“This Is the Resource Our Community Needed Right Now”

*Moments of Trauma and Crisis*

In video of an interview with the *New York Times* on the one year anniversary of the death of Mike Brown, activist Deray McKesson observed, “The death of Mike Brown and the protests that immediately followed set a precedent for how our generation would react to and . . . challenge systems and structures that oppress people.”¹ His statement was immediately followed by a series of hashtags connected to deaths of Black people in police custody in the year after Ferguson—#EricGarner, #ICantBreathe, #JohnCrawford, #WalterScott, #TamirRice, #FreddieGray, #SamuelDubose, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, #SayHerName, #SandraBland. With the uprising in Ferguson in 2014, the practices and possibilities of Black digital networks garnered the attention of journalist, academics, and the broader public in an unprecedented way. Subsequently, much has been learned from research devoted to the social, cultural, and political importance of Black Twitter, with particular attention to the role of hashtags. My aim here is to broaden the focus and examine how Twitter and the political use of hashtags fit into larger transplatform networks and strategies.

Black digital networks have been crucial in the efforts for racial justice during and since Ferguson. But they did not coalesce at that moment. They already existed, having been created and maintained over years through daily, often mundane, interactions. They migrated from earlier websites and platforms—Black Planet, message boards, Live Journal—and were cultivated around popular culture, political commentary, linguistic games, and the sharing of day-to-day experiences. These processes created Black digital networks that were then able to galvanize and mobilize people together in moments of crisis, such as the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown. The network at the center of this project is part of larger Black digital networks that have been a resource in these moments.
The flexible, multimedia, transplatform nature of this network allowed for a variety of responses to the exigencies of any given moment. Its dual nature—broadcast-style and social network—facilitated both journalistic and word-of-mouth practices of information circulation while its transplatform nature provided a range of affordances that could be used in tandem for a variety of goals. At times of racial turmoil, the network was deployed for five intertwined functions—the circulation of information, the interpretation of events, the production and circulation of counter-discourse, the construction and maintenance of solidarity and community, and mobilization for specific actions. These functions often occurred concurrently, though some emerge as more prominent at different moments. This chapter explores how the network was utilized in response to the cases of Martin and Brown, when the Movement for Black Lives emerged and became a national force.

The accounts here present a partial sketch of the ways emerging media functioned in the two pivotal cases. While the political narrative of Black Twitter often starts with its influence in bringing the Trayvon Martin case to broader awareness, the strategies the network deployed around the Martin case began to crystalize well before 2012, with the cases of Oscar Grant and Aiyanna Jones, both of whom were killed during interactions with law enforcement. Before devling into these cases and the digital responses, I consider how the network is utilized for news and commentary.

News and Commentary in the Transplatform Network

In 2011, the Wisconsin labor protests, Occupy Wall Street, and the Arab Spring solidified Twitter’s role as a source of information and a means of mobilization for social movements. Twitter’s always-on flow of information has made it an important resource through which users both receive and circulate information in several ways. First, Twitter’s constant stream of ambient information, to which users can tune in and out, creates a “monitorial” relationship to information that allows Twitter to serve as an alert system for events of interest. Second, the immediate and synchronous nature of Twitter makes it an ideal platform for improvisational reporting and eye-witness accounts. Finally, this same immediacy
makes Twitter an excellent platform for instant reactions, evaluations, and commentary on information and unfolding events.

Twitter is a central component in “an ambient media system where users receive a flow of information from both established media and from each other.” This stream of information—a series of digital fragments—can be accessed from a variety of devices. Alfred Hermida argues that this allows Twitter to function as an “awareness system” that is “always-on and moves from the background to the foreground as and when a user feels the need to communicate.”

Twitter’s immediacy and accessibility make it ideal for eye-witness reporting in real time. According to Alex Bruns and Jean Burgess, “Live tweeting [is] a more important practice on Twitter than comparable live activities have been for previous platforms.” As early as 2008 and 2009, journalists were using Twitter as a source for unverified eye witness accounts during Iran election protests and the Mumbai bombings. Live accounts may come from professional journalists on the scene, from citizen journalists, or from ordinary people engaging in “random acts of journalism” in improvisational and contingent ways.

These affordances make Twitter a valuable tool for contemporary citizenship practices. Michael Schudson argues that citizens have developed a “monitorial” attitude toward information, “scanning all kinds of news and other media sources . . . for topics that matter to them personally.” Bruns calls this “gatewatching.” Building on the longstanding concept of “gatekeeping” in journalism, in which official entities function to select what information is reported and circulated, he argues that users observe “the output of gates of news publications and other sources, in order to identify important material as it becomes available.” However, because Twitter’s information stream is comprised of heterogeneous information fragments, the news stories amplified by gatewatching exist next to eye-witness accounts, commentary, and interpretive processes. People are not just watching news publications for relevant information, but also watching micro-celebrities in their Twitter networks—including activists, online personalities, and independent media producers—as well as monitoring for hashtags that might signal an important topic and for repetitions of information, a phenomenon often described as “my timeline is talking about X.” John Zaller has argued that journalism functions as a “burglar alarm,” which sounds loudly to indicate that a
problem needs urgent attention. On Twitter, official news, citizen journalism, hashtags, and network chatter can all serve to “raise the alarm” and attract the attention of the monitorial citizen.

However, Twitter is only one component of the network I discuss here. Twitter is able to serve as such an awareness system for its users in large part because it functions as a central clearinghouse for information posted on other platforms, such as Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, and Vine, and can provide links to live streams on Ustream, Periscope, and Facebook Live. Thus, people reporting from events can make use of whatever platform has the appropriate affordances—Instagram for images and videos or Ustream for long-form streaming video—and exploit Twitter’s function as an alert system, without being confined by its limitations.

Additionally, podcasts and other long-form media provide arenas in which to aggregate, synthesize, and interpret the fragmented stream of information available on Twitter and generate more cohesive linear narratives about events. As Hermida notes of the fragments of information that comprise the ambient information stream on Twitter, “The value does not lie in each individual fragment of news and information, but rather in the mental portrait created by a number of messages over a period of time.” These fragments—official news reports, citizen journalism, random acts of journalism, commentary, reactions, interpretations—work together to form an overall impression and interpretation of an event. The podcasts in the network create a space in which participants in the network, including podcasts host, guests, and listeners, can aggregate, evaluate, synthesize, and interpret these fragmented streams, collectively generating a narrative of a given event. This process often includes the generation of color-conscious interpretations of events and critiques of dominant discourses circulated by legacy media. At times the “alarm” to which they are responding is not an event, but a discourse around an event that participants in the network see as problematic or inaccurate.

While Hermida suggests that even though “tweets are atomic in nature, they are part of a distributed conversation through a social network of interconnected users,” I would argue that they are actually only one component in a conversation that is distributed across platforms. Podcasts allow not only for greater depth than Twitter, but also for linearity.
They also enable these conversations to take place in network enclaves, relatively secluded from others and shielded from harassment. In fact, participants in the network have often remarked of the hostility that surfaces on social media around moments of trauma. The podcasts can thus become a space to discuss this phenomenon, in addition to offering refuge from it. The evolution of these practices can be seen in the digital responses to the deaths of Oscar Grant and Aiyanna Jones.

Early Responses to Racial Injustice

Prior bringing attention to the death of Trayvon Martin, users of Black Twitter made connections through everyday talk, jokes, and live-tweeting television. As early as 2009, when Twitter only had about 18 million users, compared to the 140 million it had by Martin’s death in 2012, Black users were live-tweeting television shows together, long before it became the norm on the platform. During the 2009 BET Awards, Elon James White and Bassey Ikpi, then co-hosts of TWiB!’s podcast Blacking It Up!, live-tweeted the award show using the hashtag #TWiBET09 and offered live blog commentary hosted on TWiB!’s website. Many TWiB! listeners and other podcasters also live-tweeted the show. In 2009 and 2010, Black Twitter could also be found watching shows like The Boondocks and To Catch a Predator in real time together on Twitter. Such networked co-viewing practices relied not so much on hashtags as on the homophily of the Black Twitter network and would often dominate the trending topics with related words and phrases on these nights.

Sometimes Black Twitter’s activity was organized around a specific hashtag, but often it was not. It is important to remember that early Twitter, circa 2008–2010, had significantly fewer features than its later incarnations. The platform did not yet have an automatic retweet function. Users “retweeted” by manually cutting and pasting and adding the prefix “RT.” Twitter also lacked any mechanism for connecting replies to the tweet to which they were responding. Tweets could be addressed to specific user with the @-reply function, but were not tethered as a reply to a specific tweet. This made it difficult to follow conversations one was not involved in. Hashtags ameliorated this by organizing tweets by topic, and the approach of Black Twitter users aided further.
Black users developed a homophilic approach to the platform that differed from the microblog status updates intended by its developers. Brendan Meeder’s analysis of Twitter data during this period found dense clusters of users who followed one another and noted that such clusters were predominantly Black. This arrangement helped create the network density that allowed Black Twitter to have a pronounced presence on the trending topics. It also aided in creating a sense of collectivity steeped in ongoing group conversation and shared communicative and cultural practices. It was extremely common for members of the Black Twitter network to contribute to conversations with no hashtag or other marker indicating what they were responding to. Pronouns and references would go undefined. A tweet might indicate “she” is doing something or “this” is hilarious or problematic, and so on, without ever defining what the user was referencing. The meaning could be inferred only from the broader context of what was being discussed that day. In-group references, to both Black American culture and to Black Twitter in-group knowledge, functioned similarly. These practices reproduced longstanding Black American modes of communication practices that rely on opacity and misdirection and require cultural competencies and contextual awareness to decode—hence the importance of cultural specificity to scholarly analyses and the dangers of over-reliance on hashtags in analysis of Twitter.

Early on, Twitter was used to circulate and discuss instances of police violence. Among the first was the death of Oscar Grant at the hands of an Oakland, California, transit police officer, Johannes Mehserle, on New Year’s Day 2009. Grant’s case was the first to be caught on cell phone video, posted on YouTube, and have the link circulated via social media platforms. Twitter was used to share the links to news coverage of the incident, at first from local news like Fox affiliate KTUV and independent Bay Area publications such as Topix San Francisco and Oakland Focus and eventually from major national outlets like CNN. This early reporting also came from This Week in Blackness, which posted the story on its website and tweeted the link from both its account and White’s own with the statement: “From This Week in Blackness Twitter: New From TWiB: UNACCEPTABLE: Shooting of Oscar Grant.” Actions such as the January 7 vigil for Grant at Fruitvale Station were also announced on Twitter.
From late 2009 to mid-2010, YouTube and Twitter formed avenues for information about the Mehserle trial. This was before videos could be posted directly to Twitter and instead had to be uploaded elsewhere. In particular, Youth Radio, a nonprofit founded in 1993 to train youth as journalists, had reporters at the trial and tweeted information on the hashtag #MehserleTrial. They also posted video interviews from eye witnesses and protestors as well as coverage of the protests and unrest following the verdict. Freelance journalist Thandisizwe Chimurenga, who describes herself as practicing “emancipatory journalism,” created a Twitter account @OscarGrantTrial (now @OscarGrantCoverage) and attended the trial and tweeted as it unfolded. Davey D, Hip-hop DJ, songwriter, producer and journalist, who is politically active in the Bay Area, also disseminated information via his Twitter account, in addition to his work in radio and other broadcast mediums. When unrest broke out in Oakland following the verdict, information from freelance journalists, citizen journalists, and everyday participants was circulated by YouTube and social media in conjunction.

Between the 2009 death of Grant and the 2012 death of Trayvon Martin, information about a handful of police-involved shootings of Black people circulated in Black digital networks. In 2010, the death of seven-year-old Aiyana Jones, who was killed by a bullet from an officer’s gun during a SWAT raid on her home, was discussed heavily on Twitter. Jones’s death was first reported on Twitter by white Israeli-born gender-nonconforming Hip-hop MC and activist, Invincible, who posted: “Justice for Ayanna Jones! Tonight 6pm News Conference 8pm Candle Light Vigil 4054 Lillibridge by Canfield on Detroit’s east side.” As in Grant’s case, Twitter users shared links to local reporting in the days immediately following and then from larger sites like CNN.com as they picked up the story. As the case unfolded, Twitter users also circulated a petition demanding that footage of Jones’s death be released, marked the day of her funeral with remembrances, and mourned on what would have been her 8th birthday. They followed and shared allegations of a cover-up by Detroit police, the indictment of Joseph Weekley on involuntary manslaughter and reckless endangerment charges, and the subsequent trials (which occurred between 2013 and 2015 and ended in mistrials).

These early cases are instructive because although Twitter was not yet a widely used platform, it was beginning to take shape as a place
for information circulation and mobilization. The use of Twitter for citizen journalism was also developing, although because of Twitter’s technical limitations—140 characters and no capability for images or video—information circulated mostly through links to content on other platforms, such as YouTube or TwitPic.

During the years 2009–2011, TWiB! and the Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts were also in their formative stages. TWiB!’s video series began in 2008, while Blacking it Up!, which had a brief run in 2009, returned permanently in 2011. In 2010, there were only a handful of Black podcasts, with The Black Guy Who Tips, Insanity Check, and Where’s my 40 Acres? being key among them. It was not until a few years later that podcasts developed into a robust element in the network’s distributed discussions.

Trayvon Martin

The death of Trayvon Martin and the subsequent trial and acquittal of his killer were watershed moments for the network, when the strategies that were deployed during the uprising in Ferguson and that have become central to the Movement for Black Lives coalesced. In the immediate aftermath of Martin’s death, Twitter served as alert system and tool for mobilization, while during Zimmerman’s trial it was primarily a channel for information obtained through gatewatching. Twitter, TWiB!, and the extant Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts all covered the story, with Twitter being the primary space for public engagement. The acquittal of George Zimmerman in 2013, was a key moment when the network as an oscillating networked public fully coalesced, with a clear strategy for creating enclaves for solidarity, community, and catharsis.

Martin was shot and killed on February 26, 2012, and while local news media covered his death immediately, it took nearly two weeks for the story to gain prominence on Twitter, where mentions early on amounted to personal reactions and remembrances. It was through gatewatching and the use of Twitter as a central clearinghouse for information posted elsewhere that the case first gained traction on Twitter. Benjamin Crump, who represented Martin’s family, brought on board a public relations professional, Ryan Julison, who in turn was able to obtain significant national news coverage for the story, including coverage by Reuters and CBS This Morning. By March 8, Martin’s death was being
covered by both legacy and independent media sources and a Change.org petition to bring charges against Zimmerman had been created and was quickly gaining signatures. Links to these news stories and to the petition served as “alarms” on Twitter. Almost immediately, Black users were sharing the story—both links to reporting and their own 140 character summaries—and the petition.

Bringing the Trayvon Martin case to national attention was a dialogic process between legacy media and social media. Once Black Twitter was alerted to the story, it was instrumental in circulating it and helping to maintain pressure to bring charges. By 2012, Black Twitter itself had been covered by many news outlets, including Slate, National Public Radio, NewsOne, and Forbes, and had enough visibility to affect how the case was taken up in the news cycle. Furthermore, while Twitter was instrumental in organizing and publicizing protests such as the Million Hoodie March in New York City in March 2012, it also became a terrain for protest, with users posting images of themselves in hoodies with hashtags like #WeAreTrayvonMartin. Twitter was also the medium where outrage and calls for justice were expressed. Whereas cable news and talk radio focused on gun control and legal analysis and blogs focused largely on racial politics, Twitter traffic leaned more toward humanizing Martin, sympathizing with his family, and demanding justice.

Throughout the trial, the network participated heavily in gatewatching, following, aggregating, and circulating news about the case as it emerged primarily from legacy media outlets. After the initial protests following Martin’s death, most of the information circulated within the network was from professional news outlets. Users on Twitter, Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts, and TWiB! all followed the story and discussed it when there were notable developments. The “gates” were watched not only for valuable information, but also for problematic information and media narratives in need of rebuttal.

Much of the discussion of the case involved creating counter-discourses that offered alternative interpretations and critiqued much of the legacy media reporting. It was not uncommon for members of the network to watch the televised trial, tweeting summaries and commentary that others could follow online. White watched and live-tweeted much of the trial, occasionally receiving inquiries from people at work.
who were unable to watch and wanted clarification and elaboration.23 There were also a number of hashtags associated with the case, with #Justice4Trayvon being key among them. However, other more specific hashtags were created to discuss or critique elements of the trial as it progressed. Hashtags served as vehicles for both information and catharsis. The hashtag #zimmermantrial was used to share and comment on developments in the trial. Other hashtags were more humorous. Because of his direct and forceful tone, the testimony of the medical examiner, Dr. Shiping Bao, was tweeted under the hashtag #BaoDown, a reference to a recently released Beyoncé song containing the lyrics “Bow down, bitches.” After the prosecutors rebutted Zimmerman’s account of Martin’s death, asserting “I guess the victim has 2 or 3 hands,” White created the hashtag #ThatThirdHand:

White: #ThatThirdHand is why Zimmerman needed to kill #TrayvonMartin. Y’all didn’t know that Negroes have a secret 3rd hand to deal w/ crackas?

L. Joy Williams: #ThatThirdHand is what my Grandma would threaten to use to slap the Black off of me

Tracey Clayton: #ThatThirdHand helped black people vote for Obama an extra time in the booths this last election

Dacia Mitchell: We got #ThatThirdHand because of affirmative action. #zimmermantrial24

Many of the podcasters discussed the case as it unfolded, as well as engaging listeners in its interpretation. For example, in March 2012, TWiB! did several shows that analyzed not only his death but also the reactions to it. The latter was taken up by Single Simulcast, which discussed the social media meme of “Trayvoning,” in which white people were mimicking Trayvon Martin lying dead with Arizona Iced Tea and Skittles next to him, and the “Angry Trayvon” game that was pulled from both the iTunes and Google Play stores. On July 11, just days before the Zimmerman verdict was handed down, Straight Outta LoCash brought on Defense Attorney Jasmine Crockett to discuss the trail and the possible outcomes.
Catharsis, Solidarity, and Community

On night of July 13, 2013, when news media reported Zimmerman’s acquittal, many Black Americans took to their social media networks to express their thoughts and feelings about the verdict and its implications for Black Americans in the contemporary United States. Within thirty minutes of the announcement, the US trending topics were dominated by the verdict. Many network participants tweeted about their grief, anger, and disgust, frequently expressing a sense of being treated as second-class citizens, noncitizens, or generally disposable by the broader society. Many of these users experienced harassment, including White, who, minutes after expressing his outrage over the verdict on Twitter, received responses calling him a “hateful race-monger” and comments such as “awwww you need a tissue? You gonna make it? :( JUSTICE SERVED!” Aaron Rand Freeman, co-host of TWiB! Radio, said, “Social media is a war zone.” TWiB! quickly began an unscheduled live stream, accompanied by a chatroom, to shift the discussion from the counter-public space of Twitter to the more secluded space of the podcasts. These podcasts were initially used to process the impact of the verdict. As days went on, they took on a greater interpretive function, with participants collectively working to understand the event and seeking to challenge the dominant discourses surrounding the acquittal. The night of the verdict, White and Dacia Mitchell, then co-host of TWiB! Radio, began live-streaming at about midnight EST. The unexpected show was announced via White’s personal Twitter account to his roughly 20,000 followers as well his Facebook and Google+ profiles. White’s tweets included both the link to the live stream and its accompanying chatroom and the number to call in to the show. He quite literally shifted his audience from his Twitter timeline to the live stream, gathering and insulating participating members of the network from the attacks they were experiencing on Twitter. Within thirty minutes, as heavy traffic kept crashing the TWiB! website, White tweeted to direct the audience to listen through the mobile apps TuneIn and Stitcher Radio. After taking phone calls until well after three in the morning, TWiB! Radio was back on air by noon the following day, using the same social media mechanisms to alert listeners. White, this time with Imani Gandy, co-host at the time of TWiB! in the Morning, again took listener
phone calls for over three hours. Despite being on an extended hiatus at the time, TWiB! Radio broadcast for several hours a day, every day for the next ten days.

TWiB!’s response to the Zimmerman acquittal closely mirrored Black radio’s well-documented function of informing and unifying Black communities in times of turmoil. Black radio DJs were key political and community actors during the tumultuous years of the 1960s and 1970s. In the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Black DJs across the country suspended their regularly scheduled broadcasts and “gathered people around the microphone to ponder and probe the unfolding American tragedy with the listeners.” In 1992, in the chaos that followed the acquittal of two Los Angeles police officers in the beating of Rodney King, LA’s Black-owned and operated radio station KJLH responded with an unscheduled broadcast of Front Page, its news and current events program. Front Page went on air and broadcast nonstop for days, taking phone calls from listeners and providing the community with a forum to discuss events as well as with vital information as civil unrest unfolded in the city.

Many saw the Zimmerman acquittal not only as a failure of the legal system, but as an affirmation of Black Americans’ exclusion from the fundamental rights and protections of US citizenship. The verdict also laid bare the oppression and devaluation of Black life that contemporary postracial colorblind discourses worked to obscure. Here, the work of Ghasson Hage is helpful to understanding the dynamics. Hage draws on Louis Althusser’s theory of interpellation, the process through which individuals come to occupy certain subject positions through the “hail” of social interactions, to explore the complex processes that constitute racialized subjects. “Mis-interpellation” occurs when a racialized subject who seems to be hailed as part of a collective is suddenly made aware of being excluded. This individual “believes that the hailing is for ‘everyone’ and answers the call thinking that there is a place for him or her awaiting to be occupied,” writes Hage. “Yet, no sooner do they answer the call and claim their spot than the symbolic order brutally reminds them that they are not part of everyone.” Hage argues that mis-interpellation is particularly traumatic because it is so unexpected—the “subject is ambushed.” He explains, “Just as [the subject] is led to believe that there is every reason to be hopeful, its hope is killed before its very eyes. The
subject shatters and its effort to pull itself together following that moment becomes Herculean.”

It is precisely “hope” that made the Zimmerman acquittal so traumatic for many Black Americans. The language of colorblindness and its denial of contemporary racism had come to saturate US political culture. Barack Obama, who was often praised for his ability to “transcend” race, became the first person of color to be elected to the office of the president. Many saw the event as proof that Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream had come to fruition. However, on the night of July 13, Black Americans found that rather than living in King’s Dream, they were instead still living behind of DuBois’s veil.

One hundred and ten years prior to the Zimmerman trial, W. E. B. DuBois wrote of the color line as a veil that separated the Black and white worlds. While it is unlikely that the majority of Black Americans ever believed the veil had completely vanished, it had become easy to see Obama’s election as an indication that the veil had at least become thinner, more permeable, and less determinative of Black Americans’ life chances. In seeking, and to some degree expecting, justice for Trayvon Martin and his family, Black Americans ran smack into the color line, finding that it was still much stronger than many had allowed themselves believe. White expressed this sentiment on TWiB! Radio the night of the verdict:

There is an extra amount of, I guess, bitterness that comes with this, because at the moment we are being served up that America is this meritocracy, racism is over, and all you have to do is pull yourself up and you’ll be fine. And we’re learning, day by day, night by night, that this is consistently not true.

Or as Blair L. M. Kelley put it succinctly, “I just want a time in which we are all citizens and respected as such. And I thought we were there, and we are not.”

As the symbolic order expelled Black Americans from full citizenship, their Herculean effort to reassemble their shattered subjectivity unfolded in part online. On Saturday July 13 and Sunday July 14, in the immediate aftermath of the verdict, TWiB! staff and fans called into the TWiB! live stream and took to social media to express their grief, fear,
and anger. Digital networks provided an instantly available, widely accessible means of connecting to others and enabling a collective expression of emotion. As Vince from Charlotte, who called in Saturday night, put it, “I think we are just looking for someplace to go. For someplace, for somebody else to feel the same way that I’m feeling right now. . . . just to understand that I’m not alone in this.”

Whether it was the TWiB! hosts, the callers, the people in the chatroom, or the people on social media, all expressed a sense of alienation from the American body politic. As White tweeted shortly before the Saturday night broadcast, “Next time you hear someone ask ‘Why do you have to be “black,” why can’t you just be American?’ remember this moment.” Or as Monica Roberts responded to White and two other users, “This nation only wants us when they need soldiers to fight a war.”

The sudden expulsion from citizenship, as the American symbolic order rebuked Black Americans’ sense of belonging, was made all the more traumatic as Black parents had to grapple with the pain and helplessness of watching as this moment of mis-interpellation devastated their children as well. To many Trayvon Martin became an avatar for Black youth in the United States, a symbol for the way that the broader culture regarded Black lives. During the two TWiB! Radio broadcasts the weekend of the verdict, callers expressed despair at watching their children face the harsh reality of the institutionalized devaluation of their lives. One caller, Sunny from Birmingham, AL, encapsulated this experience, “My son asked me, ‘Mom, why don’t I matter?’” Another TWiB! listener tweeted, “I’m having a baby girl in two weeks . . . & I’ve gone from elated to terrified.”

Such expressions of individual subjective experiences of mis-interpellation transformed the Zimmerman acquittal into a collective trauma. Sociologists have argued that trauma is not simply the result of a painful experience, but a social process through which symbolic representations of that event define it as an injury to the collective, thereby allowing that pain to enter “into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity.” It is through processes of representation that an event is constructed as a collective trauma, which implicitly involves a shift in collective identity. It was in digital media spaces that many Black Americans represented their experiences of mis-interpellation and, feel-
ing stripped of their identity as Americans, worked to reify their Black identity.

A few days after the acquittal White explained to me in a personal exchange that he believed a “Digital Black Nation” was emerging in response to the verdict and providing an alternative citizenship for Black Americans. He argued that TWiB! was “like a city” within a Black imagined community and that, though fraught with internal tensions and conflicts, it came together in solidarity in times of crisis. Black Americans have long existed in imagined communities connected by transportation, music, Black-owned newspapers, and the like, and it is not uncommon in certain strains of Black thought to construct Blackness as having the status of nationhood. White pointed to the unprecedented availability of real-time, geographically unfettered interactive media as solidifying those existing bonds.44

TWiB!’s live stream the night of the verdict provided the kind of synchronous listening experience that has traditionally made radio a powerful medium for the constitution of imagined communities. Like radio, the podcast provided the experience of “liveness,” the feeling of being part of a group listening simultaneously in real-time, which can create a powerful sense of connection.45 Further, TWiB!’s use of the call-in format allowed the audience to participate in meaning-making processes around the acquittal. Though it is not uncommon for TWiB! to take phone calls for portions of shows, it rarely used the call-in format for an entire broadcast until that night. The decisions to take back-to-back phone calls from twenty-one listeners made the broadcast a collective effort. In addition, audience participation not only demonstrated to listeners who the members of this community were but also served as performances of Black collective identity.

Throughout the broadcast, White and Mitchell also interjected comments from the chatroom into the discussion, allowing those who could not, or did not wish to, call in to be part of the conversation. Beyond this, the chatroom allowed the listeners to interact not just with the show, but with each other. The chatroom simulated the way a group of people might have listened to KJLH during the unrest of 1992, gathering around and commenting and discussing among themselves.

Similarly, Twitter provided an additional channel for synchronous participation, allowing listeners to interact with the show and with each
other. For listeners using Twitter, TWiB!’s longtime hashtag #TWiB-nation and White’s personal Twitter account served as focal points for these interactions. The addressivity enabled by the @-reply feature of Twitter and conversational coherence created via the use of hashtags allowed TWiB! listeners to converse on Twitter about events and comment on the show.46

The resulting discursive space allowed both hosts and listeners to engage in collective meaning-making about Black racial identity and the nature of TWiB! itself. The comments of TWiB! hosts and listeners revealed a clear conceptualization of TWiB! as a space of community, rather than a network of individuals. Early in the broadcast, White explained to listeners his rationale for going live that night, saying, “[W]e need to talk about it. Because I was just sitting there angry and I didn’t know what to do either. But we figured we’d allow for an outlet for people, kind of, to weigh in.”47 Mitchell spoke to the sense of collective experience, saying that she hoped that listening to the broadcast lets “people know they aren’t alone.” Just days after the Zimmerman acquittal, White explained to me that he felt that TWiB! had “an obligation to be there” for the community.48 TWiB!’s response—ten days of unscheduled coverage of the event—was a clear manifestation of that sense of responsibility.

TWiB!’s listeners indicated a shared vision of TWiB!’s function as space for the community. Callers expressed gratitude to TWiB! for broadcasting that night, and many listeners echoed these sentiments on Twitter. Long time listener @AwakeBlackWoman tweeted during the broadcast that it was “truly lifesaving to have #TWiB Nation on the air, taking calls: Here For Us.”49 Another longtime listener, @CoquiNegra tweeted to the hosts of TWiB! Radio the following day that TWiB! was “the resource our community needed right now. Thank you.”50

Additionally, hosts, callers, chatroom participants, and Twitter users, with few exceptions, interpreted Zimmerman’s acquittal through the lens of a Black collective identity. Many that night spoke of Black Americans’ shared status as marginalized second-class citizens, which they tied to the history of Black oppression in the United States. Expressing the feeling that Black lives were simply not valued, hosts and listeners articulated the shared experience of living in as racialized subjects in the US in the era of supposed colorblindness.
The show also addressed the sense of isolation many listeners felt, seeing many of their fellow Americans seemingly untouched by this event. White asked, “The question is who is feeling the pain? This feels like a dark night in America for us. There are tons of people who are paying no mind to this.” He continued, “There are two different countries under one umbrella here. And sometimes when you see stuff like this, it highlights it. You clearly see the two different spaces we live in.”

TWiB’s collective meaning-making process unfolded synchronously across TWiB!’s multilayered digital structure. Perhaps the most striking example of this was an exchange between White and two other listeners who were participating from Korea and Germany. At about 2:20 a.m. EST a listener named Jack called in from Seoul, South Korea, saying, “No matter where you go in the world, any Black person who sees this case relates to it, relates to, you know, the injustice.” He continued that people often ask him why he does not want to return to the United States, and stated pointedly, “This is an example of why I’m not in a hurry to go back home.” Minutes later, another listener, @HaggBoson, tweeted from Germany using the #TWiBNation hashtag, “Re: the caller from Korea. I’m in Germany and feel no desire to go ‘home,’ for the same reason.” Approximately thirty minutes later, White said on air that he was “scanning the feed,” looking through the hashtag on Twitter. He came across and read the tweet from @HaggsBoson on air, which in turn prompted those in the chatroom to discuss their experiences and feelings regarding international travel and living abroad.

The pain of mis-interpellation echoed across the podcast Chitlin’ Circuit as well. Several of its podcasters participated in TWiB!’s live streams and were present in the chatroom or part of the related interactions on Twitter, and many were in dialogue with TWiB!’s live streams, recapping and responding to what TWiB! had discussed on their shows. The same sense of grief and the experience of alienation from the US citizenry were in the foreground. However, the Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts varied in how, and even whether, they covered the verdict.

Many of them echoed the same sentiments as TWiB!, emphasizing how Obama’s election and the discourses of “postracial” America merely temporarily obscured racial oppression. The day following the verdict, TBGWT addressed the issue. Although the podcast has become increasingly political over time, at that point, Rod and Karen were largely
avoiding topics that they considered too heavy because they wanted the podcast to be funny and entertaining. But as Rod said of the verdict, “As funny as I want the show to be, if I just avoid talkin’ about it then that’s probably not good. . . . I don’t have any jokes for it really, because it’s not funny to me.” He asked Karen and their guest Amber P., who hosted her own podcasts *Black, Sexy, Geeky, and Mental* and *Black Chick Watching*, their reactions. Karen pointed to the sense of mis-interpellation saying, “Black issues in our country are not considered American issues. Our children dying are not considered American children dying. We’re considered a subculture, a subsection, Other, less than.” Rod echoed this, asserting that even having a trial was a victory of sorts because “just the American right to have our death investigated wasn’t even there.” Reggie, co-host of the *What’s the Tea?* podcast, described the feeling:

> It’s like America had this banner like, “Your life isn’t worth shit and we really don’t give a fuck about you,” But, you know, the banner got covered up by Obama 2012. But, now they’ve rehung the banner, and they’re like, “Remember, we don’t really give a fuck about your life.”

The enclave created by the podcasts also served as space to escape these potent emotions, allowing a brief respite for those who were emotionally weary. After expressing their perspectives, the *TBGWT* hosts quickly moved on to more humorous topics. All three stated that they didn’t follow the trial very closely because it was simply too painful. These sentiments were echoed in *TBGWT*’s live chat. Kriss and Kev, then co-hosts of the MTR’s *Insanity Check* podcast, mentioned the verdict only to say that they weren’t going to discuss it. Kriss explained, “Normally, while I like talking about things even if they make us uncomfortable, this joint hits a lot closer to home.” He said that they had wanted to show to be a distraction from the tragedy.

**Gatewatching and Counter-Discourse Production**

In addition to serving as a haven for those looking for catharsis, solidarity, or distraction, the network served as a tool for collectively gatewatching and challenging the mainstream news media’s coverage of the acquittal. This was no small task, given that the expression of
a uniquely Black social and historical experience was in direct violation of the edicts of colorblindness. The conversations taking place in many Black digital media spaces asserted race as a central organizing structure of the United States and a major locus of inequality. The recognition of race as something more than a trivial individual characteristic quickly elicited attempts to silence the Black voices making these claims, as many white Americans on social media platforms and in mainstream media and politics set about to dismiss or coopt those expressions of Black experiences. The network functioned as a preexisting infrastructure for alerting participants to problematic reporting, directly challenging its authors, and producing alternative interpretations of events.

In legacy media, commentators and pundits attempted to reassert neoliberal racial logics and label those discussing race as the true racists. People such as Newt Gingrich, who continued the practice in which proponents of colorblind racial logics coopt Civil Rights Movement language, condemned the people protesting in the days following the verdict as a misinformed “lynch mob.” When President Obama validated Black collective experiences of racism by saying that thirty-five years ago he could have been Trayvon Martin, several pundits responded by calling him the “race-baiter in chief” and accusing him of “tearing the country apart” by foregrounding race. Conservatives like Bill O’Reilly tried to reassert the primacy of individual characteristics rather than social structures in sustaining racial inequality by deploying paternalistic discourses of personal responsibility, asserting “the deterioration of the Black family” due to “poor individual life choices” on the part of Black Americans. CNN anchor Don Lemon echoed O’Reilly’s sentiments but said they did not “go far enough” and, reinforcing the emphasis on individual behavior, invoked the politics of respectability, telling Black Americans to pull up their pants, stop littering, and stop using the word “n-word.” Freeman described the general discursive climate saying, “These last ten days has been America collectively explaining in various ways and forms about how the Black experience isn’t really important, and it really shouldn’t be that important to you as a Black person.”

TWiB! functioned as a space in which to resist the reinterpretation of events in ways that eliminated Black experience and downplayed the severity and institutionalization of contemporary racism. Beginning the
Monday after the verdict, TWiB! shifted from providing a space for collective grieving to being a center for counter-discourse production that addressed and rebutted attempts to reframe events. White explained:

The first couple of days we broadcasted, it was—it was just this pain, and just like horror about what is actually happening. And then all of a sudden we’ve been going into this space of dealing with the fuckery that people are throwing out there and like batting it down, going “No, that’s bullshit.”

TWiB! podcasts systematically analyzed, deconstructed, and rebutted each attempt to dismiss or reframe.

Both TWiB! staff and listeners engaged in this practice on both Twitter and on-air during the TWiB! podcasts. In response to the sheer volume of problematic commentary circulating after the acquittal, White created a hashtag, #TMFRH, an abbreviation of the phrase “this motherfucker right here,” to allow the TWiB! network (both the organization proper and the social network in which it is embedded) to crowdsourcer and tag problematic commentary for discussion on TWiB! shows. On July 21, after the hashtag had been in circulation a few days, White tweeted, “The folks at @WEEKinBLACKNESS and I are going to be scanning that hashtag regularly. If you see something, say something. #TMFRH.”

Many listeners used the hashtag to flag commentary for TWiB! Radio hosts. The hashtag was given two related TWiB! Radio episodes—Episode 451: The This Motherf*cker Right Here Hour and Episode 452: The #TMRH Hour 2.

Thus, when Salon’s David Sirota moved to recenter the discussion of Trayvon Martin tragedy to one of his primary political issues—US drone strikes—both Gandy and White engaged Sirota on Twitter, making use of the platform’s counter-public enabling affordances to challenge his attempts to redirect public attention in a way that they felt was coopting the pain of Black Americans and foreclosing discussions of domestic structural racism.

White challenges to Sirota (which were Storified by another user) included the following tweets, among others:

I’m genuinely confused as to why @davidsirota keeps trying to connect the #ZimmermanTrial to Obama and drone strikes. Sir . . .
There isn’t an equivalency to #TrayvonMartin and Drone strikes. To do so erases the circumstances that leads to both.\(^6\)

To use the pain & grieving of a community to make a nonsensical political argument is not only cheap—it’s insulting. @davidsirota.\(^6\)

White, Gandy, and Freeman discussed Sirota’s tactics at length on TWiB! Radio. During the conversation, Gandy expressed her frustration:

Can we just talk about what Black people right now need to talk about right now at this moment, for like a week at least? We can’t even go a week? Until some white liberal is coming along . . . saying, “Oh no. We need to talk about this now. Y’all had your moment.”\(^6\)

In addition to responding to the minimization and erasure of Black Americans’ feelings and experiences, TWiB! Radio podcasts also served as a means for preserving these responses. TWiB! came to be an alternative archive of sorts, or, as White put it,

almost like an audio record of the fuckery that’s occurring. . . . Because the fact is, after a couple of weeks, a month or two, people will pretend like nothing happened. Nothing fucking happened. And I—I will not. I will point it out. . . . And there’s going to be a record. You can’t pretend like it didn’t happen. But, there’s a record, where it was literally collected. Like Pokémon. Racist-ass Pokémon. I wanna collect them all.\(^6\)

Because remembering is so central to identity, how the moment of the George Zimmerman verdict was, and is, remembered has dramatic consequences for the possibilities of Black collective identity in the future. Remembering the collective expulsion from full citizenship solidifies a Black collective identity grounded in a shared experience of oppression. Defending the memory of this experience is a strategy for defending the collective identity it speaks to. Thus, the nature of this memory is not only a matter of contemporary urgency, but also one that stands to affect the future viability of Black collective identity in the colorblind ideological context.
While TWiB! was deliberately functioning as a counter-public, other podcasts continued to serve as enclaves, where participants could interrogate and interpret discourse. While the Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts did discuss the same problematic narratives covered on TWiB!, they tended to do so without any intention of debating or challenging those outside the network.

Humor was a key strategy for processing the dominant discourse about the verdict. Just a few days afterward, TBGWT’s hosts asserted that people on cable news networks were debating the verdict “like ESPN treats football.” After discussing how many news outlets were anticipating riots, a white woman who rushed the stage and attacked a Black musician after he dedicated a song to Martin, and the reported book deal of Juror B37, Rod summarized his experience of the news: “I really feel like people just fuckin’ with us.” He went on to explain, “Fuckin’ with us, dog. White people just fucking with us. That is theme of today’s show. . . . I looked at today’s topics and I was just like, damn, white people just fuckin’ with us. What is going on? It’s like at an all-time high right now.” Soon Rod and Karen instituted “Fuckin’ with Black People” as a regular segment on the podcast and then developed an introduction that involved gameshow-style music to which they sang, “Fuckin’ with those Black people, we’re just fuckin’ with those Blacks! We’re just fuuuuckin’ with, fuckin’ with Black people.” Rod explained the “game,” saying, “That’s right, it’s time for the game that we all hate to play, where we find news stories and rate them from zero to one hundred, in increments of twenty-five, based on how much we feel fucked with.” Regular contestants on the game include “everybody” and “Donald Trump.”

The case of Trayvon Martin—his death, the activism to bring charges, and the trial and subsequent acquittal of George Zimmerman—was a pivotal moment for the network at the center of this project and for Black digital networks more broadly. It was with this tragedy that the network fully coalesced as a resource for times of turmoil. The strategies deployed became the basis for the complex and multilayered use of digital technologies as unrest gripped Ferguson, Missouri, in the summer of 2014.
Mike Brown and the Ferguson Uprising

On August 9, 2014, Mike Brown, an unarmed Black eighteen-year-old, was shot and killed by a white Ferguson police officer, Darren Wilson. In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, members of the Ferguson community took to the streets to mourn and demand answers. The situation escalated quickly, and within forty-eight hours police armed with military-style vehicles and weapons were deploying tear gas as a local convenience store was being looted. Over the next ten days, protests and unrest continued and were met with overwhelming force by the police, including the repeated use of tear gas and nonlethal rounds on protesters. Functioning as an awareness system, Twitter was instrumental in bringing Brown’s death to local, and eventually national, attention. The initial coverage of Brown’s death took place through interactions between Ferguson residents, existing social media micro-celebrities, and local news media.

The first alerts came from Ferguson residents and local news media who used Twitter, Instagram, and Vine to both share and seek information. Local news media played an important role in the initial reporting of the story. Brown was shot at approximately noon (Central Time) on August 9. The local Fox affiliate reported the shooting on its website at approximately 1:30, prior to the gathering of the large crowd that prompted police response. Local television station KPLR and the St. Louis Post Dispatch both reported the incident between 4:00 and 5:00 p.m. This was after a crowd of local residents had started to gather, and therefore the community reaction was included in this reporting. These local news stories were heavily retweeted. Websites of the New York Times, the Huffington Post, the Los Angeles Times, NewsOne, NBC News, MSNBC, CNN, and the BBC included the story—though as a minor story taken from the news wire.

Alongside these news stories were accounts from local people, who provided local news with information and circulated their own eyewitness contributions. A resident of the Canfield Green Apartments, which face the street where Brown was shot, tweeted within minutes of the shooting that he saw the police shoot and kill someone, and then, within the next hour, he tweeted an image of Brown’s body in the street with two officers standing next to him, taken through the slats of
his patio. The tweet with this image was retweeted over four thousand times. Minutes later, another user also tweeted and indicated witnessing the police shoot a young Black man. This post included an image of a handful of residents standing near the scene, taken from a different vantage point in the apartment complex.

In the first hours after Brown’s death, social media functioned as a channel for such word-of-mouth information-sharing. Early on, before any official information had been released and while the news reports still lacked detail, Twitter in particular allowed people to circulate information they “had heard.” This included that Brown was killed after shoplifting cigarillos and the number of shots fired.69

Reporters used social media as a resource for getting information for their own reporting. Brittany Noble-Jones, a local news reporter, solicited information from the community via Instagram and Twitter, asking people to send her pictures they were seeing on social media.70 National news media unfamiliar with the region used Twitter to contact locals. The journalist Wesley Lowery, for one, did so as he was making arrangements to come into Ferguson, telling his contacts, “Will touch base right after I land. Important to tell this story correctly.”71 Simultaneously, users alerted people who lived locally using Twitter and other social media. For example, Patricia Bynes, then a Ferguson Township Democratic Committeewoman, was @-replied by another Twitter user about the incident. When Bynes responded that she didn’t know anything about it, the user supplied her with a link to the St. Louis Post Dispatch story. The original tweet to Bynes was at 4:52 p.m., and by 5:40 she was tweeting from the spot where Brown had been shot. Noble-Jones learned of the incident via Instagram, went to Ferguson to report, and at 5:43 p.m. tweeted she had arrived on the scene.72 She provided coverage, both officially for her station and unofficially through her own social media accounts late into the night and for several days to follow.

Many local residents went to the scene of the shooting and began engaging in “random acts of journalism,” reporting as events unfolded. In addition to Bynes, Antonio French, an alderman of a neighboring ward, local Hip-hop artists Tef Poe and T-Dubb-O, local radio personality Tammie Holland, local activists WyzeChef and Ashely Yates, and others went out among the crowd and gave real-time updates via social
media. As protests continued the following day, even more people took to the streets, posting as events unfolded; some, such as C. Jay Conrod, @GeekNStereo, Netta Elzie, and others, quickly became trusted sources of information. In addition to posting what they themselves witnessed, many of these users also gathered and posted eye-witness accounts from bystanders and residents. From these fragments of information a narrative of Brown’s death began to take shape.

By 2014, Twitter users, particularly those who were part of the Black Twitter network, were well aware of the power Twitter had for raising visibility and impacting mainstream discourse. Many of Black Twitter’s most influential moments came in 2013—including the cancelation of the book contract obtained by a juror in the Zimmerman trial, which was as a result of Black Twitter’s mobilization. Consequently, many users seeking to increase the visibility of the situation went to Twitter, often including links to local news coverage. People tweeted at news outlets and celebrities or tagged them in the comments of Instagram posts. For example, T-Dubb-O tweeted images of the scene, including one of Brown’s body, to Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, CNN, and local TV station KSDK. He then continued tweeting at them, making use of Twitter’s reply feature, which allows users to connect their tweet to the one they are replying to and create a thread. People also used this feature to reply to their own tweets, to express longer thoughts in a way that would remain intact and linear in the interface. T-Dubb-O used it to offer commentary on the image in the original post, asserting that “we cannot continue to allow this type of treatment from an organization that is funded by tax dollars” and “we should not have to be afraid of those sworn in to protect and serve their community.” Users tagged Tef Poe’s Instagram post of the same images with the handles for CNN, the local Fox affiliate, Oprah, and Time Magazine.

Additionally, micro-celebrities on Twitter were instrumental in disseminating information. These users had been having their usual conversations—ranging from serious discussion about the impact of street harassment to jokes about Lifetime’s casting decisions for an Aaliyah biopic. Seeing the social media posts coming from Ferguson residents, either because they were addressed directly or because they simply saw the posts moving through the network, prompted many to use their visibility to highlight the story. For example, in response to
Tef Poe’s tweeting, “Basically martial law is taking place in Ferguson all perimeters blocked coming and going. . . . National and international friends Help!!!” Feminista Jones asked how she could help. They had a brief exchange about the importance of circulating information and generating visibility, which concluded with Feminista tweeting, “Ok well I’m gonna follow you so if I can use my reach to do anything, I’ll do my best.” As events in Ferguson unfolded over the next several days, many of the micro-celebrities in the Black Twitter network worked to boost the social media posts coming from Ferguson. For example, Baratunde Thurston tweeted, “Why are you looking at this tweet when you should be diving into @AntonioFrench’s feed? #Ferguson #MikeBrown,” directing his tens of thousands of followers to Alderman French’s Twitter timeline. Others made lists of users on the ground in Ferguson. For example, Tracy Clayton, a Black Twitter micro-celebrity who later became an editor for Buzzfeed, created a list called “Ferguson Locals & Journos” which included Elzie, Zellie Imani, and Noble-Jones.

Because of its image and video capabilities, Instagram was an important tool for posting real-time updates. Instagram allows users to take images and videos in app, meaning that users can open the app, take a picture or record a thirty-second video, and post it immediately to their feed. At the time, when other social media platforms lacked this capability, there was already a large Black network on Instagram. While much has been made of how Black Americans are a larger percentage of users on Twitter than they are of the US population, it is rarely mentioned that they are even more heavily represented on Instagram. As of 2014, 38 percent of Black internet users were on Instagram, compared to 21 percent of white users and 34 percent of Hispanic users.

However, Instagram is not designed to optimize spreadability within the platform. It lacks a built-in share feature. In 2014, the only way to repost on Instagram was to take a screen shot or to use a third-party app, such as InstaGetter, to download Instagram images to one’s phone and edit them, or various “regram” apps like Repost for Instagram or Regram that allow users to share another Instagram user’s post to their account. However, Instagram does facilitate sharing one’s posts to other platforms, specifically Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr. The Instagram app itself has a feature that allows users to link their Instagram accounts to other social media accounts. When they post to Instagram, the post is
then pushed out to their other accounts. Thus, images and videos can be taken and posted easily on Instagram, where they are difficult to share, but then simultaneously posted on other platforms that enable greater circulation.

Vine also played a crucial role in the social media coverage of Ferguson. Vine, now a defunct platform owned by Twitter, allowed users to post six-second videos that played in a loop. August 2014 was before Twitter's live-streaming service, Periscope, was created and before Facebook launched its streaming service Facebook Live. Anyone who wanted to live-stream had to use a service such as Livestream or Ustream, which were too complicated for ad hoc and improvisational media creation because they required advance set-up. While there were a number of live-streamers, such as Argus Radio, Rebelutionary Z, and Bassem Masri, many on-the-ground opted instead for video capabilities built into Instagram and Vine. French was one of the heaviest users of Vine during Ferguson. He began tweeting from Ferguson at about 6 p.m. CST and quickly became a trusted source of information via social media. French posted almost four hundred Vines between August 10 and August 30, with his heaviest posting day (99 Vines) being August 12. As of 2014, Vine had 40 million registered users worldwide, not nearly the reach of other social media platforms. Six of French's Vines were shared, or revined, on the platform over one thousand times, and one was even revined 8,600 times, but most were shared fewer than one hundred times, with about half hovering in the twenty-to-forty range. Vine, like Instagram, posed a challenge of spreadability, which was ameliorated by cross-posting links to Vine videos on other social media platforms, particularly Twitter.

Social media was an important resource not only for disseminating information, but also for coordinating on the ground, especially in the first few days of the unrest. In the hours following Brown’s death, many used Twitter to discuss where the police were restricting movement and where crowds were gathering to protest. For example, Tef Poe tweeted information he received from family members in the area and then eventually his own updates after he arrived on the scene. When Yates tweeted that she was heading to Ferguson, another user informed her that people were assembling outside the Ferguson Police Department on Florissant Road. Conrod, who lived around the corner from the
incident, but was in a different area when the shooting occurred, used Twitter to solicit information about whether he could get through the police lines to his house. Later, after being able to make it home unimpeded, Conrod contributed his update to the Twitter timeline, “For those wondering, traffic on W. Florissant is fine. Just got home. Everything is business as usual.” Many of the people who emerged as sources of information clearly had pre-established relationships with one another and were using Twitter to coordinate parking and meeting places. As days passed, people even began using Twitter to organize carpools across the country to Ferguson to participate in the protest. But even as Twitter can be useful for ad hoc planning, it also makes such activity visible, and so protestors eventually stopped using the platform as much for these activities after it became clear that law enforcement was tracking their movements through it.

Additionally, Ferguson locals used social media to contextualize Brown’s death in the history of the area. For example, after seeing reports of the fatal shooting, Conrod tweeted about the way local police disproportionately stop and ticket Black residents. He discussed what locals refer to as the police’s “curb service,” when “police not only pull you over, but sit you on the curb (sometimes in cuffs) while they search your car.” He described the practice as “degrading” and putting people “on display for all passing drivers” and concluded, “This is why there’s animosity concerning the police.” T-Dubb-O made similar statements, such as “it’s known that ferguson police department is racist and have always been and it’s not the first time they have done this,” referring to use of deadly force on an unarmed Black person. He later posted an image of the looted and burned convenience store on August 11 with the caption, “This is what years of harassment turned into last night.”

Another resident turned activist, @GeekNStereo, told a similar story: “I moved to the city for a reason. The harassment from county officers has haunted me since my teens.” WyzeChef posted on Instagram, and also shared the link to this post on Twitter, an image of statistics showing that Ferguson police disproportionately targeted Black residents in the stops, searches, and arrests they made. He later added on Twitter, “I swear there was a time when the police were shooting the hell out of black kids every week in Stl,” and “They shot those lil cats 20+ times at the Jack n the Box on Hanley and 70,” referring to an incident in
which undercover officers shot and killed two men in the parking lot of the fast-food restaurant in 2000.

One of the most important and persistent aspects of social media during the days of unrest in Ferguson was its dialogic relationship to legacy news outlets. From the outset, people monitored the coverage of Ferguson, challenging what they felt was inaccurate and commenting on the racial biases they believed framed it. For example, when the St. Louis Dispatch tweeted, “Fatal shooting by Ferguson police prompts mob reaction,”99 French used the quote function in Twitter to retweet and added, “Mob? You could also use the word ‘community.’”100 Similarly, a few outlets, including the Guardian and NBC News, reported that the crowd was chanting “kill the police.”101 Twitter users rebutted this. Yates tweeted, “A few blocks up from the police station and residents are walking there chanting ‘NO JUSTICE NO PEACE’ NOT ‘kill the police.’”102 @Vandalymz tweeted directly at NBC News saying, “I was there. Literally. Nobody chanted ‘Kill the Police’ fuck outta here @NbcNews.”103

A number of critiques concerned ways in which news reports were sensationalizing the story and portraying Black Americans as violent. After a peaceful day of protest, Elzie asserted, “The media isn’t interested in peaceful black people. Very few reporters were out there.”104 Some local Ferguson residents suggested that police allowed property damage so that Black residents could be portrayed negatively in the news media. Conrod, for one, tweeted, “I think police let this happen. This situation could’ve been contained hours ago. They let it escalate. Now excessive force seems justified,”105 and “I can’t stress that enough. Tension didn’t rise until police blocked off streets. Then they did nothing to prevent or contain the looting.”106

Citizen use of social media networks were also important to provide accounts of the professional reporting taking place on the ground. For example, Yates tweeted an account of the crowd reacting negatively to the crew from local station KSDK, which had reported that Brown was carrying a weapon: “Ppl became angry when they spotted their news crew and started yelling at them to leave. The camera man grew angry and flustered,” and “The KSDK camera man said ‘You want us gone? You want us to leave?! FINE, WE’RE LEAVING! He picked up his gear and walked off.”107 While many criticized the news media, some felt that some news outlets were doing a good job, and they publicly thanked and
highlighted reporters whom they believed to be trustworthy. In this way, local residents used social media to certify the veracity of reporting to their social networks.

As events unfolded and social media offered fragmented accounts and bits of information, users collectively began constructing a narrative from those fragments. This narrative, which tended to be in opposition to the one being presented by national news media, was seen by many in the network as the more authoritative and honest version. It was this ongoing distrust of legacy media that prompted TWiB! to go to Ferguson and report.

**TWiB! Reporting from Ferguson: Independent Media and Citizen Journalism**

In August 2014, at the behest of its audience, TWiB! made two trips to Ferguson to report live, the first from August 13 to 16 and the second from August 18 to 23. On Wednesday August 13, 2014, when White, TWiB! sound engineer and TWiB! Prime co-host Aaron Rand Freeman, and White's wife, Emily Epstein-White (who is white), arrived on location in Ferguson, they began using their existing broadcast-style network and social media networks to give voice to local accounts of the events, offering a narrative opposing that of mainstream media outlets. They were able to leverage their existing networks to provide on-the-ground coverage that simultaneously bypassed and intervened into legacy news media coverage.

During TWiB! Prime’s regular broadcast the Monday following Brown’s death, TWiB! reported on the events taking place in Ferguson. TWiB! was already attempting to make interventions into the coverage of the events. By this time, the unrest in Ferguson was in its third day. The podcast opened with audio from a news report about Ferguson that included Brown’s mother saying, “You took my son away from me. You know how hard it was for me to get him to stay in school and graduate? You know how many Black men graduate? Not many!” White recounted Brown’s death noting, “People on the ground and the police department are saying two different things,” about how events transpired. From this first coverage of Ferguson, TWiB! was devoted to analyzing how legacy media was framing the story and to
producing alternative accounts of events grounded in reports of local residents.

To this end, TWiB! had invited a local Ferguson woman, Jeanina Jenkins, onto the show to give her account of events. The shooting occurred directly across from her job while she was at work. White asked, “The reports that were coming out of there, out of Ferguson, apparently, you guys are in the middle of some sort of apocalyptic nightmare with people just freaking out. Is that’s what’s happening on the ground?” Jenkins responded, “Basically, we’re just doing chants. We peacefully chant, saying ‘No justice, no peace. ’ And we were just walkin’ back and forth with our signs, saying ‘I am a man, I am a woman.’” Jenkins continued:

The rally was peaceful. The police was out with their machine guns. They had their dogs barking at us. . . . They had their batons out like they were ready to beat us. And we were, like, doing it so peacefully. And, yes, there was a riot. But, it was a few people. It wasn’t a lot. It was a few people who were going off of their emotions. It wasn’t, like, everyone . . . It was just a few individuals that made it look like it was everyone, but it wasn’t. It was peaceful. We were all comin’ together as a Black community. Because we’re tired. We’re saying enough is enough.109

White inquired about the history of the relationship between the people of Ferguson and the police department, in response, Jenkins recounted the ongoing issues with profiling and stops that had been described by other locals.

During this first coverage, and throughout the weeks that followed, TWiB! highlighted the disparity between legacy media coverage and the accounts circulating on social media. Mid-show, as White and Gandy continued to discuss the contentious issues surrounding the coverage of Ferguson, White commented, “I think we might end up going down to Ferguson to talk to people on the ground.” Explaining that people like Jenkins should have their stories heard, he argued that “as opposed to the narrative crafted by media, the narrative should be crafted by the people on the ground. And media should be used to thereby highlight that story.” Gandy elaborated on the ways that social media provided resources for countering legacy media, which were complicit in furthering racist interpretations of events:
We’re living in this new digital age where basically citizen journalism is on the rise. And I think that it’s an important way for communities to shine a light on what’s really going on. Because the mainstream media is basically useless, in a lot of instances. I mean, they craft a narrative. The narrative says that Black people are violent. The narrative says that “oh look at these Black people looting.” Irrespective of the fact . . . that white people love themselves a riot too. I mean, anytime the Red Sox lose, anytime the Red Sox win.

It was during this conversation that TWiB! began receiving messages via social media from listeners who felt distrustful of the news coverage and who were eager to see TWiB! travel to Ferguson. One longtime listener, a white woman using the handle @tealdeer, tweeted to White, “I don’t know if it’s something you’re considering, but I would totally kick in s for you guys to go cover #Ferguson.” White responded, on Twitter, that they were working on determining if it was financially feasible. Shortly after, White announced on the show that during the next forty-eight hours first-time donations would go to funding their trip to Ferguson. Donations started immediately, before the show had even ended, and soon thereafter, when White announced that TWiB! would be traveling to Ferguson, he noted that enough money to cover airfare and hotel costs had been raised in just twelve hours because “that’s how much people don’t trust the news.”

TWiB! used its usual broadcast-style audio podcast to report, as well as producing five live-stream “dispatches” from Ferguson between August 13 and 16. During the second trip, while TWiB! Prime co-hosts Freeman and Gandy resumed regular shows, White called in with updates, as well as continuing to release dispatches from Ferguson. Listeners were notified of live streams via social media and could listen live via TWiB!’s website, Stitcher Radio, and TuneIn Radio. All of this content was then available later, streaming through the same services and for download via iTunes, Stitcher and RSS feed. Some of the Ferguson dispatches were also posted to YouTube as audio accompanied by a TWiB! logo as the visual.

TWiB! also circulated these dispatches through their social media channels, which funneled them directly to Black Twitter, who, in turn, retweeted and posted the material from other platforms. At the time, TWiB! was using a now-defunct service called “Donate your account,”
which allowed users to give an entity access to post one tweet a day to their account; in this way, TWiB! was able to extend its coverage via other users’ accounts and further expand its reach.

Social media also served for broadcast-style reporting of information. The TWiB! team, and especially White, posted a constant flow of information on social media. While Twitter served as a real-time central clearinghouse for information, Instagram housed images and videos, with links posted to Twitter. Exemplifying the blurry boundary between TWiB! the podcast network and TWiB! the social network, all social media updates the TWiB! team posted were on their personal accounts. The official TWiB! account, @TWiBnation, had only the autogenerated updates created when they posted audio files to Libsyn, their podcast hosting service. The imbrication of TWiB’s content creation with the social network it anchors was evident throughout TWiB’s reporting. For example, when White used his personal Instagram account for quick video dispatches, mundane pictures of his garden, his dog, and brunch were next to them on his feed.

Social media was also a resource for connecting with Ferguson locals and crowdsourcing information, both before and during TWiB!’s time there. For instance, the day before heading for Ferguson, White tweeted, “#ICYMI: #TWiBnation will be in #Ferguson tomorrow afternoon. Any tips or orgs you think we should talk with let us know—ferguson@twib.me.” Meanwhile, Ferguson locals tweeted at White about connecting with the TWiB! team when they arrived. Brittany Packnett, for one, tweeted “@elonjames dope. Hope to see you out in these streets in solidarity. Glad #TWiBnation will hear from our young ppl. #DONTSHOOT #MikeBrown.” They then had a brief Twitter exchange in which White solicited advice about organizations TWiB! should connect with. For his part, @GeekNStereo tweeted to White, “Hey @elonjames, hit us up when you land we’re in Ferguson cleaning up!,” referring to community efforts to clean up the debris and damage that resulted from previous nights of property damage and looting. Longtime listener Monika Brooks tweeted White a list of on-the-ground journalists that had been compiled by the Breaking News Twitter account and suggested he contact Noble-Jones.

By the evening of August 13, the TWiB! team was on location, with White tweeting their movements: “#Ferguson is locked down hard.
We're parking and going in on foot." From the time they landed at the airport until he went to bed for the night, White tweeted fifty-seven times.\(^{119}\) The tweets detailed what they were witnessing and adding editorial interpretation. There were five images, three of which were posted on Instagram, and one video. Epstein-White also used Twitter and Instagram similarly, while Freeman focused on sharing commentary about the emotional toll of the situation. Social media also served an ad hoc broadcast function. For emergent situations, White used Instagram’s video capability to record a series of fifteen-second dispatches, which he posted to other social media sites. Epstein-White also made use of her Instagram account in conjunction with Twitter, posting images of the police presence.\(^ {120}\)

The following day, TWiB! posted a two-minute video to the Root from footage taken the previous day.\(^ {121}\) The team also posted a twenty-seven-minute audio dispatch to YouTube, in which they described their experience the previous day, contextualized their social media reporting in a more detailed account, and constructed a linear narrative out of the previous day’s brief ad hoc updates.\(^ {122}\) That evening, they streamed live from the National Moment of Silence (NMOS14) protest in St. Louis. The live stream was available through TWiB!’s website, Stitcher, and Tuneln Radio. They went live at 7:18 p.m. EST with White notifying people with a tweet containing the link to the website.\(^ {123}\) Unfortunately, they were able to stream only for forty minutes before losing their signal. The forty minutes were posted as “Ferguson Dispatch #2” the following day. TWiB! also interviewed people at NMOS14, but due to technical difficulties these interviews were lost.

In the late night of August 15 and the early morning hours of August 16, in the wake of the press conference in which Wilson’s name was announced and footage of Brown stealing cigarillos was released, there was a more property damage in Ferguson. The TWiB! team was eating a late dinner and received a call about the unrest and quickly returned to the area. White posted several images to Instagram, which were also shared via Twitter, and then live-streamed for about forty minutes, starting at 2:45 a.m. EST, with the notification also going out via Twitter.\(^ {124}\) In a deviation from the norms of legacy media news coverage, rather than filling the stream with talk, White indicated to listeners that they were going to “go silent,” and would just leave the stream live and the listeners
would hear only background noise. Sometimes there was silence, sometimes noise from cars and bystanders, and White and Freeman could be heard discussing their escape route if necessary.

White returned to Ferguson alone to report from August 18 to August 23. He employed the same methods that he, Epstein-White, and Freeman used on their first trip—a combination of live streams, uploaded dispatches, and social media posts—but since he was alone, his reporting was even more improvisational and ad hoc. It relied heavily on Instagram, which can be understood as a form of witnessing, according to Michael Koliska and Jessica Roberts. Observing that the selfie can facilitate practices of citizen journalism, they note that selfies create a relationship between “space and self [that] is not only a claim that ‘I’m here!’ in a particular time and space but also a claim that ‘I witnessed this event,’ which is elementary to any form of journalism.” In this way, selfies resemble broadcasting practices, in which a reporter is shown telling a story on location. Thus, selfies can be used in “a form of digital storytelling that embeds personal autobiographical elements (self-portraits) about members of a particular community and displays them in semipublic spaces such as social media.”

White’s use of Instagram to report on Ferguson often drew upon these characteristics of selfies, combining them with video to heighten the impact of witnessing.

The imbrication of broadcast and social network functions were central to the efficacy of TWiB!’s reporting. White used Instagram to provide fifteen-second video dispatches on emergent situations. The videos were shot as selfies, but showed only half of his face. This allowed White to show more of the surrounding location than if he was fully in frame, while still positioning himself as present at a given location. He both mediated and witnessed, showing both the scene and himself as being present in it. This video thus combined a characteristic feature of broadcasting-style reporting with the social media genre of the selfie and became part of what Koliska and Roberts refer to as the overall flow of “personally witnessed history” that emerged from Ferguson. The video, unlike the still selfies discussed by Koliska and Roberts, adds audio to the process of witnessing, creating another channel for information and closely resembling live television reporting. White was very clear that he was reporting from Ferguson because of an obligation he felt TWiB! had as a media company. Yet, throughout the events of Ferguson, White
eschewed the label of “journalist,” placing himself in a liminal space between professional news reporting and citizen journalism.

TWiB! provided an alternative view of the situation than mainstream news media and was often in direct dialogue with it. White explained the importance of legacy media, “I’m putting a lot of weight on the media, because the media is reason... people are hearing these stories. The media has a responsibility to make sure there is a clear understanding of what the hell is happening.”127 Because of this, TWiB! often functioned as a media watchdog, reporting on press activities on the ground, complicating and nuancing legacy media reporting, and providing fact-checking in real time.

TWiB!’s reporting often included information regarding the presence (or absence) of news media and its actions in relation to protestors and police. White repeatedly noted the number of cameras he saw and what the reporters were doing.128 On August 15, Epstein-White posted an image to Instagram of a cluster of professional media with the caption, “One major difference tonight in #Ferguson? A lot more media here now.”129

TWiB!’s coverage also functioned to contradict, complicate, or nuance legacy media reporting. One sentiment that was echoed repeatedly throughout the network and by people on the ground in Ferguson was concern that the residents of Ferguson were being represented as dangerous and violent. TWiB!, in contrast, painted a picture of a community that was antagonized, dehumanized, and terrorized by police. Freeman argued that the entire situation stemmed from this treatment:

The reason why anything happened is because from the very moment they had planned the very first vigil—this is something just people on the ground are telling me—from the very day they planned the first vigil, they’ve been getting shoved around by SWAT-dressed police officers. From the very moment they decided they were going to do anything in memory of Mike Brown, they’ve been getting pushed around like criminals.130

For their part, White and Epstein-White described a caring and supportive community:
Epstein-White: It was crazy out there . . . There was a line of cars a mile long, honking horns. People standing out, sitting on top of cars . . . We’re trying to figure out how to get across the street, and there were dudes directing traffic from the neighborhood, who were like, “Oh, you want to get across the street? Hold on, one second.” Helped us get across the street. . . . People were passing out water and food to make sure that everybody had what they needed. Other people were going around picking up trash. This is a community.
White: They were cleaning up. They were frickin’ cleaning up.
Epstein-White: This is a community where people care about each other, and they care about their community. If you just let people be, this is what happens.131

In the late-night hours of August 15 and the early morning of August 16, TWiB! live-streamed from outside a liquor store that was being looted. Complicating cable news narratives about looting and violence, TWiB! reported that while drunk teens appeared to have been looting and damaging property, there were also residents out trying to calm the teens and get them to stop.132 TWiB! also reported that some of the chaos was escalated by white “masked agitators” from outside the community, making a distinction between these masked individuals and the community members attempting to intervene and protect the store.133 On Twitter, Freeman reiterated the idea that police were allowing property destruction to create a news spectacle of Black violence: “I think the police watched. I think the few unruly people were very clearly causing problems. Citizens very clearly tried to stop it,”134 and “the police declined to assist. They watched. Nothing. Watched us eat ourselves. By am the narrative will be SEE? Told ya! Niggers!”135

TWiB! also fact-checked reports in real time, which helped prevent early inaccurate accounts from calcifying into the accepted narrative of events. For example, on August 14, there were reports of what were either gun shots or firecrackers. Rumors of the former were spreading rapidly on Twitter. White immediately went to the area in question to investigate and confirmed no shots were fired. In a dispatch, White explained his rationale,
Someone was like, “You should be checking this, because someone else just said there was five gunshots.” I said, “No, it was fireworks.” That’s why I did it... I don’t want to run toward the gunfire. [But] if it’s not gunfire, someone has to be there to be able to quickly say, “This is not gunfire,” especially with no cops there.

He made clear that such verification was necessary not only to keep media accounts accurate, but also to protect the community from further escalation of tensions with law enforcement, arguing that if the noise was assumed to be gunfire, “Then something happens? They would have sent the goddamn National Guard in. There would have been Marines there or some shit if... someone got shot in the middle of that. You know it.”

Finally, TWiB! in general, and White in particular, became a point of articulation between Ferguson residents and protestors, Black digital networks, and legacy media. This is in part because of the associations TWiB! staff has with established media spaces—White, for one, has made appearances on MSNBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera and written for the Huffington Post, Salon, the Root, and the Grio—and in part because of the visibility of Black Twitter, which has prompted journalists and editors to follow key participants, including White. Having cultivated close relationships with local community leaders and activists, White became highly visible and credible as an on-the-ground source of information not only for the network, but also for professional journalists. For example, the Washington Post asked in the comments of one of his Instagram posts if his photo could be used in their reporting. He was also invited to do interviews on legacy media outlets, including All In with Chris Hayes (though he was bumped) and Al Jazeera (on August 20). Perhaps one of the most notable instances of White serving as a gate between digital networks and legacy media was his appearance on the Melissa Harris-Perry Show on August 24 to talk about being part of a group that was tear-gassed in a residential area.

That group consisted of White, Elzie, activist Cherrell Brown, and a handful of Ferguson residents, and as the incident unfolded in the early hours of August 19, White used streaming audio, Instagram, and Twitter simultaneously to report it, as well as recording a copy of the audio stream that he later circulated. On that audio stream, White
and his companions could be heard running and yelling, with the popping sound of tear-gas canisters being fired in the background. At first he reported that “it doesn’t even look like they’re aiming at protestors. They’re just gassing areas now.” But as the stream went on, White exclaimed, “Shit, they’re coming back!”; others yelled “Go! Go now!”; and sounds of the group running and calls to “lie down” became audible, along with the popping sound of tear-gas canisters. White and a couple of others were able to run back to their car, and once in the car, White described the scene on the audio stream, comparing the tear gassing to pest control practices, “It’s clear that they are trying to exterminate folks.” He can then be heard mumbling, “I’m going to say that right now,” followed by a pause and him saying:

Alright, we got back to the car. We got from behind the backyard and we got to the car. Outside, they’re just gassing everyone. If they see a human being, they throw a gas canister at it. People are getting rubber bulleted and just getting smacked directly in the face. This is not okay.

White had recorded that statement as an Instagram video dispatch while still live streaming. The pause was him opening the app. Thus, his report went out via both live stream and social media. On the Instagram video, his face was only slightly visible in the dark as he narrated the scene. He also gave a clearer account of the situation on Twitter shortly after the incident:

We turned a corner to park. We saw 6 dudes turn the corner and an armored van came flying down the street shooting tear gas. This is a fact.

You can argue “riot” if there’s a crowd of folks being rowdy. It was 6 people. Then they gassed us. An entire group of 8. #Ferguson.

You can’t tell me I’m lying. We were fucking broadcasting through it. I have the audio. This shit happened. #Ferguson.

Within a few hours, White had posted a twenty-minute excerpt of the recording of the live stream, which circulated through social media, where it exemplified not only the use of excessive force by the Ferguson
police department, but also the problematic reporting of legacy media. The night White and his companions were tear gassed in the residential neighborhood, they had been returning to Ferguson because of conflicting accounts about gunfire and Molotov cocktails. Late on the night of August 18, the police had announced at a press conference that there had been “shootings, looting, vandalism, and other acts of violence that clearly appear not to have been spontaneous [but] premeditated criminal acts.”

Captain Ron Johnson of the Missouri State Highway Patrol asserted that “multiple Molotov cocktails were thrown at police,” causing the police to need tear gas to control and disperse the crowd. However, social media accounts, including those by many who had come to be known as reliable sources, asserted this was untrue. Many pointed out there was no footage or images of these Molotov cocktails or of any resultant fire or fire damage.

On August 24, 2014, White was invited on The Melissa Harris-Perry Show to talk about the experience. The segment opened with a clip from the audio of that night and White observing that “the people that I was with thought that they were going to die, and it wasn’t the story that we’ve being told.” White went on to explain that while news reports had heavily emphasized rioting and looting, the story on the ground was quite different:

As we’re talking about this, and they’re framing it, and the story keeps coming out—the rioters and the looters. And the rioters and the looters. . . . It’s not the story. And at this point, you have to question, why would the media even go along with this narrative, as people are actively explaining to you, “Do you understand what’s happening on the ground?” . . . Yes, there are some folks who are doing that. But what about everybody else? What about the vast majority of people out there who are not doing that? But you feel that is . . . reasonable, because of police safety. . . . So, basically, your safety overrides my own humanity. You can’t do this to people. If this is how police have to be safe, our system is broken completely. We have to rebuild it.

With his appearance on The Melissa Harris-Perry Show, White effectively intervened in dominant mass media coverage of the events in Ferguson to paint a more complicated story, which was broadcasted on one of the three major cable news networks and taken up by other outlets.
The Chitlin’ Circuit Podcast during Ferguson

The Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts provided another arena for addressing events in Ferguson. As information came in a stream of fragmented social media posts and mainstream news reporting that many distrusted, they served an interpretive function. They created a safe space in which hosts and listeners could discuss events and provide one another support while avoiding hostilities they faced on social media or in their daily life as they navigated white spaces.

The information about Ferguson came from two primary sources, citizen journalists and professional news reporting, each posing their own interpretive challenges. Citizen journalists, ranging from local Ferguson residents to independent media like TWiB!, employed a contingent and improvisational mode of reporting that relied heavily on social media and other existing platforms like YouTube and UStream. This fragmented stream of information required an investment of time and attention to aggregate, interpret, and arrange into a narrative. Simultaneously, professional news reports presented clearer, more cohesive narratives, but Chitlin’ Circuit participants viewed them with suspicion, seeing them as untrustworthy or as being manipulated by the police. Synthesizing information from both sources for listeners, the podcasts also noted contradictions and controversies around the reporting and provided a space within which to evaluate and critique information as it emerged.

The podcasts drew heavily on citizen journalism, and many of the podcasters spoke explicitly about the role of digital and social media in providing information about Ferguson. For example, on August 15, De Ana, co-host of Nerdgasm Noire Network, began a podcast saying:

So much has gone on over the weekend . . . If you don’t know, which you probably don’t if you’re not on Twitter, is that over the weekend in Ferguson, St. Louis, a young man by the name of Mike Brown was shot and killed by the police . . . . Things escalated extremely quickly in the city of Ferguson. No major news media was covering it. The only way people were getting information about it was via Twitter from people who were there.148

On the Whiskey, Wine, and Moonshine podcast, co-host Sojourner Verdad explained, “The attention on Ferguson would not have taken place without
social media. When Mike Brown was shot . . . people live-tweeted it. You know and so that’s how it actually got out and then the crowds and everything that went from there.” Kriss, hosting the Insanity Check podcast with guest Kylanol, explained the role that mobile technologies and social media played in fact-checking the official statements,

We now have social media. We now have people on the ground. Everybody has a camera phone now. So, we are now able to document what’s going on. So, when they tell us a lie, we can go, “Well, no.” “We put Michael Brown’s body into an ambulance.” No, you didn’t. We have video of you putting his body into an unmarked van.

The podcasters drew information from these fragmented streams of citizen journalism and synthesized it with professional news reporting, producing a narrative about both the events in Ferguson and the media coverage of those events. These podcasts focused on interpretation, rather than primarily information circulation. This process was not marked as official reporting, but took the form of the conversational commentary that is standard for these podcasts. Podcasters varied on the specificity with which they cited the sources of their information, often mirroring the informality of casual conversation with statements like, “I saw that . . .,” “Someone on Twitter said . . .,” or “They reported that . . .” There was often an assumption that both hosts and listeners were pulling from the same reservoir of information. For example, a discussion on Where’s My 40 Acres? gestured toward information that had been on social media and in mainstream reporting without specifically citing or, at times, even fully explaining it:

Mike: Apparently, Elon James got a gun pointed into his face for asking for directions. ’Cause he’s there right now . . .
Deirdre: There are people who are eating at McDonalds that have gotten harassed.
Mike: Those reporters got arrested from being at McDonalds.

Here you have a reference to White from TWiB! and his account of having an officer point a gun at him, which he described on Ferguson Dispatch 1 and on Twitter, as well as to the Washington Post reporter
Wesley Lowery and Huffington Post reporter Ryan J. Reilly who were detained by police on August 13 after failing to vacate a MacDonald’s quickly enough as the officers were trying to clear it. None of these events was discussed in detail or with any specificity but were presented in the way one would in casual conversation, with an assumption that all the hosts and listeners were operating within the same information environment.

However, the podcasters were often very specific when they were rebutting statements and reporting. For example, on Insanity Check, Kriss and Kylanol created a dialogic engagement with a press conference given by Ferguson Mayor James Knowles III by playing audio from it and pausing periodically to add their commentary. In the conference audio, a reporter could be heard asking why police had not released the name of the officer who shot Brown and noting that this was very unusual. The mayor responded, “Well, actually that’s up to the St. Louis County Prosecutor’s Office, and actually it is standard protocol, in St. Louis at least, that we do not release the information related to subjects who have not been charged with a crime and right now, there is an ongoing—” at which point, the recording was paused and Kriss interjected, “‘That’s bullshit because, you know what? They were floating around the name of somebody they were looking for in St. Louis County. It was a Black kid they were looking for in connection to a robbery or something like that.’”

The podcasts also provided people with a protected space in which to discuss the events, a necessity given the nature of the interactions participants were experiencing on social media and in their workplaces. Whiskey, Wine, and Moonshine co-host Sojourner Verdad explained that she has been avoiding conversations about race and Ferguson in public:

I know we’re on a public podcast. But you guys are like my family, so I can have that conversation. I can’t have that conversation at work. Because there’s gonna be somebody that’s gonna say something that’s gonna let me know that they have that exact same mentality and if given the right tools they would behave in the exact same manner. . . . That’s the part where I don’t know what to do with the feelings that I have. ‘Cause, it’s hard for me to process, it’s hard for me—you know I’m a happy go lucky, easy goin’, you know, person. But for the last few weeks, I found I’m in
just this, in an enraged state. That I’m having to suppress so that I’m able to go to work.¹⁵³

Other podcasters also expressed similar sentiments about the hostility on social media. Rod explained the response he got after using the hashtag #IGotTheTalk to tell a story of being racially profiled and pulled over by the police while he was in college, saying, “I woke up this morning, and there was all kinds of racist trolls in my mentions and all this stuff, man. ‘Cause you know, I said a few things that kind of like got retweeted or whatever, and all of a sudden, just you know, racist people are all up in my mentions.”¹⁵⁴

Many of the podcasters highlighted that their shows were not usually about politics or racial justice, but that they felt compelled to discuss Ferguson anyway. This highlights the flexibility of the network and the ways it is deployed depending on the exigencies of the situation. For example, Kahlief Adams, co-host of Spawn on Me, a gaming podcast, explained, “You know we do a . . . gaming podcast. We are Black men first.” His co-host, Shareef Jackson, continued, “It definitely affects us, because these people who get killed are gamers, scientists, and engineers, comic book people. . . . There’s no filter for being profiled if you’re Black, right? Being successful, not successful. Rich, poor, whatever. So, I think it does affect, you know, all content creators.”¹⁵⁵ The hosts of In Deep Show ended a discussion of the dangers faced by Black children by noting that they don’t “want to preach to you all” and that they “don’t do it often,” but, as co-host Big B said, “I just wanted to put a spotlight on a situation we all are dealing with.”¹⁵⁶

While the network is comprised of individuals from a diverse array of backgrounds and with differing opinions on Ferguson, there was near unanimous recognition of a shared experience as a Black subject, of the impact of this event on every Black American. Jackson of Spawn on Me described the experience:

It’s been tough. It’s been a really hard week for me. I’ve been pretty unproductive at work. That’s been really stressful because I don’t feel like I can talk to anyone at work about it. Kinda just been doin’ a lotta tweeting. . . . It’s just been tough, man. Like, you know, just being a Black man, y’know. It’s just, you just constantly get reminded that you are always a suspect.
No matter what you did, what you’re doin’, where you’re walkin’, it’s just what is the situation. It’s definitely been a very stark reminder of that. Very very tough.\textsuperscript{157}

As they did in response to the turmoil in the wake of the Zimmerman acquittal, some of the podcasters attempted to provide a respite from the trauma. As a guest on \textit{Fiyastarter}, Rod of TBGWT explained:

\begin{quote}
we talk about it, and then we have fun, because that’s what we do. That’s our job. I’d much rather you say we party for two hours. We had a ton of people here this week that’s just, “I didn’t think it was capable for me to laugh, because I was so affected by this. But your show brought me that entertainment and that joy,” and it means a fucking ton to me.\textsuperscript{158}
\end{quote}

In addition to demonstrating the flexibility of these spaces, comments like these highlight their collective nature.

\textbf{Conclusion}

It has become clear to even the most casual observer that digital technologies now play a central role in struggles for racial justice. Research into moments of turmoil—such as Trayvon Martin’s death, the Zimmerman acquittal, the uprisings in Ferguson and Baltimore, and the ongoing Movement for Black Lives—routinely discusses the importance of digital and social media. However, this analysis is often limited by its heavy focus on Twitter. While Twitter is of great importance, it is only one element of a larger transplatform networked environment.

Twitter serves as an important “alert system,” bringing events and information to users’ attention. But in addition to being a source of information and real-time reaction and interpretation, Twitter also serves as a central clearinghouse for links and posts housed on other platforms, such as Instagram, Vine, YouTube, and Ustream. While these have features for the creation and storage of video and images, which are not available on Twitter, they lack the immediacy and brevity of Twitter. By housing content on these platforms and disseminating links or cross-posting via Twitter, users combine the strengths of multiple platforms.
and are able to customize network affordances in ways that best achieve their communicative goals.

Podcasts serve as a crucial and often unrecognized component of this transplatform ecosystem. Because they lend themselves to the creation of enclaves, podcast and audio streams enable participants to reaffirm community and collectivity, engage in catharsis, and, at times, even find a brief reprieve. Additionally, podcasters aggregate, evaluate, and synthesize the fragmented and nonstop stream of information emerging from social media and legacy media reporting, engaging in a process of collective framing and interpretation and producing narratives and counter-discourses about events as they unfold.

The multimedia transplatform network at the center of this project is vital at moments of racial crisis and turmoil. Built and maintained over several years of mundane and everyday interactions, the network became a flexible resource, able to meet a range of communicative needs, often simultaneously, as events unfolded. This complex interplay of platforms and their respective affordances is a crucial resource for many Black Americans.