

St. Louis Protests: Solidarity & Polarization

Real-Time Social Media Analysis



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“Three years after Ferguson, the same old concerns rise in St. Louis protests”

Overview:

Protests are not static isolated events. They are living, breathing organisms that transform based upon events on-the-ground, actions by public officials, and a constant barrage of positive and negative narratives from internal and external influences. Continuous information flow and real-time reactions to events shape public perceptions, trigger emotionally charged reactions, and heighten pre-existing [Social Risk](#) factors. Social media platforms now serve as virtual bullhorns. Protestors unite virtually through common identities and shared beliefs. Hashtags, Twitter posts, Facebook Live videos and Instagram pictures build solidarity, challenge traditional policing models, and vex city administrators. To effectively manage protests, public officials and police must simultaneously address dynamic events on the ground and the social media discussions that constantly amplify them.

Key Findings:

- Street protests continually evolve and are constantly reinforced by events and online narratives, which heighten social tensions within St. Louis’ already vulnerable communities
- Social media and online discussions provide a virtual bullhorn to unite individuals and amplify grievances surrounding key events, which polarize protestors and St. Louis officials and police
- Communications and community engagement efforts by St. Louis city officials and police are reactive, disjointed and fail to deliver a consistent unified message that reduces social tensions
- Protests are no longer exclusively localized actions due to external influences that mobilize online communities, shape public perception, and influence behavior

Real-Time Analysis

ENODO Global conducted real-time public sentiment analysis concerning key events, trending topics, and narratives found on various social media platforms during the recent protests in St. Louis. ENODO examined a dataset comprised of over 75,000 Tweets, 2,500 Facebook Live videos, and 3,400 Instagram posts from September 15, 2017 to September 21, 2017 to identify changes in public perception based on key events and messages related to the protests.

ENODO analysts examined the underlying Social Risk factors behind the protests. Our analysis revealed unique insights to address the ongoing social conflict in St. Louis and social unrest that exists in other locations. ENODO’s analysis highlighted the dynamic relationship



“Riots are the language of the unheard”

between street and online protestors. It revealed how narratives, specifically from visual posts, polarize St. Louis city officials, police, and online protestors. It also uncovered how external influences outside St. Louis exacerbate social tensions within St. Louis communities. Figure 1 illustrates how public perception of events is shaped by various stakeholders through targeted narratives, to influence sentiment and support their own agendas.

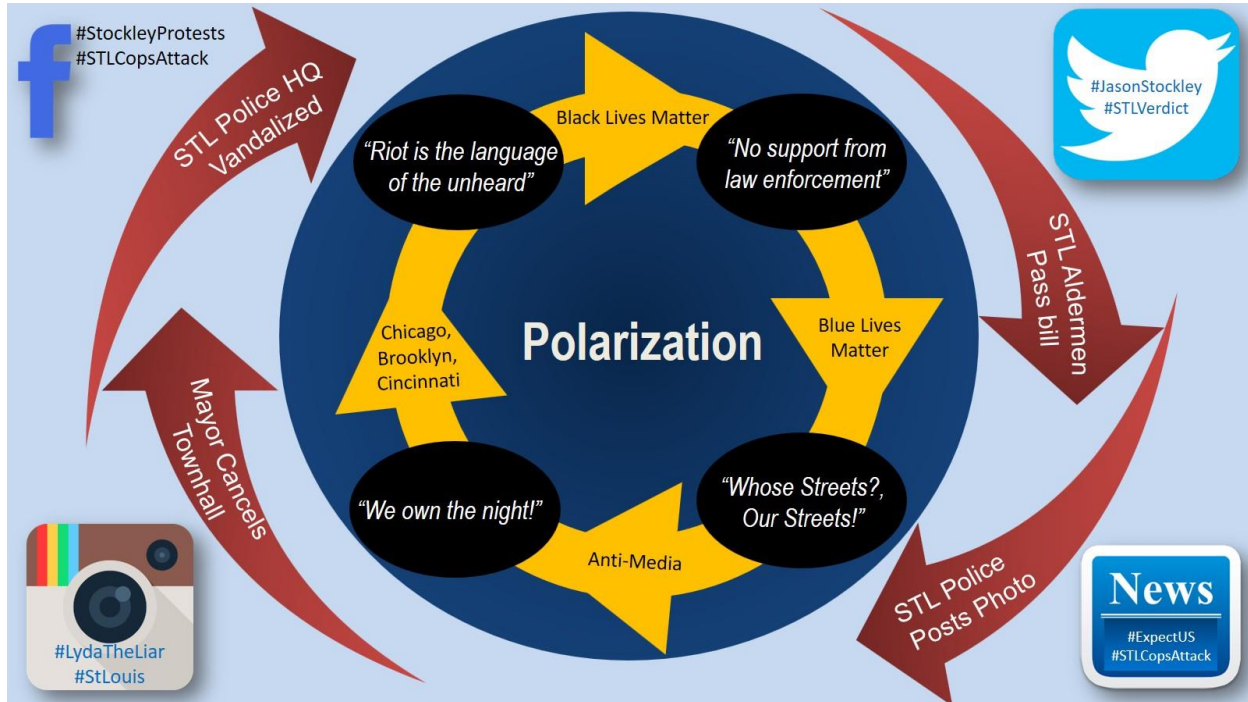


Figure 1. Events trigger narratives that are amplified by social media

Social Risk Factors

The relentless stream of online narratives linked to key events poses a continuous challenge for city officials and increases existing Social Risk factors. Social Risk factors within the St. Louis population are accentuated by the polarization between community members and St. Louis officials (“us” v. “them”) and the solidarity with activists from cities similar to St. Louis.

Dynamic Relationship:

Significant events connected to street protests generated powerful online responses that amplified negative public sentiment. During these events public frustration seamlessly flowed across physical and virtual spaces. For example, the hashtag #LydaTheLiar immediately appeared on Instagram and the Mayor’s Office drew widespread criticism after Mayor Krewson canceled her town hall meeting. In another example, the St. Louis Police Department posted photos of their daily law enforcement activities on Twitter, which was met with severe backlash. In response to the posts, street protestors took their grievances



“Social media acts a virtual bullhorn that attracts voices and amplifies public grievances.”

online. They commented and retweeted these posts, which created a powerful narrative: “no support from law enforcement.”

Narratives:

In an already emotionally charged environment, even routine announcements by lawmakers (e.g., police and mayor’s office) can provoke tense communities, creating serious backlash despite the best intentions of public officials. For example, the St. Louis Police Department tweeted a photo of weapons and riot gear confiscated from protestors in an overnight arrest (Figure 2). Within minutes the post generated more than 3,800 retweets and 780 comments from people who expressed strong opinions—both for and against police action.

Actions and narratives that are not part of a synchronized communications strategy can lead to confusion, anger, and increase distrust among citizens.

During the third night of protests, the St. Louis Police Department dispatched officers to quell protestors. As arrests were being made, some officers chanted, “Whose Streets? Our Streets!” This chant was first [used](#) by pro-immigration activists in 2014 and later became a signature chant of other activist groups including Black Lives Matter. [Reports](#) suggested that these chants were not authorized by the police commander at the scene. But more importantly, protestors perceived these chants as [hijacking](#) and even mocking their cause, and as a direct threat to protestors that was further [exacerbated](#) by print media.

Polarization:

An erosion of trust between city officials and community members has emerged as a result of the divergent perceptions of police-related protests. Active monitoring of online discussions revealed the clear disconnect between St. Louis officials (e.g. St. Louis City Police Twitter feed) and the protestors (e.g., #STLVerdict, #StockleyProtests, #StockleyVerdict). It also illustrates the ways in which conflicting narratives (“us” vs. “them”) further polarized the two groups. Online protestors found their identity as social justice activists threatened by actions of the St. Louis City’s Police Department, St. Louis Mayor’s Office, and St. Louis



Figure 2. St. Louis Police Department Twitter post



“City administrators and police are unable to simultaneously contain in-person protests and manage online grievances”



Figure 3. Sign on St. Louis Police Association building after being vandalized

Police Association. Moreover, protesters perceived the police as not only ignoring their grievances, but constantly acting against their interests. This perception deepened tensions and increased the inability of St. Louis officials to manage the wellbeing of their citizens. For example, discussions on Twitter and Instagram used the hashtags #LydaTheLiar, #QuestionsforKrewson along with #Shame to directly challenge St. Louis Mayor Lyda

Krewson’s cancellation of a town hall meeting on September 19th. Despite her official statement ending with the assurance, “we are listening,” St. Louis’ people viewed the cancellation of the town hall meeting as the Mayor’s failure to directly engage with her constituents, and a clear demonstration of the St. Louis government’s inability to govern.

In another example, the St. Louis Police Department (STLPD) [posted](#) a list of 33 protestors arrested on the night of Jason Stockley’s acquittal. An immediate backlash fueled more protests, but the STLPD rationalized their action by invoking the 1973 Missouri State’s Sunshine Law that allows public arrests to be displayed. The polarizing sentiments between the public’s view of the post (e.g., anger, frustration, and shame) and the police action (e.g., honor, duty, and law) further illustrates how these groups viewed the same event through different lenses, which ultimately amplified tensions.

External Influences:

The ongoing St. Louis protests have attracted massive online support from activists across the country who used the protest to unify their voices online. They used social media (specifically Instagram) to create a real-time, virtual, visually powerful, dynamic public forum to shape the course of the St. Louis protests and reinforce their own agendas. Protestors from Cincinnati, Chicago, and Brooklyn, used the #STLVerdict and #StockleyVerdict hashtags as vehicles to amplify their grievances within their respective communities. In Cincinnati, protesters used St. Louis hashtags (#JusticeForAnthonySmith and #JailforJasonStockley) and held solidarity banners with signs saying “Cincinnati stands with St. Louis.” #BlackLivesMatter supporters from Chicago joined the #STLVerdict discussions and criticized mainstream media for not covering the killing of nine people in Chicago on September 15th—the same day Jason Stockley was acquitted. This attracted BLM protestors from Brooklyn, Washington, D.C., California, and Texas to voice similar concerns regarding the lack of attention regarding violence in their respective cities.



Conclusion

The St. Louis protests exposed the schism that exists between protestors and public officials. They revealed how the fluid nature of on-the-ground protest, reinforced by social media, heightened social tensions and increased distrust in an already volatile environment. The gridlock from the “us” vs. “them” mentality between citizens and public officials was continually reinforced in their contrasting uses of social media. While a frustrated public relied on social media tools (e.g., Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook) to relay their grievances, St. Louis officials used social media as a mechanism to deliver public service announcements (e.g. posting photos of items captured from protestors).

There is an urgent need for public officials to re-assess their approaches to manage social unrest and to engage citizens. Real-time social media analysis is part of the solution. It provides a direct line to listen, view, and understand events through the eyes of the population. It offers city governments and public officials a means to accurately identify and measure public sentiment regarding key social risk factors. But most importantly, it provides a framework to create a meaningful two-way dialogue and a path forward to reduce conflict and improve community-police relations.





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