

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

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## Abstract

Building on the growing body of research that suggests Twitter has become a key resource for counterpublics to frame discourse about racism and policing in the United States, we explore how the contested online network comprised of tweets about the April 2015 protests in Baltimore, Maryland reflect larger socio-political battles over how conflict and protest about race is understood in mainstream America. Despite claims that online communication can result in polarized echo chambers, we find that even within this highly polarized debate, progressive counterpublic frames found widespread support on Twitter. Progressive racial justice messages were advanced, in part, by brokers who worked across polarized sub-communities in the network to build mutual understanding and model effective strategies for reconciling disparate accounts of protest events.

## Keywords

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

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

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

Two weeks after his arrest, on April 27 - the day of Gray’s funeral - a photograph of protesters standing on a Baltimore police car, with the superimposed text, “All HighSchools Monday @3 We Are Going To Purge From Mondawmin To The Ave, Back To Downtown #Fdl” (sic) began circulating on social media. The image was interpreted by authorities as a reference to the 2013 movie *The Purge*, in which lawlessness ensues following the legalization of all crime for a 12-hour period in a fictionalized, dystopian America. In response to what they perceived to be a credible threat, the Baltimore Police Department pro-actively shut down a shopping mall and metro (public transportation) station in the Mondawmin area, leaving students at a nearby high school stranded at the end of the school day. The details of events immediately following the students’ release from school are contested, with some reports suggesting police officers accosted students who were peaceably assembled, and others suggesting students initiated a confrontation by throwing rocks and bricks at the police officers. In the hours and days that followed, unrest escalated and spread throughout the city, resulting in significant

property damage and dozens of arrests as students and protesters were met with violent police and national guard response.

Another of many incidents involving clashes between police officers and African American communities in the US from 2014 through 2016, news of the events in Baltimore quickly spread through social media, generating over a million tweets in just two days. Unlike hashtags arising from community responses to police brutality that came before it - including #Ferguson, the hashtag associated with similar protests following the police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 - tweets about Baltimore clustered into two sub-groups: #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising.

Building on the growing body of research that suggests Twitter has become a key resource for counterpublics to (re)frame discourse around racism and policing in the United States (Jackson and Foucault Welles, 2016; Jackson and Foucault Welles, 2015), in this paper we explore how contested online networks, such as the one comprised of #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising, reflect larger socio-political battles over who gets to define conflict and protest about race in America and how. Using a mixed-methods combination of computational network analysis and qualitative discourse analysis, we examine leadership both within and between the #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising Twitter sub-communities. In what follows, we describe how, even in the contested case of #Baltimore, networked counterpublics continue to have an outsized influence on the emergent framing of events as they unfolded. Moreover, although extreme voices occasionally work to further polarize the debate, we find that more often, those who broker between the sub-communities advance a progressive racial justice narrative, further supporting the capacity for online communication to empower marginalized voices.

## The Contested Framing of Urban Uprisings

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

Along with the country as a whole, the press has too long basked in a white world, looking out of it, if at all, with white men's eyes and a white perspective. That is no longer good enough. The painful process of readjustment that is required of the American news media must begin now... They must insist on the highest standards of accuracy--not only reporting single events with care and skepticism, but placing each event into meaningful perspective. They must report the travail of our cities with compassion and depth.<sup>1</sup>

Political communication scholars like Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki (2001) and cultural critics like Stuart Hall (2000) have illustrated that the dominant “white perspective” named by the Kerner Commission continues to this day in the way media makers and politicians frame racial politics and issues. At the approach of the 21st century, for example, these dynamics manifested in mainstream press coverage and political commentary on the beating of motorist Rodney King by members of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) and the Los Angeles

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<sup>1</sup> United States. Kerner Commission, Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968)

uprising that followed the officers' acquittals (Jacobs, 2000). Various scholars have explored how mainstream newsmakers failed to contextualize these events and figures within histories of racism and anti-black violence in the United States, constructing instead episodic and fatalistic narratives of a natural and unchangeable divide between white and black Americans. The mainstream press and politicians also tended to falsely equate black responses to violence and marginalization with violence and danger. Infamously, then presidential candidate Bill Clinton called rapper Sister Souljah a "dangerous" "reverse racist" for her critiques of white racism in the weeks following the King incident (Jackson, 2014).

Thus, journalism, electoral politics, and other elite institutions continue to reflect the limited worldviews of those who founded and dominate them, and the resulting frames for understanding communities who have historically been excluded from these institutions limit proposed solutions to social conflict. Ultimately, such framing contributes to the discursive construction of reality (Schröder and Jensen, 2012), limiting the terms of debate about race and racism in the public sphere.

Yet, members of counterpublic communities most affected by poverty and state violence have long attempted to reframe how mainstream elites represent events like urban unrest to the American public. Members of the black public sphere have argued, for example, that the term "riot" has become ideological shorthand used to prime racial stereotypes and foreclose the possibility for complex engagement with why unrest happens while legitimizing the use of suppressive tactics by the state (Jacobs, 2000). In the 1990s, the black press provided an alternative to mainstream coverage of Rodney King's beating and the ensuing events in Los Angeles through thematic framing that focused less on sensationalism and individual figures, and more on how such instances and their reception in the mainstream press were illustrative of

ongoing systemic injustice, racial double standards, and the lasting impact of these phenomena on the African American community (Squires, 2009).

## The Network Democratization of Debates on Urban Unrest

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

Jackson and Foucault Welles (2016; 2015) have theorized the particular role of networked counterpublics in a series of case studies involving the US racial justice activism that has come to be characterized by some as the “New Civil Rights Movement.” Following the case of #myNYPD, in which a twitter hashtag introduced by the New York City Police Department was subsequently repurposed by ordinary citizens and activist groups to draw attention to cases of police brutality and misconduct, they argue that Twitter presents a new opportunity for networked counterpublics to infiltrate and change the terms of mainstream debate about issues of race and police brutality (Jackson and Foucault Welles, 2015). A follow-up piece tracks the emergence of #Ferguson, highlighting the role that ordinary citizens of color played in framing the killing of Michael Brown and subsequent protests in Ferguson, Missouri as the events in

Ferguson became a national news story (Jackson and Foucault Welles, 2016). Likewise, Freelon et al. (2016) found that the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter has eclipsed the social media spaces where it was created and spread; becoming the slogan for one of the most visible and important social movements in contemporary American politics. Taken together, this work makes the case that networked counterpublics, using the collective power and reach of Twitter, are meaningfully impacting the mainstream public sphere and democratizing discussion of race and racial justice in the US.

This is not to say that only counterpublic influences are visible and influential on Twitter. Rather, many publics, including those reflecting powerful interests are levying new technology for the creation and dissemination of political messages (Benkler, 2006). And certainly the origins of the internet, including social media spaces, are rooted in projects of militarism, capitalism, and surveillance that limit/pushback against counterpublic discourse (Foster and McChesney, 2014). Further, Choi's (2014) analysis of political discourse on Twitter suggests that online discussions can be rather insular, a confirmation of Sunstein's (2009) internet "echo chambers," where homophily and selective exposure conspire to limit information exchange across ideological frames. Because prior work on counterpublic activism often focuses on cases that remained relatively uncontested online (even if they were considerably contested offline and in the mainstream press) it is difficult to rule out the possibility that networked counterpublics operate in echo chambers (Sunstein, 2009; Jamieson and Cappella, 2008), with ordinary citizens of color enjoying unprecedented access to the mainstream public sphere, but perhaps influencing only those who are already receptive and/or sympathetic to their causes. Examining a contested network, such as the one that emerged during the protests following Freddie Gray's death in Baltimore, allows us to more clearly examine the discursive, ideological, and political battles that



occur between various publics online and to answer questions about why particular voices become more, or less, influential in these battles. The clustering that occurred around #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising presents a valuable opportunity for researchers, given that these hashtags represent the various impulses, limits, and possibilities of social media discourse and evoke common but contradictory frames used to describe urban protest activity (Trottier and Fuchs, 2014).

Given this, our work was guided by the following research questions:

**Research Question 1:** Who most centrally influenced the emergence and growth of #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising, and how did their identities and networked positions differ?

**Research Question 2:** How did digital discourse differ between #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising, and what does this tell us about the respective framing strategies used within each sub-group?

**Research Question 3:** Who were the brokers between and among #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising and what do their identities and strategies tell us about points of contention and reconciliation between different ideological framings of the same event?

## Methods

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

## Twitter Data and Network Specification

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

## Identifying Influential Network Nodes

The chief goal of our network analysis was to identify members of the network who had an outsized influence on the overall conversation. There are a number of different ways that “influence” can be measured in social networks. In studies of online activism, researchers often identify hubs, or nodes with a disproportionately large number of ties, relative to the distribution of ties in the network as a whole (Barabási and Albert, 1999). Such hubs command disproportionate attention in the network, and map conceptually to what Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveria (2012) call *crowdsourced elites* – individuals who, through communicative acts such as retweeting and mentioning, are endorsed by the network as important. Guided by this conceptualization, we first disaggregated the data into separate networks, one for users who authored tweets containing #BaltimoreRiots, and one for those who authored tweets containing #BaltimoreUprising. Users tweeting with both hashtags appeared in both networks, otherwise, users were only included in the network corresponding to the hashtag they used. Then, we identified the 10 most popular (highest in-degree centrality) nodes within each individual hashtag

network (#BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising) and extracted tweets generated by or about these nodes for inclusion in our discourse analysis.

However, hubs are just one of the many ways we might conceptualize influence in a network. Burt (2005) argues that some nodes cultivate influence not by having the most ties, but by having a diverse set of ties, such that they are among the only individuals in conversation with otherwise distinct sub-groups. These *brokers* wield influence in networks as their position allows them to gatekeep and/or otherwise control the flow of information within communication networks (Fernandez and Gould, 1994). In a polarized online network, such as the one consisting of the union of #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising tweets that emerged during the Baltimore protests, brokers may play a particularly influential role communicating across and between sub-communities. Thus, we identified brokers within and between the #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising sub-communities for further analysis. To do so, we created a network of all the users who either tweeted using *both* #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising (in the same tweet, or in separate tweets sent during the data collection window), *or* tweeted using one of the hashtags *and* were retweeted or mentioned in a tweet containing the other hashtag. Given Twitter's notification defaults at the time these messages were generated, these inclusion criteria ensured that the users in the combined network were either actively using both hashtags, or where at least minimally aware of both hashtags, as they would have received notifications about tweets containing the hashtag they did not use. From this set of users, we constructed a retweet and mention network of 5,601 nodes connected by 12,621 links. This allowed us to identify the 10 nodes with highest betweenness centrality, a measure of the extent to which a node falls on the shortest path between other nodes, and associated with Burt's (2005) conceptualization of

importance by tie diversity. We extracted tweets generated by or about these brokers for use in our discourse analysis.

## Discourse Analysis

As a method, discourse analysis allows researchers to go beyond the identification and description of networks and their members to understand how networked elites engaged in processes of meaning-making using text, images, videos, etc. It involves closely reading the text in question (in this case, tweets), looking for trends and patterns in how individuals use language, image, tone, and other discursive strategies to frame and shape discussion. In this case, we examine #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising tweets for causal interpretations of the events that unfolded in Baltimore following the death of Freddie Gray, attributions of blame for these events, narrative construction regarding the events of Gray's arrest, death, and the subsequent protests, and the use of particular tropes (e.g. black incivility vs. state oppression). We performed this discourse analysis on 3,769 unique tweets generated by or about the crowdsourced elites or brokers in the #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising (combined) network.

## Findings

### Hashtag Overview

In total, over 2,400,000 tweets containing the hashtags #BaltimoreRiots or #BaltimoreUprising were generated in the late hours of April 26, 2015 as the protests began, through the early hours of April 30, as the protests wound down and community efforts to clean up began. The #BaltimoreRiots hashtag trended first, appearing in more than 5,000 tweets before

the first #BaltimoreUprising tweets appeared in the late afternoon of April 27. #BaltimoreRiots continued to surge in popularity in the overnight hours of April 27 to 28, and remained dominant until late in the night of April 28, when it was overtaken in both hour-by-hour and cumulative frequency by #BaltimoreUprising. Use of #BaltimoreUprising surged in the overnight hours of both April 28-29 and April 29-30, and ultimately appeared in almost twice as many tweets as #BaltimoreRiots, overall.

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

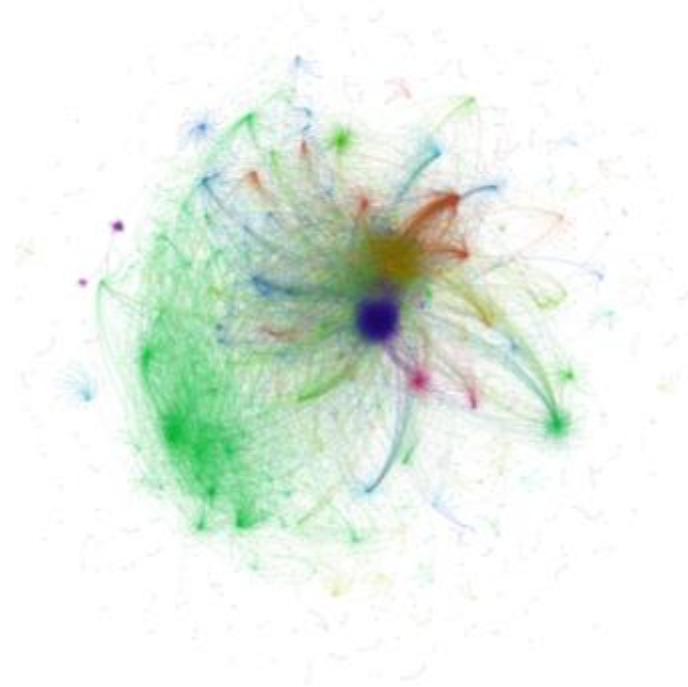


Figure 1. Graphical representation of the #BaltimoreUprising and #BaltimoreRiots network that emerged on Twitter during the Baltimore, Maryland protests on April 26-30, 2015. 11,916 nodes represent individual Twitter users, 21,021 links represent retweets and mentions between users; isolates have been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

## #BaltimoreUprising

### Crowdsourced Elites

Looking more closely within the #BaltimoreUprising sub-community (Figure 2), we see network ties disproportionately pointing to a very small number of high in-degree nodes. These nodes, the *crowdsourced elites* within the #BaltimoreUprising network include two notable activists, Deray McKesson who was retweeted or mentioned over 13,000 times in our sample (@deray, in-degree = 13,664), and Johnetta Elzie who was retweeted or mentioned over 800 times in our sample (@netaaaaaaa, in-degree = 856). Of note, @deray was retweeted or mentioned more than three times more often than the next most retweeted node in the network,

suggesting he alone had a disproportionate influence over the hashtag and accompanying conversation.

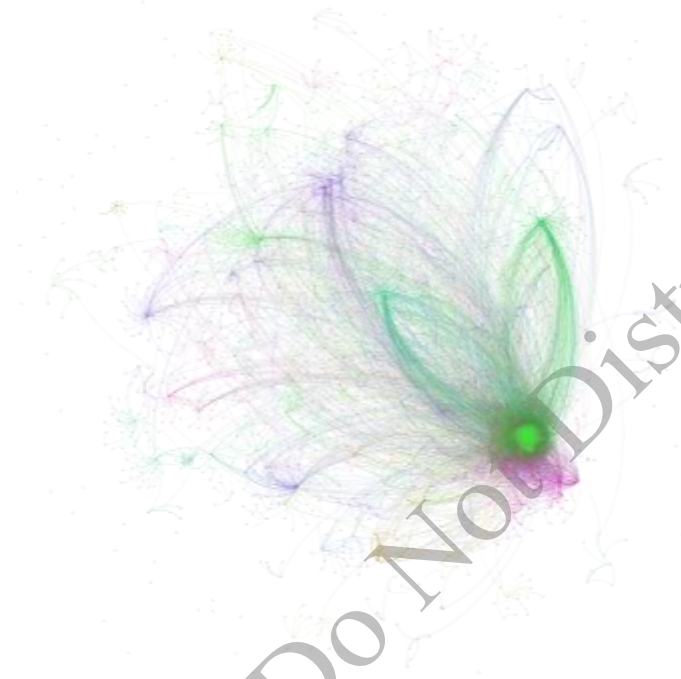


Figure 2. Graphical representation of the #BaltimoreUprising sub-community within the #BaltimoreUprising and #BaltimoreRiots network that emerged on Twitter during the Baltimore, Maryland protests on April 26-30, 2015. The graph was generated with Gephi 0.9.1.

Other crowdsourced elites include local and regional activists and activist organizations such as Keegan Stephen (@keeganNYC, in-degree = 1436), Baltimore Bloc (@BmoreBloc, in-degree = 731), and alternative/independent news outlets such as the Bipartisan Report (@bipartisanism, in-degree = 3,914). Three of the top 10 most retweeted or mentioned accounts were parody accounts, or accounts that borrow the name and/or likeness of a celebrity or fictional character and tweet under that guise. Although some have suggested these accounts can be deceptive or problematic (Wan et al., 2015), others have found that their content, however irreverent, plays an important discursive role in online communication (Highfield, 2015).

Because of their prominent role in the network, we included tweets from parody accounts in our discourse analysis.

## Discursive Frames

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

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

On the other hand, @deray, @nettaaaaaaa, and the other crowdsourced elites using the #BaltimoreUprising hashtag, framed the police, and state responses to urban unrest and black



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

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

Finally, #BaltimoreUprising elites also engaged in frequent and explicit criticism of mainstream media framing of events in Baltimore and the mainstream framing of urban unrest generally. For example, @bipartisanism tweeted images of student and child demonstrators in Baltimore and images of Baltimore demonstrators helping one another noting that media “won’t show” these kinds of images of urban uprising. Likewise, @bipartisanism criticized the “fake narrative” of the unrest being spread in the media, specifically targeting Fox News for a series of tweets about the “lies” that “villainize protestors.” Several of the parody accounts, including

@therealbanksy and @Bill\_Nye\_Tho also explicitly critiqued the sensational images picked up and spread by mainstream media, and @astraeenixie, and activist account, shared a widely retweeted video in the #BaltimoreUprising network that pointed out the hypocrisy in media attention and public concern about “black people burn[ing] stuff” when the media and public paid so little attention to the conditions of poverty, disenfranchisement, and state violence that led to it.

## #BaltimoreRiots

### Crowdsourced Elites

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

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

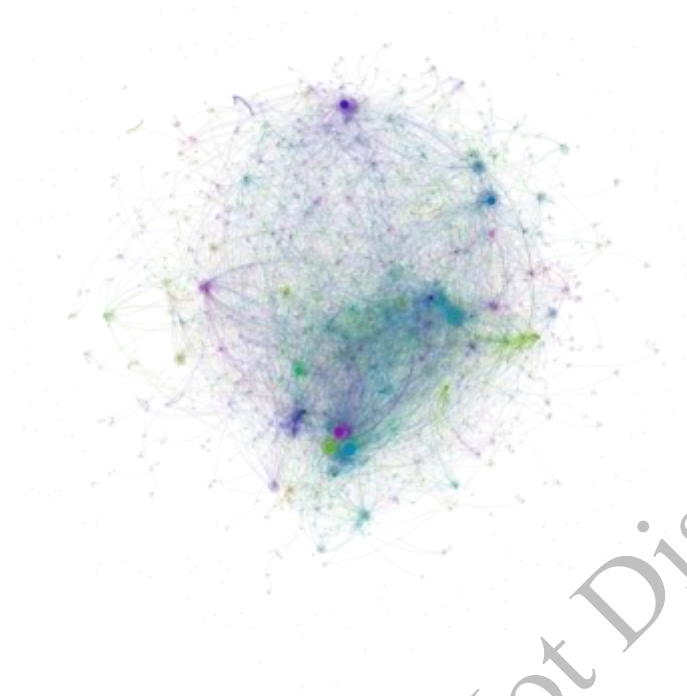


Figure 3. Graphical representation of the #BaltimoreRiots sub-community within the #BaltimoreUprising and #BaltimoreRiots network that emerged on Twitter during the Baltimore, Maryland protests on April 26-30, 2015. The graph was generated with Gephi 0.9.1.

In addition to these parody accounts, several media outlets featured among the crowdsourced elites in the #BaltimoreRiots network, including the official twitter accounts for Fox News and CNN. One alternate news account, the Bipartisan Report, which also featured prominently in the #BaltimoreUprising network was influential in the #BaltimoreRiots network as well (@Bipartisanism, in-degree = 6,720). The remaining crowdsourced elites were young, Black users tweeting videos of the protests. These users have since deleted their accounts, and therefore, to respect their privacy, we have elected not to use their names or Twitter handles, but we do discuss the content of their tweets, below.

### Discursive Frames

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

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

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

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<sup>3</sup> A senior center under construction in East Baltimore was destroyed by fire on April 27, 2015. Although the fire occurred during the same time as the protests, the construction site was located several miles away, and the fire was likely unconnected to the protest activities.

performed the very ideological work that was widely critiqued in the #BaltimoreUprising network as lacking context and denigrating black protest.

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

In this frame, black citizens constructed as behaving badly were often pitted against black citizens constructed as exceptional in efforts to discredit black protest. For example, @childhoodruiner tweeted that “this man knows what he’s talking about” alongside a video of an African American man saying that protesting “right” involves meeting with clergy and legislators, not violence and destruction. Besides oversimplifying the unrest in Baltimore, this description relies on a conservative frame that presumes working within established systems like the church and the state are the only forms of legitimate activism. In this vein, much of the media criticism in the #BaltimoreRiots network decried the fact that mainstream media did not give more attention to African Americans who sided with police.

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

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

## Brokers

In the face of ideological opposition, Twitter discourse can function to bring people closer, or push them farther apart (Conover et al., 2011). In the combined #BaltimoreUprising and #BaltimoreRiots network, we see evidence of both reconciliation and entrenchment in

discursive frames. On one hand, we found that the brokers in the combined network were most often positioned within the #BaltimoreUprising cluster, occupying a gatekeeping role between #BaltimoreUprising and #BaltimoreRiots (Fernandez and Gould, 1994), and doing discursive work to bridge disagreements and advance common understanding between groups. However, some brokers, who we call *stokers*, were positioned within a single cluster and were retweeted heavily within their respective poles, but not across both. This positioning suggests that some messages gained traction *because* of opposition to the differing ideological frames, not in spite of it. Recall that those sampled into the combined network included only those users who were aware of both hashtags (either through direct use, or through a pattern of retweets or mentions that would have produced notifications of tweets containing both hashtags). When faced with conflicting frames, it appears that many users attempted to reconcile inconsistencies through engaged discourse, but others doubled-down, retweeting messages ideologically consistent with their original frame (whatever that may have been), in an attempt to crowd out alternate interpretations of the protest activities.

### Stokers

Of four stokers in the network, three used discourse ideologically aligned with #BaltimoreUprising while one used unrepentantly #BaltimoreRiots framing. @globalrevlive, @weactradio, and @rousseau\_ist, three activist-centered accounts, worked to reify the discourse of the #BaltimoreUprising network by offering a stream of critiques of the state and mainstream response to the death of Freddie Gray and subsequent events in Baltimore. As a result, these accounts were widely retweeted by members of the #BaltimoreUprising network as they worked

discursively to center issues of inequality, racism, and state oppression in their accounting of protest events.

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



## Brokers

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

Everyday citizens, such as @BmoreDoc, @freedomgirl2011, @TruthCastersTV, and @BaltoSpectator were all part of the #BaltimoreUprising cluster (having primarily used #BaltimoreUprising and its associated messages in their tweets), but rather than constructing original narratives, they more often retweeted each other and the crowdsourced elites from the #BaltimoreUprising network, adding encouraging messages and contextual details to the tweets. What set these brokers apart from other (non-brokers) in the network was their frequent engagement other twitter users about events unfolding in Baltimore, including users in the #BaltimoreRiots cluster with whom they disagreed. For example, both @BaltoSpectator and @freedomgirl2011 regularly used pictures and videos to refute messages coming from the #BaltimoreRiots cluster. This had the effect of drawing members of the #BaltimoreRiots and #BaltimoreUprising sub-communities together to deliberate the validity of disparate interpretations of the same protest events. Another broker, @BmoreDoc, engaged in a similar strategy, amplifying popular #BaltimoreUprising images and adding his own commentary on

their content. For instance, citing an image of violent clashes between police and protesters, @BmoreDoc noted, “This is the shame of America. The police are threatening and intimidating peaceful, nonviolent protesters.” Although such discourse was not uncommon within the #BaltimoreUprising cluster, what was novel about @BmoreDoc was his habit of retweeting extended exchanges with both critics and supporters. When members of the broader community, including those within the #BaltimoreRiots cluster questioned his interpretations, he not only responded, but also shared their critiques and his responses for all to see. While elevating and contributing to the broadcast of #BaltimoreUprising framing, he simultaneously modeled effective techniques for framing and reframing events through a progressive, racial justice lens. Thus, he was able to advance his message, while also demonstrating how others might effectively join the effort.

## Conclusion

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

The polarized network that emerged to describe the protests in the wake of Freddie Gray’s death in Baltimore, Maryland in April, 2015 provided an excellent opportunity to

examine how online activism by networked counterpublics plays out in the face of considerable contestation. Echoing the historically significant frames of racial justice protest coverage, the network was discursively divided, with one-third of users tweeting with #BaltimoreRiot, and two-thirds tweeting with #BaltimoreUprising. Looking more closely at the discursive content produced by crowdsourced leaders within each hashtag sub-community, we saw that the activists, citizens, and independent journalists in the #BaltimoreUprising sub-community tweeted messages that were consistent with historical and contemporary attempts by Black counterpublics to contextualize urban protest in terms of ongoing inequalities, racial injustice, police overreach, and racism. The discursive content of #BaltimoreRiots tweets was more mixed. Some traditional media outlets, including Fox News and CNN, advanced frames consistent with traditional “riot” narratives (including images of altercations between police and African American protesters, and images of a burning CVS store). Similarly, individual citizens and parody accounts dismissed the protests as dangerous and unreasonable, casting urban protest as an illegitimate form of social activism. However, others in the #BaltimoreRiot sub-community challenged those narratives explicitly, often juxtaposing the words #BaltimoreRiots against images of peaceful protesters and/or community members helping one another during or after protest events.

Looking more broadly at how these two sub-communities intersected, we discovered two patterns. On one hand, in the face of oppositional framing the *stokers* reiterated polarized discourse, working to reify core messages and, arguably, further polarize the network. On the other hand, the *brokers*, worked across the polarized network, advocating for protesters and the Baltimore community more generally. In messages consistent with the #BaltimoreUprising framing, the brokers specifically engaged both sub-communities in the network, using images,

video, and text to simultaneously advance a progressive message, and also engage in meaningful deliberation about protesters and protest events. By retweeting these conversations for all to see, the brokers demonstrated effective strategies for advancing progressive messages and refuting dissenting, often racist, framing. Of note, we found no evidence of brokers working in the opposite direction to advance anti-protest narratives through constructive deliberation.

These results underscore the power of new media activism to (re)frame messages about urban unrest and protest, and to advance counterpublic narratives. Although the overall network that emerged along with the protests in Baltimore shows considerably more evidence of ideological polarization than others in recent history (e.g. #Ferguson), progressive racial justice frames, consistent with those advanced by networked counterpublics, continued to propagate more broadly than the racialized “riot” framing advanced by traditional elites and those on the far right. The popularity of progressive messages was facilitated, in part, by brokers who actively worked across the polarized network to advance counterpublic messages and reconcile dissenting accounts. These results highlight the particularly important role that brokers play in framing contested events, and offer insight into pathways for reconciling contentious accounts of urban unrest.

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