

‘Black Lives Matter’

'Black Lives Matter':

Cross-Media Resonance and the Iconic Turn of Language

By

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and the Iconic Turn of Language

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There is a maturing concern for *words* and their black potential. Many blacks, those who want to create one poem only, *and* those who want to create poetry for the rest of their lives, are asking for help. Their questions are poignant. How do I make words work for me? Are there ways, is there *any* way, **to make English words speak blackly?**

Gwendolyn E. Brooks (Introduction to *The Poetry of Black America: Anthology of the 20th Century*, 1973: XXIX, my bold)

FOREWORD

But if we have learned anything in the last few years, it is that traditional media are now only in charge of part of the story. There is a paucity of facts and an excess of processing power because everyone with a keyboard is theoretically a creator and distributor of content.

David Carr, 2012, *The Media Equation*

The aim of this research is to shed light, from the perspective of applied linguistics, on some societal and cross-cultural aspects of the violent encounters between US police and Afro-Americans. Such encounters have often resulted in the loss of black lives at the hands of police agents, a phenomenon that has recently attracted unprecedented media attention.

The key issues at stake are the use of excessive force and racial profiling by police—race relations still representing a direly unresolved issue for the US—in the context of US gun culture, and the *impact of news media and social media in shaping the development of events and protests*.

In the current US political climate and mediascape, it is mostly through the interaction between the new media and the public that reliable data on the number and manner of such arrest-related deaths are gathered, since before 2016 official sources (FBI, Department of Justice) only provided incomplete data. Professional reporters and engaged members of the public have striven to collect data; the British newspaper *The Guardian* in particular, in the aftermath of the death of Michael Brown (2014) and the ensuing violent protests (Ferguson riots), created in *The Counted* what to date is the most comprehensive map of police killings, which also provides examples of transformative storytelling. In this arena, ‘Black Lives Matter’—dubbed ‘a new civil rights movement’—blossomed from a passionate protest (July 2013) into a structured political movement. The now famous slogan was coined by a workers’ rights activist, who posted a missive on Facebook, ‘Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter,’ which then became #blacklivesmatter. Significantly, the BLM movement was kick-started by this successful, iconic slogan, efficiently transferred to the social media, and has frequently sparked thought-provoking discussions about race, inequality and white privilege across the US.

The power of the language of black protest, generally endorsed by liberal whites and others, has resonated overseas. In particular, Italian linguists, such as the author of this volume, are for the most part sensitive to the co-existence at an intra-national level of localized languages, or topic-related lexico-grammars, alongside the official standard language. No straightforward comparison can be made between the US linguistic map,¹ with its variety of popularly used languages, e.g. African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) or ‘Spanglish’, and the Italian situation, where local languages, now called dialects, are more ancient than standard Italian, and, broadly speaking, are still felt as more immediately expressive in given contexts. Yet, the immediacy and the iconic power of the phrases of the black protest, with the occasional emergence of AAVE grammar patterns, grounded to some extent in African Americans’ love for language, attracted my attention. This study focuses on the ways in which verbal language, synergically blended with gestures, images and other non-linguistic codes, promotes an iconic turn of the language of the protests.

The media role in these events cannot easily be overvalued, and aspects of the media coverage of and attitude toward such fatal encounters are foregrounded in this volume, which places itself in the domain of critical discourse analysis, with attention to the ongoing partial drift of CDA towards multimodal discourse analysis (MCDA). In particular, through the lens of this integrated methodological approach, also based on media studies, the tools and frames of both the discourse historical approach (DHA) and the Appraisal Framework, will be utilized. The time span considered will be 2012-2017, encompassing the media coverage of the killing of Trayvon Martin (which first provoked a sustained national reaction), the deaths of Mike Brown in Ferguson and Eric Garner in New York, the Charleston Church Massacre, the Dallas shooting and the Charlottesville riots over the removal of Confederate icons. I will also take into account the ongoing national debates, including some presidential speeches.

This volume does not attempt to draw a full-rounded sociological or historical picture of the contemporary societal situation in the US. Since the focus is on the languages of protest as amplified by the media, which typically pay greater attention to high-profile cases and may be prone to sensationalism, the projected image of the US is necessarily topic-specific, mainly based on the black protest. An interesting complementary reading

¹ See, among others <http://www.businessinsider.com/22-maps-that-show-the-deepest-linguistic-conflicts-in-america-2013-6?IR=T>; or https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/06/dialect-maps_n_3395819.html.

can be Nancy Isenberg's *White Trash. The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* (2016), which deals with the role of poor whites, deemed subhuman and even subject to slavery under certain circumstances, in the supposed land of equal and generous opportunity. Isenberg takes her place among the many 20th century historians who rejected the outdated, conventional vision of America as freer and more egalitarian than Europe, and reinterpreted US history as a struggle for economic power between the privileged and the disadvantaged. The exergue for the 12th chapter of *White Trash*, 'This dangerous chasm in the classes is alive and well in the United States of America. Don't let anybody tell you it's not (from C. Chute 1995)' may seem an echo of the famous quote from James Baldwin's letter to his nephew (written on the 100th anniversary of emancipation), 'You know, and I know, that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon. We cannot be free until they are free (*My Dungeon Shook*, 1963).' The letter was about the problems that still existed for African-Americans, which more recently Ta-Nehisi Coates, among others, has addressed as institutionalized racism (e.g., in his *Between the World and Me*, 2015).

In a truly egalitarian society there would be no room for racism. Yet, the controversy between Coates and Bernie Sanders, the former insisting on the right of black reparations for slavery and Jim Crow segregation, the latter on the greater usefulness of targeting federal resources to impoverished communities, among which the African American and Latino ones,² is an example of the difficulty of overcoming the divide between a race-first vision and a social democratic vision.³ In complex or even contradictory and volatile societal situations, an all-encompassing vision is not easy to achieve, though Obama's speeches have often outlined future-oriented, conciliatory visions, which the media have helped to make relevant in present-day communication, albeit less effectively in the realm of political realisation.

² See: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/02/why-we-write/459909/>, and <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/02/ta-nehisi-coates-case-for-reparations-bernie-sanders-racism/>.

³ Interestingly, in *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, by Richard Rothstein (2017), the issue of the mid- 20th century unconstitutional policies to segregate metropolitan areas is discussed with attention to its present day effects.

CHAPTER ONE

THE CONTEXT AND THE DEBATED VALUE OF DATA

When you use the term minority or minorities in reference to people, you're telling them that they're less than somebody else.

Gwendolyn E. Brooks

American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen.

Toni Morrison

1. The Loss of Black Lives at the Hands of U.S. Police, and the Media Attention

Since 2012, the U.S. has witnessed the frequent killings of unarmed African-American men by white police officers, with a new widespread awareness provided by unprecedented media attention. A series of high profile cases has provoked both violent and non-violent protests, which have gained momentum mainly through the social media, and made a significant impact on print media as well. A general audience of American and international readers increasingly shares concerns about the use of deadly force by police. This came to a head with the prolonged riots in Ferguson (MO) in 2014, following the shooting of an unarmed black teenager, Michael Brown. To further escalate tensions, in New York City, a month before, Eric Garner had died after being placed in a chokehold by NYPD officers (July 17, 2014).¹ These concomitant killings were foregrounded in the media, which highlighted similarities and contributed to sparking unrelenting nationwide protests and riots that also resonated abroad, especially when the grand juries declined to charge the officers

¹ Among other timelines, see:

Pictures/Timeline_%20Eric%20Garner%20Death%20_%20NBC%20New%20York.html; <http://mappingpoliceviolence.org/>

involved in either case. The key issues at stake were the use of excessive force and racial profiling by police, suggesting that race relations were still a fundamental unresolved issue for the US.

The death of Michael Brown, a model student with no criminal background, at the hands of a white police officer aroused a movement that had begun with the killing of another black teenager, Trayvon Martin, and that still resonates among recent front-page cases. Trayvon was shot in 2012 by neighbourhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman, for no apparent reason. When Zimmerman was acquitted (on July 13, 2013), under Florida's broad and controversial self-defence statute (the so called *Stand Your Ground/No Duty to Retreat* law), the now famous 'Black Lives Matter' slogan was coined by Alicia Garza, a workers' rights activist, who posted a missive on Facebook: 'Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter.' Then the hashtag was added, and the activists made banners inscribed with #j4tmla (justice for trayvon martin l.a.) and, underneath, #blacklivesmatter. Significantly, the BLM movement, gradually structured by the black community organisers Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, was kick-started by this successful, iconic slogan, efficiently transposed to the social media, and has frequently sparked discussions about race and inequality across the US.

The *role of the media* in shaping these events cannot easily be overvalued and is *a major focus of this volume*. The fluid multiplicity of the communication channels of our porous worldwide web (real-time, cross-media communication, hyper-textual links to additional sources, news aggregators, automated relevance testing systems, etc.) makes possible a rapid audience engagement. The reduced distance between professional journalists and audience members has apparently created an interactive space where the readers can cooperate in collecting and transmitting news through specific virtual spaces in well-known newspapers and magazine websites; a phenomenon that will be also taken into account in the present analysis.²

As concerns the series of black deaths at the hands of police agents, the habit of making and posting timelines of these dire events has become

² A few words should be spent on the **system adopted for quoting the sources** and giving the references **in this volume**. While books and research/scientific articles are quoted in the traditional way within the text and their references are provided at the end of the volume, for online timelines, chronicles, news-articles, posts, feeds videos, multi-media sources etc., references are provided mainly as links at the bottom of the page where they are quoted, according to the information available in each source. Thus, readers will have easy access to such sources in their updated versions.

frequent among a variety of professional figures. We shall quickly surf (and abridge) one of them as a means of both giving a broad picture of this problematic context, and showing the workings of these increasingly fluid media. Let us start with *Here's a Timeline of Unarmed Black People Killed by Police over Past Year. From Arizona to New York, the cases have added to national outrage over deadly force used by police* (May 2015),³ by Nicholas Quah (based in New York) and Laura Davis (based in Los Angeles), who are *BuzzFeed* news⁴ reporters: a member of the mobile app team, and an editor on the mobile news team, respectively. At the beginning, they feel the need to declare: 'Note: This list [of when the killings happened and their outcomes] is not exhaustive,' since one problem, which will be better described later on, is the difficulty of getting exhaustive information and statistics from law enforcement agencies. To better represent and visualize the mediascape we are dealing with, here follows, much abridged, their list:⁵

April 30, 2014: **Dontre Hamilton (Milwaukee), 31**, was fatally shot 14 times by a police officer in a Milwaukee park. The officer was responding to a call from employees at a nearby Starbucks alleging that Hamilton, who had been *diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia*, was disturbing the peace. The officers who arrived first determined that Hamilton *wasn't doing anything illegal*. Officer Christopher Manney showed up later and, after trying to pat Hamilton down, engaged in a struggle with him that led to the shooting. **Manney** was not charged. Hamilton's mother, *Maria Hamilton, is organizing a march in Washington, D.C., on May 9 to call for justice.*

July 17, 2014: Eric Garner (New York)

³ https://www.buzzfeed.com/nicholasquah/heres-a-timeline-of-unarmed-black-men-killed-by-police-over?utm_term=.otjoaEqeP#.kmQP83oAX.

Posted on May¹, 2015, at 10:46 p.m.

⁴ *BuzzFeed* is a very successful aggregator site, thriving on advertorial content. It was launched in 2006 and 'bills itself as the "first true social news organisation, the defining media company for the social age", publishing everything from slapstick images of cats to in-depth analysis of the U.S. economy.' See:

<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2013/jan/06/buzzfeed-social-news-open-uk>.

⁵ Most of the hyper-text links, images and the pictures have been eliminated, except Eric Garner's and Mike Brown's images, since their cases will be discussed in detail.



A scene from the confrontation between Eric Garner and Officer Daniel Pantaleo.

Eric Garner, 43, was killed after he was put in an illegal chokehold for 15 seconds by a white police officer – allegedly for selling loose cigarettes. Garner said ‘I can’t breathe’ 11 times as he was held down by several officers on a sidewalk. The officer who put Garner in the chokehold, Daniel Pantaleo, was not charged. Garner’s death sparked peaceful protests across the nation, with demonstrators adopting **the phrase ‘I Can’t Breathe’ as a symbol and slogan of protest.**

Aug. 5, 2014: John Crawford III, 22, was shot and killed by a police officer at a Walmart in Beavercreek, Ohio. There did not appear to be a confrontation with the police, and Crawford was unarmed – he had been holding *a toy BB gun*. The officers involved in the shooting, Sean Williams and David Darkow, were not charged.

Aug. 9, 2014: Michael Brown Jr. (Ferguson, Missouri)



Unarmed Michael Brown, 18, was shot and killed by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson. In November, a grand jury declined to charge Wilson in the fatal

shooting. Brown's death and the lack of charges against Wilson sparked protests, some of them violent, in Ferguson and across the nation. On March 4, the Department of Justice announced that *it too would not charge Wilson* for the shooting after an exhaustive investigation.

Aug. 11, 2014: Ezell Ford (Florence, California) a 25-year-old mentally ill man, was shot three times, including once in the back, by a white police officer. He was unarmed. The investigation is still ongoing, but it has been placed on an 'investigative hold'. So far, *no charges have been filed* against Sharlton Wampler and Antonio Villegas, the two officers involved. [...]

Nov. 20, 2014: Akai Gurley (Brooklyn, New York), 28, was shot and killed by a police officer while walking in a dimly lit New York City public housing stairwell with his girlfriend. Gurley, who was unarmed, was pronounced dead at a hospital. New York Police Department Commissioner Bill Bratton called the shooting an 'accidental discharge.' The officer, rookie Peter Liang, *was charged with second-degree manslaughter*, criminally negligent homicide, second-degree assault, reckless endangerment, and two counts of official misconduct.

Nov. 22, 2014: Tamir Rice (Cleveland), 12, was shot and killed by Cleveland police after officers mistook his toy gun for a real weapon. The two police officers involved, Timothy Loehmann and Frank Garmback, *have not been charged*. Rice's family has filed wrongful death lawsuit against the officers and the city of Cleveland. [...]

March 6, 2015: Tony Robinson (Madison, Wisconsin). A family member holds a picture of Tony Robinson during a **protest outside of the City Hall** building on March 9, 2015, in Madison, Wisconsin. Tony Robinson, 19, was shot and killed by a Madison police officer who was responding to reports of someone *disrupting traffic*. Police said Robinson allegedly assaulted the officer, who then shot him three times. Robinson was unarmed. The investigation remains ongoing. [...]

March 31, 2015: Phillip White (Vineland, New Jersey), 32, died while in police custody in Vineland, New Jersey. Police had responded to a call about White acting erratically and called an ambulance because he appeared to be in medical distress. A violent encounter ensued, and **video footage appears to show a police dog biting White while he is on the ground**. White was later pronounced dead at a hospital. The officers involved *have not been charged* as the investigation continues.

April 4, 2015: Walter Scott (North Charleston, South Carolina), 50, was shot by a police officer while running away from a *traffic stop* for a broken taillight. Officer Michael Slager claimed Scott had taken his stun gun. Slager was subsequently *fired and charged with murder after a video surfaced showing Scott running away*, his back to the officer, as Slager fired his gun.

April 19, 2015: Freddie Gray (Baltimore), 25, died of a spinal cord injury a week after he was arrested by Baltimore police. It's still unclear how Gray sustained the injury. Officials say he was stopped after fleeing 'unprovoked upon noticing police presence' and arrested for allegedly possessing a switchblade. He was put in a police van, which is where police say he suffered a medical emergency. The officers involved in his arrest were placed on leave, and on Friday, the state's attorney announced that they had been criminally charged in connection with Gray's homicide. Gray's death **sparked protests in Baltimore** and other cities across the nation. On Monday, protesters and police clashed, prompting hundreds of arrests and Maryland's governor to declare a state of emergency. [My emphases].⁶

Significantly, these fatal encounters often start with traffic or street stops by officers, and the officers are usually not charged with murder/manslaughter, at least until videos of the killings spark protests. Even so, protest-driven indictments in blatant high-profile cases do not predictably lead to charges, as in the case of Freddie Gray (above), who died from injuries sustained in police custody in 2015. On September 13, 2017, under Trump's presidency, the U.S. Department of Justice made it clear that no charges will be brought against the Baltimore police officers involved in Gray's arrest.⁷

There are many such timelines, which include pictures, videos, and links to social media and similar sources etc. Apparently, their data show that police killed at least 308 black people in the U.S. in 2016, and 110 black people in 2017.

Among others, see:

- *Timeline: Dozens of unarmed African Americans killed since Ferguson*, USA TODAY
<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2015/08/09/timeline-dozens-unarmed-african-americans-killed-since-ferguson/31375795/>.
- *Mapping Police Violence – Demand Action from Your Representatives – Find your representatives, see where they stand, demand action to end police violence*, <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/>.
- *A Timeline of Police Attacks in-the-USA*
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/11446472/A-timeline-of-police-attacks-in-the-USA.html>.

⁶ <http://www.buzzfeed.com/nicholasquah/heres-a-timeline-of-unarmed-black-men-killed-by-police-over#.qo5xRXYmqq>.

⁷ Freddie Gray case: DOJ won't charge Baltimore police officers. *Baltimore Sun*, September 13, 2017. <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/crime/bs-md-ci-doj-decline-charges-20170912-story.html>.

- *Timeline: Recent US police shootings of black suspects*, ABC NEWS <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-04-09/timeline-us-police-shootings-unarmed-black-suspects/6379472>.

Given the multiplicity of cross-multi-media resources that these timelines as well as more traditional newspaper articles display, the multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) perspective will also be utilised in this volume, especially where it is necessary to narrow our focus on the iconic value of language in the development of these events. Discourse historical approach (Wodak 2001, 2015) will remain the overarching critical dimension.

2. Hard-to-obtain Controversial Data and the Role of the Media

A common complaint is that the more than 18,000 police departments and law enforcement agencies operating in the U.S. do not provide clear information about the number of civilians killed while in police custody, despite the 2014 Death in Custody Reporting Act, and they are allowed to self-report officer-involved shootings as part of the FBI's annual data on 'justifiable homicides.'

Approximately, the number obtained through the self-reported information from about 750 law enforcement agencies is 400 'justifiable homicides' by police officers each year. Hence, the predictable total number is staggering. As yet, no comprehensive, aggregate database or record of police shootings is kept by the Department of Justice, and neither the Federal Government, nor the FBI, nor the Bureau of Justice Statistics collects comprehensive data on police killings across the country.⁸ This can be considered an intentional omission, particularly because the Federal Government even keeps data and statistics on attacks by wild animals and the distribution of cattle. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that, according to Professor J. Doleac, gunfire is vastly

⁸ See, among others, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/justice-dept-to-probe-ferguson-police-force/2014/09/03/737dd928-33bc-11e4-a723-fa3895a25d02_story.html?utm_term=.4d766fc3bda6; and <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2014/09/08/how-many-police-shootings-a-year-no-one-knows/>. The latter article comments on a dispute between police unions and some conservatives maintaining that shootings by officers are rare and even more rarely unjustified, and controversy is due to civil rights (or leftist) groups attributing racial motives to the shootings.

underreported: 88% of gunfire incidents are not reported to 911, owing to distrust of police.⁹

Apparently, in the current U.S. media and political climate it is mostly through the interaction between the new media and the public that such data are gathered. Crowd-sourced efforts, such as KilledByPolice.net, and FatalEncounters.org, provide easily searchable data-bases, since they subdivide the data also by name, city, year, age, race, gender, police agency, etc. Both professional reporters and an engaged public have striven to collect reliable data. *The Guardian* in particular created the most comprehensive map of police killings available—*The Counted*—in the aftermath of the death of Michael Brown (2014), and the ensuing serious questions and violent protests (Ferguson riots).

2.1 *The Counted* – A Cross-Media Project for Data Gathering

With this transformative project, *The Guardian* is responding and reacting to the lack of reliable official detailed information on these deaths. *The Counted*¹⁰ is a comprehensive record of Americans (Afro-Americans, whites, Hispanics, Orientals and Native Americans) killed by police in 2015 and 2016. It combines traditional reportage and systematic examination of public records with local news and substantiated crowd-sourced information, and is the most detailed database to date of fatal force used by police. *The Counted* demonstrates, among other things, the capacity of the media to involve the public in producing news and data. A distinctive feature of its platform is the set of effective tools for engaging readers and those involved in the story, through a variety of social (cross-)media (FB, Twitter, Reddit). On this multimodal interactive database and map, the *Guardian* team combined data with personal histories, focusing on the stories of how the ‘arrest-related’ victims died. As highlighted in the excerpt below, the language utilized on *The Guardian* website to stimulate audience participation is empathic and relies on engaging forms of direct address (help us/send us, you/r, share):

⁹ Josh Sanburn, Sep 21, 2017, Shots Fired. *Time Magazine*.
<http://time.com/4951192/shots-fired-shotspotter/>.

¹⁰ www.theguardian.com/us-news/nginteractive/2015/jun/01/the-counted-policekillings-us-database.

Help us document every police killing in America

The US government has no comprehensive record of the number of people killed by law enforcement. So the Guardian has embarked on a special project – to work from an inaccurate standard toward a more perfect accounting, and tell the stories of people killed by police. But **we need your help**.

Do **you** have information about an officer-involved death that the public deserves to know? This is the place to **share the truth** about police killings. **Send us your tips**, images, video and more – and we'll use it in our reporting. Have **you** heard of a police killing in your area? **Please share** as many details as you know*:

Please submit a link to relevant news reports / **social media postings** (optional):

Please **share your contact information** for follow-up (email or phone optional):

Would **you** like to receive **regular updates** on The Counted project by email? [...]

<http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2015/jun/01/us-police-killings-tips>.

[My emphases]

Thus, through these interactive efforts it became apparent that *agencies were killing people at twice the rate calculated by the U.S. Government* (*The Counted* recorded 270 homicides by officers in just three months of 2015, whereas the FBI had counted a mere 442 for the entire year). In particular, *Black Americans killed by police are twice as likely to be unarmed as white people are*, as follows:¹¹

- White (non-Hispanic) 15.0%
- Hispanic/Latino 25.4%
- Black 31.9%.

Let us now compare those percentages with the demographic data retrieved from the United States Census Bureau:¹²

- White (non-Hispanic) Americans make up 62.6% of the nation's total population

¹¹ The Counted (1 January 2015 – 31 May 2015). <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jun/01/black-americans-killed-by-police-analysis>

¹² <https://www.census.gov/>, retrieved October 22, 2014.

- Hispanic/Latino Americans amount to 17.1% of the population, making up the largest ethnic minority
- Black (African Americans) are the largest racial minority, amounting to 13.2% of the population.

Steven Hawkins (2015), the director Amnesty International USA, ‘described the racial imbalance as “startling” [...] The disparity speaks to something that needs to be examined, to get to the bottom of why you’re twice as likely to be shot if you’re an unarmed black male.’¹³ Among many other authoritative voices, Barack Obama had said in 2012 ‘All of us have to do some soul searching to figure out how does something like this happen.’¹⁴ However, such data and their interpretation are not void of controversy (see *infra*). The relationship between race and crime in the U.S. has traditionally been studied also through crime statistics, which have been variously used to make statements concerning the racial demographics of arrests, prosecutions, imprisonments, and, additionally, to generalize about a higher crime rate within the Black population and black-on-black crime. An exhaustive report on this lies well beyond the scope of the present investigation, which focuses on the media coverage of some recent high profile killings of Afro-Americans at the hands of police and the new related discursive practices and lexicon. Yet, overall, it can be said that even before the media attracted general attention to the phenomenon, there was already scholarly agreement on the racial disproportionality (for African-Americans in particular) in crime statistics representations. Apart from considerations of political correctness, the fundamental problem of formulating a well-informed, objective discourse on the issue of crime rates, the reasons for such rates and the statistics is that there are as yet no reliable, consistent data. Not to mention the difficulties of getting aggregate data and, more generally, of reading statistics, which require some degree of expertise.

2.2 Media Transformative Storytelling

The Counted is increasingly popular not only among non-white readers, typically sympathetic to the *Black Lives Matter* movement, but also among researchers looking for more accurate data on the use of force by police, and the general public. One of the factors that make *The*

¹³ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jun/01/black-americans-killed-by-police-analysis>.

¹⁴ *Obama Speaks Out on Trayvon Martin Killing* – NYT – March 23, 2012.

Counted particularly attractive is its easily navigable and multimodal environment (see Chapter 6), which encourages both exploratory and active participation (e.g., *Send us a tip*). From pages providing numbers and statistics, the reader can immediately shift to images, and read concise stories of the victims. As far as user engagement is concerned, the latest estimates calculated over 8 million views of *The Counted* stories and 3 million views of the database. The role of these stories and in particular the *narrativization* of the killings, with their *affective aspects*, is essential. Apparently, the need to identify and track the persons involved in the stories is a fundamental component of storytelling, as Martin and Rose put it:

to introduce people, places and things into a discourse and keep track of them once there [... is concerned] with how discourse makes sense to the reader (Martin and Rose 2009).

These requirements are effectively met by *The Counted* platform with its stories, with the aim of raising the levels of national awareness of and engagement in this crisis in policing and criminal justice, putting the government under pressure, and thereby promoting change. In the words of James Murdoch (CEO of 21st Century Fox), examples of transformative storytelling are all around us:

Storytelling – both fiction and nonfiction, for good and for ill – **will continue to define the world**. In the U.S. and elsewhere, advocates for same-sex marriage told deeply personal stories of the bond between human beings, setting the stage for legal and legislative victories celebrated under the banner ‘love wins.’ [...] Years before the election of President Barack Obama, tens of millions of Americans experienced their first black President on the [TV series] *Thriller 24*. [...] Millions of Americans] challenged their preconceptions about same-sex couples through *Modern Family* [...]. **Storytelling isn’t always positive**. In the midst of the chaos of Iraq and Syria, ISIS masterfully tells its story of blood-soaked vengeance against supposed oppressors in their own lands and those from the West. [...] Political hopefuls, for high office and otherwise, create elaborate narratives that they themselves don’t believe. **Stories matter**. In 2016 and beyond, those who wish **to create a better world** will have to make storytelling the center of their efforts, not an afterthought. [...] But more than ever before, **swift and dramatic change is being driven by powerful narratives that crisscross the world at the speed of a click or a swipe**. [...] In this connected world, the game is up. Censors cannot hide, and their victims have decided, and are empowered, not to take it anymore. [...] All sides will have generally **equal access to the tools and platforms needed to tell their stories**. People themselves will ultimately decide the

winners and losers. In this **age of narrative**, the stakes have never been higher [my emphasis].¹⁵

Though he is closely, or perhaps exclusively, focusing on the *poietic power* of narrated words, Murdoch effectively conveys the decisive importance of narratives that freely traverse the world via platforms and their fast-evolving affordances. Apart from other aspects entailed in this view of the contemporary communication arena (e.g. intertextuality, interdiscursivity and medium-specific concepts), Murdoch's perspective can contribute to outlining the recurring features of *The Counted* narratives and analyse their affective and transformative dimensions against the background of their socio-political context, strongly connoted by racial disparities.

3. Governmental vs News Media Sources

In June 2015, Laurie Robinson, the co-chair of President Obama's task force on policing, declared, 'It's troubling that we have no official data from the Federal Government [...] I think it's very helpful, in light of that fact, to have this kind of research undertaken.'¹⁶ The 2015 initiative *The Counted* by *The Guardian* has apparently been widely appreciated, and was promoted in particular by the relatives of unarmed people killed by police; in the words of Erica Garner 'Giving this kind of data to the public is a big thing [...] Other incidents like murders and robberies are counted, so why not police-involved killings? With better records, we can look at what is happening and what might need to change.'¹⁷

The incongruity of the fact that *The Guardian* has more reliable and comprehensive data than the Federal Government did not escape the attention of James Comey, (the head of the FBI until 2017), as emerged at a crime summit:

¹⁵ James Murdoch *Storytelling – both fiction and nonfiction, for good and for ill – will continue to define the world*. December 21, 2015.

<http://time.com/4154115/media-essay-james-murdoch/>.

¹⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jun/01/black-americans-killed-by-police-analysis>.

¹⁷ Erica is the daughter of Eric Garner, victim of a deadly chokehold by police in New York City (July 2014). His death led to prolonged international protests. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jun/01/black-americans-killed-by-police-analysis>.

‘It is **embarrassing** and **ridiculous**’ that the **federal government has no better information** on police shootings **than** databases compiled by ‘**the Guardian** newspaper and the Washington Post. [...] It is unacceptable that the Washington Post and the Guardian newspaper from the UK are becoming the lead source of information about violent encounters between [U.S.] police and civilians. That is not good for anybody’ (October 8, 2015. My emphases).¹⁸

Although the Death in Custody Reporting Act makes it mandatory to report on a quarterly basis all killings committed by police officers, many states do not comply with this requirement, and then also the capacity of single agencies to respond needs to be taken into account. Yet, neither the FBI nor the Bureau of Justice Statistics has taken decisive actions to enforce the Act.¹⁹ Subsequently, these FBI calculations, which relied on police chiefs voluntarily communicating their numbers, were seriously questioned, since this method only documented less than half of all killings nationwide.²⁰ Overall, on closer examination, additional deaths invariably emerged.

Accordingly, a program was implemented by the U.S. government that drew data from a plurality of sources – including the interactive journalistic source *The Counted*, which also provides the stories of the victims, thus engaging the public and voluntary contributors more effectively. Through this new Federal system, a much higher number of deaths was logged and the number of reported ‘arrest-related’ deaths more than doubled, thus exposing the shortcomings of the previous voluntary system of data gathering.²¹ The old system also allowed police to avoid providing details of fatal incidents, by generically describing them as ‘justifiable homicides.’

¹⁸ *FBI chief: ‘unacceptable’ that Guardian has better data on police violence. James Comey tells crime summit that ‘it’s ridiculous’ that the Guardian and Washington Post have more information on civilians’ deaths at the hands of U.S. police than the FBI does:* <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/oct/08/fbi-chief-says-ridiculous-guardian-washington-post-better-information-police-shootings>.

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/13/justice-department-database-police-killings-counted-statistics>.

²⁰ See, among others, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/15/us-police-killings-department-of-justice-program>.

²¹ *Killings by U.S. police logged at twice the previous rate under the new Federal program. A U.S. government pilot program that draws on information collected by the Guardian, publishes the first data gathered under the new ‘hybrid’ counting system.* At <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/15/us-police-killings-department-of-justice-program>.

According to the *Counted* project results, shared via Facebook, Twitter etc., in 2016, the situation of racial disparities has not perceptibly changed. Although the total number of deaths of unarmed people caused by police fell slightly, probably as an effect of the protracted Ferguson unrests following the killing of Mike Brown, the racial imbalance persists (see Table 1 below). This raises alarm over the predictable neglect of criminal justice reform by the Trump administration, whose members (e.g. Jeff Sessions, the designated U.S. attorney general) are often hostile to innovative, awareness-raising movements such as the popular Black Lives Matter (BLM), which is unrelentingly critical of police.²² In short, in contrast to Trump, Obama had considered that the availability of more correct data could lead to a better understanding of the whole range of the use of force by police, so as to reduce it. Yet, his administration was only able to take limited steps to that effect because of opposition by the Republican-controlled Congress. Since then, the nomination of Jeff Sessions in the Trump administration has promoted a different perspective: Sessions accused BLM of ‘being “really radical” and driving up crime by deterring officers from policing effectively. He has also consistently attacked investigations of local forces by the justice department’ (see note above).

4. The Myth of Real-Time Data via Digital Media, and Cognitive Heuristics

At this point of our discussion, it may be useful to make some brief considerations about the value and significance of data and their credibility in the multifaceted arena of contemporary communication, in light of the fact that data are increasingly shaped by the fast-paced progress of networked digital media and their ability to share information and learning, whether for amusement and social connection, self-improvement, entertainment or work. An initial concise evaluation of the effects on political debate of social media and the growth of cable TV and talk radio can be found in the following words of Barack Obama:

Because of changes in the media, we now have a situation in which everybody’s listening to people who already agree with them and are

²² *Young black men again faced the highest rate of U.S. police killings in 2016. The Counted project points to continuing racial disparities, with black males aged 15-34 nine times more likely than other Americans to be killed.* At <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/08/the-counted-police-killings-2016-young-black-men>.

further and further **reinforcing their own realities** to the **neglect of a common reality** that allows us to have a healthy debate and then try to find common ground and actually move solutions forward [my emphases].²³

For the sake of better understanding the full impact of these words, it would be useful to make a more general consideration about the cognitively and psychologically levelling effect generated by having all information available from the same research bar, at roughly at the same level of accessibility. Nowadays, a preliminary categorization/framing of the fields of knowledge, information or research we want to access is no longer necessary. For example, we can just digit either ‘Pippa Middleton’s wedding’ or ‘the choice of Celestinus V’ and we get the required information. There is no practical need to know that the former is classifiable as a contemporary celeb event, while with the latter moves in the domain of the 13th century history of the Catholic Church. Apparently, those are negligible details, especially for millennials, and no concern for the hermeneutics of the single disciplinary domains seems to worry the public. In other words, information is now available to anyone with a keyboard and an internet connection, independently of their cultural background and specific competences; hence less knowledgeable people are more easily misled or are driven by personal beliefs.

An important related issue is the reliability/credibility of information that typically arises in this vibrant scenario, which is frequently marked by inaccurate, incomplete or fake news, untruths and other controversial tendencies. Indeed, to locate trustworthy information through the multiplicity of sources, embedded links and channel convergence has become a daunting task, especially in unfamiliar fields, and there is an ample scientific literature that deals with such difficulties. In a widely cited research by Metzger and Flanagin (2013), their definition of credibility refers them all the way back to Aristotle’s notions of **ethos** (appeal based on the character of a speaker), **pathos** (appeal based on emotion), and **logos** (appeal based on logic or reason), and in our times,

Common means by which *people have traditionally reduced uncertainty about **credibility*** include *judgments based on personal knowledge* or on vicarious information (e.g., *reputation*) concerning the *trustworthiness of a source* or piece of information, and by relying on traditional information intermediaries such as experts, opinion leaders, and information arbiters to help guide their credibility decisions. **However, as more information has**

²³ <http://nypost.com/2017/04/24/obama-blames-current-political-climate-on-social-media-and-cable-news/>.

been migrated online, several of these *traditional intermediaries have been removed* through a process of '*disintermediation*,' which forces individuals to evaluate vast amounts of online information on their own [my emphasis and italics].²⁴

Accordingly, it can be perplexing to select more appropriate sources through the hyperlinked organization of the web, and, to make things worse, the increasing use of 'advertorials' makes it difficult to distinguish persuasive from informative content, not to mention the constant difficulty of evaluating the credibility of the popular Wikipedia pages. From cognitive science studies, we learn how Internet users cope with the perceived efforts of information searches:

Not all elements of a web site can be noticed or selected by users, and so *not all elements will enter into their credibility evaluations*, [... since] people do not always invest their full mental capacities in information evaluation tasks [...] and are not always able to act perfectly rationally due to limitations imposed by the human mind (e.g., non-infinite computational resources) and by external conditions (e.g., non-infinite time). [...] Individuals' behavior is adaptive in that *people seek to find an optimal balance between cognitive effort and desired outcomes*. One form of bounded rationality is ***satisficing***, which is when people [...] use just enough [cognitive resources] to provide a sufficiently optimal outcome for the context. [...] Internet information consumers [...] use] strategies that minimize their cognitive effort and time, through the use of ***cognitive heuristics*** [see note above, my italics and emphasis].

In brief, in cognitive psychology, heuristics are usually intuitive practical rules that employ a minimum of time, knowledge and computation to help us make judgments and decisions. Yet, by optimizing time and (finite) human cognitive resources, heuristics can lead us to ignore a number of problematic aspects and, eventually, to form cognitive biases. Overall, the theories of information processing suggest that **cognitive heuristics** (CH) are commonly utilized by internet information users, and play a decisive role in **evaluating credibility**. The following is a viable classification of a variety of CHs, according to Metzger and Flanagin (2013):

²⁴ Miriam J. Metzger, Andrew J. Flanagin 2013. Credibility and trust in information accessed online: The use of cognitive heuristics. Retrieved at: [http://www.comm.ucsb.edu/faculty/flanagin/CV/Metzger%26Flanagin,2013\(JoP\).pdf](http://www.comm.ucsb.edu/faculty/flanagin/CV/Metzger%26Flanagin,2013(JoP).pdf).

- ✓ *Reputation*
- ✓ *Endorsement*
- ✓ *Consistency*
- ✓ *Self-confirmation bias*
- ✓ *Expectancy violation*
- ✓ *Persuasive intent*

Of particular interest for the purposes of our discussion are the *Self-confirmation* and *Expectancy violation* CHs. Both can be defined as the result of the general human tendency to consider information as credible if it confirms one's beliefs and expectations, and not credible/untrustworthy if it counters one's beliefs/expectations, regardless of how well-documented it may be, thus leading to a self-confirmation bias. We note how these scientifically verified notions confirm Obama's considerations. In line with Metzger and Flanagin's widely praised study (2013), there is ongoing, multi-faceted scientific research, mainly (but not exclusively) regarding the domains of psychology, neuroscience and the behavioural sciences,²⁵ on how pre-existing attitudes or beliefs can affect the way in which internet users perceive or interpret messages and information.

Such topics are very popular also in the mainstream literature on contemporary communication, mainly revolving around the notions that in computerized media communication facts seem to lose ground to opinions and beliefs, in the **'post-truth' age**.²⁶ Post-truth, accepted as a new word in 2016 in the English Oxford Living Dictionary, is classified as an adjective, 'Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. [...E.g.] *In this era of post-truth politics, it's easy to cherry-pick data and come to whatever conclusion you desire.*'²⁷

A discussion of the notion of 'facts' as a socio-historical construct from the Foucauldian perspective of the inescapable connection between power relations and the correlative constitution of the fields of knowledge,

²⁵ Among others, see Michael K. Aulta, et al. 2017. Ideological lens matters: Credibility heuristics, pre-existing attitudes, and reactions to messages on ideological websites. *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 68, pp. 315-325. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563216308020>; and Alisha M. Ness et al. 2017. Reactions to ideological websites: The impact of emotional appeals, credibility, and pre-existing attitudes. *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 72, pp. 496-511. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563217301425>.

²⁶ See, e.g., Giacomo Costa, 2017. Orientarsi nell'era della post-verità. <http://www.aggiornamentisociali.it/articoli/orientarsi-nell-era-della-post-verit/>.

²⁷ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/post-truth>.

with their discursive practices,²⁸ could perhaps sound too philosophical, but its core message does not fall far from the present context. Indeed, not only ‘facts’ but also data appear as controversial issues (see *infra* 1.2.4), or even as biased myths to be demystified, in the ongoing discussion about racial disparities and their consequences in the present U.S. scenario.

Let us start from some intrinsic difficulties in gathering data of **arrest-related deaths**, as we can infer from Table 1.²⁹

<p>The new ‘hybrid’ system combines a review of open-source data, including the Guardian’s series The Counted, with a survey of local authorities. It recorded 270 homicides by officers in three months last year. The <i>FBI</i> said earlier this year that it had counted <i>just 442 in all of 2015</i> https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/15/us-police-killings-department-of-justice-program</p>	<p><i>Young black men killed by US police at highest rate in year of 1,134 deaths.</i> Final total of people killed by US police officers in 2015 shows rate of death for young black men was five times higher than white men of the same age https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/15/us-police-killings-department-of-justice-program</p>	<p>Racial disparities persisted in 2016 even as the total number of deaths caused by police fell slightly. In all, 1,091 deaths were recorded for 2016, compared with 1,146 logged in 2015. <i>Several 2015 deaths only came to light last year, suggesting the 2016 number may yet rise.</i> The total is again more than twice the FBI’s annual number of ‘justifiable homicides’ by police, counted in recent years under a voluntary system allowing police to opt out</p>	<p>Young black men again faced highest rate of US police killings in 2016. The Counted project points to continuing racial disparities, with <i>black males aged 15-34 nine times more likely than other Americans to be killed.</i> [...] The 2016 data showed a decline in the number of unarmed people killed by police, a central concern of protests across the country after the fatal shooting of an unarmed black 18-year-old in Ferguson, Missouri, in</p>
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²⁸ See Michel Foucault (1980) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*.

²⁹ Also of interest: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2015/jun/01/the-counted-map-us-police-killings>; <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/31/the-counted-police-killings-2015-young-black-men>; <https://it.pinterest.com/pin/386324474269344813/>; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/black-people-killed-by-police-america_us_577da633e4b0c590f7e7fb17; https://www.democracynow.org/2015/12/28/as_chicago_mourns_2_dead_mapping