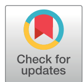
PNAS COMMENTARY



Racialized policing in the social media age

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The enduring reality of racial residential segregation in the United States means that White Americans oftentimes live within neither eyesight nor earshot of policing's most aggressive tactics (1, 2). Instead, they form perceptions of public safety as consumers of news, television, and other sources that whet penal appetites (3). In PNAS, Grunwald et al. (4) direct our attention to a new source of information with the potential to shape public understanding of race and crime: police's very own social media pages. In the past 16 years, the percentage of American adults who report that they use at least one social media site has multiplied by nearly 16-fold (5). Like any other entity, policing agencies have thus increasingly turned to social media in pursuit of the online outreach and digital engagement that modernizing organizations crave.

But police are not like any other organization. Grunwald et al. show how policing agencies use social media as state media in ways that can reinforce perceptions of Black criminality. They offer three main findings based on an analysis of all Facebook posts from nearly 14,000 law enforcement agencies in America. First, policing agencies overreport Black suspects relative to local arrest statistics on nearly all crime categories. Black suspects were identified in 32% of race crime posts but represented only 20% of arrestees. Second, Facebook users were exposed to posts overrepresenting Black suspects by 25% relative to local arrest rates, which spanned both violent crimes and property crimes. Third, overexposure was the most intense in the Midwest and some of the South and mid-Atlantic regions and lowest in Hawaii and the Black Belt. It also increased with the share of Republican voters in the county and in counties with fewer Black residents.

Grunwald et al.'s research is agenda-setting. The findings direct us to investigate how notions of racialized criminality permeate organizational decision-making in policing agencies, especially through routine practices that are seemingly race-neutral. Racialized policing emerges not just through street-level law enforcement but also online content production where the systematic omission of race may be as consequential as its identification. The findings thus call into question whether the state's coercive arm needs to be publicly active in releasing information on social media in the first place. The research does not "merely" advance our understanding of police inequality; it shows how the blue line is redrawing the color line in the 21st century.

Social Media as State Media

How policing agencies operate on social media platforms complicates two insights about how organizations use digital technology to see race. First, prior scholarship consistently documents how advancements in the private sector encode race into the very technologies that are supposed to enable racial progress (6). Proprietary technology, algorithms, and databases automate racial inequality with minimal transparency and accountability. But in contrast to the opaque processes of algorithmic racism in the private sector, Grunwald et al. expose the hypervisibility of the state's racial projects. On public social media pages, as opposed to covert digital surveillance, (7) police departments post information directly to the public. These posts have both educational and enforcement values. Overexposing Facebook users to Black suspects can simultaneously cultivate perceptions of Black criminality and recruit users as third-party enforcers to the disproportionate number of cases posted about Black suspects. These perceptions and actions can then feed back into the private sector and the growing digital ecosystem of public safety technology—including Ring, Nextdoor, and Citizen App (8).

Second, prior scholarship emphasizes how social media is a transformative tool for grassroots activism and social movements (9). Social media's low cost, wide reach, and dense connectivity empower movements like #BlackLivesMatter to shape narratives, coordinate demonstrations, and pursue countermobilizations. But even though scholarship focuses on how organizers turn to social media platforms to contest state power, social media's affordances—"the potential for action that new technologies provide to users" (10)—are precisely what attract state institutions too. For police, in particular, social media affords the visibility to widely distribute real-time information. Beyond affordances, Grunwald et al. show the value of what may be referred to as avoidances: the potential for avoiding accountability that new technologies provide to users. Social media empowers state institutions like police to circumvent mass media to publicize information directly online. With the state's imprimatur, police's social media channels are better understood as platforms for state media where information is selectively released and accountability is largely avoided.

Racial Construction in Public Records

Policing agencies epitomize racialized organizations (11). Their decisions about where and how to deploy enforcement power entrench the unequal distributions of resources in

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ways that solidify racial hierarchy. However, estimating racial discrimination's magnitude in police enforcement is often difficult, especially across police departments, (12) given challenges with administrative records as the primary data sources available. If detention practices are biased, then it follows that administrative records will be necessarily biased as well (13). In these circumstances, estimates of racial bias in police behavior will be conservative at best and unreliable at worst.

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However, racial bias may infiltrate and inform the production of not only administrative records but also public records outside of enforcement contexts. Grunwald et al. draw attention to the racial implications of selectively releasing public information online. They emphasize how the release of public records is a curated process—one that the public should view with skepticism especially when police voluntarily provide it (14). In Grunwald et al.'s case, two features enable the curated release of public records: a) the police's monopoly on public safety information (15) and b) their access to social media channels that provide platforms for publicizing such information (16). As they note, if police are more likely to arrest Black suspects than non-Black suspects for similar crimes, then their findings, in fact, underestimate overreporting and overexposure. In addition, if police's social media posts are actually effective tools for suspect apprehension, then overreporting Black suspects online should generate more arrests in cases with Black suspects versus non-Black suspects.

Thus, the central concern is that lauded organizational practices may actually launder racialized policing. Policymakers encourage police's public presence on social media as a positive development toward transparency and engagement. For instance, the Urban Institute and Department of Justice's COPS Office published a guidebook for how police departments can use social media to effectively disseminate public information (17). The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, which also recommended the value of social media for relationship building, added the importance of providing current information and avoiding incorrect statements (18). However, the policing agencies in Grunwald et al.'s study used Facebook in precisely the ways recommended, with timely crime information and no falsehoods about suspects. The problem with how these public records construct race is thus not so much about the accuracy of information at the individual level, but rather through the omission of information in the aggregate. For example, an open question is whether parallel processes of underreporting and underexposure apply to non-Black criminality. Such an analysis would help disentangle whether police are omitting non-Black crimes altogether or whether they are omitting mentions of race within posts about crimes by non-Black suspects. The former misrepresents racialized criminality, while the latter renders crime posts racially unrepresentative. Regardless, Grunwald et al. show how unregulated organizational operations—those that would be considered best practices in community engagement—culminated in racialized policing.

The Agenda Ahead

Like the best of big data research, Grunwald et al. uncover important large-scale patterns that require deeper investigation. Answering many of the questions below will require methods that feature direct and sustained interactions with the actors who are the subjects of the study's claims—for interviews and observation, rather than merely transactional purposes of data acquisition (19).

First, scholarship must articulate a theory of how the police curate digital content. What do police believe, what are they pursuing, and how are they gauging their success? Practically, it matters whether investigators or social media managers are the officers curating content and what department policies regulate the release of suspect information. Theoretically, race may guide organizational practice in different ways. Police may believe that they require greater public assistance in crimes with Black suspects, view those crimes as greater public safety priorities, or expect those posts to draw greater online engagement. Grunwald et al. organize potential mechanisms under a political economy framework that identifies incentives among content producers and content consumers. Yet, it is difficult to imagine demand-side mechanisms that would actually advance social justice. For example, perhaps social media managers within police departments see that posts about Black suspects draw more likes and comments, which they view as indications of improved community relations. However, these relationships may reconstitute online audiences that already align with police goals (20)—disguising unequal protection under legitimacy's cloak (21).

Second, scholarship must connect theory to consequences. How do people internalize police social media? Do these posts shape perceptions of race, community sentiments toward police and safety, the proportion of municipal budgets allocated to police, or local penal preferences and outcomes over time? On the one hand, if non-Black suspects do not draw as much online engagement, more accurate representations of race and crime may lower crime's importance on public policy agendas. On the other hand, greater reporting of non-Black suspects may draw the public support needed to shift overpolicing to nonenforcement approaches across a greater number of social problems. Perhaps providing more suspect information to the public generates greater case closures, which is not mutually exclusive from a variety of social costs like more police harassment and pretextual stops. Connecting theories to consequences will guide how to regulate police use of social media.

Third, scholarship should situate these findings within adjacent systems beyond criminal law enforcement. For example, Grunwald et al.'s findings about political variation suggest that election cycles might matter in police's social media activity and how local audiences engage with it. The findings should also be connected to the larger infrastructure of news production: other social media platforms, press releases, and television news. As much as police shape the vocabulary of news coverage when police kill, (22) police may also gauge media and public reactions to press releases when constructing online posts about community crimes.

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Finally, cities must ask first-order questions, such as why do police need their own channel for information distribution at all? What social benefit could it have beyond news outlets for routine news and centralized systems like amber alerts for emergency news? The 14,000 policing agencies that Grunwald et al. studied reflect the sheer number that have Facebook pages alone. Normalizing social media use by policing agencies like any other organizational type—when they are not—risks adding a digital layer to broader historical processes of how the state constructs and condemns Black criminality (23). Both social science and society will benefit through greater scrutiny of the institutional practices often accepted as routine.

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