Expanding Television’s Cultural Forum in the Digital Era: Prime Time Television, Twitter, and Black Lives Matter

Laurena Bernabo

Twitter updates and expands television’s cultural forum model by letting viewers speak to current events such as the Black Live Matter (BLM) movement. This article analyzes 1,985 tweets in response to three television episodes (Law & Order: SVU, The Good Wife, and Scandal) that dramatized BLM, and identifies five common themes in how viewers address these representations: thematic appropriateness, timing, producers’ qualifications, institutional critiques, and the purpose of entertainment television. This study concludes that Twitter facilitates a meta-commentary, which expands traditional discussions of entertainment programming, and that these programs transcend “mere” entertainment to become critiques of larger social movements.

“I feel like I was hit by a train. I hate living in a world where stuff like that happens.” This tweet could have been about any number of black boys and men killed in the U.S. in the last few years. This tweet, however, was not about Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, or Michael Brown, at least not directly. This tweet was a response to an episode of Scandal (ABC, 2012–2018)—in which a young black man is senselessly killed by a police officer—an all-too-familiar narrative now in both news stories and entertainment programming. The representations of this theme in entertainment programming, and the way that Twitter serves as a public sphere for discussion through live tweeting practices, demonstrate how social media and entertainment programming are expanding the cultural forum of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.

In addition to being utilized for activism (Brock, 2012; LeFebvre & Armstrong, 2016) and political engagement (Larsson & Moe, 2011; Vaccari, Chadwick, & O’Louglin, 2015), Twitter has come to function as a mode of viewer engagement with entertainment programming (Cameron & Geidner, 2014; McPherson et al., 2012). The symbiotic relationship between Twitter and television provides a way for viewers to engage with and comment on programs in real time, and producers with a way to access...
viewers (Twitter, 2011). However, dual-screening studies tend to focus on live tweeting of news, sports, and political events, and rarely on scripted programming. Studies of how people tweet about scripted series have considered how such social television activity affects viewing experiences (McPherson et al., 2012) or how viewers participate in discourses about shared cultural histories (Williams & Gonlin, 2017). This study focuses instead on how viewers tweet about scripted programming based on real events, specifically BLM. In particular, this study argues that Twitter and live-tweeting practices collectively manifest in an expanded televisual cultural forum where viewers discuss the role of media in the sociopolitical sphere.

Viewer discussion about televisual representations is nothing new, but it historically lacked the collective force and public eye that Twitter affords. Framing tweeting as an expansion of television’s cultural forum informs our broader understanding of television’s role in both commenting on and sparking debate about contemporary issues like racial activism. Law & Order: SVU (SVU), The Good Wife (TGW), and Scandal are significant in the way that they create a broader discussion of BLM on Twitter. This study expands previous rearticulations of the cultural forum model of television by accounting for social media engagement, specifically examining the use of Twitter in responding to BLM-inspired episodes.

This study conducts a thematic analysis of tweets responding to BLM’s dramatization in the context of a modernized cultural forum model, where Twitter broadens the forum’s scope by bringing together disparate viewers through hashtags like #blacklivesmatter and the names of television programs. Twitter has been acknowledged as a powerful tool for communicating discontent and challenging existing power structures (MacKinnon, 2012). Recent scholarship on social television, or the practice of using social media while watching television, has demonstrated the ways viewers use Twitter to discuss and engage television content over geographically disparate places (Guo & Chan-Olmsted, 2015; Lin, Chen, & Sung, 2018). As the present study illustrates, live tweeting expands television’s function by giving viewers a platform for collectively articulating, engaging, and critiquing both those meanings and their very presence on television. Five broad themes emerge from and are discussed in tweets about these episodes: 1) whether BLM themes should be dramatized in entertainment programming, 2) the appropriate timing of such representations, 3) who is qualified to dramatize BLM, 4) media critiques of social institutions, and 5) the purpose of entertainment television programs.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural Forum Model

The cultural forum model (Newcomb & Hirsch, 1983) brought focus to the collective, cultural view of the social construction and negotiation of reality. This model addresses a central question in television studies by explaining how commercialized, mass-mediated content contains a variety of ideological valences.
Newcomb and Hirsch argue that cultures examine themselves through the meta-language of their arts, and that television “does not present firm ideological conclusions—despite its formal conclusions—so much as it comments on ideological problems" (p. 49). In other words, rather than providing a powerful voice that perpetuates a singular dominant ideology via a monolithic point of view, television presents a multiplicity of meanings that inspire audiences to reflect on and consider their own positions on political and social issues.

Although some aspects of the cultural forum model make it less applicable in the current post-network era of fragmented viewing, it remains useful if we emphasize its lesser-known tenets: television presents particular values and attitudes to a sizable and heterogeneous audience, provides a space for ideological negotiation, and is viewed through ritualistic communication practices. Television remains the most mass-oriented medium, and this model remains useful for critically analyzing television texts because television continues to contribute to the construction, circulation, and negotiation of values and ideas (Lotz, 2004). Some scholars suggest that digital developments make it more difficult for television to create a cultural forum because viewers have more options and more control over what they watch, compared to the network era (Hendershot, 2013; Lotz, 2004).

However, the diminishing nature of a mass television audience experiencing and debating a specific television show does not herald the end of television as a cultural forum, because it is maintained and even expanded by dual-screen practices. A single episode of a single program is limited in its ability to comment on the significance of television. But a collection of texts with a common theme, and the use of social media to comment on them, allows us to recognize the vibrancy—with which television as a social process can explore societal fear and uncertainties—in this case, by implicitly or explicitly linking to specific incidents of violence. Moreover, many viewers’ ritualistic television practices now include dual-screening practices like live tweeting (Harrington, Highfield, & Bruns, 2013). As such, BlackLivesMatter and its cultural consequences are negotiated and shared not just in news media, but in entertainment programming and Twitter, and live tweeting across multiple programs expands television’s cultural forum in significant ways.

In the field of media and cultural studies, the cultural forum model is foundational due to its capacity to demonstrate that television, as a technology and a cultural practice, opens spaces where regular people can engage with major social debates of the day. Television programs are rich and complex, providing a multiplicity of meanings from which viewers draw their own ideologically engaged conclusions. The text-based cultural forum model traditionally focused on how a program’s textual elements encourage discussion or debate. And yet, an updated cultural forum model requires that we consider non-narrative texts, including social media microtexts, and so the present study expands the model to examine audience responses in the form of tweets.

Today, the integration of television viewing with Twitter use creates the specific cultural forum where viewers can discuss the role of media in society and politics. Live
tweeting amplifies viewers’ ideological engagement with television’s multiple meanings by compounding it with their engagement with each other and giving them a public platform that transcends geographical space and linear time. Twitter users expand television’s cultural forum by commenting on, critiquing, and critically engaging the ways television processes the material world into narrativized forms. Against this backdrop, the present study expands the cultural forum model to examine audience responses in the form of tweets. This research hopes to demonstrate how Twitter affords viewers the opportunity to create a cultural forum via a metacommentary on television as a medium, via advancing the first open research question.

**Twitter**

Since it emerged in 2008, Twitter has been a popular forum for communicating about social upheaval and engaging in activism, and for talking about media events as they occur. These two uses are reflected in the two rather disconnected strands of research on Twitter in media studies, with one focusing on social movements like BlackLivesMatter (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; LeFebvre & Armstrong, 2016) and the other on fandom and identity politics (Maragh, 2016; McPherson et al., 2012). BLM-related hashtags have not been considered as a platform for influencing mainstream television, nor vice versa. This is true, despite the fact that political movements have long aimed to influence prime time representations because prime time television is a large platform for gaining popular agreement and influencing public opinion. With BLM’s ubiquity on Twitter and its relevance to numerous programs, the current study intends to identify how representations have been influenced and received by viewers to advance a second open research question.

Numerous studies demonstrate that the political arena is an inviting area for research into Twitter’s impact, yet we know little about the relationship between social media and entertainment programming. To this end, media scholars are starting to examine the integration of social media into television through dual screening to understand how viewers use social media to (re)interpret content. For example, Schirra, Sun, and Bentley (2014) identify motivations for and benefits of live tweeting, and Maragh (2016) investigates the exploitation of Black women’s tweets for content feedback. Still, these studies tend to focus on viewers rather than how they engage in meta-analyses of representations. Some scholars have considered fandom, but not necessarily the way that social media provides space to discuss the politics of prime time entertainment media. Moreover, most dual-screen studies focus on political debates, sports, and competition-based reality shows. By contrast, the current study examines tweets surrounding three BLM-related episodes of scripted programs and suggests live tweeting’s utility both as an industrial tool and as a cultural forum for viewers to analyze and engage in a meta-level discussion of thematic dramatizations.
When *Time* magazine (Poniewozik, 2010) dubbed Twitter the “Twittercooler,” it did two important things; it tapped into the long-held understanding of television as an electronic hearth (Tichi, 1992), and tied this to the conventional practice of gathering around the watercooler to discuss the previous night’s programming. For many, television viewing now goes hand in hand with online interaction (Giuffre, 2012). Viewers increasingly create social viewing experiences by posting and reading comments and discussing programming in real time (Cameron & Geidner, 2014; Larsson & Moe, 2011). Hashtags such as #blacklivesmatter and #ferguson offer a succinct way to signal a common concern, and trending records make visible the amount of conversation surrounding those concerns; Twitter functions as an online town hall in which individual voices and collective opinions can become amplified (Van Dijck, 2013) with hashtags serving as a metadiscoursal convention (Brock, 2012).

Twitter thus becomes a virtual watercooler where the active audience paradigm of contemporary cultural studies is made visible, and live tweeting is imbricated in similar viewer motivations like camaraderie, social inclusion, and the affirmation of personal opinions (Schirra et al., 2014; Woon & Na, 2011). Viewer engagement takes on new possibilities in the public sphere of social media. Scholars have previously considered the ways that active audiences appropriate and make use of texts, as in fan poaching (Jenkins, 1992), or are used by producers who incorporate viewer feedback in a form of free audience research (Andrejevic, 2008).

Viewers in this study are considered to differ in their specific political intent in engaging with the dramatization of BlackLivesMatter. Tweeters create their own forum by engaging the text and providing their own perspective; while television producers may make use of this perspective, producers’ actions do not exhaust the Twitter forum’s political engagement. As a naturalized extension of television, Twitter complements it by expanding viewers’ opportunities to actively contribute to a wider media sphere (Harrington et al., 2013). This study attempts to provide a framework through which these two strands of Twitter scholarship and media studies can be integrated.

**Methods**

To demonstrate the way Twitter extends the cultural forum, potential focal texts were first selected. While many television series have addressed racial prejudice, particularly since Martin’s death, this study identifies and engages episodes whose narratives echo the deaths of specific black individuals. Choosing these episodes allows the identification of tweets in which the connections between historical events, news media, and entertainment programming are most clearly drawn. These episodes hail from the different dramatic subgenres of police procedural, legal, and political, demonstrating how the expanded cultural forum of livetweeting television works across a range of genres. As Lotz (2004) contends, we also benefit from analyzing trends, representations, and discourses across networks, by selecting one text from each of the three major U.S. networks. These episodes
are: Law & Order: Special Victims Unit’s “American Tragedy” (NBC, 10/2/13); The Good Wife’s “The Debate” (CBS, 1/11/15); and Scandal’s “The Lawn Chair” (ABC, 3/5/15), all of which aired in the season following the specific racial incident and death that occurred and was relevant to the current study.

Tweets for each episode were collected by using the Twitter API to search for specific hashtags, which indicated that a tweet was about the episode in question. Tweets including #SVU and #TheGoodWife were collected for the first two series. Scandal required more specificity, as there were an overwhelming number of tweets featuring #Scandal that were in fact about a Chinese pop singing group by that same name. Tweets were thus collected that contained both #Scandal and either #BlackLivesMatter or #Ferguson, the two hashtags most commonly associated with the issue of systemic racism (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015).

The number of tweets varied considerably across episodes. There were 1,588 tweets for SVU, which aired early in the days of live tweeting. Of these, the 669 that specifically addressed issues related to BlackLivesMatter and its dramatization on television were included for analysis. The low numbers of tweets featuring #TheGoodWife (236) can be explained by the episode’s airing opposite the Golden Globes. Predictably, the greatest number of tweets in this study were found with Scandal, a series that has embraced live tweeting though on-screen hashtags and an active executive producer and vivacious cast. Of the 1,080 Scandal tweets analyzed for this study, 830 included #BlackLivesMatter and 263 contained #Ferguson.

Twitter (2011) defines live tweeting as “a continuous engagement that leads to a sequence of focused tweets,” and so this study follows the conversations that occur around the hashtags described above. Although dual screen tweeting and television viewing is arguably “incompatible with time shifting” (Harrington et al., 2013, p. 207), this study examines tweets that occurred both during and immediately following each broadcast to account for east and west coast broadcasts as well as immediate SVOD and DVR viewing. By using the broader parameters of each episode’s evening in its entirety, the present analysis accounts for conversations that occur both at the time of a show’s broadcast and in the hours that follow, thus capturing the proverbial Twittercooler phenomenon. The tweets collected were uploaded into an excel file and stripped of identifying information (usernames, photos, etc.) to focus on the content of the tweets rather than the identities of those tweeting. Tweets were analyzed chronologically, while noting that SVOD technologies and the dual-coast airings ultimately disrupt the chronology of those tweets with respect to a given episode.

The researcher conducted a qualitative content analysis of the tweets by using grounded theory’s constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to categorize tweets into themes surrounding BlackLivesMatter. The flexibility of this approach allows for the (re)generation of theory based on vivid descriptions of data—in this case, through comparisons across tweets for specific thematic patterns (e.g., Maragh, 2016). Five themes, or topics on which tweets focused, emerged across SVU, The Good Wife, and Scandal, demonstrating a trend across time and series. These five themes include: 1)
The diversity of perspectives across each theme was documented to demonstrate whether Twitter’s state as a cultural forum expands television’s traditional role of commenting on ideological problems without providing firm conclusions. This approach was adopted to address the query forwarded by the first open research question, which explores whether Twitter creates the opportunity to formulate a cultural forum as a metacommentary based on television content. All tweets are directly quoted, including typos and non-traditional writing styles, with minimal use of brackets for clarification. Table 1 provides the percentages of each theme across each show and the overall occurrence of the themes taken as a whole.¹

After identifying these themes, tweets were coded for the positions that viewers took to elucidate the explanations inquired by the second open research question. Specifically, the second open question investigates how viewer may respond to the racial incidents and death under study as represented in the television programs examined. For example, of the tweets engaging the theme of timing, viewers characterized that they watched in relation to the racial incident featured in the episode as a) too soon, b) not soon enough, c) appropriately timely, or d) uncannily timely, considering current events. Due to the large number of frequency categories associated with viewer responses analyzed under each of the five themes, these frequencies are discussed below and not presented in a table.

Findings and Discussion

To understand these tweets’ contexts, we must be familiar with the narratives of the episodes analyzed. While the tweets are the primary focus of this study, the following overview of the episodes to which they respond provides a necessary context.

In particular, SVU’s “American Tragedy” blended race-related news stories in a narrative that Newsone (2013) called “Paula Deen Shoots Trayvon Martin”. Jolene, a white female celebrity chef, shoots Mehcad Carter, a young Black man
in a hoodie. White women have been brutally raped in this neighborhood by an armed man fitting Mehcad’s description, and Jolene claims that Mehcad attempted to attack her after following her down the street. The narrative reveals that Mehcad was a choirboy armed with nothing but cherry bubblegum. Jolene testifies that she feared for her life and shot in self-defense, but medical evidence confirms that Mehcad was at least five feet away from her. The narrative centers on the rapists’ prior victims, two of whom identify Mehcad in a photo lineup before the actual rapist is caught in the act, moments before Mehcad dies in a hospital. Thus, both the survivors and the police who engage in “stop and frisk” practices are depicted as unable or unwilling to differentiate among Black men.

Whereas SVU’s narrative mirrored the death of Trayvon Martin, TGW more broadly reflected on excessive force against Black men, though the inciting incident echoes that of Eric Garner. “The Debate” opens with handheld video footage of a Black man confronted by two white police officers in a mall; he accuses them of racial profiling, and one officer quickly resorts to the deadly use of his Taser. The announcement of the grand jury verdict coincides with and interrupts a debate between two educated, white, upper-middle class individuals who are running for State’s Attorney, one of whom is the show’s protagonist Alicia Florrick. During this delay, the two candidates retreat to the hotel kitchen, and their conversation leads to an impromptu debate in front of a growing audience of racially diverse hotel staff about race relations, institutional problems, and potential solutions. The “not guilty” verdict mounts concerns that protesters may turn to rioting, and the governor joins with prominent Black clergy and the victim’s wife as she tells the crowd, “This is not the time to break things. This is the time to fix them.”

Like SVU, Scandal’s “The Lawn Chair” mirrors a specific death: Michael Brown. Here, the white officer Newton shoots and kills a Black teen named Brandon Parker after he hears a vague description regarding a local robbery and confronts Brandon. Newton insists that Brandon was pulling a knife and that he feared for his life; his white partner, the first to respond, backs up his story. Brandon’s father is adamant that his son is innocent and arrives at the scene with a shotgun, refusing to leave until his son’s killer is punished. Political “fixer” Olivia Pope works to maintain peace between a growing crowd and increasingly hostile officers, and she discovers that the knife found under Brandon’s body was planted. Pope and the Attorney General confront Newton in his precinct in front of his colleagues. Newton then lets loose with a tirade about how Black youth are trained to hate and disrespect the police, concluding, “Brandon Parker is dead because he didn’t have respect, because those people out there who are chanting and crying over his body, they didn’t teach him the right values. They didn’t teach him respect. He didn’t respect me, he didn’t respect my badge. Questioning my authority was not his right. His blood is not on my hands!”

Each of these episodes engaged race relations through narratives that specifically focused on the killing of unarmed Black boys and men. Thus, this study demonstrates how Twitter functioned to afford a meta-commentary on the role of fictional
television in the public sphere and considers the role of these programs within a larger cultural forum. With these findings, the current study builds on historical precedents to demonstrate how Twitter magnifies conversations about the representations of racialized bodies and lives, and how these discussions are facilitated through engagement with entertainment television.

While studies of other live-tweeted programs have identified trends in content (McPherson et al., 2012), motivations (Schirra et al., 2014), or a combination of the two (Wohn & Na, 2011), the themes below are marked primarily by their engagement with television as a significant cultural force. By applying the central tenets of the cultural forum model to live tweeting, we can make sense of how viewers in the post-network era engage fragmented television productions in the context of an encompassing cultural medium. As this study demonstrates through the thesis of the two first open research questions, Twitter expands the interactive possibilities of television as a cultural forum and affords viewers a platform for negotiating ideological meanings and political issues.

Theme 1: To Dramatize or Not to Dramatize?

Real events inspired these episodes, and thousands of tweets did little more than point to the clear connections between the programs and BLM. The debate instead questioned whether television should dramatize such events; 70.7% of tweets engaging this topic championed these episodes as painful yet necessary, but 14.5% expressed disapproval. SVU’s episode was described as “in extremely poor taste” and “disrespectful to the Martin family,” and Scandal was accused of using “black boys bodies [as] props for TV shows,” exploiting BlackLivesMatter, and pandering to Black viewers. The greatest outrage came from those who believed executives were financially benefitting from the deaths of Black men. Additionally, these programs faced accusations that they dramatized BLM simply because they “ran out of an original storyline.” These sentiments demonstrate the ways entertainment programming and Twitter facilitated a broader cultural forum about BLM by highlighting an ongoing national crisis outside the traditional venue of news media.

Each episode was an instance, albeit to varying degrees, of art imitating life, and they were generally disheartening. Of particular concern to the 15.3% of tweets here that expressed trepidation was the extent to which some series took liberties with actual facts. Participants were alarmed by and criticized this blending of “fact” and “fiction.” Tweeters identified ways the episodes disrespected the dead or obscured the racism of those involved. For example, SVU upset viewers by letting Martin’s surrogate, comatose and fighting for his life, be mistakenly identified as a serial rapist; they lamented the representation of the “black man hoodie-wearing negro [as] the aggressor” and George Zimmerman’s stand-in as “the fragile white woman.” When a knife was found under the body of the slain teen in Scandal, fans expressed a willingness toward outrage if the knife was not revealed to have been planted.
One viewer tweeted, “don’t mix #Ferguson with falsehood of #scandal cuz some ppl will miss REAL pt.” Viewers were concerned that blending fact and fiction would denigrate the memories of Martin and Brown and feared the consequences of impugning their innocence. This theme indicates viewers’ understanding that dramatic, scripted representations based on news stories can affect viewers’ comprehension of those events covered in the news, and that viewers therefore expect entertainment programming to behave responsibly, regardless of disclaimers eschewing any connection to actual events.

**Theme 2: If So, When?**

Among those who believed that BlackLivesMatter must be represented in entertainment television, viewers commonly discussed whether enough time had passed between the real-life event and its fictional representation. Viewers were divided, with 38.5% praising episodes for being “timely” and 35% suggesting that these representations were “too much too soon” and insensitive to those communities directly affected by BLM. They described SVU as “shameful and very insensitive so close to the real events,” and a Scandal viewer addressed Shonda Rhimes to say, “We are hurting for what happen. shame.” The remaining 26.5% suggested that these episodes should have come sooner and expressed irritation that BLM had taken so long to be addressed on prime time dramas. Here, many lamented that they had become upset “all over again,” and one poetically claimed that “Just when you thought your Trayvon wound was healing, #SVU came through with a switchblade and a salt shaker.” Scandal, which aired months after Ferguson, was both criticized for waiting so long and praised for bringing attention back to an issue that had waned in national attention.

Though tweets regarding timing were generally celebratory, one Twitter user suggested that the real scandal is the fact that “it takes a trending show to get [people’s] attention back to the #BlackLivesMatter movement.” A Scandal viewer perhaps best captured this controversy by tweeting, “This might seem like ‘Too Soon’, but 10 minutes or 10 months or 10 years—it will still ring true for all.” These tweets illustrate both the inconclusive nature of Twitter’s cultural forum and the longevity of social issues like BLM that tend to permeate entertainment programming.

**Theme 3: Who Is Qualified to Dramatize?**

In addition to debating authenticity and response time, viewers drew upon these fictional representations to address a longstanding concern in African American television criticism (Havens, 2013) by considering television authorship and asking who should tell these stories. Tweets emphasized creator identities and their handling of the topic. Most viewers (63.8%), presumably dedicated fans, celebrated their
chosen program. *SVU* was characterized as “one of the few shows that can incorporate current events without making it corny.” *TGW* received similar praise from viewers, who claimed that the series “handles sensitive subjects better than most.”

Many who praised *Scandal* specifically lauded creator Shonda Rhimes because “She gets it and has the power to show it,” specifying, “Shonda knows exactly how to get this conversation started.” Rhimes was described as brave for using her platform to air controversial content and 63.8% of tweets in this category were celebratory, but it’s worth noting that the per-show averages varied dramatically; only 38.3% of *SVU*’s tweets and 48.1% of *TGW*’s tweets were positive, while 79% of *Scandal*’s tweets were positive. This suggests a strong connection between the identity of a show’s creator—the white Dick Wolf for *SVU* and Robert and Michelle King for *TGW*, and African American Shonda Rhimes for *Scandal*—and approval of one’s ability to handle a complex and sensitive cultural issue.

While these episodes were generally well received, 20.2% criticized the shows’ approaches to dramatizing BLM. It was suggested that *SVU* will “capitalize off everything,” and *TGW* received considerable critique for having an underdeveloped understanding of race-related issues. Though some viewers took a more forgiving perspective on writers who “really tried their best with this Ferguson episode,” critics generally agreed that an overwhelmingly white cast was not equipped to do this topic justice.

Another frequent criticism in these tweets, particularly with *TGW* and *Scandal*, had to do with the fact that these series rarely address race explicitly. While some viewers used social media to titter over the rare sight of so many Black people on *TGW*, others argued that “this particular show delivering that sort of message feels a bit hypocritical and self-congratulatory. Particularly when … the show is not likely to ever bring any of this up ever again.” “Like I love you #TheGood Wife,” said another, “but you’re still a show written about white people BY white people. Hanging a lantern only does so much.” Given these comments, it is perhaps surprising that *Scandal*, created by and starring powerful Black women, received similar critiques. “After 4 years, Olivia realizes she’s black?” one viewer asked. “Okay. Now #BlackLivesMatter The real #scandal.” Another commenter pointedly suggested that the *Scandal* episode was Rhimes’s pathetic “food run to the hood for fried chicken and greens,” or a transparent attempt to appease Black viewers.

The condemnation of perceived cultural appropriation is further complicated by another key point of engagement for *TGW* (12.3%) and *Scandal* (10.1%), both of which aired after BLM took the United States by storm, regarding the use of “Black Lives Matter.” Rhimes has famously made substantial strides in representing diversity, but has been conspicuously reticent about #BlackLivesMatter, instead adopting the more tonally vapid #AllLivesMatter. The point of #BlackLivesMatter is that it brings attention to the systematic dehumanization of Black lives, whereas #AllLivesMatter (and its *Scandal* equivalent, “we all matter,)” ignores racial inequalities and strips the sentiment of its political roots (Yancy & Butler, 2015). Remarks about the absence of “Black lives matter” from the series ran the gamut from angry...
(“This is the same Shonda who said Twitter activism is stupid. Of course she’s not gonna use “#BlackLivesMatter”) to wistful (“I wish u would’ve said #BlackLivesMatter or dedicated the ep”) to resigned (“*sigh* Can black people just have a moment! Yes, #WeAllMatter but dang. #Scandal #BlackLivesMatter”). Ironically, the white-cast TGW gave #BlackLivesMatter the largest movement-specific megaphone. Not only was this series praised for the scenes of protestors shouting that “Black lives matter,” but it was elevated above the Golden Globes, which aired the same night but which did not reference the BlackLivesMatter movement.

**Theme 4: Media Critique**

Each episode in this study offers a critique of powerful figures and institutions, primarily law enforcement but also courts, politicians, and news media. Tweets in turn addressed and negotiated these critiques. Most tweets (83%) criticized these predominantly white institutions, while a mere 12.9% found qualities and actions to praise; few (4.1%) expressed support for the white individuals who ended Black lives, agreeing that Jolene was right to be afraid or that Black-on-Black crime is a bigger problem than police violence, and some Scandal tweets included #AllLivesMatter. By and large, tweets engaging institutional critiques blurred the line between the fictional realm of dramas and the historical context of BLM, using these episodes to comment not only on how various institutions were represented on prime time, but also how they behave during this politically contentious moment in history. They extended the conversation surrounding these three episodes to generalize about real and fictional police, politicians, and media.

While relatively few of these tweets engaged news media, reporters were wholly ridiculed in these tweets. One TGW viewer derided news outlets by discussing a scene in which a reporter sought a 45-second response to the prompt, “Talk to us about race relations in America,” laughing “Lol becuz it’s so like the media.” Tweets skewered reporters for characterizing the victim as a “suburban father of two turned into suspected gang member,” with one viewer fuming: “I. Can’t. Even.” These tweets signal a disgruntled perception of news outlets as unable, or unwilling, to create spaces for real debate or to frame victims as such, instead vilifying them through false or irrelevant information and perpetuating racist news frames (Oliver, 1994). Scandal viewers offered similar criticisms; one tweeter suggested that “Stereotypes and distortions by the media have transformed the Black body into being synonymous for ‘threat,’” while others pointed to a noticeable lack of press coverage of BlackLivesMatter protests and the larger movement in the preceding months.

Most tweets engaging in institutional critique focused on the use of force by the police. For example, they excoriated SVU’s protagonists for circulating a dangerously vague sketch of the suspect on a wanted poster. While officers in
TGW were secondary within the narrative and generally escaped viewer comment, Scandal’s officer Jeff Newton became a stand-in for American police, just as Jolene became a stand-in for racist civilians who don’t recognize their own bigotry. When Newton confessed in a racist rant, tweeters demonized him and other police for thinking and feeling in this way. But they also characterized his rant as useful because it exposed “the sick and diabolical psyche of most police officers,” noting that it “sounded pretty similar to that ferguson DOJ findings report.” That said, while many attributed Newton’s positions to all police officers, others argued that “Not all officers are evil and vindictive.” As one concluded, this episode “raised valid arguments frm both parties along racial divides and was really insightful.”

In addition to criticizing institutions, 12.9% of these tweets prescribed improvements and celebrated instances of progressive approaches to BLM. In this way, the cultural forum of Twitter engaged the role of fictional television in discussions about the racial politics of police use-of-force. Many recommended that lawyers and politicians adopt the practices of fictional counterparts who were more useful to the BLM movement; most notably, 31.8% of TGW’s tweets in this theme praised the institutions in question, primarily by cheering on the fictional governor for “already doing more than [Missouri governor] Jay Nixon.” Similarly, Newton served as evidence that offers must “learn the biases they unconsciously bring 2 communities they police,” and that “this is why we need institutional change, because these police forces are too set in their ways.” In addition to advice, some viewers reasserted the point of the BLM campaign. “To be clear, our dream is not having cops arrested for killing us,” one wrote. “Its [sic] to have them stop killing us.” Though inspired by actual events, the fictional nature of these programs created an open space for viewers to discuss and work out their thoughts on real-life debates about institutional racism and police brutality.

Theme 5: The Purpose of Entertainment Programming

Much of the conversation revolving around these episodes boiled down to questions about the role or responsibility of scripted entertainment programming. This debate played out through different answers to unspoken questions, including, should entertainment programming give voice to one perspective or to many? Should it lecture, or should it facilitate public debate? Should it emphasize the realism of societal struggles, or should it allow for some degree of escapism?

Of the tweets engaging this theme, only 7.3% questioned whether programs should offer a variety of perspectives or be more one-sided. Shows were both praised for giving voice to a variety of positions and criticized by those who didn’t want to hear any kind of message that conflicted with or downplayed the tenets of BlackLivesMatter. When tweets included support for white shooters, particularly the one character who faced consequences for his actions, BLM’s supporters retorted “YOU don’t even like a FICTITIOUS justice to serve black folks fairly!”
Even as shows were commended for facilitating discussions about racial inequalities in the United States, a vocal minority (3.6%) characterized them as “propaganda-ridden,” “bullshit and biased,” “Ripped from liberal imaginations,” and marked by “[West Wing creator Aaron] Sorkin levels of ham-fistedness.” As scathing as their comments were, these tweeters were nearly drowned out by the 47.7% of tweets that celebrated the power of television. In addition to the prosecutors, police, and politicians who were advised to learn something, several viewers hoped that these programs would open audiences’ eyes to the realities of contemporary racial tensions. They hoped that “people will be more tolerant after watching [SVU],” and that Scandal would “open some ignorant eyes” because “People who don’t understand [Black people’s] struggle/pain might have an insight” after watching. “It’s not just entertainment,” said one of the hundreds of people who thanked Rhimes for using her platform in this way. “Even if 1 person now understands #BlackLivesMatter, #Scandal did more than entertain. It educated,” said another. This widely held sentiment led to several related claims; redefining “must-see TV,” many viewers asserted that “everyone” should, or must, watch these programs.

In addition to educating Americans or exposing them to the topic of police violence and BlackLivesMatter specifically, 41.5% of tweets engaged in this theme addressed television’s capacity for escapism. One of the clearest points of contention here regarded the outcomes for the white shooters. Jolene’s acquittal was met with considerable dismay and numerous suggestions that she be shot on the courthouse steps. SVU and TGW viewers alike hoped to witness a happier ending than the ones in real life; commenters lamented that it “Would have been nice to get some justice” on SVU and that “You can tell it’s fictional because the police made it to trial” in TGW. Together, these tweets demonstrate the belief that television should offer viewers what reality cannot or will not. With Scandal, these yearnings for justice were fulfilled. As one individual put it, “The beginning of the episode was art imitating life. The second half is hoping life will imitate art one day.” Viewers communicated hope here, however dim, for race relations in America—namely, that justice would occur and that men like the ones who killed Brown, Garner, and Martin would be held accountable for their actions.

Conclusion

From the tweets in this study, we see a Twitter forum inspired by the cultural forum of scripted prime time dramas. The Twitter forum is a site of numerous conversations, though a dominant ideology does emerge along with oppositional and resistant ideologies through cultural coding and encoding (see Hall, 1980). Notably, the discourses on Twitter tend to echo the dominant reading of the text itself. The combination of television’s and Twitter’s second-screen forums allows for the creation of a forum about the television medium, with implications for the textual bias of the cultural forum model. For example, TGW tweeters used news
media to discuss coverage of racial unrest, thus offering a metacommentary on media; such perspective is absent from the original cultural forum model, which did not account for the ways television considers its own role in culture through programming. Through dual-screening, Twitter’s cultural forum is not separate from television’s cultural forum, but in fact extends it. While Twitter’s cultural forum did not create the opportunity for television to be a reflexive medium, the two media forums work well together, with Twitter allowing viewers to critique television as a cultural forum that mediates BLM-related issues.

Scandal’s real-life inspiration, Judy Smith, tweeted that “The conversations in [‘The Lawn Chair’] aren’t easy but they must happen” because “To move forward, we must talk to each other.” This essay has demonstrated the ways dramatic programming works to cultivate these conversations, which circulate broadly on Twitter. Connected viewing through Twitter now expands these conversations in significant ways by providing not just commentary on programming but metacommentary on the role of television as a cultural forum and a cultural force. Participants collectively critique and comment on entertainment programming. When programs engage political issues like BlackLivesMatter, the Twitter forum becomes a place where connected viewers contextualize dramatizations and debate the role of television as a mediating force in American politics and culture. The forum described here resembles the Twitter forum that emerged around the real-life events in Ferguson, which was dominated by institutional critiques, emotional sentiment, and calls to action (LeFebvre & Armstrong, 2016). But in addressing dramatizations, this hybrid forum emphasizes the role or responsibility of entertainment programming in cultural crises beyond news coverage.

This study demonstrates the continued relevance of the cultural forum model in an era of social media and post-network broadcasting. Future research into television in the current digital age should further investigate the processes by which cultural issues like #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, or #NeverAgain come to be developed into scripted programming. For example, how has the process changed considering social media such as Facebook and Twitter, specifically regarding the ways that users serve as focus groups for writers, producers, and other industry insiders? Relatedly, what kinds of backlash do programs and producers experience when they refuse or fail to engage in the dialogue afforded by social media, or when they use it as a unidirectional broadcasting medium rather than engaging in “reciprocal listening”? (Crawford, 2009, p. 530).

The aftermath of Martin’s, Garner’s, and Brown’s deaths offered little cause for optimism. Although the Justice Department announced that it would conduct independent federal investigations into Garner’s death, this is considerably tempered by their ruling in the Ferguson case. The Department of Justice broadly condemned local police practices and systemic issues for rights infringements and inherent racial bias among both police and court officials even as it found Brown’s shooter innocent. Art imitated life when SVU’s Jolene was acquitted, perhaps heralding the numerous deaths of others who are guilty of little more than making
white individuals uncomfortable, nervous, or scared by the color of their skin. For all its power, as we can see, television is limited in its social influence on racial incidents such as the ones studied here. The airing of SVU’s “American Tragedy” did not prevent the deaths of Garner, Brown, or the countless other Black boys and men slain by police before TGW aired “The Debate.”

Notes

1. Of the 1,985 tweets analyzed for this study, many (37.2%) engaged two or more themes, while very few (2.6%) did not engage any at all.

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References


