

Logically.

Black Lives Matter Hashtag Trend Manipulation & Memetic Warfare on Twitter

Disinformation Investigation





Content Warning

This report contains images from social media accounts and conversations that use racist language.

Executive Summary

- This report presents findings based on a Logically intelligence investigation into suspicious hashtag activity in conjunction with the Black Lives Matter protests and online activism following George Floyd's death.
- Our investigation found that 4chan's /pol/ messageboard and 8kun's /pnd/ messageboard launched a coordinated campaign to fracture solidarity in the Black Lives Matter movement by injecting false-flag hashtags into the #blacklivesmatter Twitter stream.
- An investigation into the Twitter ecosystem's response to these hashtags reveal that these hashtags misled both left-wing and right-wing communities.
- In addition, complex hashtag counter offences and weaponizing of hashtag flows is becoming a common fixture during this current movement of online activism.

The Case for Investigation

Demonstrations against police brutality and systemic racism have taken place worldwide following the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers Derek Chauvin, J. Alexander Kueng, Thomas Lane, and Tou Thao on May 25th 2020.

This activism has also taken shape in the form of widespread online activism. Shortly after footage and images of Floyd's death were uploaded to social media, #georgefloyd, #justiceforgeorgefloyd, and #minneapolispolice began trending. By May 28th, #blacklivesmatter, #icantbreathe, and #blacklivesmatters also began trending heavily (see Figure 1).

As protests and civil unrest continued across the USA and the rest of the world in the weeks after Floyd's death, social media information flows have become increasingly important as a way to track the spread of awareness and participation within user populations.

The importance of hashtag flows was illustrated during "Blackout Tuesday", an initiative spearheaded by black recording execs Jamila Thomas and Brianna Agyemang. Their initial message was to invite the entertainment industry to "take a beat for an honest, reflective, and productive conversation" about what actions the industry can take to support the black community. The initiative was to post a black square under the hashtags #theshowmustbepaused and #blackouttuesday, signifying an end to promotion and for the conversation to happen. However, the as the hashtag went viral, users flooded Twitter and Instagram with black squares using #blacklivesmatter and other related

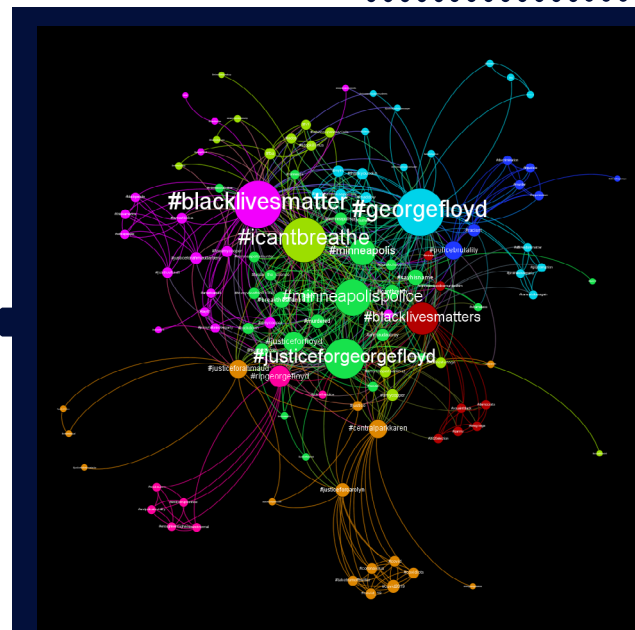
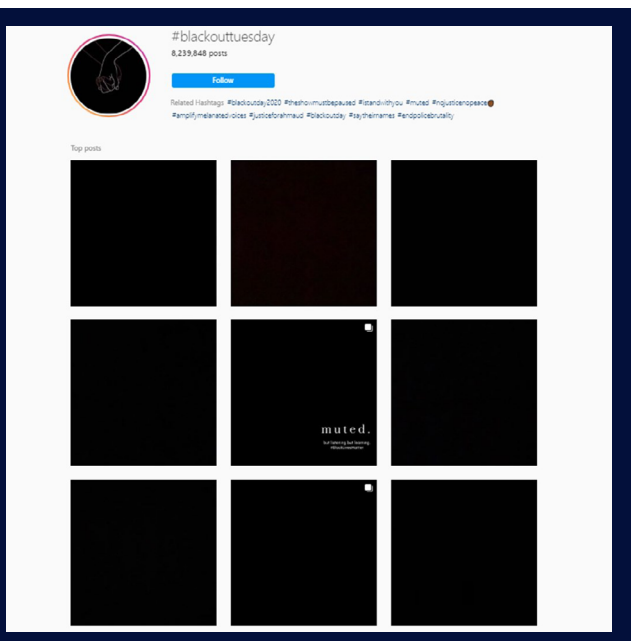


Figure 1: Twitter hashtag co-occurrence map for #blacklivesmatter (28/05/20).



hashtags. The popularity of tagging black squares with #blacklivesmatter led to vocal criticism from activists concerned that "critical information" was being hidden, and the hashtag's original organizing purpose disrupted.

Right is the #blackouttuesday hashtag for Instagram. A search using Signal Labs' hashtag co-occurrence tool shows that #blacklivesmatter, #georgefloyd, and #justiceforgeorgefloyd were the most frequently used hashtags alongside #blackouttuesday, meaning that black squares were similarly dominating those hashtag flows.

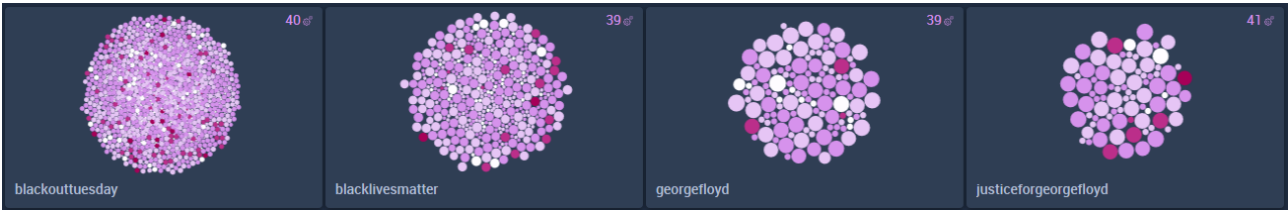
The use of hashtags to transmit critical information is of high importance for any social media-driven activism. Specific hashtags can serve as repositories for footage of police violence, a way to

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relay information about areas of safety at protests (especially important given Twitter and other social media platforms' capacity for real-time delivery), or libraries from which to share educational resources. As "Blackout Tuesday" showed, hashtag co-occurrence can disrupt these crucial flows. It is this point of weakness in the online activist ecosystem

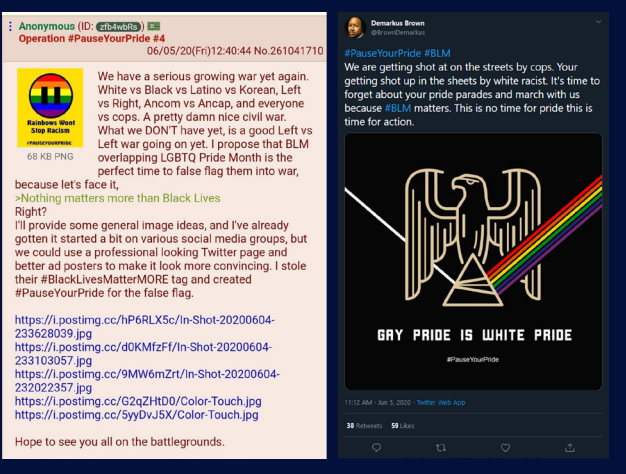
that was exploited by users of 4chan's /pol/ and 8kun's (formerly 8chan) /pnd/ messageboards. These boards are notable for being enclaves of the alt-right and rallying points for right-wing online activism and organization.

#pauseyourpride, #gobaldforblm, and #blm1488

From June 4th, the hashtags #pauseyourpride, #gobaldforblm, and #blm1488 were pushed on Twitter alongside #blacklivesmatter and other hashtags associated with the movement. Each of these hashtags was accompanied with text and images expanding on their message.

#pauseyourpride

Intended to spread the idea that Black Lives Matter marches should take precedence over any pride parades, the intent being to drive a wedge between the LGBT+ community and the wider Black Lives Matter movement.



#blm1488

was pushed with a preamble that there is a ratio of 14 white victims of police brutality to 88 black victims. Compared to other hashtags, #blm1488 is quite an obvious troll attempt wrapped in a false statistic. 1488 is a well-known Nazi code referring to the "14 words" coined by white supremacist David Lane – "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children" – and H being the 8th letter of the alphabet as a stand in for "Heil Hitler".



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#gobaldforblm

appears to have started simply as a way to troll white allies to the Black Lives Matter movement – specifically tricking white women into shaving their heads in solidarity with black women. The effect of this is threefold: to trick white people into wearing a ‘skinhead’ haircut; to ignite debates about [hair-based racism that predominantly affects black women](#); and to incite anger over exaggerated acts of performative allyship.



The text accompanying these hashtags shows that the online right and trolls from 4chan and 8kun’s politics boards have a working grasp of left-wing rhetoric and talking points. There are, however, tells throughout the false-flags which bely their origin: some users created accounts intended to imitate black people, but missed the mark and appeared caricaturish, such as in the case of “Demarkus Brown”. The #blm1488 hashtag on the other hand, seems to have failed as a result of the originators’ underestimation of how widespread knowledge of the “1488” trope is. Despite these setbacks however, this attempt to create division during a time where the focus of the activist left is comparatively tight illustrates how memetic warfare approaches by these groups has evolved.

Previous techniques centered mainly around spamming hashtags and forcing a direct message (as in the “[meme magic](#)” campaigns surrounding the 2016 US elections); this new approach subverts existing information channels in an attempt to disrupt. In this sense, the three hashtags above and their deployment are akin to culture jamming or détournement. However, while the latter are explicitly anti-capitalist endeavours, often using advertising, billboards, or other consumerist forms of information dissemination against consumerism itself, 4chan and 8kun’s hashtags are applying the same techniques to established left-wing hashtags with an aim to cause fractures and infighting at a time of high solidarity.

Twitter mapping

In order to track the movement of these hashtags, we conducted an analysis of the Twitter ecosystem as it stood on the 5th June using the three hashtags above alongside #blacklivesmatter. This produced a network graph (figure 2) of 4442 nodes including 2706 users and 1736 tweets. Although the data is not exhaustive, it allowed us to assess the traction of each of these hashtags as they related their influence on the #blacklivesmatter conversation.

The first immediate finding is that, of our three target hashtags co-occurring with #blacklivesmatter, #gobaldforblm dominates the conversation. The green section of the map represents the majority of the discourse around the hashtag and also includes the majority of the conversations around #pauseyourpride and #blm1488. This domination is also apparent in the graphs below (Figures 3 and 4) that show 1,029 total mentions for #pauseyourpride and 1,923 total mentions for #blm1488 compared to 54,529 total mentions for #gobaldforblm.

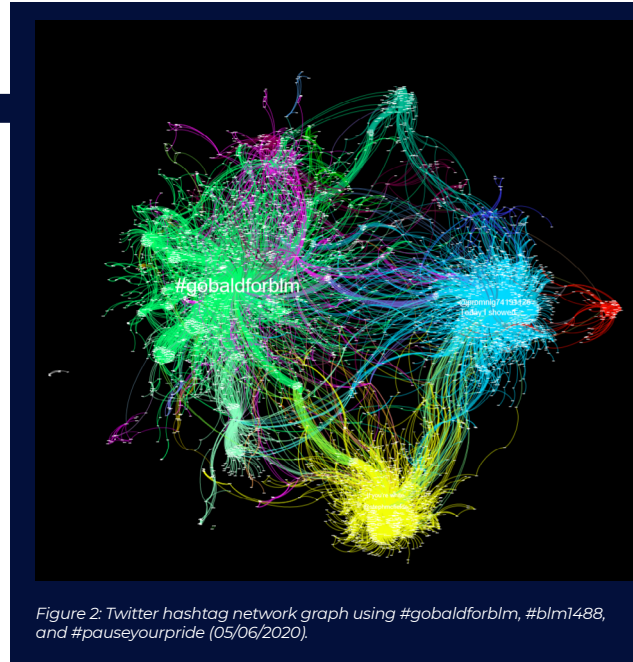


Figure 2: Twitter hashtag network graph using #gobaldforblm, #blm1488, and #pauseyourpride (05/06/2020).

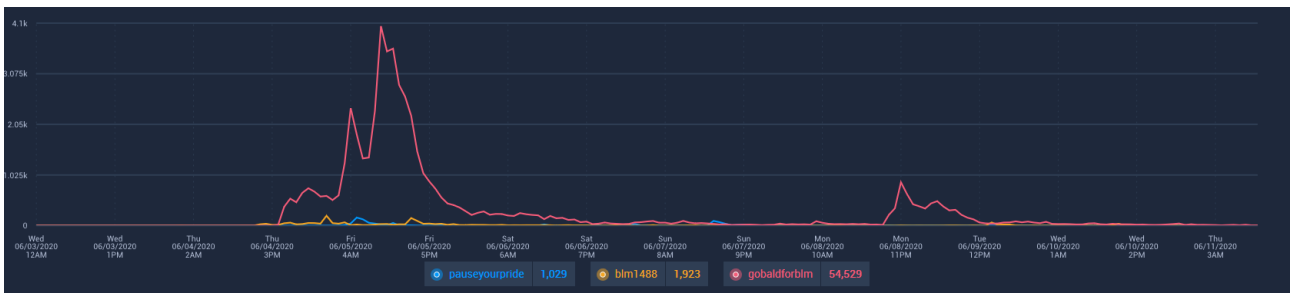


Figure 3: Total Twitter mentions for #pauseyourpride (blue), #blm1488 (yellow), and #gobaldforblm (red).

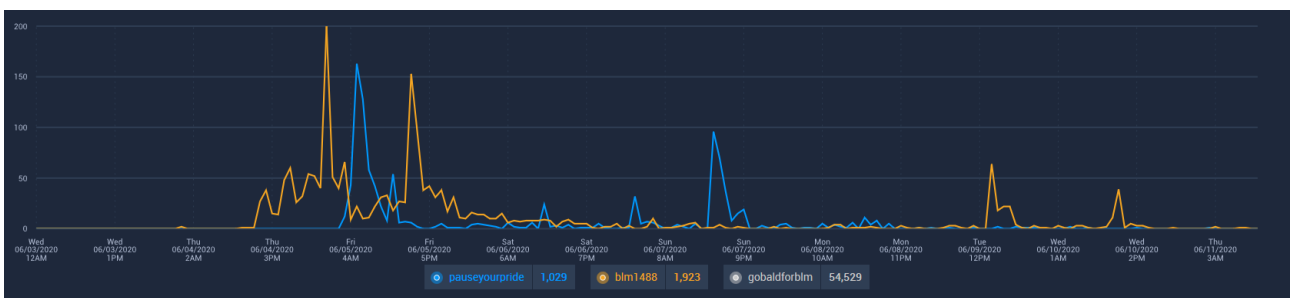


Figure 4: Total Twitter mentions for #pauseyourpride (blue), #blm1488 (yellow) only.

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In addition to the main green cluster dominating the conversation in Figure 2, there are two additional clusters in yellow and blue. These represent two viral posts whose reach caused the conversation around #gobaldforblm to trend far above the other two hashtags.

A further mapping into the extreme clustering around these two posts (figure 5) shows the extent to which these two accounts - @promnig74191126 and @stephmcfields - dominated the discourse. Coloured in blue and orange here; the cluster of replies stands out compared to the more distributed conversational clusters in pink and green. We can clearly see how discourse has centred on these two tweets responsible for the virality of #gobaldforblm. The following section contains a deeper investigation into the Twitter ecosystem around these accounts' tweets; the response from different ends of the political spectrum; #pauseyourpride and #blm1488's impact on Twitter; and emergent countertactics around hashtag-based memetic warfare.

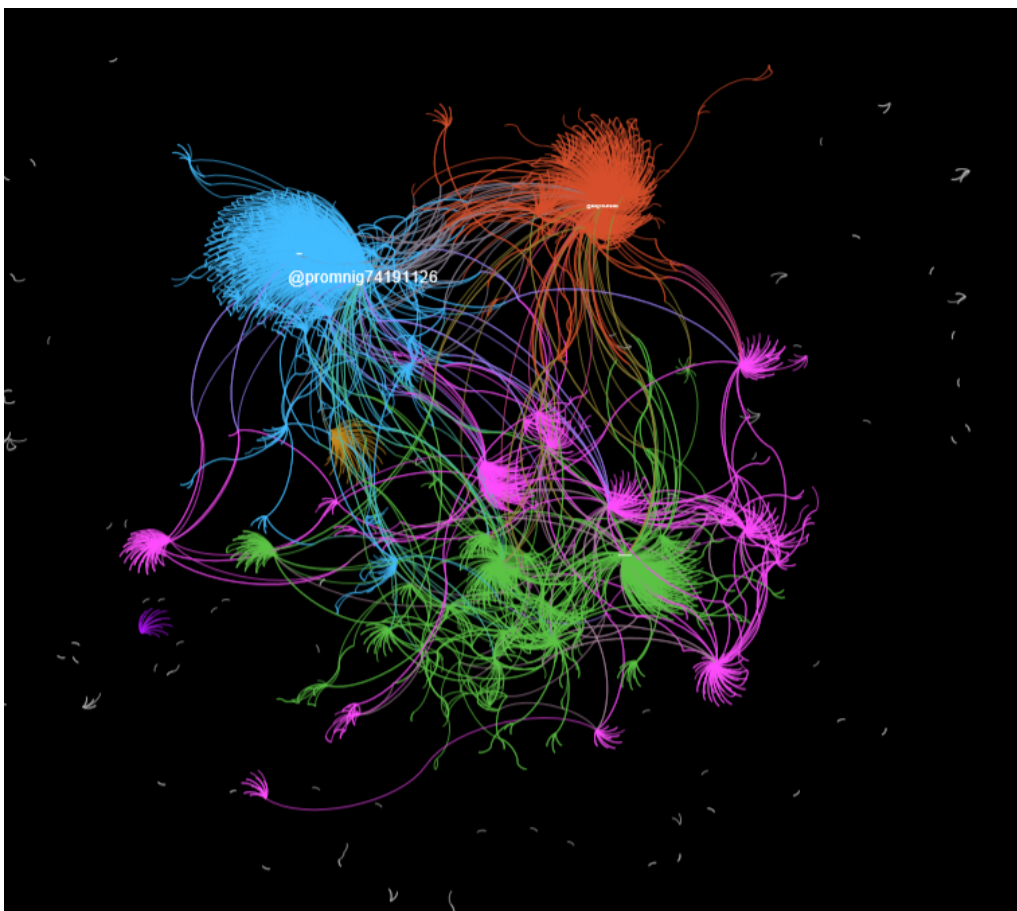


Figure 5: Filtered Twitter graph showing Maddie and Steph's dominance of Twitter's #gobaldforblm discourse.

Findings

The two accounts at the heart of the main clusters for #gobaldforblm were @promnig74191126 – screen name “Maddie” (whose tweet was used above to illustrate the content) and @stephmcfields – who has either changed handle or been deleted, either by themselves or by Twitter.

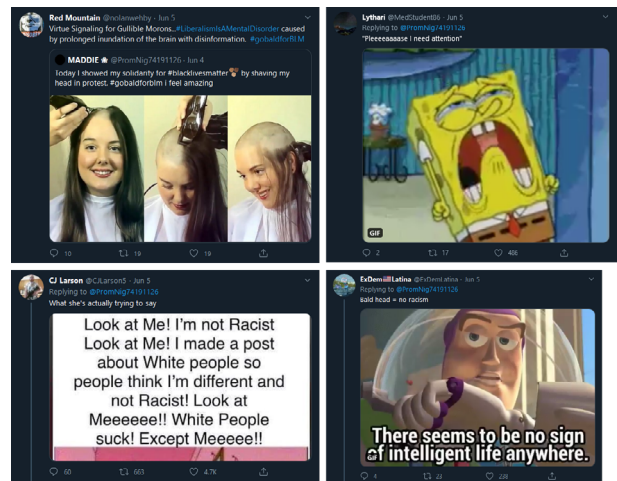
The Maddie account is an obvious sock-puppet. It was created in late May and in addition to posting the viral #gobaldforblm post has boosted similar posts from other fresh accounts. The @stephmcfields account is a little more interesting, as it had been created in August 2018. The account showed only infrequent activity before posting a tweet in a similar format to Maddie, with the following text:



The @stephmcfields account has since been deleted or changed handle (possibly to lie dormant for future operations). However, the initial impact of these two tweets is the same; rapid dissemination via accounts less than a month old to the wider Twitter ecosystem in a brute-force effort to get the hashtags to trend. The tweets by these accounts also follow a similar pattern of text akin to that above, alongside images of young women with shaved heads. It is not hard to find the original source for these images and many replied to these tweets with evidence of fakery in an attempt to debunk the movement. Accounts also tweeted celebrities urging them to take part in the movement and posted poorly-photoshopped images of celebrities having “gone bald.”

Though the initial goal of the #gobaldforblm campaign appears to have been a sincere effort into tricking white women into shaving their head, the tweets drew ire from all sides of the political spectrum. On Maddie’s tweet, for example, among the sock-puppet accounts tweeting support, there is just as much activity from right-wing accounts criticising the action as an attention-seeking fad for “virtue-signalling

snowflakes” as left-wing accounts concerned about the promotion of a “white saviour” trend. In addition, users drew attention to the irony of white people wearing a “skinhead” cut in solidarity with black people, as well noting that during World War II, shaved heads punishment for women who were found to be Nazi collaborators.



It is this critical backlash which appears to be responsible for pushing #gobaldforblm to trend; more so than 4chan and 8kun’s litany of sock-puppets. Many of the accounts admonishing Maddie’s tweet have a comfortably high reach of over a thousand followers and appear to be distinctly human accounts rather than long-term sock-puppets or cyborgs.

This reach appears to have led to a certain level of dog-piling through feedback loops as users reply with their criticisms, these replies get inserted into the newsfeed of like-minded followers, who then similarly reply with criticisms. These algorithmically-driven feedback loops explain, in part, the high boost in traffic for this hashtag over the others. Potentially, the visual spectacle of white women shaving their heads is also responsible for this hashtag dominating the other two, which attempted to gain traction through ‘cause’ based infographics and a clumsy co-opting of tropes from the racial justice movement.

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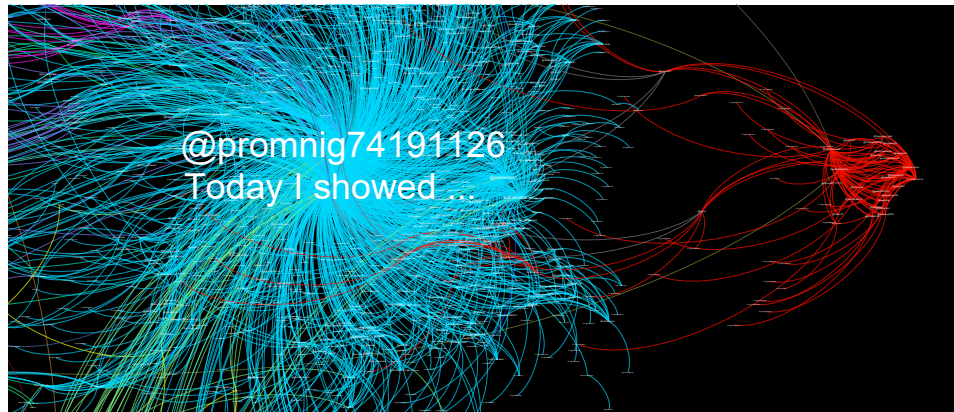
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An example of two high-profile, high-influence accounts that helped boost engagement with Maddie's tweet.



Isolated "QAnon" cluster from Figure 2.

A curious development around #gobaldforblm can be seen in the red cluster attached to Maddie's tweet. This cluster represents a group of accounts belonging to QAnon conspiracy followers. These accounts, like many others, were able to debunk Maddie's tweet and others in the hashtag by finding the source photos used for their tweets. However, rather than identifying the hashtag as a 4chan prank, they instead theorised that the hashtag was a false-flag created by the left in order to provoke rage from right wing twitter users.

4chan's /pol/ community generally consider the #gobaldforblm movement a success, and are currently organising to capitalise on the perceived momentum of the hashtag.



QAnon associated accounts debating who is responsible for 'Maddie'.

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The K-pop Factor

While the developments around #gobaldforblm illustrate the ease with which information can destabilise online communities even after being debunked from across the political spectrum, the reactions to #pauseyourpride and #blm1488 show a distinctly focussed and advanced form of grassroots memetic warfare.

The “[K-pop fancam](#)” phenomenon originated when the Dallas Police Department tweeted a request for users to reply with videos of “criminal activity” during protests. Hundreds of K-pop fans replied with fan footage of their favourite artists, swarming the replies and effectively rendering the request useless. Since then, we’ve seen more instances of “K-pop stan Twitter” clogging hashtags that are directly antagonistic to the #blacklivesmatter cause, such as #whitelivesmatter and #bluelivesmatter, effectively neutralising any attempt to get these hashtags to trend ([Parker Molloy and Alex Kaplan discuss the wider phenomenon here](#)). Both #blm1488 and #pauseyourpride were rapidly dampened by K-pop stan Twitter before any tweets could go viral and generate the same outrage as #gobaldforblm.

The reaction and sheer numbers of K-pop stan Twitter has been an effective form of platform manipulation and online activism in favour of Black Lives Matter. 4chan and 8kun users are aware of this success, however, and have responded with a counternarrative attempting to recast K-pop as racist.

False K-pop gifs pushed by a sock-puppet account in an attempt to divide online activist communities.

Tweets such as the ones above attempt to change perceptions around K-pop with the hope that Black Lives Matter will reject the subculture’s online activism. As of 10/06/2020 both pro and anti-K-pop accounts are vying for control of #kpopstansareoverparty, but the sheer numbers of the former mean that 4chan and 8kun’s subversion efforts are mostly being drowned out.



False K-pop gifs pushed by a sock-puppet account in an attempt to divide online activist communities

Conclusion

This investigation reveals a co-ordinated attempt by communities of 4chan and 8kun's politics boards to hinder Black Lives Matter online activism through subversion of left-wing language and co-option of important activism hashtags. The efforts consisted mainly of attempting to trick activists into spreading Nazi tropes and iconography, sowing discord within the #blacklivesmatter hashtag, and attempt to fracture solidarity around the movement.

Our investigation found that one hashtag in particular, #gobaldforblm, had unintentionally dominated the other two subversion projects (#blm1488 and #pauseyourpride). Tweets from 4chan and 8kun accounts drew anger from across the political spectrum, causing the hashtag to go viral, although 4chan and 8kun failed to control the discourse in the hashtag.

The other two hashtags fell to the K-pop stan Twitter phenomenon, in which K-pop fans clog right-wing hashtags with fan videos as a form of online activism. However, further investigation revealed that 4chan and 8kun attempted to create divisions between K-pop fans and other activists through a further tactic of subversion and brute-force trending.

Although their tactics may be inelegant, an awareness of the chans' disinformation tactics is essential to understanding and identifying further instances of memetic warfare and platform manipulation. Their tactics ultimately aim at fracturing solidarity within movements and attempting to over-code understandings and symbolism to create adversarial relationships. This is coupled with a rudimentary use of sock-puppet and possibly cyborg accounts that are often quite easy to spot. The relative simplicity of these tactics gives an opportunity for social media users' to be educated in how to understand when they are being deployed, and what effective countermeasures might be available.



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