

CARR CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY HARVARD KENNEDY SCHOOL

Black Lives Matter: Power, Perception, and Press



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The Topol Research Fellowship recognizes and supports Harvard Kennedy School students interested in, and committed to, nonviolent action. The Topol Fellowship aims to help students to develop a more robust, evidence-based and comprehensive understanding of nonviolent resistance movements, and to deepen their knowledge about nonviolent movements around the world. Topol Fellows support data collection at the Nonviolent Action Lab, attend a monthly discussion group on nonviolent action, and attend a global nonviolent action summit.

Introduction

Our national reckoning with racism and police brutality, long in the making, was not inevitable. Activists and community leaders had to not only organize an effective, lasting movement against racist brutality carried out by the police but also navigate the media portrayal of the Black Lives Matter movement.

In 2013, after the acquittal of George Zimmerman who fatally shot black teenager Trayvon Martin, the social media hashtag #blacklivesmatter sparked a grassroots movement fighting to end systemic racism.¹ Led by three black women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, the Black Lives Matter movement continued in 2014, demanding justice for Dontre Hamilton, Eric Garner, John Crawford III, Michael Brown, Ezell Ford, Laquan McDonald, Akai Gurley, Tamir Rice, Antonio Martin, Jerame Reid, and many more.²

While public outcry for police reform continued to mount, examples of police brutality and killing of unarmed black men and women continued to surface.³ The long and painful history of police brutality in the United States persists in the police killing Black people in the middle of daily acts of living such as wearing a hoodie, holding a cellphone, or sleeping in their homes.⁴

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, a 46 year old black man, was arrested by Minneapolis police over a fake \$20 bill. Soon thereafter, as bystander videos showed, Minneapolis officer Derek Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck for over 9 minutes, as Floyd repeatedly pleaded with officers and bystanders that he could not breathe.

The brutal, public killing of Floyd followed a series of unconscionable acts of violence against Black lives including the killings of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor, highlighting, again and again, the urgency of the Black Lives Matter movement.⁵ The BLM movement forced the American public to see



the dots and acknowledge the pattern of senseless violence carried out by the police against the black community. In so doing, the movement created the largest civil resistance campaign in American history, with millions of people across the country and around the world joining the protests.

The moment of racial reckoning was also accompanied by misleading media narratives centering violence that escalated public scrutiny of the demonstrations. The pace for change accelerated with a new established norm and consensus in racial justice, leading policymakers, city council members, and corporations to publicly speak out for the first time in support. Activists are confronted with an opportunity to demand policy changes including the reallocation of police budgets and greater accountability of law enforcement.⁶ The movement also coincided with the most devastating pandemic in modern history that underscored our shared humanity. A tipping point was reached by the movement as public opinion accelerated in support of Black Lives Matter.

¹ Capatosto, Victoria. *A Brief History of Civil Rights in the United States*. <https://library.law.howard.edu/civilrightshistory/BLM>.

² "Black Lives Matter (BLM)." Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA, <https://www.loc.gov/item/lcwaN0016241/>.

³ Wortham, Jenna. "A 'Glorious Poetic Rage.'" *The New York Times*, 5 June 2020. [NYTimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/05/sunday-review/black-lives-matter-protests-floyd.html), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/05/sunday-review/black-lives-matter-protests-floyd.html>.

⁴ CNN, AJ Willingham. "These Are the Ordinary Things They Were Doing When They Were Killed by Police." *CNN*, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/16/us/black-lives-matter-police-violence-what-people-were-doing-trnd/index.html>.

⁵ "Why The Killing of George Floyd Sparked an American Uprising." *Time*, <https://time.com/5847967/george-floyd-protests-trump/>.

⁶ "How the Black Lives Matter Movement Went Mainstream." *Washington Post*. [www.washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/how-the-black-lives-matter-movement-went-mainstream/2020/06/09/201bd6e6-a9c6-11ea-9063-e69bd6520940_story.html), https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/how-the-black-lives-matter-movement-went-mainstream/2020/06/09/201bd6e6-a9c6-11ea-9063-e69bd6520940_story.html.

I. Media Narratives of Protests

While the media outlets' influence has weakened, they continue to play an integral role in shaping the narratives of social movements. With the resources to filter and amplify the grievances of demonstrators, the press can legitimize the movement's claims. All the while, the presence of journalists has the power to hold both the government and police accountable.⁷ Journalists can focus the nation's attention, reach wide audiences, and affirm the status of a movement.⁸

However, the norms of traditional journalism tend to contribute to marginalizing social movements. Operating with the business model of eyeballs and viewership, broadcasters and newspapers may choose to cover sensational news of lawlessness and violence at the expense of the movement. Confrontations between protestors and police dominated the media narrative during the Black Lives Matter uprising over Summer 2020.⁹ Media coverage is predominantly narrated from the perspective of authorities and official sources such as city officials, police chiefs, and national political figures. Protesters, activists, and organizers—especially the ones for a “leaderless” movement—are rarely known public figures and viewed as a source by news outlets.

Although integral to any social resistance, the press is also a lens through which social movements can be silenced, distorted or amplified. In particular, the selective portrayal in media outlets of Black Lives Matter could impact the success and durability of the movement. Despite widely reported vandalism, property damage, and looting in the news, 96.4% of Black Lives Matter protests were nonviolent with no property damage or police injuries.¹⁰ In 97.7% of the demonstrations over the summer, no injuries were reported among participants, bystanders, or police.¹¹ Incidents of

violence were the exception and not the rule. The media's chase to cover the most radical action of resistance, in some ways, serves the purpose of informing the public but can also result in the skewed perception that the movement was largely violent.

Historically, movements deploying disruptive and violent resistance were more likely to sustain media attention than peaceful demonstrations, and as a consequence violent tactics detracted from those movements' core messages.¹² The coverage of violence can further reinforce the negative



96.4% — of Black Lives Matter protests were nonviolent, despite widely reported vandalism, property damage, and looting in the news.

⁷ Kilgo, Danielle K., and Summer Harlow. “Protests, Media Coverage, and a Hierarchy of Social Struggle.” *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, vol. 24, no. 4, Oct. 2019, pp. 508–30. DOI.org (Crossref), doi:10.1177/1940161219853517.

⁸ Lee, Triggering the Protest Paradigm: Examining Factors Affecting News Coverage of Protests.

⁹ “Black Lives Matter Fights Disinformation To Keep The Movement Strong.” NPR.Org, <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/25/999841030/black-lives-matter-fights-disinformation-to-keep-the-movement-strong>.

¹⁰ “Analysis | This Summer's Black Lives Matter Protesters Were Overwhelmingly Peaceful, Our Research Finds.” *Washington Post*. [www.washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/10/16/this-summer-black-lives-matter-protesters-we-re-overwhelming-peaceful-our-research-finds/), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/10/16/this-summer-black-lives-matter-protesters-we-re-overwhelming-peaceful-our-research-finds/>.

¹¹ “Analysis | This Summer's Black Lives Matter Protesters Were Overwhelmingly Peaceful, Our Research Finds.” *Washington Post*. [www.washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/10/16/this-summer-black-lives-matter-protesters-we-re-overwhelming-peaceful-our-research-finds/), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/10/16/this-summer-black-lives-matter-protesters-we-re-overwhelming-peaceful-our-research-finds/>.

¹² Douglas M. McLeod, *News Coverage and Social Protest: How the Media's Protect Paradigm Exacerbates Social Conflict*, 2007 J. Disp. Resol. (2007)

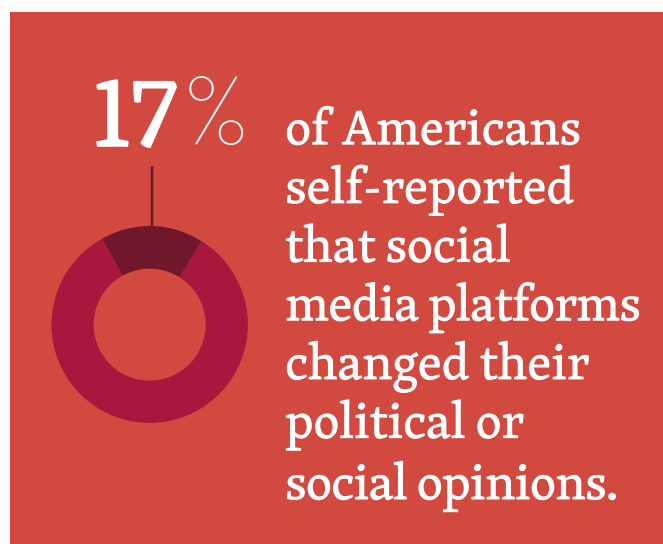
The ephemeral nature of public support highlights the narrow window of opportunity where social movements gain sufficient momentum to effect policy changes.

depiction of protesters pushing for social reforms and reduce the odds of achieving the movement's stated goals.¹³ This can erode the possibility of broader public support and can fortify the status quo.¹⁴ Furthermore, the barriers to joining nonviolent demonstrations are broadly lower for citizens, and possible allies from the mainstream are more likely to disassociate from groups that resort to violence. In contrast, law enforcement using force against nonviolent opponents is likely to provoke a backlash and accelerate public support for the movement.¹⁵

Perhaps, the gaps in media narrative are addressed by alternative sources of news including social media and videos captured by citizen journalists, resulting in more real-time and peer-to-peer dissemination of information.¹⁶ According to Pew Research Center, 17% of Americans self-reported that social media platforms changed their political or social opinions.¹⁷ Like traditional outlets, digital platforms disseminate information, shape opinions, and inform the public, but digital outlets add to the conversation first-person testimonies. Thus, firsthand accounts of "living while Black" on social media strengthened empathy and solidarity in the Black Lives Matter movement.

II. Shifts in Public Opinion

To gain momentum, civil resistance movements often rely on the interplay of sympathetic media to generate favorable public opinion. However, substantive reforms are rarely initiated from within the power structure without sustained pressure, and in the struggle for justice, movements have to mobilize enough people, support, and resources to disrupt the inertia of existing institutions.¹⁸ For example, attitudes towards law enforcement are molded by lived experiences



such as harassment and brutality faced by Black Americans that sharply contrasts with the protection and safety offered to privileged communities. However, the success of mass movements for social change requires coalition building with allies that offer strength in numbers, increase social influence, and shield participants from police and counter-protesters.

The public opinion poll conducted by Monmouth University a week after George Floyd's murder showed that: (i) 76% of Americans considered racism and discrimination "a big problem", (ii) 78% Americans agree that outrage driving protests is fully or somewhat justified, and (iii) majority of Americans believed that "police are more likely to use excessive force with a black person than a white person in similar situations."¹⁹ This marked a profound shift: at the start of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013, the majority of American voters disagreed with all three statements above.²⁰

¹³ Chenoweth, Erica, and Maria J. Stephan. *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. Columbia University Press, 2011.

¹⁴ Simpson, Brent, et al. "Does Violent Protest Backfire? Testing a Theory of Public Reactions to Activist Violence." *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, vol. 4, Jan. 2018, p. 237802311880318. DOI.org (Crossref), doi:10.1177/2378023118803189.

¹⁵ Chenoweth, Erica, and Maria J. Stephan. *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. Columbia University Press, 2011.

¹⁶ "How Black Lives Matter Uses Social Media to Fight the Power." *Wired*. [www.wired.com](https://www.wired.com/2015/10/how-black-lives-matter-uses-social-media-to-fight-the-power), <https://www.wired.com/2015/10/how-black-lives-matter-uses-social-media-to-fight-the-power>.

¹⁷ NW, 1615 L. St, et al. "23% of Users in U.S. Say Social Media Led Them to Change Views on an Issue; Some Cite Black Lives Matter." Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/10/15/23-of-users-in-us-say-social-media-led-them-to-change-views-on-issue-some-cite-black-lives-matter/>.

¹⁸ "Marshall Ganz on the Power of Social Movements." Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 11 May 2015, <https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/blog/marshall-ganz-on-the-power-of-social-movements/>.

¹⁹ BranchNJ07764732.571.3400, Monmouth University 400 Cedar Avenue. "Protestors' Anger Justified Even If Actions May Not Be." Monmouth University Polling Institute, https://www.monmouth.edu/polling-institute/reports/monmouthpoll_us_060220/.

²⁰ BranchNJ07764732.571.3400, Monmouth University 400 Cedar Avenue. "Protestors' Anger Justified Even If Actions May Not Be."

Number of people in U.S. who said they protested, according to polls

POLL	% WHO PROTESTED	IMPLIED POPULATION	POLLING PERIOD
Kaiser Family Foundation (1296)	10 %	26 million	June 8-14
Civis Analytics (4446)	9 %	23 million	June 12-22
N.O.R.C. (1310)	7 %	18 million	June 11-15
Pew (9654)	6 %	14 million	June 4-10

Note: Surveys are of the adult population in the United States

Source: *The New York Times* — Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History

The shift in public opinion was reflected in the protest turnout. Despite concerns of the COVID-19 pandemic, an estimated 15 million to 26 million Americans participated in demanding justice for George Floyd.²¹ The geographic spread also demonstrated the spread and depth of support where over 40% of counties in the United States hosted a protest.²²

The broad strokes of public opinion polls can mask the undercurrent of political polarization in the United States. It's true that there has been increased demand for justice and condemnation of racism among wealthy, educated, and politically liberal Americans, but the opinions of politically conservative Americans remain mostly unaffected.²³ Almost a year after Floyd's death, support for Black Lives Matter movement has decreased most sharply among the white population.²⁴

Conclusion

To catalyze durable change, at some point the mobilizing power in the streets must be converted into swinging public opinion and creating room for lasting changes within political and legal structures.²⁵ The ephemeral nature of public support highlights the narrow window of opportunity where social movements gain sufficient momentum to effect policy changes.

Built on years of activism demanding racial justice, Black Lives Matter shifted the paradigm of American discourse on institutional racism to a point where the imagined alternatives to the status quo are now seen not only as possibilities but occasionally as existential imperatives for a democratic society. Legislative proposals including the Breathe Act and campaigns such as 8 Can't Wait highlight the movement's impact thus far. The durability and pace of change is yet to be fully seen, but the trend so far has been nothing short of inspiring.

Monmouth University Polling Institute, https://www.monmouth.edu/polling-institute/reports/monmouthpoll_us_060220/.

²¹ Buchanan, Larry, et al. "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History." *The New York Times*, 3 July 2020. [NYTimes.com, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html).

²² Buchanan, Larry, et al. "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History." *The New York Times*, 3 July 2020. [NYTimes.com, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html).

²³ Reny, Tyler T., and Benjamin J. Newman. "The Opinion-Mobilizing Effect of Social Protest against Police Violence: Evidence from the 2020 George Floyd Protests." *American Political Science Review*, undefined/ed, pp. 1-9. Cambridge University Press, doi:10.1017/S0003055421000460.

²⁴ Samuels, Alex. "How Views On Black Lives Matter Have Changed—And Why That Makes Police Reform So Hard." *FiveThirtyEight*, 13 Apr. 2021, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-views-on-black-lives-matter-have-changed-and-why-that-makes-police-reform-so-hard/>.

²⁵ Francis, Megan Ming. *Civil Rights and the Making of the Modern American State*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

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