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## Black Marginalization, New Media and Contemporary Black Activism

May 1, 2016

By: Nathan Jamel Riemer

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# Introduction

Since the February 2012 murder of 17-year-old unarmed Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman, an armed neighborhood watch volunteer, the public conversation on race in the U.S. reignited. The conversation has persisted largely because of the determination of young Black activists who organized both online through social media and offline in public places. That conversation grew louder as news reports on the shooting deaths of unarmed Black people by armed police officers and vigilantes increased. More people became aware of the killings—and attuned to the larger conversation on racial inequality—through traditional and social media. In some cases, incidents of police violence drew public attention because they were captured on smartphones by bystanders who circulated the images through social media. The expansion of new media<sup>1</sup> means that mainstream media channels aren't the only way to get mass attention. This breach in the oligopolistic mass media allows amateurs to produce and digitally circulate media to their social networks and beyond.

New media have brought greater and more widespread awareness and access to information, particularly in instances of racial injustice. This new media also provide tools that make possible new response modes that are not reliant on traditional media outlets and political officials. New media can be leveraged to support offline protest actions, create digital forms of engagement, or produce novel forms of participation that occur entirely online (Jordan & Taylor, 2004; Christensen, 2011; Earl & Kimport, 2011). As a result, individuals and groups that feel marginalized by or alienated from the people, processes, and/or structures of traditional politics, such as young people and young Black people (Cohen, 2010) in particular, can create alternative means for political engagement. "Enabled by new media tools, individuals whose activities reside primarily outside of gatekeeping institutions are pursuing greater voice and influence in the political realm than the hierarchical political infrastructure has traditionally provided them opportunity for." (Kahne, Middaugh and Allen, 2014, p.5).

Buoyed by feelings of political cynicism and inefficacy<sup>2</sup>, and with new media capabilities at their fingertips, young people are reimagining politics. Many young people, having grown up surrounded by social media, seek a more participatory form of political engagement outside of the traditional infrastructure. Scholars at the MacArthur Research Network on Youth and Participatory Politics term these political pursuits, which

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<sup>1</sup> While definitions of 'new media' are many, in this paper, the term will refer to digital media that are created with and accessed through the use of computing technologies. Such media are generally characterized by their low barriers to production and distribution and allow for interactive, two-way communication.

<sup>2</sup> In a nationally representative survey of young people aged 15-25 Cohen (2010) found results that suggest that "all young people, and especially Black youth, harbor feelings of inefficacy and cynicism directed, in particular, at political officials." (p. 129).



are often digitally enabled, “participatory politics.” The concept of participatory politics adheres to a broadened definition of politics and political engagement that captures behavior other than the most traditional and established forms of civic and political engagement to influence public and corporate policies and practices.

Given the paradoxes faced by young Black Americans in a racially inequitable social system and the digital connectivity at their disposal, how do new media allow for different responses to perpetual racial crises, such as the murder of Trayvon Martin? This paper will explore this question while also developing themes for further inquiry into the civic and political engagement of young Black activists in the new media era. I will look at the BYP100, a national social movement organization of young Black activists, to explore the contemporary activism of young Black people by documenting and discussing its emergence and some of the ways the organization used new media during their initial year. BYP100’s work and development highlights the importance of new media for social movement actors in a contemporary media landscape.

This paper has three parts. I review relevant literature regarding social movements and changes in the media landscape vis-à-vis new media, and begin to develop a framework to understand the intersection of young Black people, new media and their political participation. The scholarship on social movements and traditional mass media highlights the longstanding importance of traditional mass media coverage to social movement actors. New media scholarship, identifies the new tools that have complicated the traditional relationship between mass media and social movement actors. New media offers both promise and problems for social movement actors.

In the second section, I return to the main focus of this paper: The story of BYP100’s emergence. The organization’s emergence reveals the sustained feelings of marginalization by young Black people and the racial crisis that followed Trayvon Martin’s murder and George Zimmerman’s acquittal. This story demonstrates ways in which young Black people are using new media to speak out on social and political issues and to organize and mobilize around the matters they find most pressing. Lastly, after addressing BYP100 members’ opinions of new media, I move into a broader discussion of new media and directions for further inquiry. I am primarily interested in how new media affords new possibilities for social movement activists and organizations, and new media’s role in the political engagement of young Black people.



# Black Marginalization and Colorblind Ideology

*To the Family of Brother Trayvon Martin and to the Black Community:*

*May this statement find us in the spirit of peace and solidarity.*

*We know that justice for Black life is justice for humanity.*

*Our hope and community was shaken through a system that is supposed to be built on freedom and justice for all. We are your sons and daughters. We are the marginalized and disenfranchised.*

*We are one hundred next generation leaders. **We are the Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100).***

*We see the hopelessness of a generation that has been broken trying to find its place in this world.*

*We understand that we need to turn anger into action and pain into power.*

This excerpt is from the inaugural statement issued by BYP100, a national social movement organization<sup>3</sup> of young Black activists, in response to the George Zimmerman verdict rendered on July 13, 2013. When the Zimmerman verdict was released, the activists who formed BYP100 were attending the Beyond November Movement Convening (BNMC), hosted by the Black Youth Project, in Itasca, IL. The BNMC brought together young Black leaders with a demonstrated commitment to civic and political engagement beyond the historic 2008 and 2012 presidential elections. Leading up to the verdict, many of these activists had participated in campaigns, engaged in protests, and digitally documented the events of the Trayvon Martin tragedy. Each of them had deeply personal attachments to the case; so hearing that Zimmerman was exonerated was heart-rending. It was collectively traumatic.

The BYP100's assertion of Black marginalization and questioning of a justice system supposedly "built on freedom and justice for all" are not feelings unique to the BYP100. Rather, these claims reflect a widespread sense of marginalization and alienation among many young Black Americans, a sentiment documented in a national study conducted by Cathy Cohen (2007). Cohen notes that more than 60 percent of young Black Americans reported that they agreed with the statement: "It is hard for young Black people to get ahead because they face so much discrimination" (p.18). Young Black Americans also asserted that the government treats immigrants better than Black people. And, unfortunately, only 11 percent of young Black Americans believed that racism would very likely be eliminated in their lifetime. Even after the his-

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<sup>3</sup> According to McCarthy and Zald (1977, p. 1217-1218) a social movement is defined as "a set of opinions and beliefs in a population which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society." They go on to define a social movement organization as a "complex or formal organization, which identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement or a counter-movement and attempts to implement those goals" (McCarthy & Zald, 1977, p. 1217-1218). I believe that the BYP100 fits easily within this description; therefore, throughout the paper, the BYP100 and its members are referenced as a social movement organization and as social movement actors.



toric 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama, 69 percent of young Black Americans reported, “Racism remains a major problem” (Cohen, 2010, p. 222).

Although these sentiments loom large for young Black Americans, and extant scholarship demonstrates a particular racial experience wherein Black Americans are at a structural deficit in many realms of American life, e.g. education, incarceration, and employment (Carter, Fine, & Russel, 2014; Alexander, 2013; Pager, 2008; Massey & Denton, 1993), declarations of racial inequality are consistently delegitimized by the contemporary American ideology of colorblindness. Colorblindness, in contrast to the previous racial ideology of Jim Crow, vehemently restricts claims of racism as a source of racial disparity. One’s race is no longer a valid variable in understanding one’s lived experience. Colorblind ideology “explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics” (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. 2). The plight of racial minorities is a “product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and Blacks’ imputed cultural limitations” (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. 2). Bonilla-Silva (2010) terms this ideology “colorblind racism,” since it is merely a new iteration of racist ideologies that have dominated the American imagination as justification for the racialized social system scholars have termed white supremacy (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Dawson, 1994).

Those who adhere to colorblind ideology paint traumatic events such as the murder of Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman’s acquittal, the unpunished beating of Rodney King, and Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath as unfortunate incidents, tough justice, isolated events or an unprecedented natural disaster. The ideology of colorblindness will not concede that such events exemplify the “marginalization and disenfranchisement,” the BYP100 assert. But those who bear the brunt of the system of white supremacy know differently. These are not one-off events. They are not novel atrocities but rather periodic and perpetual racial crises that reiterate the second-class status of Blacks in the American system of white supremacy. Using Katrina as an exemplary case, Cohen (2010, p. 110) explained:

When young Black adults and adolescents are interviewed or asked about their lives and political views, Katrina is just one more example of what many believe to be their secondary position in the American political community. It is also a reminder of the existence of structural racism in the lives of Black people in contrast to neoliberal and color-blind discourse that would have us focus almost exclusively on individual effort and decision-making.

The reigning racial ideology of colorblindness stands in stark contrast to the lived experience of young Black Americans. Consequently, mainstream racial discourse does not provide a great opportunity for Black youth to voice their grievances. And mainstream media, which has long been charged with supporting the status quo and the interests of the elite (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McLeod & Detenber, 1999), are most often not a viable outlet.

That said, perpetual racial crises can produce unique cultural opportunities for claims of racial inequality to be voiced and genuinely considered by broader swaths of the American public. As the publicity of





such injustice rises, and images, documentation and commentary fill our browsers, screens and conversations, colorblind thinking is called into question. At such moments, the cultural opportunity structure opens—often slightly—for groups such as the BYP100 and other young Black activists to gain attention and support while mobilizing through the use of a frame of racial inequality. Moreover, such mobilization relies largely on bypassing traditional mass media as the sole outlet for having one's voice heard. New media is imperative for young Black activists; it provides an opportunity to inject alternative voices into mainstream conversations.

## A Changing Media Landscape

### Mass Media and Social Movements

The rise of mass media coverage has exploded the boundaries of protest activities, allowing the number of people exposed to a protest event and the corresponding grievances to be nearly limitless. Moreover, the majority of contact between power holders, those who choose to contest the distribution and functioning of power, and the broader public is through media portrayals. Certainly, direct action protest maintains its importance in the activist repertoire of contention (Tilly, 1986); however, direct observation of such events is often not the manner in which most people become knowledgeable of particular direct action protests. For example, mass media outlets across the country and around the world aired the protest actions that took place in Oakland, Miami, Detroit, Ferguson, and New York City by those who contested the murders of Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin, Renisha McBride, Michael Brown and Eric Garner. Although the role of new media in the coverage and spread of these activist actions is undeniable, the televised protest activities amplified their reach, allowing the actions and the causes of the protesters who took to the streets to be visible to a much larger audience than they would have reached otherwise. This mass media amplification contributed to these events and their causes eliciting not only local responses but also national and, sometimes, international responses.

Although the bystander public<sup>4</sup> remains, except for when addressing the most local of concerns, “it is no longer the co-present public that counts most, but the mass audience that sits at home and watches or reads the media coverage of the demonstration.” (Koopmans, 2004, p. 368) Consequently, scholarship on mass media and social movements would argue that the broader public, and sometimes even the targeted power holders, might never gain knowledge of a movement's cause and activities if they are not taken up by the mass media. Social movement scholars have long noted that it has been largely impossible for social movements and their adherents to secure the attention of the mass public through any means

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<sup>4</sup> The ‘bystander public’ refers to those individuals who are physically present at a protest demonstration but are not participants in the demonstration. Koopmans (2004) uses the phrase ‘co-present public’ to refer to the same individuals.



other than mass media coverage (Gitlin, 1980; Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986; Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). For these reasons, political scientist Joachim Raschke (1985) stated, “A movement that does not make it into the media is non-existent” (as quoted in Rucht, 2004, p.29). While this statement may no longer hold true due to the affordances new media have brought to the media landscape, scholars continue to highlight the significance of traditional mass media outlets for social movement causes (Bimber, 2003; Cottle, 2008; Graeff, Stempeck, Zuckerman, 2014).

The importance of mediated interaction<sup>5</sup> between activists, power holders, and the mass public means that the mass media have had a central role in social movement activity. In most cases, the targeted power holders and the mass public do not respond to the messages and protests of social movement actors as experienced first-hand, “but as they appear in the media.” (Koopmans, 2004, p. 368) Because of that, the ways in which the activities and messages of social movement actors are portrayed in the mass media are vitally important. Unfortunately, this is something that most social movement actors have had little control over.

The relationship between traditional mass media and social movement actors has been both long-standing and historically asymmetric. Traditionally, social movement actors have much more to gain from mass media coverage than traditional mass media outlets have to gain from social movement actors. Social movements “make good copy for the media. They provide drama, conflict, and action; colorful copy; and photo opportunities. But...they are only one source of news among many.” (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993, p. 116-117) There is a finite amount of mass media space and time, so messages from only some actors can be communicated in the mass media at any given time. Mass media outlets, therefore, have the privilege of filtering their options and selecting which stories and messages will be communicated via their channels.

### Media Framing

While it is clear that social movement organizations and other social movement actors must compete for the limited attention of mass media outlets, coverage is not all that they are competing for in the media arena. In addition to controlling access to mass media outlets, media gatekeepers also control the ways in which news content is framed. Framing is defined as “selecting and highlighting some facets of events and issues and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution” (Entman, 2004, p. 5). Much as a picture frame encompasses and draws our attention to selected content and creates a particular perspective, media frames do the same. They present a particular picture of reality. “However, what goes into the picture frame is not simply decided by the media; its

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<sup>5</sup> Mediated interaction refers to communication conducted through the use of information and communication technology (ICT). ICT is a broad term that encompasses both traditional mass media and new media modes of communication (e.g. print, video, radio, websites, social media platforms, etc.).





framing is struggled over by political actors who have competing interests in how an issue is represented.” (McCurdy, 2012, p.246)

The goal of social movement actors is to secure a particular framing or portrayal of their messages, and this is never guaranteed, regardless of whether they secure media coverage. Preferred media representation “is an object of struggle and contestation” (McCurdy, 2012, p. 247); and, as in most cases, the parties to the struggle vie for their desired framings with varying resources. Therefore, social movement actors are not only in competition to enter into the bounded communicative space of mass media; there is also this “symbolic contest” between social movement actors and the mass media over the way in which social movement efforts and messages are framed. (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989) The ways in which social movement actors respond and restructure their activities and messages to gain mass media coverage has long been a topic of concern. (Gitlin, 1980; Wolfsfeld, 1984; Cottle, 2008; Lunceford, 2012)

## New Media, New Possibilities

The relationship between mass media and social movement actors was, perhaps, most asymmetric when there were fewer mass media channels. The expansion of mass media channels, through cable and satellite television and the emergence of the 24-hour news cycle, have to some extent, expanded the boundaries of the mass media communicative space. Certainly the development of new media and social media platforms has exponentially increased the number of media channels. People who have access to a computer, tablet, or smartphone, access to the Internet, and a base level of computer literacy can produce and circulate media. Mass media are no longer the only manner to widely communicate information about events and causes.

The Internet and its attendant technologies have produced what Bimber (2003) refers to as an environment of “information abundance.” Prior to these developments, the information that was accessible to the general public was far more limited. For example, information such as public records were often only accessible by visiting various public offices, in which case the costs in time and effort were often restrictive, or the general public relied on the constrained coverage of mass media and the elites who had access to mass media outlets to provide relevant information. The Internet and ICTs changed this by allowing for an overabundance of information to be at the fingertips of the general public. Documents and records have largely been digitized and information producers are now innumerable. The multiple sources of information and the multiple means by which information can be produced, shared, and accessed have weakened the gatekeeping ability of traditional mass media elites (Williams & Carpini, 2000; Bimber, 2003). Individuals with varying opinions and interests no longer have to consume the same media and be exposed to the same information; they can now individualize their information consumption by selecting from a cornucopia of media and sources. Some scholars look favorably on this new media landscape, citing its ability



to allow for a diversity of opinions and perspectives to be expressed and shared (Williams & Carpini, 2000). Others worry that affordances of new media allow false information to be easily and vastly spread (Newman, 2011), and for people to filter the information they consume in a manner that simply reinforces their opinions and neglects alternative viewpoints. (Sunstein, 2001)

Moreover, new media optimists believe that the addition of new media to the traditional media landscape has reshaped the relationship between social movement actors and mass media. (Bimber, 2001; Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005; Friedland & Rogerson, 2009) They point to the expanding level of access and control that the rise of new media and social media now affords. Social movement actors can now produce their own media and circulate it themselves via their social networks. Mass media gatekeepers can be bypassed. Millions of people can potentially be reached directly without the aid of a traditional mass media outlet (Friedland & Rogerson, 2009). Social movement actors can more readily input counter narratives and new voices into public conversations (Bimber et al., 2005; Cottle 2008, Etling, Faris, & Palfrey 2010; Graeff et al., 2014). The framing of social movement messages now lies in the hands of social movement actors, who can distribute their own messages without contest (Haase-Reed, Kushin & Koepfel, 2007). And, because of these affordances, social movement actors no longer have to make tradeoffs by modifying their tactics and messaging in order to please mass media gatekeepers.

Scholars who challenge these starry-eyed views of new media functions insist that new media has its own gatekeepers that affect the visibility of particular messages. As Koopmans (2004) puts it:

Even in the seemingly non-hierarchical Internet, providers, Internet browsers, and search engines pre-structure access to information on the web in such a way that certain sites are more easily and more frequently accessed than they would have been in the absence of such gatekeeping. (p. 372-3)

New media is not a level and open playing field. While almost anyone has the opportunity to speak, not everyone is equally positioned to be heard. (Hindman, 2009)

### Limited Reach (?)

Circulating information via online social and organizational networks tends to have a more limited reach than if the same information were circulated by a mass media outlet. That is because social networks are overwhelmingly characterized by homogeneity. People who interact with one another, both offline and online, tend to be similar in their demographic, behavioral, and ideological attributes. (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Mislove, Viswanath, Gummadi, & Druschel, 2010) Consequently, by circulating media via personal networks, people are generally circulating information to likeminded people rather than reaching new potential adherents and enlarging the scope of their reach. Mass media outlets, on the



other hand, have the advantage that they can spread information to a broader audience and do so more quickly. Because mass media reach such a broad and vast audience, communicating via mass media rather than personal social networks may provide a better means of reaching people that are not already movement supporters. Jenkins (2006, p. 224) explains the difference between spreading messages via mass media and new media: "It's the difference between a push medium (where messages go out to the public whether they seek them or not) and a pull medium (which serves those with an active interest in seeking out information on a particular topic). The Internet reaches the hardcore, television reaches the undecided."

### Context Collapse

Furthermore, while it is possible for social movement actors to directly address a large number of people via new and social media, these actors can never be certain exactly whom they are addressing. This can be problematic. The imagined audience plays a major role in how actors present themselves and frame their messages. As Marwick and boyd (2010) explain, "While anyone can potentially read or view a digital artifact, we need a more specific conception of audience than 'anyone' to choose the language, cultural referents, style, and so on that comprise online identity presentation." (p. 2) Consequently, media producers imagine an audience. Digital media producers, however, can never be sure that their imagined audience will correspond with their actual audience(s). Any piece of digital media can have a multitude of audiences; scholars of new media often refer to this situation as context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2010; Wesch, 2009). A piece of media framed for a particular audience may not gain any resonance with other audiences.

### Reposting and Remixing

Context collapse is not the only contextual conundrum of digital media shared online. Reposting and remixing of digital media are both practices that can alter the original context and intended framing of a particular digital artifact. People can do so by appropriating digital media whole cloth and placing it into a new locale, and possibly a new framing or narrative, or remixing it by "combining and manipulating them into a new kind of creative blend" (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006, p. 105). Phenomena such as context collapse, reposting, and remixing digital media challenges the claims of digital optimists regarding the level of control social movement actors have over their messaging online.



## Digitally Enabled Participatory Politics

The first collective action of the burgeoning BYP100 organization came the day after the Zimmerman verdict when the members of the BYP100 video recorded their response and began circulating it via their social media accounts. That the immediate reaction of these activists was to produce a piece of media that would be circulated through their online social networks is telling. By doing so, the BYP100 was able to input its collective voice into a public conversation that mass media would likely not have invited them to participate. Furthermore, this mediated response not only reflects the salience of social media and new media in their lives; it also speaks to their understanding of social media as a method of political engagement.

The high speed, ease, and low cost at which people are now able to self-produce and self-circulate media are affordances that are unique to the rise of new media. This is quite different from the production and circulation processes of traditional mass media. Consequently, the long-standing dependent relationship between activists—who wish to inject alternative framings into mainstream conversations hosted by mass media outlets—and the mass media, has been altered. Social movement actors no longer require mass media coverage in order to fulfill vital goals (e.g. mobilization, scope enlargement, and validation), and social movement actors that do not gain mass media coverage no longer necessarily go unknown to the broader public. Meaningful social movement activity is no longer dependent on the infrastructure and capital of professional social movement organizations. (Earl & Kimport, 2011) Any activist or informal network of activists who have online access via their phone, computer, or a shared computer and a basic level of computer literacy have the opportunity to organize and mobilize via new media.

Many people may not agree that this form of social media usage constitutes meaningful political engagement. Some might not consider it a political act at all. Others might claim that it is ineffectual by pejoratively labeling it as “clicktivism” or “slacktivism.” However, the Youth and Participatory Politics (YPP) scholars have a broader understanding of political engagement: “Our conceptualization of politics extends beyond the electoral focus that often dominates literature about political participation and includes a broad array of activities undertaken by individuals and groups to influence how the public sets agendas and addresses issues of public concern.” (Kahne et al., 2014; p.6) The scholars of the YPP network would call the BYP100’s video response an example of participatory politics:

*Participatory Politics* are interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern through the following types of activities:

**Investigation** - Members of a community collect, and analyze online information from multiple sources, and often provide a check on information circulated by traditional media outlets.

**Dialogue and feedback** - Commenting on blogs, or providing feedback to political leaders through other digital means is increasingly how young people are joining public dialogues and



making their voices heard around civic and political issues.

**Circulation** - In participatory politics, the flow of information is shaped by many in the broader community rather than by a small group of elites.

**Production** - In addition to circulating information young people increasingly create original on-line digital content around issues of public concern that potentially reach broader audiences.

**Mobilization** - Members of a community mobilize others often through online networks to help accomplish civic or political goals. (Kahn et al., 2014, p. 8-9)

Kahne and Cohen (2012) identify four factors that make participatory politics significant to how we understand American politics. First, participatory politics provide the opportunity to circumvent traditional gatekeepers and, therefore, operate in the political sphere with increased independence. Through participatory politics, people circulate information to broad audiences and mobilize individuals relatively easily and with little expense. Participatory politics also provides opportunities for greater creative expression and voice because of increased opportunity to independently produce media content. Finally, "Participatory politics often facilitate a renegotiation of political power and control with the traditional political entities that are now searching for ways to engage participants." (Kahne & Cohen, 2012; p. vi)

Researchers at the Media, Activism & Participatory Politics (MAPP) project at the University of Southern California, a member of the YPP network, have developed case studies that have documented the participatory politics of individual youth activists, organizations and networks. (Thompson, 2012; Zimmerman, 2012; Kliger-Vilenchik, 2013; Shresthova, 2013) In addition to other findings, these case studies highlight the power of self-production and self-circulation of new media that allow activist organizations to bypass traditional mass media gatekeeping mechanisms and gain mainstream media's attention by creating and distributing their own media content, as BYP100 did.

## Mass Media–New Media Interactions

It is important to note that the emergence of new media did not create a parallel media landscape that operates mutually exclusively from traditional mass media. There is constant and complex interaction between traditional mass media and its producers and new media and its producers. Highlighting this type of interaction, a study of trending Twitter hashtags by Asur, Huberman, Szabo, & Wang, (2011), demonstrated that while general Twitter users can generate original trending hashtags, the generation of trending hashtags more often emerges from the Twitter accounts of traditional media sources. They conclude "that social media behaves as a selective amplifier for the content generated by traditional media, with chains of retweets by many users leading to the observed trends." (Asur et al. 2011) Although it was the retweets by Twitter users of all sorts (i.e., individuals, corporations, etc.) that furthered the distribution of information



and created the trends, a traditional media source selected and generated the trending information.

A study by Graeff et al. (2014) nicely teases out the interaction between traditional media and new media, as coverage of the murder of Trayvon Martin developed over time. They found that local traditional media outlets initially covered the murder of Trayvon Martin. After the Martin family secured their attorney, the attorney enlisted the pro bono services of a publicist who successfully pitched the story to two national media outlets (Reuters and CBS “This Morning”). This national coverage was followed by the further spread of the story through new media. The authors state:

We believe the national attention brought to the story through broadcast media allowed groups like the Black Youth Project to amplify stories to their online communities, and informed actors like [Kevin] Cunningham<sup>6</sup> who launched campaigns like the Change.org petition. Without the initial coverage on newswires and television, it is unclear that online communities would have known about the Trayvon Martin case and been able to mobilize around it...The power of social media in the context of stories like Trayvon Martin’s, where a local tragedy sparked a national debate, may be less about bringing these stories to light than about shaping their arc. (Graeff, et al., 2014, p. 21-22).

Although the story of Trayvon Martin broke on traditional media, new media played a significant agenda-setting function. Online communities organized protest actions such as the Million Hoodies March that kept Martin’s story in the public eye. Additionally, online communities like the Black Youth Project insisted that Martin’s death be understood as a function of a race-based society. The large expression of online support for this alternative analysis resulted in it being indelibly wed to the story of Martin’s murder in ongoing public discourse. The impact of new media activity on the unfolding of Trayvon Martin’s story shows the vulnerabilities of traditional media’s gatekeeping and agenda setting to new media influences. (Cottle, 2008; Rosen, 2009)

## Collective Trauma and Perpetual Racial Crises

The concept of trauma, both in popular discourse and academic research, is most frequently used to denote a horrific experience of an individual. Traumatic events, however, are not solely individual experiences. Trauma can also be collective. It may be collective as a result of an event being experienced firsthand

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<sup>6</sup> Kevin Cunningham is the Howard University alum that began a Change.org petition on March 8, 2012 after viewing the Reuters piece on Trayvon Martin’s murder. The Reuters piece was shared with him via a listserv, “Men of Howard,” comprised of a fraternal group at Howard University. The petition received more than a million signatures (Graeff, et al., 2014).





by individuals en masse. Or, it may be collective because a particular traumatic event is collectivized due to mass indirect exposure, most often through event-related televised coverage.

The most recent body of research addressing collective trauma emerged around the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. This traumatic event's collective nature was first made evident in the nearly 3,000 resulting fatalities and the thousands of individuals who were directly impacted due to their proximity to the scenes of the attacks. However, those who directly experienced the attacks at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the field in western Pennsylvania, and their loved ones, were not the only individuals to be detrimentally affected by the attacks. Following September 11, psychologists were able to show that the attacks had traumatic effects on a large body of people across the United States who did not experience the tragedy firsthand. (Schuster, Stein, Jaycox, Collins, Marshall, & Elliot, 2001; Silver, Holman, MacIntosh, Poulin, & Gil-Rivas, 2002; Marshall, Bryant, Amsel, Suh, Cook, & Neria, 2007) That is, although they did not "suffer direct and tangible losses" (Seery, Silver, Holman, Ence, & Chu, 2008, p. 658) from the traumatic events, individuals who were exposed to the event through second- and third-hand accounts, most often from televised news coverage, did exhibit psychological symptoms associated with traumatic experiences. These results were contrary to the "traditional mental health models of disaster, in which mental health consequences are strongly coupled with proximity to the disaster (the bull's eye pattern)." (Marshall et al., 2007; p. 304)

The mass collectivization of trauma induced by the September 11 attacks (i.e. the diffusion of trauma-related symptoms beyond those affected firsthand at the site of the traumatic event) has been attributed to widespread event-related television coverage. Scholars claim that there is indeed an association between consumption of disaster-related televised media and stress and trauma. (Propper, Stickgold, Keeley, & Christman, 2007) Some claim that there is evidence that "event-related media consumption predicts PTSD [posttraumatic stress disorder] caseness and/or PTS [posttraumatic stress] after adjusting for other exposures" (Pfefferbaum et al., 2014, p. 3). Furthermore, the amount of televised coverage of the September 11th attacks that individuals watched was shown to be associated with the levels of their symptoms (Schuster et al., 2001). While most studies in this body of literature have focused on exposure to traumatic events via television coverage, at least one study has claimed to find an association between exposure to disaster-related social media (Facebook, Youtube, Twitter) coverage and psychological outcomes (Goodwin, Palgi, Hamama-Raz, Ben-Ezra, 2013). Additionally, it is important to note that the relationship between the viewing of disaster-related television coverage and the spread of trauma-related symptoms has also been found in studies of disasters other than the September 11th attacks (Cantor, Mares, & Oliver, 1993; Pfefferbaum, et al. 2001).

Building from the literature on collective trauma, in this paper I utilize the concept of perpetual racial crises that I define as recurring public, collective traumatic events that heighten public perceptions of



racial inequality<sup>7</sup>. The collective impact of the September 11 attacks, like the collective impact of perpetual racial crises, hinge on mass distribution of event-related coverage and the solidarity among the affected communities. Through identification with a particular community, imagined<sup>8</sup> or otherwise, individuals come to feel an allegiance to the community and its members and, consequently, a sense that the plights of members are relatively linked. There is a blending between communal identity and individual identity. Scholars that have developed concepts such as linked fate and racial solidarity have demonstrated this link between understandings of collective and individual experiences among Blacks (Dawson, 1994; Wilson, Turner, & Darity, 1973). They have argued that these concepts are rooted in the minority status of Blacks in the racialized social system (i.e., white supremacy). Although all Blacks may not think of themselves as members of a community based on their ascribed racial categorization, a great many do.

The murder of Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of George Zimmerman are injustices not only to those who experience them firsthand but also upon larger Black communities that have secondhand exposure to such traumatic events. The greater the publicity of the event, the larger the affected community will be. Consequently, perpetual racial crises may be thought of as a type of collective trauma, which is unique to racialized social systems in that they are perceived as the result, or an exemplary case, of racial inequality. The beating of Rodney King and the acquittal of his police perpetrators, the effects and aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the incarceration of Marissa Alexander, and the murders of both Michael Brown and Eric Garner and the acquittals of their police perpetrators would fall into this category.

Perpetual racial crises, such as those listed above, are pivotal moments. Through the circulation of “facts,” commentary, and visuals of these traumatic events via traditional forms of mass media as well as various forms of new media their traumatic impact is diffused. Through this same process, these events also become part of popular culture and public discourse. This is momentary. However, at this moment, more of the population is likely attuned to issues of racial inequality than they would be otherwise. Consequently, the cultural opportunity structure, which is dominated by colorblind ideology, and therefore closed off to racial claims, opens ever so slightly providing the opportunity for claims of racial injustice to be genuinely considered by the broader public. The cultural opportunity structure is a derivative of the better-known political opportunity structure perspective.

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<sup>7</sup> Perpetual racial crises differ from the established concept of racial microaggressions due to their lack of subtlety. Solorzano and his colleagues define racial microaggressions as “subtle verbal and non-verbal insults directed at non-whites, often done automatically or unconsciously” (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 17). Perpetual racial crises tend to be immense events in their scope and/or intensity. That is not to say that the subtle occurrences of microaggressions don’t also exact significant impact on both individuals and collectives.

<sup>8</sup> Benedict Anderson (1991) proposed the term “imagined community” as a way to understand nationalism. He claimed that the nation “is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” (Anderson, 1991, p. 7) Since Anderson’s coining of the term, other scholars have broadened the use of the term by applying it to groups other than nations (Acquisti and Gross, 2006; Kanno and Norton, 2003).



## Political Opportunity Structures

Political opportunity structures are one of three core concepts that social movement literature has largely focused on in addressing the emergence, development, and behavior of social movements. (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996) The concept of political opportunity structures began with the work of Eisinger (1973), who conceived of political opportunity structures as the specific context in which “politics takes place” (p. 11), thereby linking political behavior to a large context of factors that serve to either constrain or facilitate an individual’s or collective’s political pursuits. Political opportunities, however, do not simply constrain or facilitate social movement activity. Social movement activity can also produce political opportunities. (Tarrow, 1994)

Wahlstrom and Peterson (2006) distinguish between a state opportunity structure, which encompasses factors concerning shifts in the political system itself, and a cultural opportunity structure, which encompasses public opinion and related factors such as “values,” “worldviews,” and “zeitgeist.” The work of McCammon, Muse, Newman, and Terrell (2007) demonstrates that the cultural context is significant to framing efforts. In order to understand framing efforts, we must understand how they are influenced by discursive opportunity structures, defined as “ideas in the larger political culture that are believed to be ‘sensible,’ ‘realistic,’ and ‘legitimate’ and that facilitate the reception of certain frames.” (McCammon et al., 2007, p. 731) Consequently, in order to increase the likelihood of movement success, “movement actors must incorporate or respond to critical discursive elements in the broader cultural environment.” (McCammon et al., 2007, p. 726) Just as the broader conception of political opportunity structures, cultural opportunity structures open and shut over time.

The cultural opportunity structure within the United States of America may be generally closed to arguments of racism and racial inequality due to the reigning ideology of colorblindness, as articulated by Bonilla-Silva (2010). I argue that racial crises that emerge as a consequence of the standing system of white supremacy, as put forth by scholars such as Bonilla-Silva (1997) and Dawson (1994), reopen the cultural opportunity structure to such claims. Racial crises that are broadly publicized via mass media or new media reactivate the frame of racial inequality and Civil Rights that is otherwise more or less dormant within the mainstream American imagination.

## Data & Methods

The data throughout this paper were collected using multiple methods. Data collection began at the BNMC, where I attended as a note taker to document the event for the Black Youth Project. While at the BNMC, I participated in the majority of convening activities; conversing while also documenting the event with field notes. With permission of the BYP100 co-chairs, I also attended a portion of a BYP100 convening in Washington, D.C., August 23 to 25. Immediately following the BNMC, I began sitting in on many of the



BYP100's conference calls. The co-chairs of the BYP100 gave me permission to sit in on the calls. Initially, I sat in on the Coordinating Council's calls as well as the full-member calls. Once the Communications Committee was assembled and began having their own calls, I also joined them. While on these calls, my participation was minimal. I took my own notes while on the calls; the BYP100 also shared their notes with me.

In addition to my field and phone notes, I also conducted 19 semi-structured interviews. I interviewed all members of the Selection Committee and Planning Committee who had chosen which activists to invite to the convening and planned how the convening would function. I also interviewed 13 members of BYP100's Coordinating Council and Communications Committee. Lastly, I gathered data for this project by following the BYP100's Twitter profile and YouTube channel.

## The Black Youth Project & Planning the Beyond November Movement Convening

The Black Youth Project (BYP) launched in 2005 as a national research project led by Cathy Cohen, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago. It "examined the attitudes, resources and culture of African American youth ages 15 to 25, exploring how these factors and others influence the decision-making, norms, and behavior of Black youth." ([www.Blackyouthproject.com/about/](http://www.Blackyouthproject.com/about/)) In an effort to make data from the BYP available to a larger public, Cohen took it online and created Blackyouthproject.com. The BYP website now hosts survey data and corresponding reports and summaries, a database of youth organizations across the nation, a database of rap lyrics compiled from 20 years of releases, a blog populated by an array of Black youth contributors, among a number of other resources for youth, educators, activists and scholars. The work of the BYP has three guiding concepts:

**KNOWLEDGE:** We are committed to producing research about the ideas, attitudes, decision making, and lived experiences of Black youth, especially as it relates to their political and civic engagement.

**VOICE:** Unlike any other organization, we amplify the perspectives of young Black people daily without censorship or control. We have built a space on the Internet where Black youth can speak for themselves about the issues that concern them.

**ACTION:** Informed with culturally specific knowledge, we will work to mobilize Black youth and their allies to make positive change and build the world within which they want to live. (<http://research.Blackyouthproject.com/about-us/>)

It was in the spirit of the third guiding concept—ACTION—that the BYP came to organize the Beyond November Movement Convening. The convening was a long time in the making—more than two years



before its fruition.

On July 12, 2013, just outside of Chicago in Itasca, IL, the Black Youth Project, with funding from the Campaign for Black Male Achievement, brought together a group of young Black leaders for the Beyond November Movement Convening. Although 100 were invited, 85 attended. A five-person selection committee decided those who were invited from a pool of applicants. The selection committee were: Biko Baker (League of Young Voters), Kedar Coleman (Black Youth Project), Lisa Fager Bediako (Industry Ears, Inc & FreeMind Communications, Inc.), Bakari Kitwana (Rap Sessions), and Cathy Cohen (Black Youth Project and The University of Chicago), who headed it. In selecting individuals to extend invitations to, members of the selection committee expressed that they were interested in selecting a very diverse group of young Black activists to attend the Convening. They were very clear about this point.

We wanted regional distribution and breadth. We didn't want only folks from the East Coast, or only Chicago people to be in the room. We wanted the country to be covered. We wanted different issues to be covered. We didn't want it just to be all people doing incarceration work.

While diversity in general was significant, members of the selection committee also desired particular types of diversity:

In particular, I felt there needed to be a critical mass of certain groups, like LGBT folks because it seemed to me that a critical mass meant that folks would feel comfortable and that issue would be there and people would have to deal with it. It wouldn't be something that could be minimized or marginalized.

We always were trying to pay attention to how many women and how many men. We didn't want it to be a male dominated thing or mostly women who might be doing the hard work of activism. We wanted different organizations to be represented. We didn't want this just to be the League [of Young Voters] or the NAACP folks. Generally, we wanted people between the ages of 18 and 30.

Additionally, the selection committee was interested in gathering a group of activists who, in the words of one selection committee member, "engage in thinking about strategy, maybe had taken on some leadership in an organization." Another member of the selection committee provided a similar comment when asked about preferred attributes of applicants:

First of all, the desire and people who I think had something to show already, that they were already active. Some of their backgrounds that they've already created something. There's an issue that they're tied to already. We weren't really trying to recreate the wheel and trying to create an activist from scratch. These people were already doing the thing.

Determining the criteria for selecting invitees was not an easy one. Selection committee members spoke



about “going back and forth” on issues and having conversations with “creative and critical tension.” Although all members of the selection committee offered some critiques of the process, they were all pleased with the group of individuals who made it to the convening.

According to the planning committee for the convening, which was comprised of the selection committee with the addition of Melinda Weekes (Race Forward), Charlene Carruthers (National People’s Action), Jasson Perez, and Charity Tolliver (Black Thought Black Action), the broad purpose for the convening was to bring together young Black leaders who exemplify a commitment to civic and political engagement beyond the November 2008 and 2012 presidential elections. In doing so, the planning committee hoped that attendees would have the opportunity to speak about their work and form ties with one another that might result in “leveraging each other’s resources.” Furthermore, the BYP was interested in learning the best way to build an infrastructure to support the work of the young Black activists in attendance.

We thought, okay, so we do work. The BYP does work focusing on young Black people. Let’s bring together the people actually doing the political work and see if they want to build something. It wasn’t build an organization, but really build either a network or collaborations in terms of their work, and figure out also how the BYP might help facilitate what they were doing.

The goal of simply providing space for young Black activists to get to know each other and determine how they might move their work forward simultaneously and collaboratively was shared by all members of the planning committee. Another member of the planning committee expressed this sentiment, stating:

I didn’t think, [laughs] that we were trying to create an organization. I think that the thinking was we wanted young people that were going to network with each other, and we wanted young people who were going to go back and tell their network of people back in their region and in their city and bring them into the network and somehow that this group could work together nationally to have some kind of impact around policy down the road.

None of the members of the planning committee, however, reported that they expected the attendees to come together and develop a national organization, although that is exactly what happened. In fact, even after the first day and a half of the two-and-a-half day convening there was very little, if any, semblance of a cohesive group. One member of the planning committee reported her fear that there would not be any meaningful cohesion among the attendees. She reported:

I think after that second day, before the Zimmerman thing, we were trying to figure out, “How are we going to move them into something?” We were still going back and forth. I worried that, “I’m just not sure Sunday is going to crystallize. I’m not sure where we’re going to be after Sunday. Maybe we needed another day.”

And then the Zimmerman verdict happens...





## The Convening

The convening began with opening remarks from members of the planning committee. Melinda Weekes, who served as the BNMC moderator, encouraged participants to give each other “the gift of being present” throughout the convening. Over the course of two and a half days, the activists were provided with multiple forums to share their ideas and expertise, to learn from one another, and to socialize. Both formal and informal conversations among the activists focused on a variety of social issues concerning the Black community: mass incarceration, juvenile justice, LGBTQ issues, reproductive rights, violence, civic engagement, media representation, education, immigration, and labor and economic justice. In addition to discussing problems and exploring solutions, participants also discussed the challenges and opportunities of organizing round these issues given the diversity within the Black community.

Although the convening was short, the group of activists arrived eager to work and much was accomplished. There were, however, some dilemmas in trying to work jointly with such a large group of activists who were each informed by their own life experiences and identities and were experts in their own right.

## Diversity Dilemmas

The diversity of those in attendance allowed for multiple opinions and approaches, and also created difficult conversations and held some participants at a distance from one another. Participants held varying ideologies. For example, many were ardently in favor of restrictive gun control legislation and spoke in favor of repealing conceal-and-carry laws. However, there were a small number of people in attendance who did not want to repeal conceal-and-carry laws and were in favor of only slight revisions in gun control legislation. Some participants were steeped in feminist literature and thought, whereas others associated feminism with hating or demeaning men. A few wanted a revolution of the current political system, but most believed it was still salvageable. There was also a tremendous diversity of backgrounds among those present. There were immigrants and native-born citizens, people working on PhDs and others who had earned GEDs, people from middle-class families and people for whom money has always been a concern. There was an intentional critical mass of individuals who identify as LGBTQ and work on LGBTQ issues. As was the goal of at least some members of the selection committee, this kept LGBTQ concerns and perspectives from getting lost in the fray as issues were discussed and debated. This also allowed issues particularly important to Black women and Black members of the LGBTQ community to hold ample weight.

Given the diversity of those who attended, the many difficult conversations took great effort, and contentious conversations were bound to happen. So to create a space that allowed for productive and healthy interactions, at the end of each day, moderator Melinda Weekes would ask the participants to state what



they thought worked well from that day's sessions and what they thought should change in order to improve the next day's sessions. On the second day, one of the cisgendered<sup>9</sup>, heterosexual, male participants stood up and asked if participants could give "everyone the benefit of the doubt. So I don't have to come up here always and say, 'Hi, my name is [Bob] and my preferred gender pronoun is'—I don't have to do all that every single time that we start a conversation. And I feel like—we could—get past that a little bit and give people the benefit of the doubt. I feel like some people feel like they are being silenced if they don't overtly say, 'I don't want to hurt A, B, C, D through Zs' before they say anything." He did not mean any disrespect by his comments and he was sure to explain as much. For those participants who were transgendered or preferred not to be referenced with any gender identification, the issue was too important to simply place in brackets. However, understanding that he did not mean to be offensive but was simply naïve and unfamiliar with transgender concerns, the response was milder than it may have been otherwise, albeit numerous hands shot into the air after his comments. This young man's request highlights the difficult conversations that took place at the convening. He had no intention of denying anyone's identity, but rather he had realized the difficulty of Black diversity and was looking for a way to make it easier to navigate.

None of the participants likely found an easy way to deal with dilemmas that arose from within group diversity during the convening. As noted in the previous *The Convening* section, however, they did successfully work with one another. Addressing differences turned out to be part of that work. Both the leadership of the planning committee and the commitment of the attending activists allowed the convening to be a "safe place" for participants to address their differences and remain affirmed in their identity. Additionally, because the group was comprised of a large number of Black women and Black members of the LGBTQ community, these feelings of affirmation were unique for some participants. One young woman explained her pleasure in being among a group that was so unique in its composition. She stated:

I was very happy to be in a space that felt very fem-positive, woman positive, queer positive, trans positive, right? It didn't, because for a lot of times I think particularly as a person of color, as a woman of color, as a Black woman you just always feel oppression. Like it's always there and it always just like hanging in the air, you know? So it's nice to be in those spaces where you don't have to deal with that stuff and doing a lot of work with Afro Latino men in particular, I deal with a lot of misogyny.

It was nice to be, I guess, building and working and in communication/fellowship, whatever with men that were willing to check themselves when I was around that. There definitely was like an instance where that came up and I wasn't in that group but I kind of came into it afterwards.

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<sup>9</sup> The term cisgender identifies those people whose gender identity matches their given biological sex category. The term "resist[s] the way that 'woman' or 'man' can mean 'nontransgendered woman' or 'nontransgendered man' by default" (Stryker, 2008, p. 22).



But I really appreciated like the way everybody dealt with it, you know? Because I don't think of things-this is really random, but it's the only way I feel I can describe it-so the best sermon I ever heard was about perfect peace. And the minister said that like perfect peace isn't about like calm waters all the time. It's like you get rocked too hard to the left, got to push it to the right, too far to the right, you've got to push it to the left.

So it's kind of like how I thought how the convening was. I thought you create a safe space and then when things come up you deal with it in a very loving way so that it doesn't have to escalate. It's just natural that whatever our "ists" and "isms" are we're going to be confronted with, but it's just the way you deal with it. So I thought that was really great.

Although she noted a particular "instance" that was not congruent with the overall "fem-positive, woman positive, queer positive, trans positive" environment, she felt that the group had created a "safe space" that allowed them to successfully handle it.

When summarizing her opinions of the BNMC, one of the women who served on the planning committee also commended the group members for the way they handled such concerns:

It was intense, it was great, it was engaging. I learned a lot. I thought it was really remarkable in terms of how the group itself filled the space with itself. The incredible diversity in the room I think was an exceptional quality of the space along with the intentionality around being inclusive around that diversity.

The integrity of how the participants approached difference and disagreements made for it to be emotionally exacting and draining and light a lot of times. It also was honest and also courageous.

As issues of difference arose, the group addressed them straightaway and did not allow them to hijack the convening's larger conversations. Though tensions did arise, overall there was greater affirmation. As one young man explained:

I think part of it has to do with people's willingness to be self-reflective. I felt like there was a lot of people, not simply checking other people's privilege, but checking their own privilege. I think people were really open and really interested in figuring out how we work together...

So I think there's something about being in a room full of people who may or may not look like you, but you have an idea about the politics you want to create together. You have some idea of what justice would look like, what equity means, so I think the focus, there was kind of an understanding that one, we weren't checking people's Black cards, so it wasn't like, are you Black? Let me see. You don't look Black to me.

I felt like that kind of thing was, we were smarter than that. That was nice, I think. Another thing



was that people were smart and aware when it came to gender and sexuality. Constantly bringing that up as an issue that is not something antagonistic to Blackness, but something we have to think about and consider when we're crafting and building a movement that's Blackness and gender and sexuality and class, and all of these things, right? There's not just one thing...

The politics isn't just one thing, and it's not just one role we need people to play, so the Black movement is not just about people saying Black power, and pumping their fist, not that it ever was. That might be one image, but that's not all of it. I thought this Black Youth convening brought all of these people together. Under that sense of like, we already know that Blackness isn't just one thing. We already know that what we need isn't just one change.

It can't just be about Black men reclaiming their masculinity and their manhood without considering what Black women need, without considering what Black trans people need. I thought that was important for me. One of the most striking moments was when someone who was not transgendered brought up the issue of bathrooms and space and of gendered space and to me that was really--that was a great moment and a great thing because usually what happens, and what Black people experience is that you have to be the person who stands up for the Black things because nobody will...

The three comments above attest to the unique environment at the BNMC. Though the range of participants' perspectives and identities was vast, their diversity did not mar the success of the joint work that took place throughout the convening. Participants understood the value of togetherness as young Black people, and so despite the difficulty, they stood together.

## The Zimmerman Verdict: A Racial Crisis

As the second day of the convening came to a close, one of the participants mentioned that the verdict for the George Zimmerman trial had been reached and would be announced in 15 minutes. Participants immediately rushed from the room in search of the nearest television airing the coverage. Many returned to the conference room once the coverage of the trial was being streamed online and projected on the overhead screen. The room filled with nerve-wracking anticipation, and the participants stood in a circle hand-in-hand in solidarity as they awaited the verdict. There were whispers, but no one dared to speak aloud. This changed as the not-guilty verdict was read. People yelled and shouted in agony and anger. Some broke down in tears. Others spoke in shocking disappointment. Few remained silent.

All of the activists who were interviewed pointed to this moment, the rendering of the Zimmerman verdict, as the significant turning point of the convening. Experiencing this traumatic moment together activated the shared identity of those present. This was a racial crisis. One Coordinating Council member highlighted the deep impact of this moment for Black people. She referred to it as "a national disaster for





the Black community. It may not have been a hurricane or a tornado, but for all intents and purposes, the Zimmerman verdict and that whole process really was a natural disaster for our community just in the way that it affected each of us so deeply.” None of the activists had been present and witness to Trayvon Martin’s murder nor did any of them know him personally. Yet they did experience deep emotional pain and distress from the verdict rendered. Because they identify as members of the larger Black community of which Trayvon Martin was a part, and their familiarity with the story of his murder acquired via event-related coverage by both traditional mass media and new media, many activists believed that any member of the Black community was vulnerable to both a similar threat and lack of justice. Consequently, the fact that George Zimmerman was not held accountable for Trayvon Martin’s death was not just traumatic for his family and friends. For at least some young Black people beyond Trayvon Martin’s immediate social circles “it basically was a statement from the state and all these people saying ‘Black life doesn’t matter,’” stated one of the BYP100 activists. For many of the young Black activists at the convening, this moment was one that heightened their sense of their racial position in this country.

The lack of cohesion among the convening participants prior to this moment was not subtle. Many participants noted it when pointing to the Zimmerman verdict as a moment of unification among the participants. In the words of one young woman:

I think that [i.e. the unifying of the group] happened when the Trayvon Martin verdict, like, dropped. Because, like you know, at first it was like we were working on politics here, we were working on social justice here, and youth justice here, like, L.G.B.T.Q. community here, and after the verdict dropped, it was like, “Whoa, let’s forget about everything and figure out what we’re





going to do next.” ... And that’s when I realized, like you know, we all really came together. Then that next day, I know we were supposed to continue what we had in the previous day, but we ended up spending our last day really focusing on what we can do together as a whole. And that’s where I think BYP100 like really like developed.

Another participant echoed these sentiments when speaking about the group uniting:

The seeds of that were the Zimmerman verdict, because before that people were quite disjointed. Some people were very upset about the conversations, some of the people in the room, the content, the flow of the convening. Because you had a group of people who range from center moderate to far left.

I’ll be completely frank. There were some folks with very problematic views on Black people, be it around respectability, or around the privatization of public goods, such as education. So some folks had some problematic or like some anti-liberation views, or point of views, and I was wondering how did you get here, like, what are you doing here. So all of that was going on.

In this quote she highlights the noted change among the participants pre- and post-Zimmerman verdict by stating, “before that people were quite disjointed.” Her comments also demonstrate the divergent opinions and beliefs held by convening participants that contributed to the lack of group coherence. Furthermore, some participants felt that there would not have been an organization emerging from the convening had it not been for the collective crisis of the Zimmerman verdict serving as a point of unification. One female participant recounted:

No, I don’t think there would be any organization at all. And I’m saying this because we all had our own opinions and ways or whatever to our approach. So there wasn’t a unified synergy.

The moment when the participants heard the Zimmerman verdict seemed to alter the way they understood their relationship to one another.

Another participant claimed that the shared experience created “trust” among those present. Prior to this moment, he explained, he felt that there was a lack of trust among the participants:

From a psych perspective, if you experience trauma with somebody, you all are kind of locked in that. That’s what a memory is, locked in. So we all came, many of us fresh off of having, obviously, watching the Trayvon Martin trial in the days or weeks leading up to the convening. For me, like, hands down, when we were literally in a circle, standing around, and when they announced the verdict, that was it. So it was like, good or bad, whatever your ultimate perspective was on that experience was, that to me, was when we really came together. Because it was like the stakes were immediately raised a bit higher. For me, that moment, was like ‘Okay, we’re gelling now.’

But I think we, that’s just me, but we needed that fire, we needed that motivation of seeing and





experiencing an injustice together, because I think that the reaction, like seeing everybody's reaction. Seeing people cry. Seeing people throw their phones down. Seeing people pray. Seeing people who just say, 'Fuck this, I've got to go to bed.' It made everything real.

I think that coming up until that point, we kept talking, actually on Saturday we were doing like a fish bowl experience, several people had mentioned, some prefaced their statements with saying things like, "We know there's a lot of hurt but, blah, blah, blah, we're trying to stay on task. We know people have triggers, but we're trying to stay on track." So all of these like, warm-up statements trying to get people to be in the room at the same time without all of their baggage.

So that moment was like, "Hey. We all experienced this at the same time." So you still are going to come with your full self to that experience but we have now experienced this together. And I think it kind of, just sort of made like, a formal starting point for all of us, because in that moment it was "Hey, we are all starting from our response to the verdict."

Witnessing the exoneration of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin accentuated the importance of the activists' commonality and overpowered the divisions and lack of "synergy" they had previously noted.

It was this moment, standing in the presence of each other as the Zimmerman verdict was read, that the individuals, and all of the diversity that they embodied, melted and came together into one group. Their individuality and diversity were not annihilated, but at this moment there seemed to be space for all. As everyone stood staring at the same images on the screen, listening to the same words project from the speakers, they were confronted by their shared identity and racialized social position. Whether they considered how easily transposable they were with Trayvon Martin, or thought about how the young Black men that they loved as friends, brothers, sons, and partners could have been killed without proper recourse, they all took note that this type of incident is all too common in the Black community. If all of those present could not come to a common agreement on anything else, they all saw the gravity of this moment for Black people. One of the male participants recounted the experience of that night in this way:

I felt like I was living in a historical moment. I felt like I was breathing an air that wasn't just about me anymore; it wasn't just about me anymore it was about people that came before me and people that are going to come after me. There was something at stake.

Out of crisis arises a lot of things. And one of those things is that people come together and they organize and they speak back and they fight back. So when you have a lot of pressure, when you have a lot of people beating you down, at some point you're going to say this is not enough.

I think it was kind of divine that we were all there in this moment, to support one another, to love one another, to push one another and challenge one another as we're angry, as we have all these heightened emotions...Because I talked to people that night and all they could feel was despair,



all they could know was hopelessness, but because I was there in that moment, I felt the despair and the hopelessness for a second, but what I felt more than that was, “Okay, now we got to move. Now we got to do something. Now we got to push.” I wasn’t able to wallow.

The collective heartbreak and emoting that happened that night spurred on collective healing and collective work. It was not long after the verdict that the participants determined there was work that needed to be done that night. They split up into various contingents. Some headed into downtown Chicago to be among other people who were gathering to demonstrate their disapproval with the verdict. Others remained at the hotel and formed working groups to determine what their collective response should be.

The interplay of new media and traditional mass media in the coverage of Trayvon Martin’s death and George Zimmerman’s trial, exploded the “bulls-eye pattern” of disaster (Marshal, et. al. 2007) as many, many miles away from the murder and its trial, these young Black people standing in Itasca shed tears of heartbreak and agony. But their response was not unique; sentiments of agony, heartbreak, and anger manifested throughout social media posts and collective action protests all across the country were documented and circulated to the public via new media and traditional media outlets. Protests were documented in Chicago, New York City, Washington D.C., San Francisco, Houston, Oakland, and many other major cities across the U.S. While Black people grieved the murder of Trayvon Martin, they were also angry, sad, and fearful for what the exoneration of George Zimmerman meant for the collective Black community. This is why in addition to calling for “Justice for Trayvon,” Twitter-circulated cell phone pictures captured protesters demanding that “The Whole Damn System is Racist,” “We are all Trayvon,” “Only White Life is Protected in America,” and “Stop criminalizing Black Bodies.” The murder of Trayvon Martin and the exoneration of his killer was a racial crisis. It was an iteration of the recurring public, collective traumatic events that heighten public perceptions of racial inequality.

## The BYP100 Emerges

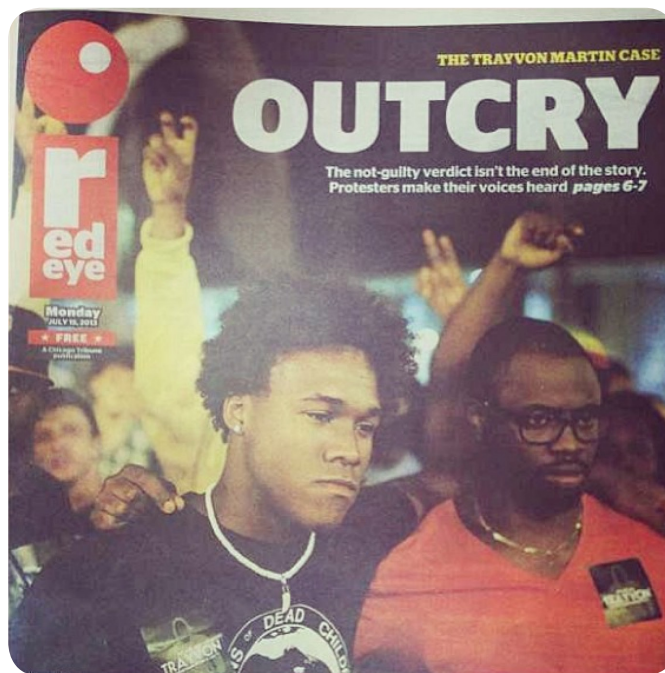
It was not until the night of the verdict that participants began to collectively, consistently, and confidently refer to themselves as the “BYP100.” Earlier in the convening, the term had come up, but it was most often used by members of the planning committee. And, even then, “BYP100” was used infrequently and without certitude that participants had bought into the name, or of thinking of themselves collectively. Witnessing the Zimmerman verdict drew the participants’ together and changed that. They became a “self-conscious, mutually acknowledging” collective (Lewis, 2004, p. 627). They were now the BYP100. This coming together, however, did not mean that every disjuncture and difference of opinion had been eliminated.

As mentioned, soon after the Zimmerman verdict, the group split into different contingents that each took a different approach in their immediate response to the verdict. This became a point of contention



between the participants who went downtown and those who stayed at the hotel. Many of those who went downtown, about 12 people, felt that more of the group should have come along to engage in direct action protesting. “So it was a task the next morning to weave a narrative that was like, ‘yes, you went here and we were here, but both of those things contribute to what we’re going to do moving forward. Both of those things are important,” explained Coordinating Council member. So the following morning, each of the contingents was called to the front of the room to report to the larger group. In this way, each was shown to be one prong of the group’s multi-pronged approach, regardless of what they had chosen to work on the night before.

One group presented a schematic of leadership types (e.g. Builders, Dreamers, and Sustainers) to challenge the members of the BYP100 to think critically about where they should situate themselves in the collective actions of the group. Another contingent presented some concrete actions that the BYP100 wanted to pursue in response to the Zimmerman verdict and broader issues surrounding the verdict. As their spokesperson stated: “We want to end racial profiling. We want to end conceal and carry. End stand-your-ground. And end the criminalization of Black bodies.” The contingent that rallied in downtown Chicago then reported about their experiences. Raw video footage of the rally was posted on the Chicago Sun-Times website that morning and showed the prominent presence of BYP100 members. Additionally, the faces of two BYP100 members were featured on the front cover of the Monday, July 16, 2013 edition of the Redeye, a daily newspaper geared to 18-34 year olds and published by the Chicago Tribune.



Two members of the BYP100 at the protest of the Zimmerman verdict in downtown Chicago.





A group of BYP100 members at protest of the Zimmerman verdict in downtown Chicago.

The fourth contingent read aloud a proposed statement from the BYP100 to the public in response to the Zimmerman verdict. The statement was well received by the larger group and before the convening concluded, a video of the response was produced.

### #BYP100's Social Media Response

BYP100 members squeezed in close on one side of the conference room in order to fit within the video camera's scope. As everyone else stood in silence, a male and a female member of the BYP100 who were seated at center took turns reading portions of the following statement from an iPad:

*To the Family of Brother Trayvon Martin and to the Black Community:*

*May this statement find us in the spirit of peace and solidarity.*

*We know that justice for Black life is justice for humanity.*

*Our hope and community was shaken through a system that is supposed to be built on freedom and justice for all. We are your sons and daughters. We are the marginalized and disenfranchised. We are one hundred next generation leaders. We are the Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100).*

*We see the hopelessness of a generation that has been broken trying to find its place in this world. We*



*understand that we need to turn anger into action and pain into power.*

*As we waited to hear the verdict, in the spirit of unity, we formed a circle and locked hands. When we heard “not guilty,” our hearts broke collectively. In that moment, it was clear that Black life had no value. Emotions poured out - emotions that are real, natural and normal, as we grieved for Trayvon and his stolen humanity. Black people, WE LOVE AND SEE YOU. We mourn, but there’s hope as long as love endures.*

*Trayvon was manifested from ancestral excellence. The salt water falling from our eyes now, is not different from the salt water we were trafficked on then. If the soil of the United States could speak, before saying a word it would cough up our blood. Choking frantically, crust-curdling with the gore of a oppressed peoples it has been force-fed. White supremacy has water-boarded it with the remnants of its genocide of us.*

*This moment reminds us that we can’t look to others to see our value but we have to recognize our own value. In spite of what was said in court, what verdict has been reached, or how hopeless we feel, Trayvon did NOT die in vain. A mother should never have to bury her son. However, his death will serve as the catalyst of a new movement where the struggle for justice will prevail.*

*Instead of a moment of silence, we raise our voices together. As Audre Lorde said, “our silence will NOT PROTECT US.” We are young leaders standing on the shoulders of our ancestors, carrying the historical trauma embedded in a legal system that will NOT PROTECT US. We are the legacy of Black resilience that compels us to fight for our lives.*

*We continue to call out Black Love, Black Power and Black is Beautiful in the face of continued devaluation of Black life. We affirm a love of ALL Black life, no matter if we are in hoodies or business suits, incarcerated or in boardrooms, on welfare or in the WNBA, on the corner or in the White House. We declare the fundamental value, beauty and power of ALL Black people. The poet Claude McKay once said, “Though far outnumbered, let us show us brave...we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack. Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!”*

*JUSTICE FOR TRAYVON.*







#BYP100 Responds to George Zimmerman Verdict - YouTube

Within two days of the video being posted to the BYP website and the social media sites of the BYP100 members, it was reposted and further circulated online by such noted websites as HuffingtonPost.com, Ebony.com and AlJazeera.com. The amount of coverage that the BYP100 video received by corporate digital media sites helped to catch the attention of many people. This was clear in the number of views that the video garnered—23,000 within the first few days—as well as the amount of invitations that the BYP100 received for media appearances.

Because of the video's release, the BYP100 gained a significant online media presence long before it had established a formal organizational structure. The online media attention created an air of organizational development that was not yet present. For example, shortly after the video's release, the Root.com expressed interest in doing feature stories on the "leaders" of the organization. However, while the BYP100 left the Beyond November Movement convening with plans and fervor, "the only structural thing at the time was a semblance of a commitment to a coordinating council," noted a member of the current BYP100 Coordinating Council. Additionally, just a few weeks after the BNMC, about five members of the BYP100 went to Florida to attend an event organized by the Dream Defenders and Power U, founded in 2012 and 1998, respectively. The event was a rally in support of the Take Over Florida campaign in which members of the Dream Defenders occupied the Florida governor's office in Tallahassee. When the attending BYP100 members reported back to the larger group regarding their participation, one of them exclaimed, "BYP100 was an organization in everyone's eyes! It was a real thing. A representative of Black youth action in the country." This was prior to the BYP100 formally implementing an organizational structure or engaging in any public facing collective action or campaign beyond the release of their video response to the Zimmerman verdict.





# Building the BYP100 and its Political Commitments

Before leaving the Beyond November Movement convening in Itasca, members of the BYP100 began forming committees to ensure that their collective work would not end with the convening. A day later, the BYP100 began meeting remotely. Although they were not a formal organization by the time members went to Florida to lend support for the Take Over Florida campaign, they had already begun organizing and institution building.

Sixteen members attended the BYP100's first remote meeting. It was held as a conference call, with an agenda that was shared via GoogleDocs and annotated during the meeting. This format became standard for BYP100. The 16 people on this first call comprised the Coordinating Council. Coordinating Council members had self-selected themselves into this group before leaving the convening. During this meeting, it became clear that there was an intention to develop the BYP100 into a full-fledged organization. The need to develop a communications policy, commitment expectations for members, and a proposal for an organizational infrastructure took center stage. By their second meeting, a week later, the BYP100 was already planning its second convening, which would take place in Washington, D.C., the weekend of the March on Washington's 50th anniversary.

The March on Washington convening was a seminal moment for the BYP100's development. About 30 people were in attendance for the first day of the convening; more members of the BYP100 would arrive to participate in other events that were held throughout that weekend. These first meetings were concerned with the development of the group's mission, vision and core values. Those in attendance were divided into various small groups throughout the day in order to discuss and develop proposals. After each small group session, the groups were brought back together in order to share their ideas for the group's guiding principles and to provide constructive critique of the ideas of their peers. This process was difficult as some members wanted to use more radical or more inclusive language than others were comfortable with. In the end, however, there was success. The BYP100 members that were present were able to come to an agreement on the mission, vision, and core values that they wanted to guide their collective work:

## Vision

Black Youth Project 100 envisions a world where all Black people have economic, social, political and educational freedom.

## Mission

Black Youth Project 100 is an activist member-based organization of Black 18-35 year olds, dedicated to creating justice and freedom for all Black people. We do this through building a network focused on transformative leadership development, non-violent direct action organizing, advocacy and education.



## Core Values

**1. We are experts of our own experience** - We do not represent all young Black people, but we strive to be reflective of all Black youth. We speak for ourselves, build spaces for young Black activists and engage in existing spaces where they speak for themselves

**2. Holistic energy** - We bring our entire selves to the work. Our efforts are driven with love, using a culture-centered approach (art, music, dance, call and response, songs and chants), while nurturing individual leadership, and building power through our collective. We apply energy to BYP 100's work and in the solidarity work we engage in with other marginalized groups.

**3. Radical & purposeful inclusion of all Black people** -We are committed to building and sustaining a collective that is reflective all young Black people, including but not limited to a diversity of: sex, gender, class, citizenship status, sexuality, physical ability, education experiences and faith.

**4. Challenge & growth** - We challenge each other and promote each other's growth within the collective. We challenge injustice and work toward creating a world where all Black people are free.

**5. Action** - We are committed to engaging in meaningful action to fulfill our mission and realize our collective vision through a democratic, consensus-driven process. Our actions are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic (yet visionary), and time-specific.

These were then shared with the wider BYP100 membership. Their feedback was collected, and the Mission, Vision, and Values were later ratified through a process in which members of the Coordinating Council called general members to ascertain their support for the proposed Mission, Vision and Values statements.

A matter of weeks after the March on Washington convening, the BYP100 had another major milestone. With the help of Cathy Cohen, the group was able to secure a substantial grant from the Arcus Foundation to hire a full-time National Coordinator and continue to grow the organization and its work. Charlene Caruthers was hired as the BYP100's first National Coordinator in November, 2013. Charlene was hired because of her extensive experience as a political organizer, having held previous positions at ColorOfChange.org, Women's Media Center, and the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation, as well as her experience in digital organizing at National People's Action. Shortly after her hiring, the BYP100 began to put energy behind growing its ranks. It began composing a recruitment and new member policy and initiated the development of several local chapters. Chicago, New York City, Washington, D.C., Oakland, and Philadelphia were identified as locations for the first chapters. New Orleans was then added. Just



before their one-year anniversary, the BYP100 implemented a dues-paying formal membership policy. On the one-year anniversary, July 13, 2014, Cathy Cohen and Beth Richie, professor of African American Studies and Criminology, Law and Justice at the University of Illinois at Chicago, hosted a fundraiser with the BYP100 as the beneficiary.

## **LGBTQ and Feminist Commitments: “When I enter a room, I am never just Black.”**

As mentioned, when the selection committee was deciding which applicants to extend invitations to, they selected a group of young Black activists with an overrepresentation of LGBTQ people. This not only inspired difficult conversations at the BNMC, it also ensured that a queer and feminist analysis remained central both at the convening and as the BYP100 came together as an organization. This is a significant feat because throughout the history of Black civil rights organizations, there have not been many cases in which Black women and Black LGBTQ people have been acknowledged as principal contingents.

At the convening, participants drew attention to who gets a seat at the table or a voice in the conversation when “Black issues” are discussed. They questioned whether members of multiple classes, women, and members of the LGBTQ community have a voice, and, if so, whether or not their voices influence the conversation. Highlighting the extent to which the Black LGBTQ community has long been excluded from larger conversations of Black issues, one participant stated sarcastically, “Apparently we are new to the movement.” Additionally, many participants expressed the need to affirm the multiple identities that intersect and define the many experiences of Blackness. Put poignantly by one female participant, “When I enter a room, I am never just Black.” She went on to explain that sometimes gender is a bigger issue to her because often “white people in their space feel as though they have to understand race and things of that sort” but often within Black spaces we do not feel the need to create a space to speak about gender because everyone is Black and so everyone is assumed to be going through the same “struggle.” Yet, as another female added, “the struggle looks different.”

In highlighting the difference between the ways some older organizations have neglected to take seriously or make central the diversity of Blackness, and her own way of thinking, one member of the BYP100’s Coordinating Council explained:

I think about things in an intersectional way because in the community and in the culture that I’ve grown up with, I can never just be Black. I had to be Black. I had to be female. I had to be working class. You have to be queer. You have to put all those coats on. That’s the way that I approach things, it’s going to be a little bit different, but it’s all a part of the same coin at the end of the day.

By stating, “it’s all a part of the same coin at the end of the day,” she is maintaining an alliance with older



organizations as she points out their shortcomings. Therefore, although members of the BYP100 are well versed in the history of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and inspired by the Black organizations that led the fight at that time, the BYP100 does not want to mimic those organizations.

Just as much as members of the BYP100 look to the Black activist organizations of the past, and those older organizations that have continued into the present, for inspiration, they also critique them, especially for their lack of an intersectional focus. Consequently, when speaking about whom the BYP100 is and what makes it unique, there were two characteristics that were repeatedly mentioned during interviews. The first characteristic is that the BYP100 is a “Black-led, Black organization.” Here, one of the members explained why this was a unique and important feature of the BYP100:

That we’re Black. That we’re Black in an anti-Black time of multiculturalism and people of color politics that seeks to kind of disappear what Black politics is... At a moment where we want to forget about indigenous struggles and ideas of how colonization still shapes our politics or even in advanced capital countries, but even in something like the United States. We want to forget how slavery and the production of what we understand as Black political subjects still shapes our politics and our understanding of politics. Like why Obama is a special moment. That there is a need for a Black organization that speaks to Black politics, speaks to Black criminalization.

The fact that the BYP100 is “dedicated to queer feminist politics” was the second characteristic frequently mentioned:

I think the other piece is that we’re dedicated to building a Black politics that sees queer/feminist politics as fundamental, not just some ethical-moral thing to do. That the only way we will win is with a feminist politics and a queer politics that’s willing to make mistakes and figure all of that out in terms of organizationally what that looks like and also campaign-wise what that looks like.

Although BYP100 members do not claim to have everything perfectly figured out, they are committed to incorporating feminist and queer politics into the Black political lens. This means developing a political analysis that seeks to lay bare all forms of power that shape our lives. In addition to recognizing formal or traditional state power and its functioning, the queer feminist approach also understands the way the state and other sites of traditional power seek to regulate the intimate sphere (e.g. issues of desire, identity, and family structure). Consequently, by being “dedicated to building a Black politics that sees queer/feminist politics as fundamental,” the BYP100 is working to develop a political analysis that makes all power dynamics visible.

Another BYP100 member also spoke to the organization’s commitment to Black feminist and queer politics that goes beyond superficiality:

I think, one, our commitment to doing the work in a way that’s not just feminist in the label, but really valuing the leadership of people who aren’t cis-gendered men. And so that’s one thing.



And people can see themselves in something that's a part of a departure from a lot of other organizations, racial justice organizations, civil rights organizations.

And then the fact that so many of our members identify as queer, LGBT, or somewhere along the spectrum, and then the fact that that's embraced, and it's valued, and it's not hidden, I think that's another thing that ties people together.

We actually just had a training last night where that was pretty much what one of our members said. They were asked, it was a recruitment training, and the facilitator asked somebody, why are you a member of BYP100. And he said something to the effect of, as a queer Black man, I get to bring my whole self to the work. This work allows me to do work that's connected to my identity.

So, yes. The identity of being Black is the common theme throughout the organization. But folks being able to come as themselves is a huge, huge part.

Often, BYP100 members mentioned both characteristics—being a Black organization and being committed to feminist and queer politics—in their responses.

So, we're not a people of color organization. We are a Black, or people who identify as Black, organization. Black American, Black in general, Black Latino, because we have people who were not born here in the United States who are members. So, that's the first thing. And having a racial justice analysis that is not anti-Black, it centers, the myriad of experiences that Black people have on this particular land. Be it if they were born here or not born here. So, that's the first thing.

The other thing that sets us apart is that we do our work through a clear and feminist lens, and we do it unapologetically. So, we've been asked, I was asked just last night, is this a LGBT organization. No we're not, but we do our work through this particular lens, and we know that we have to be out front with it or else it will be erased. It won't happen.

So, for us to not be, we're not the National Black Justice Coalition. We're not Fierce or another explicitly Black LGBT organization. We're not, but the work that we do and who we are requires us, absolutely requires, to think about how issues impact Black folks, and that our leadership is representative.

And the same goes for feminism, and our approach through a feminist lens, feminist values. It's a difference. We're not a women's organization. We have a lot of women in leadership, and that sets us apart from almost any mainstream civil rights organization that I know of.

As the above quote highlights—because the BYP100 maintains a commitment to a Black queer and Black feminist political analysis—some observers have difficulty in categorizing the group. While they may



understand that the BYP100 is a Black-identified organization, they too often don't understand why their feminist and queer commitments are so prominent if they are neither exclusively a Black feminist organization nor a Black LGBTQ organization. This is unfortunate, yet illuminating. And I think that the person quoted above is correct in saying, "We have a lot of women in leadership, and that sets us apart from almost any mainstream civil rights organization that I know of." History shows that the tradition among Black civil rights organizations has been to either submerge feminist and queer issues under a banner of collective Black concerns, create separate organizations to deal with those concerns or, leave Black feminist and LGBTQ people to join, when welcome, feminist and queer organizations led by whites. In all cases, this has presented a picture that conveys mainstream, collective Black concerns and the concerns of Black feminists and Black LGBTQ-identifying people as mutually exclusive. Consequently, many people who have not been taught otherwise do not have the framework to easily understand that by maintaining a feminist and queer political analysis the BYP100 is attempting to address the concerns of all people who collectively identify as Black.

This is a concern that was raised by a member of the selection committee when speaking about what she feels the BYP100 may not have yet considered. Her response was, "They are aware of most of those things. Like I said, I think they will encounter all the attacks that come with being in line with progressive and queer and feminist politics." She went on to express that she was concerned about how the BYP100 may be compared to other young Black or multicultural organizations that look and act more like the prominent civil rights organizations of old, which were characterized by one charismatic male leader. Her concern is that "traditional civil rights folks might say, 'That feels more like who we are than this organization led by women and trans and queer people talking about Syria.' I think they just have to be prepared for what does it mean to really hold on and promote an expanded progressive analysis that includes lots of folks of color and not just Black people. That includes the range of Black people [who] want to talk about liberation and transforming things like wealth allocation. It's not everybody's cup of tea." Therefore, "traditional civil rights folks," who may have access to resources, both monetary and otherwise, may withhold their support from the BYP100 because they find the work of the organization less legible when read through a traditional civil rights frame.

## **BYP100: Black Youth, Black Police & Transformative Justice**

On March 12, 2014, the BYP100 released another video. It was recorded during a BYP100 convening that was hosted by Princeton University's Center for African American Studies.







The BYP100 at Princeton University

The video was posted to the BYP100's YouTube page. It captured footage of a dialogue between a Black police officer and some members of the BYP100 on March 8, 2014. The officer pulled over a car carrying a number of BYP100 members as they were leaving the Princeton University campus and heading back to their hotel. The officer cited a broken taillight as the reason for the stop. The taillight, however, was found to be in working condition once the car was stopped and further inspected. Before letting the BYP100 members go, the police officer reportedly asked them where they were heading and told them that he would beat them there. He did beat them there. The conversation in the video linked below takes place once the BYP100 members arrive and find the officer in his car in front of the hotel where they were staying.



Black Youth, Police, & Transformative Justice



The conversation deals with issues of the criminalization of Black youth. Members of the BYP100 approached the police officer and attempted to explain to him how they, as young Black people, felt criminalized by police through racial profiling. The police officer tried to convey that profiling and criminalizing them was not his intention when he stopped their car.

One of the BYP100 members who attended the Princeton convening recounted the interaction with the police officer that took place after a small BYP100 party. The following excerpt was taken from her blog post.

After our party, a group of us were pulled over by a Black police officer. The tension was high, Black youth at a white university, all of whom have an inherent distrust of the police, and a system that has an inherent distrust of Black youth. Although we were doing nothing wrong we know all too well the realities of the Trayvon Martins of the world and that we are often “guilty until proven innocent.” The misunderstanding was able to evolve into a teachable moment for both parties where race issues and the lack of safety Black youth feel was discussed. We are on our way to creating policies that address stop & frisk and the shoot first law, but our first accomplishment, I think, is sparking those conversations the world is afraid to have. Conversations that build bridges. (<http://darlingtiara.blogspot.com>)

Like the video response to the Zimmerman verdict, the Princeton video quickly gained the attention of corporate digital media outlets and thereby similarly exemplified the interaction between amateur media producers and established media outlets in the changing media ecology. Although members of the BYP100 independently produced this video and did not pitch it to media outlets, at least a portion of 130,000 views that the video received likely came as the result of coverage by corporate media outlets. It was first picked up by theRoot.com and reposted in a short article on March 18, 2014. It was then reposted on BET.com. It was also picked up by other noted websites such as Bossip.com and UrbanCusp.com.

This digitally enabled act of participatory politics—the production and posting of the Princeton video—was only possible because of the affordances of new media. Without digital platforms such as YouTube, where members of the BYP100 initially posted the video, the BYP100 would not have had the ability to share this experience with such a large audience. It is most likely that this police encounter would never have come to the attention of anyone other than the participants. The drama and sensationalism that often draws the attention of mass media news coverage was absent. Because the BYP100 both produced and distributed this piece of media independently, they had sole control of its original framing. The BYP100 framed this police encounter as an example of transformative justice rather than simply highlighting the negative aspects of the interaction. Fresco Steez, a member of the BYP100, provided the following definition of transformative justice during a subsequent Google Hangout titled **“BYP100 Methods of Social Change:”** A means to transforming the systems, institutions, and environments that we interact with on a daily basis. So they are no longer systemically violent.”



This framing created a counter narrative to most publicized interactions between police and young Black people. The murder of Trayvon Martin, the exoneration of George Zimmerman, and the salience of related coverage via both new and traditional media created a shift in the cultural opportunity structure away from strict colorblindness and toward an acknowledgement of race as discussions of racial inequality became more frequent in mainstream discourse. This shift in the cultural opportunity structure was kept operative both on account of the publicity of subsequent killings of Black people at the hands of police and White vigilantes that occurred between Trayvon Martin's death in February 2012 and the Princeton convening in March 2014<sup>10</sup>, and thanks to the work of activists such as the BYP100 who were committed to building and sustaining a movement addressing these moments of racial crises. Such moments, along with the concomitant work of mass media outlets and activists, amplified the longstanding narrative of contention between the police and Black people. Consequently, when readers came across the Root.com's headline, "Black Youths Attending Princeton Conference Pulled Over by Police, Then This Happened...", or the UrbanCusp.com headline, "Watch: Youth Activist Group BYP100 Members Pulled Over by Princeton Police," many were likely surprised to see the video of a peaceful conversation between a police officer and members of the BYP100. Additionally, Bossip.com readers were likely made equally curious by the counter narrative when seeing the headline "A Lil Positivity: Black Youths At Princeton Have 'Healthy Dialogue' With Cop Who Racially Profiled Them [Video]." I would argue that it is likely that this counter narrative contributed to the spread of the video and its large number of views, as people were enticed to watch and share given the broader social context.

In addition to the host of websites, social networking sites, and blogs where the Princeton video was reposted, it was also reposted in a web forum hosted by Chimpout.com. The welcome message to the Chimpout.com web forums reads:

Welcome to Chimpout. A Black plague is descending upon civilization. That plague is called the nigger. Here at Chimpout we provide up to the minute nigger facts and news stories that are either covered up or buried by the mainstream media. Everything you read here is the truth, gleaned from worldwide sources.

Our message is simple. Niggers are a cancer upon human society.

You will find true stories of brutal nigger rapes, murders and other anti-social behavior, along with a healthy dose of general nigger stupidity that largely goes unreported by the big media outlets.

Sit back, read up and find out the true nature of the nigger, be prepared to laugh, cry and become furious as you discover the on going destruction and mayhem caused by niggers.

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<sup>10</sup> For example, Jordan Davis, Aiyana Jones, Reikia Boyd, and Renisha McBride.



We are not a white supremacist site here at Chimpout. We welcome all races, creeds, and colors.....just no niggers.

Whether the BYP100 had thought a little or a lot about their imagined audience, this was neither the location nor the audience that the BYP100 had in mind for this video when posting it to their YouTube site. However, once the BYP100 posted it online they no longer had control over who would comprise their audience, where else the video would be reposted, nor how it would be recast.

Based on the video narration by one of the BYP100 members, clearly the BYP100 had framed the incident as an example of “transformative justice,” highlighting the fact that all interactions between young Black people and the police do not have to end negatively. Most other sites that reposted the video framed it close to the BYP100’s original framing. These sites could have framed the video however they chose. By simply copying and pasting a link to the video and embedding it in their own site, they had the opportunity to create a new narrative and context for it. The person who posted the video on Chimpout.com chose to take up this opportunity. Consequently, the video was reposted not as an example of transformative justice but rather as, “Yet further proof that niggers and Libtards have turned the USA into the Titanic.” (Chimpout.com) This incident exemplifies both issues of context collapse (Wesch, 2009; Marwick & boyd, 2010) and new media reposting, both of which bring to question the degree to which social movement organizations, like the BYP100, and other social movement actors can control their media representation online.

## BYP100’s Opinions on New Media

The BYP100’s video response to the Zimmerman verdict and the video of the conversation they had with the Princeton police officer are not the only ways in which the BYP100 has utilized new media to engage in participatory politics. The BYP100 maintains accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and Google+ in addition to its YouTube account. Group members also participate in Twitter chats. Two chats addressed the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. (#BYPMLK) and the 2014 State of the Union address (#BarackTalk). Both Twitter chats were collaborative efforts. #BYPMLK was a collaboration with the Black Youth Project. According to the TweetReach Report for the two-hour chat, #BYPMLK reached more than 465,000 Twitter accounts, had nearly 3 million impressions, and had 282 contributors, including Dr. Barbara Ransby (University of Illinois at Chicago), Dr. Cathy Cohen (University of Chicago), Charlene Carruthers (National Coordinator of the BYP100), and Luvvie Ajayi (BYP100, AwesomelyLuvvie.com, The Red Pump Project). #BarackTalk was a collaboration with the League of Young Voters and almost 30 other youth organizing and advocacy groups across the nation. This two-hour chat preceded the 2014 State of the Union address and focused on issues of concern to young people of color. It resulted in 14 million impressions. The BYP100 has also hosted a public GoogleHangout titled Methods of Social Change and maintains internal communication via Face-



book messaging and the use of GoogleDocs.

Most BYP100 interviewees claimed that new media was critical to the work that they do. For example, one member exclaimed, “I think it’s pretty important. I guess I would say like, on a scale of 1 to 10, like 1 being completely useless and 10 being absolutely necessary, I would say it’s probably like a 9 or a 10.” Another member who was equally certain about the importance of social media in her activist work stated, “It’s really the cornerstone of everything that I do, particularly because I can’t be in a million places at one time.” Based on the responses of BYP100 members, I would say that the primary functions for which they view new media as valuable to both their work as individual activists and as an organization are communication and information gathering.

## New Media Expanding Communication

Many of the BYP100 members highlighted the possibilities for communication via new media. Some reported that they believed new media enhances the scale of communication. That is, “you’re able to amplify stories,” by communicating to a larger number of people than you would be able to communicate with offline. The scale of communication that is possible via new media was also clear in the following statement from another BYP100 member:

Twitter and those type of things, you know, help to get a message across on a wider scale than you can do any other ways, right now, you know? So you need social media. You know, you need all kinds of communication, but that is how you can get it out fast. By the click of a button, you can reach all across the world, you know? So you have to still do your groundwork, and you have to still reach the older people that are not on it, but that word-of-mouth could get to them off of Facebook, off of twitter, off of Instagram or whatever, so it is very crucial and necessary.”

Another member claimed that new media is “a platform to the masses.” He went on to explain:

I think within one button, within one click, you can send a message to millions of people, right? I think, that in and of itself, is a basic function but I think a powerful function nonetheless to so easily and so freely to communicate to the masses, which just makes it so much easier to organize.

Those two quotes both convey great optimism in the ability to communicate with a vast public through new media. Issues such as online gatekeeping, homopholous social networks, and reposting and remixing that may hamper intended communication didn’t appear in any members’ responses.

In addition to the speed and scale of communication possible through new media, new media affordances have also allowed the broadening of the type of information and perspectives that can be publicly communicated. The seemingly infinite number of possible online communication channels affords oppor-





tunities for more actors to have a public voice. BYP100 members see this as no trivial matter. “It’s power,” stated one respondent who went on to explain:

We’ve seen lots of movements whether we want to talk about Occupy the Hood or we want to talk about the movement with Trayvon Martin and the movement with Marissa Alexander. All of these movements should be waged on and offline and most of these movements are being led by young people of color and so I think social media is very critical and I think social media presents an opportunity to folks who didn’t necessarily have the financial means or didn’t necessarily have the resources that other people with traditional power used to have, but I think that social media gives people especially people who have traditionally been marginalized the power to make a footprint.

A corresponding view of the significance of new media was expressed by a member of the Coordinating Council who stated, “What it’s contributed is that we’re able to have a voice in some incredible way...You actually have that space and you can hold that space and move forward and move agendas forward in a way that you just weren’t able to before.” BYP100 members do not view the expansion of the scope and scale of communication as simply a quantitative matter; they believe that it creates a qualitative difference in social movement work.

Free from complete reliance on mass media outlets to disseminate information and messages, social movement actors have the ability to bypass mass media outlets and create their own media outlets. As one member explained of new media:

It’s a platform for people to hear my voice in any capacity, from my thoughts to my music to my speeches to my video. That’s the platform that I don’t have to wait for WGCI. I don’t have to wait for BET. I don’t have to wait for someone to book me. Shit, excuse my language; my website is my own channel. Go to my website. You want to see what I’ve done?...I don’t have to wait for any other websites to post me because I’m posting myself. I think that’s the beauty of the Internet.

Not only can social movement actors publicly post media and information outside of mainstream and corporate media outlets, but by doing so you can post “your message in your terms,” explained one member of the BYP100. Because of this, he claimed that the ability to create a “narrative” is the most critical function of new media.

It gives you a chance to say your message on your terms in your narrative, right? The Zimmerman verdict was we’re saying our message in our terms; this experience of 100 Black folks. We were able to edit that video so that people saw what they saw, and then put a message behind it. It’s on our terms and then it filters through whatever . . . once the Root [i.e the Root.com] got it or the folks got it, they were taking on our message and how we interpret it. So that’s what it does: it allows us to build public discourse on our terms and how we want it.





Having this level of control over messaging by utilizing new media is of great value to social movement actors. This fact is not lost on BYP100 members. “As an organization, it’s essential. It’s essential for us to get our message out, and for people not to know not just who we are, but to receive our analysis on what’s happening to Black people in this country,” a Coordinating Council member said.

However, just because individuals or organizations such as the BYP100 can create, post, and circulate their own media online does not mean that their “analysis” will follow their media as it is viewed and reposted by online audiences. Although theRoot.com stuck closely to the BYP100’s framing of the Princeton video, they did not match it perfectly. Originally, and likely by accident, theRoot.com identified the BYP100 members as Princeton students. “And we never said that,” explained the Coordinating Council member. “Never said that we were Princeton students. And then some other stuff about what happened. They didn’t ask us first, and they actually didn’t even follow what was in the tape about, I mean the video, about what happened.” Even though theRoot.com framed the Princeton video favorably, the analysis and portrayal of the video was not exactly that of the BYP100.

## Information Gathering

Because so many more people can now find a way to exercise their voice through new media, the amount of information and perspectives that is now relatively easily accessible has grown vastly larger. Some members of the BYP100 reported that the most critical function of new media is the way in which it allows you to gather information that is not easily accessible offline. Much of this is due to phenomena such as online citizen journalism and self-documentation that have been made possible by social networking sites and other new media platforms. Citizen journalism is defined as “the act of a citizen, or a group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information” (Bowman and Willis, 2003, p. 9). Self-documentation refers to the process of frequent documentation via video, images, and text of one’s self on publicly accessible online platforms. Both citizen journalism and self-documentation may take the form of personal websites, blogs and postings on social networking sites.

Citizen journalists provide alternative sources of news that operate outside the mainstream system of mass media. Often these alternative news sources offer alternative perspectives. One interviewee touched on this as she explained that she saw a difference between the mass media messaging regarding social issues in the Dominican Republic and what was being tweeted and posted by people who were in the Dominican Republic and unaffiliated with mainstream news outlets. Based on this observation, she primarily uses new media to gather information. “Information meaning that it just keeps me informed...Because the mainstream dialogue is a bit different from what was actually going on on the ground, as is usually the case.” As mentioned previously, the mass media often have a host of selection pressures when choosing



which stories to cover and what framing to place them in. Citizen journalists, on the other hand, can use their own new media accounts to cover any story in any way they choose. This increases the number of stories that can be covered in online space, and may also increase the number of frames and perspectives conveyed.

Self-documentation also provides a host of information that is now far more accessible than ever before. By browsing Twitter, Facebook, and other social networking sites and online platforms, it is possible to find out a ton of information on individuals, both intimate and insignificant. “People can tweet that they voted. People can post on Facebook that they voted. And it’s a public display of not only what you’ve done, but it’s also an opportunity to publicly display your beliefs about the world and what you value” explained one respondent.

Another interviewee indicated that she used social media intentionally to gather the opinions and concerns of individuals; this, she claimed, is the most important function of new media.

I think the most important function is just hearing the people, like, you know, what their issues and concerns are. Like, you know, like even, I get bored sometimes when I’m sitting here, go on Twitter just to see what kind of people think. Because you can like search anything. So, if I say something like, “My lights are always out on my street.” Like, you know, someone has tweeted that. To figure out where they’re tweeting that from, and you can provide them with the resources, like, “Oh, you can call your council member. Or, your congressmen and address them.” Like, a lot of people don’t know that they have that power...But you can definitely figure out, like, what issues are happening. You know, that’s why I use social media.

Another member mentioned the use of new media to gather this type of information. This member was the only respondent who was not entirely affirmative regarding the criticality of new media to her activist work.

I wouldn’t say that it’s like absolutely critical, but I think it’s definitely beneficial and can be effective and great. I don’t think people should like focus solely on social media to like get things done. If anything, to me it’s like another platform to hear the voice of the people. And then figure out what you can do from there. What kind of actions you can take from what people have said, so, yeah.

Despite claiming that new media was not absolutely critical to her work, this member still thought new media to be beneficial. Much like citizen journalists, the culture of self-documentation on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr provides an abundance of information that is not covered by mainstream news. Consequently, without new media, gaining access to these perspectives and opinions would be a cumbersome, if not impossible task.



## Downsides of New Media

Lastly, a number of the interviewees felt that new media does have some downsides when it comes to political engagement and activism. One of the participants mentioned that one “thing that’s problematic about the rise in new media in the civic engagement, civic political engagement, is this culture of, I guess, urgency.” She pointed to the response on Twitter to the kidnapping of over 200 girls in Nigeria by the militant Islamist group Boko Haram. (#BringBackOurGirls)

I think that one of the things is that, mostly an example, with the kidnapping of over 200 girls from the school in Chibok, Nigeria. And one thing that I saw happen very early, and was really problematic, and I talked about it on Twitter, was this call for US intervention, or this call for Americans to get involved in bringing back our girls.

And I said, how do we raise awareness about this issue without being imperialists with this situation. Because have you ever thought to ask, do you not think the people in Nigeria are capable for speaking for themselves. Have you consulted them before you’re writing petitions? Because I was tweeted a petition asking to call on the Nigerian government to rescue the girls. Something like that.

And I said, I’m an American citizen. The Nigerian government is not accountable to me. They are accountable to their people. And there’s this thing that says its American thing of us to just come in guns a’blazing without actually assessing the situation...So I think, on new media, it’s a tool, because it’s not that people didn’t have these attitudes before, but it allows that information, that message, to spread a lot quicker. And people to jump to do the bandwagon politics a lot easier, a lot faster, without taking a moment to do any analysis about what’s actually going on.

The fact that there are no qualifications, other than Internet access and know-how, needed to post, comment on, or create an online campaign around any issue or concern can be seen as a benefit to democratic goals. It creates the possibility for more people to voice their concerns and opinions than would otherwise be the case. However, as pointed out by the BYP100 member quoted above, it can also be problematic. There is an ease with which people can join or decline to join campaigns they come across online without having an in-depth consideration of the issue at hand. Additionally, because online participation in a campaign is typically an extremely low-commitment activity, people can create or participate in campaigns, however well informed or misinformed, with little risk and low costs to their time.

A number of other BYP100 members tended to highlight the fleeting nature of most online activity when discussing the downsides to its use for civic and political engagement. Although all of them also highlighted beneficial ways in which activists and activist organizations can and do make use of new media, they were also critical of the possible impacts of online forms of participation.



I just think that social media is so ephemeral. I think that's the biggest . . . I'm not going to go the route on like, "Oh these young kids today. This isn't really activism." I really do think it changes people's minds to view videos. I really do think it builds their consciousness to view certain videos. It gives them education tools that are necessary to their lives. I do not think that we should be dismissive about that.

I do think that social media can sometimes be ephemeral in that it can be a campaign for the moment and then it's gone. You could have Black hoodies or a Blackout for a day and the sun rises tomorrow and it's forgotten.

Another BYP100 member also commented on the lack of sustainability of online activism. In addition, her comments beg the question of what civically and politically meaningful online activity looks like.

I do think that it makes people a little bit lazy. I think that it makes everybody feel like they can be an organizer. People will say, I have 5000 followers on twitter, people retweet me all the time like I'm a cultural thought leader. Do you know what I mean? I'm like, okay, that's great, but what are you doing? So if you have 5000 people following you, what are you doing with that? Because if you're just reading about love and hip hop, that's not helpful like I'm sorry, that's not doing anything. I do think that it makes people a little bit lazy. I think it also does kind of make people forget the community aspect of it that it's not just about you. So just because you have 5000 followers or created a really popular hashtag, I mean, that's great and it's not about you and nobody's going to care about that stuff in a couple of months, let alone, a year

In both this quote and the one prior, BYP100 members expressed their concerns that on its own participatory politics in the form of new media activities may not have long-term consequences. Either the attention gained online may be too fleeting or the activity too superficial. This skepticism points to a distinction between voice and influence. Certainly, the low barriers to new media usage enhance the ability of members of the public to voice their opinions. Additionally, by circulating opinions and other forms of information through posting, Tweeting, emailing, and blogging, people have the ability to impact the information and ideas to which members of their online social networks are exposed. However, under what circumstances these acts of low-barrier, participatory politics will or will not result in meaningful political influence is less certain. Moreover, members who critiqued the use of new media as a tactic for civic and political engagement emphasized that it is imperative to have an "online-offline connection."

## Still Have to Organize Offline

Despite the ubiquity of new media, its numerous affordances, and its salience in the lives of BYP100 members, they still see traditional offline activism as vital to social movement work. A number of BYP100 respondents explained that online tactics were critical to their work, but they were not sufficient in bring-



ing about desired change. One of them explained it in this way:

What you can do is realize your movement isn't going to be a digital movement. Otherwise, because what we're interested in is like material conditions changing right, so it will be the streets we touch and walk on. That's where we want to see change, so we can't just live in this cyber world.

I think that's a tool that we can use but it's not everything. There's nothing like being face to face with people. There's nothing like sharing space like we did. If we had been doing that whole convening as a Google chat, it would have been interesting, but it was nothing like putting all of us in that space in Chicago in the summer.

There is something about building face-to-face friendships that is a component, an essential component to social movements and building that way. I also think that now in the time that we live in, that social media and all these new technologies are essential. They are essential because they help us build, but we can't rely on solely that.

In claiming that there is a qualitative difference between online and offline interaction that is important to social movement work, this respondent pointed to the BNMC and the emergence of the BYP100 as an example. The respondent quoted below differentiated online and offline activity by specifying them as engagement and activism respectively when asked how new media has contributed to Black youth engagement.

I think it's contributed to Black youth engagement...And I don't know if I would make the leap to activism quite yet only because for me, activism has to have some real world connection. So if you are on Twitter and you tweeted like our hashtag #CriminalizedLives, like yeah, you're engaged, but you're not an activist yet because you haven't done any work. You haven't taken the next step. So I think that's the hard piece and that's like why it's an online-offline connection. It's like we need to engage them online and then get them to really take action in their own communities wherever they're at. That's the next piece.

Regardless of their critiques, none of the BYP100 interviewees felt that new media could be ignored, rather, they were advocating for a cautious and intentional approach to utilizing new media to engage politically and civically. As opposed to choosing online or offline tactics, BYP100 members tended to think that online tactics should be seen as "an add-on to build onto the stuff that you're already doing" or as just "one doorway to your constituency." Survey work by Cohen and Kahne (2012) has also noted this multipronged approach to political participation among young people, noting that those who engage in participatory politics, either through online activities or offline activities, tend to engage in traditional acts of political engagement as well.



## Discussion

This paper has attempted to explore some of the ways in which the addition of new media to the mass media landscape has afforded novel means and modes of social movement activity, and the development of social movement organizations. By providing individuals and organizations the ability to relatively easily produce and distribute their own media, the emergence of new media has altered the reliance of social movement actors on traditional mass media outlets. It has also reduced the gatekeeping ability of traditional mass media outlets making it possible for a larger number of individuals and organizations to participate in media framing and agenda-setting processes. Additionally, new media has aided organizational development by allowing members new ways to communicate across space and by creating new opportunities to reach potential constituents. Through their online efforts it is now possible for social movement actors to gain public recognition and support.

In bringing this paper to its close, I first want to discuss the way in which the development and work of the BYP100 highlights the importance of new media for social movement actors in our contemporary media landscape. I then want to address the fact that new media affordances have not only provided an alternative to traditional mass media. New media affordances have also allowed for the development of new forms of civic and political participation and have extended opportunities for civic and political engagement to a broader population. These new forms of participation tend to fall under the category of participatory politics and outside the purview of what has traditionally been considered political participation. This raises new considerations for future research in social movements, collective action and political engagement.

### A New Media Landscape

Scholars once maintained that social movement organizations and their messages that were not picked up by mass media outlets were as good as nonexistent. If social movement actors were not able to gain mass media attention and have their messages circulated among the broader public, then the likelihood of those movements to grow and bring about social change was improbable if not impossible. Contemporary scholars have since provided research that challenges this understanding and demonstrate the need for revision (Bimber, 2001; Bimber et al., 2005; Friedland & Rogerson, 2009; Cottle, 2008; Graeff et al., 2014). New media has not eliminated the importance of mass media, but has provided an alternative in many ways.

The purpose of telling the story of the emergence of the BYP100 was to provide an example of the ways in which young Black people are making use of new media to organize and mobilize around their collective trauma and shifts in the cultural opportunity structure brought on by perpetual racial crises. I have





attempted to highlight how new media has served as a platform for a large amount of the public-facing work the BYP100 has engaged in during their first year. New media allowed the activists of the BYP100 to immediately take advantage of shifts in the cultural opportunity structure brought on by the mass amount of media coverage, published both online and offline and distributed both via mass media outlets and social media networks, of the murder of Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of George Zimmerman. Without any real semblance of an infrastructure, the BYP100 was initially able to set meaningful mobilization in motion by garnering substantial attention through the views of their response to the George Zimmerman verdict, which was posted and reposted online. This mobilization was then further developed and sustained by subsequent organizing efforts by the BYP100 both online and on the ground.

The work of the BYP100 points to some of the ways in which the rise of new media has altered the traditional social movement-mass media relationship. Far from subjecting themselves to the values, whims, and timeframes of mass media outlets, the BYP100 and its members have produced and disseminated their own media. They have not made formal pitches to mass media outlets for coverage, although they intend to do so in the future. A member of the Communications Committee made this clear when asked whether the BYP100 would intentionally seek more mainstream media attention as part of their redeveloped communications strategy:

Yes, because it shines a light on what we're doing and gets more faces on it and somewhat legitimizes our work to get mainstream attention. I think for us, mainstream media has definitely helped push our work because we've gotten press that has allowed more eyes on our Twitter account and our Facebook, and then when it's time to ask for something or do a Twitter town hall, we get more people because they're like, "Oh, we saw you guys on the show."

Consequently, while the BYP100 would oppose the idea that mainstream mass media coverage is the only path to successful movement efforts, they do see the value in mass media coverage.

The two BYP100 videos addressed in this paper gained much attention as demonstrated in the number of views they acquired and the number of sites on which they were reposted. Presumably, this has helped the organization with scope enlargement and has certainly created a level of validation. However, neither of these videos was accompanied by a direct call to action. While the BYP100 may have gained the attention of a broader audience, the ability of the videos to serve as pathways for particular forms of engagement was limited. This is because while the BYP100 understood the importance of the content of their videos and their ability to speak to the current social moment they had not yet formulated a social media strategy in which these videos would have been a part. Seeing the amount of attention that was given to the Princeton video, the BYP100 began to consider how they could use the video as a pathway to engagement rather than as an informative piece. They have begun to consider how attention, particularly attention accessed through new media, can be used toward achieving the organization's goals (e.g. organization, mobilization, and frame resonance).



## Views vs. Bodies

The hallmarks of in-person protests is the drama of the event, the amount of mass media coverage, and the number of bodies that social movement actors are able to organize and mobilize in one place. Consequently, protests that create the greatest drama receive the most mass media airtime, and those that bring out the largest number of people are often viewed as the most significant. This assessment is largely one which is based on the collective actions of the 1960s, an era which was void of the affordances of new media and the connectedness of social media. At that time, activists and other members of the public had no way to publicly demonstrate their grievances or their support for a particular cause other than placing their bodies in a physical space that would elicit attention and disruption. And, the more drama and more people that place their bodies in the same space the more likely they will receive attention. The rise of new media has created new opportunities for activists and others to make public their grievances and bring attention to the causes that they support. Today Facebook boasts more than 1.35 billion members; YouTube 1 billion users; and Twitter 284 million users. The platform that these social media sites provide is like no other, past or present.

Social movement actors, informal networks, or organizations with Internet access can now publicize their own messages to a potentially vast audience on their own accord. Additionally, those who do not think of themselves as activists can do the same. By joining online with others who support their cause through liking, forwarding, reposting, and sharing digital content, people engage in the collective amplification of their messages; often exponentially increasing the number of viewers. Online collective amplification cannot be written off because scholars fail to update their understandings of collective action and social movement activity to fit the modern context. I do not mean to make a comparison between the values of the two forms of protest (i.e. in-person and online) that would privilege either. It is my understanding that the value of both forms of protest have been proven, and both forms of protest have potential to continue allowing marginalized people, such as young Black Americans, to have voice and influence in a society that would prefer them to be voiceless and inconsequential. My intention is to highlight that scholars of social movements, collective action, and political engagement need to seriously consider the value of views versus bodies. Future research needs to further explore online collective amplification via new media as a consequential form of mass mobilization.

## Racial Crises and New Social Movement Actors

Since openings in the cultural opportunity structure brought on by racial crises are often relatively momentary, we need to consider the fate of individuals and organizations that organize and mobilize in response to such openings. Regarding organizations that emerge at these moments, the main question considers the life of these organizations. Will the organizations that come together at these moments be



able to develop an infrastructure that will allow them to persist past the particular racial crisis that motivated their members to coalesce? Bimber (2001) has begun thinking about grassroots organizations that emerge online in order to engage in online-based collective efforts. He explains that these organizations may be a new model for social movement organizations. A particular event will cause “transient, decentralized groups” to emerge and organize to engage in collective action for a single concern and then contently disband afterward knowing that if needed a similar group can be brought together in the future (Friedland & Rogerson 2009). However, many contemporary grassroots organizations that have developed in response to the collective trauma of recent perpetual racial crises, such as the BYP100, have no intention to take on this transient and reactionary form. Their goal is a sustained presence and a sustained fight; a movement, not a moment.

Bimber does not speak to such grassroots organizations that emerge locally or offline that may want to persist past one particular racial crisis. These organizations may feel a drastic reduction in support once the cultural opportunities that allowed for their emergence lose their prominence. It may become impossible for them to sustain themselves beyond the initial support garnered at the height of the crisis. In order to persist past mobilizing around a single moment and become persistent participants in a movement a new organization of young activists needs to develop some form of infrastructure to make longevity more probable. This often entails resources that young activists and organizations do not have at their disposal, and so one means of working toward a sustained organization is to attempt to leverage the support of more established individuals or institutions that are sympathetic to the cause. The BYP100 did just that. By taking advantage of the social capital of their key supporters they were able to gain access to institutional resources that allowed them the opportunity to develop an infrastructure and expand their membership. This has contributed to the BYP100’s persistence beyond the initial attention that they garnered from their response to the Zimmerman verdict.

In addition to thinking of the survival of new organizations, which form in response to racial crises and subsequent shifts in cultural opportunity, scholars also need to consider the individual activists that are born of these racial crises. Given the fact that many of the recent racial crises have emerged around the plights of young Black Americans, it is important that scholars pay specific attention to the entrance of young Black people into national civic and political conversations as the result of such crises. The number of young Black people that engaged in collective action around national concerns for the first time on account of the murders of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown is likely huge. Although many took to the streets, new media affordances has also allowed those not apt to organize in that manner or too young to be allowed to do so to participate in collective action around these racial crises. Young people who would otherwise not have had opportunities to participate in social movement activity have been able to do so through their viewing, posting, and reposting of digital content. These racial crises have created very particular environments for these initial experiences. These young Black people are entering the public



sphere at a time when feelings of marginalization, disillusionment, and alienation of young Black Americans are both being publicly reiterated and publicly affirmed. Scholars need to explore what this means for the development of political attitudes and political behavior among this group of young people.

## Conclusion

In a society where race continues to be a basis of social structuring, racial crises will continue to arise. Inevitably, such instances will further support and reiterate the feelings of marginality that are widespread among young Black Americans and were addressed at the beginning of this paper in the BYP100's response to the George Zimmerman verdict. As event-related coverage of racial crises are carried to our inboxes, Twitter feeds, and Facebook timelines that are continually at our fingertips, the use of new media and social media likely contribute to the spread of collective trauma caused by perpetual racial crises. The ubiquity of new media, its accessibility, and connectivity, however, also provides the opportunity for new meaningful responses to perpetual racial crises.

The emergence and development of the BYP100, as well as some of their ongoing work, demonstrates the new possibilities brought on by the affordances of new media. Although no social movement actors will ever have complete control over the framing of their media messages, either due to traditional mass media gatekeeping or new media reposting and remixing, the ability to independently produce and distribute media is a monumental advance for social movement actors. As Kahne et al., (2014) explain, "Enabled by new media tools, individuals whose activities reside primarily outside of gatekeeping institutions are pursuing greater voice and influence in the political realm than the hierarchical political infrastructure has traditionally provided them opportunity for." (p. 5) By utilizing new media tools on multiple occasions the BYP100 were able to get their message out to a large audience of potential constituents. This would have been a far more difficult and dependent process otherwise. While new media definitely comes with its own set of limitations and potential pitfalls, those seem to be outweighed by the possibilities new media affords.

The structure of the traditional media landscape did not lend itself well to the inclusion of marginalized voices and alternative viewpoints. The relatively small number of media outlets created an intensity of gatekeeping pressures as media producers aimed, and continue to aim, to gain the biggest portion of the mainstream audience. New media now provide increased opportunity for at least some typically marginalized voices to actively influence the variety of media, frames, and social issues that contribute to public discourse. There is now an expanding "new digital repertoire of contention" (Earl & Kimport, 2011, p. 180) in addition to the more traditional offline repertoire of contention (Tilly, 1986). Part of the implications of this is that those who experience collective trauma and collective feelings of marginalization now have a broader range of possibilities for collective response.



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