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Echoes of Change: Media Distortion and Cultural Violence in BLM Narratives

Mahamed Rage

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Abstract

This research paper examines the significant impact of media on the public narratives surrounding the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which emerged in 2013 in response to systemic racism and police violence against Black individuals. By exploring the evolution and manipulation of media portrayals, the study highlights how both digital and traditional media have influenced public perceptions of BLM. The central thesis posits that strategic manipulation by counter-movements and selective media framing have significantly distorted the movement's original intentions, contributing to societal misunderstandings and cultural violence. Drawing on Johan Galtung's theory of cultural violence, the study illustrates how language and symbols within media narratives have been used to legitimize repression and delegitimize nonviolent resistance. The analysis also applies Mohandas K. Gandhi's concept of trusteeship to the role of media institutions, arguing that journalists and media owners, as stewards of public discourse, have a moral responsibility to prioritize truth, diversity, and equity over profit and political alignment. Through an analysis of secondary sources, including academic journals, articles, and media reports, the paper investigates how language and imagery have been used to undermine BLM's legitimacy. Additionally, it explores the implications of this distortion, particularly in relation to historical narratives of nonviolent resistance and the broader societal impact on racial justice movements. The findings highlight the urgent need for balanced and accountable media coverage that uplifts nonviolent movements like BLM, ensuring a more informed public and a more just, democratic society.

Introduction

On a rainy February evening in 2012, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin walked home through a gated Florida neighborhood with a drink and a pack of Skittles in his hoodie pocket. He never made it. George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer, found Martin suspicious, pursued him against police advice, and ultimately shot him dead. When Zimmerman was acquitted, arguing self-defense despite Martin being unarmed, the verdict ignited national outrage (Kilgo, Mourao & Sylvie 2018,414–415). In response, Alicia Garza penned a Facebook post she called “a love note to Black people,” declaring: “Black people, I love you. I love us. Our lives matter.” Patrisse Cullors reposted it with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. With Opal Tometi, they launched what would soon become one of the most influential racial justice movements in modern American history (Clayton 2018,453–454).

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement quickly evolved into a sustained, nonviolent campaign against systemic racism and police brutality. Yet as it gained visibility, its message became increasingly misrepresented. Media portrayal and counter-movements began to distort the movement’s aims, shifting public discourse away from justice and toward narratives of fear and division. This manipulation can be understood through Johan Galtung’s theory of violence, which outlines three interrelated forms: direct (physical harm), structural (institutionalized inequality), and cultural (symbolic and ideological justification). Cultural violence, in particular, is the most insidious—it legitimizes and obscures other forms of violence by embedding harmful narratives within institutions like the media, education, and law (Galtung 1996,2). By framing BLM protests as chaotic, threatening, or extremist, media coverage has helped normalize resistance to racial equity while maintaining existing hierarchies.

This paper argues that the distortion of BLM's message, especially through the rise of counter-movements like Blue Lives Matter, functions as a form of cultural violence. These counternarratives co-opt the rhetoric of civil rights to protect state power and reposition law enforcement as a persecuted group, despite their institutional authority (Thusi 2020,27–28). Media, both digital and traditional, play a central role in this process, shaping public perception through strategic language, imagery, and framing.

BLM formally gained national prominence after the 2014 police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, which sparked widespread protests and further propelled conversations about police violence. Social media platforms like Twitter became critical arenas for these debates, with hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter reflecting deeper societal tensions over race and justice (Carney 2016,181; Maguire, Nix, & Bradley 2017,47).

However, mainstream media often adopted frames that marginalized the movement. Leopold and Bell (2017) found that major U.S. newspapers frequently relied on the protest paradigm, framing demonstrations as violent or criminal while overlooking the movement's core concerns. They used frames like "riot," "crime story," "carnival," and "public nuisance," which deflected attention from systemic issues and painted protestors as threats to social order (Leopold & Bell 2017,721).¹

In addition to this, the rise of counter-movements like "All Lives Matter" and "Blue Lives Matter" further complicated the narrative. These groups leveraged social media to frame BLM as radical or exclusionary, distorting its core message of equality and justice (Carney 2016,182–183). Such framings, amplified by traditional news outlets, contribute to public

¹ As per Chenoweth (2021, 55), while the administration depicted the BLM protests as "riots", "reports showed that protestors remained strictly nonviolent in over 97 percent of the events, despite the fact that police beat, tear-gassed, and assaulted hundreds of protestors and arrested thousands more".

misunderstanding and reinforce cultural violence by making resistance to racial justice seem reasonable or necessary.

These distortions are not solely the product of ideological opposition. They are reinforced by the internal structures of the media industry itself—including editorial routines, dependence on official sources, and market-driven imperatives, which together sustain narratives that marginalize dissent and uphold dominant power structures (Entman & Rojecki 2000, 921; Leopold & Bell 2017,723).

In sum, this paper explores how media framing and counter-movements manipulate public narratives around nonviolent resistance, using BLM as a case study. Through an analysis of media texts, scholarly literature, and movement responses, it examines how language, imagery, and power intersect to distort calls for justice, revealing the deep entrenchment of cultural violence in American public discourse.

1.1. The Power of Language in Social Movements

Language has always been a vital tool for nonviolent social movements, shaping public perception, mobilizing supporters, and framing the narratives that define their objectives (Tarlau 2014, 376). Historically, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s exemplified the strategic use of language to advance social justice. The very slogan or descriptor for the struggle, “The Civil Rights Movement”, made it clear that people were fighting for justice and the recognition of their civil rights. Martin Luther King Jr.’s speeches, such as the “I Have a Dream” speech, used aspirational and inclusive language to galvanize support and frame the struggle for civil rights within the broader context of American ideals of freedom and equality. This strategic use of language was crucial in

garnering widespread support and highlighting the moral imperatives of the movement.

However, as Hooker (2016) points out, the historical narrative of the Civil Rights Movement has often been romanticized, focusing primarily on its nonviolent aspects while ignoring the violence and resistance activists faced. This strategic and selective remembrance by the media and other bad-faith actors has shaped contemporary perceptions of legitimate protest, often to the detriment of current nonviolent movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM) (Hooker 2016, 455).

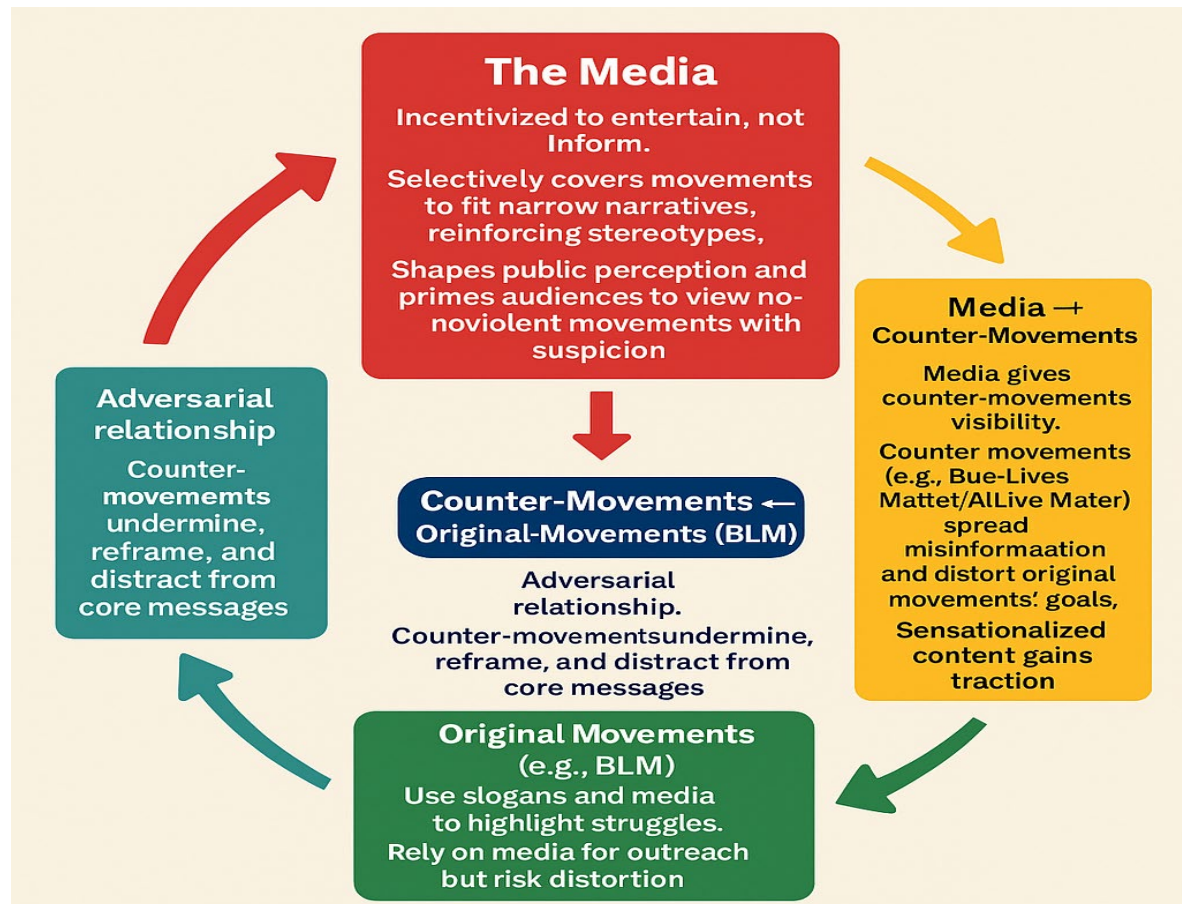
The slogan "Black Lives Matter" emerged in 2013 as a direct response to systemic racism and violence against Black individuals, particularly in policing. It encapsulates a demand for recognition of the value of Black lives in a society where they are disproportionately targeted (Banks 2018,714). The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter quickly gained traction on social media, becoming a central symbol of the movement's fight against racial injustice (Carney 2016,181). The intended message of "Black Lives Matter" is clear: it calls for an end to the systemic devaluation of Black lives and demands equality and justice. It is a direct response to the persistent racial inequalities that plague American society, particularly in law enforcement.

The language of "Black Lives Matter" has faced significant distortion, particularly through the emergence of counter-movements such as "All Lives Matter" and "Blue Lives Matter". These counter-movements often dismiss cases of police brutality against Black Americans by suggesting that the victims were not respecting the importance of police protection (Carney 2016,193). By redirecting attention from racially motivated incidents, these slogans aim to undermine the specific call for racial justice inherent in the "Black Lives Matter" movement. The phrase "Black Lives Matter" is often misconstrued as divisive, prompting the creation of the "All

Lives Matter" slogan, which asserts that all lives are equal. However, "All Lives Matter" is frequently used to deny the specific issues of police brutality and racism faced by Black individuals, diluting the urgent message of BLM.

To illustrate the cyclical relationship between media and counter-movements, refer to Figure 1. This figure, which I have termed "the spin cycle of distortion," demonstrates how nonviolent social movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM) interact with counter-movements and are subsequently portrayed by the media. It highlights the dynamic interplay between these parties and how their interactions contribute to the overall distortion of the original message and intentions of the movements.

Figure 1: The Spin Cycle of Distortion



1.2. Distortion of the BLM Message by Counter-Movements.

Despite its clear message, "Black Lives Matter" has been subject to significant distortion, primarily through the efforts of the media and counter-movements. The news media often plays a crucial role in this distortion by employing rhetorical strategies that undermine the movement's legitimacy.

The Blue Lives Matter movement was founded in December 2014 by four New York City police officers following the fatal shooting of Officers Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu. Motivated by what they saw as growing hostility toward law enforcement, the founders sought to counter negative media portrayals and provide emotional and material support to officers and their families. Their mission emphasized public awareness, mutual aid among officers, and comfort for those affected by the dangers of police work. The movement adopted a distinct flag—a black-and-white American flag with a single blue stripe—to symbolize the “thin blue line” police hold to maintain order. The movement initially centered on solidarity within law enforcement and public recognition of the risks officers face (Thusi 2020, 17-20).

However, the movement quickly evolved into a counternarrative that undermined calls for police accountability, particularly those voiced by the Black Lives Matter movement. As national protests highlighted systemic police violence against Black communities, Blue Lives Matter reframed the discourse, casting police not as perpetrators but as victims under siege. “According to a December 2016 poll, 61% of Americans believed there was a 'war on police,' and 68% of white Americans had a favorable view of law enforcement, compared to just 40% of Black Americans” (Thusi 2020,17). The racial disparity in public perception of law enforcement soon translated into legislative action, with policymakers across various states introducing "Blue

Lives Matter" bills that reclassified offenses against police officers as hate crimes. These initiatives reframed the conversation, positioning law enforcement as a persecuted group and deflecting attention from the structural violence faced by Black communities. The symbolic language and imagery of the movement, most notably its modified American flag, were later appropriated by white nationalist groups, as seen during the 2017 Charlottesville rally. What began as a response to the targeted killing of police officers evolved into a broader countermovement that resisted racial justice efforts, illustrating how institutional racism is sustained through both legal mechanisms and dominant cultural narratives (Thusi 2020, 21).

The media has consistently played a critical role in shaping public perception of nonviolent movements by disproportionately highlighting instances of disorder, particularly during Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests. This selective framing served to criminalize Black protesters and legitimize a militarized police presence as defenders of societal order. Such depictions catered primarily to white audiences and reinforced narratives of white authority and control. Within this environment, counter-movements like Blue Lives Matter gained traction by reframing the discourse around law enforcement victimhood and deflecting attention from systemic racial injustice.

As Thusi (2020) notes, rhetorical tactics such as citing "Black-on-Black crime" worked to delegitimize the BLM movement and devalue Black lives relative to police lives (Thusi 2020, 24–25). The term "riot" itself operates as a politically loaded mislabeling, often employed to undermine the legitimacy of otherwise peaceful protests. As Chenoweth and Stephan emphasize, such language strategically delegitimizes nonviolent resistance despite empirical evidence showing that nonviolent campaigns are more successful than violent ones, achieving their aims 53% of the time compared to just 26% for violent campaigns (Chenoweth and Stephan 2008, 8).

Labeling peaceful protests as violent not only justifies state crackdowns but also undermines the efficacy of democratic dissent. However, history—from East Timor to the Philippines—demonstrates that disciplined, mass-based nonviolent resistance often produces loyalty shifts within regimes and international support, ultimately leading to political transformation (Chenoweth and Stephan 2008, 25–36).

Johan Galtung's foundational work on violence, as outlined in his 1969 article "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," offers a comprehensive framework that is essential for understanding the full spectrum of harm experienced by marginalized communities. Galtung expands the concept of violence beyond its narrow, physical sense, arguing that "violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations." (Galtung 1969, 170). This definition anchors violence not only in acts of bodily harm but also in the systematic denial of potential well-being due to structures and cultures that entrench inequality. He further elaborates that violence includes both direct actions and the threats of such actions, stating, "I see violence as avoidable insults to basic human needs, and more generally to life, lowering the real level of needs satisfaction below what is potentially possible. Threats of violence are also violence" (Galtung, 1990, 292). These insights are critical to assessing the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which emerged in response to the police killings of Black individuals and the broader systemic neglect of Black life in America.

Galtung's three dimensions—direct, structural, and cultural violence—together illuminate how harm against Black communities is perpetuated and normalized. Direct violence manifests through police brutality, while structural violence is embedded in biased institutions that perpetuate marginalization, such as discriminatory law enforcement and judicial systems

(Bertilsson 2021, 38). Cultural violence legitimizes these injustices by framing Blackness as threatening and resistance as disorderly, particularly through skewed media narratives. This cultural framing reinforces structural violence by shaping public perception in a way that normalizes inequality and justifies direct harm. For instance, media portrayals that depict Black Lives Matter protests as violent create a climate in which excessive policing is accepted or even expected. This cycle of harm is reinforced by poverty, racial profiling, and underrepresentation in leadership roles, all of which reduce the potential for full realization of well-being within Black communities (Bertilsson 2021, 39). Therefore, dismantling police violence and its systemic roots demands not only institutional reform but also a shift in cultural narratives and public consciousness that sustain racial hierarchies.

Audre Lorde's warning that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Thusi 2020, 27–28) resonates powerfully in analyzing the Blue Lives Matter movement. By co-opting the language and strategies of civil rights, originally designed to protect marginalized groups, the movement repositions police officers, who often enact state violence, as a vulnerable class in need of protection. This inversion of civil rights rhetoric is not just symbolic; it has had tangible legislative consequences. Blue Lives Matter has influenced the passage of hate crime laws that reframe police officers as victims, reducing accountability for acts of violence against Black individuals and further entrenching systemic power imbalances (Gail 2022, 416–418). The appropriation of the abbreviation "BLM" also reflects a digital form of structural violence, as it disrupts the visibility and searchability of the Black Lives Matter movement, undermining its effectiveness in digital organizing. As Thusi (2020) argues, these legal tools—meant to safeguard civil rights—are ultimately being weaponized to reinforce the very structures they

were intended to challenge, demonstrating how the master's tools, even when repurposed, continue to serve the master.

In recent years, other counter-movements like "All Lives Matter" have surfaced, aiming to shift the focus away from racial issues. According to David Bedrick, a counselor and author, although this slogan appears to be inclusive, it effectively removes race from the conversation, which demonstrates a deliberate ignorance of racial issues in America (Bedrick 2015). Bedrick explains that when White individuals respond with "All lives matter," they are ignoring the privilege they have, which people of color do not possess. This phrase serves as a form of negation and opposition to Black Lives Matter, highlighting competitive victimhood. While many view their profession as integral to their identity, it is different from race, which is an immutable characteristic. People can choose to become police officers, but being Black is not a choice.

1.3. Media Distortion and the Romanticization of Nonviolent Movements

As previously stated, the media plays a large role in distorting the original message of nonviolent social movements and helps to create and fan the flames of counter-movements. One of the more insidious ways they do this is through the selective deployment of public memory. Hooker (2016) explains that the media often compares BLM unfavorably to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, particularly the nonviolent protests led by Martin Luther King Jr. For example, Bill O'Reilly claimed that King would not support BLM, arguing that BLM condones violence, which contrasts with King's pacifism. This comparison serves to delegitimize BLM by suggesting its methods and message are less valid because they do not align with the

romanticized, nonviolent image of past civil rights activism. Often described as “not your grandfather’s civil-rights movement,” Black Lives Matter distinguishes itself through its rejection of top-down leadership and traditional organizational models (Cobb 2016 as cited in Solomon and Martin 2019, 9). This phrase highlights the movement’s departure from the centralized, hierarchical structures of 1960s-era activism, instead embracing a decentralized approach that empowers local communities. While BLM has identifiable founders and an official platform, it intentionally prioritizes collective leadership and community-driven action to align with its broader goals of equity and systemic change.

The romanticization of the Civil Rights Movement often deliberately ignores the violence faced by activists, creating a skewed perception of what constitutes legitimate protest. Hooker (2016) points out that while civil rights activists primarily used nonviolent methods, they were frequently met with violence from the state and white supremacists. This selective remembrance perpetuates a discourse that only certain forms of protest are socially acceptable, sidelining the harsh realities of the struggle for racial justice (Hooker 2016, 452).

Romanticization, in this case, can be seen as a form of flawed logic, where the success of nonviolent resistance is often attributed to the presence or threat of violence rather than the effectiveness of the nonviolent tactics themselves. This argument suggests that if a nonviolent movement achieves success in the presence of some violence, the success is due to the violent elements rather than the nonviolent strategies. On the contrary, according to Chenoweth and Stephan (2008). Chenoweth and Stephan’s research challenges the assumption that violence is more effective, demonstrating through extensive analysis that nonviolent movements are significantly more likely to achieve their goals than violent campaigns.

A similar argument is sometimes applied to Gandhi's movement for Indian independence, where the presence of revolutionary violence is cited as a crucial factor in achieving independence. However, this perspective overlooks the significant impact of Gandhi's nonviolent strategies, which mobilized the masses and garnered international support for the cause. While revolutionary violence did exist, attributing the success solely to these violent elements ignores the broader and more profound influence of nonviolent resistance (Zunes, Hardy, and Stephan 2010, 6).

The Civil Rights Movement, like Gandhi's movement, operated alongside other groups that used violent tactics, though these groups were not part of the nonviolent movement itself. Their presence does not undermine the overall effectiveness of nonviolent resistance. The presence of groups like the Black Panthers, who believed in self-defense and armed resistance, does not invalidate the overall effectiveness of the nonviolent approach led by figures like Martin Luther King Jr. The nonviolent civil rights protests were instrumental in highlighting the moral injustices of segregation and racism, gaining sympathy and support from both national and international communities.

The logic that admixtures of violence in nonviolent movements discredit nonviolent strategies is flawed. Nonviolent movements often operate in highly volatile environments where various forms of resistance coexist. Discrediting nonviolence because of the presence of some violence ignores the complex dynamics of social movements and oversimplifies the pathways to social change. This reasoning fails to acknowledge that many violent movements also include nonviolent elements, which can be crucial in achieving their goals (Dobos 2023, 46 - 47).

Additionally, we tend to see ourselves as good people, a phenomenon described by cognitive science as a “motivated belief.” This is a belief we desperately want to be true, so we interpret information and events in ways that confirm it while ignoring or rationalizing away information that contradicts it. We do not want to believe that we are morally deficient, so we are inclined to discount data indicating such a deficiency. The idea that nonviolence is just as effective as violence (if not more so) is an example of such data—it challenges our notions of collective virtue and decency, making our reluctance to accept it understandable (Dobos 2023, 48).

Overall, romanticizing the Civil Rights Movement while ignoring the violence faced by activists creates an incomplete and misleading narrative. The effectiveness of nonviolent resistance should not be discounted due to the presence of some violent elements. The Civil Rights Movement and Gandhi’s struggle for Indian independence demonstrate that nonviolent strategies can be powerful and effective, even in the face of violence. Acknowledging the full spectrum of tactics used in these movements provides a more accurate understanding of their successes and the complex realities they navigated (Hooker 2016, 458).

This selective remembrance and romanticization also influence how contemporary movements are perceived and reported. Additionally, the media deploys rules of decorum to discredit BLM protesters. Decorum refers to the expectation of politeness and conformity to social norms in public spaces. Deem (2002) argues that those who do not conform to these norms are often deemed unfit for citizenship and public participation (Deem 2002, 446). This strategy was evident in the media coverage of the 2015 protests in Baltimore following Freddie Gray's death. Initially reported as peaceful, the protests were later framed as chaotic and violent, focusing on a minority of protesters who engaged in looting and property damage (Banks 2018,

713). This shift in focus from peaceful protest to disorder delegitimizes the movement by emphasizing actions that violate social decorum. Headlines such as "Scenes of Chaos in Baltimore as Thousands Protest Freddie Gray's Death" from The New York Times and "Baltimore riots: Looting, fires engulf city after Freddie Gray's funeral" from CNN exemplify this strategy. These headlines conflated the chaos with the protesters, framing BLM participants as the creators of disorder and thus portraying them as 'bad' citizens (Yan and Ford 2015; Babcock 2015, as cited in Banks 2018, 715). This focus on deviant behavior marginalizes the nonviolent majority and skews public perception against the movement.

Another media strategy is the maintenance of a post-racial discourse, which denies the existence of systemic racism and frames any discussion of racial inequality as a form of reverse racism. Conservative media figures like Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity frequently label BLM activists as "race hustlers," accusing them of exploiting racial issues for personal gain (Banks, 2018, 716). This rhetoric aims to reassert a post-racial narrative that claims America has moved beyond racism, thereby discrediting BLM's claims of systemic racial injustice. The term "race hustler" is used to dismiss the legitimate grievances of BLM activists by framing their activism as manipulative and self-serving. O'Reilly, for instance, denies the existence of white privilege and attributes racial inequalities to personal failings rather than systemic issues. He uses statistics on unemployment rates, median household incomes, and family structures to argue that race does not create structural inequalities (The O'Reilly Factor 2014, as cited in Banks 2018, 716-717). This rhetoric undermines BLM by positioning its activists as exploiters of racial issues, thereby delegitimizing their cause.

The distortion of BLM's message through these media strategies has significant consequences. By framing BLM as violent, disrespectful of social norms, and manipulative of

racial issues, the media contributes to a broader societal misunderstanding of the movement's true objectives. Chenoweth's research on nonviolent resistance underscores the harm of such mischaracterizations. She argues that labeling nonviolent movements as violent not only delegitimizes them but also shifts public focus away from the critical issues they aim to address, thus perpetuating the status quo and undermining the movements' effectiveness (Chenoweth & Stephan 2008, 35). This deliberate mislabeling serves as a form of cultural violence, detracting from the movement's legitimate calls for justice and reform. This not only hampers the movement's efforts to gain widespread support but also reinforces existing racial prejudices and divisions. Moreover, the emphasis on decorum and post-racial narratives serves to uphold the status quo by delegitimizing any form of protest that challenges systemic injustices. As Lozano-Reich and Cloud (2009) note, rules of decorum are often used to silence marginalized groups and maintain existing power structures (Reich and Cloud 2009, 224). By demanding that BLM adhere to unrealistic standards of civility created by a revisionist and romanticized view of the past, the media effectively stifles the movement's ability to advocate for meaningful change.

2.1 The Erosion of Media Integrity: Causes and Consequences

The decline in media quality can be traced back to the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine, a regulatory policy that once required broadcasters to present contrasting viewpoints on controversial issues. The Fairness Doctrine, established by the Federal Communications Commission in 1949, was designed to ensure that the limited number of broadcast frequencies available to the public were used in a manner that served the public interest. The doctrine mandated that broadcasters devote airtime to discussing matters of public importance and present

opposing views on these issues. This regulation aimed to prevent any viewpoint from monopolizing the airwaves and promote a balanced discourse (Rendall 2005). However, the Fairness Doctrine was repealed in 1987 during the Reagan administration. This move was part of a broader deregulatory agenda that viewed broadcasters not as community trustees but as marketplace participants.

A well-informed electorate is a cornerstone of democracy. By ensuring that broadcasters serve the public interest and provide diverse perspectives, trusteeship supports the kind of informed public discourse that is necessary for a healthy democracy. The concept of trusteeship can counteract some negative effects of media consolidation. When a few large corporations control a significant portion of the media landscape, there is a risk that the range of viewpoints presented will be narrow. Trusteeship can help ensure that even large media entities provide diverse and balanced content.

The repeal of the Fairness Doctrine has had a detrimental effect on the quality and balance of media coverage. The rise of partisan programming and the decline in diverse viewpoints have contributed to a polarized media environment. To address these issues, there is a growing call for the reintroduction of the Fairness Doctrine or similar regulations to ensure that the public airwaves serve the interests of all citizens, not just those of media conglomerates and their commercial interests (Rendall 2005).

2.2. Trusteeship and Media Responsibility: The Case for Broadcasters as Trustees in Post-Truth Times.

Mohandas K. Gandhi's theory of trusteeship, originally conceived as a moral alternative to capitalism, offers a compelling framework for rethinking media responsibility in the current age of misinformation and polarization. Rooted in the legal concept of a trust, Gandhi's vision encouraged business owners to view themselves not as absolute proprietors but as custodians of wealth who bear a duty to serve the public good (Banks 2018, 716). This idea did not reject private ownership but insisted that wealth, resources, and power must be exercised ethically and in service of society (Iyengar & Bhatt 2023, 38). Applied to the media, this philosophy invites broadcasters and media conglomerates to see themselves as public trustees—guardians of information who have a moral obligation to ensure fair, accurate, and inclusive reporting for the benefit of a democratic society.

Broadcast frequencies are a finite public resource, and those who hold licenses to use them carry a civic responsibility. When media actors operate purely as market participants rather than trustees, the public interest is often subordinated to commercial or political agendas. Gandhi's idea of trusteeship encourages a shift back toward prioritizing the common good. Historically, policies like the Fairness Doctrine in the United States embodied this ethos by requiring broadcasters to present diverse viewpoints on controversial issues (*Red Lion Broadcasting Co. v. FCC*, 1969). Its repeal, however, paved the way for a more partisan media landscape, contributing to the rise of corporate entities like Sinclair Broadcast Group, whose programming reflects concentrated ideological interests rather than broad public accountability (Rendall 2005). The erosion of diverse, balanced coverage has weakened trust in media institutions and diminished citizens' access to essential information needed for democratic participation (Rendall 2005).

In global contexts, including coverage of the war on Gaza and the Palestinian people, we see the consequences of failing to uphold a trusteeship model. Mainstream media outlets often rely on state sources or official narratives while sidelining local voices, particularly Palestinian journalists reporting firsthand from conflict zones, many of whom have risked or lost their lives in pursuit of the truth. Meanwhile, Western corporate media operatives, often far removed from the realities on the ground, sit comfortably in high-rise offices, repeating sanitized state narratives while ignoring the overwhelming, vivid photographic and video evidence emerging from what is arguably the most livestreamed genocide in modern history. This deliberate refusal to engage with verified material and on-the-ground testimony reflects not just a journalistic failure but an ethical one. In such a media environment, where the erasure of an entire people can occur in plain view yet remain obscured to much of the public, we must ask: what chance do nonviolent movements at home have when the state can so effectively shape and suppress the global narrative of injustice? This dynamic exemplifies Johan Galtung's notion of cultural violence, where media becomes a tool not of information but of erasure—legitimizing oppression by framing it as order, and dismissing resistance as chaos.

To address this crisis, the concept of trusteeship must be re-centered in media ethics and practice. Gandhi's vision of trusteeship positions those with access to public resources, including information and platforms, as moral stewards rather than profit-driven actors. Applied to media, this means broadcasters and media owners should see themselves as trustees of public discourse, obligated to represent diverse voices and provide accurate, balanced reporting. Rather than amplifying state or corporate interests, media guided by trusteeship would serve the public by prioritizing truth, equity, and accountability (Ishii 2020). Upholding this principle is essential for rebuilding trust, ensuring democratic participation, and safeguarding the integrity of nonviolent

movements—both locally and globally—in an increasingly polarized and manipulated media landscape (Iyengar & Bhatt 2023, 45).

3.1. Dehumanizing Discourse and the Costs of Repressing Nonviolent Movements: The Case of BLM and Counter-Movements.

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has played a central role in challenging systemic racism and advocating for police accountability in the United States. Yet, in response to BLM's growing influence, counter-movements such as Blue Lives Matter and All Lives Matter have emerged, often employing dehumanizing and ideological language to undermine and distort BLM's message. These counter-narratives are not merely rhetorical—they function as instruments of what Johan Galtung terms cultural violence, where language and symbols are used to legitimize both structural and direct violence. Drawing from sociolinguistic theories by Gumperz (1982) and Hymes (1974), the ideological framing of these movements reveals how discourse is weaponized to shape social perception and control narratives, contributing to the cultural conditions that sustain systemic inequality (Platt & Williams 2002,345).

The media plays a pivotal role in amplifying these narratives. The distortion of nonviolent campaigns, particularly BLM, has significantly shaped public perception, often portraying peaceful protests as dangerous or chaotic. This reframing undercuts the moral authority of the movement and diminishes public sympathy, making it easier for the state to justify repressive policing tactics (Banks 2018, 710). Such portrayals reduce the perceived legitimacy of BLM's nonviolent resistance and blunt the public's reaction to state-sanctioned violence. Galtung's framework shows how this type of cultural violence allows the state and

media to obscure the unjust nature of structural violence and instead portray the state as defending order, thereby legitimizing further repression.

Moreover, repressing nonviolent movements like BLM carries higher political and social costs than repressing violent campaigns. According to Chenoweth and Stephan (2008), when a movement maintains nonviolent discipline, state repression is more likely to backfire. Internally, it can trigger shifts in loyalty among regime actors, such as civil servants, security forces, or judicial officials, who may sympathize with the movement's goals. Externally, violent crackdowns on peaceful protesters often generate international condemnation and increase support for the resistance, while reducing support for the regime (Chenoweth & Stephan 2008, 11–12). However, these dynamics are heavily contingent on the public's ability to perceive the movement as nonviolent. When media distortion successfully reframes peaceful protests as violent threats, it lowers the costs of repression and erodes the potential for domestic and international backlash. Therefore, the manipulation of language and imagery not only shapes perception but actively undermines the effectiveness of nonviolent resistance.

3.2. Mitigating Repression Costs through Media Narratives:

To mitigate these high costs, counter-movements and media often distort the nonviolent nature of BLM. By emphasizing isolated incidents of violence or portraying protests as inherently violent, the media creates a narrative that frames BLM activists as "violent insurgents" rather than peaceful protesters.

This distortion serves several purposes:

1. Justification of Repression: By portraying BLM as violent, authorities can justify aggressive policing and repression. This framing reduces the perceived severity of cracking down on BLM compared to a movement that is widely recognized as nonviolent and reported as such in the media.
2. Reducing Backlash: If the public perceives BLM as violent, there is less outrage and backlash against repressive actions. The domestic and international repercussions of violent crackdowns are less severe when the movement can be credibly labeled as a threat.
3. Weakening Internal Solidarity: Media distortion can sow discord within the resistance by creating divisions over the movement's perceived violence. This weakens internal solidarity and reduces the movement's effectiveness.
4. Decreasing External Support: By framing BLM as violent, media narratives can decrease external support for the movement. International actors and domestic allies are less likely to support a movement perceived as violent, reducing the pressure on the regime to reform. In the case of the Black Lives Matter movement, the regime is the US government, laws, and policing institutions. Dehumanizing discourse by counter-movements like Blue Lives Matter and All Lives Matter further amplifies the media's distortion of BLM. These counter-movements often frame BLM activists as violent criminals, undermining their legitimacy and justifying repressive measures.

This dehumanizing language aligns with Galtung's cultural violence by normalizing structural violence and marginalizing BLM's message. Overall, the interaction between dehumanizing discourse, nonviolent resistance, and the costs of repression illustrates the complex dynamics at

play in contemporary social movements. By understanding how language and media shape public perception and legitimize structural violence, we can better comprehend the challenges faced by movements like BLM. The higher costs of repressing nonviolent campaigns underscore the importance of maintaining and communicating a commitment to nonviolence, as this strategy not only garners internal and external support but also increases the legitimacy and resilience of the movement in the face of repression (Chenoweth, Stephan 2008, 12).

Conclusion

This research has examined the significant impact of media on the narratives surrounding the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, focusing on how media portrayal has evolved and been manipulated over time. The strategic manipulation of language and imagery by counter-movements, amplified by both social and traditional media, significantly distorts the original intentions of nonviolent social movements like BLM. This distortion contributes to a complex landscape of cultural violence and societal misunderstanding in the United States.

The paper highlighted how the BLM movement, which began in response to systemic racism and police violence against Black individuals, has faced numerous challenges due to media misrepresentation. Key incidents, such as the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, were discussed to illustrate how social media debates and hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter have shaped national conversations on race and policing (Carney 2016; Maguire, Nix, and Bradley 2017).

Moreover, the media often employs the protest paradigm, using marginalizing techniques such as the riot frame, crime story frame, and public nuisance frame, diverting attention from BLM's core issues (Leopold & Bell 2017, 723). The interaction between BLM and counter-movements like "All Lives Matter" and "Blue Lives Matter" was analyzed, showing how these groups have further distorted BLM's intentions and propagated divisive narratives through social media (Carney 2016, 181).

The study also delved into structural influences within the media industry, such as the routinization of news coverage, reliance on official sources, market pressures, and traditional news values, which perpetuate stereotypes and negative perceptions of BLM (Entman & Rojecki, 2000, as cited in Leopold & Bell 2017, 721-726).

Ugoji (2017) notes, language plays a central role in shaping societal outcomes, whether in times of peace or conflict, in educational achievements, economic conditions, or political systems (Ugoji 2017, 93). This insight underscores the importance of language in framing media narratives and public perception. To counteract media distortion, it is crucial to implement strategies that promote the use of accurate, non-inflammatory language and encourage critical media literacy. Educators, journalists, and media organizations must work together to ensure that language is used responsibly and that diverse perspectives are represented fairly. By doing so, we can create a more informed and balanced media landscape that better reflects the complexities of social movements like BLM and fosters a more just and equitable society. Having established the extent of media distortion and its impact, it is essential to explore solutions to promote more accurate and balanced media coverage. According to Ugoji's analysis on language and global peace, several strategies can be implemented to address these issues:

First, it is crucial to incorporate peace linguistics and media literacy education. Educators should teach students to critically analyze media content, recognizing how language shapes and distorts reality. By understanding the ideological implications embedded in media narratives, individuals can become more discerning consumers of information and less susceptible to manipulation. This educational approach can foster a generation that is better equipped to navigate and challenge media biases in everyday interactions (Ugoji 2017, 93). As Ugoji states, "Even the media that ordinarily should handle the issue of agenda settings have been carried away and as such the language of the media is that of wars, conflicts and their likes" (Ugoji 2017, 91). This quote underscores the pervasive influence of conflict-oriented language in media. By teaching peace linguistics, we can counteract this trend, encouraging students to recognize and question the prevalence of combative language. This can lead to a more balanced and peace-oriented media landscape, reducing the societal impact of inflammatory rhetoric.

Second, media organizations themselves must adopt stricter guidelines to ensure fairness and balance in reporting. This includes revisiting concepts similar to the Fairness Doctrine, which mandated that broadcasters present contrasting viewpoints on controversial issues. Reinstating such policies would encourage a diversity of perspectives, reducing the perverse profit-driven prevalence of one-sided narratives that contribute to societal polarization (Rendall 2005). Balanced reporting can mitigate misunderstandings and foster more constructive dialogues in society.

Additionally, journalists and media professionals should receive training in critical linguistics and peace linguistics to become more aware of how their word choices and framing can influence public perception. This training should emphasize the importance of presenting social movements in their full complexity, avoiding oversimplification and sensationalism. Such

awareness can improve the quality of media interactions and reporting, leading to more nuanced and accurate representations.

Furthermore, regulatory bodies like the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) should enforce policies that hold media outlets accountable for biased reporting. These bodies can implement monitoring systems to evaluate the balance and fairness of coverage, ensuring that all significant viewpoints are represented. Accountability measures can help reduce the spread of misinformation and promote responsible journalism.

Lastly, fostering independent, non-profit media organizations can provide alternatives to mainstream corporate media. These outlets often have greater freedom to explore nuanced stories and give voice to marginalized communities, counteracting the dominant narratives that tend to marginalize or misrepresent social movements. Supporting such media can diversify the information landscape, offering the public a broader array of perspectives and fostering a more inclusive discourse.

In addition to these measures, the importance of language development from an early age cannot be overstated. Teaching children the value of using non-provocative language and promoting linguistic politeness strategies can help prevent conflicts and encourage peaceful coexistence. According to Ugoji (2017), teaching children to use respectful and appropriate language from an early age can greatly diminish the chances of future conflicts. This idea is supported by Sapir and Whorf's theory of linguistic relativism, which suggests that our language shapes how we perceive and interact with the world (Ugoji 2017, 88).

In conclusion, by integrating critical linguistic education, enforcing balanced reporting guidelines, training media professionals, regulating media practices, supporting

independent journalism, and emphasizing early language development, we can work towards a media landscape that more accurately reflects the diverse realities of nonviolent social movements. This comprehensive approach will help to mitigate the distortions perpetuated by the media, will eliminate or reduce the prominence of counter movements seeking to discredit nonviolent movements, and maintain the status quo. All this will help to foster a more informed and equitable society. By addressing the strategic manipulation of language and imagery, we can ensure that nonviolent movements like BLM are represented more accurately, laying the groundwork for a society rooted in justice, truth, and collective dignity.

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