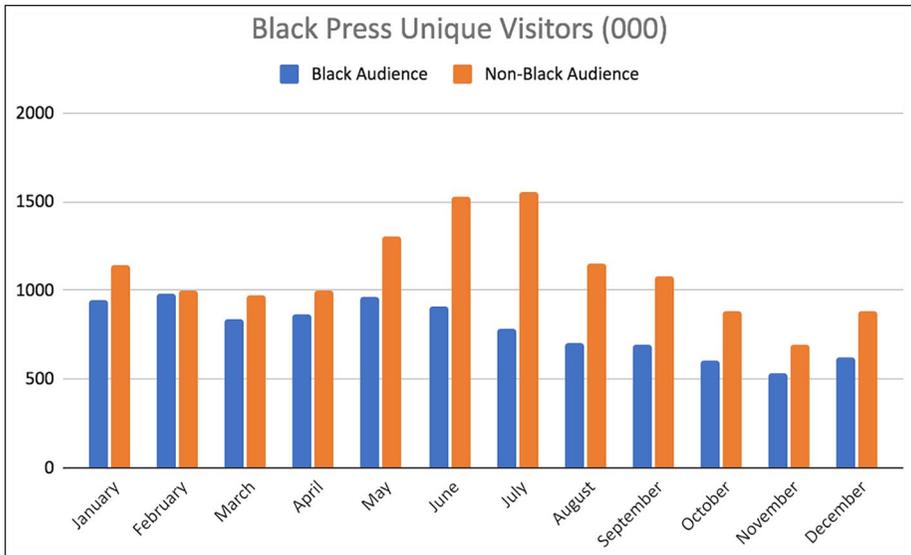


Chart A2. Black press unique visitors in 2020 by race.
Source. Comscore.

Table A1. Interview Subjects.

Outlet name	Interview subject	Job title
Amsterdam News	Akisa Omulepu	Web Editor/Manager
Black Doctor	Derrick Lane	Chief Marketing Officer
Black Sports Online	Robert Littal	Founder and CEO
Bossip	Lanae Spruce	VP, Social & Content Strategy at iOne Digital
Essence	Charisma Deberry	Director, Social Media
Love B Scott	Denver Sean Blackwell	Editor-in-Chief
Madame Noire	Lanae Spruce	VP, Social & Content Strategy at iOne Digital
News One	Lanae Spruce	VP, Social & Content Strategy at iOne Digital
Rolling Out	Munson Steed	CEO
The Griot	Shana Pinnock	Director, Social Media
The Shade Room	Angie Nwandu	Founder
The Undeclared	Marcus Matthews	General Editor, Social Media
Vibe	Christine Imarenezor	Executive Editor

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Note

1. For US-based metrics, Comscore uses a panel of about one million people for desktop data and roughly 80,000 people for mobile data. Panelists are required to provide demographic data (such as age, gender, and race) for themselves and members of their household and for multi-user devices. Comscore determines the user through unique user fingerprints and session markers, such as an email address (Comscore 2019a, 2019b).

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