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**#BLACKLIVESMATTER AND STRUGGLE OVER NATIONAL
DISCOURSE ON TWITTER:
DIGITAL ACTIVISM AS NEW PUBLIC SPHERE**

***Abstract.** The tragic death of George Floyd, an African-American male killed by a white policeman, has been widely discussed on social media and instigated many to use social media as an argumentum over the law enforcement role and the racist status quo in the USA. As social media have unignorably become a tool for activists who seek to introduce new voices into the present-day monoglossic public opinion, Twitter has offered the space for the Black Lives Matter digital activism to create their own identity that enables them to participate in (re)shaping the public opinion and aspire for social change. Social media, leaning on the technological thrust into modern society, have created a viable substitute for public sphere to challenge the power and hegemony which control the production of discourse and agenda that dominate the public opinion. The study draws on Habermas' theory of the 'public sphere' so as to conceptualize the #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) activism aimed at controlling the public national discourse. Critical Discourse Analysis, in its turn, provides the framework for critical examination of language choices and the ways in which texts are structured, selected, and invested with meanings that facilitate the promotion of certain ideologies and particular social representations. Using this theoretical background, the article explores language means used in Twitter messages (<http://twitter.com>) by BLM activists between May 25 and 31, 2020, in the aftermath of Floyd's death. The article reveals that #BlackLivesMatter tweets expose the discourse of inequality, injustice and racism across the American nation and that Twitter is used by the black minority marginalized in the American society as an alternative space to*

(re)construct the public sphere and to challenge the mainstream mass media dominated by the white ideology. The linguistic analysis uncovers the divisive nature of #BlackLivesMatter messages on Twitter expressed by the emphatic blacks vs whites opposition as well as their particularism that becomes pronounced in the debates of BLM activists with the universalist #AllLivesMatter supporters.

Key words: digital activism, public sphere, #BlackLivesMatter, Twitter, public discourse, critical discourse analysis.

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#BLACKLIVESMATTER ТА БОРОТЬБА ЗА НАЦІОНАЛЬНИЙ ДИСКУРС У ТВІТЕРІ: ЦИФРОВИЙ АКТИВІЗМ ЯК НОВА ПУБЛІЧНА СФЕРА

Анотація. Трагічне вбивство афроамериканця Джорджа Флойда білим поліцейським широко обговорювалося в соціальних мережах та сприяло використанню соціальних мереж для критики правоохоронних структур та расистської ідеології в США. Оскільки соціальні мережі безсумнівно стали інструментом для активістів, які намагаються протиставити офіційну суспільну думку альтернативному погляду на ситуацію в суспільстві, Твітер надав руху Black Lives Matter простір для створення ідентичності, яка

уможливорює його участь у (пере)формуванні суспільної думки та запровадженні суспільних змін. Соціальні мережі стали ефективною альтернативою публічної сфери, яка кидає виклик офіційній владі, яка довгий час контролювала створення суспільного дискурсу та порядку денного, що зазвичай формували суспільну думку. Дослідження руху #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) спирається на дві теорії: на теорію публічної сфери Габермаса та на метод критичного аналізу дискурсу. Останній дозволяє авторам статті дослідити мовні особливості твітів, які сприяють просуванню ідеології та соціальних репрезентацій. Використовуючи цю теоретичну базу, автори статті розглядають мовні особливості повідомлень, розміщених в Твіттері (<http://twitter.com>) активістами #BlackLivesMatter у період з 25 по 31 травня 2020 року, тобто відразу після смерті Джорджа Флойда. У результаті аналізу виявляється, що твіти активістів руху викривають теми нерівності, несправедливості та расизму в США, а також використання Твіттера як альтернативного простору, в якому представники чорношкірої меншини, маргіналізованої в американському суспільстві, (ре)конструюють публічну сферу та кидують виклик масмедійному мейнстріму з його ідеологією білої більшості. Лінгвістичний аналіз виявляє, що повідомлення під хештегом як стилемою #BlackLivesMatter експліцитно протиставляють уражених в правах чорношкірих громадян білошкірим, а також виражають партикуляристський світогляд, що стає особливо очевидним у дебатах між активістами руху BlackLivesMatter з прихильниками універсалістського руху AllLivesMatter.

Ключові слова: цифровий активізм, публічна сфера, #BlackLivesMatter, Твіттер, публічний дискурс, критичний дискурс аналіз

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#BLACKLIVESMATTER И БОРЬБА ЗА НАЦИОНАЛЬНЫЙ ДИСКУРС В ТВИТТЕРЕ: ЦИФРОВОЙ АКТИВИЗМ КАК НОВАЯ ПУБЛИЧНАЯ СФЕРА

***Аннотация.** Трагическое убийство афроамериканца Джорджа Флойда белым полицейским широко обсуждалось в социальных сетях и способствовало использованию социальных сетей для критики правоохранительных структур и расистской идеологии в США. Поскольку социальные сети несомненно стали инструментом для активистов, пытающихся противопоставить официальное общественное мнение альтернативному взгляду на ситуацию в обществе, Твиттер предоставил движению Black Lives Matter пространство для создания идентичности, которое делает возможным его участие в (пере)форматировании общественного мнения и проведения изменений в американском обществе. Социальные сети стали эффективной альтернативой публичной сферы, бросающей вызов официальной власти, которая долгое время контролировала создание публичного дискурса и той повестки дня, которая влияла на общественное мнение. Изучение движения #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) опирается на две теории: на теорию публичной сферы Хабермаса и на метод критического анализа дискурса. Последний позволяет авторам статьи изучить языковые особенности твитов, способствующий продвижению новой идеологии и новых социальных репрезентаций. Используя эту теоретическую базу, авторы статьи рассматривают лингвальные особенности сообщений, размещенных в Твиттере (<http://twitter.com>) активистами #BlackLivesMatter с 25 по 31 мая 2020 года, то есть сразу после смерти Джорджа Флойда. Анализ материала выявил в твитах активистов движения BlackLivesMatter темы социального неравенства, несправедливости и расизма в США, а также последовательное использование Твиттера как альтернативного пространства, в котором представители чернокожего меньшинства, маргинализированного в американском обществе, (ре)конструируют публичную сферу и бросают вызов массмедийному мейнстриму с его*

идеологией белого большинства. Лингвистический анализ свидетельствует о том, что сообщения под хештегом *BlackLivesMatter* эксплицитно противопоставляют пораженных в правах чернокожих граждан белым, а также выражают партикуляристское мировоззрение, что становится особенно очевидным в дебатах между активистами движения *BlackLivesMatter* со сторонниками универсалистского движения *AllLivesMatter*.

Ключевые слова: цифровой активизм, публичная сфера, #*BlackLivesMatter*, Твиттер, публичный дискурс, критический анализ дискурса

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The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement started its digital activism on Twitter with the hashtag #*BlackLivesMatter* created by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. The hashtag was originated in 2013 in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman who murdered the unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin in Florida in 2012. According to the official site of the movement, "#*BlackLivesMatter* is working for a world where Black lives are no longer systematically and intentionally targeted for demise... The call for Black lives to matter is a rallying cry for ALL Black lives striving for liberation" [3]. Since 2013, the hashtag #*BlackLivesMatter* has gained prominence owing to many cases of racist violence and police brutality especially in cases of police killing black males like Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and Eric Garner [5]. The killing of George Floyd, who died from asphyxia on May 25, 2020, as a white officer kneeled on his neck for eight minutes, has given momentum to a global wave of the BLM movement. Since

then, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter has been disseminating messages about the police brutality toward the Afro-Americans and calling for social justice and racial equality on Twitter.

Twitter, the world's largest microblogging service which gained singular political importance among Black audiences [9], has been chosen as a case study because it was the launch base of the BLM movement as a slogan and a hashtag and its platform is still used by BLM activists to highlight injustice and racism. Twitter is being broadly used by the black people that has become the refraction of the ongoing production of the black culture or what scholar Andre Brock calls "Twitter's mediation of Black cultural discourse" [4, p. 530] which has led to the phenomenon of the Black Twitter [4; 6; 9; 16].

The **purpose** of the article lies in highlighting how the digital social movement of the #BlackLivesMatter strives to control the Twitter discourse on the race crisis and to oppose the antagonist discourse #AllLivesMatter. The **scientific novelty** of the research arises from the analysis of BLM discourse on Twitter as a new form of the public sphere with its own features. The **object** of the article is the discourse generated by BLM activists on Twitter. The **subject** of the study is topics and language means used by the activists in their tweets.

The **material** of the research is a sample of 300 tweets with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter collected using the Twitter's Advanced Search Feature posted between May 25 and May 31, 2020.

Theoretical framework. Habermas' theory of public sphere provides a good understanding of the BLM discourse on social media and the movement's digital activism as means to participate in (re)producing the national discourse. For Habermas, oppressed communities and lower classes did not participate in shaping the public opinion because "they had neither the leisure nor the opportunity" to engage themselves in anything beyond their needs for viability [11, p.102]. In this sense, the access to discourse to mass media and the public sphere is controlled by powerful groups where few people "say or write what they want, where and when they and to whom they want" [19, p.9]. However, technologies and the fast

development of social media have made the public sphere different from what it used to be. Social media proved to be a perfect vent for 'average' citizens to bring to light their thoughts as it allows to upload user-generated contents and to share individual opinions in an immediate and open communicative environment.

Along with Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, etc., Twitter is one of the digital platforms which allows social movements like Black Lives Matter to "articulate their core beliefs and offer a frame to the public" [14, p.1817]. In other words, Twitter is an increasingly valuable resource for digital activism, defined as a "form of activism that uses the internet and digital media as key platforms for mass mobilization and political action" [10]. Twitter affords more public circulation as it allows inserting hashtag to a phrase or word which can help "accenting and highlighting some issues, events, or beliefs as being more salient than others" [1, p.623]. Inserting hashtag to a particular framed slogan or incident provides the competence and accessibility for such particular issues to become "focusing events" which, according to Birkland, are rare, salient, largely related to audiences, become considerably present in media and stay permanent in public sphere [2]. These focusing events are important for BLM propaganda as, promoted by hashtags, activists' discursive practices amplify "collective action frames" that give agency to the movement. "Collective action frames" operate to create ideologies and agendas molded into understandable and digestible phrasings for the followers of a social movement and those sympathetic towards it [1]. Drawing on Saussurean semiotics and the assumption that words are meaningless without their context, we can argue that the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter has gained a semiotic power and become a "floating signifier" [13] of BLM activists who deploy it to guide followers' interpretation of a hashtagged real-life context.

It should also be mentioned that digital activism on social platforms represents the struggle for space in the public sphere and is used as means to challenge the power exercised by the dominant groups. By doing so, digital activism contributes to the production of the national discourse. Therefore, #BlackLivesMatter goes far

beyond the focusing event of killing George Floyd: it aims at challenging the legacy of oppression, racial domination and victimization of the black community and reshaping the public opinion on social justice, racial equality and liberation. These representations in digital realm transfer the ideological baggage of the public opinion from the dominated social groups to the oppressed group [8].

Considering that "all practices are practices of production" [7, p. 122] is a way to give voice to the voiceless and meaning to those whose perspectives are typically represented as meaningless in the "mainstream" mass media. Social media for the voiceless are, thus, an alternative public sphere to produce their own discourse and contribute to social processes. Hence, in order to understand how the discursive practices of BLM's activists on Twitter, the study will apply Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) deployed by Fairclough, van Dijk, and Wodak (see [7; 8; 15; 20]. CDA provides the guiding lenses to understand the struggle over the national discourse by exposing the hidden ideology and elements of power relations at play. For Hall [12, p. 99], language and behaviour are the media, and their practices always occur in social sites, linked with social apparatuses. CDA helps spotlight "signifiers that make up the text, the specific linguistic selections, their juxtapositioning, their sequencing, their layout" [15].

Findings and Discussion. Social media allow participants to engage and shape their own discussions and offer an opportunity to challenge dominant ideologies and mobilize for social change. The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter itself indicates that its creators and users strategically intended to emphasize the significance of racism over other kinds of oppression. This "collective action frame" [1, p.614] is an approach which "mobilizes potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists" [18, p.198]. It is seen as some social schemata that unite the shared meanings of #BlackLivesMatter's activists to help construct a recognized social and political identity of their own community in this digital public sphere.

The following messages are typical tweets that dominated Twitter discourse after Floyd's killing: they verbalize the 'blacks vs white/police' opposition and explicitly present racism as a systematic American political tradition:

(1) *"I cannot breathe." Again. A **handcuffed black man** represents more danger than **armed white man** shouting at the police. #BlackLivesMatter (black young woman)*

(2) *You know what's divisive? **White cops** killing **black men**. Asking yourself if he had been **white**, would he be dead and the answer is no because **white men** can walk up in the capital of a MI with mask on and guns strapped across them in the biggest display of little man syndrome... (black young woman)*

(3) *The world is a terrible place for **Black and Brown folks** right now. Listen, validate, amplify their voices. Educate yourself on **racism** as a structural issue. I believe that #BlackLivesMatter. (identity unknown)*

(4) *The **black race** should have been enjoying equal rights, equal fair play, equal justice in the world today, make no doubt about this that **white privileges** and **white supremacists** always make it known to us as a fact that some lives are worth more (black young man).*

(5) *Too often, **Black parents** have to sit their teenage children down and tell them they may be stopped, arrested, or even shot because of the **color of their skin**. Our nation's history of **systemic racism** and use of excessive force must be confronted so we can begin to heal (black middle-aged woman).*

The tweets accuse the American law enforcement system of structural racism and of stereotyping black males as criminals and more dangerous than whites. Drawing on this stereotype in the American societal and political consciousness, police always look at the black bodies as a threat and thus target them violently, while *white supremacists*, as some tweets mention, walked with weapons and terrorized BLM's supporters "and the police greeted them as friends" [17]. Hence, these posts aim at constructing a new discourse in the public sphere that shows ethnicities of colour as victims just because of their skin colour that is perceived as a marker of inferiority and insignificance. The posts are designed to make supporters conceptualize the issue of racism against minorities as

historically structured, as ideology that privileges the white supremacy. The above posts, then, are collective action frames created by BLM actors to facilitate the process of constructing a profound social identity on Twitter. Thus, their discursive actions in this digital sphere shape a new reality where their societal existence is acknowledged as an unignorably racial power that demands equality and justice and can dominate and control the public discourse.

This is an attempt to organize and guide actions designed to reframe the social reality with new representations of victimized and repressed communities. By creating its digital existence, BLM activists and its hashtag users attempt to align and keep connected with each other and with other neglected and disadvantaged social and ethnic groups as well as those members of the dominant groups who sympathize with the oppressed. This engagement helps to spread their discourse over racism and oppression they are going through. Though the 'truths' assumed in this digital public arena could be imperfect, but they are crucial for shifting the dominant national discourse and mobilizing for social change that the activists strive for.

Since social media is an open sphere to all audiences, participants of different orientations and ideologies always struggle with each other for the control over the discourse. In other words, there is always a counter discourse. In the case of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, the antagonist is the hashtag #AllLivesMatter where everyone concentrates on selective ideologies, whether strategically or unintentionally, to produce their own "truths" over the controversial events. Consequently, BlackLivesMatter activists post texts that both defend their own discourse and dispute, sometimes undermine the counter narrative of the #AllLivesMatter movement:

*(6) I don't understand how some will say "All Lives Matter" when society continues to prove to us time and time again how **LITTLE** black lives are really valued. Saying black lives matter does not mean that another races doesn't, it means that our lives matter **JUST AS MUCH** as any other (black young woman)*

(7) *Gain justice for those who lost their lives due to racism. we're asking you to spread awareness and realize how important this movement is not just for **black lives** but **everyone** else's, including yours. **all lives** will matter once **black lives** matter (identity unknown).*

(8) *If **All lives** truly mattered, then the **black race** should have been enjoying equal rights, equal fair play, equal justice in the world today, make no doubt about this that **white privileges** and **white supremacists** always make it known to us as a fact that some lives are worth more. (Black middle-aged woman)*

(9) *"**All lives matter**" diminishes the value of the **black lives matter** movement. Yes, **all lives** do matter, but the focus needs to be towards the group of people whose lives aren't being valued. (white young man)*

In these posts we can notice different approaches to defend the #BlackLivesMatter rhetoric against the counter discourse of #AllLivesMatter. (6) admonishes the hidden racism in the #AllLivesMatter as its users defend the social status quo in the USA where black lives are seen as LITTLE compared to the whites' and that the aim of the #BlackLivesMatter is just to demand equality and to be valued JUST AS MUCH the other races. The capitalized words aim to draw attention to the racism instituted in the society that blacks are inferiors and thus their goal is legitimate as they have all the rights to be as equal as the dominant white group.

(7) emphasizes the universality of the BLM movement by assuring that it is not created exclusively for black people but it is a universal endeavor for all oppressed humans seeking justice, equality and human rights. The tweet addresses the #AllLivesMatter accusation that the BLM movement and its supporters disregard all races other than the black one. Thus, the user employs the tactic of refuting charges.

Tweets (8) and (9) condemn the rhetoric of #AllLivesMatter about significance of all lives by stating that lives do value but the value is different: black lives are not worth as much as white lives. The tweets accuse the #AllLivesMatter movement of being created only to strip the BLM movement of its legitimacy in the public discourse.

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Interestingly, unlike the posts in the previous set, the opposition in (7)-(9) runs along the 'all vs blacks' divide: what the authors mean is that, in political and social reality, the pronouns *all* and *everyone*, inclusive by nature, do not in fact include the blacks.

This fight between both of the hashtags on Twitter is aimed at winning the struggle over the discourse dominance; it is a struggle of knowledge and ideologies for control over the national discourse and public sphere on social media.

Hence, #BlackLivesMatter tweets posted in response to the #AllLivesMatter messages fight back its rhetoric by celebrating particularism over universalism.

Conclusion and Remarks. Drawing on Habermas' theory of public sphere and applying Critical Discourse Analysis, the research sheds some light on the relation between social media and the public sphere in modern communicative space. The research shows that the BlackLivesMatter movement and its hashtag #BlackLivesMatter struggle for creating an identity in the digital public sphere and defend their own rhetoric against the counter discourse of their antagonists.

The thematic analysis of the sample reveals that the BLM digital activism concentrates primarily on police brutality against black men leaving aside cases of injustice towards black women and other ethnicities.

The linguistic analysis of tweets reveals that the BLM movement, at least in the form of digital activism, is based on the assumption of racism as systemic feature of law enforcement bodies in the USA as well as the assumption of the 'blacks vs whites' opposition that permeates American society. In addition, the analysis of the two antagonist discourses, #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter, reveals the inherent particularism of the BLM movement, which influences the meaning of pronouns with inclusive semantics (*all*, *everyone*) that, in BLM activists' tweets, do not include members of the black community.

All in all, the study BLM messages on Twitter reveals that social media have been transformed into the public sphere that consolidates people of a social group and provides them with the

platform for 'digital activism', a set of actions aimed at controlling the national discourse in the wider public sphere and at mobilizing users for social change.

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