

Representations of Race and Social Movement Strategies in the US

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Abstract : Based on content analyses of major US media, immediately following the George Floyd killing in May 2020, some mayors and local, state, and national officials offered favorable representations of protests against police violence. As the protest movement grew to historic proportions with 26 million joining actions in large cities and small towns, dominant representations of racism by elected officials and leading media shifted—replacing both the voices and demands of protestors with representations by elected officials. Major media quoted Black mayors and Congressional representatives who emphasized concerns about looting and the disruption of public safety. Media coverage privileged elected officials who criticized movement demands for defunding police and deplored isolated instances of property damaged by protestors. Subsequently, public opinion polls saw an increase in concern for law and order tropes and a decrease in support for protests against police violence. Black Lives Matter and local organizations had no coordinated response and no effective means of communication to counter dominant representations voiced by politicians and globally disseminated by major media. Politician and media-instigated public opinion shifts indicate that social movements need their own means of communication and collective decision-making—both of which were largely missing from Black Lives Matter leaders, leading to disaffection and a political split by more than 20 local affiliates. By itself, social media by myriad individuals and groups had limited purchase as a means for social movement communication and organization. Lacking a collaborative, coordinated strategy, organization, and independent media, the loose network of Black Lives Matter groups was unable to offer more accurate, democratic, and favorable representations of protests and their demands for more justice and equality. The fight for equality was diverted by the fight for representation.

Keywords : black lives matter, public opinion, racism, representations, social movements

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