

ARTICLE

Social media, socialization, and pursuing legitimization of police violence*

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Abstract

Every day, police departments across America are executing stops, summonses, arrests, and increasingly, tweeting. Although scholarship has focused on how social media democratizes news production and information sharing for activist movements, it has yet to explore how police leverage these attributes to advance institutional interests. I argue that, beyond digital surveillance or community engagement, social media provides police with the technological capacity to pursue both daily socialization of online audiences to their worldview and legitimization in the aftermath of contested police violence. I provide evidence by adopting a qualitative approach to “big data” sources analyzing 1) all 3,167 tweets posted by the New York Police Department in 2018; 2) the 778 Twitter replies to their most contested fatal shooting that year; and 3) a sample of 139 news articles covering this shooting over a year afterward. As public scrutiny toward police intensifies, social media represents an independent channel for police to publicize information unfiltered by traditional mass media. These findings have implications for police accountability and the episodes of police violence that do—and do not—elevate into national controversies.

KEYWORDS

legitimation, police violence, social media, socialization, Twitter

Although many attribute the recent nationalized episodes of police violence to issues ranging from police militarization (Moule et al., 2019) to racial bias (Fridell & Lim, 2016), police departments themselves focus on the anti-police protests and one-sided media coverage that unfolded in their wake. For example, in 2015, then-NYPD Chief of Department and now former-NYPD Commissioner James O'Neill described the street protests following the nonindictment of Officer Daniel Pantaleo in the death of Eric Garner as follows:

The protest, it was not a good time to be a cop. The vitriol that was hurled at us. Every day, I had 3,000 cops assigned to the protest. We had 10,000 people in the street, we had 30,000 people in the street. And the protest wasn't against nuclear power, it wasn't against education. It was against us. And I've had so many arguments against people, against politicians, saying: "No they weren't, they weren't directed at you." I said, "No, you're wrong. I was there every day. And I saw, they were directed at us." (O'Neill, 2015, YouTube video)

For officers like O'Neill, the most salient aspects of the nationalized episodes of police violence are the anti-police sentiments afterward. Survey evidence suggests that officers believe that these anti-police sentiments are emboldened by street protests and negative media coverage (Nix et al., 2018). In fact, a 2016 Pew survey of almost 8,000 officers found that 81 percent agree that "in general, the media treat[s] the police unfairly" (Gramlich & Parker, 2017). Among these officers, two thirds feel "frustrated" on the job and one third feels "angry." Together, public protests and media coverage have generated genuine perceptions among police of a "war on cops."

As police departments seek contemporary tools to manage controversial police violence, scholarship has primarily focused on the digital strategies of social activists to publicize it. The rise of citizen journalism and social media platforms have significantly advanced the ability of social movements to capture, circulate, and call into question the legitimacy of various police practices (Brown, 2016; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015; Nummi et al., 2019). For example, studies on movements like Black Lives Matter have begun unpacking how social media democratizes information sharing and news production to spread awareness and expose problematic policing (Ray et al., 2017). Scholarship, however, has yet to investigate how police apply these very attributes of social media to advance institutional interests. Although existing theories account for how police leverage mass media relationships to strategically convey public information (Chermak & Weiss, 2005; Gamson & Wolsfeld, 1993), we know comparatively little about how police pursue legitimation in an increasingly digital environment. As the "blue line" is increasingly on "thin ice" and the meaning of police support is increasingly politicized (Brown, 2016), research must unpack police strategies for managing public legitimacy in the contemporary era.

Operating in an environment of intensifying public scrutiny (Weitzer, 2015), police departments every day are not only executing stops, arrests, and summons but also, increasingly tweeting. Scholars and policymakers analyzing police use of social media like Twitter have conceptualized it in two ways: 1) social media as *digital surveillance*—a new tool to pursue classic enforcement in an online environment (Brayne, 2017; Patton et al., 2013) or 2) social media as *community engagement*—a platform to enhance public communications and improve community relations (see Crump, 2011; President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). Missing from these studies is how police visibly operate social media in the public sphere and for purposes beyond enforcement or engagement. This study examines how social media, as an increasingly core police activity, is used for the strategic presentation of police actions.

I argue that social media affords police departments with the technological capacity to manage their environment of heightened scrutiny by pursuing both 1) *socialization* in daily posts and 2) *legitimation* in the aftermath of police violence. First, daily posts are designed to socialize an online audience to the police's worldview by conveying how to understand noteworthy events from their perspective. Socialization is the process whereby people learn the norms and values of a group or institution, thus developing a particular relationship and orientation toward it (see Trinkner & Tyler, 2016). By highlighting specific success stories, sharing organizational news, and responding to mass media critiques, daily social media posts expose online constituents to police-specific news and interpretive frameworks.

Second, this online audience cultivated through daily socialization becomes particularly important in the aftermath of controversial incidents of police violence. Although police exercise force on a daily basis, only a subset rises to become problematic cases of police brutality (Lawrence, 2000). A key reason is that mass media traditionally privileges state narratives as the "official" account of what happened, which typically minimizes any officer wrongdoing (Chermak & Weiss, 2005; Manning, 1992). When street protests erupt and demands for reform grow in response to an episode of police violence, however, mass media is more likely to turn critical—no longer representing a reliable channel for police to broadcast strategic information. When controversial violence must be legitimized, social media now represents an independent platform for police departments to publicize curated content unfiltered by mass media. With the help of online constituents socialized by daily posts, departments can better diffuse information justifying the policies and practices surrounding how the incident unfolded.

Adopting a qualitative approach to "big data" sources, I provide evidence for this argument by combining data that cover the breadth and depth of the NYPD's social media strategies. In 2016, NYPD Commissioner William Bratton summarized the department's social media strategy as 1) disseminating "self-published stories on the Department's owned media," such as social media platforms, 2) thereby "bypass[ing] and then driv[ing] the traditional media" as a 3) "vehicle to get the earned media that comes when other people share the NYPD's stories with their personal networks" (NYPD, 2016, p. 70). This provides a blueprint for this article's data sources and analysis. First, to identify daily social media posts over an extended period of time, I conduct a content analysis of every tweet the NYPD posted in 2018 ($N = 3,167$). Second, to examine how social media is used to bypass traditional media, I examine the role of social media when stakes are highest and police must maximize their social media impact: in the aftermath of contested police violence. I analyze the seven NYPD tweets and 778 comments in reply to their most contested fatal shooting in 2018—that of Saheed Vassell—to identify how police use social media to pursue legitimation amidst negative mass media coverage and street protests. Third, I analyze a sample of 139 news articles covering the Vassell shooting from April 2018 through September 2019 to trace the reach of the NYPD's social media strategies beyond Twitter to traditional mass media and, by extension, their audiences. Together, these sources provide a composite of the strategies and implications of how America's largest police force is pursuing socialization and legitimation in the twenty-first century.

This study shifts attention to the digital strategies of police—beyond enforcement and engagement—in the age of social media. On the one hand, police use of social media for strategic self-presentation aligns with paradigmatic uses of social media across organizations for public relations, reputation management, and relationship building (see Treem & Leonardi, 2016). The police, however, are not the paradigmatic *user*. As armed representatives of the state empowered to communicate information directly to the public—especially in the aftermath of violence they have committed—successful socialization and legitimation reduces accountability by rendering

reform unnecessary. Examining how state actors like police use social media for socialization and legitimation is critical considering that institutions like the NYPD possess 36 times more Twitter followers than the New York City chapter of the Black Lives Matter Movement. Unlike Michael Brown, George Floyd, and many others etched into the national movement for police reform, stories like of Saheed Vassell remain unknown. As discussed in the Conclusion, analyzing police use of social media for socialization and legitimation offers key insights into police accountability and how it can be undermined in a digital age.

1 | POLICE IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Two conceptions dominate studies about police use of social media: 1) social media as *digital surveillance*, which highlights various objections to the covert law enforcement practice and 2) social media for *community engagement*, which emphasizes its promise for improving community relations. In contrast, I argue below that these two dominant approaches overlook another use that has critical implications for police accountability and public understandings of police violence: social media for *socialization* and *legitimation*.

Table 1 summarizes key differences among these three ways police use social media. First, digital surveillance cultivates a one-way flow of information from suspects to police for law enforcement purposes. A 2016 survey of 539 police departments found that 70 percent use social media for “intelligence gathering for investigations” (Kim et al., 2017). For example, one way law enforcement leverages social media is for evidence of associative ties between gang members for conspiracy prosecutions (Lane et al., 2018). Scholars have objected to these practices as deepening racial bias, exacerbating overcriminalization, interfering with First Amendment rights to freely associate, and violating Fourth Amendment rights against unreasonable searches and seizures (Joh, 2016; Patton et al., 2013; Stuart, 2020). Underlying these objections is the opaqueness of the officer decision-making that motivates particular investigatory choices: which profiles to focus on, which suspects enter the database, and what information is tracked (Brayne, 2017).

Second, scholarship and policymakers have also presented the promise of social media as community engagement (see Crump, 2011). Whereas social media for digital surveillance focuses on the police’s covert purposes, social media as community engagement emphasizes increased visibility and public exchange—even if only with a limited group of online users (Grimmelikhuisen & Meijer, 2015). For example, President Obama’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing recommended the following: “Law enforcement agencies should adopt model policies and best practices for technology-based community engagement that increases community trust and access” (President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015, p. 36). By engaging in two-way communication where both sides incorporate feedback to influence the other, community engagement aligns with procedural justice efforts in police departments aimed at improving community trust, police legitimacy, and ultimately, police–community relations (Tyler, 1990).

In contrast to social media as surveillance or engagement, I emphasize social media as *socialization* and *legitimation*. Socialization and legitimation leverage social media as a one-way influence channel from police to the public. This one-way channel is unconstrained by mass media, which typically filters information to the public—even from “official” sources—especially during times of public controversy (Lawrence, 2000; Mawby, 1999). Although specific online posts may be motivated by multiple uses, a key distinction is whether information and influence are flowing in both directions between the parties. When police transmit information to the public and neither replies nor incorporates feedback (see Cheng, 2020), then the nature of the interaction reflects more socialization and legitimation than genuine engagement—no matter police intentions.

TABLE 1 Types of police use of social media

Police Use of Social Media	Primary Purpose	Nature of Interaction			Implications For
		Direction of Influence	Party Providing Information	Party Receiving Information	
Digital Surveillance	Law Enforcement	One-Way	Suspects	Police	Privacy
Community Engagement	Improve Police–Community Relations	Two-Way	Police & Online Public	Police & Online Public	Trust
Socialization & Legitimation	Mediate Public Pressure for Reform	One-Way	Police	Online Public	Accountability

Furthermore, even though the purposes of these three social media uses may overlap, they are not equivalent and must be distinguished to unpack the full stakes of police use of social media. Unlike that of digital surveillance and community engagement, the primary purpose of socialization and legitimation is to mediate public pressure for reform. By enhancing the police's ability to control public information (Bullock, 2016), social media becomes key in managing calls for police oversight and reform in an environment of heightened scrutiny. For example, in the aftermath of controversial police violence, police can counter growing calls for reform by mobilizing public support for existing police practices. If police can successfully communicate the appropriateness of police actions and demonstrate that locals agree, then (1) at the officer level, individual accountability becomes moot because officers exercised proper tactics and (2) at the organizational level, external oversight and reforms become unwarranted because the public endorses existing department practices. Like any other organization, police departments are defined by an institutional imperative to legitimize themselves, avoid oversight, and maintain organizational independence. As the state's armed representatives, however, the means by which police pursue these ends matter. Successful socialization and legitimation can help police resist institutional changes in policy and practice. In the remainder of this section, I unpack how social media provides police with the technological capacity to do so.

1.1 | Daily posts and socialization

Socialization refers to the process by which people internalize the norms and values associated with a group, social institution, or society in general. For example, scholarship on legal socialization has examined “the process whereby people develop their relationship with the law” and “how variations in socialization lead to variations in adult orientations toward the law” (Trinkner & Tyler, 2016, p. 418). When people interact with the criminal justice system—whether through jury service, incarceration, or policing—they learn the legal system's values and, accordingly, how to orient themselves toward it (Justice & Meares, 2014; see Cheng & Liu, 2018).

Social media affords police the technological capacity to socialize. Specifically, it enables police to post curated content valuable in cultivating an online audience and conveying how to understand noteworthy events from their perspective. Although individual officers have varying personal perspectives, policing as a profession has a worldview that “consists of socially organized ways of seeing and understanding events that are answerable to the distinctive interests of a

particular social group” (Goodwin, 1994, p. 606). On social media platforms, police can communicate this worldview through posts that provide practical information (e.g., public safety announcements and crime updates) and initiate public engagement (e.g., daily achievements, officer promotions, and officer deaths). Even though “police socialization” has been used to describe the process through which police recruits learn to become police officers (Van Maanen, 1975), this article examines how police pursue socialization of the broader public—equipping it with the perceptual lens to understand and internalize how police think and what they value.

Even before social media, however, police have pursued socialization through strategic communications with mass media. Traditionally, mass media and police share a symbiotic relationship given mass media’s dependence on crime stories and police interest in shaping perceptions of crime (Chermak & Weiss, 2005; Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). Public information officers within police departments engage in reputation management by diffusing positive narratives, images, and memories of policing (Chermak & Weiss, 2005). For example, police funerals play an important symbolic role in police culture (Sierra-Arévalo, 2019; Terrill et al., 2003), which mass media enhances by televising and reinforcing the ritualism (Manning, 1977). By privileging official narratives, mass media helps socialize the public to appreciate police as “crime fighters” (Erickson, 1991).

As the violence of the police’s monopoly on force is increasingly publicized, however, the monopoly must be increasingly legitimized. The recent rise of citizen journalism, activist movements like Black Lives Matter, and organized filming practices like copwatching present police with modern challenges in legitimizing violence amidst intensifying public scrutiny (Ray et al., 2017; Stuart, 2011). These activist initiatives leverage social media to contest police violence by disseminating videos, sharing information, and mobilizing supporters (Brown, 2016; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015; Nummi et al., 2019).

In response, police must now devise strategies to manage public expression and information in the digital era (Bullock, 2016), especially when controversy erupts. Police may deploy increased enforcement after a citizen attacks an officer (Legewie, 2016), but after an officer commits controversial violence, information distribution is key to legitimation and re-establishing social order. As explained next, social media represents a powerful tool in this pursuit.

1.2 | Legitimizing contested police violence

Social media also represents a new tool to legitimize contested police violence. Recent surveys suggest that more than three quarters of police officers in large departments agree that the mass media “mistreats” police, which frustrates officers and increases fears of anti-police sentiments and false allegations (Gramlich & Parker, 2017; Nix & Pickett, 2017). As long as police perceive mass media coverage as unfair, they will increase reliance on social media regardless of whether the coverage is biased. With social media, police can now circumvent mass media intermediaries who act as gatekeepers for news production. Specifically, social media provides police the technological capacity to release unfiltered information directly to the public that is key to legitimizing contested police violence (Grygiel & Lysak, 2020). Rather than gatekeepers, mass media now becomes part of the police’s online audience—heightening reliance on police for new information, which is then broadcasted to their audiences.

Rather than a substitute, however, social media supplements traditional mass media strategies. For decades, police have cultivated relationships with news outlets and relied on them to diffuse strategic narratives to the general public (Chermak & Weiss, 2005; Manning, 1992). In most cases,

police uses of force do not rise to become controversial cases of police brutality. A major reason why is because police are the primary information holders whose voices are privileged as the “official” account of what happened (Lawrence, 2000). Even today, despite growing perceptions of media bias against police, departments still hold press conferences and use mass media to reach wider audiences than they could otherwise do independently.

But although *not* all police uses of force become controversial, those that *are* contested have a pronounced effect on public opinions of police (Weitzer, 2002). For example, despite typically symbiotic relationships with police, mass media can also create trouble by amplifying public outrage and contesting the legitimacy of police violence (Erickson, 1991; Hirschfield & Simon, 2010). In the case of Rodney King, for example, mass media seized on the story’s dramatic cues (e.g., the graphic videotape’s narrative power and the history of police violence against minorities) and elite conflict (e.g., the Los Angeles Police Department’s disagreement with public officials on the severity of the issue) to elevate King into a “news icon” (Lawrence, 2000).

Despite the legal “victory,” the case of Rodney King reveals why police need additional tools for legitimation in the public sphere. Inside the courtroom, lawyers defending Los Angeles Police Department officers trained the jury on how to evaluate King’s videotaped beating: approach the event as a sequence of ten separate events; microanalyze King’s movements to determine his aggressiveness; and conclude any use of force as professionally justified as long as King “started to” signal non-cooperation (Goodwin, 1994). Outside the courtroom and in the public sphere, however, King’s controversial beating provoked the Los Angeles riots, which shifted voters toward liberal policies (Enos et al., 2019) and have stimulated mobilization efforts to this day, like cop-watching (Stuart, 2011). In other words, legal victory did not settle the enduring public outrage over the violence’s legitimacy. Instead, police departments need additional tools to socialize the public, like they trained jurors, and legitimize controversial violence in the public arena.

Social media equips police departments to diffuse strategic visual and verbal content directly to the public. In general, images provide important visual anchors to events, stories, and memories (Ferrell, 1999; Wagner-Pacifici, 1996). Viewers even assign different truth values to images. For example, the blurriness and low production value of surveillance footage is often associated with authenticity (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2011; Lynch, 2004). Social media not only permits self-publication of curated content, but also helps diffuse it by providing a platform for posters to engage, respond to, and share the content. For example, the policing website “Police One” encourages departments to focus on visuals that evoke emotions: “Emotional connections are established using personal narratives, or short videos meant to appeal to something as simple as our shared human nature” (Hans, 2019, para. 15). Similarly, the Urban Institute recommends “includ[ing] media such as photos and videos in your posts” because “[t]weets that include photos or videos tend to be retweeted more than all-text tweets” (Tiry et al., 2019, p. 19). By posting visual and verbal information that reinforces one another, police can focus viewers to particular frames—using social media to shape the lens through which events are interpreted and remembered.

2 | BACKGROUND: THE NYPD’S SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY

From inscribing precinct Twitter handles on the bumpers of all department vehicles to detailing its online reach in annual reports, the NYPD values cultivating a social media following. In its 2018 Annual Report, the NYPD Commissioner highlighted its digital reach: 503,000 Twitter followers; 774,000 Facebook followers; 10.1 million page views of its website; 2.6 million page views of its newsletter-style blog NYPD News; and 2.2 million video views on Youtube (NYPD, 2018a, p. 51). Like 25 percent of the 539 police departments surveyed in 2016 (Kim et al., 2017), the NYPD’s

social media posts are managed by public information officers. Specifically, the NYPD's Office of the Deputy Commissioner, Strategic Communications (DCSC)—now called “Deputy Commissioner, Public Information”—leads this social media initiative by creating content, like graphics and videos, for online audiences. DCSC manages communications for NYPD headquarters and its 119 affiliated Twitter accounts (NYPD, 2018a, p. 50).

The NYPD's strategic communications initiative began under Commissioner William Bratton, who officially ushered the NYPD into the social media age on January 23, 2014 with his first tweet: “Follow me here... Great to be on Twitter. Should be the start of a beautiful relationship” (Bratton, 2014). The goal of this relationship was to communicate “the humanity of the men and women in blue” and remind “the public of what cops do, day in and day out—the acts of kindness or quotidian heroism that never make the news” (NYPD, 2016, p. 70). By self-publishing these stories on the department's Twitter, for example, Commissioner Bratton envisioned social media as bypassing and driving traditional media coverage, ultimately penetrating people's personal networks as stories diffused online (NYPD, 2016, p. 70). Doing so is crucial given the national narrative critical of policing—one that police believe is propagated by news media and anti-police protests (Nix et al., 2018).

In the remaining sections, the results are divided into two parts, with the data and methodology presented with their corresponding findings. Part I unpacks the types of tweets the NYPD posts as part of its “Daily Social Media Use.” Part II zooms in on the NYPD's most contested case of police violence in 2018 to examine “Pursuing Legitimation of Controversial Police Violence.” Finally, the article concludes with a “Discussion and Conclusion” section.

3 | PART I: DAILY SOCIAL MEDIA USE

3.1 | Data, method, and analytic approach

As America's largest police department, the NYPD represents a particularly insightful case for several reasons. Historically, NYPD practices ranging from broken windows policing (Harcourt, 2001) to Compstat (Weisburd et al., 2003) have diffused to departments across the nation. Empirically, the NYPD has the high number of public interactions and Twitter activity to valuably study how police actions are presented on social media. Developing its Twitter since 2014, the NYPD has amassed more than 650,000 followers in five years—sizably larger than its peer urban police departments in Los Angeles (200,000 followers) and Chicago (130,000 followers). Conceptually, scholarship has specifically examined the NYPD as a target for activist mobilization on social media (e.g., Jackson & Welles, 2015), suggesting that the NYPD's social media is a growing space for strategic framing and contestation. Rather than representative, the NYPD case offers opportunities for theory generation with predictive value for how police departments across America will mobilize in the social media age.

To provide an overview of how the NYPD uses social media on a daily basis, I analyze every tweet the NYPD posted in 2018 from its official department-wide account *NYPD NEWS* (@NYPDnews) ($N = 3,167$). After importing each post and its metadata into a Microsoft[®] Excel[™] spreadsheet, I inductively coded every tweet (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). First, to get a basic descriptive overview, I coded each tweet based on whether it invited information or provided information. This distinction was not always clean cut as, for example, tweets inviting crime information also provided information about leads. In my second round, I therefore identified the various types of information provided—including public service announcements, crime information,

descriptions of officer success stories, and links to external news sources. Third, particular narratives about police repeatedly emerged from tweets, which I tracked. This was often discernable from the hashtags included in the tweet—for example, “#NYPDconnecting” was coded as promoting the narrative of police as community oriented. Finally, I also aggregated descriptive statistics of the Twitter activity of peer New York City public institutions to contextualize trends in NYPD posts.

3.2 | Findings

In 2018, the NYPD’s daily posts drew higher public engagement than those of other New York City agencies, yet the department rarely engaged back. The NYPD posted 3,167 tweets or approximately nine tweets per day. By the end of the year, the NYPD had 585,080 followers and each tweet received an average of 10 replies, 63 retweets, and 181 likes. The NYPD posted replies, however, only 26 times in 2018—a response rate of .82 percent. In other words, the NYPD responded only once for every 122 tweets it posted. Although other agencies did not receive as many replies, retweets, and likes as the NYPD did per tweet, they still managed to have a high response rate. For example, the Parks Department averaged 3 replies, 21 retweets, and 52 likes per tweet. Nonetheless, its response rate was 23.58 percent ($N = 287$). The tweets of several other agencies also drew high public engagement, yet they still maintained a higher response rate that year—including the Department of Education, Fire Department, and Department of Sanitation.¹

The NYPD’s combination of attracting high public engagement, yet responding at a near-zero rate, reflects its use of Twitter as a one-way channel geared more toward information and influence than genuine engagement. On the one hand, the NYPD provided important pragmatic information to the public. Out of the 3,167 total tweets in 2018, 27.41 percent ($N = 868$) featured public service announcements or advisory statements broadcasting resources, tips, and immediate events. For instance, 5.99 percent of these 868 tweets contained traffic advisories and 8.29 percent ($N = 72$) reminded people that public safety is a shared responsibility. Almost all NYPD tweets contained a visual component either with a photo (79.07 percent, $N = 2,504$) or a video (15.76 percent, $N = 499$)—with a sizeable portion of tweets publicizing surveillance photos or videos, photos of missing persons, and mug shots or sketches (13.14 percent, $N = 416$).

At the same time, however, NYPD Twitter also served as a channel for public expression aimed at casting police actions in strategic ways. For example, 49.98 percent of total tweets in 2018 ($N = 1,583$) featured various officer success stories: recovering contraband ($N = 368$), arresting/apprehending suspects ($N = 299$), pro-community interaction ($N = 692$), traffic enforcement ($N = 63$), saving an animal ($N = 52$), and saving a person ($N = 109$). These posts communicate the daily officer achievements that the department believes deserve praise. For instance, figure 1 depicts one of the 368 times the NYPD posted about contraband successfully recovered in 2018. This tweet promotes narratives of police as public servants (“While many New Yorkers were dreaming about holiday gifts, our officers...”) and protectors (“safely removing this loaded firearm”). The embedded photo of the firearm and bullets visually reinforces the quality policing accomplished.

¹The Department of Education averaged 7 replies, 15 retweets, and 35 likes per tweet, while maintaining a 3.24 percent response rate ($N = 43$). The Fire Department averaged 4 replies, 22 retweets, and 59 likes per tweet, while maintaining a 2.18 percent response rate ($N = 48$). The Department of Sanitation averaged 3 replies, 11 retweets, and 17 likes per tweet, while maintaining a 67.46 percent response rate ($N = 1,107$).



FIGURE 1 Example NYPD Tweet [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

In addition to success stories drawn from public interactions, the NYPD also shared internal organizational news—the noteworthy events that occurred within the police’s world. Specifically, a quarter of the NYPD’s tweets in 2018 broadcasted news about officer promotions and celebration events at police headquarters ($N = 394$), as well as memorials of fallen police officers ($N = 405$). Together, tweets of public success stories and internal news promoted narratives of police as protectors ($N = 1024$, 32.33 percent), community-oriented ($N = 692$, 21.85 percent), highly-trained professionals ($N = 404$, 12.76 percent), and dedicated public servants who sacrifice on a daily basis ($N = 417$, 13.17 percent).

Social media also permits police to provide their audience with the proper perceptual framework to understand police critiques, especially from mass media. For example, when *The New York Times* published an op-ed that the NYPD does not prioritize sexual assault cases, the NYPD tweeted: “A Letter To The New York Times: The Special Victims Division has regularly engaged with advocacy groups, doctors, nurses, psychologists, social workers, and prosecutors to improve its performance” (NYPD NEWS, 2018k). The tweet also contained a link to nypdnews.com, where the Chief of Department wrote a longer response about how the NYPD does prioritize sexual assault cases. In fact, slightly more than half of all the links posted were to “nypdnews.com” ($N = 227$, 54.44 percent)—the department-written, newsletter-style correlate of NYPD social media pages. In additional examples, the NYPD posted tweets criticizing an Inspector General report as itself “a classic case of misreporting” (NYPD NEWS, 2018j) and contesting the paroling of a convicted police killer by directing audiences to “[r]ead the truth, here [[link to nypdnews.com](http://nypdnews.com)]” (NYPD NEWS, 2018i). These examples show how social media affords police the capacity to insert their voice into the public sphere and counter critiques by distributing strategic information.

Amidst intensifying public scrutiny toward police, these routine posts enable departments to strategically represent police actions—regardless of whether they are representative of officer practices or not. On a daily basis, police use social media to communicate how they meet local safety demands through active community engagement; how their quality service provision discredits criticisms of police practices; and how the police’s organizational events, news, and promotions instantiate police as professionals. As with any social media user, the goal of such content is to help cultivate an online audience that understands the department’s constraints and appreciates its contributions. The online audiences cultivated through these daily posts become even more central when controversy erupts, especially in the aftermath of police violence.

4 | PART II: PURSUING LEGITIMATION OF CONTESTED POLICE VIOLENCE

One of the most extreme forms of state action is when police officers shoot and kill. In the contemporary era, shooting and killing is often followed by tweeting—using social media as a platform to independently distribute curated information. In this part, I break down all of the NYPD’s police-involved shootings in 2018 and justify the selection of one case—Saheed Vassell—as the most contested shooting. Focusing on this contested shooting reveals how police leverage social media when the stakes are highest: street protests have erupted, mass media is hostile, and city officials are calling for dramatic reforms. Rather than daily socialization, these contested moments require more immediate legitimation through additional social media strategies. This section incorporates analyses of both the sequence and substance of Twitter activity and mass media coverage around the Vassell shooting to provide an in-depth view of how police can shape public understandings of police violence in the age of social media.

4.1 | Data, method, and analytic approach

In 2018, NYPD officers discharged their firearms in 35 incidents, including in 17 adversarial exchanges, eight unintentional discharges, five officer suicides, and four animal attacks (NYPD, 2018b). Out of the 17 adversarial exchanges, 15 subjects were struck: ten nonfatally and five fatally. The NYPD tweeted about all five of these fatal shootings—as they constituted the most extreme episodes of state violence in New York City in 2018. These NYPD “breaking news” tweets featured the following pattern: 1) a tweet first informing the public about the police-involved shooting and advising it to avoid the area; 2) a series of updates including a description of the incident and photos of the weapon recovered; and 3) an announcement, livestream, and permanent video of a press conference.

These press conferences and breaking news tweets were sufficient to legitimize each police killing except for one: that of Saheed Vassell. On April 4, 2018, NYPD officers fatally shot Vassell in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Multiple 911 callers reported a man pointing an object at pedestrians. According to the New York State Office of the Attorney General [“NYS OAG”], which has jurisdiction as special prosecutor over deaths of unarmed civilians by law enforcement officers, 911 operators dispatched the assignment as a “firearm job” even though the 911 callers were equivocal (NYS OAG, 2019, p. 2). After seeing Vassell take a “two-handed shooting stance,” four officers fired ten shots striking Vassell multiple times (NYS OAG, 2019). Rather than a firearm, Vassell

TABLE 2 Activity on NYPD “Breaking News” Tweets covering 2018 fatal shootings

Incident Date	Borough (Precinct)	N “Breaking News” Tweets	Total Activity
January 1	Bronx (48)	5	549
March 5	Brooklyn (69)	5	300
April 4	Brooklyn (71)	5	2,268
September 17	Queens (104)	4	307
December 9	Staten Island (120)	2	535

Notes: “N ‘Breaking News’ Tweets” refers to the total number of tweets the NYPD posted announcing the shooting and follow-up press conference. “Total Activity” refers to the total number of comments, retweets, and likes to the “Breaking News” tweets as of 10/19/19. Number of comments only includes direct replies.

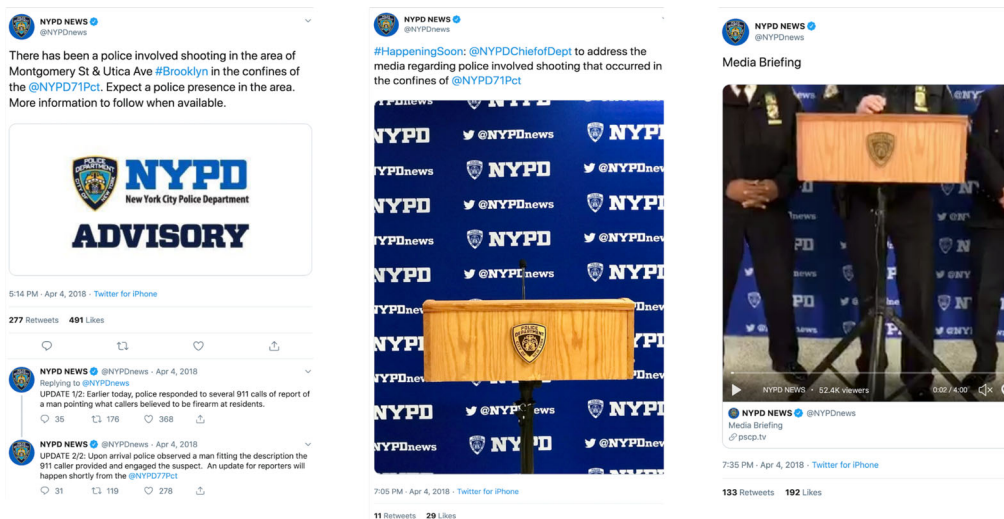


FIGURE 2 “Breaking News Tweets” [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

possessed “part of a gas tank” (NYS OAG, 2019, p. 51). Nonetheless, one year after the shooting, the NYS OAG deemed the officers’ use of force legally justified.

Unlike the other fatal police shootings in 2018, when the NYPD posted the breaking news tweets in the Vassell case, it was immediately contested both online and in person. As seen in table 2, out of all the NYPD’s breaking news tweets covering police-involved shootings in 2018, the Vassell shooting drew the most activity—measured by the sum of comments, retweets, and likes. In fact, out of all the NYPD tweets covering both fatal and nonfatal police-involved shootings, the top five tweets drawing the most activity all covered the Vassell shooting. In addition to online activity, hundreds joined Vassell’s family members in person by marching to the 71st Precinct to demand justice (Gabbatt, 2018).

To unpack how the NYPD legitimized this contested case of police violence, I constructed a dataset of comments responding to all seven of the NYPD’s tweets about Vassell posted between April 4 and April 7, 2018 (figure 2). First, consistent with all other fatal shootings in table 2, the NYPD posted five “Breaking News Tweets” advising the public that they “engaged” a suspect matching the 911 description (NYPD NEWS, 2018f–h). These tweets also announced an upcoming media briefing (NYPD NEWS, 2018b, d).

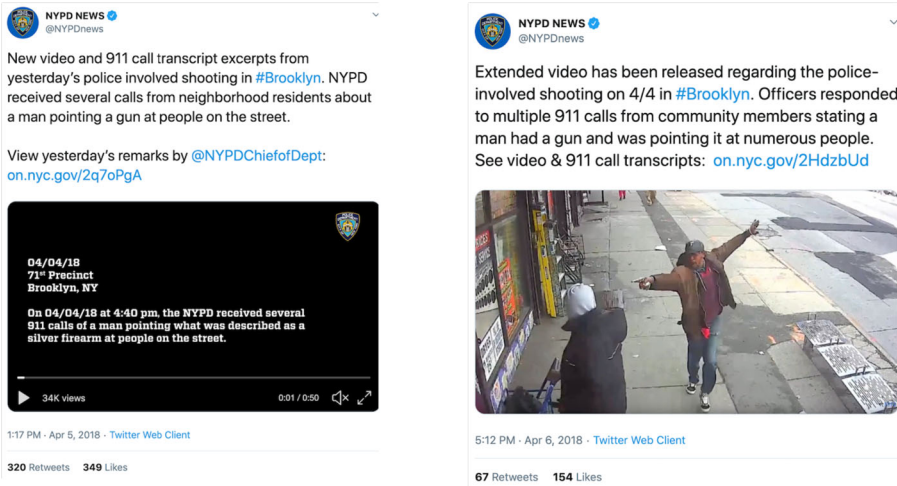


FIGURE 3 “New Video Tweet” (Left) and “Extended Video Tweet” (Right) [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

TABLE 3 NYPD Tweets And Posting Accounts On Vassell Case

	Tweet	Posting Accounts	N Comments
“Breaking News Tweets”	Advisory Tweet	NYPD News	140
	Update #1	NYPD News	51
	Update #2	NYPD News	32
	Media Briefing Soon	NYPD News	4
	Media Briefing	NYPD News	60
		Chief of Department	10
“New Video Tweet”	New Video	NYPD News	354
		NYPD Police Commissioner	44
		Various NYPD Precincts	33
“Extended Video Tweet”	Extended Video	NYPD News	29
		NYPD Police Commissioner	14
		Various NYPD Precincts	7
		Total	778

For the Vassell shooting only, however, the NYPD posted two additional tweets. One day after the shooting, the NYPD posted the “New Video Tweet,” which contains an embedded video montage of surveillance footage interspersed with 911 quotes (figure 3) (NYPD NEWS 2018e). Second, on April 6, the NYPD posted the “Extended Video Tweet” with a screenshot from surveillance footage and a link to the NYPD News website to watch extended video and read the complete 911 transcripts (NYPD NEWS, 2018c). These additional tweets were necessary precisely because the Vassell shooting was immediately contested.

As seen in table 3, I constructed a dataset of all the comments posted in reply to the seven tweets the NYPD’s central Twitter account posted, as well as the replies to other NYPD accounts that posted the identical tweets. Specifically, between July 24 and July 28, 2019, I imported each

post and its metadata into an Excel spreadsheet. Across these seven tweets posted on the accounts cited in table 3, 362 unique Twitter accounts posted 778 comments.

Inductive coding proceeded in three stages (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967). First, I read each comment and established a schedule of 32 codes based on the stated explanations that posters offered for the shooting. About half of the 32 codes expressed common themes, such as characterizing Vassell as a legitimate public safety threat, which I grouped together. Second, I conducted a formal coding of the comments based on the schedule established in the prior stage. I sorted codes into those expressing (dis)approval of police actions and who they identified as the responsible party. Third, I coded each *poster* based on whether they expressed approval, disapproval, or neither. For posters with multiple comments ($N = 9$),² I scored them based on whether the majority of their posts expressed approval (score of 1) or disapproval (score of 0). For posters with equal comments expressing approval and disapproval ($N = 2$), I determined a final score based on their comments in the aggregate. Most posters were consistent in their evaluations. Out of the 362 unique accounts that posted, only five posted comments that I coded as expressing approval and disapproval in different comments. Overall, a majority of accounts expressed approval of police actions ($N = 215$, 59.39 percent).

A persistent issue with using Twitter data is the presence of bots, trolls, and other anonymous accounts. Although existing research suggests that the size of the police's online audiences is limited and self-selected (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2015; Ramirez, 2018), controversial incidents are likely to draw larger audiences—with both “genuine” and “nongenuine” users. Uncovering the identities of particular accounts and reliably identifying the nongenuine ones is currently not possible. A greater proportion of nongenuine users commenting on the Vassell shooting, however, would still be consistent with its controversial nature. Furthermore, regardless of the type of account posting, the information and narratives within the New Video Tweet were disseminated nonetheless, reaching audiences across and beyond Twitter.

Finally, to analyze how the NYPD's social media posts diffused to audiences beyond Twitter, I constructed a dataset of news articles. In September 2019, I conducted a keyword search for “Saheed Vassell” on LexisNexis, which generated 303 news articles. Removing duplicates, aggregator news sources, foreign language articles, and press events yielded a final count of 139 articles. I coded these articles for descriptive information, including whether it was published pre- or post-New Video Tweet; if it explicitly referenced the New Video Tweet; and whether it contains surveillance photos/videos of Vassell. Together, this combination of data from Twitter and news sources enables analyses of how the NYPD's tweets contributed to shifts in online (dis) approval, mass media framing, and public understandings of the appropriateness of police actions.

4.2 | Findings

The New Video Tweet facilitates legitimation by equipping viewers with a set of curated visual representations (e.g., surveillance video) amplified by various discursive practices (e.g., zooming in, slow motion, and captions) and motivated by the goal of framing police action as appropriately responsive to the threat that Vassell posed. The tweet's caption, plus the video's opening frame, describes how police received 911 calls describing a man pointing a firearm at people on the street. These captions equip the viewer with the relevant framework to evaluate the

² Given the low number of posters with multiple comments, the analysis focuses on overall (dis)approval rates across all comments—rather than tracking how individual posters might have changed their opinions over time.

upcoming scenes—training the focal points on an armed individual. In contrast, the actions of responding officers recede in relevance. Despite the video’s narrative arch, responding officers never witnessed Vassell’s interactions with pedestrians, nor the footage of those interactions. In fact, no officer is even depicted in the New Video Tweet. As the video foregrounds Vassell’s actions as the object of scrutiny, those of responding officers become literally inscrutable.

Furthermore, the New Video Tweet transforms a seconds-long shooting into an escalating series of 911 calls and aggressive actions by Vassell before officers ever arrived on scene. These depictions vest control of the situation out of the police’s hands. If the victim was aggressive and 911 callers requested police action, then the proper police response requires force. The first visual shows a pedestrian entering a store and, in slow motion and zooming in, Vassell lunging and pointing an object toward him. The video then pauses at the point Vassell’s object is closest to the pedestrian. Although the underlying construction of any video reflects editorial decisions, the additional layer of slow motion, zooming in, and pausing further insert the police’s perceptual field. These production decisions designate to viewers what is relevant: the aggressive actions that Vassell exhibited. Rather than depicting how the pedestrian reacted, if at all,³ the video cuts to a quote from the first 911 caller: “There is a guy in a brown jacket walking around pointing—I don’t know (to someone else) what is he pointing in people’s face? They say it’s a gun, it’s silver.” In the 911 transcripts the NYPD released the next day, however, the quote ends with uncertainty rather than third-party confirmation: “There’s a guy in a brown jacket walking around pointing I don’t know what is he’s pointing at people’s faces. *I don’t know what* if it is if it’s a gun. It’s silver” (NYPD News, 2018a, emphasis added).

Next, the video shows Vassell pointing an object toward two new pedestrians, whose reactions also cannot be analyzed because their faces have been blurred. The video cuts to a second 911 quote: “There’s a guy walking around the street, he looks like he’s crazy but he’s pointing something at people that looks like a gun and he’s like popping it as if like if he’s pulling the trigger.” As the full transcripts later reveal, however, the caller clarifies in the very next sentence: “He’s not pulling a trigger but he’s making a motion as if he is and there is something sticking out of his jacket” (NYPD News, 2018a).

In the final scene, Vassell approaches an intersection and holds the object in both hands toward the street. The video zooms in and captions: “At this point, responding officers discharged their weapons.” In other words, at the precise point Vassell is seen pointing an object toward something undepicted in the video, responding officers shot at Vassell ten times. By zooming in, the video enhances Vassell’s stance even though officers did not necessarily see Vassell from this proximity or angle. Finally, in the third quote, the 911 caller reports a gun. This call, however, was received *after* police arrived on the scene and already shot Vassell. In fact, even though the NYPD included this call in the New Video Tweet, the NYS OAG report excluded it altogether.

Despite the selective information presented in the New Video Tweet, however, the analyses below trace how it 1) shaped online approval rates and mass media coverage and 2) diffused as posters and mass media engaged with it. These findings reveal more precisely how police use social media to pursue legitimization of contested fatal shootings.

³ Assessing pedestrians’ reactions is important because if they did not react or if they reacted with laughter, as some reports suggested (Dempsey & Tzun, 2018), then that would weaken the implication of Vassell as aggressor.

4.2.1 | Inverting online approval and shifting mass media coverage

Unlike the NYPD's other police-involved shootings in 2018, most posters and commenters expressed strong disapproval in response to the Breaking News Tweets announcing the Vassell shooting. Out of the 166 unique posters, 57 expressed approval, whereas 109 expressed disapproval, yielding an approval rate of 34.34 percent. Out of the 297 comments, 238 comments revealed identifiable positions about whether they (dis)approved of the shooting. These 238 comments yielded 344 codes: 36.63 percent expressing approval and 63.37 percent expressing disapproval. As presented in table 4, disapproval focused primarily on the police's quickness/proneness to use violence (22.48 percent); the need for systemic reform (19.27 percent); and police making excuses or constructing a narrative to deflect responsibility for the shooting (14.68 percent). In contrast, the minority that expressed approval focused on the appropriateness and reasonableness of the police's use of force (27.78 percent); how Vassell was a legitimate public safety threat either because the pipe is a weapon or police believed it was a firearm (24.60 percent); and how he deserved this outcome (20.63 percent).

In terms of the parties that posters focused on, those who expressed approval almost equally focused on the wrongfulness of Vassell's behavior (47.62 percent)—for example, he was threatening—as they did on the reasonableness of police action (43.65 percent)—for example, police used appropriate force. In contrast, those who expressed disapproval overwhelmingly focused on the wrongfulness of police actions (75.69 percent), including police needing more training and always shooting first and asking later. This pattern of disapproving posts disproportionately focusing on the wrongfulness of police actions, instead of defending Vassell's behavior, persisted throughout the analyses.

After the Breaking News Tweet, the NYPD posted the New Video Tweet, which drew 320 retweets, 343 likes, and 431 comments and replies. Out of these 431 comments, 307 revealed identifiable positions on the shooting. These 307 comments yielded 480 codes: 327 (68.13 percent) expressed approval versus 153 (31.88 percent) expressed disapproval. These comments were posted by 169 unique accounts, 134 (79.29 percent) of which approved versus 35 (20.71 percent) of which disapproved. In other words, whether calculated by comments (from 36.63 percent to 68.13 percent, $p \leq .000$) or unique accounts (from 34.34 percent to 79.29 percent, $p \leq .000$), the approval rate *inverted* from the responses to the Breaking News Tweet.

The New Video Tweet further polarized explanations between those expressing approval and the now minority expressing disapproval. The final column in table 4 shows the difference in means between comments on the Breaking News Tweet versus those on the New Video Tweet. Although the number of comments is too small to detect an effect using *t* tests in some of the breakdowns, the overall difference in means across the other categories reflects a general shift toward approval and demonstrates that this difference is not a result of random chance. For example, following the New Video Tweet, an even *greater* proportion of disapproving comments focused on the police's quickness to use violence (22.48 percent to 35.29 percent, $p \leq .007$) and how police acted procedurally incorrect (5.05 percent to 14.38 percent, $p \leq .002$). In contrast, the percentage of comments citing the appropriateness of police use of force increased from 27.78 percent in response to the Breaking News Tweet to 39.45 percent in response to the New Video Tweet ($p \leq .021$). Although a smaller proportion of comments expressing approval believed Vassell wanted or deserved being shot (20.63 percent to 13.15 percent, $p \leq .047$), the one instance of NYPD engagement suggested agreement with this explanation. The official 26th Precinct Twitter "liked" the following comment in reply to its Extended Video Tweet: "I'm so sorry for those people who got

TABLE 4 Frequency of explanations in all NYPD Tweets

Explanation by Responsible Party:	Approval							
	Breaking News		New Video		Extended Video		New Video - Breaking News	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	Difference	p value
Police:	55	43.651	168	51.376	19	55.882	.080	.140
Police are not racist	2	1.587	1	.306	0	.000	-.013	.132
Police force/response was appropriate	35	27.778	129	39.450	14	41.176	.117*	.021
Police must be appreciated	18	14.286	38	11.621	5	14.706	-.027	.441
Vassell:	60	47.619	129	39.450	11	32.353	-.082	.115
Vassell broke the law	3	2.381	2	.612	0	.000	-.018	.107
Vassell wanted/deserved it	26	20.635	43	13.150	9	26.471	-.075*	.047
Vassell was a public safety threat	31	24.603	84	25.688	2	5.882	.011	.813
Others:	11	8.730	30	9.174	4	11.765	.004	.883
Vassell's family is at fault	1	.794	9	2.752	0	.000	.020	.205
Police just responding to 911 callers	7	5.556	15	4.587	2	5.882	-.010	.668
Media bias in covering this case	1	.794	4	1.223	2	5.882	.004	.696
National gun climate/policies	2	1.587	2	.612	0	.000	-.010	.321
Total	126		327		34			
Explanation by Responsible Party:	Disapproval							
	Breaking News		New Video		Extended Video		New Video - Breaking News	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	Difference	p value
Police:	165	75.688	98	64.052	3	60.000	-.120*	.015
Police making excuses	32	14.679	7	4.575	2	40.000	-.101**	.002
Police are biased	31	14.220	7	4.575	0	.000	-.096**	.003
Police are quick/prone to use violence	49	22.477	54	35.294	0	.000	.128**	.007
Need systematic police reform	42	19.266	8	5.229	1	20.000	-.140***	.000
Police acted procedurally incorrect	11	5.046	22	14.379	0	.000	.093**	.002
Vassell:	25	11.468	29	18.954	2	40.000	.075*	.044
Vassell was not a public safety threat	25	11.468	29	18.954	2	40.000	.075*	.044
Others:	28	12.844	26	16.993	0	.000	.040	.270
911 callers can be inaccurate/biased	10	4.587	11	7.190	0	.000	.026	.287

(Continues)

TABLE 4 (Continued)

Explanation by Responsible Party:	Disapproval							
	Breaking News		New Video		Extended Video		New Video - Breaking News	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	Difference	p value
National gun climate/policies	4	1.835	1	.654	0	.000	-.012	.333
Insufficient mental health treatment	3	1.376	8	5.229	0	.000	.039*	.031
Killing is morally wrong	2	.917	3	1.961	0	.000	.010	.392
Disgust	9	4.128	3	1.961	0	.000	-.022	.247
Total	218		153		5			

Notes: The last column calculates a two-sample *t* test, which compares the difference in means of two groups.

†*p* ≤ .10; **p* ≤ .05; ***p* ≤ .01; ****p* ≤ .001 (two-tailed tests).

menaced by this deranged individual. 100 percent was looking for suicide by cop” (NYPD 26th Precinct, 2018).

Like the inversion in online approval, mass media coverage of the Vassell case shifted before versus after the New Video Tweet. Although media sources commonly update published articles to correct information or add new details, such edits can also substantively alter the framing of events. For example, *CNN* published one of the first articles on Vassell (figure 4). Like the dominant narrative following the Breaking News Tweet, the two pre-New Video Tweet headlines frame the incident as a mistaken killing (figure 4a and b). In fact, although the first sentences of both articles are identical (“New York City police officers shot and killed a black man Wednesday after he pointed what they believed was a gun at them, authorities said”), the second article then links the incident to other high-profile episodes of police violence: “The incident comes amid a resurgence of questions about unequal treatment of people of color by police following the police shooting in Sacramento, California, of a man who police said had a gun.” This context aligns with explicitly identifying Vassell’s race as Black in the headline.

After the New Video Tweet, *CNN* altered the framing of the shooting with the publication of the third headline (figure 4c). Whereas the action verb in the pre-New Video Tweet headlines is “kill,” the post-New Video Tweet focuses attention on the video’s “release.” Rather than a mistaken police killing, the incident is now framed as a justified fatal shooting—that police shot a man who pointed an object at them, which is supported by video evidence. With this new and more formal framing, the article opens by describing the New Video Tweet, which is embedded within the article. This final version of the *CNN* article simultaneously constitutes and reinforces an understanding of the incident as appropriate police conduct—aiding in its legitimization.

At least nine other instances of intra-article updates were observed. For example, before the New Video Tweet, *The Washington Post* published an article with the headline: “Police shoot and kill Brooklyn man after mistaking a metal pipe for a gun.” After the New Video Tweet, a new headline for the same article was posted: “‘They say it’s a gun’: NYPD releases video, 911 clips in fatal shooting of man holding metal pipe.” The content of the article also incorporated reporting on the New Video Tweet, including quotes from the 911 callers.

(a) First Headline, Published *Pre*-New Video Tweet

New York officers kill man after mistaking metal pipe for gun

By Faith Karimi, CNN
 Updated 6:53 AM ET, Thu April 5, 2018

(b) Second Headline, Published *Pre*-New Video Tweet

New York officers kill black man after mistaking metal pipe for gun

By Faith Karimi, CNN
 Updated 11:11 AM ET, Thu April 5, 2018

(c) Final Headline, Published *Post*-New Video Tweet

New York police release video of man pointing object before fatal shooting

By Faith Karimi and Eric Levenson, CNN
 Updated 3:09 PM ET, Thu April 5, 2018

FIGURE 4 Evolution of CNN Article Headlines on Vassell Case [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

(a) First Headline, Published *Pre*-New Video Tweet (b) Second Headline, Published *Pre*-New Video Tweet
 (c) Final Headline, Published *Post*-New Video Tweet

Thus, the New Video Tweet substantively shifted online approval and mass media coverage of the Vassell shooting. To unpack these shifts, the following section traces how various engagements with the New Video Tweet helped diffuse and establish it as the defining framework for understanding the Vassell shooting.

4.2.2 | Diffusing by engaging

Although the NYPD posted the New Video Tweet, it was online posters and mass media who helped solidify the tweet's perceptual framework and strategic visuals as the defining anchors of the Vassell incident. In particular, engaging with the New Video Tweet helped diffuse it. The section below identifies key activities that reinforced the New Video Tweet: sharing screenshots, incorporating video details in replies, and clicking backward to dispute initial disapproval.

First, evidence from the distribution of first-time posters across the NYPD tweets suggests that rather than changing the views of initial online posters, the New Video Tweet more likely motivated new posters to participate (see Flores, 2017). Out of the 362 unique accounts, 166 (45.86 percent) posted for the first time on this topic in response to the Breaking News Tweets. Of these 166, only 58 (34.94 percent) expressed approval of police actions. The New Video Tweet subsequently motivated an additional 163 (45.03 percent) new posters to post—of which 129 (79.14 percent) expressed approval. The Extended Video Tweet cemented this trend of emboldening supporters—drawing the remaining 33 (9.12 percent) first-time posters of which 28 expressed approval (84.85 percent).

These new posters diffused the information contained in the New Video Tweet by referencing, reposting, and sharing it while defending their positions. For example, in a comment posted in response to the Breaking News Tweet, but after the New Video Tweet was released, *erica* (@Ericamichalski) referenced the “pictures and videos of this guy” to counter claims by posters suggesting they would not have shot Vassell: “Why don’t you people look at the pictures and videos of this guy? He’s pointing the pipe which looks like a gun at random people you’re saying you wouldn’t shoot that’s bs people come on” (*erica*, 2018). Other posters shared screenshots of Vassell pointing the metal object at individuals (e.g., figure 6), which the NYPD facilitated by posting a screenshot



FIGURE 5 Comments on Breaking News Tweet Before (Left) Versus After (Right) New Video Tweet [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

themselves when it released the Extended Video Tweet (see figure 3). Posters often shared these screenshots without captions, suggesting they believed that the image alone contained sufficient evidence of appropriate police actions.

Furthermore, the New Video Tweet affected the content of posts by influencing what people understood to have happened and the reasons for why the police violence was (in)appropriate. For example, posters shifted their explanations from unfalsifiable claims to more specific details incorporating the visual evidence. *Jeremy Potteiger* (@jpottgaming) commented on the Breaking News Tweet both before *and* after the New Video Tweet (figure 5). Before the New Video Tweet, *Jeremy Potteiger* expressed approval of police actions by citing Vassell's invisible intentions—that this was a case of “suicide by cop, plain and simple,” suggesting that Vassell sought suicide by provoking police to shoot him (Potteiger, 2018a). The New Video Tweet, however, equipped *Jeremy Potteiger* to shift away from the vague claim of “suicide by cop” to more specifically describe what Vassell was holding (“an object”), how he was holding it (“in a violent manner”), and where he walked to warrant the appropriate police action (“in the middle of the intersection acting crazed”) (Potteiger, 2018b). Although both tweets have elements implying Vassell wanted to be shot, the second tweet also explained why Vassell was a legitimate threat to public safety.

Posters even clicked backward to respond to past comments and correct the record based on the information about revealed in the New Video Tweet. Three minutes after posting in reply to the New Video Tweet, *John Robins* (@JohnRob81406399) returned to the original Breaking News Tweet. In response to a comment asking rhetorically, “How are we here again?”, *John Robins* attached a screenshot with the comment: “You tell me” (figure 6) (Robins, 2018). By sharing this particular screenshot, *John Robins* helped diffuse both the New Video Tweet's framing—that police were purely responding to the danger that Vassell posed—as well as the visual image reinforcing that framing. Similarly, after first replying to the New Video Tweet, *Victor D'Plore* (@VictorDPlorable) clicked backward to directly respond to police criticisms (D'Plore, 2018). Countering a comment characterizing police as “fucked up,” *Victor D'Plore* shared the same screenshot as *John Robins* and attributed Vassell's death to him pointing an object at pedestrians—even though, again, responding officers never saw these interactions before fatally shooting Vassell. These responses reflect the purposeful effort to click backward from the New Video Tweet and dispute the initial disapproval of police actions raised in response to the Breaking News Tweet.

Finally, mass media further cemented screenshots of the surveillance footage as the visual anchors defining the Vassell case. Out of the 98 news articles substantively covering the case, 37 (37.76 percent) included a screenshot or photo from the surveillance footage specifically. Screenshots were even featured in coverage of activists arguing that the footage was partial and demanding its full release; of public defenders calling for the release of the officers' names; and of the leak of the officers' names four months after Vassell was killed. Regardless of the nature of the story,

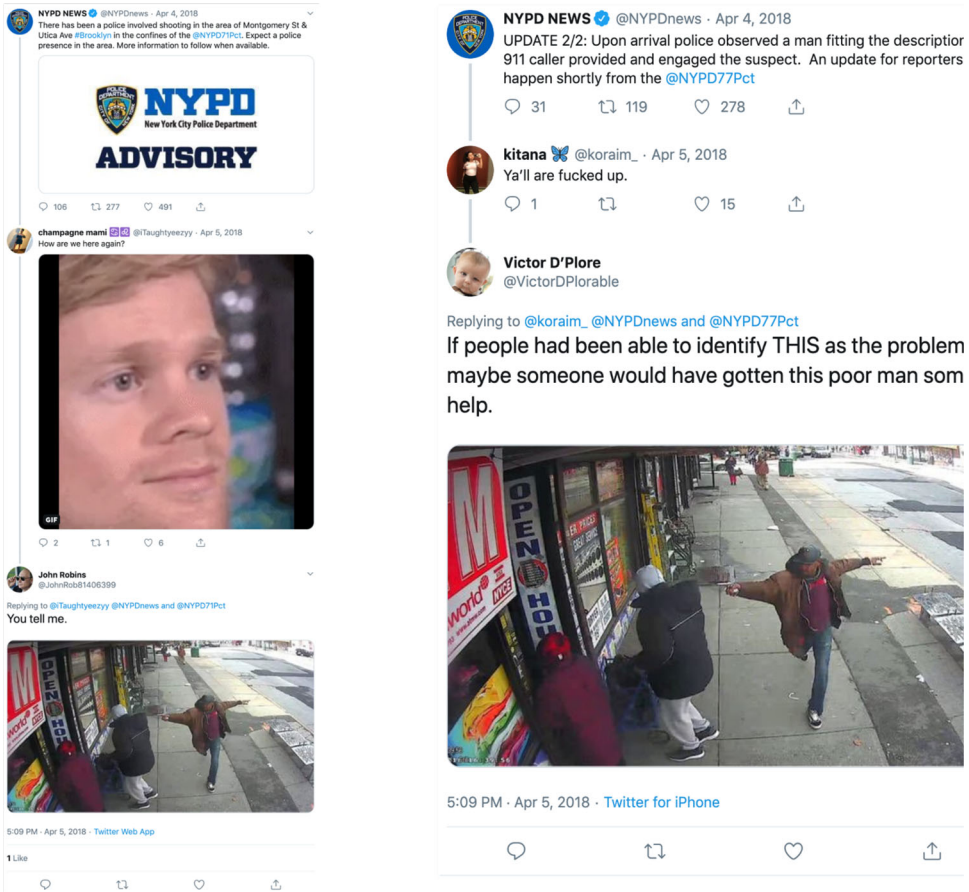


FIGURE 6 Comments on Breaking News Tweets by Posters Who Clicked Backward [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

mass media entrenched the New Video Tweet’s framework and screenshots in subsequent coverage of the Vassell case.

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

An enduring challenge for institutional actors is how to legitimize controversial state actions. On the one hand, police departments are mirroring other organizational types seeking to cultivate a social media presence and engage in outreach, information distribution, and relationship building. The police are unlike any other organization, however. When police departments are permitted to have their own social media accounts, the coercive arm of the state is empowered with a platform to communicate information to the public about one of the most extreme state actions: police violence.

Drawing on the case of America’s largest police force, this study examines how social media provides police with the technological capacity to advance key institutional interests in the contemporary era of heightened police scrutiny. First, on a daily basis, police release public information

and engage in public expression to socialize an online audience to their worldview. Second, in the aftermath of particular incidents of police violence, especially when contested by mass media and ordinary citizens, police can leverage social media to independently release curated content key to legitimizing violence. As the NYPD's most contested fatal shooting in 2018, the case of Saheed Vassell reveals how social media reduces reliance on mass media for news production, as well as how it can facilitate diffusion of a crafted presentation of events. The New Video Tweet not only inverted the approval rate of the police killing of Vassell, but it became its defining perceptual framework and visual anchor. In particular, online posters and mass media cemented the New Video Tweet's influence by engaging with it: sharing screenshots, incorporating video details in replies, and clicking backward to respond to old posts with new information. This case reflects the fulfillment of Commissioner Bratton's vision of releasing curated content on police social media, bypassing mass media, and ultimately penetrating personal networks.

Adopting a qualitative approach to "big data" sources, this study analyzes the scope and depth of online police practices—beyond digital surveillance or community engagement—in pursuit of socialization and legitimation. Nonetheless, future studies should analyze the communication officers and policies within police departments to further uncover intentions, strategies, and motivations when it comes to digital media, especially when deciding the content and timing of particular online posts amidst real-time police controversies. Additional analyses should also focus on unpacking how officers envision their online audience and the nature of accounts that police engage with online. These studies will help identify the critical ways institutional actors leverage social media at the local level.

5.1 | Implications

A key insight from this study is that critical information can be construed and masked under the guise of transparency initiatives. Although this study focuses on America's largest police department, policing agencies from Elgin, Illinois (Elgin Illinois Police Department, 2018), to Phoenix, Arizona (Phoenix Police, 2020), are also turning to social media, independent online platforms, and "transparency portals" (Fremont Police Department, 2020) to release annotated videos of police shootings and other controversial events. These other controversial events include, for instance, street protests. After the police killing of George Floyd, social media became an important space where both police and activists posted video evidence accusing the other of initiating violent clashes (Fry & Rosenberg-Douglas, 2020).

Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of interrogating the institutional incentives at the intersection of trends in policing, technology, and society. Although transparency is a key element in establishing trust between state institutions and the public, *selective* transparency is often difficult to discern, evades legal regulation, and as demonstrated above, exacerbated by social media. This study demonstrates the importance of dissecting the production of published records, accessing omitted materials, and tracking the strategic claims-making based on the information released. Doing so is imperative because as police increasingly perceive mass media as biased and street protests as anti-police (Nix et al., 2018), police will foreseeably increase reliance on social media to strategically present police actions. Thus, whenever digital content is released, the positionality of its producer must be disclosed—for example, officer to body-worn camera, citizen to cellphone, driver to dash cam, and resident to surveillance system. As video recordings become increasingly prevalent, this study's findings on the role of social media in socialization and

legitimation will become increasingly important in public debates around institutional accountability and systemic change.

These findings also offer important implications for the episodes of local police violence that do—and do not—turn into national controversies. As important as the growth of citizen journalism and activist social media strategies are (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2011; Ray et al., 2017), this study emphasizes the need to unpack modern police strategies aimed at managing information in the public sphere. Despite their digital nature, police social media posts have real-life consequences, especially for the victims of police violence and affected stakeholders. As a platform for mass information distribution that is independent from mass media, social media facilitates selective transparency by enabling police to 1) withhold information key to conducting independent investigations into officer wrongdoings, while 2) releasing information that further empowers constituents aiding in narrative diffusion. Social media helps shift mass media's role from gatekeepers of news production to members of the police's online audience. When this happens, police can more successfully legitimize violence in cases like Saheed Vassell's—who remains unknown on the national stage and detached from the social movements around Michael Brown, George Floyd, and many others.

Beyond policing, comprehensively understanding social media's effects on society requires uncovering how information released directly on digital platforms, especially with the imprimatur of the state, shapes collective understandings of news, events, and daily occurrences. In the contemporary era, social media represents a platform uniquely designed to shape social memories while avoiding various forms of public accountability: self-publication of curated content and visuals, diffusion by nonstate actors like online posters, and in the process, directing mass media coverage. In other words, the attributes of digital platforms that make them promising opportunities for social change simultaneously render them engines for the legitimation of the status quo (Schradie, 2019). In fact, this study suggests that as social media provides state institutions with greater control over competing narratives, states actors will more likely cover, rather than commemorate, reputation-damaging events and identities (Rivera, 2008). Like national archives (Wilson, 1996), school textbooks (Morning, 2008), and mass media (Gitlin, 1980), social media is expected to become a new arena where the politics of reputation management and knowledge production unfold.

5.2 | Policy implications

A key hurdle to mitigating the issues identified above is that even the most promising and specific guidelines regulating police use of social media will likely succumb to rational decision-making, organizational culture, and enduring institutional incentives. For example, in July 2020, the NYPD released a new policy governing the release of body-worn camera footage in police-involved shootings. This new policy requires the NYPD to release footage within 30 days of the incident, which the mayor presented as an improvement from the previous policy providing the commissioner with discretion over its release (Associated Press, 2020). This article's findings, however, highlight concerns with precisely the video that is released. The new policy, like the previous policy, permits the NYPD to release "representative samples of footage" and "salient events leading up to the event" (NYPD, 2020). Furthermore, "[e]xtraneous and/or redundant material may be omitted." In other words, when it comes to body-worn cameras, the selective transparency exemplified in the New Video Tweet is not only organizationally incentivized but also institutionally justified.

Given the hurdles to overcoming enduring institutional incentives through regulation, city executives should require police departments to deactivate official Twitter accounts. First, multiple options already exist for cities to convey emergency information, amber alerts, traffic advisories, and even details about police shootings. For example, mayors or emergency management offices can convey live updates to crisis situations on social media. Doing so would not only centralize information, but also distribute it through a more democratically accountable office. Many cities already offer opt-in text and e-mail alerts, which can even reach those not on social media. Second, it is both unlikely and undesirable for police to improve community relations through social media. Social media is a poor platform for reaching new audiences—evidence points to polarization as the more likely outcome on social media than persuasion (Bail et al., 2019). In other words, social media will unlikely help police improve relations with those who do not already support them. Even if new audiences are exposed to police, this study shows the implications for when the armed representatives of the state are empowered to transmit information directly to the public. Transforming community relations will require police to maximize resources toward changing basic interactions in person—not deciding what and how verbal and visual information is communicated online to the public.

As police transformation becomes a political priority in cities across America, we must interrogate the police practices that we have come to accept as routine. While social media does represent a technology that can amplify community demand for police accountability, it can also aid in its avoidance. This study underscores the unsettling implications of social media as a new tool for police to pursue socialization and legitimation in the twenty-first century.

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