

Scaling Social Movements Through Social Media: The Case of Black Lives Matter

Social Media + Society
October-December 2018: 1–14
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DOI: 10.1177/2056305118807911
journals.sagepub.com/home/sms


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Abstract

In this article, we explore the potential role of social media in helping movements expand and/or strengthen themselves internally, processes we refer to as *scaling up*. Drawing on a case study of Black Lives Matter (BLM) that includes both analysis of public social media accounts and interviews with BLM groups, we highlight possibilities created by social media for building connections, mobilizing participants and tangible resources, coalition building, and amplifying alternative narratives. We also discuss challenges and risks associated with using social media as a platform for scaling up. Our analysis suggests that while benefits of social media use outweigh its risks, careful management of online media platforms is necessary to mitigate concrete, physical risks that social media can create for activists.

Keywords

Black Lives Matter, scaling up, social movements, coalitions, narratives, networks

Introduction

In recent years, scholars have begun exploring the significance of social media for social movements and movement activism. While research differs on how and in what ways social media platforms inform social movement endeavors (Earl, Kimport, Prieto, Rush, & Reynoso, 2010), the proliferation of scholarship in this area suggests that digital platforms “have become essential tools for 21st-century social movements” (Freelon, McIlwain, & Clark, 2016, p. 2).

An under-explored area of social movement research is the role social media can play in broadening movement impact. We address that issue in this article by exploring opportunities and challenges that social media creates for movements to *scale up*, which we define as the process of expansion and/or internal strengthening that broadens movement impact (Ross et al., under review). Drawing on the case of Black Lives Matter (BLM), we use a mixed methods research design to explore how social media platforms, in particular Facebook and Twitter, can provide opportunities for activist groups to broaden movement impact. We contribute to existing social movement literature by highlighting the importance of social media as a scaling tool that simultaneously facilitates *strengthening* the movement by facilitating collective meaning-making and the creation of support networks and *expanding* the movement, specifically by enabling local BLM groups to form coalitions and to amplify and disseminate non-dominant discourses about police brutality and

Black liberation. Our research also illustrates the challenges created by social media usage, which extend beyond limitations outlined in existing empirical scholarship.

Review of the Literature

Broadening the impact of social movements has not been the explicit focus of much scholarship focused on social media. However, existing literature about the role of social media in collective action, more broadly, offers insight into its importance for mobilization, coalition building, and collective meaning making. These illustrate possible functions social media can play in scaling initiatives for social change and provide the framework for this study.

Social Media and Mobilization

The most obvious and intuitive link between social media and scaling is its potential for mobilizing new activists. As scholars have noted, partly due to its “public sphere” nature, social media creates participation opportunities—such as

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boosting protest turnout or supporting fundraising campaigns—that broaden mobilization, thus helping scale movement endeavors. For instance, Khamis and Vaughn (2012) point to the significance of Facebook in disseminating information and mobilizing participants during the Tahrir Square protests in Egypt. They also note the importance of Facebook pages and groups in providing “safe spaces” for protesters to meet, as well as “a type of public commons for free speech” not available elsewhere (p. 157). De Choudhury et al.’s (2016) analysis of BLM further emphasizes these points, pointing to social media as a platform for continued involvement and reflection around issues related to race and policing and highlighting its significance for developing common understandings of ideology and a shared sense of movement identity.

While recruitment of participants is most centrally discussed in the literature, some scholarship indicates that social media activists use social media to mobilize other necessary resources. For instance, Sommerfeldt (2011, 2013) shows that activist groups utilize digital media to generate monetary donations for their work. Doan and Toledano (2018) also illustrate the potential for mobilizing funding through digital crowdfunding campaigns. This emerging area of research suggests a powerful role for social media in providing movements with the tangible resources necessary for scaling their endeavors.

Social Media and Coalition Building

Largely missing from existing literature is the role of social media in shaping coalitions, even as social movement scholarship outlines the significance of coalitions in building and sustaining movements (Ackerman & Duvall, 2005; Shaw, 2013). The handful of scholars who explore the role of social media in shaping coalitions suggest that its role is to create space for online social networks that allow activists to strengthen connections and build social capital. For example, drawing on interviews with protest participants in Taiwan, Nien (2017) argues that social media can create “weak ties” that draw together protesters with different identities, but who come together against a common enemy. Hwang and Kim (2015) use a social capital framework to argue that large online networks contribute to weak and strong ties, both of which have positive effects on intention to participate in a social movement. Furthermore, as Baron (2013) indicates, social media facilitates the creation of *large* and *sustainable* interpersonal networks or coalitions by enabling personalized and organizational sharing (see also Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

Researchers point to the importance of shared narratives, ideologies, and/or collective identity as a basis for bringing groups together in coalitions (e.g., Bystydzienski & Schacht, 2001; Chávez, 2011; Fligstein, 2001). These authors indicate that the ability to bring together diverse interests around a common cause is critical. Mizrahi and Rosenthal (2001)

suggest that successful coalitions are also characterized by conducive sociopolitical and economic conditions, a competent core leadership group committed to collaboration, and access to resources. However, while resource consolidation or inspirational leaders may spark coalition building, those coalitions that last develop both a shared ideological focus and organizational structures to uphold alliances long term (Bystydzienski & Schacht, 2001, pp. 8-9). These essential elements for successful coalition building are the same processes that scholarship indicates social media use can bolster: meaning making, resource mobilization, and member recruitment.

Social Media and Meaning Making

Existing research indicates that social media can help shape discourse on relevant political issues. As a “public space,” social media is not used solely to disseminate information about movement tactics or actions but also plays a role in shaping the very discourse on issues that social movements raise (Carney, 2016). Milan (2015) argues that by creating opportunities for recurring interactions among activists, social media serves as

the vehicle of meaning work, adjoining and to some extent replacing other traditional intermediaries such as alternative and mainstream media and face-to-face interactions. In other words, it became the process through which the symbolic takes form, rather than its mere physical (or virtual) representation. (p. 890)

Writing about the Occupy Wall Street movement, both Kavada (2015) and Penney and Dadas (2013) note the salience of digital spaces both for collective meaning making processes. Other authors discuss its importance for disseminating shared ideologies into public discourse (Olesen, 2013; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012).

Because of its role in meaning making, social media platforms also enable diverse groups to discuss, plan, and act together. Thorson, Edgerly, Kligler-Vilenchik, and Luping Wang (2016) draws on research around the People’s Climate March to highlight the range of groups utilizing digital platforms for framing the climate issue, and crucially, for enabling “personalized framings of the climate issue to be made visible to one another, a precondition for building bridges across distinct orientations to climate” (p. 4800). Thorson et al.’s research suggests that social media spaces create “big tents” that enable multiple personalized frames to be used simultaneously under a broad umbrella. As such, these opportunities help engender a sense of collective identity and cause, which has been shown to be crucial for effective social movement organizing (e.g., Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Valocchi, 2009).

As distinct from traditional organizing, Bennett and Segerberg (2011, 2012) note that in digital environments, collective action is far more personalized. In social media

spaces especially, political content is expressed via “personal action frames” that are inclusive of multiple personal reasons for contesting the status quo (p. 744). Bennett & Segerberg suggest that communication technologies enable the sharing of these personalized frames. Movements that use social media platforms “have frequently been larger; have scaled up more quickly; and have been flexible in tracking moving political targets and bridging different issues,” compared with conventional movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 742). Calls to action *not* based on the use of personal action frames, they argue, may not be as widely relevant, necessitating additional resources for aligning diverse frames and creating a sense of collective identity. Similarly, Earl and Kimport (2014) point out that the accessibility of digital spaces has led to organizing around a much broader set of issues than previously.

Limitations and Risks of Social Media

It is important to note, however, that scholarship does not uniformly suggest a positive role for social media in promoting activism and social movement participation. Youmans and York (2012) highlight constraints that proprietary social media platforms like Facebook can place on grassroots organizers who use these platforms to disrupt or challenge regimes. These include preventing the use of pseudonymous or anonymous posts, counter-activism by regime actors to remove the accounts of key movement activists or shutting down the use of social media altogether, or the doxxing¹ of activists by regime allies on social media. As they note, “social media tools that facilitate protest can also be used by repressive regimes and their supporters to dampen and disrupt opposition” (p. 323).

Hintz (2016) further addresses restrictions that may exist when social media is used to voice and mobilize dissent due to commercial interests underlying social media platforms. Indeed, events such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal involving Facebook data use leading up to the 2016 US elections have illustrated the potential for data collected through social media platforms to be exploited and potentially used in insidious ways (Tufekci, 2018). Moreover, Poell (2014) notes that use of symbols, pseudonymous postings, and certain linguistic choices may be viewed as *self-censorship* on the part of activists, potentially interpreted “as the result of states successfully steering Internet users away from directly expressing political critique, and confronting central state authorities” (pp. 195/196). In addition, while Bennett and Segerberg highlight potential benefits of digital organizing, the broader range of issues addressed in this context can also lead to more diverse understandings of movement ideology and potentially mitigate opportunities for collective identity development. Indeed, scholars note that the ability to achieve a collective identity is partially shaped by the nature of the movement’s issue of focus. For example, Freelon et al. (2016) suggest that the relative success of BLM is due to its

focus on the concrete issue of police brutality, noting, “Unlike wealth or income inequality, police brutality is concrete, discrete in its manifestations, and above all, visual” (p. 82). They argue that this emphasis makes BLM’s work particularly well-suited to Internet-based activism, in contrast with, for example, Occupy Wall Street, with its focus on the more amorphous (and difficult to visually express) issue of wealth inequality. This suggests that while social media spaces *can* serve as platforms for building collective identity and creating a cohesive movement ideology that might mobilize new participants or facilitate coalition-building, it is also important to explore constraints that social media can place on mobilization for and engagement in collective action.

In sum, existing literature suggests that social media can facilitate meaning making, resource mobilization, and coalition building, thus pointing to its potential utility for helping social movements scale up. Scholarship also points to the constraints of social media on movement activity, both structurally through co-option by state agents and in terms of the potential of digital platforms to blur the clear ideology necessary for movements to scale. However, none of the aforementioned studies explore how these uses and limitations of social media, in tandem, serve to build and constrain a movement. Indeed, the study that most closely approximates our exploration (De Choudhury, Jhaver, Sugar, & Weber, 2016) maintains a somewhat limited understanding of movement growth, focusing on the number of participants in a movement versus a more holistic conceptualization of scaling. Likewise, most studies employ a single methodology, either quantitative or qualitative, to address research questions related to social media as a tool for social movements. Only Baron (2013) approaches his research question with a mixed methodology, but the movements he explores are geographically bound to Washington State versus a broadly dispersed, non-hierarchical movement. This indicates that further research is needed in order to understand whether and how social media shapes possibilities for movement scaling, particularly in the context of large, loosely connected movements with a strong digital presence.

Social Media and BLM

To address this gap, we focus on the role of social media in the context of BLM, a movement inextricably tied to the digital sphere. Since its inception in 2014, BLM has grown into a national network, part of the broader movement for Black Lives that includes more than 50 organizations with a shared vision and platform for Black liberation and an end to police brutality.² BLM is characterized by its explicit rejection of hierarchy and centralized leadership, instead billing itself as “leader-ful,” horizontally structured, and characterized by an intersectional approach that lifts up queer women of color (Milkman, 2017). As Ransby (2017) notes, “The suggestion that the organizations that have emerged from the Black Lives Matter protests are somehow lacking because

they have rejected the old style of leadership misses what makes this movement most powerful.”

Existing research focusing on BLM largely attempts to contextualize the spread of the #blacklivesmatter hashtag. Gallagher, Reagan, Danforth, and Dodds (2018) compare the discourse of BLM and All Lives Matter, based on Twitter usage of hashtags associated with each. They find that the diversity of topics related to BLM is greater than that associated with the #AllLivesMatter hashtag, which is more tightly intertwined with conservative perspectives. Further to this point, Ince, Rojas and Davis (2016) focus on how the public interacts with BLM, highlighting to the potential of broad audiences, rather than just central movement activists, to “alter and manipulate the movement’s construction of meaning” (p. 1827). Finally, Yang (2016) illustrates that use of #blacklivesmatter provides an opportunity for users to engage in narrative agency, that is, to create their own stories and discourse around the term and its meaning (see also Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). In contrast, however, Duncan-Shippy, Murphy, and Purdy’s (2017) exploration of variation in the intensity and topical breadth of the coverage of BLM by mainstream media finds that mainstream media tends to frame BLM through a relatively narrow lens. Thus, the literature suggests potential tensions between a possible lack of focus on movement messaging on one hand and a media (and public) perception of BLM as narrowly focused on the other hand.

Existing research points to the significance of BLM as an emerging movement in the United States, but also illustrates potential contradictions and gaps in our understanding of the way it is shaped by social media platforms. Our study seeks to address some of these gaps by focusing specifically on how social media creates opportunities and challenges for BLM to broaden its impact. Drawing primarily on interview data from social media–based groups that use the BLM frame, we explore the complexity of scaling through social media in the context of a largely, but not solely, digital movement. We address both possibilities and challenges of using social media as a tool for broadening the impact of BLM as a network and as individual groups.

Research Design

Our interpretations are the result of a multi-part, mixed methods process of data collection and analysis. We first created a comprehensive database of public “BLM” social media accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. This database became the basis for a quantitative analysis of the types of groups flying under the banner of Black Lives Matter, BLM, or #blacklivesmatter groups. Subsequently, we used this database to strategically select a subset of these groups to interview about social media use within and across the movement. These interviews provided us with deeper, qualitative insights on the opportunities and limitations of using social media to scale up social justice movements.

Quantitative Methodology: Database Development

Our research team first identified 362 social media accounts by searching for the name Black Lives Matter or BLM and for accounts that used the #blacklivesmatter hashtag in their profile on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Comprehensiveness of the database was ensured by searching social media applications multiple times as well as by having multiple individuals conduct these searches. All three authors were engaged in the searches during two primary windows of time, first in January of 2017 and a second time in April of 2017. During each search window, an average of six independent searches were conducted by each author.

Information collected about each of the social media accounts included location, date when the social media account was started (when available), and stated affiliation (or not) as a chapter of the BLM network (when this information was available).³ We later added in information about number of members (for groups), likes (for pages), or followers (for Twitter handles), and any information in the “about me” blurb or group/page/handle profile.

Database Profile

After compiling the database of BLM social media accounts, we conducted an initial analysis to better understand different approaches and primary mission/activities characterizing BLM as a movement.⁴ First, we removed accounts with a description illustrating that the nature of the group was to counter or challenge (rather than support) the principles of BLM and consolidated the database to prevent duplication of groups with multiple social media accounts.⁵ This left us with 296 social media accounts, of which 161 included information in the profile description that allowed us to categorize the accounts in more detail.

Of these 161 accounts, 42 (26%) self-identified as linked to the national BLM movement, while another 49 (30%) identified in ways that suggested some affiliation but in ways that were unclear.⁶ The remaining 70 accounts (44%) used the BLM name or hashtag, but claimed no explicit link to the national network or the Movement for Black Lives. As we discuss later in the article, this suggests that the accessibility of social media allows groups to take on the mantle of social movements without direct connections to movement activity or leadership.

We also categorized social media accounts according to profile information about engagement with social justice issues; 52 (32%) accounts emphasized issues related to systemic oppression of Black people, while 13 (8%) focused explicitly on issues related to criminal justice and police brutality. Another 14 (9%) groups emphasized affirmation and empowerment of Black people. Of the remaining groups, 31 (19%) discussed a combination of these or other areas of focus, such as addressing capitalism and colonialism,

Table 1. Typology of BLM social media accounts.

| | Number | Percentage ^a |
|--|--------|-------------------------|
| <i>Affiliation with BLM national network</i> | | |
| Linked to national network | 42 | 26% |
| Unclear link | 49 | 30% |
| No explicit link | 70 | 44% |
| <i>Type of social justice engagement</i> | | |
| Systemic oppression of Black people | 52 | 32% |
| Criminal justice/police brutality | 13 | 8% |
| Affirmation/empowerment of Black people | 14 | 9% |
| Combination or other | 31 | 19% |
| <i>Level of engagement</i> | | |
| Direct action | 34 | 21% |
| Providing information to broader community | 3 | 2% |
| Dialogue and online discussion | 28 | 17% |
| <i>Other forms of self-identification</i> | | |
| College/educational group | 6 | 4% |
| Ally group | 3 | 2% |
| Book club/book discussion group | 2 | 1% |
| Women's groups | 4 | 2% |
| Other distinct form of self-identification | 9 | 6% |

^aPercentage is percentage of groups out of the 161 social media accounts providing sufficient profile information to be included in these characterizations, rounded to the nearest whole number.

misogyny, or community empowerment. In terms of level of engagement, we noted the existence of groups that claimed to focus on direct action or mobilization of their members (34 groups, 21%); those dedicated to providing information to the broader community about social justice issues (3 groups, 2%); and those social media accounts with a goal of creating spaces for dialogue and communication in the online setting (28 groups, 17%).⁷

Our categorization of groups also included how they self-identified, specifically when this self-identification addressed something other than existence as a geographically based chapter (formal or informal) of the national BLM network. Although fairly uncommon, distinct areas of self-identification included several college-based and educationally focused groups (6), groups explicitly affiliating as created for White allies engaged in anti-racist work (3), book clubs (2), and women's groups (4). In addition, one group was created to help organize a "buy black-owned" business challenge, while another community group expanded on the premises of #BLM to focus on "Black, Brown & Red Lives." This variety in the self-identification of groups further speaks to the potential of drawing on the #blacklivesmatter hashtag and addressing core premises of the BLM movement in a way that remains distinct from some of the movement's goals, which we

discuss in detail later in the manuscript. A summary of these characteristics is presented in Table 1.

In addition to substantive areas of categorization, we also noted in our analysis the geographic spread of those groups for which location information was available, highlighting both the international nature of the BLM movement as well as the areas of greater and lesser BLM density. This geographic dispersal can be seen in Figure 1.

Our analysis highlighted the wide range of actors and action types that characterize BLM-related social media accounts, even as these accounts all signal solidarity or even affiliation with the BLM movement as a whole. This variety raised further questions about the use of digital platforms in the context of social movement work, which we aimed to address through in-depth discussions with a subset of the groups in our database.

Qualitative Methodology: Semi-Structured Interviews

To better understand these trends and use of social media by these groups, we contacted administrators of 48 social media accounts for interviews, drawn from the 161 accounts for which we had substantive profile information. We used a theoretical sampling strategy to select the groups we invited to interview. Specifically, these accounts were selected because they reflected diversity in terms of location, number of followers/members, affiliation with the BLM network, type and level of social justice engagement, and other areas of self-identification, as per our initial analysis. Our aim was to reach out to a subset of groups that could provide insight into a range of online and on-the-ground activity, connections with other BLM groups, and use of social media for social justice engagement related to the principles of the #blacklivesmatter movement.

Of those contacted, administrators of 20 groups responded; after discussion with these groups about the nature of the research, 11 groups agreed to be interviewed. These groups differed in size (from approximately 300 to nearly 9,000 followers or members at the time of contact), location, relationship to the BLM network and the Movement for Black Lives, and areas of activity. During the study period, growth across the sample set was substantial. From early 2017 to early 2018, we tracked increases in most groups of between 200 and 500 members; some ballooned by several thousand to a following of well over 10,000 by 2018. However, this was not the case across the board. For instance, one group dissolved and its page became dormant by the time we were able to schedule an interview with its administrator. Of the remaining groups, another discontinued its page briefly, then later resurged, and a second simply became inactive as it stopped updating its page or adding additional posts. Two groups of the 11 interviewed decreased in number of members or followers by 2018. Their characteristics are highlighted in Table 2.

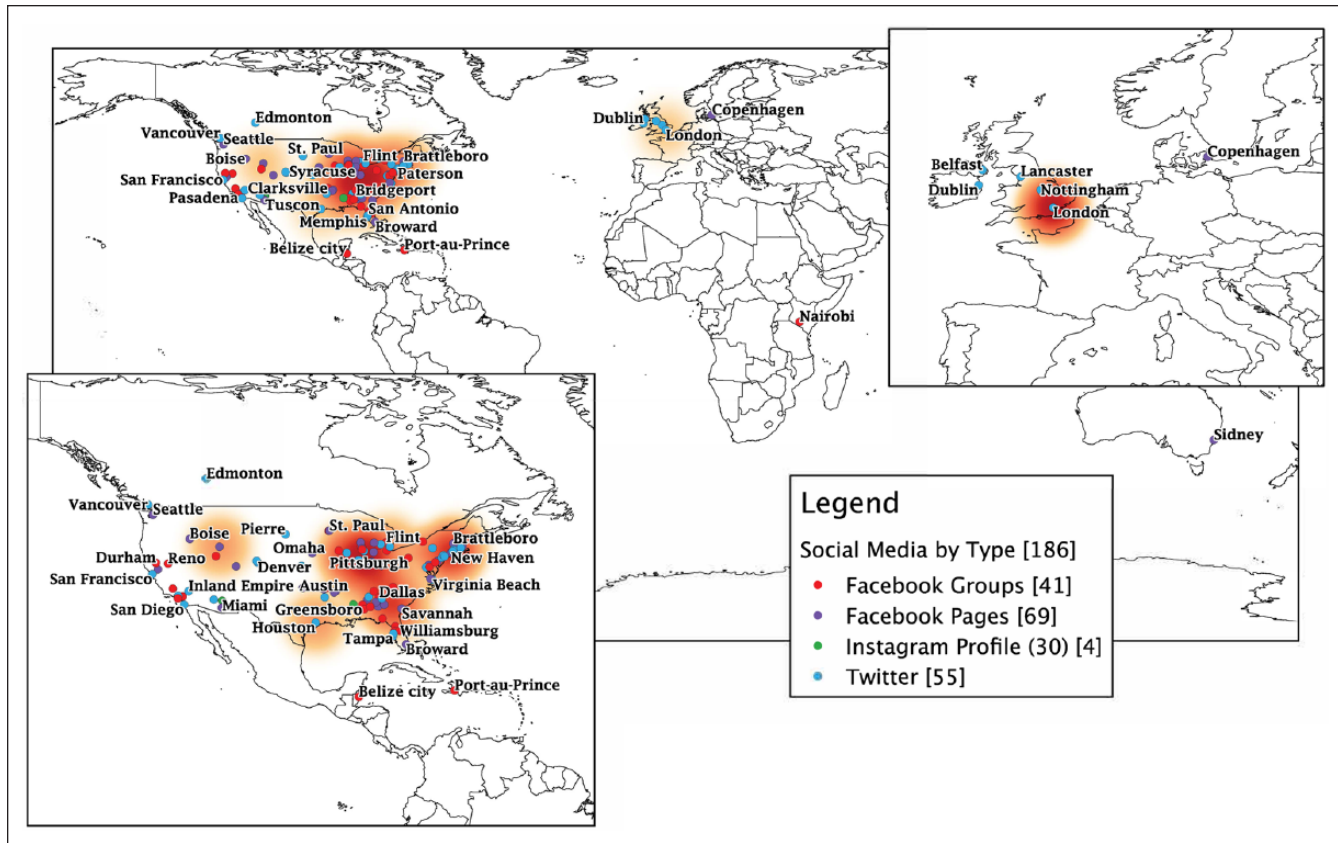


Figure 1. Growth of BLM social media groups over time, 2012–2017. The heatmap shows where BLM groups were created and where they may have influenced the creation of other groups, using data from the 186 social media groups linked to specific geographic locations. Brighter colors indicate high levels of activity in a geographical area during a set period of time. For instance, our analysis shows that groups in the East Coast of the United States were created around the same time and place, while groups on the West Coast were created at different times. This suggests virality at specific times and geographical region.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews with the organizations were conducted by the first two authors using Skype or phone and recorded using audio recording software. Interviews ranged from 30 to 70 min. All interviews used a semi-structured protocol focusing on three primary topic areas: group histories, use of social media, and connections with other BLM organizations. However, in line with semi-structured interviewing practices, we allowed interviewees to expand upon those areas they found most relevant, leading to different emphases in our interview data for each group.

Once data were collected, each interview was transcribed verbatim; transcripts were returned to each interviewee for member checking and modifications. Subsequently, transcripts were read by all research team members and main themes for analysis were discussed. Each team member then coded transcripts line-by-line, focusing on the central themes identified. Once initial coding was complete, the team addressed discrepancies in coding and discussed major connections between codes and broader themes. Preliminary findings from the interviews were written up and sent to all interviewees for member checking, to support the validity of our inferences.

In the remainder of this manuscript, we draw on our analysis of this interview data to address the question: *How has BLM used social media to scale up?* We illustrate different roles that social media plays in BLM organizing and discuss the challenges that social media use has created for movement activity.

BLM, Social Media, and Scaling

Although use of social media by BLM organizers was not described as consciously designed or contrived for the specific purpose of fueling growth, it was identified as central in their organizing efforts in three ways: (1) for mobilizing internal and external resources, (2) for building coalitions among and between BLM groups and other social movements, and (3) for controlling the narrative of the movement. We describe each of these in turn below.

Social Media as a Mobilization Tool: Building Internal Connections

For a number of BLM groups, social media was referenced as a tool for building direct, personal ties within the community of BLM activists. Several group administrators talked about

Table 2. Characteristics of Black Lives Matter groups interviewed^a.

| Interviewee no. | Members of BLM network (year/no.) | Approximate size ^b | Geographic location | Self-identification ^c |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1 | Y | ~11,150 | Southwestern US | |
| 2 | N | ~1,500 | Online only | Discussion group |
| 3 | Unclear | ~8,500 | Southeastern US | |
| 4 | N | ~1,050 | Southwestern US | University-based group |
| 5 | N | ~300 | Online; international | Ally group; women's group |
| 6 | N | ~2,900 | Online only | Ally group; discussion group |
| 7 | Unclear | ~1,500 | West Coast US | |
| 8 | N | ~1,000 | Northwestern US | University-based group |
| 9 | N | ~2,700 | Mid-Atlantic US | |
| 10 | N | ~1,000 | Midwestern US | |
| 11 | N | ~5,000 | Midwestern US | |

BLM: Black Lives Matter.

^aSpecific group locations and names have been removed to preserve the confidentiality and ensure the safety of activists interviewed.

^bSize refers to number of followers as of November 2017.

^cSelf-identification is included only for those accounts categorized as something other than a location-based BLM group.

the immense value of having other BLM group leaders online to talk with about personal highs and lows as movement organizers, share ideas, and informally coordinate efforts locally and nationally. For them, social media served as a tool for mobilizing resources in the form of support networks. One BLM organizer shared that “before December 2014, I only knew one other person in this [BLM] community, directly. And since then, I now know a good, I want to say a good 10–15 people, I’m quite sure more than that, that I can actually call and say, ‘Look this is what’s happening, I need your support.’” Moreover, a recurring challenge cited by leaders of BLM groups was leadership attrition due to burn-out. As such, having others to commiserate with and share experiences was recounted as key to maintaining pace and enthusiasm for the cause. One group administrator reflected,

[Social media] also allows us to be able to network, it allows people in another region to be like, “Okay, I send solidarity,” to say, “I feel you.” That gives you the extra push and rejuvenation that you need sometimes in this organizing field. And also, you are doing all this work but a lot of folks are not doing the work with you, right? But then a lot of people are having similar problems and doing similar work around the world and so it allows you to be like, ‘Okay, I see what you are doing. How did you get through that? Alright, okay. I’m gonna do that over here.’ And it allows us to be a whole network without being right in front of each other’s faces.

An additional, and important, benefit highlighted in this quote is the possibility for conversations among leadership online, leading to new initiatives or expansion of existing programming or events between locations. For example, if a vigil or speaker series showed success in one city or town with a BLM presence, leaders disseminated success stories to other BLM coordinators or administrators. This indicates the importance of access to one another’s work and highlights how social media can open a path for transmission of

ideas and knowledge among widely dispersed activists within a given movement. The strong connections forged among BLM activists also suggests that social media can strengthen connections among activists in ways that greatly exceed the creation of “weak ties” indicated in existing scholarship (Hwang & Kim, 2015; Nien, 2017).

Social Media as a Mobilization Tool: Generating External Resources

In addition to building connections among groups within the BLM movement, group administrators highlighted the salience of social media for mobilizing resources from outsiders and lay movement members. For instance, given that social media pages are largely accessible without the need to sign-up or attend in-person meetings or events, BLM groups online can quickly build and link-up large numbers of followers, and several mentioned gaining followers simply through maintaining an online presence. Online networking features such as “likes” or “followers” also augment the profile and status of a group with the click of a button. The following quote from an interview with the administrator of a very active Southwestern BLM group is a particularly good example of this function in practice:

Facebook, it’s a tool. It’s just about: “did you know this was going on?” We cross-share events. We basically tell people, “Hey this is going on here, this is going on there, the school board is happening here.” That’s what we do. And because of the heavy use of social media with the demographic we have, the information spreads like wildfire.

Of the groups we interviewed, this particular group saw the most substantial growth throughout our research window. However, it was not the only group acknowledging the

importance of spreading information about its events, and thus gaining followers, through social media. Another group administrator highlighted, “We are firm believers in the organizing capability of social media to make people come together. You can get 10,000 people together in hours.”

Indeed, all but two of our 11 interviewees highlighted the importance of social media as a tool for organizing events, protests, or marches and for getting word about them out to potential attendees. Capitalizing on the online audience built through their Facebook, Twitter, and/or Instagram accounts, BLM groups stated that they regularly create event pages or posts which are published on the groups’ feed to encourage supporters to take to the streets. Several groups explained that these events are then shared by themselves or their followers to other networks, exponentially and quickly growing the number of potential attendees. One group administrator we spoke to described a march that the group organized in the wake of the Alton Sterling and Philando Castile shootings. He noted that in a very short amount of time, the event quickly grew to over 1500 people who were committed to attending:

Social media, you know, worked as an amplifier. [. . .] I don’t want to say made it more legit because it’s legit either way, but it definitely adds more sound to your voice and it allows you to reach people that you otherwise wouldn’t have reached.

Another group administrator seconded this, stating, “I’ve seen from my own personal experience of putting [up] a Facebook event or even a Facebook post go from 30 likes and 41 hits to 1000 people showing up for an event.” Administrators noted the importance of posting specific action steps rather than just highlighting traumatic things happening in their community and describing different ways in which individuals might get involved, for example, protesting or attending in-person events, writing letters, and making calls to legislators for successful mobilization.

Beyond its potential for getting people involved with concrete actions and on-the-ground events, a key benefit of open access to information enabled via social media was the ability to obtain both community support and funding. Our findings in this regard reinforce and expand upon the emerging literature about activist use of digital resource mobilization, in particular as this suggests the importance of social media as a platform for resource-limited activists (Doan & Toledano, 2018). For instance, administrators in one West Coast explained,

We are so grassroots that we don’t get money through anywhere else but through people power. That’s like the only way that we reach people, by using social media to get people to see what we are doing so that they feel comfortable and willing enough to donate to our cause.

They noted that the group uses social media as a platform for connecting with better-resourced groups (e.g. of White allies) and to put out calls for donations or requests for

specific resources needed for their events and longer term initiatives. Other groups talked about receiving grants, venue space, ride sharing, or other services, all facilitated through social media pages and communication tools therein. One administrator attributed the group’s fundraising success to a strong communications strategy, noting that based on their strong social media strategy for one event, a sponsor reached out with an offer of funding support. The administrator noted, “Social media is a space to demonstrate that you know what you are doing. You don’t have to pitch your idea at the office.” Another administrator noted, “When we need something we’ll just post, ‘we need this’.” She explained that she would receive messages from people who had seen the post and were willing to help and that those messages were often the start of relationships with new supporters of the group’s work who then remained actively engaged. Having witnessed the value of social media for this purpose, some groups have now formalized fundraising platforms on their profiles through the introduction of “donate now” buttons and links to other donation sites.

Social Media as a Coalition Building Tool

Among the recurrent themes that emerged among BLM group administrators was the significance of social media for building connections and coalitions with other groups in the movement to facilitate strategic action. This kind of coalition building occurred in the form of the development of partnerships between groups, in contrast with the creation of relationships among individual leaders characterizing what we describe as building internal connections. Administrators of a group in the Southwest noted,

We are in contact with other BLM organizations throughout the country, so we use it just by inviting them on Facebook, or, like, they like our page, we like their page. It allows us to link up with other people who are doing the same work as us.

Administrators of a Midwestern BLM group likewise noted, “All the chapters [in our State]. . . we get together often, and we all do events together.” Their statement speaks to the way that social media facilitates connections between groups that can move beyond a purely online presence and in some cases can further increase event turnout.

It is important to note that while connecting with other groups on social media occurred widely, there did not seem to be a single set of criteria for developing partnerships. For instance, some connections took the form of *within movement* coalitions between other groups using the #BlackLivesMatter banner or group name. Groups talked about how this sort of partnership was facilitated by a simple search for “Black Lives Matter” online. For example, one Midwestern group discussed a message they had received from an activist who was looking for connections to local groups in her area, but had been unable to locate these groups

on her own. She contacted this group because of its public social media presence and apparent association with the movement: “We had someone down from Louisiana who was very worried about the police, asking us for help. [. . .] She just happened to find us somewhere on Facebook, so she inboxed us and asked us for help, because she saw that we were Black Lives Matter.” Social media in this instance helped this individual connect to a BLM group elsewhere that, through their own connections, was able to link her into the movement. Another group administrator noted that she happened to meet some members of another BLM group at one of their events, and “we connected and so then we became Facebook friends and then I stayed connected that way [with what they were doing].” In addition, several administrators spoke about connecting with multiple groups through conference calls hosted by national BLM leadership and using these connections to learn new strategies or about the kinds of events undertaken around the country. In other words, social media facilitated both the initial process of connecting to BLM or specific BLM groups and the possibility of learning from BLM activists in different places.

Alternatively, many groups we interviewed talked about building *cross-movement* coalitions within a wider *movement network*, that is, coalitions of BLM and non-BLM groups or movements, both local and national. One group shared a powerful story of how social media contributed to bringing a diverse group of movement leaders and followers together for an event that was organized immediately following the Orlando Pulse nightclub mass shooting:

[We] organized a series of vigils here the day of the shooting, so by that Sunday evening at 6 o’clock we had, I think it was 1500-2000 people. But the thing is, I posted about that event at like 10 o’clock that morning, and I had been so busy because I was out and about and like doing interviews and talking to the press and they were coordinating with elected officials at that point to make statements at different press conferences. And what came of that is, I hadn’t realized that people literally started emailing things and people were like taking screenshots of this event. And the next thing you know, like, the [local] LGBT chorus was like “oh, we are going to come sing,” and then the other groups started calling up “oh we are going to come too.” And there was this intersectional prayer where each group got to say something from their group. And I represented the atheist community and I was in the middle of it in purple so out of about 1500 who were told by word of mouth how, and it’s, it’s amazing how fast it actually spread, and that was my moment of like “what the hell just happened here?”

In addition to its potential for bringing together diverse groups of activists around specific events, administrators we spoke with also noted the importance of social media for building longer term coalitions with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ); women; immigrant; and “brown” groups. One group talked about this type of coalition building as “the rising tide lifts all boats” and supporting

“the least among you,” asserting that social media provided an accessible way to do this:

If you see trans women of color and they are looking to like amplify, and they’re talking about something that affects that the least among you, you amplify that. You reTweet that, you repost that. You write a comment and say this is the reason why you are posting this. And you bring in allies to the world and you show it and you live it.

Another group administrator stated,

We’ve shared a lot of information about what was happening in Standing Rock, you know, those kinds of things are relevant because they have to do with the discourse in this country and what’s happening. When you open yourself up to that, you see the patterns more clearly.

These statements suggest that through transmission of information among and between groups, social media plays an important role in building knowledge about the systemic nature of oppression across different populations and thus allows groups facing shared institutional marginalization to create connections and potentially work together to challenge systemic injustices. Our research thus suggests social media facilitates coalition building in ways that extend beyond the creation of loosely connected networks or shared ideology, as suggested by existing scholarship (Baron, 2013; Nien, 2017). Specifically, social media creates opportunities for amplifying the causes of like-minded activists. This occurs in terms of disseminating information about other areas of focus, and also by using social media platforms to “comment on” and engage *with* those issues in the process of information transmission. In other words, social media creates opportunities for developing interactive relationships with like-minded activists in ways that extend beyond traditional forms of coalition-based organizing.

Social Media as a Narrative Amplification Tool

Coalition building, personal networking, and resource mobilization all speak to significant roles social media can play in scaling movements such as BLM. However, according to our interviewees, perhaps the most notable function of social media is providing activists with the ability to control their own narrative, thus creating awareness and visibility for the issues that the movement addresses. This stands in contrast with the way BLM activists discussed portrayal of the movement in traditional and mainstream forms of media. For instance, one group shared, “Social media provides us a platform to tell our story as real, as raw, and as relevant as it may be, without the worry of a filter being put on, or someone else’s perspectives and biases.” Moreover, social media tools facilitate amplification of preferred narratives through functions such as “repost” or “share” options.

Groups also noted that social media provides an open source venue for a direct counter narrative. A BLM group administrator in the Mid-Atlantic region spoke about social media as being more credible than traditional news media, using the example of reporting from a protest:

I actually went to Baltimore when the Freddie Gray uprisings happened. And I could see how accurate Twitter was, versus what the media was saying. Like, I was standing beside the person who was doing the Tweeting. And then I see what the media says . . . Well now, all the sudden, that's another thing. Now you know, before you didn't, before you were taught to trust the media, to trust the source like the Washington Post, like the New York Times. You couldn't cite the internet before . . . you can actually cite Twitter, now you can actually cite Facebook, and it's because now there's more credibility, there's more exposure. You can actually find the people, the grassroots activists and be there and watch and see and their videotaping and then I can read the same article [in the mainstream media], or an article of accounts of the same day and I can say, "That did not happen."

As these quotations show, the use of social media for presenting and amplifying non-dominant narratives highlights an important function of digital platforms in contributing to shifts in public discourse. Indeed, this suggests a far more significant role for social media in movement scaling than the existing literature on meaning making indicates (e.g., Kavada, 2015; Milan, 2015), because social media use enables movements not only to create a shared narrative, but to easily and quickly disseminate that narrative as a contrast to existing, mainstream discourse. Given the significance of discursive or cultural shifts for movement scaling (Authors, submitted), this further illustrates the role social media can play in broadening movement impact.

Challenges and Risks

While social media plays an important role for BLM groups, there are also challenges to its use. Our findings, in fact, suggest that these go beyond the primary limitations described in existing literature and include complacency, ideological blurring, and concrete (sometimes physical) risks to activists with an online presence.

First, as group administrators emphasized, social media, *on its own*, cannot build and/or sustain movements for social change. Real change, they posited, can only be achieved when social media is coupled with more traditional forms of organizing. One West Coast BLM group administrator stated,

You can start a Facebook [group], but it's how you get people engaged, how you get people to follow you, how you get people to know what's up. You got to hit the streets too. And that's what a lot of people don't want to do, they don't want to do that part. And that's why like, Facebook only goes so far.

Thus, while an online presence is beneficial, its accessibility can also present limitations in terms of potentially

allowing people to feel they have achieved something simply through their virtual participation—a phenomenon known as “slacktivism” (Morozov, 2009). While not all digital participation is meaningless, our interviewees noted that social media in combination with ground-level activism is a more influential and powerful combination for building the movement. In the words of another BLM group administrator in the Southwestern US: “We hit social heavily, *and* we travel so we can talk with people on other side of the country. We are firm believers in the organizing capability of social media to make people come together.”

Moreover, despite possibilities created for strengthening BLM through social media, these same platforms also mitigate opportunities for broadening the movement's reach. The accessibility of social media platforms, for instance, limits possibilities for activists to fully control who is, or is not, part of the movement, or how its primary framing symbol—the hashtag #blacklivesmatter—is utilized. Even among groups that support the values BLM promotes, not all fit neatly into the movement, as the wide range of issues in our social media account database highlights in terms of areas of focus as well as level of engagement with advocacy and direct action to address systemic injustices against Black lives. Of the group administrators we interviewed, two groups were led by White women in solidarity with the movement but otherwise unaffiliated with BLM or the Movement for Black Lives. The primary focus of these groups, unlike many of the others, was to foster a greater understanding and awareness of police violence and structural racism among White followers. One group shared that they had even considered limiting membership *only* to White females and noted that Black group members were frequently “silenced” by other members deleting or derailing their threads. Thus, these groups are in a position of working to advance the movement, but they are not part of “a collective that centers and is rooted in black communities,” as the Movement for Black Lives' platform states.⁸

These two groups were also notable in that they have no on-the-ground organizing component: they exist solely online as platforms for discussions among primarily White individuals. Thus, though many of the BLM groups we interviewed stressed their support of “ally-ship,” these two groups demonstrate how, given the accessibility of social media platforms and the ease with which symbols can be adopted, the hashtag and the name can be applied to many types of initiatives that may not fully align with the movement's central platform. In other words, these groups may share the same fundamental values as the BLM movement. However, given their lack of focus on direct action to address the demands of the Movement for Black Lives, as well as their focus on the White community specifically, sometimes to the exclusion of Black voices, it seems unlikely that activists formally aligned with BLM would perceive them to be part of the movement. Indeed, as one of the administrators we interviewed explained, “We are not an official group and

have no connection to any other group. Probably we shouldn't even call ourselves Black Lives Matter."

The nature of these two groups in particular points to the way that social media use can potentially hinder positive movement impact by making it easier for groups to adopt or appropriate symbols even if they do not share the collective identity or primary focus of the movement. This can ultimately blur movement messaging, something that in the case of BLM is further exacerbated by the existence of numerous social media groups that use the BLM frame, but which embody values not fully aligned with those promoted by BLM as a movement. Our findings suggest that the catchiness of the #blacklivesmatter hashtag can serve to constrain impact by broadening the range of issues included under the BLM umbrella and facilitating opportunities for disseminating counter-messages. This finding emphasizes that social media presents a challenge to controlled framing with "sticky" content, as in the world of marketing, because the open-ended and participatory nature of social media engenders "spreadable" content that, while easy to share and engage with, "leads to audiences using content in unanticipated ways as they retrofit material to the contours of their particular community" (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013, p. 6).

Those opposing BLM's message also target BLM group media platforms to disrupt or divert attention away from the cause. One group administrator noted that this was a particular issue in social media spaces, saying,

When we first started this Facebook group, we spent a lot of our lives online arguing with people, painful argument after painful argument, with folks popping up in response with a knee-jerk response, often racist, about groups mobilizing around racial justice.

Another group administrator explained, "social media gives everyone a chance to have an opinion about what you do and don't do." For many of the groups, these opinions come in the form of comments related to the counter-movement #AllLivesMatter. Group administrators noted that much of this "trolling" occurs as a way of trying to shut down the conversation altogether, that is, by using the comment "All Lives Matter" as a way of saying, "Shut up."

The ability to disseminate information broadly and quickly through social media is thus juxtaposed with a need to constantly monitor the space, diverting resources away from amplifying the movement's central messages. In fact, BLM group administrators spoke to the immense amount of time they dedicate to moderating their online social media profiles, in large part to stay on the defensive front against unsavory narratives or outright criticism. Some groups take preventive measures such as closing groups to followers only or requiring administrative review before accepting new members. However, these approaches ultimately limit public accessibility and the potential for reaching a broader audience. This further highlights the tensions in using social

media as a platform for scaling: while it greatly facilitates opportunities for information transmission, the ease with which opponents can access these same social media platforms means that there is a constant need to monitor what is being posted online.

In addition, BLM group administrators are in the metaphorical as well as actual line of fire when it comes to security risks introduced by being associated so visibly with their public pages. Although activists in general are at risk of verbal or physical attacks from opposition parties or authorities, online activism through social media extends that risk to 24 hr a day, 7 days a week. In an age where the lines are regularly blurred between public and private life online, BLM group administrators can easily be tracked down at home or in their local neighborhoods should someone wish to take spiteful measures. Several group leaders mentioned that they experience a constant sensation of being watched. One administrator shared, "I made a Facebook event for a vigil we held for Terence Crutcher. Literally 3 minutes later I got a call from [the local] Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) branch." Another group administrator noted, "The police use social media a lot to like stalk and look at you and so you know that you are not alone." Beyond institutional surveillance, BLM activists pointed to the threat of recognition by the public at large. One mentioned receiving death threats, and another pointed out that as a result of this work,

Your private life is completely out the window. People are legit starting to recognize us now. It's just like, it's gotten to the sense of celebrity, more than ever—something I don't want. We don't use our real names . . . But somehow people figure out our full, like our entire names, and everything about us.

These statements point to the more challenging aspects of using social media as a platform for engaging in or building movement activities, illustrating that, despite its potential benefits, social media can significantly exacerbate physical risks already associated with nonviolent civil disobedience and activism.

Conclusion

As our case study of BLM indicates, social media use by contemporary movements with a significant online presence highlights opportunities that these platforms create for broadening the reach of and strengthening connections between group members, thus suggesting its potential as a tool for scaling movement endeavors. In particular, our interviews illustrate the key role that social media plays in meaning making and resource mobilization, which can build coalitions both within and across-movements and thus expand movement impact.

The salience of connectivity that social media creates for these groups suggests that regardless of their on-the-ground or other organizing, BLM groups perceive themselves to be

part of a larger BLM movement, in large part because of relationships formed through social media platforms. This sense of connectivity points to an important benefit of social media for strengthening and scaling social movements: the possibility of helping far-flung activists develop a sense of collective identity. As scholars have long noted, collective identity is central to social movement work and indeed plays a key role in strengthening the identity of movement activists and keeping them engaged in movement endeavors (Shaw, 2013; Valocchi, 2009). Our research indicates that digital spaces create new opportunities for the development of collective movement identity. Thus, our work suggests that we should further extend the focus of research on Internet activism as described in Earl et al.'s (2010) typology, from viewing digital platforms solely as spaces for logistical organizing and/or mobilization of resources to spaces for strengthening movements and creating coalitions (Earl & Kimport, 2014). Indeed, our research presents a unique contribution by highlighting the significance of social media for coalition building activism. In addition, findings from our study significantly extend our understanding of social media's importance with respect to the potential for collective meaning making and shaping of discourse. These areas have been addressed only briefly in empirical scholarship; both deserve further study in the context of contemporary social movements.

All of the activists with whom we spoke indicated, either explicitly or implicitly, that benefits of social media outweigh its costs. However, given the real, physical risks associated with social media use, especially for activists who are simultaneously organizing and engaged in on-the-ground initiatives, it's important to think about potential *unintended*, and likely unwanted, impacts of using social media as a scaling tool. In particular, we encourage further exploration into the way that digital spaces and knowledge transmitted through them can potentially enable counter-protests or even risk of physical harm to activists. Research to date has primarily addressed these issues from the perspective of state control and surveillance, yet our interviews suggest that targeting by "trolls" or counter-protesters is an issue that needs to be taken seriously.

Finally, it is important to note the inherent challenge in exploring scaling of a broader movement using a single case study. Even for the case of BLM specifically, our mixed methods approach combining an analysis of online profiles and interviews with activists administering individual, autonomous BLM groups around the United States, falls short of speaking for the movement as a whole. Our data points to the highly localized nature of these groups and the initiatives they support. Moreover, our interviews were conducted *only* with BLM groups that have (or had) an active social media presence. Therefore, while our research provides important insights about the relevance of social media for scaling groups within one social movements, our analysis is limited by its failure to include groups that may function primarily or entirely outside of the digital sphere or outside

of common social media platforms. Given the preponderance of groups associated with BLM around the United States and internationally, it is difficult to know how many and where such groups exist. Discussions with members from such groups would likely provide further insights into social movement scaling possibilities and challenges associated with social media use.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by a grant from private funder Sidney Topol.

Notes

1. Doxxing, or doxing, refers to the practice of publishing identifying or private information about individuals. This often occurs with malicious intent (McNealy, 2018).
2. see <https://policy.m4bl.org/about/>
3. It is important to note that affiliation as a formal chapter of the BLM network was based on self-identification and in many cases did not match the chapters listed on the BLM network website. We were unable to clarify, either by information available on social media or via interviews, the basis for formal affiliation and/or criteria for joining the network.
4. We attempted to explore the spread of BLM over time but were unable to find creation dates for many of the social media accounts identified and were thus unable to do so.
5. Our database is current through April 2017, when initial compilation was completed.
6. It is important to note that in many cases, self-identification as part of the national movement did not match the chapters listed on the BLM network website. We were unable to clarify, either by information available on social media or via interviews, the basis for formal affiliation and/or criteria for joining the network.
7. In terms of both type and level of engagement, those groups not explicitly focused on one of these areas did not share this information in this profile and/or emphasized solidarity/adherence to the focus of the national BLM movement.
8. See <https://policy.m4bl.org/platform/>

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