



SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA: THE PROPAGATION OF  
#BLACKLIVESMATTER

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	v
CHAPTERS	
I.    INTRODUCTION.....	1
II.   LITERATURE REVIEW.....	5
III.  CONTEXT.....	10
IV.  METHODS AND ANALYSIS.....	24
V.    CONCLUSION.....	42
REFERENCES.....	44

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Seven day moving average of logged monthly tweet count from 2013 to 2020 of all three keywords.....	13
Figure 2. All geotagged tweets about Ferguson between August 10th at 11:10PM and August 27th at 3:13 PM.....	30-31
Figure 3. First 6 hours of data collection.....	34-35
Figure 4. First 12 hours if data collection.....	37-38
Figure 5. First 24 hours of data collection.....	39-40

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## **Introduction**

The growth of social media has created a world in which humanity is far more interconnected than ever before. It draws people together and permits instantaneous communication. Few people are completely separate from the rest of the world or isolated to one specific geographic location. Social media has allowed for a whole new mode of communication and a new way for information to be spread. That information allows for everyone to know what is going on, and an informed populace can be threatening for the people in charge. It also can provide a political space for people who are often pushed to the side in the political realm and mainstream news media. Further, it gives an ability for words to make an impact far away from the speaker as it creates a platform for speech. Social media creates an expansive web of connections which connects people around the globe. In order to look at how these connections impact collective action, I attempt to answer the following question: Does social media allow for social movements to overcome geographic barriers and facilitate the propagation of collective action?

Social media are a new tool for group connectivity as well as developing new contacts, following news stories, interacting with celebrities, and gaining recognition. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram allow for individuals to have their own digital platform and space. These spaces are all interacting with one another through a giant web as individuals reach out and comment on each other's posts, tag relevant parties, react to posts, and follow those spaces relevant to their own lives or interests.

This interconnectedness has brought people together like never before, making borders and geographic distance largely obsolete as people can keep up with friends, family, and political, societal, and pop-culture leaders thousands of miles away, and, with increasingly accurate automatic translation, they do not even need to share a language. Connections established this way also bring about a potential for political causes and movements to be conveyed over digital space in ways normally reserved for physical space allowing for the evolution of the geopolitical space that has traditionally been at the center of social movements.

There is a common belief amongst a vocal portion of society and within activist circles that the digital spaces that social media cultivates are of minimal benefit or actually a detriment to movements. Many are uncertain about the transformation of political space that social media provides and question its effectiveness, arguing that online activism has little to no actual impact in helping social movements achieve their goals. They claim that many political actions individuals engage with on social media platforms are insubstantial and are of little consequence. For instance, adding a filter to one's profile picture or liking a post are unsupported on the ground and are often the only action those 'digital activists' will take. Some opponents actually speculate that by liking those posts or adding that filter, such 'activists' are unlikely to continue in their activist activities. In fact the term 'clicktivism' has been coined with these specific thoughts in mind. However the digital space has a much more important role in modern social movements than they realize. The ability of a social movement to network, normalize itself, or even go viral, is essential to modern social movement strategies and longevity.



This is what the research here demonstrates. Furthermore, there is an assertion that because some actions are ‘passive’ they are less crucial and/or less political, but that is inaccurate.

Social media platforms can create a safe space for minority groups and they can also create a space where marginalized groups can safely counter dominant discourses which cause harm. For example, for many years organizations such as Autism Speaks and medical professionals have talked over and ignored the actual desires and needs vocalized by the autistic community, but recently there have been pushes on and offline to include autistic voices in autism education. A space was created online through the hashtag “actuallyautistic,” allowing for autistic people to speak about the dangers of common practices and beliefs about their neurodivergence<sup>1</sup> as well as to normalize behaviors which have caused them to be labelled as ‘weird’ or ‘outcasts’. Despite many of the people in the hashtag simply behaving the way they normally do or speaking the way they normally do they are doing a lot to allow allistic people to understand. In many ways their work can be considered ‘passive’ but it is also largely political and can have far-reaching impacts on the social structure and the future place neurodivergence has in society. Another example of ‘passive’ actions is the voice of and support of LGBTQ+ individuals online. Being part of the LGBTQ+ community is still very stigmatized and being out online can be a largely political act even if all that changes in the user’s content is adding the word ‘gay’ or ‘trans’ or ‘queer’ to their profile. Large strides can be made to increase acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community just by having enough people out and

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately this paper is not actually on the autistic community and this point stands mostly as an example. For the sake of brevity the topic is not given the in depth analysis it deserves here. More details can be found through the actuallyautistic hashtag and at The Autistic Self Advocacy Network

letting those not involved with the community interact with those inside the community, thus allowing for normalization and perhaps the ending of stigmas and prejudices against the community. Once again, this is quite ‘passive’, but it is a move that can be quite impactful, and it is definitely not ‘less important’ than other political moves<sup>2</sup>.

This study focuses on a single case study, #BlackLivesMatter, in order to explore the central research question: Does social media allow for social movements to overcome geographic barriers and facilitate the propagation of collective action? I collected geographical data and quantitative data on tweets about Ferguson during a time period following the murder of Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. I was able to analyze the data through Microsoft Excel in order to better understand the information being presented. I begin by analyzing the current state of social media research, then move on to address my methods and data analysis. I conclude by reviewing my results and looking at limitations of the present research

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<sup>2</sup> These examples come from my personal participation within these online communities and consist of my observations of them.

## **Literature Review**

Classical theories of social movement emergence tend to focus primarily on political opportunity and regime type (Thörn 2006). Renowned sociologists Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly focused early work on the control the state exerts over its people and thereby the state's ability to prevent movements from happening. According to their work, the greater the control over the population, the less able movements are to form and spread. Tarrow and Tilly (2015) also consider aspects such as the type of government the state has such as if it is a democracy or a dictatorship. While these aspects are important, this body of scholarship places a lot of focus on the state and formal structures. This tends to overlook or not take into account informal structures and developing political space. Political space "is an area where unconstrained articulation and organization can occur and where political authority using the structures of the state cannot arbitrarily control or inhibit the will of the people" (Tkacheva et al. 2013:4). Some regimes have cracked down on the political space either across the entire state or specifically in certain demographics to prevent uprising and solidarity between actors within the regime. Social media has become a new political space unlike what has previously existed because it is hard to shut down and allows for connections to be forged across any distance. This informal structure is very valuable for movement organizations.

Over time, many scholars have attempted to explain exactly how social movements form and coalesce. During the 1960s there was a major change in theory;

social movements and collective action were no longer viewed as sporadic or the result of irrational behavior (Jenkins 1983). Towards the beginning of the 1970s resource mobilization theory was developed. Resource mobilization theory focuses on the ability and necessity of a movement to aggregate resources in order to achieve their goals. These resources may include, but are not limited to, “legitimacies, money, facilities, and labor” (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Tilly (1978) claims that the mobilization process is one of the keystones of social movement creation. Tilly also looks at the balance between movement organization and resource mobilization, stating that some have “a complex internal structure, but few pooled resources” while others are “rich in resources, but the resources are all under individual control” (1978). Resource mobilization theory looks for a balance between the two, and it is heavily invested in the infrastructure employed by a social movement. Social movement organizations are often assumed to be the group behind the aggregation of resources within resource mobilization theory and it is often assumed to be one of the main jobs of the organization. Additionally, the greater the capacity of the social movement industry, all the social movement organizations working towards a similar goal, to gather resources the more likely they are to succeed in bringing about the change they seek to accomplish according to popular iterations of mobilization theory (Edwards and Gillham 2013). Some critics of resource mobilization theory argue that it fails to account for movements with small quantities of resources. Other critics argue that it puts little emphasis on the weight of the objectives, the culture of the movement, or the identity shaped by the movement and the social movement organization (Golhasani and Hosseinirad 2017). In other words the main shortcoming of the theory,

according to critics, is the narrow focus, which leaves a lot of explanatory factors ignored.

One thing that resource mobilization failed to incorporate was the political structure defining the environment of the movement. Therefore, many scholars have looked at the political structures in place in order to offer a theory which is more in-depth and allows for analysis given all types of political structures. McAdam and Snow (1997) note that Lipsky (1970) and Eisinger (1973) found interest in the way movements seem to move, ebbing and flowing, and they pointed to the varying level of opportunities that a movement could access (McAdam and Snow 1997). This evolved into the political opportunity structure model, which argued that movements are more likely to emerge when certain events or contexts are in place. McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1996) state that, Tarrow (1983;1989) suggests that there are four different ‘opportunities’ which movements can utilize: access to political institutions, stability or instability of political alignments, availability of and posture of allies, and political conflict among elites (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996). These opportunities can allow the necessary crack in the foundation of the power structure for a movement to push through and form. These political opportunities create a central pillar of Political Process Theory.

A predominant contemporary theory is the Political Process Theory (PPT). PPT is multi-faceted, but it is mostly known for the political opportunity portion (Caren 2007). This essentially refers to a change in political power and structure, either positively or negatively for the group in question, which prompts the movement (Almeida 2019). Other factors commonly analyzed by this theory relate to the framing of the movement,

the way that the movement is presented to the public and the media; mobilizing structures such as in a social movement organization, protest cycles, or the way protests, and contentious repertoires, the ways in which a movement can make its claims (Caren 2007). Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow are some of the most prolific authors with regards to PPT. In the second edition of their book, *Contentious Politics* (2015), they emphasize regime type and how this impacts the development of movements based on two axes: regime type and capacity to control the public (Long 2016). Tilly and Tarrow argued that regime type and control can be a determining factor in how the movement crystallizes and the type of structures the movement utilizes. For example in Egypt, the Arab Spring developed largely through informal organizations and networks due to a government that was democratic largely in name only and with very strict and bold capacity to control which focused on fear (Shearlaw 2016). In this way, repression and the state can both act as the political opportunity and shape the mobilizing structures of the movement.

While PPT is a mainstream theory, it is not without criticism. PPT has been criticized by some for its rigid structure however. Jasper and Goodwin (1999) criticize PPT for overemphasizing structural factors, treating nonstructural factors as structural, and for being based on terminology which lacks overarching definition, making the theory too flexible to act as the universal theory many of its proponents claim it is.

The nonstructural factors that are overlooked by PPT can include the new political space which social media opens. Lim (2012: 234) argues “social media may be viewed both as technology and space for expanding and sustaining the networks upon which social movements depend.” Other scholars have noted that social media provide “an

infrastructure for digital protest while physical protest is restricted” identifying a gap left by more state centric works (Khazraee and Novak 2018: 11). Furthermore, scholars of social movements have noticed that accepted theories do not account for social media. Mundt et al (2018), for example, look at “the key role that social media plays in meaning making and resource mobilization” which allows for the scaling up of social movements (Mundt et al. 2018: 11). In a similar vein Tufekci and Wilson (2012) have proved that “people learned about the protests” in Tahrir Square, Egypt “primarily through interpersonal communication using Facebook, phone contact, or face-to-face conversation” (363).

## Context

As Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old Black student, was walking home through a Florida neighborhood, he was spotted by George Zimmerman, a white neighborhood watchman. Zimmerman called 911 and the dispatcher told him the police were on their way and to not pursue Martin. Disobeying the dispatcher, Zimmerman ran after Martin which resulted in a brief altercation between the two in which Zimmerman shot and killed Martin. Zimmerman argued Martin was a threat despite Martin being armed with nothing but iced tea and Skittles. Martin's death caught a lot of media attention and initiated a significant public outcry arguing that the shooting was a result of racial bias.

Almost a year-and-a-half later, Zimmerman was found 'not guilty' of second-degree murder after sixteen hours of jury deliberations. This decision was met by feelings of sorrow and distress from major swaths of the Black community. One activist, Alicia Garza, wrote a quick Facebook post stating "black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter" in what she has since called 'a love letter to the Black community'. This letter was a statement of community and an affirmation that they were deserving of respect (Grant and Williams 2016). Just a few hours later, fellow activist Patrisse Cullors realized the potential of her statement and the virality of a hashtag and turned the last three word into a hashtag: #BlackLivesMatter. Cullors utilized the hashtag as she shared Garza's words with her friends and community. Cullors also led a protest march in Beverly Hills under a banner broadcasting the hashtag to the world (Day 2015). They



recruited fellow activist Opal Tometi, who helped spearhead online organizing of the hashtag. Through the creation of Twitter accounts and Tumblr blogs, they promoted the hashtag in an effort to create a viral rallying point for all those against the police brutality prominent against Black Americans. This was the birth of the movement, but the strength of the movement had not actually yet developed. The networking of Garza, Cullors, and Tometi was important for the movement to prosper, and it created the basic foundation of today's Black Lives Matter movement. However, the movement was not fully established until later when participation and public salience increased.

Approximately a year after Trayvon Martin's death, Eric Garner was suffocated by a police officer as he was being detained for allegedly selling untaxed cigarettes. He was placed in a chokehold by police and was kept in that chokehold even after almost a dozen utterances of his now infamous last words "I can't breathe." (Capelouto 2014). Garner's death was met with significant public backlash as the entire event was filmed and sent to the media. When protests<sup>3</sup> began the protestors did not decide to rally behind the hashtag promoted by Garza, Cullors, and Tometi, #BlackLivesMatter. Instead the protests saw Garner's last words as their rallying cry as they worked to call each other to action and call for change from legislators.

The 2014 protests in Ferguson started with the death of Michael Brown. Police Officer Darren Wilson shot at Brown twelve times with 6 shots hitting their mark. Some witnesses tweeted out as soon as the events occurred, and more took to Twitter and the

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<sup>3</sup> Many refer to the protests that occurred as a result of Garner and Brown's deaths as 'riots.' However, the term riot has become increasingly racialized. It is often attached to protests that have become violent for a variety of reasons to undermine the protest and to turn the general populace against the protestors. For these reasons, in the writing of this thesis I have avoided the term (Steinmetz 2020).

streets as the police left Brown's corpse on the ground under the summer sun for four hours before moving him. This gave protestors another grievance to scrutinize. Not only was there a dead Black man, but his body was then disrespected and mistreated by not being moved, cared for, or fully identified. Even before the news media had truly picked up on the issue at hand, locals began tweeting about the events under the heading of #Ferguson, which allowed #Ferguson to materialize as a digital headquarters for updates, ideas, and events for people around the world to look at and digest. As the traditional news media lagged in reporting, many at the scene or outraged from a distance were reporting to keep attention on what was originally perceived as an underreported police shooting (Bonilla and Rosa 2015) but would become one of the most known cases of police violence, the decade's equivalent of the filmed beating of Rodney King.

Michael Brown's death was viewed by much of the American public as a white police officer once again utilizing his power in an unjust attack on a Black man. This murder came only shortly after the widely publicized suffocation of Eric Garner. After Brown's death, protests broke out quickly, but despite #BlackLivesMatter being coined 18 months prior, the hashtag was not as common as one might think in relation to what is now considered a seminal moment in the Black Lives Matter movement. Of the over two million hashtagged tweets referencing Ferguson archived from the 18 days following Brown's death, only 1,108 tweets, fewer than a tenth of a percent (.06%), contained #BlackLivesMatter. Despite the pre-existing networking, the original protests in Ferguson were not a result of any organization. They were organic collective action events, not a call for action from any specific group (Ray et al. 2017).

By the time Officer Wilson's grand jury hearing was completed, where the grand jury decided not to indict him (Cohen 2014), #BlackLivesMatter was far more prominent, representing 10.35% of all hashtagged tweets about Ferguson (Ray et al. 2017). In just a few months the hashtag took off and represented far more people and an overarching message. How exactly did that happen? Available data fails to explain the huge disparity and, further, the reason behind the take off of the hashtag, but a few guesses can be made. The most mundane explanation could be that activists discovered the hashtag near this time period. Another explanation is that the pre-existing network set up by Garza, Cullors, and Tometi allowed for the increased usage of the hashtag. The shift in usage can be seen through data collected by Giorgi et al (2020) and their graph below:

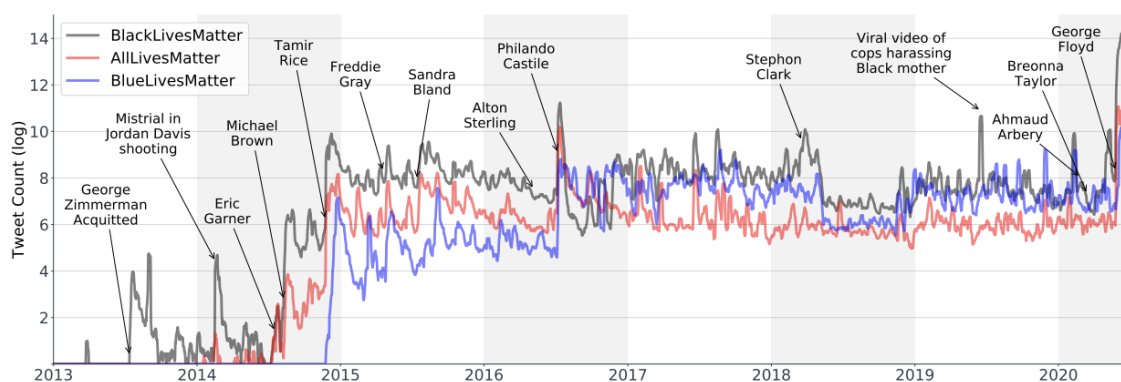


Figure 1: Seven day moving average of logged monthly tweet count from 2013 to 2020 of all three keywords. We include markers for high profile events associated with the BLM movement.

As the graph shows, the number of tweets regarding #BlackLivesMatter grew dramatically after Brown's death. It was not the first spike of tweets with the hashtag, but it was the spike that prompted the continuous usage of the hashtag and transformed the hashtag from just another hashtag to being synonymous with a movement that has shaped a generation. Perhaps it was spurred by the frequency of major events, including Tamir

Rice's murder, which was just a few days prior to the grand jury decision not to indict Wilson for the murder of Michael Brown. By that point, enough tweets circulated to gain traction as the rallying cry of and name of the movement.

The increase in support for BLM and use of the hashtag could also, therefore, be attributed to the more distant support. After Brown's death, #Ferguson became a digital space where people could update others on what they witnessed around them, interact with those at the scene, or offer words of advice on the matter. In many ways the early parts of the protests found a home and created a digital political space for themselves and others to consult (Bonilla and Rosa 2015). It was an amorphous and unpoliced square for citizen journalism, documentation, and first hand accounts of what was occurring, but as time progressed and more official news coverage took hold in Ferguson, activists may have felt less pressure to continue updating #Ferguson. Tweets slowed and were less likely to be tagged or were tagged under the broader St. Louis hashtag, #StL (Bonilla and Rosa 2015). This in some ways left a digital void for the protestors and distant supporters to find refuge. Perhaps then #BlackLivesMatter helped to fill the void allowing for protestors incapable of, or unwilling to take to the streets of Ferguson, or any of the supporting protests, to continue to support and keep up with the movement. Both of these are simply conjecture, and further investigation needs to be done in order to understand the reasons behind the trend, but they do demonstrate the centrality of social media in their geographical propagation.

We do know that as the protests in Ferguson continued to grow, the three founders of the #BlackLivesMatter movement helped the activists on the ground, both in the

streets and on the web. Cullors and Darnell Moore organized a Freedom Ride similar to the ones from the Civil Rights Movement. With over 600 people they travelled to Ferguson to help those on the ground and to network so that activists could create more concrete and supportable goals and stronger movements back at their homes. When it came time for them to leave Ferguson, Cullors connected with individuals from 18 locations planning to create Black Lives Matter chapters in their own locations (“Herstory” 2019). Physical discussion and connection was a strong reason for some of the geographic distribution, but the continuation of the movement came through a lot of social media interaction. One activist claims that “Social media, you know, work[s] as an amplifier” and “it allows you to reach people that you otherwise wouldn’t have reached” (Mundt et al. 2018). The movement is not just connectivity over social media, rather the ability of social media to strengthen and propagate the movement is staggering.

The protests in Ferguson were a large affair even from the first night, adding to the evidence that the protests were natural and spontaneous and not a planned or organized event. The day after Brown’s murder, protestors amassed around the Ferguson Police Department; at this point Wilson’s name had not been released to the public and cries for the Wilson’s name and justice filled the air. By that evening peaceful protest had turned more violent, 32 people were arrested and 300 police officers were deployed overnight due to reports of arson, gunfire, and looting (Pulliam-Moore and Myers 2014). One of the most infamous locations of the protests was a QuikTrip gas station which was burned down on the first night; it became a location where protestors rallied and planned (Millitzer 2014).

Critics of the movement, and often any similar movement, are normally quick to bring up violence such as this to discredit the movement, but it is important to examine the role violence plays in protests. One role violence plays in protests is in renegotiating each actors' (ie protestors and the police) access and control of a space. While space and spatial incursions can be hard to strictly define in protests, enforcers like the police are often strict in ensuring that actors like protestors clear out of their allotted space when their allotted time is considered elapsed. Violence then tends to erupt as protestors try to defend access to space and police try to reign in protestors (Nassauer 2021). Therefore, violence is not a real statement on the movement's validity. The violence of some protestors is often weaponized by the media and the police to justify violence from the police, but empirical data provides a more sound and reliable analysis and understanding of the purpose violence has.

Violence by police was evident through their crowd control measures, like tear gas and rubber bullets, sprayed at peaceful protestors and Ferguson citizens simply going about their lives (Lowery 2014). These events were captured for the world to see on social media, and Twitter depicted Ferguson as a war zone with the police in gas masks and full tactical gear. This portrayal was helpful in pooling support online as it drew sympathy to the protestors; while the news could call the protestors violent and the police innocent, the public could, if they chose, see videographic and photographic evidence of the violence perpetrated by the police (Mislán and Dache-Gerbino 2018). Over time, social media allowed for protestors to have a microphone that was fully in their control. Others could access social media, but the narrative on social media could be largely

controlled by protestors and not traditional media sources, governmental systems, or the police. They could not fully control their image and speaking on social media still had consequences for protestors, but it gave them a voice and it gave them an ability to spread their message and narrative.

With their message the movement has advocated for many types of reform, abolition of the current police system, and a decrease of state violence against the Black community in general. As a movement, Black Lives Matter is leaderless and lacks the strong professionalization which commonly occurs as movements become larger. The movement also lacks many specific, overarching demands as they lack a form of overarching leadership. Unlike the Civil Rights Movement which gave way to CORE, SNCC, SCLC, NAACP, etc., the Black Lives Matter Movement has actively resisted the leadership of these organizations and the leaders associated with them (such as Rev. Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson, etc.). Instead the majority of participants are volunteers (as opposed to the careerism of the ‘old guard’), and the development of social movement organizations has been slow (Taylor 2016). Garza, Cullors, and Tometi created the Black Lives Matter organization which mostly functions to fundraise, promote ideals, and organize less disruptive measures of political action such as letter writing campaigns and congressional advocacy (“2020 Impact Report” 2021).

The movement has traditionally practiced largely disruptive measures such as protests and boycotts, as well as less traditional repertoire of tactics such as a variety of social media campaigns. The protestors goals are often more revolutionary (working towards change in the entire system), as opposed to reform based (working within the

political system), with calls to defund the police, abolish the system of mass incarceration, and end state violence. (Ray 2020, Cullors 2020). These goals have largely been unmet thus far, but they have met some successes. Since the movement began rallying around the slogan of ‘Defund the Police’ in 2020, more than 20 major cities have re-examined their funding and diverted funds largely away from their police organizations (Levin 2021). Furthermore, the movement has gone from near obscurity as Garza, Cullors, and Tometi attempted to unite as many activists and individuals as possible through #BlackLivesMatter, to a movement that is well known across the United States and around the world.

Since Ferguson, the movement has become a household name. They have protested after the deaths of many others at the hands of the police and have called into action people from around the globe. Protests have been documented on all continents excepting Antarctica and over 4000 cities in just half of 2020 (Smith 2020). The movement has cemented itself as an international movement, even if it is largely focused on the United States. Inside of the United States the movement has also worked in solidarity with other movements working to end state violence such as the movement against the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock. Many within the Black Lives Matter movement, recognizing the similarity of their plights and their repression, went to Standing Rock in order to aid in their stand to keep access to fresh and safe water which was threatened by the pipeline’s path (Petrella and Loggins 2016). Through solidarity the movement’s have the ability to strengthen each other and to increase the effectiveness of both movements.



From Trayvon Martin to Mike Brown to George Floyd and victims in between and since, the Black Lives Matter movement will not stop until police brutality is a thing of the past. Conversations about state violence against the Black community have become more commonplace and are more nuanced than ever before. There are new actions taken and new achievements won all the time on the path to the future which the Black Lives Matter movement aims to secure. Social media has been foundational in the organizational aspects and recruitment tactics of the movement.

BLM has become increasingly internationalized. As BLM has continued to expand, it resonated with the Black communities in other countries as well. Smaller, more localized organizations in specific countries such as the London Campaign Against Police and State Violence, an organization which has helped organize multiple protests and rallies in solidarity with and support of BLM as early as December 2014, have taken up the torch of BLM in their own localities and/or have had an increased platform due to it (Essif 2015). This has not been the first time that movements started to end racism against the Black community have grown to occupy an international audience. In the late 1910s and the early 1920s, the American-based International League of Darker Peoples was able to secure a meeting with prominent Tokyo news publisher, S. Kuriowa, to convince them to advocate for the inclusion of racial equality in the Paris Peace Conference (Blain 2020). The 1960s Civil Rights Movement in the United States was heavily influenced by the actions of Gandhi. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) was formed in 1942 as a way to replicate the nonviolent techniques of Gandhi (Zunes and Laird 2010). Leading up to and throughout the Civil Rights Movement, a Pan-Africanist

movement began brewing within the Black community in the United States. The movement, with lead thinkers such as W.E.B DuBois and Marcus Garvey, focused on separationist ideals, calling to separate the Black community and returning to Africa. Those involved with Pan-African ideas began to support the movement supporting the independence movements in Africa around this time, and African politicians and activists such as President Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya were deeply involved in the political ideals as well (Kuryla). Black movements within the United States have frequently and historically been connected with various international organizations and individuals. Therefore it is not surprising that BLM found a connection abroad as well.

BLM has been reaching internationally since the start. As the protests broke out in Ferguson, and the police became increasingly violent, protestors were met by solidarity from protestors who participated in the Arab Spring revolutions three years previously. The revolutionaries gave them tips on how to deal with tear gas and out maneuver the police (Grant and Williams 2016). There was a connection between the groups, a level of solidarity, which marked the first moment of internationalization of the Black Lives Matter movement. Approximately two months after the death of Mike Brown, there were international chapters of the Black Lives Matter Global Network in a few major cities like Toronto, Canada (Blain 2020). A year after that, there were a total of 26 international chapters which were operating throughout the world (Ohikware 2015). The movement was capable of expanding past the boundaries of the United States relatively quickly. Around the world groups were demonstrating in order to bring attention to the deaths of or violence against Black youth by mostly white police forces. In Berlin there was a

campaign called “Ferguson is Everywhere,” in London the protestors took note of a young Black man, Julian Cole, who was left in a vegetative state following a spinal injury left by police officers, and in Amsterdam Black youth gasped out “Ik kan niet ademen,” (Dutch for “I can’t breath”) evoking the final words of Eric Garner (Essif 2015).

Other organizations also worked in solidarity with BLM as well. In Japan, ‘Tokyo for Ferguson’ protest was organized in December of 2014. This protest was organized by an organization called African American Youth Travel Program which helps African American youth broaden their horizons through travel and give them opportunities which they may not have normally. The protest garnered over 100 supporters of various ethnicities (Leroux 2014). While this protest was organized by an American organization, the response by the Japanese public and the support from those not included in the organization indicated an international interest in involvement and effort. The United Nations has made statements and, in 2016, listened to pleas and statements made by Tometi (Blain 2020). While the UN is not an activist group, its role in international governance is essential to international change and news coverage. In 2014, many world leaders and governments had comments or political angles to make about the protests in Ferguson. Russia and China both took the opportunity to insult the United States, making points about the American government deserving it for their meddling in the Ukraine and America needing a dose of humility which this was providing (Harding et al. 2014). The global attention was full of political maneuvering for various governments and politicians, but the attention it garnered for the movement was still significant.

Present day, the Black Lives Matter movement has continued to evolve and produce international attention and support. The movement gained widespread traction and support again in 2020 after the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Floyd was killed by police while being arrested under suspicion of the usage of counterfeit money. His murder involved Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin pinning Floyd to the ground with his knee against the back of Floyd's neck. Within minutes, Floyd was unconscious, and then a few minutes later Floyd was dead ("Four Minnesota Police Officers" 2020). Taylor was murdered by plain clothes police officers that entered her apartment with a 'no-knock' warrant, believing them to be intruders, Taylor's boyfriend fired a singular warning shot into the ground. The police officers responded by shooting off over thirty rounds into Taylor's apartment which caused her death ("Justice Denied" 2020). Their murders caused a pervasive sense of outrage which revitalized BLM and caused widespread protests around the United States. Internationally, the incidents also sparked protests as people became aware of them. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Germany alone saw tens of thousands of individuals participating in protests in many of Germany's major cities. Berlin saw crowds of around 15,000, Munich saw 20,000, and Hamburg saw 14,000 ("George Floyd Killing Spurs Fresh Protests" 2020). Other countries also experienced large protests as their populace affirmed that the issue of police violence was not unique to the United States. For several weeks in a row a large group gathered in Tokyo to protest police violence and racial discrimination in solidarity with protests occurring in the United States, and in Taiwan, many took the opportunity to point out Taiwan's issues of discrimination against their indigenous population as well (Au

2020). There is still widespread international concern over the issues which BLM is centered upon resolving, and that concern is deepening. Additionally, just as protestors in Ferguson were given tips and support from the Arab Spring revolutionaries, protestors in the 2020 protests were able to learn from and adopt tactics from Hong Kong protestors (“U.S. Protesters Are Taking Some Tactics” 2020). There is this continued spirit of solidarity and innovation among protestors across the globe as they deal with the violence of their various police forces and find ways to counter it. The social movement repertoire, protest guidelines, and safety protocols for protestors continue to evolve to keep up with the new violent tactics and techniques. All of these changes and risks are in order to one day live in a better world.

## **Methods and Analysis**

In deciding the specific case to study in order to answer the central research question, I focused on a few details. First, the propagation of #BlackLivesMatter and the movement behind it is perhaps the best known example in the United States of a movement becoming ‘viral’ on social media. It was also one of the first movements to heavily utilize social media through its creation, its actions, and its maintenance. The various revolutionary movements that created the Arab Springs in the Middle East and North Africa also had heavy social media work in their campaigning and organization, but I was looking for a movement that was still ongoing in order to open up the opportunity for continued research and incoming data as the movement continues to progress. Additionally, the movement was chosen because the lack of leadership and strong supporting organizational infrastructure proves counter to many currently accepted theories within social movement literature. Despite the presence of some organizations such as the Black Lives Matter Global Network, the movement does not have a singular leader or voice. Furthermore, despite the Black Lives Matter Global Network sharing their name and founders, it does not actively guide the wave or the current of the movement. Instead it works on fundraising, day to day operations, and further outreach. They are not completely separate entities, but they are not fully integrated either. Finally, the movement’s social media presence and abilities is often counter to the opinions and thoughts of the average person. Many look down upon online activism or consider it to be unproductive in achieving the movement’s goals as it is not the same as having people

‘on the streets.’ However, Black Lives Matter has continued as a movement through the combination of its online activism and its ‘real life’ activism, proving a key counter to common ideations.

This research was conducted as a single case design in order to fully focus in on #BlackLivesMatter. To give the hashtag and the movement surrounding it the attention and research it deserves, requires a closer and more thorough analysis than a multicase analysis would permit (Gustafsson 2017). Additionally, the movement itself acts as a far enough departure from many movements of the past that comparing the two could result in far more confusion than answers. The interpretive ability of the case study could become bogged down and convoluted in an attempt to fully address the various differences between the propagation and support of the Black Lives Matter versus the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s for example (Willis 2014). While this design limits the generalizability of the research conducted (Willis 2014), the Black Lives Matter movement is in some ways a trailblazer. With other movements taking note of BLM, future research may note that the conclusions drawn in this paper are more generalizable to future movements than movements of the past.

To answer the central research question, I conducted a spatial analysis of tweets created between August 10th at 11:10 PM and August 27th at 3:13 PM in regards to the murder of Michael Brown and the events following it. This involved the collecting of Twitter data, the creation of a chronological series of maps, and analyzing the maps and data. The maps depict the gradual internationalization of the movement, and the way that the movement spread across the United States. The isolated incidents of the various tweet

groupings suggest that they occurred without the influence of mainstream news coverage in those locations.

Ray et al. (2017) compiled a data set of Tweets in the weeks following the shooting of Michael Brown. This data set consists of social media posts made to Twitter (tweets) during the eighteen days following Michael Brown's murder and met the search criteria "Ferguson." The tweets were originally collected via Twitter's Application Programming Interface (API), which allows users authenticated by Twitter to access large swathes of data regarding tweets (Ray et al. 2017). Collected data ranges from the text of the tweet to the location of the user at the time of the post, to the number of followers the creator of the tweet has, to the original language the tweet was written in. The tweets were condensed into tweet IDs which appear as a list of numbers. Through Twitter's API, all available data for a specific tweet ID can be pulled. The team of researchers made the data publicly accessible for future researchers to analyze.

After pulling the IDs of their data, I utilized a software called Twarc which facilitates the process of collecting the tweets themselves from their tweet IDs called hydrating. This process took about a week of constant background running on my computer. After hydrating all the tweets, Twarc left me with a JSONL file (a type of data file which utilizes the JSONL coding language) which I then had to convert to a CSV file (a data file which has 'Comma Separated Values') so that it could be opened and manipulated with Microsoft Excel. Through a few adjustments to the Twarc software made by a programming expert, Twarc could convert between the two leaving me with a CSV file which I then put onto Excel. The original file which Ray et al. utilized contained



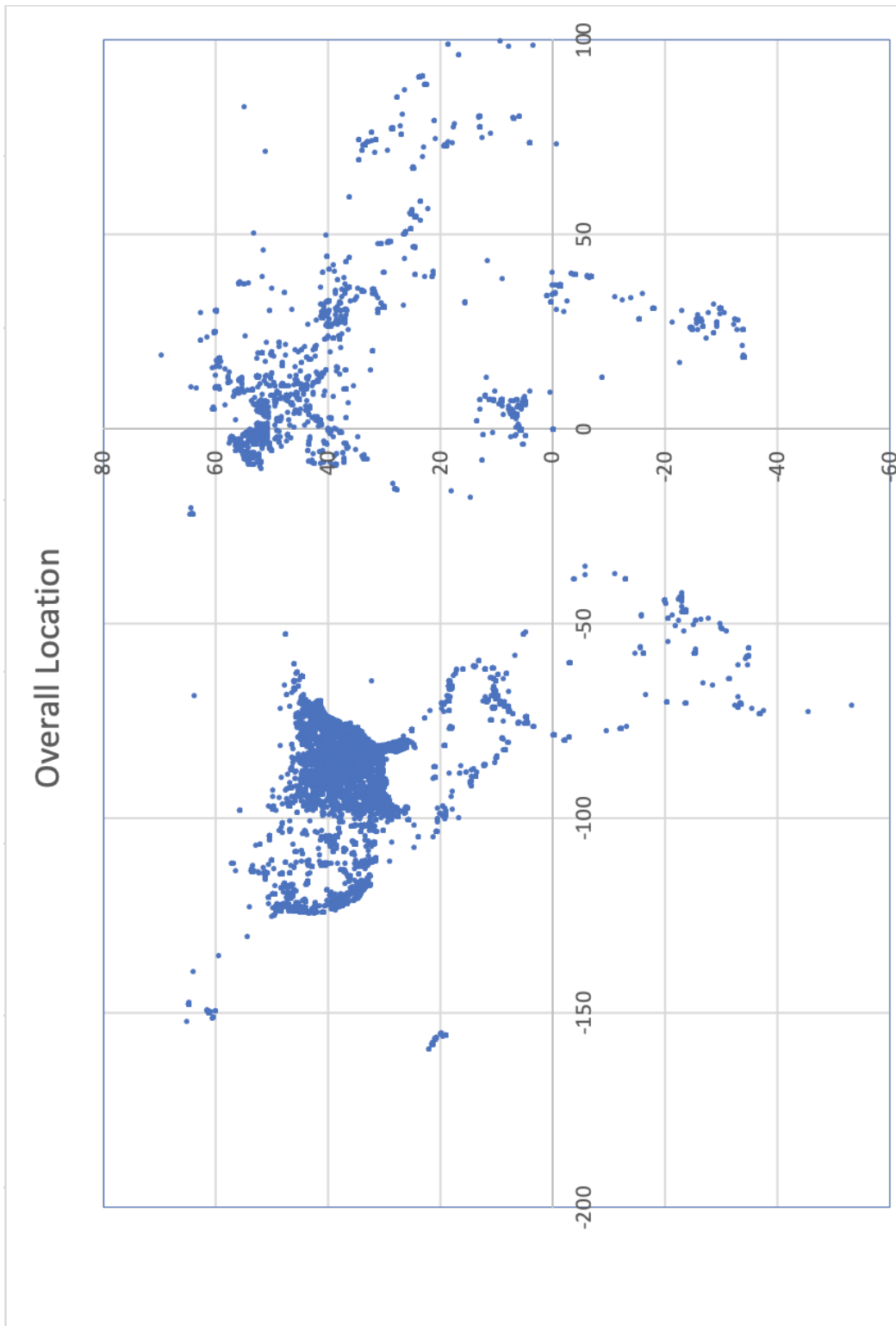
around thirteen million tweets, but through corrupted or deleted tweets the size of my file was around nine million tweets.

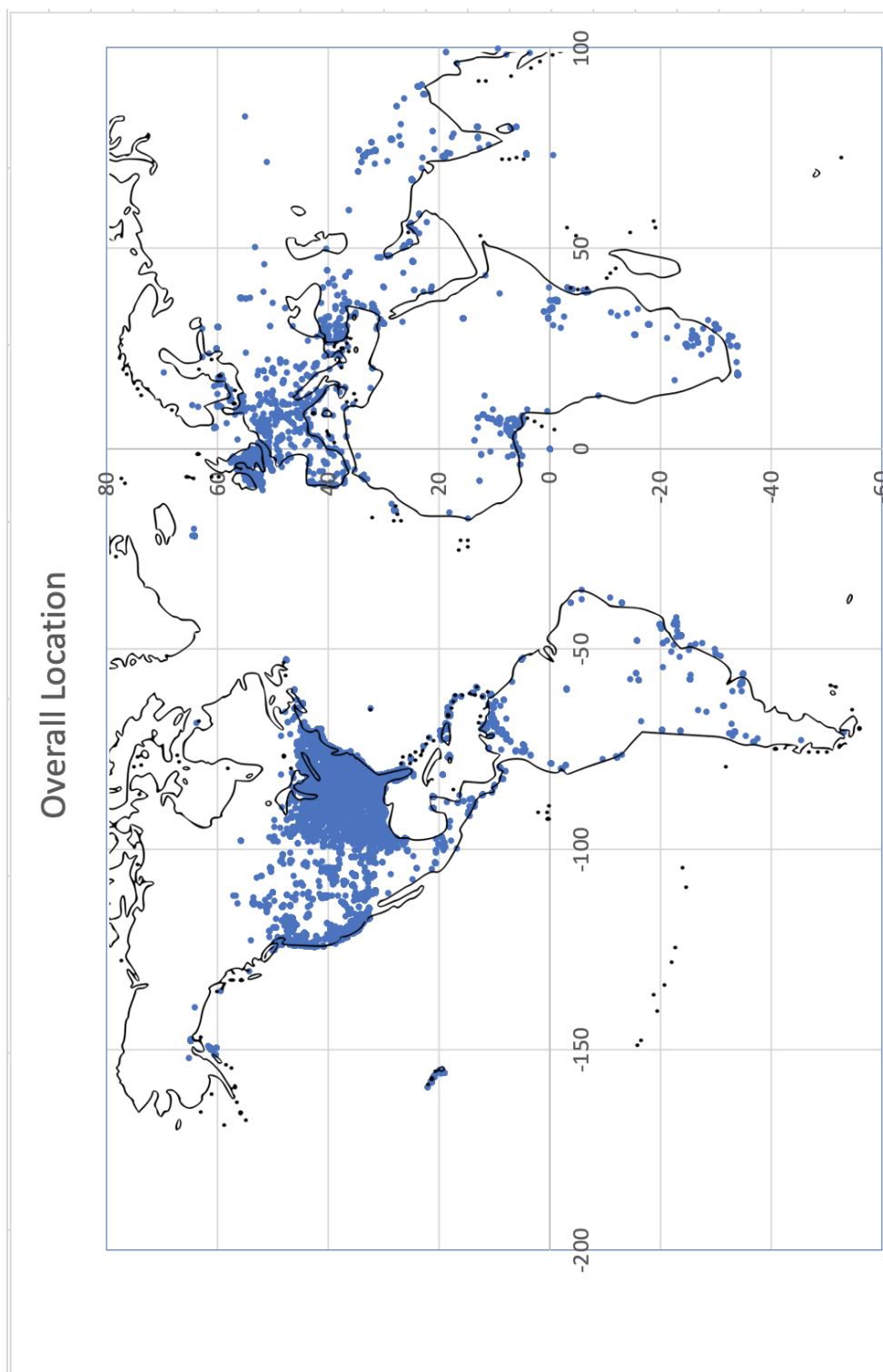
After accessing the data on Excel, I decreased the file size by eliminating categories of data unnecessary for this research, while retaining the necessary categories; these included: tweet id, tweet url, time, user screen name, text, coordinates, hashtags, media, urls, in reply to screen name, place, user created at, user location, and user name. This removed many of the categories including: parsed created at, tweet type, favorite count, in reply to status id, in reply to user id, language, possibly sensitive, retweet count, retweet or quote id, retweet or quote screen name, retweet or quote user id, source, user id, user default profile image, user description, user favourites count, user followers count, user friends count, user listed count, user statuses count, user time zone, user urls, and user verified. Some of these categories were quite difficult decisions to cut. For the purpose of my research, the amount of individual ‘clout’ that a user has was of minimal importance therefore categories like follower count, friend count, verified status, user favorites count, default profile image were cut from the list. Some categories were unclear to me and were cut due to confusion such as ‘parsed created at’ and ‘source’. They also felt duplicative because ‘source’ was often simply listed as Twitter and ‘parsed created at’ was seemingly just another way to write the time of creation. Others were harder to cut such as description, language, and information linked to the retweet value. They were not cut due to insignificance or because they were not linked to the research, but to allow for my computer to run better and to allow for the focus to be solely on twitter dispersion and not individual tweets. Finally the others were cut due to being

redundant in relation to other data such as 'in reply to status id' being too similar to 'in reply to screen name' or for having little usable or interesting data such as time zone which is primarily listed as 'none'. Then I manipulated the categories to allow for easier manipulation. I split the 'time' category into separate categories for month, day, year, and time, and I split 'coordinates' into a latitude and longitude category. Then the data was sorted, and I filtered out data that had a 'none' value for coordinates so that the focus could be on the tweets which were geotagged. The main drawback to this approach is that only approximately one to two percent of tweets are typically geotagged. Geotagging is a process whereby users can decide to add their location to their tweet based on either exact location or nearby location. This makes the sample self-selected which may be less than ideal. Luckily with the high volume of tweets, the data set still contained 57,797 individual tweets. For the purposes of this research, however, it is relevant that 98% of the relevant tweets could not be geotagged.

Taking the coordinates for all of the geotagged tweets, I created a baseline chart in Excel, putting them all into a scatter plot. After creating the scatter plot, I overlaid a map to avoid confusion on location because while some areas, like the majority of the United States, were very clearly defined due to the density of tweets, others were harder to be certain of the general location just by glancing at the graph. The maps allow for greater efficiency and clarity in analyzing the data. The map does not fit perfectly on the graph due to differences in projection and an inability to create a perfectly accurate map, but it still can provide a clearer understanding of the location tweets were sent from without requiring each coordinate to be plugged into GPS software.

While this data was interesting, more information could be ascertained by creating a series of longitudinal maps. In order to create this scatterplot timeline, I then sorted the tweets by day and time and generated maps with smaller time frames. First, a map was created of the first six hours of data collection, then the first twelve hours, then the first twenty four. This allows for better understanding of the way that the tweet locations changed over time, or the way the hashtag was geographically moving across time. While the first graph, depicting all the data, was fairly easy to understand due to density, the other maps were harder to establish geographical boundaries and relative location data such as country or continent of origin, so a map was overlaid to allow for more clear understanding of the location and dispersal of tweets. Due to a geographical paradox which states that no map can be entirely accurate, these graphs are not perfect nor are the maps overlaid upon them. The map projections and scale are hard to ensure are completely synchronous to the graph so both the graphs with and without overlaid maps will be provided when discussing a specific map.





**Figure 2 all geotagged tweets about Ferguson between August 10th at 11:10PM and August 27th at 3:13 PM**

Figure 2<sup>4</sup> depicts the location of tweets which mention Ferguson between August 10th at 11:10 PM and August 27th at 3:13 PM. As can be seen, despite heavy localization in the United States, there are tweets across the world from various people interested in the events. The news of the event had to spread across the world, but we know that the news media was not immediately effective in reporting upon the protests and events (Bonilla and Rosa 2015). Of course, across this whole time period, there was adequate news coverage, but did the other countries wait to be told or were they already part of the audience before traditional news coverage reached them? There are significant groupings of tweets across much of Europe and clustered in groups throughout the rest of the world as well.

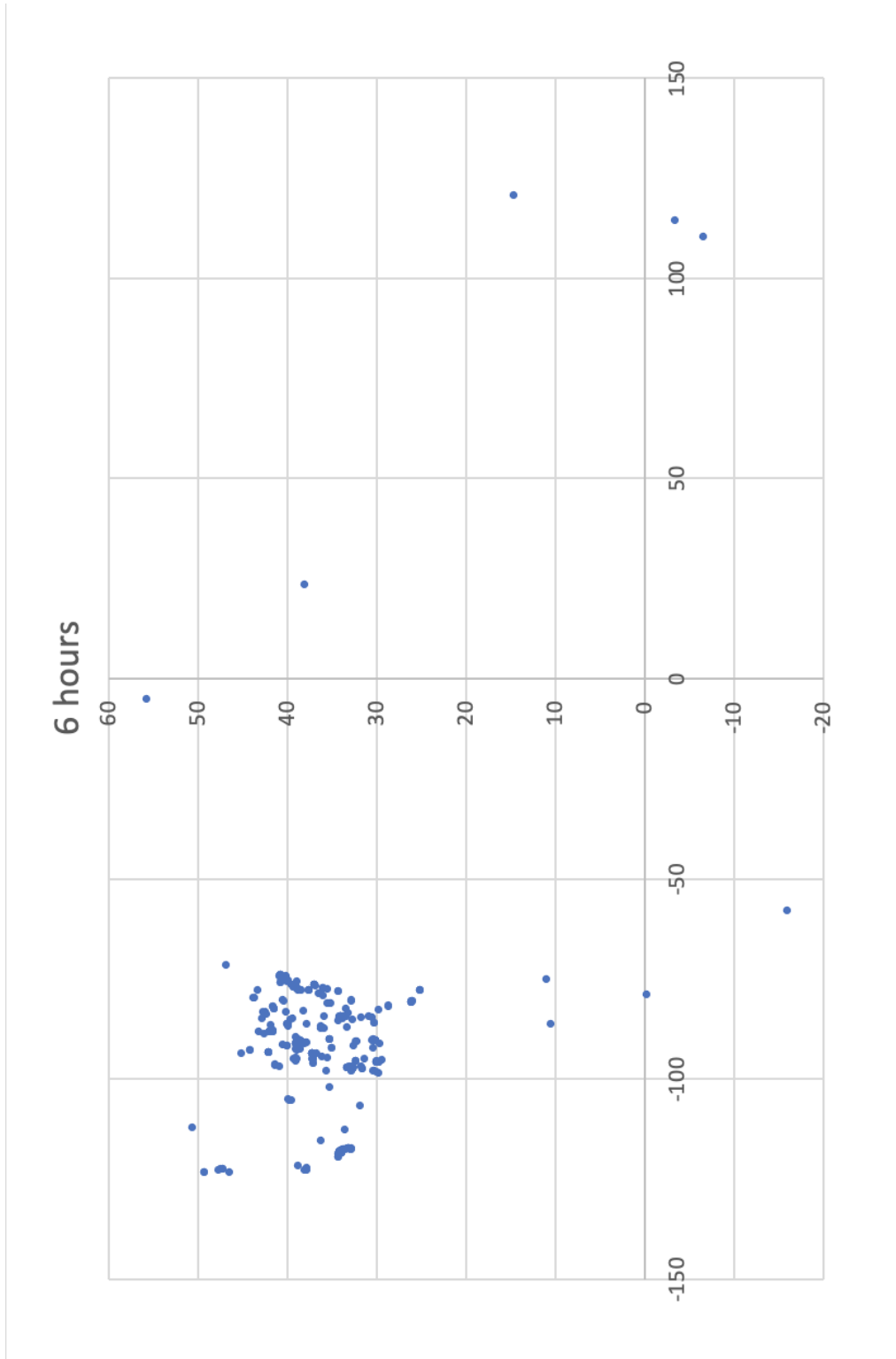
Figure 3 depicts the time between August 10th at 11:10 PM and August 11th at 5:10 AM, the first six hours of data collection. This data displays an interesting trend. The information and interest in the Ferguson protests, and the murder of Mike Brown have not yet escaped the United States. It is, however, spanning quite a lot of the United States. Despite the event originally being isolated to a single town in Missouri and lackadaisical news media, large swaths of the United States knew about the event, and cared to share their thoughts on the matter. Further, the events have traveled outside of the United States as well. The tweets outside of the United States are interesting because of their isolation. Figures 2, 4, and 5 indicate that with widespread news coverage and as the Ferguson protests enter the social consciousness, tweets are made in groupings.

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<sup>4</sup> Overlaid maps can not be fully accurate, therefore, for purposes of the paper, the maps are biased in order to be better aligned with the United States. Maps are for reference and to allow for a better understanding of the location that the data is indicating not to precisely place each coordinate as that is what the coordinates are for.

Figure 3 does not depict this though. Instead the tweets outside of the United States are made in isolation perhaps depicting that the areas began to become aware of the movement by means other than traditional news media such as social media.

Unsurprisingly, many of the spots with the highest density are those that are high population density areas like Southern California, or the East Coast because the higher the population density, the more people there are in the area to geotag their tweets causing a higher density of tweets. With so many people in the area, the 1%-2% of tweets that tend to be geotagged is a much larger number of people than in less populated areas such as Wyoming or South Dakota. Another factor is that the places with decreased population densities may be less likely to geotag their tweets as the places they are located are less recognizable to a larger audience. Individuals from highly populated and well known areas such as Los Angeles, CA or Boston, MA may be more likely to tag their location due to a high recognizability by a large audience.





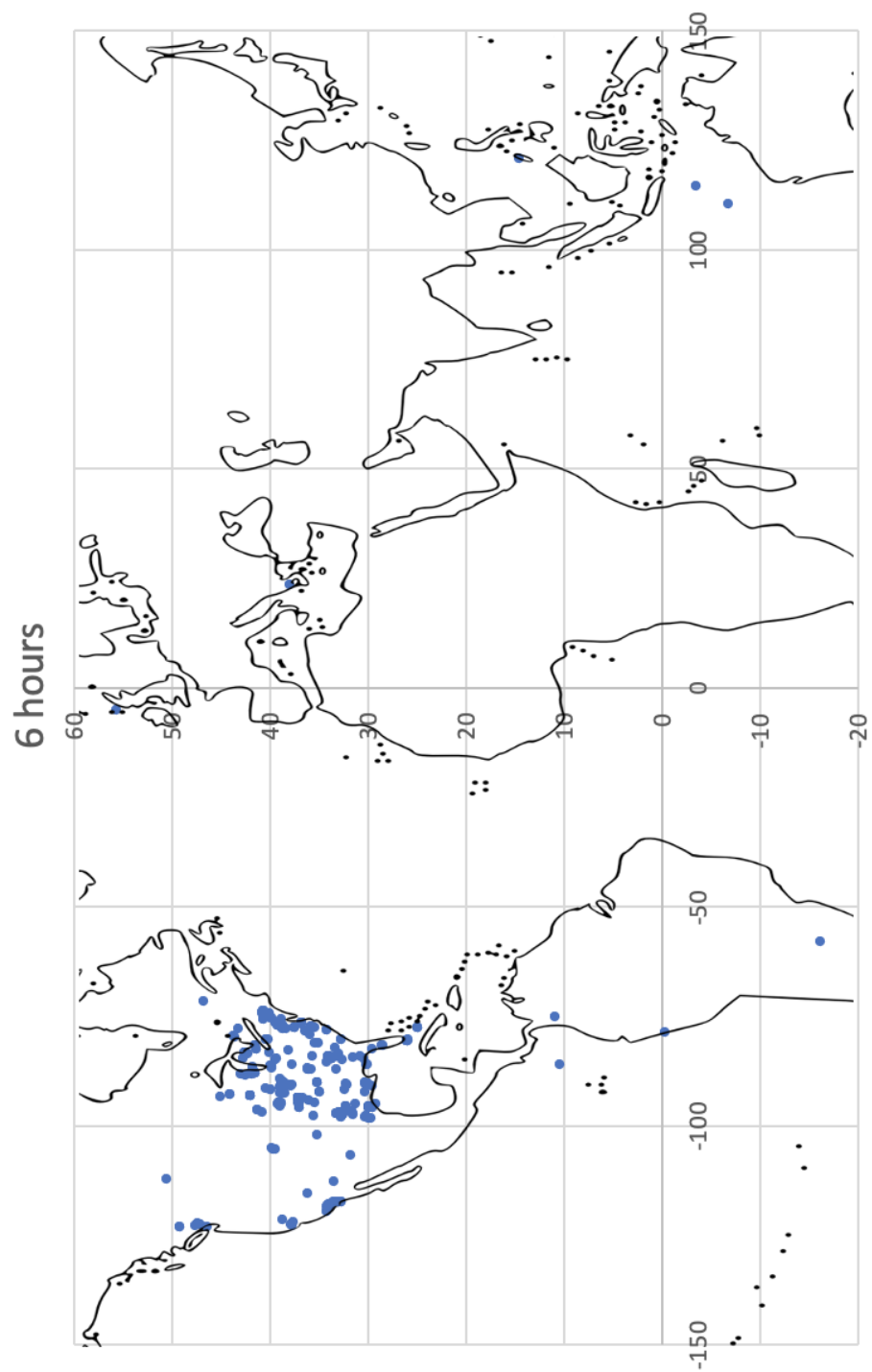


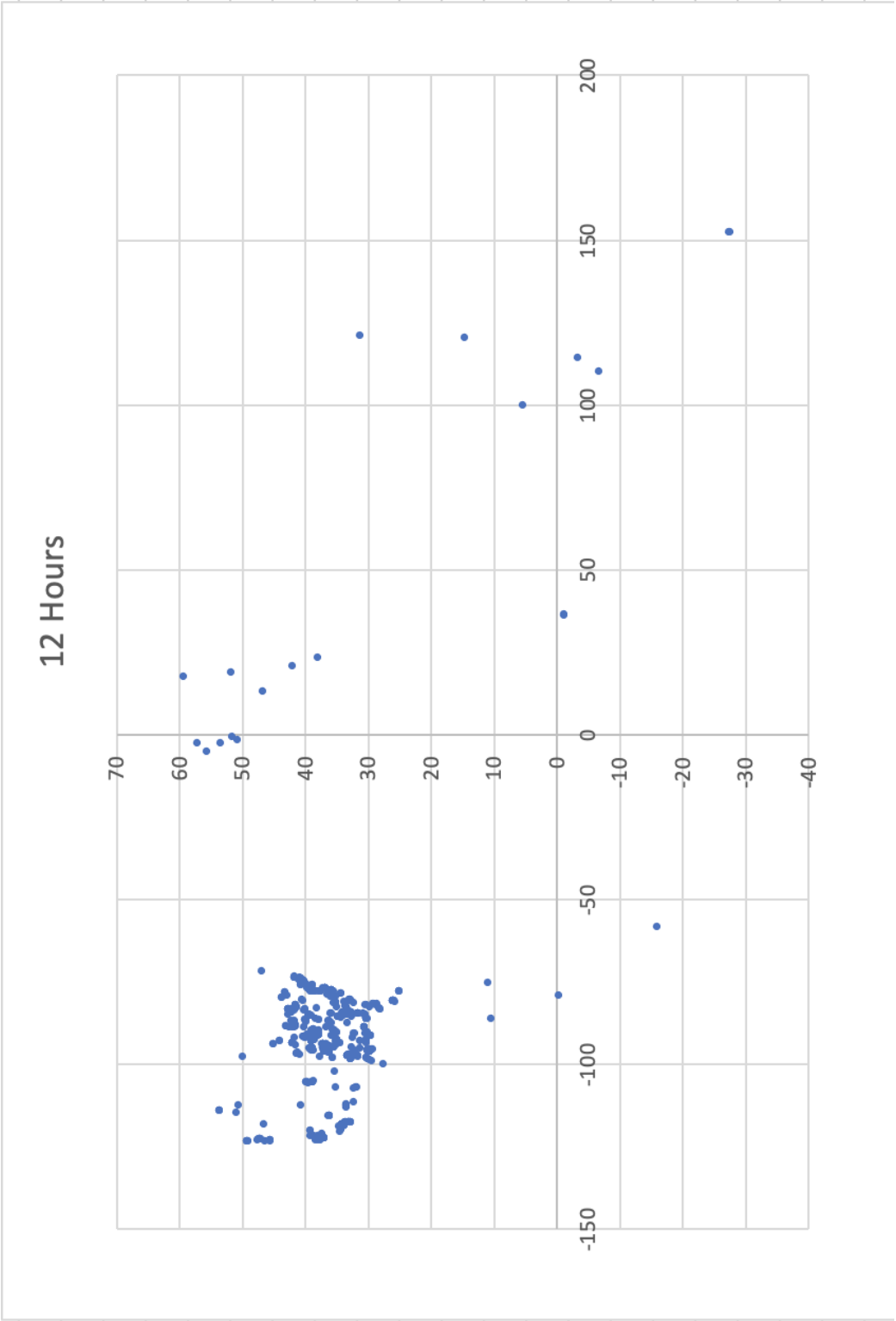
Figure 3 First six hours of data collection

With six more hours of data collection logged there are similar trends, but the density is getting higher across the board. More countries and continents are getting interested in the events and are joining the conversation taking place on social media. There is still an expected concentration around high population areas, but many of the tweets from different countries are traceable back to one or just a few tweets on the topic still. The only country other than the United States that is showing a concentration of tweets higher than just a single tweet or two is the United Kingdom. Perhaps this is due to a common language, heavy cultural exchange between the two countries, and/or the rise of similar tensions between the Black community and the police which existed in the United Kingdom<sup>5</sup>.

The tweets appear to be a major point of first contact for individuals to communicate about the events occurring in Ferguson. This contributes to the coalition building that is imperative to the creation and maintenance of a social movement or other forms of collective action. Social media can disperse information across great distances relatively quickly. By doing that individuals can notice the events and react quickly as they do in the United States and the locations abroad which have identified tweets.

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<sup>5</sup> In 2011 the United Kingdom saw a group of protests very similar to the start of Ferguson after the murder of Mark Duggan. Similar to Brown's murder, Duggan was a young Black man murdered by the police. The causes of the protests and the environments which the protests came from were not entirely equivocal, but there were several similarities (Newburn 14).



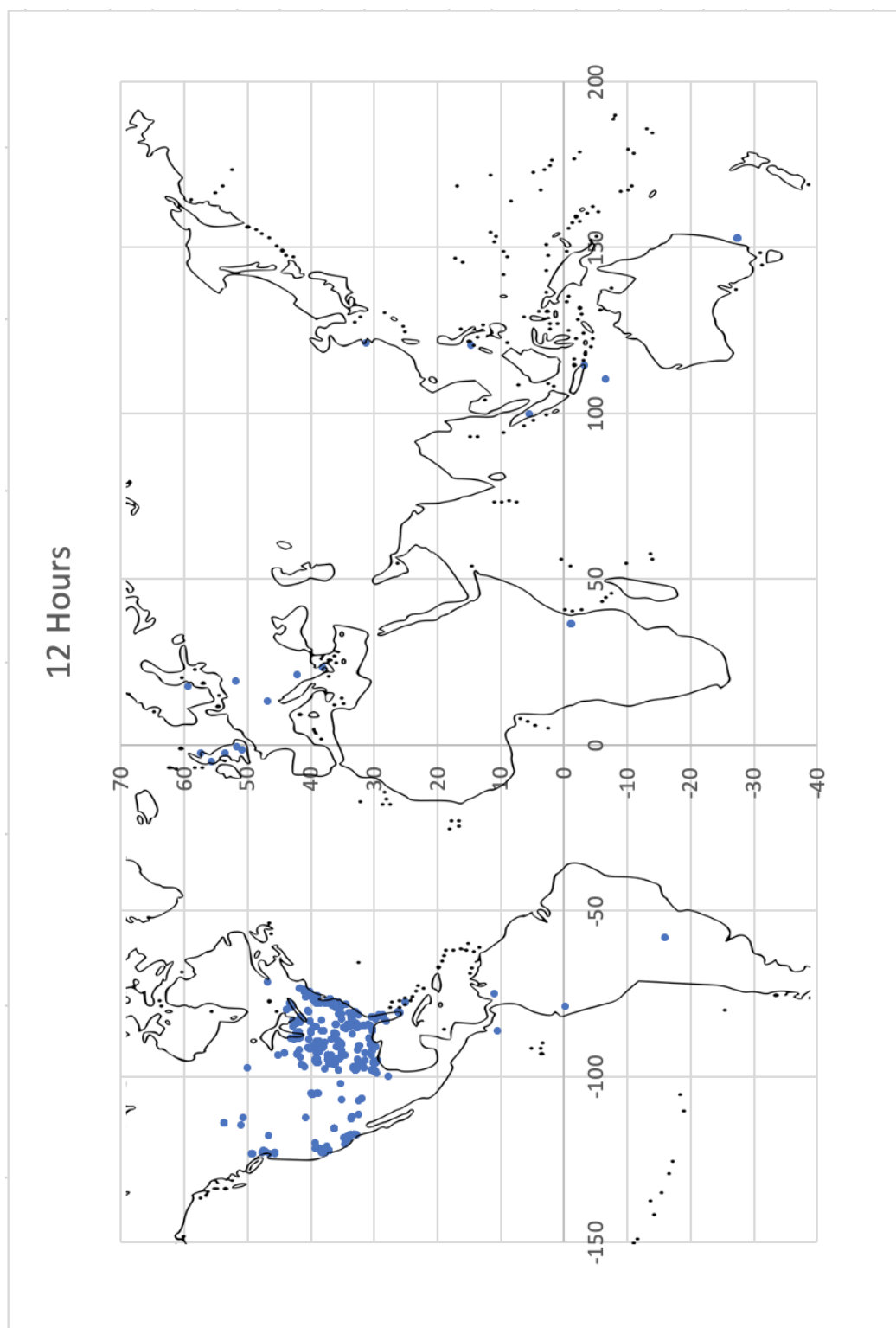
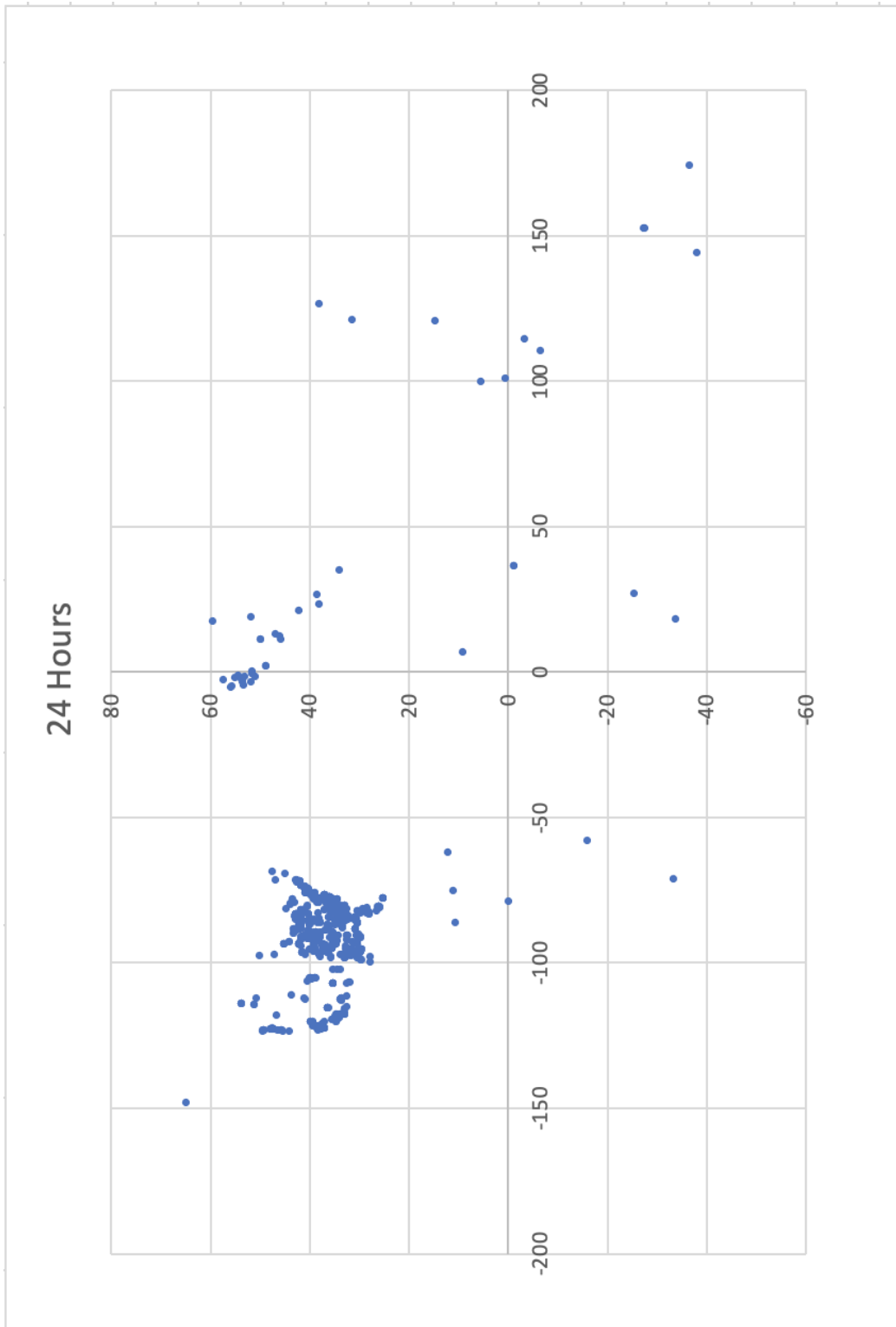


Figure 4 First 12 hours of data collection



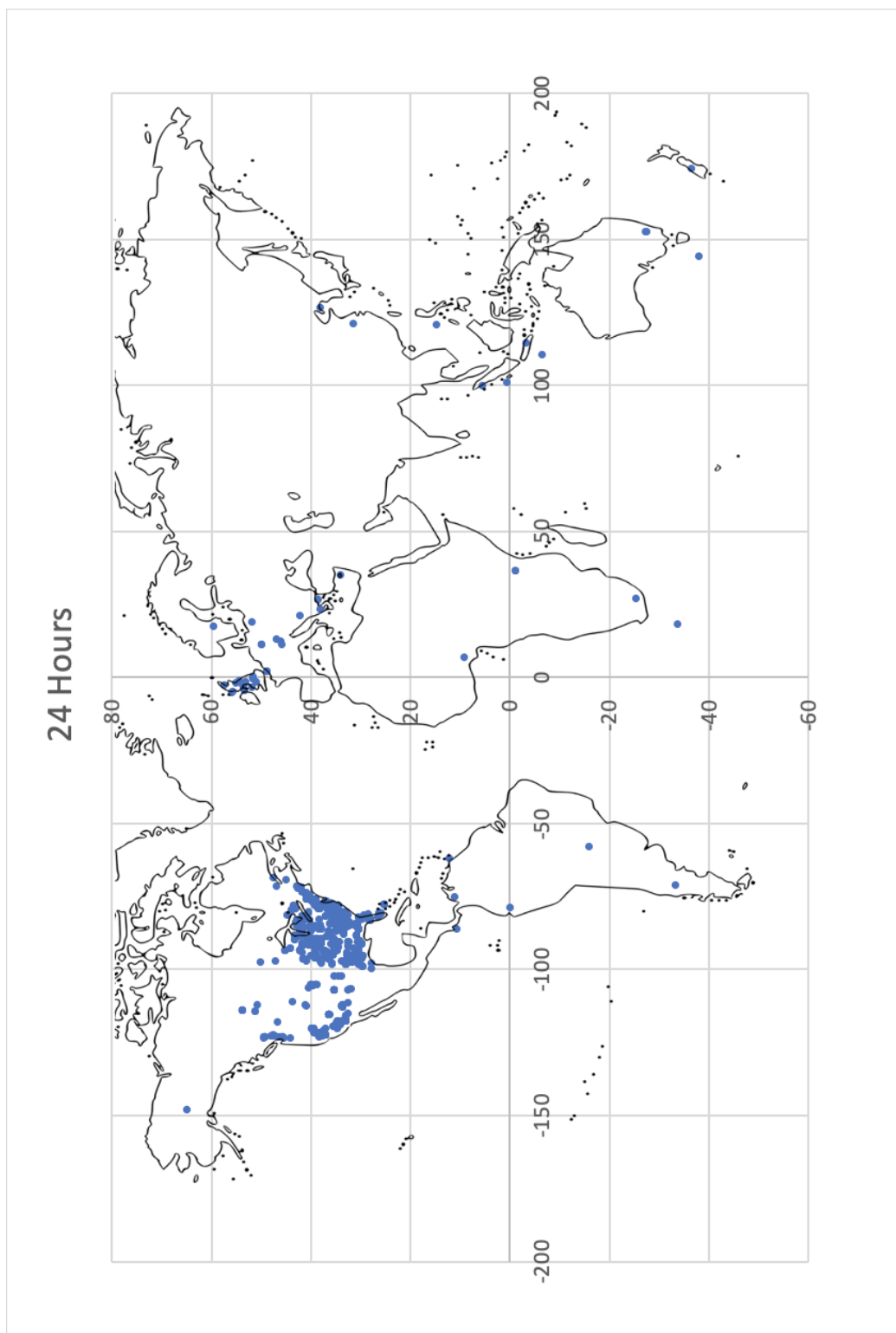


Figure 5 First 24 hours of data collection

Figure 5 is the first 24 hours of data collection and depicts the same trends as Figure 4. There is a much heavier concentration in between the East Coast and the middle of America. By this point, the spark has started to be stoked into a blazing fire within the United States. After this first day, it is unlikely that many fully expected the movement to last months or for a movement as prominent as Black Lives Matter to be created. However, in hindsight it is not surprising. Flames are coming from the United Kingdom as well as greater amounts of tweets are coming forward. Other countries are becoming roused by the news as well, tweeting about the events and what is happening. These tweets are just an early sampling of the level they reach by the end of data collection.

The end of the data collection part of this research displays a mapping of all geotagged tweets in the time period. Wide spread news coverage and awareness of the movement has begun to dilute the data as it is harder to pinpoint the beginnings of the movement in new locations. One thing that remains clear while looking at Figure 2 is that upon finding out about Ferguson, many felt the need to speak out on social media. There was a desire to publicly voice opinions, support, criticism, and/or information about the movement. This practice can help create a greater network and identity for the movement as well as creating hundreds of thousands of conversations about the movement across the globe.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the Black Lives Matter movement seems to have benefited greatly from Twitter. Twitter helped the movement create a collective identity, keep interested parties up-to-date on the happenings in Ferguson, and propagate the information across large distances. Historically, events like Mike Brown's murder would not be able to garner traction across the world, and if they did, they would not take such a strong hold upon the public's memory or consciousness. Instead, these events would normally be swept away with the changing news cycle. With Twitter and other social media, however, the movement has control of its own relevance and interested parties can tune in to the movement as they desire, not only when the news sees fit.

Unfortunately, the data that was available on geographic location of social media users was limited due to the low percentage of individuals geotagging their tweets. If more data can be collected and/or found, many more studies could be conducted. Geographic dispersion of social media and social movements is a topic which lacks a lot in its study and can hopefully be studied more in the future. Furthermore, social media as a type of political space has not been fully explored by the academic community either. While social movement literature is not a completely new phenomenon, social media has a lot left to be explored both by itself and in conjunction with social movements.

Social media has created a new world with large interconnected communities. People are no longer isolated and kept separate, but they now have the ability to interact with other individuals and communities from around the world. Individuals are capable



of interacting with new worldviews, ideas, and interests more often than ever before. This has created new situations for the political world, and it leaves a lot yet to be discovered.

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