Considering the Political Roles of Black Talk Radio and the Afrosphere in Response to the Jena 6: Social Media and the Blogosphere

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Abstract

In this paper, we present the Black[1] blogosphere's discussion of the Jena 6 case to uncover how ethnic identity is performed discursively to promote social activism. Historically, African Americans have used radio for communication about critical issues, such as political elections, health care, education, economic development and civil rights. More recently with the growing popularity of blogs and other social media, there is evidence of a cultural shift toward democratization that allows dispersed and committed African Americans to collectively discuss pressing social issues of concern to their communities. Through an analysis of black blog postings reporting on the Jena 6 case, this case study chronicles the way in which black audiences responded to this news story. The findings point to critiques of dominant cultural meanings about race relations and racial injustice. In addition, our findings suggest that social media has become an additional medium that is effectively used by African Americans' in their historical struggle for civil rights.

Keywords: Blogging, Social Media, Jena 6, Social Movement, blacks, African Americans

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[1] In this article, we use "Black" and "African American" interchangeably to reflect the different peoples of African descent in the US.

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> *Ten years ago this [the Jena 6 protest] couldn't have happened. You didn't
> have the Internet and you didn't have black blogs and you didn't have
> national radio shows. Now we can talk to all of black America every day.
> We've been able to form our own underground railroad of information,
> and when everybody else looks up, it's already done.*

- Reverend Al Sharpton[2]

Introduction

According to Squires (2000), the question of how black-controlled media shapes

black public life has not been rigorously investigated. Black radio was the primary

communication channel used for communication and mobilization during the civil rights

and black power movements in the US from the 1920s to the mid-1970s. Ward (2004)

notes that key civil rights leaders, like Martin Luther King, and organizations, such as the

NAACP, put a premium on access to the radio, often finding it far more effective than the

print media or television in advancing their cause. Radio was also used strategically to

influence the opinions of non-black people on racial matters.

Today, African Americans are increasingly using social media, such as blogs,

Facebook and Twitter, to produce their own content and align geographically dispersed

communities to expand participation in the discussion of events related to black interests.

For instance, the Pew Internet and American Life Project reports that minority adults

outpace whites in their use of social technologies. Nearly half of black Internet users go

to a social networking site on a typical day, while just one third of white Internet users do

so on a daily basis (Smith, 2009). Of the African Americans online, 25% use Twitter at

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[2] http://www.chicagotribune.com/services/newspaper/printedition/wednesday/chi-jena_blog_web19,0,3502418,print.story

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least occasionally, with 11% using this service on a typical day (Smith, 2011). African

Americans are more likely to own a mobile phone, and they use a much wider range of

their cell phones capabilities (Smith, 2009). These capabilities include using text

messaging and social networking sites, watching and recording videos, listening to music,

and posting multimedia content online. African Americans were found to be very active

users of social media technologies. These technologies were often used to interact with

government and remain informed about current events and news in their neighborhoods

(Smith 2009). Researchers worry, however, that African Americans may be using their

increased Web access more for entertainment than for empowerment (Washington,

2011). Thus, there is a concern that a new "digital divide" may be emerging with blacks

being challenged by more access to ICTs with a limited knowledge of skillful use of the

data which is often vital in driving empowerment, economic and community

development.

In this paper, we are concerned with how ethnic identity is performed discursively

in the African American blogging community to promote social activism. We use the

Jena 6 case to examine how blogs continue in the radio tradition by simultaneously

entertaining, informing, educating, and mobilizing the national black community. Jena is

a small community of about 3,000 people in Louisiana, USA. In September 2007, the

community became the site of a massive civil rights protest that attracted thousands after

six black students who became known as the "Jena Six" were charged with attempted

murder after a white classmate was severely beaten. The physical altercation was the

culmination of a series of racially tinged events that took place over the course of a few

months. The six black teens received overwhelming support from African-American

activists around the country, many of whom believed the charges against them were excessive. In 2007, black talk radio hosts, bloggers, and civil rights leaders organized a protest that drew tens of thousands from across the nation.

The Jena 6 case demonstrates how African Americans are increasingly using social media, such as blogs, to produce their own content and align geographically dispersed communities to expand participation in the discussion of events related to black interests. While black radio continues to play an integral role in conscience-raising discussions and advocacy approaches to address inequities in political elections, health care, education, economic development and international policy, more recently blogs are virtual spaces used to foster social activism in physical spaces. Blodgett and Tapia (2011) introduce the concept of "digital protestainment" to articulate the hybrid culture that emerges through the interchange between online and offline forms of social activism. In the Jena 6 case, we focus on how radio hosts and bloggers were called into service to inspire a massive rally and evaluate its effectiveness.

Black Radio and Blogs: Communication Media in the Struggle for Civil Rights

According to Omi and Winant (1986), America has a seemingly permanent system of racial meanings and stereotypes that permeates its culture and subjugates African Americans. To protect against oppression in a racist society, African Americans developed a psychological "banding together" (Sellers et al., 1998). Shared experiences of racial subjugation not only contribute to psychological cohesion; they also foster collective social activism as evidenced by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. The Civil Rights Movement, which lasted from 1954 to 1968, was aimed at abolishing discrimination against African Americans through racial integration. Conversely, the

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Black Power movement promoted racial dignity, and economic and political self-sufficiency through the creation of black political and cultural institutions that nurtured and promoted black collectivism.

Over time, these movements resulted in improved civil rights for African Americans, as well as growth of ethnic pride and awareness. Despite these cultural and civil rights gains, widening economic, health care and educational disparities between American Americans and whites persist forty years later. In August 2011, the US Labor Department reported that the unemployment rate for whites slipped to 8%, while Black unemployment rose to 16.7%, its highest level since 1984 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). In its *State of Black America 2010* report, the National Urban League determined that the overall equality index for blacks is 71.8%. The overall equality index is a measure of disparities between blacks and whites in economics, education, health, civic engagement and social justice. An index value of less than 1 means blacks fare worse than whites in a particular category, while a value of 1 or above, indicates parity or better. According to the results of this study, while blacks are most similar to whites in civic engagement (102%), economics (57.4%) and social justice (57.2%) are the two areas with the greatest inequality. There were also minimal gains from the prior year in the categories of health (76.8%) and education (77%).

In the wake of the Civic Rights Movement, Dr. Martin Luther King noted the critical role of the media and modes of communication in redressing these inequalities. "Without the help of the media, the voices of African Americans will always be muddled and change will be very, very slow …." He further acknowledged that any coverage was prized: "One tiny minute, just sixty seconds in it. I can't refuse. I dare not abuse. It's up

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to me to use it."[3]. Communication media, such as black radio and more recently the black

blogosphere, continue to play a fundamental role in a collective African American

identity formation and the struggle for racial and economic equality in the US.

Black Radio

"At the height of the Civil Rights Movement, radio, more so than television or

print media, served as African Americans' main source of news and entertainment.

Scholars, however, have generally overlooked this essential element of African-American

life." (Jeffries, 2005, p. 338). During the peak years of the movement in the 1950s and

early 1960s, civil rights groups, individual activists, and sympathetic broadcasters used

radio to support and report on southern black activism. National civil rights

organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

(NAACP) and the National Urban League, attempted to use radio to rally white support

for the fight against Jim Crow. Black-oriented radio stations also forged relations with

local civil rights activists, sometimes in spite of formidable White resistance (Green,

2007). For example, William E. Leech and his brother owned Jackson, Tennessee's first

black radio station, WJAK. While listeners of WJAK were content with stories on church

news and community events, Leech noted that listeners were unhappy with the station's

stories that heightened awareness of whites attacking black demonstrators and cattle

prodding blacks from local stores (Merrill, 2003). In 1970, a two-person news operation

at James Brown's Augusta, Georgia radio station played a central role in bringing the city

into the post-Jim Crow era. Under the slogan "Truth and Soul," WRDW-AM News

provided crucial coverage of the movement to integrate the downtown retail workforce, a

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[3] http://communities.justicetalking.org/blogs/day28/archive/2007/02/27/celebrating-martin-luther-king-s-birthday-Black-history-month-and-the-media.aspx

campaign that led to general transformations in local race relations (The Black Commentator, 2003).

According to Ward (2004), radio remained more prevalent in black southerners' lives than television throughout the Civil Rights era. Moreover, radio far outdistanced the reach of print media in communicating cultural and political information that shaped local movements, such as community identity formation, race pride, and critical consciousness (Green, 2007). "Many black broadcasters adopted a more militant tone in the late 1960s and 1970s, endorsing continued protests, putting overtly political music on their playlists, and even embracing Black Power. At the same time, African American activists within and outside the industry began pushing for an increase in the number of black-owned and black-managed stations" (Boyle, 2005 p. 251).

Despite the efforts to expand black control of radio, there was a disconnection on station ownership and the control of on air content. This disconnect resulted from the faulty assumption that black ownership meant a greater commitment to program content on civil and economic rights. By the end of the 1970s, African Americans still owned less than 2 percent of the nation's radio stations. Ward (2004), however, argues that black ownership of radio stations did not guarantee more racially conscious programming; rather, it is his contention that progressive radio content helped shape black identity and create new levels of racial consciousness. Thus, control of radio content may be relatively more important than station ownership in promoting the political, social and economic advancement of black people in the US. In the early to mid-seventies, many large, medium and even small cities across the nation experienced a emergence in black radio news. This growth is viewed as a response to the voices of an awakened and

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politicized people. However, black radio station ownership had relatively little to do with the phenomenon. "According to the National Association of Black-owned Broadcasters (NABOB), there were only 30 African-American owned broadcast facilities in the United States in 1976. Today, NABOB boasts 220 member stations - and local black radio news is near extinction" (The Black Commentator, 2003). What seems to be more important is the control of news content, not the communication medium.

The "Blackosphere"

While radio remains an integral communication medium within black communities, black-oriented websites provide alternative platforms for the creation, dissemination and ownership of content that promotes black interests and cultural values. According to Poster (1995), mass media like radio "are interpreted by individuals who are interpellated by them, but these readers and viewers are not addressed directly, only as a generalized audience and, of course, they respond in fully articulated linguistic acts". However, on the Internet, "individuals read and interpret communications to themselves and to others and also respond by shaping sentences and transmitting them…The 'magic of the Internet is that it is a technology that puts cultural acts, symbolizations in all forms, in the hands of all participants; it radically decentralizes the positions of speech, publishing, filmmaking, radio and television broadcasting, in short the apparatuses of cultural production." Thus, while radio content is generally produced by cultural elites to be consumed by a generalized audience, social media content is produced by the masses to be consumed by a niche audience. In this study, we are interested in examining how ethnic identity is performed discursively in the African American blogging community to

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promote social activism. Specifically, we focus on black-oriented blogs or the

"Blackosphere" which Francis Holland (2007a) defines as follows:

> *These blogs are by and principally for Black people, focusing not only upon Black people but upon people and issues deemed relevant to the Black people who write these blogs and post comments. At Black blogs, we comment on the issues of the day raised in white newspapers and blogs, but we also highlight issues that Whites mostly ignore, such as the unfair criminal prosecution of individual humble and unknown Blacks. Our commentary and the relative importance that we give news are informed by our unique historical perspective on and position in America. From our vantage point, we share with each other a distinct perspective and critique that white people, including White progressives, cannot have and generally do not want.*

The discussions that take place in blogging communities are often aligned to real

world topics and tend to maintain traditional, hegemonic identities, roles, and other ties to

physical embodiment (Herring and Martinson, 2004). In the Blackosphere, the discussion

often takes on the roll of a support system and communication medium for black people.

Because blacks are communicating largely amongst themselves, "we can do so without

filtering our language and thoughts to appease white sensibilities and without worrying

that information we want to share and the fundamental truths that we wish to impart are

more than whites can bear" (Holland, 2007b). The discussions that take place may seem

controversial to non-blacks. However, because the assumed audience is black,

discussants are not concerned about censoring themselves because of a concern that some

white people may be offended by the views that many Black people hold in common.

The black blogging community can now be considered thriving, lively and

impactful within its own spheres of influence (Easter, 2007). For instance, the Black

Weblog Awards (http://www.blackblogawards.com) and the Black Web Awards

(http://www.blackwebawards.com) were created to acknowledge the importance of these

active, engaged communities. In July 2008, the first *Blogging While Brown: The International Conference for Bloggers of Color* (http://bloggingwhilebrown.blogspot.com) brought together the bloggers and blog readers that enable the Black community to aggressively examine, challenge and mobilize against pressing social issues.

With the narrowing of the so-called "digital divide", rise of social media and easy-to-use blogging tools, African Americans and other historically underserved groups now have a chance to raise their collective voice to address pertinent topics that mainstream media fails to or marginally covers (Jones, 2007). For instance, on May 11, 2007, National Public Radio reported on how and why African Americans are using blogs to shape national debate on various social issues, such as the 2008 presidential debate and blacks receiving harsher jail sentences in the court system, an issue highlighted in the Jena 6 and Genarlow Wilson cases (National Public Radio, 2007).

The Blackosphere is attractive to African Americans for both cultural and technological reasons. African Americans employ beliefs and concepts originating from their ethnic identity to find and create Web content. Researchers have found, for instance, that black Internet users feel more comfortable visiting websites that focused on black culture (Hoffman, Novak and Schlosser 2000; Kretchmer and Carveth 2002; Ross 2001). African Americans are also less trusting of mainstream media, and this creates a desire for an alternative forum (Squires, 2000). Sometimes, blacks online use blogging communities to interrogate media representations of their ethnic group (Kvasny and Igwe, 2008). Nonetheless, a dearth of relevant content, as well as Web content that reproduces stereotypical depictions of African Americans found in print and broadcast

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media are factors that have historically limited African Americans use of the Web (Brock, 2006; Kvasny and Truex, 2000; Brock, Kvasny and Hales, 2010; Kvasny, Payton, and Hales, 2010). With the growing availability of low-cost and easy to use Web 2.0 authoring tools, African Americans are now able to author Web content that persuades readers that the site is authentic and trustworthy. The Blackosphere emerged as the result of the collective efforts of individuals creating public spaces to circulate information, create and rearticulate oppositional frameworks for expressing black identity without censorship from non-blacks. Black blogs also provide opportunities for community interaction and political involvement. In a study of blog genres, Herring and colleagues (2005) found that the blogs in their sample were overwhelmingly of the personal journal type (70.4%), like the Blackosphere blogs where authors report on their inner thoughts and feelings.

The Blackosphere does, however, differ technologically and politically from older black media websites. While black media websites have larger audiences and budgets, they were slow in integrating Web 2.0 interactive features, such as RSS feeds, and the ability to recommend, comment on, and share content. Viewers remain passively engaged with the content.

In contrast to older black media websites, the Blackosphere was created by the active engagement of the audience. For instance, Witt (2007), a reporter at the *Chicago Tribune*, reports that the Blackosphere has developed into a formidable grassroots organization that "within a matter of a few weeks collected 220,000 petition signatures—and more than $130,000 in donations for legal fees—in support of six black Jena teenagers who are being prosecuted on felony battery

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charges for beating a White student…" This viral Civil Rights Movement was literally conjured out of the ether of cyberspace, of a type that has never happened before in America—a collective national mass action grown from a grassroots word-of-mouth movement spread via social media, including Internet blogs, as well as e-mails, message boards and talk radio.

The Afrospear Jena 6 Coalition blog crafted a press release that proclaimed Thursday, August 30th, 2007 as a "Day of Blogging for Justice". Thirty coalition members wrote blog entries on behalf of the six young men in Jena who were perceived as victims of racially motivated civil rights abuses. The coalition also asked mainstream media to "step forward and discharge their duty to provide coverage of this vitally important event to their viewers and readers and act as 'the fourth institution' of governmental checks and balances that constitutional framers intended the press to be" (Boswell, 2007). A blog dedicated to Jena 6 coverage was created (http://thejena6blog.blogspot.com), and remains active five years after the initial events took place. In a show of solidarity, many black bloggers included "Free the Jena 6" images (Figures 1) on their websites. The Color of Change (http://www.colorofchange.org), an Internet-based organization devoted to strengthening African America's political voice, spearheaded online petitions and fundraising for the Jena 6 legal defense. Leveraging these online political actions, Rev. Jesse Jackson, Rev. Al Sharpton, Martin Luther King III, popular black radio talk show hosts, such as Michael Baisden, and black citizens converged in Jena on September 20, 2007 to protest

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what they regard as unequal treatment of African Americans, particularly of youth
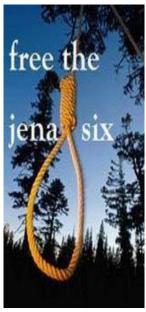
in the community.

Figure 1: Jena 6 images

With this backdrop, we sought to analyze the Jena 6 discourse in the

Blackosphere as a means of creating and evaluating social action. Our focus predates the

more recent social movements in Northern Africa, yet, provides a case of how social,

political, cultural and economic themes were articulated within the black community via

social media.

Research Methodology

The Jena 6 Case

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As Robinson (2007) reports, the Jena 6 case began when black students at the local high school in Jena, Louisiana sat under a tree that was informally known to be a place where white students congregated. White students took offense and responded by hanging three nooses in the tree. In the US, the noose is often associated with lynching - the killing, especially by hanging, of an individual by a mob for an alleged offense without the benefit of a trial. Lynching was used frequently in the South from 1890 to the 1920s by white supremacist mobs to terrorize blacks attempting to exercise their rights to vote, to be members of political organizations and to attend school. Today, the noose continues to be used as a symbol to intimidate black people.

In following months, racial tensions simmered. On December 4, 2006, black students heard a white student bragging about a racial assault his friend had made. Six black students responded by assaulting the white student. The white student was treated in the local emergency room for minor injuries, and attended a party later that same evening.

The White local officials responsible for handling the incident judged the nooses as a youthful prank, and punished the white students with a brief school suspension. The six black students, however, were expelled from school, arrested and charged as adults with felony offenses, including attempted murder and aggravated assault. Later, the charges were reduced to battery for all but one the offenders, Mychal Bell. The six black teens received overwhelming support from African-American activists around the country, many of whom believed the charges against them were excessive. Black talk radio hosts, bloggers, and civil rights leaders organized a protest that drew tens of thousands from across the nation. On September 22, 2007, more than twenty thousand

people traveled to Jena to attend peaceful rallies to protest this disparity in the justice system and show their support for the six black defendants known as the Jena 6.

According to Younge (2007), "These incidents have turned Jena into a national symbol of racial injustice. As such, it is both a potent emblem…because it shines a spotlight on how race and class conspire to deny black people equality before the law…and a convenient whipping boy because it allows the rest of the nation to dismiss the incidents as the work of Southern redneck backwoodsmen without addressing the systemic national failures it showcases". While the events in Jena happened in 2006, they were not reported nationally until 2007. As Robinson (2007, p. A19) notes, "We still might not know about what was happening in Jena if the case hadn't been noticed by bloggers, who sounded the alarm. And I'm quite sure there would have been no busloads of protesters descending on Jena if the cause hadn't been taken up by a radio personality best known for R-rated banter about sex and relationships." The rally was also heavily promoted via social media, namely websites targeting black online users and blogs.

Research Approach

Kahn and Kellner (2004) view blogging and the Internet subculture that has erupted around this practice as particularly deserving of analysis because bloggers have demonstrated themselves as "technoactivists favoring not only democratic self-expression and networking, but also global media critique and journalistic sociopolitical intervention" (p. 91). Blogs are relatively easy to create and maintain, allow hypertext linking between webpages, support multi-user discussions and mass syndication.

Individual opinions by the blogger as well as debate, dialogue and commentary by the readers are central to the blogging experience.

The research seeks to chronicle the ways in which black audiences responded to the Jena 6 news story and how black blogs expanded participation in the discussion of events related to black interests. Emphasis is on how the blogs may serve as discursive spaces that empower African Americans to discuss and report current events in their communities. We view the Blackosphere as cultural spaces where ethnic identity is performed discursively to promote social activism. The discussions in the Blackosphere often challenge dominant cultural meanings about race relations and racial injustice.

The primary data sources used in this analysis are weblog posts and comments of incidents related to the Jena 6 case. We selected the Jena 6 because it represents the first national civil rights rally to be organized principally through social media tools. We selected the top five blogs (Table 1) listed in the Electronic Villager's Black Blog Rankings (BBR). For us, the BBR represents a unique and meaningful blog ranking to measure audience. The BBR is open to any blogger of African descent, and in August 2008, 1,329 black blogs were tracked (BBR, 2008). This represents growth from 75 black blogs in September 2007, to 850 in March 2008, to 1,269 in July 2008. We use the August 2008 BBR statistics because this is the timeframe used to extract the postings and comments from the blogs in our study. The BBR, however, ceased publication on October 15, 2009.

The BBR was derived from Technorati, the authority that tracks over 112.8 million blogs and 250 million pieces of tagged social media. Technorati Authority is the number of blogs linking to a website in the last six months. The higher the number, the

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more Technorati Authority the blog has. Technorati Rank is calculated based on how far a user/reader is from the top. Thus, the smaller the Technorati Rank, the closer the blog is to the top. As a means of comparison and benchmarking the figures in Table 1, the number one ranked blog was the Huffington Post (Technorati Rank: 1; Authority: 26,085) in August 2008. In Technorati's *State of the Blogosphere* (2008) report, 133 million blogs were indexed with 1.5 million posting content within the week that Technorati took its snapshot.

Table 1: Black Blog Rankings

BBR Rank	BLOG NAME	TECHNORATI RANK	TECHNORATI AUTHORITY
1	Pam's House Blend [politics]	1,142	2,160
2	Nah Right [entertainment]	974	2,713
3	Bossip, com: Gossip for the Hardcore [entertainment]	916	2,866
4	Concrete Loop [entertainment]	916	2,999
5	Oliver Willis [politics]	713	4,280

In selecting these blogs, we explicitly acknowledge that no single blog serves all African Americans – as the community is not monolithic along socio-economic, education, and/or political affiliation dimensions. Moreover, within this community, there exists cleavage along diverse lines of class, gender, sexuality, and generation. The three entertainment-oriented blogs tend to have teen and young adult audiences. Nah Right speaks from a largely young adult male perspective, while Bossip speaks from a young adult female perspective. Concrete Loop is more gender balanced in its content. The three entertainment blogs appear to have primarily African American readership based on the self-referential identity labels (e.g. I am a black woman) used by blog commenters. Pam's Blend and Oliver Willis are politically oriented blogs with more racially diverse readership. Oliver Willis hosts a diary at the liberal political blog DailyKos, while Pam's

House Blend presents news stories involving LGBT concerns. The blog author, Pam Spaulding, served as a credentialed blogger at the 2008 Democratic National Convention and hosts a diary at the community site of progressive political blog Firedoglake. The mix of entertainment and political bloggers writing about the Jena 6 case provides some evidence of how widely the Jena 6 case was discussed across African American communities.

Data Collection

Data collection started by combing through the blog archives to locate all blog posts and associated discussions that were related to the Jena 6 case. We selected all posts that included this term in the title of the blog post or if the content of the post was primarily about the Jena 6 case. The results of this search are included in the 38 blog posts listed in Table 2. While the entertainment blogs focus solely on the rally and BET Hip Hop Awards, the political blogs chronicle the early events leading to the rally.

Table 2 –Jena 6 Topic Posts from Black Blogs

Blog	Topic of post	Number of comments
Bossip (7 posts, 1347 comments)	Jena 6 honored at the BET Hip Hop Awards	58
	Jesse Jackson criticizes Barack Obama for not attending the Jena 6 rally	321
	Jena 6 video of alleged misuse of donations to the Jena 6 Defense Fund	498
	Jena 6 on the red carpet at the BET Hip Hop Awards	173
	White college students in Black face to reenact the Jena 6	112
	Artists performing at the Jena 6 Empowerment Concert	29
	Jesse Jackson criticizes Barack Obama's response to the Jena 6 case	156
Concrete Loop (14 posts, 1710 comments)	Jena 6 attorney wants judge and district attorney off the case	24
	Alleged misuse of legal defense donations	102
	Jena 6 defendant to appear on Dr. Phil	200
	Police arrest White man antagonizing Jena 6 protestors	280

	Court overturns conviction in Jena case	110
	Information on the Jena 6 rally	48
	Jena 6 case background, petitions and rally	196
	Jena 6 case background and petitions	265
	Judge removed from the Jena 6 cases	21
	Jena 6 attorney wants judge and district attorney off the case	24
	Jena 6 video of alleged misuse of donations to the Jena 6 Defense Fund	73
	Jena 6 defendant ordered back to jail	102
	Jena 6 honored at the BET Hip Hop Awards	212
	White man arrested for antagonizing Jena 6 protestors pleads guilty	53
Nah Right (2 posts, 594 comments)	Rapper Bun B heads to the Jena 6 rally	230
	Rapper, actor and activist Mos Def at the Jena 6 rally	364
Oliver Willis (8 posts, 97 comments)	Jena 6 case background	2
	The symbolic meaning of the noose	21
	White supremacists threaten lynching in response to the Jena 6 protest	1
	White supremacists publish the addresses of Jena 6 families with instructions to kill	5
	White college students in Black face to reenact the Jena 6	7
	Jesse Jackson criticizes Barack Obama's response to the Jena 6 case	8
	Civil rights groups organize the Jena 6 rally	63
	Justice Department reports a spate of noose sightings in the aftermath of the Jena 6 events	13
Pam's Blend (7 posts, 130 comments)	Progressive blogosphere silent on the Jena 6 case	95
	Jesse Jackson criticizes Barack Obama's response to the Jena 6 case	3
	Jena 6 background and the rally	3
	White supremacists publish the addresses of Jena 6 families with instructions to kill	11
	Jena mayor irate that his town has become a center of hatred and racism	2
	White supremacists publish the addresses of Jena 6 families with instructions to kill	15
	Black bloggers organize the Jena 6 protests	1

Data Analysis

The analysis focused on themes that emerged in three areas: initial posts that described the case, posts that covered the Jena 6 rally, and posts that critiqued the behavior of the Jena 6 defendants after they were released on bail. Central to the threads are concepts of economic and social development, criminal justice system, racism, classism, mobilization of grassroots organizing, and generational shifts of political power within the black community. While symbolism and differences among perceptions of racism and White privilege abound, we observe how the Blackosphere enabled a social movement that was consequently further empowered by black radio. This empowerment resulted in the development of a national African American community infrastructure to support the Jena 6 rally and creation of global awareness of the case.

We developed an interpretive approach for coding the 38 blog posts and over 2800 comments in response to the blog postings. To organize the data, we considered the posts chronologically – those that provide background information about the Jena 6 case, those that focus on the rally, and those that chronicle events that took place after the rally. Our approach was to start with the posts themselves and organize them chronologically. In this way, we could see the story unfold through a series of events. Once we had the timeline organized, we analyzed the threads of conversation found in the comments. This analysis was focused on high-level themes across the blogs rather than micro-level conversational codes. This process yielded the 10 overarching themes as shown in Table 3. Each theme is discussed in the following section.

Table 3 – Jena 6 Themes in the Blackosphere

Themes	Meaning
Recounting the Facts of the Case	Defining the actions of the actors involved
The Symbolism of the Noose	Connotation of Physical Structures
The Jena 6 Rally	Movement from Virtual, Viral Space to a Physical locality
Silence by Progressive Mainstream Bloggers	Minimal, if any, Social Media Coverage by the Majority
White Supremacists	Antagonists to the Jena 6
Critique of "Perceived" Black Leadership	Comparison to the Civil Rights Movement
White Expectations of About the Rally	Perceptions of Black Action Before the Rally
Post Rally Critique	Perceptions of Black Action After the Rally
Uptick on Noose Sightings	Diffusion of the Symbolism
Younger Generation & Social Activism	Generational Differences to Activism

Research Findings

Recounting the Facts of the Case

The Blackosphere political bloggers were largely responsible for the early reporting on the Jena 6 case. These initial discussions focused on disseminating the events related to the case as well as the historic significance of the noose as a symbol of racial hatred. The tone of the discourse is primarily one of disbelief that 40 years after the civil rights movement Blacks were still subjugated to racism and excessive sentencing by the US judicial system. It was like taking a walk back in time to the Jim Crow South. As Willis states in his post *Jena: Throwback Town,* "I swear, it's like something out of the 1950s south over there. What the hell." What's most striking about these background discussions is how the Jena 6 resonated with black Americans' history of racial provocation, extreme charges for moderate crimes, overzealous prosecutors and inept defense attorneys, and all-white juries. Sadly these elements are ordinary in black American life.

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All of the commenters expressed outrage for this seemingly overt racism in both the actions that led up to the hanging of nooses and the response by school officials and the judicial officials presiding over the case. Commenters are equally outraged at this racially motivated injustice. "So blacks sit under a tree that is, 'for white only.' The next day there are nooses in the tree. Blacks get angry. White D.A. tells the black kids he can end their lives with a stroke of his pen. Yet people on the right as [sic] saying racism is a thing of the past. That D.A. should be in jail, as should the kids that hanged the nooses." What's noticeably absent in much of this discourse is the acknowledgement of the black students' retaliatory beating of the white student.

The Symbolism of the Noose

The symbolism of the noose was the most highly discussed topic on all of the blogs. For blacks, the noose is clearly a symbol of racial hatred and intimidation. Oliver Willis notes in his post: " I really hate writing a lot about racial issues, but sometimes you gotta. I'm constantly amazed at the complete ignorance exhibited by way too many white folks on these issues….What would it take, as far as a sheltered upbringing, to not automatically get that nooses would instantly bring to mind lynching?" For Willis, there is little consideration for interpretations of the noose that are not associated with the lynching of blacks.

Conversely, White respondents opined that there are alternative understandings of the noose, and one has to consider the context of use. A middle aged White male noted: "As a kid growing up in the 1960s…we all learned how to create a noose because of its association with Westerns…However, after high school, or even seeing Blazing Saddles in jr. high school, no way. But more importantly, the context as I understood it

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was that the nooses appeared on the tree immediately AFTER the black kids sat under the tree. And given that, how could anyone NOT think it was about lynching?" Other symbols that emerged from White participants in the discussion include cowboys, Alice Cooper, "Clint freaking Eastwood", Western films such as Fury, European gallows, the Norse God Odin, public hangings of rustlers and outlaws in the Old West, and Billie Holiday's rendition of the song, "Strange Fruit", which solemnly depicts the lynching of Southern blacks. Thus, while Blacks discussed the noose primarily as a symbol of lynching. White commenters discussed a number of alternative interpretations.

The Jena 6 Rally

The Blackosphere continually updated their websites with links to mainstream media reports like the CNN website with news and video devoted to the Jena 6 case (http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2007/news/jena6/). These posts closely followed the rally, providing the audience with updates on the celebrities and politicians participating in the rally. Three themes emerged from these discussions including the silence of mainstream bloggers, critique of antagonistic actions of White Supremacists, and the troublesome comparison of the Jena 6 to the historical march on Selma, Alabama during the Civil Rights Movement. Each of these themes are discussed in turn.

Silence by Progressive Mainstream Bloggers

Pam's Blend composes a post that critiques the silence of progressive White blogs on the Jena 6 rally. After describing the topics were posted on the popular progressive political blogs, such as Firedoglake, DailyKos, MyDD, TalkLeft, and TalkingPointsMemo, Pam notes "When the Jena 6 does make an appearance on progressive blogs today, it's little more than a passing nod. Huffington Post has a blog

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post buried below the fold; ThinkProgress gives it a two-sentence news brief. However, many of these blogs are eagerly pointing to news stories which suggest the Republican candidates don't care about black issues." Pam provides two explanations for why White bloggers are uncomfortable discussing race - "not my area of expertise" and "it's not my issue". The point of this post wasn't to suggest that "big boy" bloggers are racists because they failed to report on the issue. In addition, it "wasn't about 'making' any of the mainstream A-list progressive bloggers cover this event, it was observing that a major event didn't receive major blog coverage and musing why that is".

Self-identified White commenters suggested that "white privilege" explained the lack of commentary in White progressive blogs. "White privilege is the water we're swimming in as white people. Fish don't know they're wet." Another commenter went on to note: "I think that a lot of progressive white people have gotten accustomed to being the most oppressed person in the (white) room that they are in…That is, the very real repression of dissent in this country…has had an effect on the thinking of progressives, and not in my opinion a broadening effect." One White woman, however, offered a dissenting viewpoint. "I wont allow people … to tell me 'it's not your issue' because I'm white -- and therefore not entitled to share my experiences with racism."

Some people of color used alternative explanations including "white guilt" for advantages received from systemic racism, and "white fear of young black men" makes it easier to see these young men punished. White guilt was a particularly salient theme found in numerous comments. "So, why would a white blogger write about these young black men? Doing so illuminates their privilege and many white bloggers would rather write about their misery..." Another commenter wrote "i read the comments in the diary

at kos. the amount of denial and defensiveness is amazing. thanks for pointing it out, pam. i think the denial stems from a combination of ignorance and guilt.". In this discussion, ignorance wasn't seen as maleficent. Rather, the progressive White standpoints were generally seen as naïve and uninformed. According to one Black commenter: "While I think that all progressives are upset by what's gone on in Jena, I think that a good number of them: 1) Think this is an isolated occurrence, confined to a few people in a small town or two down in the deep south. 2) Don't fully appreciate the reality of what happened...In a sense, I guess I'm making the sickening argument that because I'm oppressed I 'get it.'" Even though African Americans "get it" some found it easier and safer to remain silent. "Pam, I'm sorry I don't participate more in these threads about race. I know you want us to and I appreciate that you make it safe, but like most white folks, it's hard and I often take the easy way of saying nothing."

Black commenters posited why progressive Whites don't 'get it'. "I assume that too many of them a noose hanging in a tree is just some rope, or a boy-scout knot tying exercise, rather than a horror-movie threat of violence or death. They don't "get" the broader situation and context, they miss the implications buried in the term used of '**sitting under the white tree**.' They have no personal experience of being denied access to public resources or spaces for no good reason and with **socially-approved violence** always a possibility or the direct threat. The system works for them, and ironically even when their own personal anger issue is police misconduct, they can often assume those cops are equally vile to all citizens." To the Black commenters, Whites unwittingly benefit from the institutionalized systems that perpetuate racial hierarchies in the US, and

fail to fully comprehend the effects of oppression because they don't experience it on a daily basis.

White Supremacists Antagonize Jena 6 Protestors

One disturbing event discussed on four blogs was the White Supremacists publishing the home addresses of the Jena six families with instructions to kill. The FBI was monitoring white supremacists organization in Virginia that published the addresses and phone numbers on the website "Lynch the Jena 6". The website is quoted as saying "If these n------s are released or acquitted, we will find out where they live and make sure that white activists and white citizens in Louisiana know it ... in order to find someone willing to deliver justice." White commenters distanced themselves from the hate speech by stating their disapproval of these actions and noting that these actions and opinions are not widely held amongst Whites. Blacks acknowledged that existence of racism. "Whether most would like to think that racism in this country is 'beneath the surface' or nonexistent, it is surely alive and well, and having it exposed even further in Jena is a good thing." Others used sarcasm to downplay the hurt that these statements inflict. "This is another reason why I don't understand the billions being poured into securing our borders when we clearly have one of the most deranged and dangerous groups living and working among us. Oh, but they're WHITE, so they can't be THAT bad."

Critique of Perceived Black Leadership

Just days before the rally began, the blogs reported a news story in which Jesse Jackson criticized Barack Obama for not attending the Jena 6 Rally. Jackson was quoted as saying, "If I were a [U.S. presidential] candidate, I'd be all over Jena…Jena is a defining moment, just like Selma was a defining moment." By not engaging in the Jena 6

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rally, Obama was "acting like he's white". Jackson later denied making the last comment. A White commenter fails to understand how the Jena 6 rally can be viewed in the tradition of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. "It kills me that people are actually comparing this to Selma. 6 kids beat the shit out of one kid and yet somehow there's an injustice going on because the perps were black and the victim was white. What kind of crazy freaking world do we live in?" Some blacks agreed. "I gotta agree with [screenname] on this one. I doubt King world be proud to defend the Jena 6, who did exactly what King refused to do when confronted with ugly racism-reacted with violence, and on somebody possibly innocent of wrongdoing. How are the actions of the Jena 6 a victory for civil rights and a blow against racism? I'll bet you double or nothing that this just confirmed, in the minds of some people, that blacks are dangerous and violent and would kill all the whiteys if given the chance."

Most blacks disagreed. They clearly empathized with the rage that led the black youths to retaliate violently and supported this behavior. "If that 1 white kid was the person who put those nooses up, they could have killed him and I would not have felt any sympathy. Hell, they could have tied him up to that tree and shot him execution style and I would have donated to their defense fund." Others saw the protest as being justified by inequities in the judicial system. "Attempted murder for a school brawl when there was no punishment for threatening the black students with a shotgun, or beating up the black student who showed up at an all-white party. THAT is what is being protested."

White Expectations about the Rally

This theme is primarily concerned with assumptions that Whites made about the behavior of Black protestors rallying in Jena and fears about potential violence that might

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befall the protestors. The blogs cited mainstream media reports about White residents who expected mayhem at the rally. For instance, White storeowners closed their doors in fear of violence by protesters. "I mean, I REALLY get pissed off by craptacular quotes like "I'm going to lock up and stay away'. What the hell? One of the largest gathering of people in this nation's history was the Million Man March and it was one of the most peaceful gatherings in the nation's history. Here it is, 2007, and white folks expect the worse from people who can afford to come to their town and protest a travesty of justice. Mrs. Shopowner, why don't you lock up your store and, oh, I don't know, JOIN THE DEMONSTRATION? Offer coffee (dash of hazelnut syrup, s'il vous plais?) to some of them? ::Tries to calm down breathing::"

One disturbing report by the Southern Poverty Law Center (2007) warned of expected White Supremacist activity at the Jena Rally. On the white supremacist message board Stormfront.org, people were reminded of their legal right to defend themselves with firearms if attacked. David Duke (2007), former Grand Wizard of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, described the peaceful rally as follows: "today, September 20, the town has been invaded by thousands of thugs like Al Sharpton who seek to make violent black hate criminals such as Michael Bell and the rest of the so-called "Jena Six" into heroes. Even worse the entire White population of the town is facing a media lynching by being labeled racists who are unjustly persecuting black young men."

Post Rally Critique

After the rally, the entertainment blogs tended to report on the questionable actions of the Jena 6 defendants. There were several posts, primarily on Bossip and Concrete Loop, that critiqued two defendants' appearance at the Black Entertainment

Television (BET) Awards. This was the most discussed topic related to the Jena 6 and the discussion was overwhelmingly critical. This raised the ire of the Black community because these youths were paraded out as celebrities with expensive clothes and flashy behavior. People found this behavior in poor taste and questioned whether their donations to the legal fund were being misused to finance clothing and jewelry. "Bryant Purvis and Carwin Jones of the Jena 6 were stuntin it up on the red carpet this weekend at the BET Hip Hop Awards. Look at them rollin up to the hip hop awards and kickin it at after parties like the Jena 6 is a rap group or something." Nearly all the commenters agreed that these actions were abhorrent and made supporters feel like they were hoodwinked. "Jena 6 repulses me. Dumb ass people were marching to 'Free Jena 6' when they committed a serious crime. It should have been 'Justice for Jena 6', and that would entail punishment for the crime they committed. These kids have been involved with numerous criminal activities, and need to be held responsible, not made into heros [sic]. And this doesn't excuse the noose at the tree, they should be dealt with as well, but WE need to stop making excuses for black kids acting like violent idiots, and try raising them to know what is right and acceptable and what is just plain wrong. But I have a feeling they will be back in the criminal justice system again REAL soon."

Uptick of Noose Sightings

After the rally, the political bloggers picked up on mainstream media reports on a spate of noose sightings throughout the US. Oliver Willis reports, "Nooses have been looped over a tree at the University of Maryland, knotted to the end of stage-rigged ropes at a suburban Memphis theater, slung on the doorknob of a black professor's office at Columbia University in New York, hung in a locker room at a Long Island police station,

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stuffed in the duffle bag of a black Coast Guard cadet aboard a historic ship, and draped around the necks of black dolls in the Pittsburgh suburbs." The black commenters discussed the fear that noose provokes and the disregard expressed by Whites. "What makes me even more scared are the white people I've caught laughing about this like its's not big deal."

Younger Generation and Social Activism

While Black leaders from the Civil Rights era such as the Reverends Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton played a central role in the Jena 6 rally, the entertainment blog communities tended to look for leadership in younger African Americans. "find a hole and jump in, jesse and al! our generation is not feeling your bull! i hope Barack continues stays on the right track tho…" These young adults made a clear distinction between older political leaders (Reverends Jackson and Sharpton) and new political leaders (Obama). Other young adults are more respectful in their call for a new generation of black leadership. "I have one thing to share from the rally I was at. We talk about the 'old heads' [Martin Luther King Jr], Malcolm X, Jesse Jackson, etc but we forget that the older group is not the ones who are going to fight this battle for us, it's got to be the younger group doing the leg work and rallying…Who's the leaders of our generation and it's a different racist battle. It's not the same one fought during the 60's Civil Rights Movement, this is a different beast. And to fight this beast we have to attack it differently." Here the commenter both recognizes the work of older activists while calling upon his peers to assume leadership roles.

Discussion

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By chronicling the ways in which black bloggers generated discourse that brought the Jena 6 case to national attention, we argue that black blogs provide useful spaces for discussing perceived racial injustice from a diverse African American cultural perspective. Moreover, black bloggers are able to raise awareness of racial injustice within both the black community and the broader US society and mobilize collective action. If traditional civil rights leadership is to continue to manifest its influence, it has to adapt to technological innovations embraced by those born after the 1960s movement. This means a "new" movement that is flanked by radio voices and bloggers who have shown an ability to mobilize mass protests in context of social, educational and economic justice. At the same time that blacks were using blogs to mobilize Jena 6 rally, we witnessed the Obama presidential campaign using social media for grassroots mobilization in black communities. These events suggest that young black Americans can effectively harness the power of social media to advance causes of political and social significance

We also contend that social networking websites and other media provided the mechanism for the Jena 6 movement. Yet, the people were the drivers of the political and economic change advocated by the Jena 6 and its protesters. This notion was congruent with those espoused by Egyptian journalist, Mona Eltahawy, who shared her views at a panel sponsored by the Center for International Media Assistance and the National Endowment for Democracy. She and others noted that people drive demonstrations. Without humans generating content and communicating in ways that express values and integrity of purpose, these technologies cannot be used to realize social change. The panel experts noted that in the case of Egypt, Tweets and Facebook coupled with a

television medium (Villareal, 2011) played a critical role in social and political movement. This coupling of communication modalities was, likewise, significant to the Jena 6 case whereby black radio ultimately covered the story once the Blackosphere initiated the online discussion.

The success of blogging should not be judged solely on whether or not it generates obvious political effects. Rather, blogging should be seen as expanding the notion of what the Internet is and how it can be used in everyday life to increase freedom, community, and empowerment (Kahn and Kellner, 2004), and to overcome digital inequities (Payton, 2008). Indeed, the Jena 6 case clearly demonstrates how underserved communities can organize and mobilize a peaceful political protest that results in effective change. The case also demonstrates notions of community and empowerment. Though diversity of views exists, members of the Blackosphere communicated from an ethnic standpoint. They directed and controlled a discourse that was shaped by age, gender and race. However, the discourse that takes place in this online ethnic community is not entirely free of punitive consequences from outsiders. Black bloggers noted the absence of black concerns in the mainstream media and white supremacists sought to intimidate and threaten Jena 6 advocacy. Blacks also wrote from the standpoint of experts while the white commenters were the minority with their comments corrected, overturned or promoted by blacks. The political value of this discourse is the result of black ownership and control of the discourse, not an essential property of the technology.

Finally, this study suggests a need for additional research on the Internet and African Americans that re-envisions the traditional digital divide framing as an issue primarily of access. For instance, Kim et al. (2007) report that African Americans

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"lagged behind" other ethnic groups in Internet connectedness, a multidimensional measure that includes qualitative characteristics like social and technological environment, context and history of Internet use, scope and intensity of the goals that drive people's Internet use, and centrality and importance of Internet use in daily life. However, more recent studies have found that African Americans are more likely than the general population to access the Web by cellular phones. Yet, new divides may be emerging because of limitations on what you can do on a mobile device (Washington, 2011). This increase in mobile Internet access and the accompanying differences in Internet experience heightens the need for studies that examine culturally salient behavioral aspects of use and interpersonal relationships characterized by social support, communication, and resource sharing (Kvasny and Igwe, 2008). As Kahn and Kellner (2004) argue, blogging should be seen as expanding the notion of what the Internet is and how it can be used in everyday life to increase freedom, community and empowerment for disadvantaged communities. Furthermore, we offer that one critical topic relative to the emerging divides is that focused data/information access which moves the discourse beyond technology access and into economic development, citizen democracy and social justice.

The growing use of social media by citizens demonstrates the need for studies of the Internet and African Americans that enlarge focus beyond the digital divide to include culturally salient behavioral aspects of use and interpersonal relationships characterized by social support, communication, and resource sharing (Kvasny and Payton, 2007; Hill, Beynon-Davies and Williams, 2008). Narrow definitions of access and use (Payton and Kiwanuka-Tondo, 2009) that have historically typified research on African American

Internet users fail to capture the phenomena in action and the social engagement in this

ethnic community.

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