Violently Peaceful: Unpacking Portrayals of Black Lives Matter Protests

Cynthia Tuzo

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Violently Peaceful: Unpacking Portrayals of Black Lives Matter Protests

Cynthia Tuzo
Criminal Justice Department
Prof. Robert Matarazzo
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Abstract

Black Lives Matter (BLM) is an international activist organization that aims to fight racial inequality and injustice in America. During the summer of 2020, many American citizens utilized their First Amendment right to protest against the killings of unarmed Black people in association with the BLM movement. BLM emphasized the use of nonviolent tactics to fight injustice. Contrary to their emphasis, the protests associated with BLM were portrayed as both violent and peaceful depending on the political beliefs of the reporter. In my research, I consider what it means for a protest to be peaceful and whether the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 were peaceful, despite the differing portrayals. I used a scholarly article to lay out a definition of the term “peaceful protest”. I also relied on other scholarly articles about BLM and the Civil Rights Movement, a movement recognized for being peaceful, to lay the framework through which I would analyze the portrayal of BLM and its associated protests in media and news sources. I argue that Black Lives Matter was portrayed positively and negatively by opposing political sides but, despite the differing portrayals, the movement was predominantly peaceful.
Introduction

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances” (The Bill of Rights: A Transcription). In my research, I will specifically focus on the right to peaceably assemble. By reviewing scholarly articles about protesting, news and media articles about the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, I define what it means to peaceably assemble and discuss the response to the BLM movement during the summer of 2020. In my research, I will consider what it means for a protest to be peaceful and compare that to how Black Lives Matter and its associated protests during 2020 were portrayed in the media.

Black Lives Matter (BLM) is an international activist organization, founded by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi in 2013, with the goal of combating violence against members of the Black community. BLM was founded in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the man who shot and killed Trayvon Martin in 2012. BLM has led many protests in response to the killings of unarmed Black people. The organization believes that Black lives are specifically and systematically targeted for failure (“Herstory”, n.d.). Black Lives Matter does not argue that Black lives are targets for violent action, but the movement was originally founded to speak out against violence by police officers against members of the Black community. The movement now focuses on eliminating white supremacy while also combating violence against the black community (“About”, n.d.). BLM also recognizes those who have been left out of Black liberation movements of the past and aims to include everyone to strengthen the movement (“Herstory”, n.d.). During the summer of 2020, the Black Lives Matter
movement saw a drastic increase in public support. In combination with the COVID-19 pandemic, the death of George Floyd sparked an influx of followers for the movement. Thousands of protests across America were held in response to several deaths or violent attacks against Black people, many of these protests were under the name of Black Lives Matter. The main objective of the 2020 BLM protests was to bring light to and fight against injustice faced by Black Americans.

**Literature Review**

*What It Means To Be Peaceful and A BLM Study*

In giving American citizens the right to protest peacefully, the authors of the Constitution did not define what it means for a protest to be peaceful. A similar theme across several academic journal articles involves authors also not providing an explicit definition of a peaceful protest while exploring the topic. Peaceful protests are instead discussed as a dichotomy of peaceful or violent.

In “Nonviolent Methods and the American Civil Rights Movement 1955-1965” (1974), Bo Wirmark details the various methods of protesting during the Civil Rights Movement. Wirmark opens the article by defining the various nonviolent protesting techniques. He utilizes a writing by Gene Sharp called *A Dictionary of Nonviolent Action*. When Wirmark’s article was written Sharp’s writing was an unpublished manuscript. This writing by Sharp is now in a book called *Social Power and Political Freedom* (1980). Sharp defines nonviolent action as “those methods of protest, resistance and intervention without physical violence in which the members of the nonviolent group do or refuse to do certain things” (Wirmark, 1974). Wirmark then explains Sharp’s division of nonviolent methods into three categories: nonviolent protest,
noncooperation, and nonviolent intervention. Nonviolent protests include ones that are mostly symbolic of dissatisfaction with an action, policy, or regime. Parades, marches, and picketing are examples of nonviolent protests. Noncooperation involves refusing to cooperate socially, economically, or politically with an opponent; this can be seen in strikes and boycotts. The final nonviolent method, nonviolent intervention, “involves active, deliberate intervention in the situation” (Wirmark, 1974). This is often seen as the most aggressive form of protesting and involves going directly against established laws or social practices. A classic example of nonviolent intervention are sit-ins (Wirmark, 1974).

While examining the nature of Black Lives Matter, BLM is often compared to the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement was another historic movement that advocated for racial equality in America and is now regarded as a successfully peaceful movement. In his 2018 article, Dewey M. Clayton compared the BLM movement to the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-1940s to 1960s. Clayton’s article, “Black Lives Matter and the Civil Rights Movement: A Comparative Analysis of Two Social Movements in the United States” (2018), analyzed articles from the *New York Times* within two significant years for both movements. For BLM he chose 2014-2016, the first two years in which BLM gained national attention after Eric Garner and Michael Brown’s deaths. For the Civil Rights Movement Clayton focused on 1960-1962, these two years were early and significant for the movement in a similar way to the years chosen for BLM. Clayton then compared how each movement framed their political issue, specifically whether their issues were framed as Human Rights statements or Institutional Criticism statements. Human Rights statements portray the issue of racial inequality as a human rights issue. Institutional Criticism statements criticize the American institutions that create and support
racial inequality. Clayton also compared the leadership styles and political messages of both movements (2018).

From his research, Clayton found that only 42 of the 209 New York Times articles referenced Human Rights or Institutional Criticism statements; of those 42, 39 were Institutional Criticism, six were Human Rights statements, and three contained both (2018). The New York Times articles for the Civil Rights Movement resulted in 39 total articles; 36 of the 39 referenced Human Rights or Institutional Criticism statements. Of the 36, 35 were Institutional Criticisms, 10 contained Human Rights statements, and nine contained both (Clayton, 2018). Going into this research, Clayton hypothesized that BLM would receive more negative media coverage than the Civil Rights Movement. Instead, he found the New York Times did not portray either movement more favorably than the other. His research found that the New York Times reported both movements as they were happening from the perspectives of participants and observers; thus, the New York Times did not frame each movement’s issues. Each movements’ actions framed its own issues and the New York Times’ simply reported significant events (Clayton, 2018).

Clayton concludes his article by explaining the differences between the messages, leadership styles, and focuses of both movements. The Civil Rights Movement, according to Clayton, pushed the message of inclusivity and wanted to gain support from anyone who agreed with the movement. In contrast, BLM struggled to advocate for inclusivity because their message was heavily anti-police (Clayton, 2018). The Civil Rights Movement had a hierarchical, male-centered leadership style. While BLM encouraged decentralized leadership and a more grassroots organizational system. BLM was also more inclusive of women and members of the LGBTQ+ community than the Civil Rights Movement. Clayton argues that a pitfall of BLM is their inability to connect with mainstream society. BLM framed its message as a fight for the
equality of Black people in America. The Civil Rights Movement, on the other hand, framed its message around the American ideals of equality, freedom, and justice for everyone. The Civil Rights Movement was able to portray their fight as an American problem and American citizens were able to connect with it more than the Black-centered message of BLM (Clayton, 2018). Kimberly Lane, Yaschica Williams, Andrea N. Hunt, and Amber Paulk examine the portrayal of race by the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*’s coverage of Trayvon Martin's death, in their article "The Framing of Race: Trayvon Martin and the Black Lives Matter Movement" (2020). Lane et al. utilize Joe Feagin’s concept of the white racial frame as the foundation of their analysis. In his book, *The White Racial Frame*, Feagin analyzes how beliefs and stereotypes about people of color strengthen systemic racism and racial discrimination. Lane et al. use the media coverage of BLM and Trayvon Martin’s death to analyze racial frames in the news, in this case, the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* (Lane et al., 2020).

Lane et al. begin by citing Erving Goffman’s concept of frame analysis, the idea that humans create frames to categorize information about the world to make sorting through large amounts of external information easier and quicker. They continue by explaining the dominant racial frame in America, the white racial frame, on top of strengthening systemic racism and discrimination with racial stereotypes has also created “a strong pro-white sub-frame and a strong anti-black sub-frame that possibly delegitimize voices of racial resistance” (Lane et al., 2020). Lane et al. then utilized Robert M. Entman’s idea that media is framed through “selection” and “salience” (2020). Entman argues that the media selects parts of reality and makes them more salient to shape our understanding of a problem and its solutions; frames also deflect from other parts of reality by selecting only partial realities. Lane et al. argue that by making specific details more salient, the media controls what the public thinks about. They apply
this argument to the idea of racial frames and maintain that Black Americans are extremely underrepresented in the media (Lane et al., 2020).

In conducting their research, Lane et al. collected articles about Trayvon Martin and Black Lives Matter from the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* from January 1, 2012, to August 1, 2016. Their search resulted in 422 total articles: 88.4% demonstrated an anti-black frame, 81.9% had a pro-white frame, and 75.3% had a stereotype frame (Lane et al., 2020). Articles with an anti-black frame portrayed race and the BLM movement as divergent. Within the anti-black frame were sub-frames of inadequacy, lack of leadership, and lawlessness used to describe BLM. Articles with pro-white frames portrayed George Zimmerman, the police, and whiteness as virtuous and protective. The virtuous sub-frame depicted Zimmerman and the police as forces of good and righteousness. Articles written with a stereotype frame described Black Americans through stereotypes, such as “suspicious,” “criminal,” and “thug” (Lane et al., 2020). Four sub-frames within the stereotype frame characterized Trayvon Martin as a “Criminal ‘Gangsta’ Thug,” black women as “Sassy” and “Hypersexual,” Black American youth as “lazy,” and BLM as a threatening “black militant uprising” (Lane et al., 2020). Lane et al. conclude their article by reiterating their main argument that the white racial frame presents a strong positive attitude toward whiteness and a strong negative attitude toward blackness. The white racial frame in *New York Times* and *Washington Post* articles about Trayvon Martin and BLM, from January 2012 to August 2016, perpetuated negative racial frames and white supremacist ideologies (Lane et al., 2020).

The *US Crisis Monitor* was a project created by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) and Princeton University’s Bridging Divides Initiative. It was created to track and mitigate potential political violence in America. The *US Crisis Monitor* collected data
on all protests during the summer of 2020 and various government responses. In the article, “Demonstrations and Political Violence in America: New Data for Summer 2020”, written by Roudabeh Kishi and Sam Jones the Crisis Monitor summarizes and analyzes the data collected from the week of George Floyd’s death in May 2020 to August 2020. The project recorded 7,750 protests linked to the BLM movement, and over 360 counterprotests, across the US between May 24th and August 22nd.

The Crisis Monitor found that from May 26th, the day after George Floyd’s death, to August 22nd 93% of the 7,750 protests linked to BLM resulted in no violence or destruction of property (Kishi & Jones, 2020). The study recorded over 10,600 total demonstrations across the country during this time, 10,100 of which were peaceful (Kishi & Jones, 2020). The movement around George Floyd’s death was opened to include other victims of police violence and racism in America, such as Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and Jacob Blake. The protests associated with BLM peaked in late May and early June; the vast majority of which were peaceful. Even in urban areas where violent demonstrations occurred, the study found that this violence was contained within specific blocks instead of spreading throughout the city (Kishi & Jones, 2020). The article also explains that public support for the movement peaked on June 3 and sharply declined after. The article then cites a poll created by a site called FiveThirtyEight. This poll found that 42% of participants believe “most protesters [associated with the BLM movement] are trying to incite violence or destroy property” (Kishi & Jones, 2020). The authors explain that this imbalance comes from an over-portrayal of violent demonstrations in the media.

Groups such as the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) have recorded various disinformation campaigns intentionally portraying the movement in a negative light. The study found that many of the violent or destructive protests were aimed at destroying statues that
represent America’s history of racist violence. Not only was this used to portray the movement as violent, but also sparked a heated debate over whether statues of historical figures should still be standing. It was also recorded that, alongside the increase in anti-racist protests, an increase in racist symbols attempting to intimidate or warn racial activists was also seen. The ACLED study also took note of the global spark caused by George Floyd’s death. In the week after Floyd’s death, 8,700 protests across 74 countries occurred in support of BLM. The movement represented anti-racism and anti-police violence activism other countries could apply to their own situations (Kishi & Jones, 2020).

The authors then explain that while certain media groups focus on looting and vandalism associated with BLM, there is little evidence that supports the claim of the entire movement being violent. The report also found some instances in which infiltrators came in and incited violence during a protest. It found that “Between 24 May and 22 August, over 360 counter-protests were recorded around the country, accounting for nearly 5% of all demonstrations” (Kishi & Jones, 2020). Of these counterprotests 43 of them turned violent, about 12%. The ACLED study recorded more than 100 events in which non-government individuals engaged in protests, the majority of which were with the BLM movement. These non-government actors included groups from both the political left and right (Kishi & Jones, 2020).

The Crisis Monitor found that early on in the movement there was mixed governmental response to protests. The protests largely began as peaceful and in some instances authorities even joined in and showed support. There were incidents of support and violent reactions early on. Overall, ACLED found the government tended to respond with force. The study found that more than 9%, or one in 10, of BLM demonstrations were met with government intervention. Of those 9%, over 54% of the protests the authorities responded to, they used force. It also found the
government was more likely to respond to a BLM protest than any other protest during that time, and they were more likely to intervene with force. Kishi and Jones explain that the increase in the use of force was created by a push to “militarize the government’s response to domestic unrest, and particularly demonstrations perceived to be linked to left-wing groups like Antifa, which the administration views as a ‘terrorist’ organization” (2020).

The *Crisis Monitor* also noted a connection between the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement. The article references research by the *Washington Post* which shows that people who lost their jobs were more likely to participate in protests; essential workers were also more likely to protest. Many protests were also caused by large-scale unemployment from COVID-19, unsafe working conditions, mask mandates, etc. The article concludes by looking back over the summer to anticipate what may occur in the 2020 presidential election. Noting the immense division over racial inequality, police brutality, the pandemic, and the inflation of these divides by the Trump administration; the article warns that without intervention these tensions will only get worse (Kishi & Jones, 2020).

**Methodology**

In my research, I attempted to answer the question of what it means for a protest to be peaceful and consider the portrayal of the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 in the media. I began by searching for various articles on news and media outlets written during the summer of 2020 about the movement. I will analyze the language surrounding the movement, from both political perspectives, about the protests and their effects.

To conduct my research I chose to begin by simply Googling “BLM” or “Black Lives Matter” and limiting the search to only articles from between 05/01/2020- 08/31/2020; I then
selected the “news” button under the search bar to limit the results even further. I then decided I would only focus on three specific news outlets with different political views and compare how they spoke about BLM, the protests, and the people involved. For the right-wing and conservative perspective, I chose Fox News, the Epoch Times, and the Washington Examiner. All are popular, relatively well-known conservative news and media outlets in America. The Epoch Times is slightly newer than Fox News and the Washington Examiner, but it was created before 2020 and still had a fair amount of articles written about the protests. For my opposing side, I chose, what I would consider to be, less biased or at least less conservative news sources; The Guardian, the New York Times, and NBC News. It is possible they are still biased, just in a different direction from the conservative news sources. Within each of these websites, I applied the same method of searching “BLM”, “Black Lives Matter”, or “Black Lives Matter protest” and when I could I applied the filter of articles written between 05/01/2020-08/31/2020. For websites I could not limit the time period, I simply only chose articles written during that time. In addition to searching on each media outlet’s website, I also searched on Google the name of each source and “BLM”, “Black Lives Matter”, or “Black Lives Matter Protest” to try and increase the range of articles I could find.

In choosing which articles to review, I tended to focus on those that represented most of the opinions written. I tried to find common themes among various articles from each political side and used articles that expressed most of those themes. I also used other articles to corroborate the ideas and facts presented by each side and chose articles that expressed the most prevalent ideas and facts. In finding articles to define what a peaceful protest is, I searched several databases within Pace University’s digital library for scholarly articles. I limited my search to JSTOR and EBSCOhost journal articles. Within these, I searched for topics including
“peaceful protest” and “Black Lives Matter”. A pitfall I discovered while researching was the lack of a formal definition of a peaceful protest. Through all of the databases and articles considered, none of them explicitly stated what a peaceful protest looks like. After reading several articles and finding no explicit definition, I Googled “peaceful protest meaning site:jstor.org”. I chose to use Google because it would give me access to a wider variety of scholarly articles based on Google’s search algorithm for “peaceful protest meaning” rather than relying on the databases’ use of keywords to find relevant articles.

Results

Black Lives Matter = Domestic Terrorism (allegedly)

National attention was drawn to the Black Lives Matter movement following the protests against George Floyd’s death in May 2020. This attention attracted people from all political perspectives to express their beliefs about the protests and the BLM movement as a whole. During the summer of 2020, the movement and its associated protests were both scrutinized and praised. Although the majority of protests associated with BLM were found to be peaceful, the few violent ones were emphasized by those who opposed the movement. During the summer of 2020, several individuals and politicians publicly denounced the Black Lives Matter movement. The movement was accused of being Marxist, Communist, and a terrorist organization. Opponents of BLM often claimed the movement, its leaders, and its followers were dangerous and untrustworthy.

The Epoch Times is a far-right international newspaper and media source based in New York City. The Epoch Times was founded in 2000 to focus on the persecution of those who follow Falun Gong, a new Chinese religious movement created in 1992 (Roose, 2020). The goal
of the newspaper was to counter Chinese government propaganda against Falun Gong. The newspaper skyrocketed in popularity during the 2016 presidential election (Roose, 2020). The *Epoch Times* backed Donald Trump as an ally in their fight against the Chinese Communist Party and used Facebook to subtly advertise the paper and its beliefs to millions of users (Roose, 2020). Roger L. Simon is a novelist, screenwriter, and current columnist for The *Epoch Times*. Simon has been writing for the Epoch Times since December 2019. Among the many articles written by Simon, “Black Lives Don’t Matter to Black Lives Matter” (2020a) and “Our Educational System Makes US Land of Useful Idiots” (2020b) question the legitimacy of BLM.

In June 2020 Simon wrote “Black Lives Don’t Matter to Black Lives Matter”, an article arguing that the Black Lives Matter movement does not care about Black deaths unless they are at the hands of the police. Simon suggests that BLM protests are inconsistent and focus more on being anti-police than pro-Black. Simon begins the article by mentioning a shooting that occurred on Father’s Day weekend in Chicago. 105 people were shot that weekend and 15 people died, 5 of whom were children under 18. He then mentions several other mass shootings across the country. He states “BLM doesn’t seem to care about violence done to blacks if the police aren’t involved, even though black-on-black crime is by many multiples more lethal and more common” (Simon, 2020a). Simon claims that the BLM movement is intent on destroying the country and creating a revolution with Antifa to make themselves more powerful. Antifa is an anti-fascist, anti-racist far-left political movement that engages in violent and nonviolent forms of protesting; some members of Antifa justify the use of violence to support its cause (Bogel-Burroughs & Garcia, 2020).

Simon also proposes another reason why BLM avoids dealing with black-on-black violence. He explains that Lyndon B. Johnson and the policies he implemented during his
presidency are at fault. The Great Society program of 1964 created the welfare system, both of which Simon asserts are to blame for the disintegration of the Black family and community. Simon urges that if BLM actually cares about Black lives they should do the work of improving ordinary everyday Black lives. Leaders of the movement should encourage people to stop depending on welfare, seek employment, start businesses, and stay away from drugs and gangs. Simon concludes his article by expressing that BLM has the power to improve the Black community but cannot do so because they are focusing too much on revolution and tearing things apart rather than building them up (Simon, 2020a).

A couple of weeks later Roger L. Simon wrote “Our Educational System Makes US Land of Useful Idiots”. In this article, he describes the “useful idiot” and how the BLM movement used this type of people as mindless followers. Simon defines the “useful idiot” as someone who is ill-informed, easily gullible, often in the middle class, and can be easily manipulated by a political group into supporting their cause; Simon claims “useful idiots are all around us” (2020b). The swift growth of the BLM movement and steep increase in followers, according to Simon, is an example of this. He then posits that BLM is an overt communist organization and “Its leadership advertises itself as ‘trained Marxists’ (their words)” (Simon, 2020b). He also brings light to Susan Rosenberg, a far-left activist and former member of the May 19th Communist Organization, being a major financial contributor to BLM. The May 19th Communist Organization, like Antifa, was a far-left anti-racist and anti-imperialist militant group during the 1970s; this group often resorted to violence in their self-proclaimed war against American imperialism (Rosenau, 2019). Simon continues by explaining that no one seems to care about the possible connection to Communism or former violent extremists who may be
financially benefiting from the success of BLM. He attributes the cause of this ignorance to the American education system (Simon, 2020b).

Simon explains that the “useful idiot” machine begins in colleges and universities and continues to pump out useful idiots every year. Over the years colleges and universities have become mostly leftist and Democratic, and the students at these schools follow suit. Some of these students then go on to teach at other colleges and universities, but also elementary, middle, and high schools. All the while nothing about this system is questioned or examined and the system continues, getting more biased every year. Simon then states that there is endless diversity in schools but almost no viewpoint diversity in those same spaces. The education received in college then lingers with students afterward and is enhanced by the media and corporations that are too afraid of not being politically correct. Simon concludes the article by warning that if this system continues, in a few years we will become a nation full of “useful idiots” (Simon, 2020b).

The Washington Examiner is a conservative news outlet based in Washington D.C. The Washington Examiner was founded in 2005 and was once a daily newspaper specific to the D.C. metropolitan area that focused on local news and politics. In 2013 the newspaper was discontinued and became the weekly magazine it is today. Eddie Scarry is the author of three political books and a former columnist for the Washington Examiner. Scarry has also written for the New York Post and is now a columnist for The Federalist online magazine. Scarry wrote several articles for the Washington Examiner from November 2014 to June of 2021, some of which include “What do Black Lives Matter protesters even want anymore?” (2020b) and “Hey, news media, the police are ‘overwhelmingly peaceful’ too” (2020a).
Written in mid-June 2020, Scarry’s article “Hey, news media, the police are ‘overwhelmingly peaceful’ too” asserts that the national media tends to shy away from reporting violent acts committed by Black Lives Matter protesters, when it does mention violence related to BLM it is coupled with a disclaimer that the majority of protests are peaceful. Scarry contends that the media should do the same for police officers, who are often patrolling the streets and are not killing as many people as they are portrayed to. Eddie Scarry supports his argument by citing Department of Justice statistics from 2015 about interactions with the police. Scarry refers to the Department of Justice's finding that most Black drivers believed officers behaved properly. Scarry then mentioned that within the DOJ report, only 3% of Black people who interacted with the police experienced a threat or non-fatal use of force. He concludes by stating “The vast majority of protesters are peaceful, sure. And so are the vast majority of police officers” (Scarry, 2020a).

Almost a month later, in “What do Black Lives Matter protesters even want anymore?” Scarry claims that after the video of George Floyd’s death went viral the nation as a whole agreed that policing reforms were necessary and was prepared to understand “the problems unique to black people and looking at what can be done to address them” (2020b). He continues by stating “But now it’s been impossible to make any progress on the issue because the proposals have been either ridiculous (defund the police), vague or, quite frankly, meaningless” (Scarry, 2020b). Scarry then discusses several calls to action by Black writers or commentators about how White people can behave to support the Black Lives Matter movement.

Scarry presents five different arguments by different Black writers and commentators, by directly quoting each person and questioning each one. For example, the first idea Scarry presents is by a Harvard University and Harvard Law School graduate, and Black writer for the
Nation magazine, Elie Mystal. Mystal puts forth that White people can help the Black Lives Matter movement by fighting racism wherever they see it; in public, in private, “every day, at all times, everywhere” (Scarry, 2020b). Scarry replies “OK, but what does that mean? Is little blonde Becky’s confrontation with a ‘racist’ she identified at brunch going to solve or affect in any way the ‘systemic racism’ we’re supposed to be addressing?” (2020b). Another example includes Dana Brownlee’s, a former Black contributor for Forbes, proposition. In a Forbes article, Brownlee created a list of 10 actions White people can do in their workplace to promote racial justice. These actions ranged from simply connecting with more people of color, to talking with your children about race, to joining or starting a diversity committee. Scarry counters this by stating that the suggestions given by Brownlee would be rejected and considered performative by other voices in the BLM movement (Scarry, 2020b).

On top of the many individual opinions against the BLM movement, several politicians also publicly criticized the movement, including the former Mayor of New York City Rudolph Giuliani and former President Donald Trump. During his appearance on Fox News’s "Bill Hemmer Reports" in June 2020, Giuliani declared police brutality is propaganda. He stated, “Reforms are certainly needed, but I also think that to make it appear as if police brutality is systemic is really propaganda -- Police brutality is an issue but it's not the major issue that they are trying to make it” (Creitz, 2020a). Creitz, the author of this article, explains that following the death of George Floyd anti-cop rhetoric reached a high point. Giuliani asserts that the narrative of police brutality against Black Americans is extremely false and equally dangerous for officers, it has resulted in hundreds of officers being injured. Giuliani expressed support for protesters fighting against injustice but denounced their idea that police brutality is a serious issue. Giuliani continued to criticize BLM’s narrative of police brutality when he presented the
statistic that “only 10 percent of the shootings of unarmed people involve blacks, 20 percent involve whites” (Creitz, 2020a). The former Mayor was asked about Joe Biden’s attitude that some cities might have too many law enforcement officers, as a possible reaction to outcries by left-wing activists to defund the police. He replied, “Joe Biden is a complete phony” (Creitz, 2020a). Giuliani continued that decreasing police presence would only hurt minorities; he supported this by stating that 70 to 75 percent of homicide victims in New York City are Black and the offenders also tend to be Black.

During another Fox News interview on The Story with Martha MacCallum in mid-August 2020, Giuliani advised former President Trump to declare Black Lives Matter as a domestic terror organization. Giuliani expressed confusion as to why companies would give money to Black Lives Matter, “which is run by three Communists who are avowed terrorists” (Creitz, 2020b). Similar to Roger L. Simon's claims, Giuliani also alleged that Susan Rosenberg was funding BLM. Giuliani supports his assertion that BLM should be declared a domestic terrorist organization by referencing several violent actions and statements given by people in support of the movement. He pointed to various lootings that had occurred and stated “this is an illegal organization and their intent is to overthrow our government” (Creitz, 2020b).

Former President Donald Trump also publicly denounced the BLM movement and protests on several occasions. In May 2020, 4 days after George Floyd’s death, Trump expressed his opinion on protests and riots in Minneapolis. The series of tweets began when Trump tweeted “I can’t stand back & watch this happen to a great American City, Minneapolis. A total lack of leadership. Either the very weak Radical Left Mayor, Jacob Frey, get his act together and bring the City under control, or I will send in the National Guard & get the job done right.” (Casiano, 2020). In a follow-up tweet, Trump stated “These THUGS are dishonoring the memory of
George Floyd, and I won’t let that happen. Just spoke to Governor Tim Walz and told him that the Military is with him all the way. Any difficulty and we will assume control but, when the looting starts, the shooting starts. Thank you!” (Casiano, 2020) X, formerly known as Twitter, flagged these tweets for glorifying violence and Trump clarified his tweets the next day. He clarified his statements by asserting that people looting and rioting should not drown out the voices of those peacefully protesting. He expressed his belief that “The rights of peaceful protesters are very important but we can’t allow the situation to descend further into lawless chaos” (Phillips, 2020), preventing such chaos would respect Floyd’s family and his memory. Trump has also publicly described BLM as a “Marxist group that is not looking for good things for our country” (Nelson, 2020), in response to several professional sports teams kneeling during the national anthem in support of the movement.

The overall message of those who opposed the BLM movement and protests during the summer of 2020 was that the movement’s goals are not what they claim to be. The movement presented itself as one attempting to fight racism and injustice in America, but some opponents claimed it sought to tear the country apart. BLM was claimed to be inconsistent in their messages, relying too heavily on attacking the police force, and, by extreme opponents, as a domestic threat to America. When emphasizing the violence of BLM protests, some opponents also expressed concern for the potential harm the movement could cause to the country. The movement was either explicitly stated to be violent or was compared to past violent political groups. The comparisons between BLM and historically violent political groups implied a violent backdrop behind the organization’s main message. While some were publicly mistrustful of BLM and urged others to question the movement, not all of the responses to the BLM protests were negative.
In Defense of Black Lives Matter

Immediately after the summer of 2020, many media and news outlets responded to the negative portrayal of BLM protests and protestors. In September 2020 outlets such as The Guardian, NBC News, and the New York Times also reported on the protests. The September articles specifically focused on the backlash the Black Lives Matter protests and movement received from its opponents.

The Guardian is a global news organization that began as a British daily newspaper. The Guardian is an independent newspaper originally founded in 1821 under the name The Manchester Guardian. In early September 2020 Lois Beckett wrote “Nearly all Black Lives Matter protests are peaceful despite Trump narrative, report finds”. The main argument of this article is the majority of BLM demonstrations were more peaceful than its opponents claimed it to be. Beckett explained that while the majority of protests tracked during the summer of 2020 were peaceful, the report found a trend of violent responses from government forces and non-government individuals. The article, citing the ACLED study’s finding of governmental response to 9% of BLM protests, asserts that despite the high percentage of peaceful protests the US government responded heavily and with strong amounts of force. Beckett states that governmental authorities responded to protests with weapons including “teargas, rubber bullets and pepper spray or beating demonstrators with batons” (2020). The article also mentions an alarming amount of individual acts of violence and intimidation against BLM protesters, such as car-ramming attacks. The director of research and innovation at ACLED told The Guardian “There have been some violent demonstrations, and those tend to get a lot of media coverage”
(Beckett, 2020). Beckett (2020) concludes the article by asserting that violent responses from the
government did not make protests more peaceful, it did the opposite.

Another article titled “‘Not by accident’: False ‘thug’ narratives have long been used to
discredit civil rights movements” (2020) was written by Safia Samee Ali for NBC News. In this
article, Ali contends Trump’s use of the word “thug” to describe BLM protesters is not a new
concept and has been used throughout history to undermine racial protests. Ali begins the article
by stating Trump described BLM protesters as “thugs” almost a dozen times after the death of
George Floyd. Ali explains that politicians using the word thug is not new and has been used in
the past as a way to diminish and undermine racial movements and public support for them. The
use of thug, Ali claims, is intended to rewrite the history of peaceful protests and defame them
with images of violence.

Ali utilizes interviews with three college professors to explain the dichotomy between the
findings of the study and the statements of the movement’s opponents. One such professor is
Trimiko Melancon, who teaches African American and American literary and cultural studies at
Rhodes College. Melancon asserts that it is a strategic choice to portray the BLM protests as
violent and destructive. She explains that acts of violence, even if minimal, are propped up and
used as justification for suppressing the entire movement. Ali then explains the history of
opponents of racial movements mislabeling activists to discredit them. An example she provides
is the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Civil rights activists were often labeled as
subversives; a label used to imply violent intentions. This was done to push the demands of those
activists away from the mainstream and tarnish their respectability (Ali, 2020).

Ali then provides Melancon’s definition of the word thug, “‘Thug’ is a coded and
racialized term that people use instead of Black or brown. These labels and monikers have
particular layers and certain things already embedded in them” (Ali, 2020). The layers within the term can be used to imply protesters are not peaceful and are enemies of the state. Ali continues to explain that the aggressive criminal charges given to protesters who have been arrested are also a strategic move. Melancon explains this causes the public to fear siding with those who have been given such serious criminal charges. The article then explains “Many times, the rhetoric around threats creates a disproportionate force in action” (Ali, 2020). Ali clarifies this statement by explaining that because the BLM protests have been painted as a dangerous threat, the government must respond accordingly even if the threat is largely rhetorical. Ali also cites the ACLED’s findings that one in 10, or 9%, of BLM protests have been met with government intervention, compared to only 3% of intervention for all other demonstrations. The narrative of danger and threats is also used to decrease public support and sympathy, Melancon states. People begin by sympathizing with the movement because they are fighting injustice. Once the narrative is changed, the public begins to change their opinion (Ali, 2020).

Ali also explains the importance of distinguishing the movement and organized peaceful protest from acts of violence. “Several Black Lives Matter chapters have condemned violence taken place during protests” Ali affirms (2020). Ali explains that when protests have been peaceful, opponents cite any violence associated with the movement to detract from the original movement’s claims. Melancon also explains that movements can be infiltrated by outside individuals who come in intending to incite violence. This can also make it seem like the movement is violent if the infiltrator seems like they are part of the movement. Ali concludes this article by explaining that the largest difference between the Black Lives Matter movement of today and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s is central leadership. The BLM movement
lacks strong figures like Martin Luther King Jr. Although BLM lacked central leadership, it still gained a massive multiracial and multicultural support system (Ali, 2020).

Many of the articles written in support of the protests attributed the decrease in public support to biased media framing and misinformation. News and media outlets and politicians that opposed the movement tended to focus heavily on the few violent protests and presented them as if they represented the entire movement. This negative portrayal not only paints the protests as dangerous but also the individual people who associate with the movement.

Discussion

Politics Impact Portrayal

In my research, I attempted to define a peaceful protest and examine the portrayal of the BLM protests of 2020 compared to this definition. Going into this research I expected to find negative descriptions of the protests. I was unsure how peaceful the protests truly were, but I expected to find negative views of them. I found that the Black Lives Matter protests, while largely peaceful, were portrayed by various media outlets and political figures differently depending on their political perspectives. Many right-leaning and/or conservative media sources tended to portray the BLM movement as dangerous, violent, and hiding ulterior motives. It was also occasionally claimed that the movement was destructive to society. Politicians and media sources with political perspectives opposing those associated with the BLM movement often publicly dissented the movement’s call to action against injustice. BLM was often discredited by its opponents through the negative depiction.

During the summer of 2020, Donald Trump and Rudolph Giuliani referred to BLM as Marxists and Communists. Roger L. Simon also claimed BLM was conspiring with former
violent extremist groups. While Marxism and Communism on their own are not inherently violent, Marxist and Communist movements such as the May 19th Organization and Antifa have used extreme violence to further their political campaigns. May 19th, for example, was known for detonating symbolic bombs in buildings that represented American imperialism. Politicians in opposition to the BLM movement compared BLM to these violent extremist groups to imply that BLM was also a violent organization.

The nature of the arguments presented by those who disagreed and those who agreed with the movement is largely one of politics versus action, respectively. The media sources and politicians who disagreed with the movement reflected on the political aspects of the movement, comparing them to other violent political groups of the past. They focused on the seemingly anti-cop political message of the movement. This took focus away from the anti-police brutality message of the movement and was used to discredit it entirely. Referring back to Lane et al., they argued the media framed its depictions of Trayvon Martin and BLM through the white racial frame. Their research found the majority of articles on these topics from 2012 to late 2016 often reported this news through pro-white and anti-black sub-frames. The media sources and politicians that denounced the movement spoke about BLM and its 2020 protest similar to the articles about Trayvon Martin and BLM from 2012 to late 2016. Both referred to the BLM movement as thugs and a militant threat to American society. Lane et al. also explained the concept of frames and the idea that people create frames to categorize and sort through information from the world around them more easily. The politicians who disagreed with BLM put the movement in the same categories as other violent political groups from the past, thus framing BLM in the same way as those groups. Whether BLM and its protests were truly violent
was not the focal point, rather the politics of the movement and the infrequent violent actions were used to portray the entire movement as violent and threatening.

In contrast to BLM’s violent portrayal by those who disagreed, news and media sources that agreed with the movement tended to portray them positively. Those sources reported the largely nonviolent action taken by protesters in their fight against racial injustice. Media and news articles like “Nearly all Black Lives Matter protests are peaceful despite Trump narrative, report finds” (Beckett, 2020) and “‘Not by accident': False 'thug' narratives have long been used to discredit civil rights movements” (Ali, 2020) defended the movement and reported the peaceful nature of protests in its defense. Sources that agreed with the movement often argued that the negative depictions of the protests were inaccurate representations and distracted from BLM’s intention to fight injustice and uplift Black lives. An important feature of these sources is the ability of the movement’s opposers to degrade and discount the movement by focusing on occasional violence. This is significant because, despite the nonviolent tactics of protestors, the outcry of the movement can be discounted and ignored if it is seen as violent. Public support of a movement such as BLM is vital in achieving its goals because the goals involve bringing to light and fighting against current social systems.

Dewey M. Clayton’s comparison of BLM to the Civil Rights Movement can shed light on why the BLM movement gained strong negative reactions from right-leaning and conservative political sources; especially his comparisons of both movements’ messages and the presentation of their issues. Clayton compared the Civil Rights Movement’s inclusive nature to the divisive nature of BLM’s anti-cop theme. He claims this caused the BLM movement to garner less support than the Civil Rights Movement. This idea can be seen in some of the opposition's arguments against the movement. Giuliani, Trump, Eddie Scarry, and Roger L.
Simon argued against the movement because it focused so heavily on painting police officers as violent and criticizing all officers for it. Clayton also argued that a major pitfall of the BLM movement was its inability to connect with mainstream society. Although BLM gained support from, and even inspired, countries around the world, Clayton asserts that the movement’s focus on the Black experience made it harder for people outside that experience to connect with it. In comparison, the Civil Rights Movement presented the issue of racial inequality as a problem for all of America. This idea may shed light on why some do not connect with the movement while others do. Those who do not relate to the movement may see the occasional violence as completely unjustified, leading to condemnation of the movement altogether.

**Conclusion**

From my research readers will learn that nonviolent action is defined as “those methods of protest, resistance and intervention without physical violence in which the members of the nonviolent group do or refuse to do certain things” (Wirmark, 1974). Additionally, Nonviolent protests include symbolic displays of dissatisfaction with an action, policy, or regime. Based on this definition, the recorded 93% of protests associated with BLM during the summer of 2020 that resulted in no violence or destruction indicates the movement was largely peaceful.

Readers will have also learned about the impact racial frames had on the portrayal of Trayvon Martin and BLM from 2012-2016. Several of these frames were also seen in the 2020 depictions of BLM by its opposers, including the divergent, lawlessness, stereotype, and black militant uprising sub-frames. The Black Lives Matter movement was portrayed through these negative sub-frames to expose what its opposers believed to be a contradictory political message, one that claimed to fight against injustice but instead violently fought for dangerous ulterior
motives. Clayton’s comparison of BLM and the Civil Rights Movement’s messages and the delivery of their messages helps explain the negative reactions to the movement. The divisive nature of BLM’s anti-cop and Black-centered rhetoric prevented them from earning more support. Conversely, the Civil Rights Movement presented its message of fighting racial inequality as a problem for all Americans; thus, allowing them to gain more support from a wider range of people.

Returning to the main purpose of this research, Black Lives Matter as a movement and series of protests were predominantly peaceful. The most supportive evidence of the protests’ true nature is the ACLED study. The study collected weekly data about the protests, from the beginning to the end of the summer. The US Crisis Monitor was an unbiased, purely numerical method of collecting and reporting information about the protests. Seeing as the report found that 93% of the BLM protests were nonviolent, it is fair to say the protests were substantially peaceful. Despite Black Lives Matter no longer being front-page news, the discourse around race and racial inequality in America is still ongoing. Now that we are four years behind the intensity of the COVID-19 pandemic and the peak of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, potential future research can be done on the retrospective beliefs of Americans about the movement and its associated protests. Potential research may look into how the beliefs of Americans about the Black Lives Matter movement, and its associated protests, may have changed since 2020.
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