



Article

Faith and reason: An analysis of the homologies of Black and Blue Lives Facebook pages

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Abstract

Highly publicized deaths of Black men during police encounters have inspired a renewed civil rights movement originating with a Twitter hashtag, “Black Lives Matter.” Supporters of the law enforcement community quickly countered with an intervention of their own, using the slogan, “Blue Lives Matter.” This project compared the discourses of their respective Facebook groups using cultural discourse analysis that considered words, images, and their symbiosis. Based on a foundation of structural Marxism as articulated by Althusser, this project found that the two groups’ symbol systems are homologous with larger, ideological tensions in American culture: faith and reason.

Keywords

Discourse analysis, ideology, police, race, social media, visual communication

Police in the United States kill a civilian, a disproportionate number of them African American men, about every 8 hours, a rate that far surpasses that of other developed democracies (Lartey, 2015). While many of the deaths are considered to be legal and legitimate and likely resulting from, at least in part, an exceptionally high rate of gun ownership¹ in the United States, the extent of the violence and its racist dimension have fomented considerable political debate. Black Lives Matter, an activist group that rose out of a Twitter hashtag, emerged as an intervention against racial inequality in the

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American justice system. The group became more widely known to the general public during unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, after Michael Brown was killed by an officer in 2014 (*New York Times*, 2014).

The public relations counter-attack was swift and sure. Police departments, unions, and support groups quickly responded with their own hashtag, “Blue Lives Matter,” in defense of law enforcement. Yet another slogan, “All Lives Matter,” entered the public sphere, seemingly inoffensive but tone deaf to the racial disparities of American life. On- and off-line, these battling hashtags and slogans amplified the contentious discourse. Twitter was the site for real time and immediate argument, but Facebook provided the stage for extended engagement, with pages devoted to the interests of civil rights activists and police supporters where users could share news, argue, and post political images.

This project represents a cultural discourse analysis (CuDA) of these two pages over the course of a constructed week in 2016, taking into account the multimodality of online communication and its posts, images, and interactivity. The *Black Lives Matter* page is an official page representing the Black Lives Matter organization. *Blue Matters*, with a national reach, is its Facebook counterpart (the Facebook page “Blue Lives Matter” represents New York City). Based on hundreds of posts, comments, and memes posted by users, this project suggests that the two sites represent more than two sides of a debate, but an historic ideological dialectic of American culture: faith and reason.

Foundational literature: online culture and its discourses

This project conceives of discourse broadly, as a binding agent for social groups. Clifford Geertz (1973) is often cited as the originator of the idea that culture is constructed through a web of communicative artifacts, and James Carey (1989) solidified this idea for communication scholarship. The relationship between the two groups, one representing protest, the other authority, can be viewed through the lens of structural Marxism, as articulated by Althusser ([1971] 2012). In contrast with the brute force of repressive state apparatuses, Althusser argued that “... Ideological State Apparatuses function *by ideology*” (p. 81, italics in original). In other words, discourse from those in power is itself a form of power.

Ideology as manifest in discourse can take any manner of mediated forms, including online social groups. Online texts contrast with other forms of media in that they are asynchronous, multimodal, and offer anonymity to users (Walther, 2007). Social media sites constitute a special type of online text as multiple stakeholders contribute to content, which not only imparts information but also creates community. What is said and *how* it is said crystallizes the identity of these online cultural subgroups and exhibits their ideologies.

Online community and discourse

One of the earliest theoretical frameworks about online communities comes from Walther’s (1996) seminal work in which he argued that the study of human communication online required its own perspective. He proposed that computer-mediated communication (CMC) provides, “in some cases, opportunities for selective self, idealization,

and realization” (p. 28). This approach allows for researchers to consider the role identity plays in online interaction. An Internet user’s ability to self-select and choose what groups to join cultivates a sense of collective identity in online communities.

But what of online communities dedicated to disrupting business as usual? Social movements, as they came to be called, were once automatically considered social problems, but in the 1960s and 1970s gained attention from researchers interested in conflict, social justice, and challenges to dominant power structures (Cathcart, 1980; DeLuca, 1999; Simons, 1976). Early research on social movements emphasized small-group and organizational theory (DeLuca, 1999) but soon the *discourse* of such efforts attracted attention. Indeed, McGee (1983) argued for rhetoric’s centrality with his essay, “Social Movement as Meaning,” in which he argued, “collective behavior is one of many possible, but nonessential, consequences of a *consciousness consisting of or represented by a form of rhetoric*” (p. 74, italics added).

Building upon this idea, Stewart et al. (2012) suggested that social movements are comprised of interpretive communities that work symbolically within networks to instantiate their identity and persuade outsiders of their cause. They proposed that studies of the rhetoric of social movements might be well served by Fisher’s (1984, 1985) narrative paradigm and Bormann’s (1985) symbolic convergence theory (SCT). Bormann suggested that as storytelling creatures, groups of people will share and communicate within a particular “fantasy,” in this case, a specific view of the world and how it works. In SCT, “fantasy” is not used with the connotation of science fiction or magical dreams but merely shared ideological narratives.

Black Lives Matter is a social movement that continues the work of the 1960s Civil Rights movement. Starting as a Twitter hashtag, Black Lives Matter gained national prominence during the unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, after Michael Brown was shot to death by Officer Darren Wilson (*New York Times*, 2014). The group focused first on police violence against people of color, but subsequently widened its agenda to address other issues such as the rights of African American women, unequal incarceration rates, and other matters of social injustice. Black Lives Matter activists combine online organizing with embodied protest. “Our demand is simple,” founder Johnetta Elzie told the *New York Times* in 2015, “Stop killing us” (Kang, 2015). Black Lives Matter presents itself as a non-violent organization in the tradition of Dr Martin Luther King, but the wave of protests that followed police use of force controversies in Chicago, Baltimore, and Baton Rouge sparked outrage from the law enforcement community and its supporters (Larimer, 2015). Chan and Lee (1984) used the label “protest paradigm” for this type of discourse, which presents social movements as deviant, non-normative, and outside the realm of law-abiding citizens. This extends Althusser’s ([1971] 2012) argument that “Ideological State Apparatuses” (such as media, educational, or cultural institutions) cultivate a belief that the ruling system of power is moral.

Discursive form on social media

Social media discourse combines characteristics of face-to-face conversation and online communication. It may or may not occur in real time, but once posted, it is relatively public (and potentially available to the world). Social media allow for users to employ

images, videos, memes, and emojis, which can mimic the nonverbal cues of face-to-face communication, but within the limits of images made available by a texting service (Lo, 2008). Online communication can be considered as a form of multimodal discourse, as conceived by Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) with symbiotically connected images, words, colors, and visual cues. Form and content are inextricably linked in asynchronous, though often rapid, conversation, mimicking face-to-face encounters in some ways, yet granting users anonymity and the safety of distance and time.

Emoticons help online text mimic spoken language and render it more conversational; they are not mere decoration (Dresner and Herring, 2010; Lo, 2008). Over time, norms emerged for the use of such icons, which became more visually sophisticated. The increased use of mobile texting gave rise to the development of actual images for embedding in messages. Novak et al. (2015) found that emojis were used 4% of the time in tweets and interestingly were used to express positive sentiments more often than negative ones. Witmer and Katzman (1997) found that women used what were then called “graphic accents” more than men.

Memes constitute another component of online culture and discourse. Wiggins and Bowers (2015) defined them as “remixed and iterated messages which are rapidly spread by members of participatory digital culture” (p. 1903). They are usually user-created still images, animated GIFs, and videos typically intended as a joke (Davison, 2012). Sometimes they incorporate familiar elements that carry symbolic meaning when incorporated into the overall product, such as the “sarcastic Willie Wonka” or “confession bear,” a form known as image macro memes (Davison, 2012; Vickery, 2014).

Börzsei (2013) argued that memes are not meant to be beautiful or visually appealing, and instead focus on delivering a (usually) ideological message. Shifman (2011) argued that meme phenomena should be considered according to cultural-aesthetic and social logics as well as Lanham’s (2006) concept of the “attention economy.” This focus on delivering a core message means that sometimes memes do appear primitive or poorly made, but scholars have argued that memes can be an effective way to increase political participation and construct collective identity (Gal et al., 2016; Milner, 2013).

Although news websites have employed a variety of strategies to engage users (Stroud et al., 2016), communication scholars have become concerned about what they see as increased incivility online in comments (Anderson et al., 2014; Hmielowski et al., 2014). Some scholars have argued that platforms like Facebook have fewer uncivil comments among users because Facebook is a platform that removes anonymity (Halpern and Gibbs, 2013), though other research counters that Facebook users are more likely to selectively expose themselves to content that aligns with their views (Stroud and Muddiman, 2013). Uncivil comments have been found to inspire more incivility, inhibiting productive discussion (Chen and Lu, 2017).

Race, authority, and American tribalism

Racism is not unique to America, but it has a unique form there because of slavery’s role in the country’s early economic development and because on paper, racial inequality is supposed to have disappeared. Like a geographic fault line, race is always part of political discourse and exists in the background even for issues that seemingly have nothing to

do with race (Patterson, 1998). Scholars such as Omi and Winant (2014) and Fields (1982) have convincingly argued that race is a social construct that is *useful* to existing power structures, that is, White supremacy. Bonilla-Silva (1997) went further and argued that racism ought to be considered as *part* of the existing power structure.

The police are the enforcement arm of existing power structures. As Manning (1988) put it, "(T)hey serve the state and the state's interests" (p. 10). Manning (1977) also argued that the stress of navigating two worlds, those of criminals and the law-abiding populace, cultivates a sort of "myth" or an almost religious sense of common purpose that gives police work "reified authority" (p. 327). The professionalization of police organizations that started in the late 1800s also set in place militaristic discipline that conflates police work with masculinity: toughness, righteous violence, and zero-sum thinking (Crank, 2004; Manning, 1977; Reel, 2012).

As a militaristic, male dominated institution, police agencies in the United States are patriarchal in ways that overlap with White supremacy (Dubber, 2005). Researchers report that racism within police departments even victimizes fellow officers who happen to be Black (Bolton and Feagin, 2004). Like patriarchy, White supremacist discourse legitimates and sustains hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality (Daniels, 2016). Few Americans openly call themselves White supremacists, yet it operates quietly and intransigently in the background (Daniels, 2016). For instance, the general social survey (a nationwide, large-scale study) found that while most Americans believe everyone deserves to be able to vote or have access to housing, as of 2008, 50% of White Americans blamed economic disparities on a "lack of will" among Blacks and only 30% blamed discrimination (Bobo et al., 2012). A significant 43% of all Whites blamed inequality on a lack of educational access and very few (less than 10%) reported having sympathy or admiration for Black people (Bobo et al., 2012).

Patriarchal White supremacy is woven into American ideology, in spite of many laws and slogans claiming otherwise. Police agencies, which cannot be everywhere all the time, must employ ideological discourse for social control. Schneider (2015, 2016) examined the way police agencies have started to use social media for investigative and public relations purposes. As for police responses to protest discourse, he notes that they "... respond to these affronts as contests over their social power, thus providing perspective into the legitimation of police authority as a broadly constituted meaning-making process" (Schneider, 2015: 228). When police use social media, therefore, they are able to reproduce authoritative structures in response to the counter-narratives of protest sites. Online group identity, whether authoritative or resistant, can be considered both the product *and* producer of ideological discourses.

Problem statement

Facebook pages can be devoted to nearly any cause or group; they are created as temporary spaces for college courses, professional clubs and, of course, politics. As such, they are useful sites for studying the way online communication fosters group enculturation. Members of online communities use multimodal discourse, such as emojis, memes, and comments to establish their values and identities. Given the significance of the Black and Blue Facebook pages to contemporary discourse about race and social justice in the

United States, they offer a unique window to American culture. More formally, we ask, *how do the users of the Facebook groups “Black Lives Matter” and its national pro-police counterpart, “Blue Matters,” use codes and symbols to discursively construct group culture?* This type of descriptive question is well-suited for qualitative inquiry.

Methodology

This project took the shape of an informal online ethnography that relied on qualitative discourse analysis to explore group cultures as they are represented on social media. This method can reveal the dynamics of online social groups that would not be possible via interviews, focus groups, or questionnaires. Observing online groups as they conduct their business and conversations allows researchers to see how language sustains relationships and instantiates identity within these online realms (Lo, 2008; Murthy, 2008). Researchers have pursued a variety of approaches to online ethnography, or “netnography” (Bowler, 2010; Kozinets, 2010). A Geertzian thick description of social life takes years of observation. This project is more modest and a sampled online discourse in order to discern the ideological culture-building activities of Facebook users.

CuDA. We adapted a technique known as cultural discourse analysis to analyze the material. One of its driving theorists, Donal Carbaugh (2007), defines it as “a historically transmitted expressive system of communication practices, of acts, events, and styles, which are composed of specific symbols, symbolic forms, norms, and their meanings” (p. 169). CuDA examines the interactional accomplishments, structural features, and sequential organization of communication (Carbaugh, 2007). It relies on and extends Fairclough’s (2013) critical discourse analysis (CDA) with attention to ritual, myth, and social drama (Carbaugh, 2007; Fairclough, 2013; Philipsen, 1987). A CuDA entails theory, description, and interpretation, and might employ a comparative or critical mode. Given our interest in the way the two oppositional Facebook groups instantiate their group identity, we will focus on a comparison.

But just what kind of language use are we comparing? After all, Facebook users are already part of a culture, and it is impossible from online posting alone, to know a user’s race, ethnicity, or even gender. One approach that seems beneficial, therefore, is to think in terms of Bormann’s (1985) “fantasies,” or shared value systems, in terms of their *homologies*. A homology is an interpretive rhetorical pattern that can be shared by disparate activities. Brummett (2004) defines it as “a pattern found to be ordering significant particulars of different and disparate experiences” (p. 1). Olson (2002) traced the similarities between the way convicted rapists, sport hunters, and so-called “hate” criminals talked about their activities. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984) found homologous rhetoric connecting the artistic and literary fields. In other words, it is unlikely that the cultural formations of these two Facebook groups are unique entities, but instead represent larger ideological “fantasies.”

Method

In the spring of 2016, we planned a constructed week for downloading material from the two Facebook sites. We collected the Top 10 posts (the most recent) from each site and

Table 1. Constructed week and scrapbook pages.

Day of the week	Date (2016)	Black Lives	Blue Lives
Tuesday	12 April	22	24
Wednesday	20 April	25	29
Thursday	28 April	7	45
Friday	6 May	31	42
Saturday	14 May	24	33
Sunday	22 May	37	46
Monday	30 May	26	42
Total scrapbook pages		172	261

the visible comments. These 140 posts constituted the base, but each time we visited we also recorded the comments associated with those posts and replies within those posts. We cut and pasted entire page-grabs to collect the multimodal messaging of Facebook communication: comments, other word-based messages, photos, gifs and memes (which usually employ words with images), emojis and their myriad combinations. Videos (and their associated contextual elements) were downloaded separately. We took notes during this scraping process, then converted the files into what we nicknamed “scrapbooks” for the sake of analysis.² Table 1 lists the dates of our constructed week and the number of scrapbook pages created for the two sites. In order to collect threads, comments, *and* images, we made screenshots and copied elements to Word® files. This method has limitations, as emojis were sometimes distorted and videos had to be (and were) recorded separately. Moreover, the number of pages was affected by the inclusion of images, which had no consistent sizing; our counts merely reflect overall proportions. While quantitatively imperfect, this method yielded a rich corpus of several hundred pages for qualitative multimodal analysis. Figure 1 presents a sample scrapbook page.

Guided by the constant comparison method associated with the grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss (1967), we subjected every item in the scrapbooks to a round of open coding.

We examined our open codes with an eye toward common themes and repeated the coding process until we identified meaningful clusters of discourse. These meaningful clusters often carried common key words and symbols. Qualitative analysis is susceptible to the subjective biases of the analysts, who in this case support civil rights based on race and gender. Even though every effort was made to let the data speak for itself, it must be acknowledged that any resulting interpretation will be framed from a particular perspective. See Table 2 for our comparison of key words and elements.

Findings

The *Blue Matters* and *Black Lives Matter* pages represent more than a disagreement about police policy in the United States. The discourses posted to the Internet by the page producers and group members reflect one of the most enduring dialectics of American life, that of religion and secularism. That is, the ideologies of these Facebook pages can

 NAME REMOVED If a police officer was shot and it was caught on camera should his family have to be exposed to the video over and over again just because someone felt like posting it. I could care less about the guy he brought it on himself but his family is innocent
[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · [1 hr](#)

 NAME REMOVED I wouldn't give a fuck if it was a family member. They shouldn't have been making bomb threats in the first place.
[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · [2](#) · [1 hr](#)

 NAME REMOVED Lol I'll call the waaaaaambulance for you
[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · [1](#) · [47 mins](#)

 NAME REMOVED For cripes sake, knock off the trauma bull shit. Just maybe if people went so protected from reality we might finally come up with realistic understandings and means to curb this crap.
[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · [37 mins](#)

 NAME REMOVED Damien Allen you are what's wrong with society, you have lost your humanity, with an attitude like yours I am sure we will be seeing you or a family member on the other side of that camera one day
[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · [1](#) · [35 mins](#)

 NAME REMOVED Dont like it? Dont watch. That fucking simple.
[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · [1](#) · [29 mins](#)

 NAME REMOVED Ashly you have a valid point, but Mike Short has a better one. The police are under a magnifying glass 24/7, videos are the only thing that proves their innocence anymore.
[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · [2](#) · [28 mins](#)

 NAME REMOVED Steven Burginger excuse me for having a heart and for caring about the family. You want to curb this crap then maybe people should start acting as though they are humans and show their humanity. No one is protected from reality every day we are exposed to crap like this or something else this is just the world we live in and maybe that's why people feel free to act this way because no one really gives a shit anymore
[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · [1](#) · [28 mins](#)


Chris Valente



[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · [1](#) · [26 mins](#)

Figure 1. A sample "scrapbook" page from the corpus.

Table 2. Comparing key words and elements.

	Blue perspective: Blue posts or pro-Blue comments from either site	Black perspective: BLM posts or pro-BLM comments from either site
Emojis	200	17
Videos	30	9
Bitch	4	0
Pig	0	2
Pussy	2	0
Thug	26	0
Terrorist	12	0
God bless	88	0
Jesus	5	1
Obey	1	0
Discipline	6	1
Teach	0	3
Learn	1	4
Accountability	1	13

BLM: Black Lives Matter.

be seen as echoes of other historic divides, such as the Civil War, the Scopes Monkey Trial, or Prohibition. The tension between faith and reason can be seen in contemporary partisan politics, between liberals who see society as a system and conservatives who are more likely to think of society in terms of a moral hierarchy (Haselby, 2015). Importantly, this tension has marked discourse about race in the United States since the earliest days of the republic. The Bible was used to justify slavery and continues to be invoked by American White supremacists (Blum, 2016). Table 3 presents characteristics of the faith/secularism tension that we gleaned inductively. These dimensions started as rough notes in open coding and gradually became the system by which we analyzed most of the material.

We acknowledge that there is no way of knowing the actual demographic characteristics of the individuals posting and commenting online. We simply noted what sort of profile picture the person uses and whether they use a traditionally female or male name when applicable. We took special interest in comments to various posts, as these represent interaction and engagement online. Even though the two Facebook groups are not in formal conversation with one another, arguments on each page reflected the perspectives of their counterpart.

Codes and symbols

Even though Facebook limits the visual design choices for a particular group page, the two sites had distinctly different looks. The most noticeable characteristic for a new visitor is the use of color. The Black Lives Matter page has a banner that is mostly yellow, with subtle shadowed images from civil rights demonstrations, and an illustration of an

Table 3. Dimensions of the secular tension homology.

Dimension	Blue perspective	BLM perspective
Function of FB	To vent	To inform
Belief system	Faith	Reason
Nature of society	Good vs evil	A neutral system
Power	Top-down authority	Popular authority
Human behavior	A matter of nature	A product of nurture
Gendered values	Patriarchy	Feminism
How are we connected?	On a hierarchy (a ladder)	Equidistant/unity (a sphere)

BLM: Black Lives Matter.

African American man wearing a hoody with his fist in the air holding what appears to be a dandelion blossom. Yellow is significant as a color often associated with African culture. The anti-apartheid movement, for instance, used yellow, black, red, and green in its campaigns. The Blue Matters page has a darker, more somber look and feel, with a black-backgrounded banner depicting an American flag in black and gray with one long, distinct blue stripe. The banner includes the slogan, “Sometimes there’s justice; sometime there’s just us.” One slogan that could be occasionally seen on the Black Lives Matter page was “stay woke,” a colloquialism that echoes the Marxist call to abandon false consciousness in order to consider the workings of a social system in which certain groups maintain power and others are oppressed.

The two pages are distinct in terms of activity and the types of media posted. The Blue Matters page, for instance, posted 30 videos during collection periods; the Black Lives Matter page posted only nine, and the videos themselves were different. The Black Lives Matter page used videos that depicted specific civil rights demonstrations and were edited pieces blending video, natural sound, music, and graphics. The Blue Matters page shared videos from other sites and depicted more varied events, such as a news conference with a police leader, a K9 (patrol) dog attacking a suspect in a car, or badge-cam video from an incident in which an officer survived being shot during a traffic stop. The Blue Matters page was far busier and posted many more items overall than the Black Lives Matter page. Each visit to the Blue Matters page garnered 10 *completely new* posts, whereas our visits to the Black Lives Matter page sometimes found only one or two posts that were new.

The Black Lives Matter page used hashtags as a way to label particular issues, not only its eponymous tag, but #sayhername and #PurpleReigns after the pop music icon Prince died. The top post on the Blue Matters page was always a sales image for specially made T-shirts, usually with angel imagery or other icons of Christianity or medieval Knights. The Blue site was generally more likely to use memes and images in comments. There also, commenters used emojis far more often (200 compared with 7). This was especially true for female commenters on the Blue Matters page. For instance, in comments regarding a post about an officer who saved some baby ducks, one commenter managed to find baby duck emojis. Another response, to the Blue Matters opening post selling a T-shirt memorializing law enforcement, combined many emojis (Figure 2).

User (appears to be white female) May God Bless, Watch Over, Walk With, Place a Hedge of Protection Around and Cover in the Blood of Jesus all who Serve and Protect Us Each and Every Single Day In Jesus Name Amen 🇺🇸🙏❤️🇺🇸. For those hero's that we have lost...May they Rest In Peace. Amen 🇺🇸🙏❤️🇺🇸

Figure 2. Religious emojis.



Figure 3. The praying eagle.

The Blue Matters page used religious icons often, large and small. Many Blue Matters memes conflate patriotism and Christianity, as with the praying Bald eagle posted on Memorial Day, in yet another overlap between military service and law enforcement (Figure 3).

Symbolism on the Black Lives Matter page included the hoody and the raised fist, which can be interpreted as an expression of power and solidarity or as a threat. The hoody became a rallying image in the wake of Trayvon Martin’s murder, yet for critics, remains the mark of a “thug.”

Values

The values espoused on the two pages echo the basic dichotomy in American culture between liberals and conservatives. The Black Lives Matter page described the values that inspired the hashtag and the movement. Here, for instance, in a discussion of the group’s history, one of the founders articulates opposition to violent protest:

Many people were trying to make sense of what happened, but I felt like the ways that people were trying to make sense of what happened and what we needed to be doing about it were actually destructive ... and so I wrote a letter to black people on Facebook saying that there was nothing wrong with us and we deserved dignity and respect. (Alicia Garza, Black Lives Matter Co-Founder, on the inspiration behind #BlackLivesMatter)

The Black Lives Matter page espoused the stated values of its founders: non-violence, social justice, and racial equality. Even when trolled, there was no indication that those running the page engaged with negative commenters, though some *group* members did on occasion. For instance, in this thread, a commenter angrily tries to combat the “all lives matter” logic with an analogy:

Commenter J: All lives matter

Responder A: If your granny dies and you write some heartfelt fb post while grieving, I hope someone comments “all grandmas matter.”

(*other comments*)

Responder C: When cop groupies say “blue lives matter,” what they really mean is “blue lives matter more.” When black people say, “black lives matter,” what they really mean is, “black lives matter, too.” That’s the difference.

We found one instance of a Black Lives Matter commenter using the word “pig” as a slur against police, but this was rare; in fact, we found only two instances of the word “pig” in the scrapbooks (see Table 2). The word “thug” was the most common slur used by Blue Matters posts or commenters, appearing 26 times. The words “bitch” and “pussy,” patriarchal insults, were used less frequently, four and two times, respectively. In Black Lives Matter discourse, “teach” and “learn” appeared more often than in Blue Matters discourse.

The most frequent words of all, however, were found in discourse from the Blue perspective: the phrase “God Bless” appeared 88 times. The Blue Matters page lauded top-down authority with religious overtones and asserted the need for righteous violence as discipline against criminality. A shared news video of a Baltimore woman who beat her son for joining in protests was applauded on Blue Matters:

(emoticon is black white & blue) A parent that isn’t afraid to kick her kids ass for being a thug (clap emoticon, thumbs up emoticon). Before everyone gets their pants in a bunch, I’m not condoning beating your kids but this punk didn’t need a timeout. He needed the ass kicking he got and if he hasn’t already, he will thank his mom for the beat down one day. Great story.

Videos depicting police use of force appeared not on the Black Lives Matter page but on the Blue Matters page, usually with posts and comments that explained why such police actions were procedurally and morally necessary. Sometimes commenters debated procedural details, but the need for force was assumed. Guns and gun culture appeared often, even in connection with children. One shared video depicted a little girl opening a gift: a pink rifle. This symbolic mix of gun culture and gender norms stood out, but patriarchal values permeated the Blue Matters page. Even though most commenters made a

point of honoring the men *and* women in blue linguistically, male officers dominated the visual discourse, whether drawn as Saint Michael, photographed in protective poses with children or videotaped while pulling an accident victim out of a car. Images of female political figures such as Hillary Clinton or Michele Obama were manipulated to appear as though they were shrieking.

Supporters of law enforcement officers (LEOs) commenting on Black Lives Matter were similarly patriarchal. In response to a post publicizing a meeting about Black feminism (#sayhername), a commenter wrote,

I'm noticing more and more attractive, intelligent black women choosing attentive, caring white men for husbands. I salute these wise, farsighted young ladies for their intelligent choices.

This was one of the few posts that referred to Black people as people, men or women. LEO supporters who commented on Black Lives Matter tended to use the words “thugs,” “criminals,” or “terrorists,” conflating race with criminality. On the Blue Matters page, insults to criminals often associated them with femininity. Here are some comments from a thread discussing the attack on a suspect in a car by a police dog:

Commenter R: Jesus Christ, if they shot the guy, people would bitch. Send in a K-9, people bitch. High speed pursuit, people bitch. Don't respond quickly enough, people bitch. And people wonder why I prefer the company of animals.

Responder A: That's liberals, everything bothers them
(*other comments*)

Responder D: I often wonder WHY people call at all! They bitch no matter how we handle it ... Why not just handle it themselves? Ooohhh, that's right. They are all giant vaginas and can't manage their own lives ... I forgot!

The most striking characteristic of the whole corpus, however, is the overlapping values of Christianity, patriarchy, and White supremacy expressed on the Blue Matters page. A post on 14 May, for instance, is a photo of a note apparently written by an employee of a fast-food restaurant to a police officer. It read, “Thank you for your service and protection. May God bless you and place angels of protection around you! Thanks again, #bluelivesmatter.” Most of the immediate responses evoke the call and response of a church service:

Responder A
(appears to be a

white female): May God bless the person that wrote this also.

Responder B: (profile image is a tree but uses a traditionally female name):
GOD BLESS THE MEN AND WOMEN IN BLUE

Responder C: (profile image is a white rose and uses a traditionally female name):
Angels watch over and protect those who wear the Blue ... keep them safe

Responder E: (indistinct profile picture with traditionally male name):
BLUE LIVES MATTER. THUGS DON'T

In contrast, the Black Lives Matter page publicized events and did not sell anything. Whether the posts were about educational events, meetings, or movie showings, posts were quickly met with negative trolling. For instance, on 26 May (collected 30 May), the Black Lives Matter page posted information about a documentary that would air on Black Entertainment Television (BET) later in the summer, with a publicity poster and an explanatory post. The post garnered 180 comments; this was the first one, by a user with a traditionally male name and whose profile picture is a close-up of an eye—a visitor to the Black Lives Matter page:

Black lives matter movement should pick people who are not criminal thug racist cop haters as their martyrs if they want to be taken seriously! Until then keep your garbage out of my face!

Occasionally, seemingly White users posted supportive comments to Black Lives Matter. Yet, even these came with a tinge of superior self-regard. Here, a responder who appears to be a White man participated in posts about Prince on 14 May:

Obama Says Movements like Black Lives Matter “Can’t Just Keep on Yelling” (as posted in the NY Times). President Obama has Saul Alinsky and Thomas Pain turning over in their graves. The purpose of protest is as the latter 2 have pointed out is to confront, challenge and question authority ...

A Black Lives Matter supporter, with a traditionally female name, wrote on the same thread:

White people who speak against Black Lives Matter do not speak for me. (In part because their spelling, capitalization, and grammar are so dreadful.)

Overall (though not in every instance), the Black Lives Matter page reflected a secular belief in human equality, feminism, and non-violence (though the raised fist is often interpreted as a violent symbol). The Blue Matters page expressed support not only for law enforcement but also for a tight bundle of authoritarian, patriarchal, religious discipline.

Group boundaries

Discourse on the Black Lives Matter page is intended for an African American audience; group identity is built around race. The Blue Matters page does not call itself a “White” page but instead frequently connected Blackness to criminality, calling Black Lives Matter supporters lawless “thugs” and “terrorists.” *Visitors* to the Black Lives Matter page made similar statements, like this one, the very first comment to a Black Lives Matter post about the #SayHerName campaign, from a person whose name and profile picture indicates he’s a White man:

Black Lives Matter scum are racists and bigots. Everything they do is geared towards spreading their hateful [sic] and destructive ideology.

Later in the thread, a man whose profile picture indicates he is a Black man tried to interject with secular information about the Bible:

The truth is that America was founded on the enslavement of millions of Africans. That the bible [sic] is a lie written by Caucasians.

That Africans have been [sic] here long before the bible. It is time for our people to open there [sic] eyes.

Knowledge is power.

The truth will hurt.

Many commenters attacked him: here are two, the first from a person with a traditionally male name, the second from someone with a traditionally female name:

Commenter A

(apparently male): Just how do you know You yourself have never been a slave either you utter morron [sic]. Just where do you get your frigging education in an out house? Just show all of us this basic fact that blacks were on this earth long before anyone. I call BS.

Commenter B

(apparently female): The Bible has been around longer than the USA ... Where do you get your info ... Also, in the words of Morgan Freeman, racism would go away if ppl stopped talking about it and using it as their excuses ... Almost every nationality has some history of slavery ... Get over it.

The use of a blue line in the page design resonates with text on the Blue Matters page, symbiotically constructing an identity that can be described as tightly knit, defensive, and behind a distinct border. Many posts focused on law enforcement as the “real” victims, such as this one in response to a Blue Matters post about a fallen officer:

Where is the president while all of our men and women in blue are dying? Why won't he stand up for the people for protect us, that protect him? Why does he always comment on thugs but allows for our officers to die? Do something! Stop killing police officers! They are just like us, put their pants on the same way, go to a job and are grossly underpaid but don't complain, they suit up everyday, risk PTSD, risk their lives. Enough is enough!!!

This post, from a commenter who has “warrior” as their profile image, exemplifies the conflation of defensiveness, Christianity, and violent, righteous discipline:

First off arm yourself you are your first responder, call the police, they are the second responder, when you live in the country such as myself, 20 minutes is a long wait, no fault of law enforcement, but in my many years as a correction officer i know, the person already on scene makes the biggest difference, so be armed your life is your responsibility, unlike people who live in big cities, we know our LEO's, they are our coaches, sit in the pew's beside us, and they know i am armed as they are, and i have their back as they have mine.

During the course of the study, the iconic popular music star Prince died, prompting the Black Lives Matter page to temporarily change its profile picture. The matter might have been a digression to the discourse under study, except for an extraordinary line of conversation about him:

Commenter K: Prince would NEVER allow this post if he were alive. He was for all races, not racist like BLM! Not just Black! Not to mention he was mixed.

Responder A: U are right about everything expect [sic] He wasn't mixed lmao u just watch Purple Rain and ran with it huh?

Commenter K: He himself said he was mixed.

Visitors to the Black Lives Matter page also asserted that Prince was a Republican and a Trump Supporter, citing a story from GlennBeck.com about the musician's conservative religious views:

Commenter L: The ironic thing is—Prince was a Republican AND Donald Trump supporter. LMAO [smile emoticon] Once again. BLM shows how uninformed it is. LMAO [smile emoticon]

Finally, here is part of a long post from a person whose profile image and name indicate she is a White woman:

Commenter A: Prince was not "black" he was just Prince a very humble religious quiet loving man and friend to all people. He was not a rioter or protester or troublemaker Prince you were magical and everyone loved you and your music and incredible drive and talent- writer of music dancer so creative we will miss you thank you for your gift of music to us

Commenter B

(who has a traditionally

African name): Every single word you said is true, except for the part of him not being Black. Prince was Black and he said he was, it is well documented.

Commenter A: Yes I realize he was indeed black, but, he did not go around proclaiming it = he had issue with black-white, he had numerous white people along with black, etc who were dear friends with him, he did not go around pushing the race button and everyone loved him.

People did not see him as black or white or red he was just “Prince” and everyone loved him and his music :-)

He was a respectable black man and loved everyone

Commenter B: He was a Black Man period.

For Prince, a funk musician who bent gender with his clothing and often wore his hair in a natural afro, to be palatable for these commenters he could not be Black. Because he did not “go around proclaiming it,” he had no race.

Discussion

The elements of online messages in a Facebook community lend themselves well to CuDA. A comparison of the two sites and the way their discourses reflect group rituals, myths, and social drama extends Althusser’s conception of ideological apparatuses to social media.

On the Blue Matters page, users routinely support law enforcement; they adhere to hierarchal, authoritarian principles and the binary of good and evil. Indeed, the culture of the Blue Matters page is almost a religion unto itself, complete with totems (the badge), rituals (saying “I’ve got your six”), and belief that the group is special. The Black Lives Matter page is more irreligious. With a few exceptions, official posts were informational, somewhat low-key when compared with those on the Blue Matters page. While there are some arguments on the Black Lives Matter page, even between users who appear to be Black, the most angry, vociferous voices are on Blue Matters page and in *comments* by visitors to the Black Lives Matter page.

The rituals, values, and identities expressed online are therefore homologous to the ideological rifts in American culture generally. Blue Matters users established themselves as righteous disciplinarians who could look down on the so-called “thugs” of Black Lives Matter. Posters on the Black Lives page presented an identity as law-abiding citizens rationally pursuing equality.

Each page uses symbols and ritual in distinct ways, whether in use of color and memes on the Blue Matters page or the more carefully produced videos posted by the Black Lives Matter page. The values represented on the two pages are as expected, but the way those values are *expressed* is strikingly different. The Black Lives Matter official posts are more informational than polemical, in the form of announcements about upcoming protests, educational events, or films (the tributes to Prince being an exception). Official Blue Matters posts often use defensive language, providing examples of officers doing good deeds or news about officers who have been killed or injured on the job. The Black Lives Matter page had far more negative comments from pro-police visitors than the Blue Matters Page garnered from pro-Black visitors.

These qualitative observations seem to indicate that these two subcultures are structurally different. The Black Lives Matter page, like the movement it has inspired, is a relatively open, loose, and inclusive network working on social justice issues. Supporters share some slogans and symbols and have a common interest in the civil rights of African Americans. Blue Matters culture, on the other hand, seems more intensely bound by codes that are religious, militaristic, and authoritarian. Supporters on the Blue Matters page

espoused support for what they see as righteous violence and discipline, and turn to one another for mutual protection as soldiers do in combat. This is an interesting rhetorical twist reflective of the “myth” identified by Manning (1977), as LEOs are sanctioned by the state to kill when necessary, but are rarely prosecuted for the deaths of civilians. Police have the financial support of government pensions, unions, and technologies of protection. As of this writing, 114 officers were killed in the line of duty, more than half of them in accidents or by related illnesses (ODMP.org, 2016). In some highly publicized cases that horrified the national public, they were occasionally murdered by attackers who singled out police—but the majority of these killings were committed by White men (King, 2016). For Blue Matters supporters to express such rage at the Black Lives Matter movement seems not based on social or statistical realities but for the patriarchal infraction of questioning their authority. Such emotional rhetoric, especially in the context of uncivil commenting, overwhelmed any possibilities of constructive debate about police policy.

Conclusion

This project examined the multimodal discourse of two disparate Facebook groups in order to better understand the intercultural differences between supporters of the Black Lives Matter and Blue Matters pages. Even though, as comedian Jon Stewart pointed out, it is possible for a citizen to simultaneously expect fairness in policing and support police officers, the two pages reveal significant differences not only in group interests but also in their very culture (Reifowitz, 2014). The discourse embodies ritual, myths, and the social drama in ways that echo the homology of faith and reason, a long-standing American ideological tension.

As a qualitative project, this study cannot generalize about all members of the groups, nor does it attempt to describe the social psychology or political personalities of group members. Instead, using CuDA, this project traced the characteristics of two sorts of American “tribes,” based on their multimodal communication online. We found a distinct difference in discursive style: the use of video, religious imagery, factual evidence, and group boundaries. These findings open up possibilities for further research on the social psychology of group members, or a quantitative content analysis of posts and comments that might further extend knowledge about their discourse.

The tension between religion and secularism is ingrained in American ideology, rooted in the rhetoric of its very origins and often overlapping with discourse about race. Echoing the findings of other research about online comments and incivility, this project points to the way online communities coalesce without necessarily engaging in civil deliberation. An “all lives matter” page cannot bridge these differences; it is unlikely any webpage can. The qualities of online communication, such as interactivity, anonymity, and accessibility, as well as the ever-increasing ease with which users can create multimedia messages, have the potential to cultivate democratically productive discourse, but this is not inevitable. This project found instead a coalescence of two historic perspectives, faith and reason, within rival groups, and virtually no constructive group interaction. Social media, therefore, may democratically provide access for marginalized groups to network, support one another, and express concerns to authority, but that does not guarantee that those concerns will be understood, or even heard, by those in power.

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Notes

1. The United States leads the world in gun ownership, according to the Council on Foreign Relations (Masters, 2016), and there are as many guns in the country as there are adults (Beckett, 2016) even though the percentage of households owning guns has declined to 36% (Ingraham, 2016). Three percent of Americans are so-called “super-owners” who have accumulated, on average, 17 firearms.
2. The authors are willing to share these scrapbooks in PDF form with fellow researchers.

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