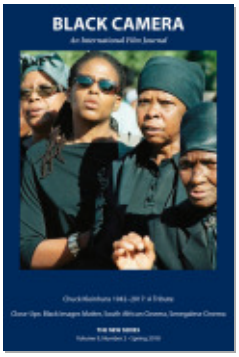
Critical Surveillance Literacy in Social Media: Interrogating Black Death and Dying Online



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Close-Up: Black Images Matter

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Abstract

The circulation of surveillance videos and images of African Americans murdered or detained by police and private security has been enhanced by the spectacle of new media. Media spectacles are created by surveillance records to foster news ratings and advertising revenues at the expense of national conversations and public policy addressing racial injustices. Increasing resources have been allocated in service of new forms of record keeping by the state, as new federal and municipal commitments to surveillance in the form of police body cameras has escalated, fueled by the requests from the families of victims of police violence and murder. In this article, I take a critical view on information records like surveillance videos as a fundamental part of emerging narratives of public safety and as a profitable endeavor that demands greater critical surveillance literacy.[1] Instead of tacit acceptance of the gaze of surveillance videos generated from African American death and dying, I think we must cultivate a critical surveillance literacy for making sense of extra-judicial and state sanctioned violence. Thus, I use critical discourse analysis to make sense of the profits that accrue from surveillance videos and analyze the online, internet-based media discourses that obscure surveillance practices. I investigate how these types of records and digital artifacts work in service of persistent domination of African Americans in the United States.

A Critical Surveillance Literacy of the Black Body

The circulation and consumption of traumatic images is a major issue facing members of the public who use the Internet. Armies of commercial content moderators are hired by social media firms, for example, to screen objectionable and traumatic or illegal content and the business of moderation is increasingly becoming a matter of legal and ethical concern by Internet companies.[2] While certain types of objectionable material is filtered out of view by software or human beings, images of African Americans dead

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and dying are often the titillating object of persistent media spectacle, and such material is hyper-circulated and often goes viral through online media platforms. Recent examples of Internet media spectacles include the circulation of videos of Mike Brown, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Alton Sterling, Korryn Gaines, and Philando Castile, among others. What we need is a framework to contextualize how social media fosters symbolic death and posttraumatic stress, in service of expanding a much needed critical surveillance literacy.

Scholars have argued that surveillance measures have a discriminatory effect by race and class that make bodies of color more susceptible to policing and criminalization.[3] Since the passage of the 2001 USA Patriot Act, the role of law enforcement has been expanded, and new state-imposed definitions of safety in the name of national security that disproportionately profile and surveil Black and brown bodies, while acculturating the public to increasing levels of control.[4] Lyon characterizes the heightened levels of control as contributors to "a culture of fear, control, suspicion, and secrecy, where everyone is a potential terrorist."[5]

Understanding the political economy of media spectacles online, through an analysis of the discourses that circulate about murders of African Americans, can help uncover the ways in which that digital technology platforms traffic in Black death because it is incredibly profitable, both offline and off. Often, surveillance records are used to instantiate a right to fear Blackness while simultaneously provoking inquires by community members and families into violent racialized death in the United States.[6] Thus, we need to think through the complexities of the consolidation of media companies on the Internet, not unlike traditional media like newspapers and radio, and the consequences of such records on public well-being and in service of social action.

Guy Debord offers relevant thinking to examine the spectacle of Black death, where he articulates a framework for thinking about the social life of commodification, and the spectacle that society has become as a result of capitalism and alienation. For him, mass media was powerfully complicit in the superficiality of culture, and by extension, I contend that social media exacerbates the spectacle of death and dying, through the mechanisms of virality and hyper-circulation. In the context of viral videos of Black death, this means we must consider the commodified status of the subjects, and to some degree their loss of agency in these videos, and how social media traffics these images. While at one moment we think of these videos as meaningful in helping us make sense of police brutality and state violence, we also imagine them as evidence, or records that will bring about justice.

This is where the work of critical archival scientists, Anne Gilliland and Michelle Caswell, provokes us to consider the ways that

documentation—specifically the records of human rights abuses (both real and imagined)—play a meaningful role in the recognition of atrocities:

> Conjured by the unattainable hopes for closure by survivors and victims' families, such imaginary documents are bound by their impossibility; they are always out of grasp, falsely promising to make sense of the nonsensical, always emerging on an intangible horizon. They will never serve as legal evidence, nor provide answers about past atrocities. Yet, despite these limitations, imaginary documents help us to both broaden our definition of human rights documentation to include the affective needs of survivors and victims' families and to reconceptualize archives as institutions that can make meaning out of past atrocity when legal systems are unable to or are perceived to fail to administer justice.[7]

I use their theorization of the expected intervention that such imagined evidence might bring forward, and apply it to the desire for video evidence of African Americans harmed or murdered to be delivered to justice by their existence, particularly those that go viral and garner national and international attention. The imaginary of recorded videos or photos taken of victims by bystanders, or by victims themselves, will allegedly bring about justice and resolution. But, this hope for the possibility of records like social media videos to resolve injustice has to be questioned when these records don't have the impact the public often anticipates in official legal and judicial processes.

Certainly records, and the potential records the circulate in the social media of the future, can serve as documentation for a possibility of recognition. Yet we know, for example, that creators of video "evidence" or records in the informational sense, are legitimated by the State (or not). A clear case of the disavowal of the truth of records is the video evidence recorded by Ramsey Orta, who filmed the death of Eric Garner by NYPD, only have his own criminal record including gun and drug charges used as a means of incarcerating him for up to four years. Orta's documenting of the death of Garner did not serve to convict those who killed Garner, but did generate significant Web traffic for news outlets covering the story; indeed, it is now reported as one of the most important and iconic viral videos to ever be recorded, but in service of whom? The record is both real in its materiality and its commercial value, while simultaneously an imagined means of justice within a legal framework.

Under the current conditions that drive digital media platforms like Google Search, which I have previously written about at length, and subsidiaries of its parent company, Alphabet, such as YouTube or Google Maps, many communities and their histories and identities are held hostage to the profitability of the spectacle. I want to challenge the idea that certain or all

social media records will serve as an arbiter of justice, as if documents are a matter of objective fact. We know for example, again, that videos and photos existed in the deaths of Oscar Grant and Korryn Gaines, yet citizen produced records have not had the same legitimacy as other forms of records generated by the State, and are therefore often considered suspect by legal, state sanctioned decision makers.

The implications of these online practices, and the records of Black death that are generated and shared are profound in their consequences. Videos that circulate in multinational media platforms that feature Black death and dying are a type of commercial property that works in service of the consolidation of power, even while working simultaneously to raise consciousness and awareness of the differential status and lack of justice for Black people in the United States. Viral videos work simultaneously as surveillance technologies, which are often rooted in an emancipatory logic of free flowing information and a right to see and circulate; a right typically over-afforded to White Americans.[8] In this way, surveillance technologies and multinational internet communications platforms work to protect property for the wealthy who have historically been, and contemporarily are, White Americans.[9] Viral images often become the property of these companies; and the social media of Black life is hyper-surveilled by the State, often by local law enforcement and federal agencies. The ACLU's latest report issued on October 11, 2016 corroborates the testimony of many Black activists about the ways that law enforcement surveilled activists in Baltimore, and #BlackLivesMatter activists working in Ferguson, MO using Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, with metadata provided to them from Geofeedia, a social media monitoring software.[10] Previously, I have characterized these technological surveillance encroachments in my research on Google Glass by reasserting Harris' position that, "the normalization of 'the other' is a product of the ways in which White property, White interests, and even Whiteness itself, can and should be protected at all costs."[11] In the case of a surveillance technology like Google Glass, the very premise that the gaze of the techno-elite upon the world through Glass, a class of users that was primarily White and wealthy, as a legitimate incursion upon others vis-à-vis the "explorer" and other colonial metaphors used by the brand tells us a lot about who becomes property within the gaze, and the companies that derive benefit from it.[12]

Trafficking in Black death and dying, including resistance movements that call for justice in the face of it, does not preclude using these images as commodity or Clickbait. This is part of the troubling landscape of digital media platforms, which often erase the context and history of racial violence in the United States from the dissemination of content. While many think of the internet as a perpetual "digital archive" of the many societies within which

it is organized, it is anything but; for archives are organized intentionally to frame and understand communities and ideas in context. Tonia Sutherland has written extensively about the social imaginary of Black death and the erasure of images of violence against African Americans from archives throughout the United States, and she characterizes the lack of collection of records of Black death and dying, in terms of postcards and memorabilia of lynching, for example, as a type of amnesty that has been given to perpetrators of such heinous acts.[13] Her historical accounting of the ways that public policy stemming from the Civil War granted clemency to those who had been perpetrators of racist violence against Black people. She asserts, "Archives as memory institutions are collectively mandated to create, maintain, use, and make available records of a shared national history. Where then, is the evidence of this difficult past?"[14] I extend her argument: if social media are serving as some type of perpetual record, then in whose interest is the platform operating to circulate such evidence in the interest of political, social, and economic justice?

Black Death and Dying for Sale

Myths of a digital meritocracy premised on a technocratic colorblindness emerge key to perpetuating gender and racial exclusions, and are the byproduct of the tone deafness in Silicon Valley that consistently seeks to disavow itself of racist technological practices. Jessie Daniels wrote a powerful piece examining the way colorblind ideology operates in Silicon Valley, and across the Internet, and reminds of us of how race and racism are embedded in the culture and practices of digital technologies, writ large.[15] I argue that alongside this, social media is often uncritically celebrated as a mechanism for "knowing," as if there were not a more than three-hundred-year U.S. history of making visible the dead bodies of African people as a signifier of white power. We often hear people say things like, "if we didn't have these videos, we wouldn't know," even though the reality of other offline practices such as lynching has served as a form of social communication in families, neighborhoods, communities, cities, at the hands of the State, and in the lives of everyday White Americans.

We need a better understanding of the cultural importance of trafficking in the spectacle of Black death and dying on the Internet by looking at how often and to what profit Black death as a viral phenomenon is exponentially potent and traumatizing. In so doing, my research corrects the widespread misconception of digital media platforms as neutral technologies, value-free, and absolved of the social meanings and ideas they put forth. Decisions made by online media giants are driven by profit, at the expense

Figure 1. Most popular news story from Google search on keywords "Eric Garner" on October 15, 2016, which opens with an advertisement from Cisco, and Amazon banner advertisement. (Source: CNN.com).

Figure 2. Most popular item from Google video search on keywords "Eric Garner" on October 15, 2016, which has banner advertisement from Homebay. (Source: YouTube.com).

of women and people of color whose images and cultural markers are often sold to the highest bidders, literally through the auctioning of keywords and selling of advertisements on top of, or in relation to, viral images of Black death (figs. 1 & 2).

By tracing the ways that Black/African Americans are represented and trafficked, I attempt to reveal a complex layering of silences: the silences of those who cannot control the ways in which they are represented at the level of group identity (victims and their families, for example), the silences of the overwhelming majority of people who are unaware of the ways in which they are represented and how this may shape public opinion, and the silences of the companies who do not engage with the civic impact of the ways in which they profit from the media spectacle of Black people dead and dying. We need to better understand the messages encoded in the spectacle. The effects of the circulation of Black death through social media and the emotional consequences that are exacerbated by digital technologies challenge the notion that surveillance footage can be a means of change when the prevailing spectacle is one of profiting from the pain of Black people, with no remedy or restitution, or reparation. I see each of these as essential to what I have coined, a heightened need for a critical surveillance literacy in social media.

Social Media Murder and Posttraumatic Technologies of Terror

What we need are better understandings of what circulation of images that represent death and dying of African Americans through social media is doing, and whether it is indeed contributing to the recently declared public health crisis called racism (fig. 3).

In the meantime, we can learn something from the discourses of journalists documenting their experiences of trauma in reporting on Black death and dying for news organizations. This phenomenon was well articulated on August 20, 2015, when Gene Demby, a noted African American journalist was interviewed for National Public Radio's *Morning Edition* show about the story he wrote for *Code Switch* on the emotional and psychological tolls experienced by African American reporters covering Black death in the media.[16] As a journalist for NPR, Demby covers race and policing, and is inundated with tweets through social media from people with stories and details about the killings of Black people, particularly through state sanctioned police violence. He detailed the ways that Black journalists are incredibly challenged to create "psychic distance" between the subject matter of covering murdered African Americans, and their own lived realities of being potential victims themselves, or for those they know, of police profiling and murder. Demby said that the overwhelming responsibility to cover the stories of racial inequality take a toll on Black journalists, particularly for those who feel the need to be truthful in the coverage of how African Americans are policed. His story brings to the fore the ways that journalistic "objectivity" is mediated through the lens of whiteness in the newsroom, and is portrayed as a kind of alleged neutrality and objectivity, when it is anything but.

Figure 3. Tweet about Black reporters being arrested while covering the death of Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 13, 2014.

In his story for *Code Switch*, he shares the experience of "double vision" that Black reporters share:

> A couple of other reporters I talked to for this story expressed that concern: not being able to do justice to every story, every hashtag, every lost life. "In terms of taking care of myself," Wes told me, "we're one year in, I need to take some time off, and I haven't." Part of the fatigue he described was similar to something Trymaine told me: dealing with the double vision of seeing yourself or someone you love in the story of woe you're out there reporting. Wes grew up in suburban Cleveland, and he and his brothers hung out near the park where 12-year-old Tamir Rice was killed by a cop last winter. He remembers first dealing with that double vision during the Trayvon Martin case. "I was a light-skinned black man walking around in a hoodie buying candy from convenience stores in a sketchy suburban neighborhood every single day of my upbringing," he said. "How many nights was I dressed the exact same he was, doing the exact same thing he was doing?"[17]

There are serious consequences that are understudied about the circulation of Black death through social media, and the emotional consequences that are exacerbated by digital technologies. Demby's coverage of Black reporters affected by the trauma of bombardments of the murders demonstrates how racism in the United States operates as a system of incapacitating social inequalities, with state-sanctioned death functioning as a penultimate manifestation of racist violence. We need to think about whether digital circulations of Black death exacerbate mental and emotional health crises for the communities who are the targets of violence vis-à-vis hyper-policing and increased surveillance. The investments in so-called remedies or new records of abuse through surveillance footage, only obscure our ability to challenge digital technologies and the alleged liberatory narratives that surround them.

Racism can manifest on many levels, from interpersonal attitudes and interactions that are biased and prejudicial, to social structural organization that foster discrimination and access to resources such as jobs, education, power, and symbolic representation.[18] Studies show that African Americans are more likely to experience stress and anxiety due to multiple forms of racial discrimination and prolonged exposure to racism at the cultural and institutional levels.[19] The circulation of videos of Black people dead and dying, particularly at the hands of the State and corporations, no doubt contributes to these stressors.

Little research has been conducted yet on the long-term relationship between social media use and PTSD among African Americans, particularly among a large user base of social media, Black women. A recent dissertation by Morgan Maxwell found that:

> "While Facebook and other SNSs have been viewed as safe spaces for young African Americans to release their frustrations about American racism, findings from this study reveal SNSs increase perceptions of racism, and subsequently influence expressions of anger, anticipatory body alarm response, and general stress. To the extent that these outcomes can collectively impact the health of African Americans, social media use may be more maladaptive to young African Americans than previously thought."[20]

Exposure to social media, while an effective means of discussing issues of race, as Andre Brock from the University of Michigan has noted, allows for everyday libidinal responses that celebrate and reframe Blackness; yet it is also likely to increase stress and anger because of increased exposure to racism and racist content. We see this in the experience of being exposed to the virality of Black death and dying without consent, which often happens on Facebook, Twitter, as well as in YouTube. New research on Black college-aged women's "racialized social media engagements" show that "sustained exposure to racialized violence on social media had detrimental effects on their socio-emotional wellbeing."[21] The importance of this research is that it extends our considerations about the limits and possibilities of social media as a project for political organizing on issues of race and racism. Who then benefits from the circulation of images of Black people dead and dying on the Web?

A Call for Critical Surveillance Literacy in Social Media

It is here that I want to revisit and foreground my call for critical surveillance literacy in social media, which is informed not only by internet practices that situate Black death and dying as commodity subject, but also includes a revisiting of the historical practices of literacy and epistemology among Black people in the United States. A critical surveillance literacy of dead bodies, and the images of such, have been used both in service of bolstering white supremacy and in the commodification of Black death, which has generated strategies of "reading" and knowing about structures and practices of surveillance and control of Black people's lives (figs. 4, 5, & 6).

If we revisit the notion of an official record using the critical archival lens and its source of legitimation: publicly generated records of Black death and dying, such as the records in figures 4 and 5, we can read these images as illegible in the convicting of those who harm or murder Black people. Indeed, the proximity of the recording practice, its legitimation by the record-maker, and the record keepers, is overdetermined by proximity to power and property rights. In the case of lynching records vis-à-vis commercial postcards and memorabilia as represented here, the faces and even names of White

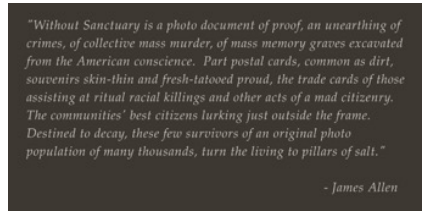

Figure 4. See www.withoutsanctuary.org for more.

Figure 5. The corpse of Clyde Johnson. August 3, 1935. Yreka, California Gelatin silver print. Real photo postcard. 3.1/2 x 5 3/8 in. Etched in the negative, "Killer of Jack Daw Aug 3, 1935 vengeance in Siskiyou County."

Figure 6. The lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, a large gathering of lynchers. August 7, 1930, Marion, Indiana. Gelatin silver print. Copy photo. Frame, 11 x 9", photo, 3 7/8 x 2 3/4" inscribed in pencil on the inner, gray matte: "Bo pointn to his niga." On the yellowed outer matte: "klan 4th Joplin, Mo. 33." Flattened between the glass and double mattes are locks of the victim's hair.

citizens can be fully documented yet never be used as evidence that would lead to conviction for their participation in the spectacle of murdering of Black people. Indeed, Sutherland's argument that archives grant clemency, might also extend to mass media and social media records that appear to be a backdrop for the spectacle: whether through the selling of commercial advertisements and for generating audiences, both online and off.

Recording a particular truth with a focus on evidence, however, has been the central focus on the move toward the call for increased use of policy body cameras. The dominant media discourse of police body cameras suggests that these new state-controlled technologies, which are embedded with a number of problematic assumptions, will be an objective arbiter of truth (figs. 7 & 8).

Stacy Woods, in her new work on body cameras, says:

> The body-worn camera shifts the onus of transparency and accountability from the police themselves and relocates it in a technological object. In this way, the cameras also operate as tools for controlling the emotional state and outcry of the public. Instead of indictments for individual police officers or strategies for significant structural change, we have a seventy-five million dollar investment in a technological solution that is in and of itself considered enough.

Figure 7. Increased calls for body cameras based on calls from families of victims.

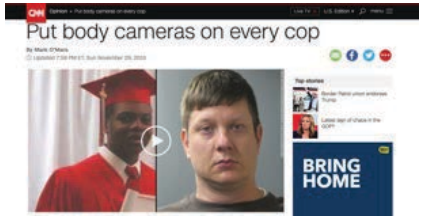

Figure 8. Increased calls for body cameras in major national news Key news outlets have taken up the issues of surveillance records as a legitimate discourse. One major gesture, in response the out of control spiral of videos of Black death has been a public policy response to increasing technological investments in projects like police body cameras.

Thinking about this in the context of the records of the Internet, and the platforms that control and profit from surveillance and citizen videos means that the virality of Black death will be generated in a context of greater surveillance of communities. We need to cultivate a better understanding of how identity is in dialectical tension between struggles for social justice and the privatized, neoliberal models of media ownership that circulate Black death and dying in relationship to the selling of products and services by major U.S. corporations.

In the past, images of Black death and dying have played a crucial role in organizing for civil rights, as evidenced by the work of Ida B. Wells and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Their reframing and use of images of lynching to galvanize abolitionists movements against Jim Crow segregation and the devastating use of violent force and murder in the suppression civil and human rights for Black people was important in shaping public opinion in support of key anti-discrimination and civil rights legislation. In the contemporary moment, within the context of the digital, we must think about the speed at which images are copied and circulated, and whether organizations working on issues of criminal accountability for violence against Black people, which includes expanded social, political and economic rights, are able to reframe the narrative as consistently and visibly as social media platforms. It is here that the basis of community control over images and identity is under threat in an unregulated technology sector that affords little rights the subjects, their families, or their communities in the circulation and narrative surrounding digital images.

Ultimately, this is the crucial dimension of our critical surveillance literacy in social media. Through this lens, we can consider that social media records, unlike other records and artifacts of the past, may have little bearing on the development of strategies that help us recuperate from the losses of life. Rather than have these videos and images continue to be fodder for the justification of our annihilation and serving as memes for white supremacists online or as spectacles to generate Web traffic to large media hubs, we need to challenge how these videos as a type of commercial property that works in service of the consolidation of power. Instead, we could consider public policy that gives families the right to take down images from platforms where they lose control over the narrative that accompanies such videos. We should consider whether the financial investments in the expansion of collecting and storing such images through body cameras, surveillance footage, or user-generated content from the victims themselves, should hold greater potency for bringing about justice, in terms of indictments and convictions. The circulation of Black death and dying is not enough. We need policy that

enables such records to have legitimacy in bringing about resolution and restitution for victims.

The struggle over digital framings of Black death and dying is important in our understanding of both the consequences and affordances of digital media. We need to interrogate how the spectacle of social media often swallows whole the story, and spits back little to dismantle systems of violence.

Safiya Umoja Noble is an assistant professor at the University of Southern California Annenberg School of Communication. Previously, she was appointed in the Department of Information Studies, African American Studies, and Gender Studies at UCLA. She is the recipient of a Hellman Fellowship and UCLA Early Career Award. Noble's academic research focuses on the design of digital media platforms and their impact on society. Her monograph on racist and sexist algorithmic bias is entitled *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. She is an associate editor for the *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, and coeditor of two books, *The Intersectional Internet: Race, Sex, Culture and Class Online* (Digital Formations, 2016) and *Emotions, Technology, and Design* (Elsevier, 2015). Safiya holds a Ph.D. and M.S. in Library & Information Science from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and a B.A. in Sociology from California State University, Fresno.

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